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AP PHOTO



Japan Empress Masako yesterday praised the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to atomic bombing survivors, calling it a significant reminder of peace. Nihon Hidankyo survivors will attend the Oslo ceremony, advocating for nuclear disarmament and urging younger generations to work toward a world without nuclear weapons.

AP PHOTO



South Korea A fishing boat capsized after colliding with a sand barge near Gyeongju, killing seven crew members and leaving one missing. Rescue teams yesterday mobilized helicopters and coast guard vessels to search for the missing individual, an Indonesian national.

AP PHOTO



Philippines Mount Kanlaon erupted, sending ash three kilometers high and displacing hundreds in Negros. Authorities raised the alert level, warning of further eruptions. Villages near the crater were evacuated as ashfall disrupted visibility and sparked health concerns in affected areas.

AP PHOTO



Indonesia Flash floods and landslides devastated Java's Sukabumi district, killing ten and leaving two missing. Over 3,000 residents evacuated as extreme weather damaged homes, roads, and fields. Rescuers recovered bodies from mudslides and warned of ongoing risks in affected villages.

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SANDS CHINA ANNOUNCES LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIP TO BRING NBA TO MACAU

RENATO MARQUES

SANDS China Limited (SCL) has announced a multi-year partnership with the National Basketball Association (NBA) to bring world-class basketball to Macau.

The newly inked partnership aims to bring NBA preseason matches and other complementary initiatives annually in Macau.

According to the agreement, SCL will host two preseason games per year over the next five years at the newly revamped Venetian Arena.

The Brooklyn Nets and Phoenix Suns will kick off this partnership, with two games in October next year.

Details were provided by NBA's deputy commissioner Mark Tatum during a media roundtable held at the Londoner Macau. The first game will take place Oct. 10, with a second game Oct. 12.

At the same event, Patrick Dumont, president and chief operating officer of Las Vegas Sands Corp., said, "This is a very exciting day for us. We've been working on this for a long time. It's a big dream of ours to be able to bring international sports and entertainment to Macau."

"What better way to bring sports to Macau than to bring the best sport in the world, which is basketball? We're very proud that we have this partnership with the NBA. It's a multi-year, long term partnership. It's about investment in Macau's future, it's about driving high-value tourism, it's about driving sports, the usual dialogue, and all kinds of fun things around basketball," he added.

Tatum unveiled the details of the games, noting, "I'm excited to announce that next October, the Brooklyn Nets and the Phoenix Suns will be returning to China to play games here as part of this partnership with Sands," he said. "Basketball has a long history here, and it is an exciting day. We have a large number of fans in this area who love the game of basketball. It's the number one sport here." He remarked that the Nets and Suns teams are also very popular in Macau, mainland China, and Hong Kong.

Tatum noted that the partnership also significantly incorporates elements of corporate social

RENATO MARQUES



responsibility for both companies, noting that players like Kevin Durant, Dennis Schröder (a world champion from the 2023 World Cup), Devin Booker (an Olympian and all-star) would attend. "This event will give the opportunity for fans in Macau and throughout the region to see the world's best basketball players in addition to the game. This partnership is also about giving back to the community."

Grant Chum, CEO and president of Sands China, noted that with the signing of this multi-year partnership with the NBA, SCL will be bringing a whole series of landmark and iconic events, sporting content, and related lifestyle events to Macau.

"Through this multi-year partnership, we are looking to take Macau's tourism and sports strategy to a new level," Chum said. "I think you've heard a lot about Macau's direction in tourism in conjunction with conventions, retail, and sports, and we believe the strategy works both ways. We are bringing internationally renowned sporting events, such as the NBA games, to Macau to enhance the tourism landscape. At the same time, we believe the sporting spectacle and events will also be enhanced by the broader hospitality and integrated resort tourism landscape. The intention

is that people will be able to enjoy the best of hospitality, entertainment, retail, food, and beverage, together with these great sporting events, the spinoff lifestyle, and indeed mice events that will arise out of this great partnership."

Remarking on the company's social responsibility aspect, Chum also added that this is also a key focus for SCL, stating that this would not be restricted to the time of the games (between September and October annually), but would extend throughout the year through various opportunities to engage with the local community, promote youth sports, and leverage the league's global social responsibility program, NBA Cares,

with the Sand Cares program.

The SCL CEO also remarked that the extensive revamp of the Venetian Area, which was highly praised by NBA officials, is a source of pride for Sands and the significant investment in the facility is "a key part of our integrated resort."

PARTNERSHIP HELPING TO BUILD CITY'S REPUTATION

The partnership between SCL and the NBA aims to build Macau's reputation as a regular host of major world-class sports events.

"By bringing this international sporting experience and associated lifestyle events to Macau, we expect to boost tourism and

attract international visitors," Chum explained. "Over a number of years, this partnership will help to build the city's reputation as a host for globally recognized events, particularly in sports. We expect Macau's profile and reputation will continue to flourish and we are thrilled to contribute to that."

Chum also noted that the collaboration between SCL and the NBA was smooth, driven by a shared passion for excellence and innovation and a desire to engage with local communities. He stated that both parties appreciated the synergies that result for each organization as a result of this partnership.

CHALLENGES OF HOSTING REGULAR-SEASON NBA GAMES IN MACAU

WHEN asked about the possibility of hosting regular season NBA-games in Macau, in addition to preseason games, NBA deputy commissioner Mark Tatum explained that logistical challenges, particularly related to travel time, make it difficult to schedule such games.

The NBA official explained that the regular season has a very high density of games, which in some cases also forces teams to travel significant distances. To host games out of the US, particularly in locations with a large time zone difference, would create serious pro-

blems for teams.

"We know that travel time and jetlag directly affects performance. It's not just about Asia but also all the other places in very different time zones."

This same challenge also applies to hosting the NBA All-Star Games, which already has a long list of places eager to host these events, but faces the same challenge of relocating equipment to ensure that the games are hosted at the same quality and standard as in the US. RM

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

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

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

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ADMINISTRATOR & CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Kowie Geldenhuys kowie@macaudailytimes.com

OFFICE MANAGER_Juliana Cheang juliana@macaudailytimes.com

ADDRESS_Av. da Praia Grande, 599, Edif. Comercial Rodrigues, 12 Floor C, MACAU SAR

Telephones: +853 287 160 81/2 Fax: +853 287 160 84

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RENATO MARQUES

SPORTS

THE return of world-class entertainment and sports events is imminent, Patrick Dumont, president and chief operating officer of Las Vegas Sands Corp. (LVS), said to the Times during a media roundtable event last Friday.

"We're very excited about it. If you think about the investment we've made and you look at what the other concessionaires have invested in, you can see the transformation and creation of new tourism infrastructure in Macau. Macau is an excellent market. When you compare it to other global tourism hubs – both from an entertainment and business perspective – Macau has a multitude of assets that allow world-class events to be held."

These comments were made in response to questions about the return of international events hosted in Macau in the past, and in particular in the Venetian Arena.

"You are going to see more investment from us, and I hope you see more investment from concessionaires in Macau. There is a lot of untapped potential and we are very excited about it."

