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BEIJING RAISES ITS ESTIMATE FOR THE SIZE OF ITS ECONOMY IN 2023

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China launched a new amphibious assault ship Friday, capable of launching fighter jets and designed to strengthen the navy's combat ability in distant seas. The Sichuan, the first ship of the 076 type, is China's largest such ship yet, displacing 40,000 tons and equipped with an electromagnetic catapult which will allow fighter jets to launch directly off its deck, according to the official Xinhua news agency.



AP PHOTO

Hong Kong Hundreds gathered on Saturday to watch the city's first pyrotechnics drone show, as part of a campaign to raise support and awareness of panda conservation. The 10-minute drone show featured 1,000 drones, some of which were equipped with fireworks, flying over the Victoria Harbour and forming images of the city's giant pandas.



AP PHOTO

Norway Top ranked chess player Magnus Carlsen (pictured) has left the World Rapid and Blitz Chess Championships after refusing to change out of the jeans he wore to the competition, the International Chess Federation said. The federation said in a Friday statement that its regulations include a dress code that bars participants from wearing jeans at the event.



AP PHOTO

Sweden Burial associations are looking to acquire enough land for something they hope they'll never have to do: bury thousands of people in the event of war. The search follows recommendations from the Church of Sweden's national secretariat, which reflect crisis preparedness guidelines from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) and the Swedish Armed Forces.

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**EXTERNAL
MERCHANDISE TRADE
DECLINES IN NOVEMBER**

Macau's total merchandise exports and imports amounted to MOP1.15 billion and MOP11.49 billion respectively in November, down 17.3% and 7.8% year-on-year, according to the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC). The merchandise trade deficit totaled MOP10.34 billion in November. From January to November, the total value of merchandise exports rose 1.7% year-on-year to MOP12.46 billion, while the total value of merchandise imports dropped 9.1% to MOP117.70 billion. The merchandise trade deficit totaled MOP105.23 billion in the first eleven months of the year, down MOP12.04 billion from the same period last year.

**GNI, GDP SOAR AMID
RECOVERY EFFORTS IN
2023**

Macau's Gross National Income (GNI) surged by 50.9% year-on-year in real terms to MOP359.81 billion in 2023, fueled by a 75.1% increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which reached MOP369.33 billion. Information from the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC) shows that the total outflow of external factor income skyrocketed by 264.7% to MOP117.53 billion, while inflows rose by 58.3% to MOP108.01 billion. Consequently, net external factor income recorded a deficit of MOP9.51 billion. Per-capita GNI also grew significantly to MOP530,504, reflecting both rising GNI and steady population growth.

**VETERINARY CARE
PROVIDERS MUST
APPLY FOR LICENSES BY
JANUARY**

A new law governing veterinary clinical care and commercial animal activities took effect on April 1, 2024, mandating that qualifying establishments apply for a provisional license by Jan. 25. The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) is urging compliance ahead of the transitional period's end on March 31. Under the law, establishments involved in veterinary care, breeding, sale, and boarding must secure a license to operate legally. IAM has been conducting briefings and inspections to assist businesses in understanding their obligations to promote the orderly and sustainable development of the veterinary and animal industries.



**CRIME
FIVE RESIDENTS LURED INTO
HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

VICTORIA CHAN

FIVE local residents, including a 16-year-old boy, have fallen victim to human trafficking schemes involving telecommunications and internet scams in Taiwan and Cambodia, the Judiciary Police (PJ) has reported late last week.

According to the PJ, the victims were misled by false promises of high-paying jobs abroad. Four individuals, comprising three men and one woman,

traveled to Taiwan, where they were coerced into participating in illegal activities before being detained by local authorities.

The fifth victim, a 38-year-old woman, was lured to Cambodia but managed to escape and return to Macau, as reported by local media.

As cited in media reports, the scammers had falsely claimed the relevant jobs did not require any skills or prior work experience, and that the compensation would be generous. The job

seekers mistakenly believed these statements to be true.

Additionally, some individuals were aware that the tasks they would be performing before traveling abroad were potentially illegal, but still decided to take the risk in pursuit of profit.

The PJ's investigation began in September after receiving reports of missing residents. Authorities discovered criminal organizations were using social media platforms to post fake job advertisements, often offering

incentives such as airfare and accommodation. Upon arrival, victims had their passports and mobile phones confiscated, trapping them in exploitative situations, unable to contact their families.

A report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights indicated hundreds of thousands of individuals, primarily Chinese nationals, have been trafficked to Southeast Asia for similar purposes. The report, published in August 2023, said at least 120,000 people were trafficked to Myanmar and around 100,000 to Cambodia.

Cases of telecom and internet fraud in Macau increased 75.8% in 2023, with estimated losses amounting to MOP311 million. Official data released in February showed the region recorded 1,306 scams committed via phone or online last year, an increase of 735 cases compared to 2022.

The PJ has launched an anti-fraud app on the Chinese social network WeChat, enabling users to check suspicious phone numbers, bank accounts and email addresses. Residents are urged to be cautious of high-paying job offers abroad and to avoid becoming unwitting accomplices in fraud schemes.

The police said that in Taiwan, individuals involved in fraud or money laundering can face prison sentences of up to seven and 10 years, respectively.

**TRAFFIC
Fatal accident in Hac Sa
sparks safety concerns**

NADIA SHAW

A traffic accident on Hac Sa road in Coloane claimed the life of a motorcyclist Saturday morning, reigniting concerns over road safety in the area. The incident occurred around 8 a.m. when a motorcycle collided with a heavy goods vehicle, leaving the rider unconscious at the scene. Despite immediate medical attention, he was pronounced dead shortly after arriving at the



hospital.

Ng Chi Long, vice chairman of the Hac Sa Village Mutual Aid

Association, expressed alarm over the frequency of serious accidents in the area.

"There have been many serious accidents in this area in recent years," he said, urging local authorities to take swift action to enhance traffic safety. He pointed out the hazardous conditions, noting the accident site is near a youth activity development base and is surrounded by slopes, curves and various facilities.

"The area is bustling with private cars and construction vehicles," Ng added. "In the past, vehicles have been suspected of not properly engaging their brakes and colliding." With plans for more facilities like a youth activity camp and Happy Farm, he fears increasing traffic could

lead to more tragedies unless measures are enforced.

Ng suggested several safety improvements, including installing speed bumps similar to those on Av. Marginal Flor de Lotus, adding fisheye cameras at vehicle entrances, and erecting clear signage to remind drivers to slow down. He also proposed considering a speed limit for this residential section and installing speed monitoring systems to protect pedestrians and vehicles alike.

The police continue to investigate the cause of the collision and are appealing for witnesses with any information related to the accident.

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EVENTS

Cotai outdoor venue hosts 11,000 at its inaugural concert

NADIA SHAW

THE newly inaugurated Macao Outdoor Performance Venue welcomed approximately 11,000 attendees for its opening concert Dec. 28. Organized by the Cultural Bureau (IC), the event celebrated the 25th anniversary of Macau's return to China with an array of performances.

"This venue is a game-changer for our entertainment industry," said Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai during a pre-concert visit. "It not

only enhances our cultural offerings but also promotes economic diversification." The venue spans 94,000 square meters and can accommodate over 50,000 spectators.

The concert featured over 30 artists from Hong Kong, Macau, mainland China, and South Korea, including popular names like Hins Cheung and Janice M. Vidal, with a vibrant stage setup and dynamic visual effects.

"This is just the beginning. We are excited to see how this space evolves into a hub for internatio-

nal performances," said IC president Deland Leong.

The first event also served as a trial run for the venue's facilities and crowd management systems.

"We wanted to ensure everything was in place for a smooth experience," said Leong. The concert ran for two and a half hours and concluded with a collaborative performance of "Heritage and Origin," commemorating the 25th anniversary of Macau's return to the motherland.

In preparation for the event, officials conducted extensive

planning to ensure safety and organization.

"Our priority was to manage the flow of people effectively," said Commissioner General of the Unitary Police Service Leong Man Cheong.

Looking ahead, the IC plans to open the venue for events throughout 2025, inviting proposals from local and international organizations. The aim is to attract major cultural festivals and enhance Macau's reputation as a "City of Shows."

"We are committed to making

this venue a cornerstone of our cultural tourism strategy," said the IC president.

Meanwhile, lawmaker Ella Lei emphasized the importance of free public transportation for the recent concert, which facilitated quicker evacuations.

However, she noted that future events organized by private entities may not offer similar travel arrangements, prompting a need for the government to enhance overall transportation coordination.

She proposed conducting further tests under various scenarios, including adverse weather conditions, to ensure preparedness.

Lei also recommended introducing shuttle buses to key areas in the city as this would help manage pick-up, drop-off, and queuing more effectively at designated locations.

TOURISM

Visitors surge this Christmas season

NADIA SHAW

MACAU experienced a festive boom this Christmas, welcoming approximately 117,000 visitors Dec. 25, marking an 8% increase from the previous year. According to Public Security Police (PSP) figures, about 110,000 visitors departed the city on the same day, reflecting the city's vibrant holiday atmosphere.

In total, around 679,000 people crossed the borders of the Special Administrative Region (SAR) that day, with 361,000 being inbound travelers. The Border Gate, the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, and Qingmao Port were the busiest crossings.

Despite this Christmas Day surge, visitor arrivals on Christmas Eve saw a notable decline of 18%



compared to last year, with only 98,000 entering Macau. However, the combined entries and exits for that day still showed a slight increase of about 4% from 2023.

"The fluctuations in visitor numbers reflect both seasonal trends and economic factors impacting travel," said Andy Wu, head of the Travel Industry Council of Macau.

The lead-up to Christmas also saw significant

activity. Last Saturday's Winter Solstice attracted around 110,000 tourists—a remarkable 45% increase year-on-year. With an average of 95,000 visitors per day throughout November, the city is experiencing a tourism recovery that is nearing pre-pandemic levels.

Former Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng indicated in a Legislative Assembly plenary session that visitor arrivals could indeed

reach 34 million this year, surpassing initial targets.

To attract tourists during this festive period, the MGTO has organized various events including the "Light Up Macao" festival and an outdoor concert. The annual Tap Seac Square Christmas Market is also ongoing until Jan. 1. Tourists have expressed diverse motivations for their visit. Some were drawn by fireworks displays and concert performances, while others came to experience Macau's cultural heritage.

However, local business owners report that while foot traffic has increased, spending per visitor has decreased compared to last year.

"The weaker yuan has impacted purchasing power for many mainland visitors," one business owner noted.

LABOR

EMPLOYMENT STEADY IN LAST QUARTER

MACAU'S general unemployment rate and the unemployment rate of residents remained unchanged in the third quarter of 2024, while underemployment rose slightly, according to the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC).

The general unemployment rate for September-November 2024 stood at 1.7%, unchanged from the previous August-October period. Similarly, the unemployment rate of local residents held steady at 2.3%. However, the underemployment rate rose by 0.3 percentage points to 1.5%.