"We have a brand new arena for the NBA, but we are also going to do a lot of other things in that space," Dumont noted. He echoed Grant Chum, CEO and president of Sands China Limited (SCL), who previously said that the Venetian Arena's revamp ultimately will cater to more than sporting events, and is the "centerpiece" of the SCL's new development strategy,

World-class entertainment expected to return to Macau



which includes more sports, entertainment, and MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions).

Dumont and Chum both observed that since the inauguration of Venetian Macau, SCL has been at the forefront of entertainment. The company has hosted an impressive array of world-class events, including concerts from renowned artists such as Celine Dion, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Katy Perry, Justin Bieber, and the Rolling Stones. It has also hosted top boxing matches between

Manny Pacquiao, Brandon Rios, and Chris Algieri; tennis stars such as Pete Sampras, Roger Federer, and Andre Agassi; and shows such as "The Amazing Race Australia," and Travis Pastrana Nitro Circus, to mention just a few.

The recent agreement with the NBA to bring preseason games to Macau for the next five years marks the NBA's return to Macau since its inception in October 2007, when the Cleveland Cavaliers played the Orlando Magic in an exhibition match at the Venetian Arena.

THE VENETIAN ARENA: A KEY TO ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

The SCL's investment of over USD200 million (MOP1.6 billion) to renovate the Venetian Arena is a pivotal element of SCL's development strategy and aligns with the government's "City of Sports" vision and other economic diversification strategies.

"As we look ahead over the next five to 10 years, we are fully aligned with the strategy to develop Macau as a city of sports and

sports tourism. This partnership is a centerpiece of that strategy. We have invested heavily in the remake and remodeling of the Venetian Arena. This was done partly with the partnership in mind, but also as part of a larger strategy seeking to host international sporting events in this venue in the years to come. This is a very big commitment on our part to develop the 'tourism + sports' strategy. It is also a key part of the broader diversification of the Macau tourism landscape," Chum said.

HOSPITALITY

Sector: City needs to prioritize length of stay over visitor numbers

LYNZY VALLES

THE hospitality sector has expressed optimism about the new policy that would allow Zhuhai residents to visit Macau from next year, with up to seven days per visit.

Earlier this month, the Chinese government approved new measures to simplify travel regulations for residents of Zhuhai and Hengqin.

This initiative represents a significant change, as it is the first instance where China has introduced a Macau visa for travel without imposing limits on the number of visits.

Speaking to the Times on the sidelines of an event at the Artyzen Grand Lapa, Rutger Verschuren, vice-chairman of the Macau Hotel Association, believes that the new policy is ex-



Rutger Verschuren

pected to bring a significant influx of visitors from Zhuhai and Hengqin to Macau, which could help counteract the current trend of local residents leaving Macau for shopping and entertainment across the border.

The area vice president for Macau and Hengqin Operations at Artyzen Hos-

pitality Group noted that many of these visitors are likely to become day-trippers, engaging in shopping and dining within Macau.

He emphasized that this influx will undoubtedly contribute to the local economy, remarking on the importance of the increased stays.

Meanwhile, the Macao

Government Tourism Office (MGTO) anticipates up to 34 million tourists this year.

The Times questioned whether this rate has indeed been beneficial to the hotel sector in the peninsula, as recent government data shows that average length of stay for visitors decreased by 0.1 days year-on-year to 1.2 days, while the length of stay for overnight visitors remained steady at 2.3 days during the first quarter of the year.

The official explained that while this influx is beneficial, it also comes with challenges. "There are also a large number of day-trippers who do not use hotel facilities," he acknowledged.

He estimated that about 60% of day-trippers might not stay overnight in hotels, which could affect overall occupancy rates despite increased visitor

numbers.

Verschuren highlighted the importance of focusing on extending the length of stay for visitors rather than solely increasing visitor numbers.

"The more visitors, the better for the economy," he said, but stressed the need for strategic planning as visitor numbers rise alongside easing border restrictions.

"I think we need to start concentrating in the coming years to really lengthen the length of stay, and not focus as much on the millions of visitors."

Verschuren believes that integrating Hengqin's offerings with Macau's could alleviate pressures on local infrastructure while enhancing the overall visitor experience.

"If we can foster the integration with Hengqin, that

would be a positive development," he said, noting that this integrated approach could lead to a more sustainable tourism model benefiting both regions in the long run.

Looking ahead to the festive season, Verschuren provided a positive outlook on occupancy rates in local hotels.

He indicated that December is shaping up to be a successful month for the hospitality sector, with good occupancy rates expected.

"December looks excellent," he said, while acknowledging that some tourists might avoid Macau during the handover celebrations due to anticipated crowds. However, he remained confident that overall hotel performance would be strong during this period.

PJ WARNING ISSUED ON STUDY ABROAD SCAM TARGETING PARENTS

Parents are urged to stay vigilant against a growing scam involving students and children studying abroad. Recent reports to the Judiciary Police (PJ) reveal that scammers are impersonating law enforcement officials, claiming that students need large sums of money to process visa applications. The fraudsters provide convincing details, including the child's name and ID number, to create a sense of fear and urgency. In many cases, parents often remit money without verifying the request, only to discover that their children have unwittingly transferred the funds directly to scammers.

PSPS REPORTS RECORD-BREAKING CROSS BORDER TRAFFIC OF 200 MILLION

The Public Security Police (PSP) have announced a record milestone for 2024, with the cumulative number of inbound and outbound passengers surpassing 200 million as of last Saturday. This surge in travel was evident on the afternoon of Dec. 9 where busy scenes unfolded at the border crossings.

IC CALLS FOR COTAI VENUE EVENT PROPOSALS

The Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) is now inviting event proposals for the outdoor performance venue in Cotai, which will operate from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31, 2025. This venue, spanning approximately 94,000 square meters and accommodating over 50,000 spectators, is designed for large-scale performances. Proposals are welcomed from local and international performing arts groups.

MOP50-TICKET FOR RESIDENTS AVAILABLE FOR COTAI TRIAL CONCERT

The "Macao Outdoor Performance Venue: Warm-up Party" is set for Dec. 28 at 7 p.m., featuring artists like Hins Cheung, Julian Cheung, Pakho Chau, and Janice M. Vidal. This trial event aims to attract 15,000 spectators, with tickets priced at MOP480, MOP780, and MOP1,080. Special "Tickets Exclusive for Macau Residents" are available for MOP50 through a registration and random draw system.

CCAC CLEARS KUN IAM STATUE PROJECT OF ADMINISTRATIVE VIOLATIONS

VICTORIA CHAN

THE Commission Against Corruption (CCAC) has concluded an investigation into a complaint regarding the construction of the Kun Iam Statue project in Hac-Sa Reservoir, finding no administrative violations, according to Commissioner Chan Tsz King.

The project, which was suspended last year amid public controversy, prompted CCAC to open an inquiry and conduct a thorough investigation.

Speaking to the press over the weekend at the "Walk for a Million" event, Chan stated that the investigation had been completed and found no issues with the project's policies or the public perception of the events surrounding it.