The labor force living in Macau grew by 1,800 to 386,000, while total employment increased by the same amount to 379,300. The number of employed residents also rose by 800 to 287,300. Employment in the gaming sector and financial activities increased, but declined in the

hotels, restaurants and similar activities industry.

The number of unemployed individuals was 6,700, similar to the previous period. Most of the unemployed were previously engaged in the gaming sector and retail trade. The proportion of new labor market entrants seeking their first job dropped 3.6 percentage points to 14.6% of the total unemployed.

The number of underemployed individuals increased by 1,100 to 5,800, with the majority working in real estate and business activities as well as the transport and storage sector.

Compared to the same period in 2023, the labor force participation rate decreased 0.4 percentage points to 68%, and the unemployment rate declined 0.6 percentage points to 1.7%. The underemployment rate, however, rose 0.1 percentage point to 1.5%. VC

PUBLIC WORKS

IAM UNDER FIRE FOR DELAYED RESPONSE TO FAULTY STREET SIGNS

VICTORIA CHAN

THE Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) has been criticized for failing to promptly report issues with faulty street signs.

An internal investigation from the Office of the Secretary for Administration and Justice disclosed that the staff did not take immediate action to address these problems, leading to significant delays in remedial measures.

In early September, IAM officials discovered several street signs had become detached, raising suspicions of fraudulent activity involving the contractor responsible for the signage replacement. A subsequent police investigation led to the arrest of individuals associated with the contractor, who were referred



to judicial authorities.

The IAM is tasked with the installation, maintenance and replacement of public street signage. A contract awarded to the lowest bidder, totaling MOP1.1

million, included MOP258,000 specifically for the production of signage. However, inspections revealed the new street name tiles, which began to be installed in January, were sub-

standard. The tiles exhibited yellowing and glaze separation, which was attributed to a production method that deviated from the underglaze process specified in the contract.

Despite the IAM's duty to monitor quality, inspection staff failed to promptly report these defects. It was not until September—after further investigation revealed the extent of the problem—that IAM filed a police complaint and initiated the replacement of the faulty signage.

The internal investigation report criticized the bureau's inspection protocols, noting a lack of rigor and ineffective internal communication. It revealed the organization did not adequately follow up on the issues that arose during inspections.

"This incident has negatively impacted society and exposed significant deficiencies in IAM's

engineering practices and internal management," the report stated.

In light of these findings, the Secretary for Administration and Justice, André Cheong, proposed a reshuffling of IAM's management, which included the replacement of José Tavares (who had previously announced his retirement) with Chao Wai Ieng as president.

According to the report, the IAM has a history of successfully executing various municipal projects, including those related to sewage drainage and environmental hygiene, garnering public recognition. However, this incident has underscored the need for a comprehensive review of its operational procedures. The report called for the establishment of strict internal standards, a reevaluation of the organization's structure, and an increase in operational efficiency.

Additionally, the investigation pointed to potential disciplinary infractions among IAM staff, suggesting the need for further inquiry into individual misconduct.

GBA

Sam Hou Fai highlights women's role in regional growth

NADIA SHAW

STATE Councillor Chen Yiqin and Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai emphasized the crucial role of women's contributions to regional development at the inaugural "Sisters Join Hands to Build a Good Home in the Greater Bay Area" event held yesterday in Macau. The event aimed to strengthen collaboration among women across the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area.

During the opening ceremony, Chen underscored the essential roles women play within the 'One country, two systems' framework.

"Women's roles are irreplaceable in promoting development and building the Greater Bay Area," she stated.

Echoing this sentiment, Sam Hou Fai noted an increase in cooperation among women from Macau and



its sister cities.

"Women hold up half the sky," he said, praising their crucial role in advancing societal progress. He added that recent exchanges have produced significant results, showcasing the strength of female collaboration.

Chen also referenced President Xi Jinping's recent visit to Macau, where he commended the region's achievements since its return to China.

"President Xi's support reflects his deep concern for Macau and

provides guidance for our continued development," she said. This event builds on efforts initiated by the All-China Women's Federation in 2020 to unify and empower women in the region.

As part of the discussions, Chen shared three guiding principles for women in the Bay Area: leveraging Xi's vision for 'One country, two systems,' actively participating in regional development, and enhancing women's well-being through coordinated

efforts.

"Throughout history, women have been a key force in achieving family happiness, promoting social harmony, and driving urban development," she added.

Sam concluded by noting that women account for approximately 54% of Macau's population, underscoring their importance as a driving force behind development.

"Together, we can create a new chapter for high-quality development," he said.



SPORTS

TEAM MICHAEL CHANG WINS 2024 MGM MACAU TENNIS MASTERS

Team Michael Chang emerged victorious at the 2024 MGM Macau Tennis Masters, defeating Team Li Na 11-6. Held last week at the Macau Forum, the tournament featured an innovative Captains Challenge format.

"It's been great to have such an incredible team—everyone played brilliantly and contributed," said Chang after the match.

The competition began with singles matches, where players rotated after losing rallies, intensifying the excitement. Andrey Rublev secured the championship for Team Chang by defeating Casper Ruud in a single-point contest. Karolina Muchova set the

tone early, defeating Wang Xinyu 6-3, 7-5.

Rising star Shang Juncheng also made headlines by defeating Kei Nishikori 6-3, 6-4 in a friendly exhibition match characterized by "trick shots, comedic antics, and infectious laughter." Shang expressed his delight, stating, "Exhibitions are always special. I really enjoy my time here."

The event was organized by MGM and IMG and marked a significant moment in tennis as Asia's first mixed-gender format tournament. Muchova praised the experience in Macau, saying, "They treat us so well, and there are so many fans." NS

ZHUHAI TRAGEDY

Man sentenced to death for killing 35 people after driving into a crowd

KEN MORITSUGU, BEIJING

A court in China has sentenced a man to death for killing 35 people last month by driving into a crowd, in an attack that raised national concern about mass killings.

Fan Weiqiu was venting his anger because he was unhappy with his divorce settlement, the court in the southern city of Zhuhai said in handing down the sentence on Friday. The victims were exercising at a sports center. Fan pleaded guilty to endangering public safety by dangerous means, a court statement said.

Fan's "criminal motive was extremely despicable, the nature of the crime was extremely vile, the means of the crime were particularly cruel, and the consequences of the crime were particularly severe, resulting in great social harm," the court said.



The attack was one of several in China in late October and November and spurred Chinese leader Xi Jinping to order local governments to take steps to prevent future "extreme cases." His order prompted vows from local leaders to examine personal disputes that could trigger aggression, from marital trou-

bles to disagreements over inheritance.

Fan's sentence was the second one handed down in quick succession just weeks after the recent attacks, much faster than court cases normally take in China.

A court last week gave a suspended death sentence with

a two-year reprieve to a driver who injured 30 people when he drove into elementary school students and parents in Hunan province. Such sentences are usually commuted to life in prison.

The court in the city of Changde said the driver was taking out his frustrations after losing mo-

ney he had invested.

Such attacks on crowds, with a vehicle or a knife, are not new in China, but the spate this fall and the high number of victims in the Zhuhai attack renewed the focus on the issue. The attackers are often taking out their anger and frustration over a personal matter in what are known as "revenge on society" crimes.

Chinese authorities keep a tight lid on any reports about the attacks.

The death toll in Zhuhai wasn't announced until 24 hours after the attack. In addition to the 35 people killed, another 43 were injured, police said. The driver, Fan, who was 62 years old, was found in his vehicle trying to stab himself with a knife, a police statement said.

Police set up barricades the day after the attack and barred people from entering the sports complex. Members of the public left bouquets of flowers by an adjacent square instead. MDT/AP

AD

Academic Year 2025/2026 Central Registration for Children Entering Kindergarten for the First Time



Aims

Optimise schools' enrolment mechanism; simplify the steps for parents to enrol their children in kindergarten for the first time; enable parents to confirm the preferred schools as early as possible.

Targets

Macao residents aged 3 by 31 December 2025, and will enrol in infant education in Macao for the first time.

Gentle Reminder:

- To enrol in schools in Macao, non-Macao residents must possess a stay permit or residence permit for over 90 days issued by the competent entity of the Macao SAR. Parents must process the registration at any of the DSEDJ counters.
- Schools set no limit to the number of registrants and interviews. There is also no priority for early registration in the Central Registration system. Therefore, there is no need to be hurry to process registration.
- Macao residents can apply for "school for children of Macao residents" in Hengqin through Central Registration; it is not counted as the registration limit of 6 schools.
- At the time of interview, parents should show the screenshot of "Interview QR Code" on their phone to the school staff. The QR Code can be reused.
- Parents only need to bring the screenshot of the child's "First-time Enrolment QR Code" to the school to process enrolment or school transfer procedure according to the requirement of the school.
- The DSEDJ will provide "Service of consultation and arrangement of school places" to parents who are in need.

Timeline (Year 2025)

Admission information	Starting from 1 January onwards, parents can consult the enrolment information on the DSEDJ website or school website.
Central Registration	Parents register through "Macao One Account"/ on the DSEDJ website / at the DSEDJ counters Between 6 and 16 January
Schools announce the interview date and time	Between 19 and 21 February
School admission interviews	Between 1 and 25 March
Schools release the admission list and parents confirm online which school to enrol their children in	Release the admission list on the DSEDJ website and at schools 7 April Parents can check the admission list and confirm one school to enrol their child in through "Macao One Account"/ on the DSEDJ website Between 7 and 9 April
Schools announce the students admitted from the waiting list	From 10 April onwards
Parents go to school to process enrolment/ school transfer procedures	From 11 April onwards (According to the period informed by schools) Students on the admission list must process enrolment on or before 14 April
Enrolment at other schools	If a child has not yet been admitted to any school by 15 April, or parents want to enrol their child in another school, parents can visit the DSEDJ website to check the status of K1 places available at different schools, and go to the schools that still accept enrolment for enquiries and registration.

For enquiries
8397 2309

For details, please browse
DSEDJ website:

www.dsedj.gov.mo



DSEDJ app

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GDP

Beijing raises its estimate for the size of its economy in 2023

ELAINE KURTENBACH,
BANGKOK

CHINA'S economy grew a bit more in 2023 than earlier thought, but the revision has not affected forecasts for "about 5%" growth in the GDP this year, the government said last week.

The estimate for total econo-

mic activity, or GDP, in 2023 for the world's second largest economy was increased by about 2.7% to 129.4 trillion yuan (\$17.7 trillion), based on an economic census conducted once every five years. Earlier this year, the government said the GDP in 2023 was 126.06 trillion yuan.

The exact impact on China's annual economic growth in 2023

was not given. Officials said further details would be released later. The economy grew at a 5.2% annual pace in 2023, according to the earlier estimate, up from 3% in 2022.

The size of the U.S. economy in 2023 was \$27.36 trillion.

The economic census included years when the COVID-19 pandemic was causing severe disruptions to business activity, travel

and ordinary activities in China. The economy is still recovering from those shocks and from a severe downturn in the housing market that followed a crackdown on excessive borrowing by property developers.