The government had previously decided to suspend building a Kun Iam statue at the Hac-Sa Reservoir in the face of public opposition against the project,



Secretary for Administration and Justice, André Cheong, said in an earlier press conference.

Cheong stated that despite good intentions, the government decided to suspend the construction of the controversial statue and adjacent structures in the face of public criticism, and promised to restore the areas affected by the initial construction work.

Regarding CCAC's investiga-

tion into the management of the Cultural Industry Fund, which was the predecessor to the merged Cultural Fund and Cultural Industry Fund, Chan noted that this investigation has also been completed.

The investigation focused on whether there had been any criminal offenses related to the granting of funding, particularly related-party transactions. However, Chan mentioned that following

thorough investigation, it was discovered that there had been no feedback from the Cultural Development Fund, prompting a subsequent review and follow-up.

He added that midway through the year, the fund revised its grant procedures based on the department's recommendations. More detailed regulations and conditions were established, and over 300 projects were carefully examined by the department.

The fund has since made changes to its grant criteria and implemented more detailed regulations based on CCAC's suggestions, Chan said.

The Public Administration and Civil Service Bureau (SAFP) also followed up on the matter, and the fund informed the department that it would review all funding issued in this area.

When asked about the investigation methods applied, Chan explained that they could not be made public, but emphasized the depth and thoroughness of the probe, which required significant time and resources.

Regarding CCAC's future, Chan, who will soon be Prosecutor General, expressed confidence in the commission's ability to handle cases strictly in accordance with the law and established procedures, ensuring a smooth handover.

SONG MAN LEI

Top judge: Justice affirms judicial independence, fairness

VICTORIA CHAN

MACAU'S top judge, Song Man Lei, has emphasized the judiciary's commitment to maintaining judicial independence and fairness since the city's return to Chinese sovereignty 25 years ago.

In a recent media interview, Song, the chief justice of the Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR), highlighted the significant growth in public understanding and trust in the region's judicial system.

"Judicial independence has been strengthened, with judges and prosecutors performing their duties without any interference, en-



suring judicial fairness and the authority of the law," said Song.

Song, who has served as a prosecutor since 1996, noted that the public's understanding and trust in the judiciary has grown considerably over the past

quarter-century.

During this time, the number of judges in Macau has more than doubled, from 23 in 1999 to 52 today.

Highlighting the positive interaction between the judiciary, executive, and legislative branches,

Song pointed to the Portuguese-Chinese composition of the bench for national security cases as an example of the courts' commitment to the 'One country, two systems' principle.

"It does not violate the principle of natural jurisdiction and ensures the accurate application of the national security law in specific cases," she explained, noting that an amendment would be proposed to the legislature to establish new regulations regarding criminal jurisdiction under special circumstances.

Looking ahead, Song said the courts would continue to promote multi-party cooperation, including bolstering cross-border enforcement linkage mechanisms and deepening judicial cooperation, to further strengthen Macau's legal system and maintain its economic and political stability.

SAFP

NEW MEASURES CALL FOR SUSPENSION OF INDIVIDUALS FOR OATH VIOLATIONS

A newly proposed disciplinary measure aims to suspend management and senior staff within the Public Administration and Civil Service Bureau (SAFP) for a period from 10 days to one year as part of an amendment to the management framework presented to the House for review, five months after the Executive Council introduced the bill.

The draft legislation revises the Statute of Managerial and Executive Staff, mandating that individuals taking office must swear an oath to uphold and execute the basic law of the Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR).

According to the proposal, it is deemed a violation if an individual deliberately recites content that contradicts the oath's requirements or if their swearing is perceived as insincere, as cited in a TDM report. The law states such refusal leads to an automatic annulment of the appointment, with mandatory dismissal as a consequence.

The timing for taking the oath is set by the presiding authority and must occur within 90 days of the law's enactment. Failure to carry out instructions from superiors is also grounds for terminating the service commission.

Additionally, the bill also introduces a warning system. Should staff members fail to effectively manage their department or implement policies, the supervisory body can issue a warning, which will be included in their performance evaluations.

2024 Macau International Kart Grand Prix concludes

NADIA SHAW

THE 2024 Macau International Kart Grand Prix, a highlight in the motorsport calendar, successfully concluded at the Coloane Karting Track (Kartodromo de Coloane). Organized by the

Held from Dec 6 to Dec 8, the IAME Asia Final serves as a culmination of the IAME Series Asia, which features multiple categories including Cadet, Junior, Senior, and Master classes. Participants in this event compete for prestigious titles and the chance to qualify for the IAME World Final in 2025.

In parallel, the AAMC Karting Championship Round 8 featured exciting races in categories such as X30 Junior and Senior classes. This championship is organized by the Automobile General



Association of Macao-China (AAMC).

Notable results included Wong Chi Him from Macau securing first place in the Sands Cup, followed closely by compatriots Wan Chio Ut and Wan Chio Iat. In the Cadet Class for the Macau In-

ternational Kart Grand Prix, Italy's Nuvolini Many took the top spot, with China's Han Yuchen in second and Hong Kong's Kwong Mason Alexander rounding out the podium.

In the Junior Class, Thailand's Porsche Anuchatkul

emerged victorious in both the Macau International Kart Grand Prix and the IAME Asia Final 2024. The Senior Class saw Spain's Ruben Moya Lopez dominate, while Chen Pengyuan from China excelled in both Master Class categories.

SMES

GOV'T TO INCREASE FUNDING FOR CONSUMPTION PROGRAM

SECRETARY for Economy and Finance, Lei Wai Nong, announced plans to increase funding for the citywide consumption-boosting program aimed at encouraging residents to spend more during weekends. The initiative, which has already seen heightened participation, is designed to support local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by incentivizing consumer spending.

On the sidelines of the "Walk for a Million" event, Lei stated that the budget had been increased, highlighting the program's success in driving local commerce. The government's strategy includes enhancing the chances of winning coupons through a lucky draw, which has attracted crowds to participating shops. "People are queuing up in some shops," he noted, emphasizing the popularity of such programs among locals and their impact on increasing commerce.

While the exact amount of the budget increase remains undisclosed, Lei assured that details would be revealed after the program concludes. The current initiative has been well-received, with many residents eager to participate in the rewards system that encourages spending at local businesses.

This consumption-boosting program aims to combat the trend of residents shopping in mainland China, particularly during holidays and weekends when prices are often lower. Lei hopes to retain consumer spending within the city. **NS**

IAM confirms replacement of peeling street signs

THE Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) has confirmed that all affected street signs have been replaced and that administrative penalties are being pursued against responsible parties.

IAM's José Maria da Fonseca Tavares has addressed the controversy surrounding peeling street name

signs in Macau on the sidelines of the "Walk for a Million" event on Sunday.

The issue, which came to light in September, raised concerns about potential cost-cutting measures in public signage.

The bureau has accused a company contracted to replace hundreds of bilingual street signs of defraud-

ing the project through the unauthorized use of stickers instead of the specified manufacturing method.

The replacement street signs were required to be manufactured using an underglazing technique for enhanced durability and visibility. But the company allegedly used cheaper sti-

ckers, violating the material requirements outlined in the contract.

Meanwhile, the official also announced that the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) has completed archaeological work on Hac Sa's temporary green open space, which is set to be restored and reopened to the public shortly. **NS**



CORPORATE BITS

Celebrate the 'Joy of Wonder' at Artyzen Grand Lapa this festive season



This holiday season, Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau invites the public to immerse themselves in the enchantment of the "Joy of Wonder" at the property.

The resort has announced a lineup of celebrations featuring a series of dining experiences and activities.

A particular highlight is Café Bela Vista's "Christmas Doce Afternoon Tea Set," running from December 1 to December 26. This year, the restaurant celebrates Portuguese culture through its afternoon tea experience, blending traditional sweet and savory treats with a contemporary twist. Guests can customize their selections from the tea trolley, featuring items marinated and prepared for months to enhance their

flavors.

Freshly made at 6 a.m., the team crafts delicious gingerbread, panettones, cookies, and muffins—all made in-house with natural ingredients, free from preservatives. Highlights include the signature Portuguese pudding and freshly baked scones, ensuring a homely touch to the guests' dining experience.

Additionally, until December 19, guests can enjoy a Christmas Weekday Festive Dinner Buffet featuring classics like Roasted Turkey and Traditional Yule Log Cake. On December 24 and 25, guests can indulge in Merry & Delicious Seafood Lunch and European Dinner Buffets, with complimentary sparkling wine for lunch and

free-flow beverages for dinner.

Moreover, Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau will host a New Year countdown with a lavish dinner buffet, including a Countdown Party ticket.

Rutger Verschuren, area vice president for Macau and Henqin Operations at Artyzen Hospitality Group and general manager of Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau, remarked: "For us at Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau, Christmas signifies a time of warmth and joy, allowing us to engage with our community and spread happiness, which is at the heart of our mission."

This year, festivities kicked off with its chocolate Christmas tree, a "masterpiece crafted with culinary artistry, creativity, and love."

Chinese leaders pledge 'moderately loose' monetary policy, more support for slowing economy

ELAINE KURTENBACH,
BANGKOK

CHINA'S top leaders have pledged to loosen monetary policy and provide more support for the slowing economy, while Premier Li Qiang swiped at threats of higher tariffs on Chinese exports, saying they hinder global growth.

Shares in Hong Kong jumped Monday after state media released a report on the meeting by the ruling Communist Party's Politburo that said leaders would "implement more active fiscal policies and moderately loose monetary policies."

The shift to "moderately loose" from the "prudent" monetary policies of the past 14 years was taken as a significant shift by market players, unleashing a spate of buying that pushed the Hang Seng index up 2.8%.

"This marks a significant recalibration in their approach, aiming to cushion the anticipated economic shocks" (from higher tariffs), Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management said in a commentary.

Several months ago, the Chinese central bank and other regulators began rolling out various policies aimed at encouraging businesses and households to spend more money. Overall, yesterday's statement mostly reiterated the same broad promises as usual.

"The readout leaves little doubt that the shift toward a more supportive policy stance that began in September is still alive and

AP PHOTO



Chinese Premier Li Qiang speaks as he chairs the "1+10" Dialogue on Building Consensus on Development to Promote Global Common Prosperity, at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing, yesterday

well," Julian Evans-Pritchard said in a report. He noted that the last such shift was in late 2008, during the global financial crisis, and that it may be followed by faster interest rate cuts in the coming year.

The meeting has set the tone for an annual economic planning meeting later in the week that will reaffirm policies for the coming year.

China's economy has growing a bit more slowly than the official target for a 5% expansion in annual terms this year, and the property market is still in the doldrums. Consumer spending remains subdued, having never fully recovered after the COVID-19

pandemic, and the statement from the Politburo meeting promised a "combination punch" of government spending and easier credit to help boost consumption.

Consumer inflation in November was a lower-than-expected 0.2%, the government reported yesterday, down from 0.3% the month before mainly due to lower food prices. That leaves ample room for interest rate cuts, analysts said.

With youth unemployment still relatively high and many households feeling the pinch of lower housing prices and unstable jobs, the statement called for improving the "people's sense of gain,

happiness and security."

"We must do a good job in people's livelihood protection and security and stability to ensure the stability of the overall social situation," it said.

Also yesterday, Li, who as premier has the traditional role of overseeing the economy, met with heads of the World Bank and other big international financial organizations.

Li did not refer to the United States by name, but took aim at countries that restrict trade through higher tariffs and other measures, in a veiled slam at Washington at a time when the U.S. has been tightening controls on exports

of advanced technology, while President-elect Donald Trump is threatening to sharply hike import duties on Chinese products.

"If we look at the obstacles to economic globalization, some countries now easily resort to imposing additional high tariffs, erecting barriers of protection. There are more and more restrictive measures on trade," Li said.

"The reason why I'm talking about this issue is that under the background of weak economic growth of the world, this issue has further increased uncertainties and caused huge interference to the operation of the global economy," he added. **MDT/AP**

TAIWAN

Taipei detected Chinese ships in nearby waters ahead of anticipated drills

BEIJING appears to be preparing for widely anticipated drills in response to a recent visit by Taiwan's leader to Hawaii and Guam.

Taiwan's defense ministry said yesterday that it detected Chinese naval and coast guard ships entering the Taiwan Strait and the western Pacific and that China had restricted airspace along its southeast coast through Wednesday.

There was no immedia-

te confirmation from the Chinese side.

It comes as U.S. President-elect Donald Trump said he would not commit to defending Taiwan if China were to invade during his presidency.

China says Taiwan is part of its territory and opposes American support and military sales to the self-governing island. Lai Ching-te made stops in Hawaii and Guam during a

weeklong tour of the Pacific that ended Friday.

China maintains that Taiwan is a province that should not have its own president or foreign relations.

Taiwan's defense ministry said it has set up an emergency response center and launched combat readiness exercises in response to Chinese activity in the Taiwan Strait. It did not say what those exerci-

ses entailed.

"It must be pointed out that there is no such thing as a defense ministry in Taiwan," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said when asked about the Taiwanese statement. "Taiwan is part of China, and the Taiwan issue is China's internal affairs. China will firmly safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity."

China, which views Lai as a separatist, held major military exercises around Taiwan following his inauguration in May and his national day speech in October. It also held a major drill after Nancy Pelosi, then the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, visited Taiwan in 2022.

The Taiwan defense ministry statement said China had restricted air space in

seven zones off Fujian province, which faces Taiwan, and off Zhejiang province, which stretches north from Fujian to Shanghai.

Trump was asked during a televised interview if he would commit to defending Taiwan.

"I never say, because I have to negotiate things, right?" he told NBC's "Meet the Press."

He said he had spoken in recent days with Chinese leader Xi Jinping but the two did not discuss the Taiwan issue.

"We talked about other things," he said. "But I have a very good relationship, and I hope he doesn't do it." **MDT/AP**

AUSTRALIA

Nauru agrees to give Canberra a veto right over pacts

ROD MCGUIRK,
MELBOURNE

AUSTRALIA announced a multimillion-dollar agreement with Nauru yesterday that gives Australia a veto right over a range of pacts the tiny Pacific atoll might want to enter with third countries including China.