The government has stepped up measures to counter the slowdown in consumer spending and business investment, pledging again this

week to step up spending and issue more bonds to finance support from local governments that are suffering partly due to the property crisis.

Such efforts are helping, the World Bank said in a report last week. It lifted its estimate for China's growth this year to 4.9% from its forecast in June of 4.8%.

The World Bank's update for China's annual growth next year was raised to 4.5% from an earlier 4.1%, but it still shows growth slowing in coming years. The forecast for 2026 is for the economy to expand at a 4% pace.

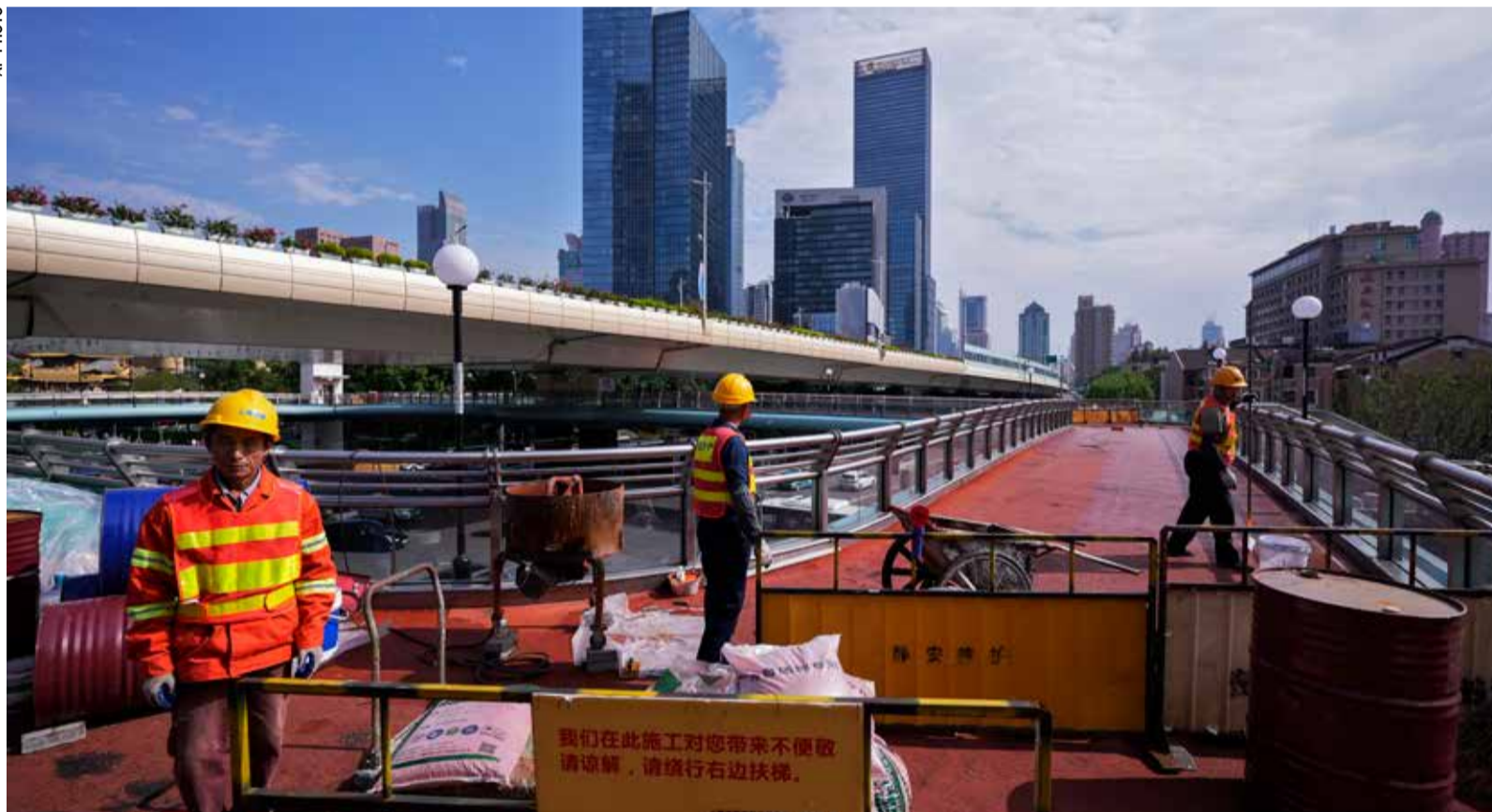
Weakness in the property sector remains a drag on growth, and people whose houses have lost value will remain reluctant to spend much. That will keep inflation low, the report said, at 0.4% for this year, rising to 1.1% in 2025.

It noted that while moves to boost demand by cutting mortgage down payments and interest rates, funding affordable housing projects and subsidizing recycling programs for cars and appliances are supporting demand, such measures won't do enough to restore growth to higher levels.

The risk of higher tariffs on Chinese exports to the U.S. once President-elect Donald Trump takes office and other limits on trade are other potential threats to the economy given China's growing reliance on exports to help drive growth.

The World Bank reiterated its calls for China to improve its social safety net and to help redress widening inequality to help provide a firmer economic footing for the hundreds of millions of its people who are either low income or part of what it calls the "vulnerable middle class," and are at risk of falling back into poverty. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



STRAIT TENSION

China sanctions seven companies over US military assistance to Taiwan

THE Chinese government placed sanctions on seven companies on Friday in response to recent U.S. announcements of military sales and aid to Taiwan, the self-governing island that China claims as part of its territory.

The sanctions also come in response to the recent approval of the U.S. government's annual defense spending bill, which a Chinese Foreign Ministry statement said "includes multiple negative sections on China."