Australia offered 140 million Australian dollars (\$89 million) over five years to the remote nation's population of 12,000 under the treaty to be implemented next year, including AU\$40 million (\$26 million) to enhance policing and security.

"Recognizing the security of one of us affects the security of both of us, the treaty provides that Nauru and Australia will jointly agree to any engagement by other countries in Nauru's security, banking and telecommunications sectors," Australian Prime Minister An-



Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese looks on as Nauru President David Adeang (right) signs the Australian Parliament House guest book in Canberra

thony Albanese said in a joint statement with Nauru President David Adeang at Australia's Parliament House.

Adeang said Nauru's partnership with Australia, its former colonial master, is "vital" to his country.

The pact has some similarities to a deal struck in May with Tuvalu, another tiny Pacific island nation with a similar-size population as Nauru, which also gave Australia a

veto power over third-country deals.

The Tuvalu deal followed a security agreement struck between China and the Solomon Islands in 2022 that has raised concerns of a Chinese naval base being established in the South Pacific.

Meg Keen, director of the Pacific Island Program at the Lowy Institute, a Sydney-based think tank on international policy, said Nauru had sacrific-

ed its ability to strike security, banking and infrastructure deals with China and other third parties in return for a big increase in Australian funding.

"It is a move by Australia to limit Chinese reach and influence in the region," Keen said in an email.

"The treaty allows Australia to strengthen regional ties and cement its leading role as the development and security partner of choice," she said.

A key part of the deal is that Nauru will retain an Australian bank.

The Commonwealth Bank of Australia will open a branch in Nauru next year after Australia's Bendigo Bank withdraws from the country.

"This treaty strengthens our own economy, enhances also our mutual security and addresses critical challenges like debanking and ensuring inclusive growth and resilience for our own people," Adeang said. MDT/AP

SOUTH KOREA

JUSTICE MINISTRY IMPOSES A TRAVEL BAN ON PRESIDENT YOON OVER MARTIAL LAW

SOUTH Korea's Justice Ministry yesterday imposed an overseas travel ban on President Yoon Suk Yeol as authorities investigate allegations of rebellion and other charges in connection with his short-lived declaration of martial law last week.

Yoon's martial law decree on Dec. 3, which brought special forces troops onto Seoul's streets, plunged South Korea into political turmoil and caused worry among its key diplomatic partners and neighbors. On Saturday, Yoon avoided an opposition-led bid to impeach him, with most governing party lawmakers boycotting a parliamentary vote.

But opposition parties vowed to submit a new impeachment motion against him this week.

Bae Sang-up, a Justice Ministry official, told a parliamentary hearing that it banned Yoon from leaving the country following requests by police, prosecutors and an anti-corruption agency as they expand their investigations into the circumstances surrounding Yoon's power grab.

Yesterday, a senior National Police Agency officer told local reporters in a background briefing that police can also detain Yoon if conditions are met. MDT/AP



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AP PHOTO



U.S. President-elect Donald Trump meets Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, last week

PUTIN'S WAR

Trump calls for immediate ceasefire in Ukraine

ELLEN KNICKMEYER,
WASHINGTON

DONALD Trump pushed Russian leader Vladimir Putin to act to reach an immediate ceasefire with Ukraine, describing it as part of his active efforts as president-elect to end the war despite weeks from taking office.

"Zelenskyy and Ukraine would like to make a deal and stop the madness," Trump wrote on social media, referring to Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

In a television interview that aired Sunday (yesterday, Macau time), Trump also said he would be open to reducing military aid to Ukraine and pulling the United States out of NATO. Those are two threats that have alarmed Ukraine, NATO allies and many in the U.S. national security community.

Asked on NBC's "Meet the Press" if he were actively working to end the nearly 3-year-old Ukraine war, Trump said, "I am."

He refused to say if he had spoken to Putin since winning election in November. "I don't want to say anything about that, because I don't want to do anything that could impede the negotiation," Trump said.

Trump's call for an immediate ceasefire went beyond the public policy stands taken by the Biden administration and Ukraine and drew a cautious response from Zelenskyy. It also marks Trump wading unusually deeply into efforts before his Jan. 20 inauguration to resolve one of the major glo-

bal crises facing the lame-duck Biden administration.

Trump made his proposal after a weekend meeting in Paris with French and Ukrainian leaders in Paris, where many world leaders gathered to celebrate the restoration of Notre Dame cathedral after a devastating fire. None of the advisers traveling with him appeared to have expertise on Ukraine.

Kyiv would like to close a deal, Trump wrote on his social media platform Truth Social. "There should be an immediate ceasefire and negotiations should begin."

"I know Vladimir well. This is his time to act. China can help. The World is waiting!" Trump added. He was referring to mediation efforts by China that many in the West have seen as favoring Russia.

Zelenskyy described his discussions Saturday with Trump, brought together by French President Emmanuel Macron, as "constructive" but has given no further details.

Zelenskyy cautioned that Ukraine needs a "just and robust peace, that Russians will not destroy within a few years."

"When we talk about an effective peace with Russia, we must talk first of all about effective peace guarantees. Ukrainians want peace more than anyone else. Russia brought war to our land," he said Sunday in a post on the Telegram messaging app.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded to Trump's post by repeating Moscow's long-standing message that it is open to talks with Ukraine. Peskov referenced a decree by Zelenskyy from October 2022

that declared the prospect of any talks "impossible" as long as Putin was Russia's leader.

That decree came after Putin proclaimed four occupied regions of Ukraine to be part of Russia, in what Kyiv and the West said was a clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty.

Trump's former national security adviser, retired Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, warned there was no such thing as a quick fix to ending Russia's war with Ukraine.

"What I'm worried about is this kind of flawed idea that Putin can be placated, right, that Putin will come to some kind of a deal," McMaster told "Fox News Sunday."

"I think it's really important for President Trump to adhere to his instinct in this connection ... peace through strength," McMaster said, adding, "How about give them what they need to defend themselves, and then saying to Putin, 'You're going to lose this war?'"

While Trump has said before that he would like to see a quick ceasefire in Ukraine, his proposal Sunday was framed as a direct appeal to Russia. The quick responses from Ukraine and Russia demonstrated the seriousness with which they regarded the idea from the incoming American president.

Both Trump and President Joe Biden pointed this weekend to Russia's disengagement in Syria, where the Russian military largely moved out of the way while Syrian rebels overthrew the country's Russian-allied president, as evidence of the extent to which the Ukraine war has sapped

Russia's resources.

Biden said at the White House on Sunday that resistance from Ukraine had "left Russia unable to protect its main ally in the Middle East."

The Biden administration and other supporters of Ukraine have made a point of not being seen to press Ukraine for an immediate truce. Ukraine's allies fear a quick deal would be largely on the terms of its more powerful neighbor, potentially forcing damaging concessions on Ukraine and allowing Russia to resume the war again once it has built back up its military strength.

Trump portrays himself as up to making fast deals to resolve conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East that have frustrated many of the Biden administration's own mediation efforts.