China objects to American military assistance for Taiwan and often imposes sanctions on re-

lated companies after a sale or aid package is announced. The sanctions generally have a limited impact, because American defense companies don't sell arms or other military goods to China. The U.S. is the main supplier of weapons to Taiwan for its defense.

The seven companies being sanctioned are Insitu Inc., Hudson Technologies Co., Saronic Technologies, Inc., Raytheon Canada, Raytheon Australia, Aerkomm Inc. and Oceaneering International Inc., the Foreign Ministry statement said. It said that "relevant senior executives" of the com-

AP PHOTO



panies are also sanctioned, without naming any.

Any assets they have in China will be frozen, and organizations and individuals in China are prohibited from engaging in any activity with

them, it said.

U.S. President Joe Biden last week authorized up to \$571 million in Defense Department material and services and military education and training for Taiwan.

Separately, the Defense Department announced that \$295 million in military sales had been approved.

The U.S. defense bill boosts military spending to \$895 billion and directs resources toward a more confrontational approach to China. It establishes a fund that could be used to send military resources to Taiwan in much the same way that the U.S. has backed Ukraine. It also expands a ban on U.S. military purchases of Chinese products ranging from drone technology to garlic for military commissaries.

Zhang Xiaogang, a Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson, said last week that the U.S. is hyping up the "so-called" threat from China to justify increased military spending.

"U.S. military spending has topped the world and keeps increasing every year," he said at a press conference. "This fully exposes the belligerent nature of the U.S. and its obsession with hegemony and expansion."

The Foreign Ministry statement said the U.S. moves violate agreements between the two countries on Taiwan, interfere in China's domestic affairs and undermine the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Taiwan's government said earlier this month that China had sent dozens of ships into nearby seas to practice a blockade of the island, a move that Taiwan said undermined peace and stability and disrupted international shipping and trade. China has not confirmed or commented on the reported military activity. **MDT/AP**

SOUTH KOREA

A plane is engulfed in flames after skidding off the runway, killing 179

HYUNG-JIN KIM & KIM TONG-HYUNG, SEOUL

A passenger plane skidded off a runway at a South Korean airport yesterday, slammed into a concrete fence and burst into flames after its front landing gear apparently failed to deploy. All but two of the 181 people on board died in one of the country's worst aviation disasters.

The Jeju Air plane crashed while landing in the town of Muan, about 290 kilometers south of Seoul. The Transport Ministry said the plane was a 15-year-old Boeing 737-800 jet that had arrived from Bangkok and that the crash happened at 9:03 a.m.

A total of 179 people — 85 women, 84 men and 10 others whose genders weren't immediately identifiable — died in the fire, the South Korean fire agency said. Emergency workers pulled two people, both crew members, to safety. Health officials said they are conscious and not in life-threatening condition.

Among the 177 bodies so far found, officials have so far identified 88 of them, the fire agency said. The passengers were predominantly South Korean, as well as two Thai nationals. Thailand's Foreign Ministry said its embassy in Seoul received confirmation from South Korean authorities that the two Thai passengers were among the fatalities.

The fire agency deployed 32 fire trucks and several helicopters to contain the blaze. About 1,570 firefighters, police officers, soldiers and other officials were also sent to the site, according to the fire agency and transport ministry.

Footage of the crash aired by South Korean television channels showed the plane skidding across the airstrip at high speed, apparently with its landing gear still closed, overrunning the runway and colliding head-on with a concrete



Firefighters and rescue team members work near the wreckage of a passenger plane at Muan International Airport in Muan, South Korea, yesterday

wall on the outskirts of the facility, triggering an explosion. Other local TV stations aired footage showing thick plumes of black smoke billowing from the plane, which was engulfed in flames.

Lee Jeong-hyeon, chief of the Muan fire station, told a televised briefing that the plane was completely destroyed, with only the tail assembly remaining recognizable among the wreckage. Lee said that workers were looking into various possibilities about what caused the crash, including whether the aircraft was struck by birds, Lee said.

Transport Ministry officials later said their early assessment of communication records show the airport control tower issued a bird strike warning to the plane shortly before it intended to land and gave its pilot permission to land in a different area. The pilot sent out a distress signal shortly before the plane overshot the end of the runway and skidded across a buffer zone before hitting the wall, the officials said.

Senior Transport Ministry official Joo Jong-wan said workers have retrieved the flight data and cockpit voice recorders of the plane's black box, which will be examined by government experts investigating the cause of the crash and fire. He said it may take months for investigators to complete their probe. The runway at the Muan airport will be closed until Jan. 1, the ministry said.

Thailand's prime minister, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, expressed deep condolences to the families of those affected by the accident in a post on social platform X. Paetongtarn said she ordered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to provide assistance immediately.

Kerati Kijmanawat, the director of Airports of Thailand, confirmed in a statement that Jeju Air flight 7C 2216 departed from Suvarnabhumi Airport with no reports of abnormal conditions with the aircraft or on the runway.

Jeju Air in a statement expressed its "deep apology" over the crash and said it will do its "utmost to manage the aftermath of the accident."

In a televised news conference, Kim E-bae, Jeju Air's president, bowed deeply with other senior company officials as he apologized to bereaved families and said he feels "full responsibility" for the incident. Kim said the company hadn't identified any mechanical problems with the aircraft following regular checkups and that he would wait for the results of government investigations into the cause of the incident.

Family members wailed as officials announced the names of some victims at a lounge in the Muan airport.

Boeing said in a statement on X it was in contact with Jeju Air and is ready to support the company in dealing with the crash.

"We extend our deepest condolences to the families

who lost loved ones, and our thoughts remain with the passengers and crew," Boeing said.

The incident came as South Korea is embroiled into a huge political crisis triggered by President Yoon Suk Yeol's stunning imposition of martial law and ensuing impeachment. Last Friday, South Korean lawmakers impeached acting President Han Duck-soo and suspended his duties, leading Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok to take over.

Choi, who traveled to the site in Muan, called for officials to employ all available resources to find the missing and identify the victims as soon as possible. The government declared Muan a special disaster zone to provide assistance to the families of victims and designated a weeklong national mourning period through Saturday.

Yoon's office said his chief secretary, Chung Jin-suk, presided over an emergency meeting between senior presidential staff to discuss the crash and reported the details to Choi. Yoon expressed condolences to the victims in a Facebook posting.

The Muan crash is one of the deadliest disasters in South Korea's aviation history. The last time South Korea suffered a large-scale air disaster was in 1997, when a Korean Airline plane crashed in Guam, killing 228 people on board.

MDT/AP

ADVERTORIAL

GREAT TIMES

A Journey of Cultural Splendor at POLY MGM MUSEUM



Nestled in Macau, a city steeped in history along the Maritime Silk Road, the POLY MGM MUSEUM opened in November at MGM MACAU is a harmonious fusion of tradition and innovation brought to life through a collaboration between the Poly Culture Group and MGM. This museum isn't merely a collection of artifacts, but a showcase of Chinese intangible cultural heritage and a platform for intercultural dialogue.

Setting the bar high, the museum upholds Chinese national standards for exhibiting grade-one cultural relics, establishing itself at the forefront of China's cultural connection to the world. It embodies a blend of East meets West, antiquity and modernity, virtuality and reality, and culture and technology, creating an immersive exhibition experience with state-of-the-art technologies.



The inaugural exhibition, "The Maritime Silk Road—Discover the Mystical Seas and Encounter the Treasures of the Ancient Trade Route," transcends geographical, chronological and cultural boundaries, offering the audience a captivating journey through history, present developments, and future prospects of the ancient trade route. Collaborating with nearly 20 national museums and international cultural institutions, the exhibition boasts a collection of 228 artifacts and artworks in 184 sets. Among the highlights are nearly 30 grade-one cultural relics, including the renowned four Bronze Zodiac Heads of the Old Summer Palace.

Admission is free. Discover more at museum.mgm.mo.



AP PHOTO

A part of Azerbaijan Airlines' Embraer 190 lies on the ground near the airport of Aktau, Kazakhstan, last week



RUSSIA-AZERBAIJAN

Putin apologizes for 'tragic incident' but stops short of saying plane was shot down

RUSSIAN President Vladimir Putin on Saturday apologized to his Azerbaijani counterpart for what he called a "tragic incident" following the crash of an Azerbaijani airliner in Kazakhstan that killed 38 people, but stopped short of acknowledging that Moscow was responsible.

Putin's apology came as allegations mounted that the plane had been shot down by Russian air defenses attempting to deflect a Ukrainian drone strike near Grozny, the regional capital of the Russian republic of Chechnya.

An official Kremlin statement issued Saturday said that air defense systems were firing near Grozny airport as the airliner "repeatedly" attempted to land there Wednesday, last week. It did not explicitly say one of these hit the plane.

The statement said Putin apologized to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev "for the fact that the tragic incident occurred in Russian airspace."

The readout said Russia has launched a criminal probe into the incident, and Azerbaijani state prosecutors have arrived in Grozny to participate. The Kremlin also said that "relevant services" from Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are jointly investigating the crash site near the city of

Aktau in Kazakhstan.

The plane was flying from Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, to Grozny when it turned toward Kazakhstan, hundreds of kilometers (miles) across the Caspian Sea from its intended destination, and crashed while making an attempt to land. There were 29 survivors.

According to a readout of the call provided by Aliyev's press office, the Azerbaijani president told Putin that the plane was subject to "external physical and technical interference," although he also stopped short of blaming Russian air defenses.

Aliyev noted that the plane had multiple holes in its fuselage and that the occupants had sustained injuries "due to foreign particles penetrating the cabin mid-flight."

He said that a team of international experts had begun probing the incident at Azerbaijan's initiative, but provided no details. Earlier this week, the Azerbaijani Prosecutor General's office confirmed that investigators from Azerbaijan are working in Grozny.

On Friday, a U.S. official and an Azerbaijani minister made separate statements blaming the crash on an external weapon, echoing those made by aviation experts who blamed the crash on Russian air defense systems responding to a Ukrai-

nian attack.

President Joe Biden, responding on Saturday to a reporter asking whether he thought Putin should take responsibility for the crash, said: "Apparently he did but I haven't spoken to him." Biden made the comment after leaving church in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands.

Passengers and crew who survived the crash told Azerbaijani media that they heard loud noises on the aircraft as it was circling over Grozny.

Dmitry Yarov, head of Russia's civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia, said Friday that as the plane was preparing to land in Grozny in deep fog, Ukrainian drones were targeting the city, prompting authorities to close the area to air traffic.

Yarov said that after the captain made two unsuccessful attempts to land, he was offered other airports but decided to fly to Aktau.

Earlier in the week, Rosaviatsia had cited unspecified early evidence as showing that a bird strike led to an emergency on board.

In the days following the crash, Azerbaijan Airlines blamed "physical and technical interference" and announced the suspension of flights to several Russian airports. It didn't say where the interference came from or provide any further details.