There is no prohibition on incoming officials or nominees meeting with foreign officials, and it is common and fine for them to do so — unless those meetings are designed to subvert or otherwise affect current U.S. policy.

The Logan Act bars private citizens from trying to intervene in "disputes or controversies" between the United States and foreign powers without government approval. But the 1799 statute has produced just two criminal cases, none since the 1850s and neither resulting in a criminal conviction.

In the NBC interview taped Friday, Trump renewed his warning to NATO allies that he did not see continued U.S. participation in the Western military alliance as a given during his second term. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1961 APARTHEID ATTACKED AT NOBEL CEREMONY



Albert Luthuli, leader of the banned African National Congress, has appealed for racial equality in South Africa after accepting the Nobel peace prize for 1960 in Oslo, Norway.

During a moving speech to distinguished guests - including King Olav of Norway - Mr Luthuli said he considered the award "a recognition of the sacrifices made by the peoples of all races [in South Africa] particularly the African people who have endured and suffered so much for so long".

Mr Luthuli received his prize for advocating non-violent resistance to racial discrimination dressed in traditional Zulu attire with a leopard-skin hat and necklace of lion's teeth.

He described South Africa as a "museum piece" and its policy of apartheid as "a hangover from the dark ages of mankind, a relic of an age which everywhere else is dead or dying".

He said his aim and that of his supporters was to end "such evils as white supremacy and racial discrimination, all of which are a threat to peace".

The South African authorities stripped him of his chieftainship for refusing to relinquish leadership of the ANC which was banned last year.

His movements are also restricted to a Zulu reservation but he was granted special permission to travel to Norway to accept his prize.

He is also under a suspended sentence for burning his pass, an identity document that must be carried only by non-white South Africans.

At the award ceremony in Oslo University, the chairman of the Nobel peace prize committee, Gunnar Jahn, paid tribute to the 62-year-old African leader in his struggle for human rights.

Mr Jahn said Mr Luthuli, who led the ANC from 1952 until it was banned last year, had done well to reject the use of force in his quest for racial harmony in South Africa.

He also praised Dag Hammarskjold, the late UN Secretary-General, who was today awarded the 1961 Nobel Peace Prize posthumously for his efforts to secure peace in Africa.

He was killed in a plane crash in Northern Rhodesia on 18 September this year and today his prize was accepted by Rolf Edberg, Swedish Ambassador to Norway.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Three days later South Africa's Foreign Minister Eric Louw condemned Alfred Luthuli's acceptance speech as "propaganda and incitement in Europe". In 1962 Mr Luthuli was prohibited from attending meetings or making speeches and all his statements were banned from South African media. Then on 21 July 1967 he was killed by a train as he was crossing a railway bridge near his home. Ten thousand people attended his funeral in the Grootville African Reserve. After the ANC was forced to go underground in 1960 it switched to violent tactics such as industrial and economic sabotage through its military wing led by Nelson Mandela. The ban on the ANC was not lifted until 1990. Mr Mandela was himself awarded the Nobel peace prize with President FW de Klerk in 1993 and elected South Africa's first black president in the country's first multi-racial elections held in 1994.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
Mar. 21-Apr. 19
 You're growing stronger. Personal matters take focus. Your experience makes you attractive. Imagine winning. Go for it and keep your eyes on the prize.

TAURUS
Apr. 20-May. 20
 Rest and recharge. Review the current situation and make plans. Consider things philosophically. Avoid provoking jealousies by staying sensitive to others.

GEMINI
May. 21-Jun. 21
 Rely on each other. Share ideas and information with friends. Support community goals, wishes and dreams. Avoid snarky commentary. Keep a gracious public profile.

CANCER
Jun. 22-Jul. 22
 Take advantage of being in the professional spotlight. You're attracting the attention of someone influential. Show respect and gain love. Stay on task.

LEO
Jul. 23-Aug. 22
 Time to expand your territory. Keep your objectives in mind. Plan routes in advance to avoid delays and traffic. Get adventurous. Investigate possibilities.

VIRGO
Aug. 23-Sep. 22
 A lack of funds would mess with your plans. Manage accounts and budgets. Stay in communication with interested parties. Contribute to support your family.

LIBRA
Sep. 23-Oct. 22
 Compromise. Negotiate with your partner to refine the plan. Strategize and align your interests. Imagine perfection, work out the steps and coordinate who does what.

SCORPIO
Oct. 23-Nov. 21
 Focus on physical labors. Prioritize health and fitness. The pace is picking up. A change to the status quo is possible. Watch for openings.

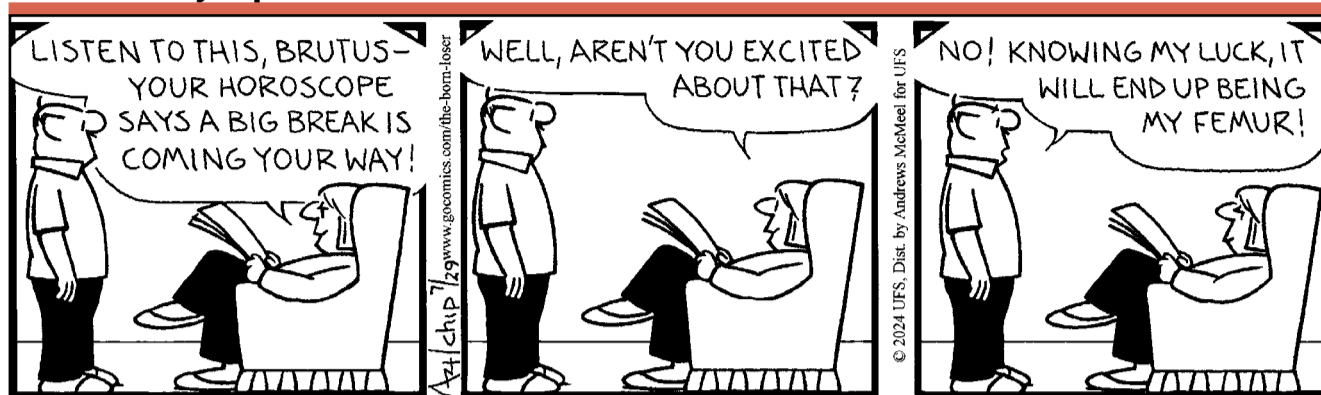
SAGITTARIUS
Nov. 22-Dec. 21
 Relax. Games and fun require your attention. You're attractive and attracted. Give in to unexpected visits or spontaneous diversion. Fall in love again.

CAPRICORN
Dec. 22-Jan. 19
 Household issues need focus now. Stick close to home and get your chores done. Plan a project to beautify and improve your family's space.

AQUARIUS
Jan. 20-Feb. 18
 Participate in interesting conversations. You can learn what you need. Update your skills. Brief your team on a brilliant idea. Listen and share options.

PISCES
Feb. 19-Mar. 20
 Maintain momentum. You can find resources from unexpected sources. Invest in success. Follow an elder's advice. Prioritize basics. Build and grow.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-4	7	fine
Changchun	-13	-3	fine
Chengdu	5	9	cloudy
Chongqing	8	10	overcast
Fuzhou	14	20	overcast
Guangzhou	14	23	cloudy
Guiyang	1	5	rain
Haikou	18	25	rain
Hangzhou	7	12	rain
Harbin	-15	-10	cloudy
Hefei	4	7	rain
Nanjing	6	9	rain
Shanghai	8	10	rain
Taipei	17	20	rain
Wuhan	5	7	rain
Hong Kong	21	25	overcast
WORLD			
Moscow	-7	-3	cloudy
Frankfurt	2	4	cloudy
Paris	4	6	rain
London	6	7	rain
New York	11	11	cloudy

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Durango dwellings; 6- German river; 10- Church section; 14- Love deeply; 15- ___ breve; 16- Environmental sci.; 17- Speed demon; 18- WWII event; 19- Must've been something ___; 20- ___ Lanka; 21- Eastern; 23- Go along (with); 24- "Forbidden" fruit; 26- Alternate; 27- One giving a ring; 29- Additional pay; 31- Mixture; 32- Faucet stuff; 33- Neckwear; 36- In spite of; 40- Shoebox letters; 41- Portals; 42- Taj Mahal town; 43- Alpaca's cousin; 44- Like the back of a fraidy cat?; 46- On ___-to-know basis; 48- Frozen rain; 49- Shed ___; 50- Young hooter; 52- Parisian season; 55- Hill toy; 56- Capital city of Western Samoa; 57- Bert's roomie; 59- "Smooth Operator" singer; 60- Riga resident; 61- Luster; 62- Winter Palace ruler; 63- Throb; 64- Now;

DOWN 1- Limos, hatchbacks, and coupes; 2- Hebrew month; 3- Debutante; 4- Exist; 5- Mariachi's wrap; 6- Hawkins of Dogpatch; 7- Alan of "M*A*S*H"; 8- Space pioneer Shepard; 9- Narrow beam of light; 10- Equine sounds; 11- Without ___ in the world; 12- Elector; 13- Gen. Robert ___; 22- Camera type, briefly; 23- Take ___ for the worse; 25- Agricultural implement; 26- ___-Day vitamins; 27- Circle at bottom, point at top; 28- Hand cream ingredient; 29- Iraqi port; 30- Ed and Mel of baseball; 32- To ___ it may concern; 33- Made tighter; 34- As to; 35- Crikey!; 37- Lazybones; 38- Tailless amphibian; 39- Freshwater fish; 43- Directing head; 44- Pub drink; 45- Student's second chance; 46- World book; 47- ___ lift?; 48- Roofing stone; 49- Kind of D.A.; 50- Crude cartel; 51- Accompanied by; 53- ___ yellow ribbon...; 54- Start of a counting rhyme; 56- Pie ___ mode; 58- Letter after pi;

Friday's solution

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 PJ (Picket) 28 557 775
 PSP 28 573 333
 Customs 28 559 944
 S. J. Hospital 28 313 731
 Kiang Wu Hospital 28 371 333
 Commission Against Corruption (CCAC) 28326 300
 IAM 28 387 333
 Tourism 28 333 000
 Airport 59 888 88

Taxi 28 939 939 / 2828 3283
 Water Supply - Report 2822 0088
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 Electricity - Report 28 339 922
 Macau Daily Times 28 716 081

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SKIING

Pinheiro Braathen performs snow samba to celebrate Brazil's first podium in World Cup ski race

ANDREW DAMPF

IT'S not just soccer anymore. Brazil is finding World Cup success in skiing now, too.

Lucas Pinheiro Braathen became the first Brazilian skier to finish on a World Cup podium when he placed second in a giant slalom in Beaver Creek, Colorado, on Sunday.

Pinheiro Braathen celebrated the achievement in truly Brazilian — and Pinheiro — style: with a samba dance on the podium, the Brazilian flag wrapped around his waist and cowboy boots on his feet.

“What a moment to break out a dance in front of all these amazing fans here today. I came onto the circuit to make a difference. I came here to be myself and hopefully be an inspiration to the



outcasts out there, to the people that feel a bit different, to follow their own path,” Pinheiro Braathen said.

“It's such a privilege to be able to be the first one to bring the Brazilian flag — something that I'm so proud of — up to a winter

sport World Cup podium,” he added.

Pinheiro Braathen's mother is Brazilian and his father is Norwegian. He had raced for Norway until abruptly retiring a little more than a year ago after getting into a dispute with the Norwegian

ski federation following modeling work for a rival brand of the federation's clothing supplier.

In March, Pinheiro Braathen announced his comeback for Brazil, a federation that had not been represented on Alpine skiing's World Cup circuit since 2016.

Brazil has never won a medal at the Winter Olympics but now Pinheiro Braathen will likely be a contender at next season's Milan-Cortina Games. So could Nicole Silveira, who finished third in a World Cup skeleton race in Pyeongchang, South Korea, last month for Brazil's first podium result in a winter sport.

The only man who competed in Alpine skiing for Brazil at the 2022 Beijing Olympics was Michel Macedo, who didn't finish his second slalom run.

Pinheiro Braathen's result got

little coverage in Brazil on Sunday, which was also the day when the final round of the nation's soccer league was being played. But skiing is hardly followed in Brazil, where there is not much in the way of Alpine resorts. Argentina and Chile are better known as skiing destinations in South America.

Pinheiro Braathen won five World Cup races when he represented Norway: three slaloms and two giant slaloms. He also won the 2022-23 season-long slalom title — but he missed that season's world championships due to an appendectomy.

One of skiing's most vibrant personalities, known for painting his fingernails and a taste for fashion, Pinheiro Braathen often cites Ronaldinho and Dennis Rodman as his idols. He noted how many challenges he's had to overcome in the sport.

“It's standing up against all the pressure and all the potential judgement that follows when going your own path,” he said, noting that skiing is “a quite masculine” sport.

Having put down the fastest second run after placing fourth in the opening leg, Pinheiro Braathen finished a slim 0.12 seconds behind Swiss first-time winner Thomas Tumler to improve upon two fourth-place finishes earlier this season. **MDT/AP**

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IN MACAU (2023)



OPINION

World Views

JON GAMBRELL, MDT/AP



COLLAPSE OF SYRIA'S ASSAD IS A BLOW TO IRAN'S 'AXIS OF RESISTANCE'

For Iran's theocratic government, it keeps getting worse.

Its decadeslong strategy of building an "Axis of Resistance" supporting militant groups and proxies around the region is falling apart. First came the crushing Israeli campaign in Gaza triggered by the Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel by Iranian-backed Hamas.

That war spawned another in Lebanon, where Israel has mauled Iran's most powerful ally, Hezbollah, even as Israel has launched successful airstrikes openly inside of Iran for the first time.

And now Iran's longtime stalwart ally and client in Syria, President Bashar Assad, is gone. As dawn broke Sunday, rebel forces completed a lightning offensive by seizing the ancient capital of Damascus and tearing down symbols of more than 50 years of Assad's rule over the Mideast crossroads.

Ali Akbar Velayati, a key adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, once called Assad and Syria "the golden ring of the resistance chain in the region."