If proven that the plane

crashed after being hit by Russian fire, it would be the second deadly civil aviation accident linked to fighting in Ukraine. Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was downed with a Russian surface-to-air missile, killing all 298 people aboard, as it flew over the area in eastern Ukraine controlled by Moscow-backed separatists in 2014.

Russia has denied responsibility, but a Dutch court in 2022 convicted two Russians and a pro-Russia Ukrainian man for their role in downing the plane with an air defense system brought into Ukraine from a Russian military base.

Following Wednesday's suspension of flights from Baku to Grozny and nearby Makhachkala, Azerbaijan Airlines announced Friday that it would also halt service to eight more Russian cities.

Several other airlines have made similar announcements since the crash. Kazakhstan's Qazaq Air on Friday said it would stop flying from Astana to the Russian city of Yekaterinburg in the Ural Mountains for a month.

Turkmenistan Airlines, the Central Asian country's flagship carrier, on Saturday halted flights to Moscow for at least a month, citing safety concerns. Earlier this week, Israel's El Al carrier suspended service from Tel Aviv to the Russian capital, citing "developments in Russia's airspace." **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1958: CASTRO'S REBELS EDGE CLOSER TO CAPITAL



A vicious house-to-house battle between rebel guerrillas, led by Fidel Castro, and the Cuban army is raging around the town of Santa Clara, the capital of the province of Las Villas.

The capture of Las Villas is a key goal for the rebel force, known as the 26 July Army, before they advance on the capital, Havana.

Despite being heavily outnumbered by the Cuban army, the rebels have enormous popular support and have won a number of significant victories.

Just a few weeks ago, they were confined to their tiny mountain stronghold at the other end of the island. Now they have advanced into a position where they are poised to take the capital itself.

The guerrillas have been fighting to overthrow the military government of Fulgencio Batista for two years.

But in the last 48 hours about 3,000 people have been killed or injured in some of the bloodiest fighting in the history of Cuba.

The army has countered the rebel attack on Santa Clara with fighter and bomber aircraft, as well as guns and tanks.

One of the rebel leaders, Dr Ernesto "Che" Guevara, has appealed to the government commander in Santa Clara for a truce to clear the streets of the casualties.

Broadcasts on rebel radio said his appeal had been rejected.

The president is reported to be preparing to take personal command of his forces to destroy a convoy of guerrilla soldiers currently moving south from Santa Clara.

In a sign of how desperate the situation has become for the government, President Batista today removed the Commodore of the Navy's air force, Joaquin Yarela Canosa, from his post.

He was the second senior figure in the armed forces to be sacked this week. The army commander in Las Villas, General Alberto Rio Chaviano, lost his job a few days ago.

Meanwhile, amid rumours that President Batista is preparing to flee the island, two of his young sons arrived in New York, accompanied by their grandfather, Manuel Perez Benitoa.

Mr Benitoa denied that the two boys were being evacuated ahead of a government surrender, saying, "I bring them every year to see the snow."

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Two days later, on New Year's Day 1959, President Batista fled the country to the Dominican Republic, his government overthrown and his regime at an end.

He was to live the rest of his life in exile in Portugal and Spain and died in Spain in 1973.

Fidel Castro was sworn in as premier on 16 February 1959.

Since then, Cuba has been a one-party state in which Fidel Castro exerts control over virtually every aspect of Cuban life.

From an early stage, his leadership put Cuba on a collision course with the United States.

Antagonism between the two nations led to economic sanctions against Cuba from 1960. Two years later, Fidel Castro brought the world to the brink of nuclear war as his alliance with the USSR provoked the Cuban missile crisis.

Diplomatic relations have never been restored, and the US continues to enforce trade sanctions against Fidel Castro's regime.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS



ARIES

Mar. 21-Apr. 19

Explore frontiers. Try new ideas, perspectives and views. Savor unusual flavors. Stay in communication with your home base while expanding boundaries. Pursue a dream.



TAURUS

Apr. 20-May. 20

Collaborate to grow family finances. Make an overdue change. Set long-term plans and work together to advance them. Check out an interesting suggestion.



GEMINI

May. 21-Jun. 21

Discuss dreams, ambitions and inspiring visions with your partner. Determine the way to go. Learn something new about someone familiar. Create new possibilities together.



CANCER

Jun. 22-Jul. 22

The excellent work you've been doing reflects you well. Keep showing up. Provide steadiness and stability. You're gaining respect and status.



LEO

Jul. 23-Aug. 22

Declare your heart to the one who makes it beat louder. Talk and dream about the future. It's easy to align on common desires.



VIRGO

Aug. 23-Sep. 22

Family comes first. Walk and talk together. Alternate between physical exercise and quiet reverie. Listen especially to young people. Prioritize fun and laughter.



LIBRA

Sep. 23-Oct. 22

Communication channels are wide open. Write, express and sketch your ideas. Connect with your network and share. Love energizes and inspires your creativity.



SCORPIO

Oct. 23-Nov. 21

Business booms. Your work's in demand. Your ideas are attracting attention and it could get profitable. The more you complete, the more you gain.



SAGITTARIUS

Nov. 22-Dec. 21

Nurture yourself. Get involved with a personal project. Follow a dream. Accept assistance and support. Use something you've been saving. Pursue a passion.



CAPRICORN

Dec. 22-Jan. 19

Take a break and catch up. Slow to consider the road ahead. Consider feelings, emotions and sensitivities. Plan and prepare for different scenarios.



AQUARIUS

Jan. 20-Feb. 18

Pull together. Make sure that what you're building together is strong. Share what you're doing that works. Coordinate efforts to strengthen teamwork and ease.