"Without the Syrian government, this chain will break and the resistance against Israel and its supporters will be weakened."

That break in the chain is literal. Syria was an important geographical link that allowed Iran to move weapons and other supplies to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Its loss now further weakens Hezbollah, whose powerful arsenal in southern Lebanon had put Iranian influence directly on the border of its nemesis Israel.

Iran still holds the card of its nuclear program. Though it denies that intention, it can use the potential for building a weapons capability to cast a shadow of influence in the region.

It's a dramatic reversal in Iran's regional might

Only a few years ago, the Islamic Republic loomed ascendant across the wider Middle East. Its "Axis of Resistance" was at a zenith.

Hezbollah in Lebanon stood up against Israel. Assad appeared to have weathered an Arab Spring uprising-turned-civil war. Iraqi insurgents killed U.S. troops with Iranian-designed roadside bombs. Yemen's Houthis fought a Saudi-led coalition to a stalemate.

Syria, at the crossroads, played a vital role.

But the speed of Assad's collapse the past week showed just how reliant he was on support from Iran and Russia — which at the crucial moment didn't come.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Assad's fall a "historic day," saying it was "the direct result of our forceful action against Hezbollah and Iran, Assad's main supporters."

Iran's theocratic rulers long touted their regional network to Iranians as a show of their country's strength, and its crumbling could raise repercussions at home — though there is no immediate sign of their hold weakening. Anger over the tens of billions of dollars Iran is believed to have spent propping up Assad was a rallying cry in rounds of nationwide anti-government protests that have broken out over recent years, most recently in 2022.

Iran could respond by revving up its nuclear program

The loss of Syria does not mean the end of Iran's ability to project power in the Mideast.

There remains a risk of wider attacks in the region, particularly on oil infrastructure. An attack in 2019 initially claimed by the Houthis but later assessed by experts to have been carried out by Iran temporarily halved Saudi Arabia's production of oil.

Whatever happens next, Iran will need to make the decision weighing the problems it faces at both home and abroad. [Abridged]

THE HUNT FOR UNITEDHEALTHCARE CEO'S ELUSIVE KILLER YIELDS NEW EVIDENCE, BUT FEW ANSWERS

THE BUZZ

Police don't know who he is, where he is, or why he did it.

As the frustrating search for UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson's killer got underway for a fifth day yesterday (Macau time), investigators reckoned with a tantalizing contradiction: They have troves of evidence, but the shooter remains an enigma.

One conclusion they are confident of, however: It was a targeted attack, not a random one.

They know he ambushed Thompson at ET 6:44 a.m. Wednesday as the executive arrived at the Hilton for his company's annual investor conference, using a 9 mm pistol that resembled the guns farmers

use to put down animals without causing a loud noise. They know ammunition found near Thompson's body bore the words "delay," "deny" and "depose," mimicking a phrase used by insurance industry critics.

The fact that the shooter knew UnitedHealthcare group was holding a conference at the hotel and what route Thompson might take to get there suggested that he could possibly be a disgruntled employee or client, NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny said.

Over the weekend, police divers were seen searching a pond in Central Park, where the killer fled after the shooting.



AP PHOTO

SYRIAN REBELS FREE PRISONERS FROM ASSAD'S NOTORIOUS DUNGEONS WHO CELEBRATE IN DAMASCUS STREETS

KAREEM CHEHAYEB, DAMASCUS

BASHAR Barhoum woke in his dungeon prison cell in Damascus at dawn Sunday, thinking it would be the last day of his life.

The 63-year-old writer was supposed to have been executed after being imprisoned for seven months.

But he soon realized the men at the door weren't from former Syrian President Bashar Assad's notorious security forces, ready to take him to his death. Instead, they were rebels coming to set him free.

As the insurgents swept across Syria in just 10 days to bring an end to the Assad family's 50-year rule, they broke into prisons and security facilities to free political prisoners and many of the tens of thousands of people who disappeared since the conflict began back in 2011.

Barhoum was one of those freed who were celebrating in Damascus.

"I haven't seen the sun until today," Barhoum told The Associated Press after walking in disbelief through the streets of Damascus. "Instead of being dead tomorrow, thank God, he gave me a new lease of life."

Barhoum couldn't find

his cellphone and belongings in the prison so set off to find a way to tell his wife and daughters that he's alive and well.

Videos shared widely across social media showed dozens of prisoners running in celebration after the insurgents released them, some barefoot and others wearing little clothing. One of them screams in celebration after he finds out that the government has fallen.

Torture, executions and starvation in Syria's prisons

Syria's prisons have been infamous for their harsh conditions. Torture is systematic, say human rights groups, whistleblowers, and former detainees. Secret executions have been reported at more than two dozen facilities run by Syrian intelligence, as well as at other sites.

In 2013, a Syrian military defector, known as "Caesar," smuggled out over 53,000 photographs that human rights groups say showed clear evidence of rampant torture, but also disease and starvation in Syria's prison facilities.

Syria's feared security apparatus and prisons did not only serve to isolate Assad's opponents, but also to instill fear among his own people said Lina Khatib, Associate Fellow in

the Middle East and North Africa program at the London think tank Chatham House.

"Anxiety about being thrown in one of Assad's notorious prisons created wide mistrust among Syrians," Khatib said. "Assad nurtured this culture of fear to maintain control and crush political opposition."

Just north of Damascus in the Saydnaya military prison, known as the "human slaughterhouse," women detainees, some with their children, screamed as men broke the locks off their cell doors. Amnesty International and other groups say that dozens of people were secretly executed every week in Saydnaya, estimating that up to 13,000 Syrians were killed between 2011 and 2016.

"Don't be afraid ... Bashar Assad has fallen! Why are you afraid?" said one of the rebels as he tried to rush streams of women out of their jam-packed tiny cells.

Tens of thousands of detainees have so far been freed, said Rami Abdurrahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based pro-opposition war monitor.

Over the past 10 days, insurgents freed prisoners in cities including Aleppo, Homs, Hama as well as Damascus. MDT/AP



AP PHOTO

Australia Authorities declared an arson attack on Melbourne's Adass Israel Synagogue an act of terrorism, increasing investigation resources. The blaze follows rising antisemitism and is the first terrorism designation since April. A new federal initiative targets hate crimes against Australia's Jewish community.



AP PHOTO

Bangladesh and India yesterday [Macau time] held high-level talks in Dhaka to address tensions following Sheikh Hasina's exile and attacks on minorities. India emphasized support for a stable Bangladesh, while Dhaka urged non-interference, dismissing allegations of escalating minority-targeted violence as exaggerated.



AP PHOTO

Saudi Arabia The Trump Organization announced two new luxury real estate projects in Riyadh, partnering with London-based Dar Global. The deals expand Trump's Middle Eastern portfolio, following ventures in Dubai and Oman, and come weeks before Donald Trump's return to the White House.



AP PHOTO

Moroccan company Moldiag is producing Africa's first mpox tests, selling them for \$5. This milestone addresses testing shortages, with orders from Congo, Nigeria, and Uganda. The initiative aligns with Africa's push for self-reliance after struggles to obtain medical supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic.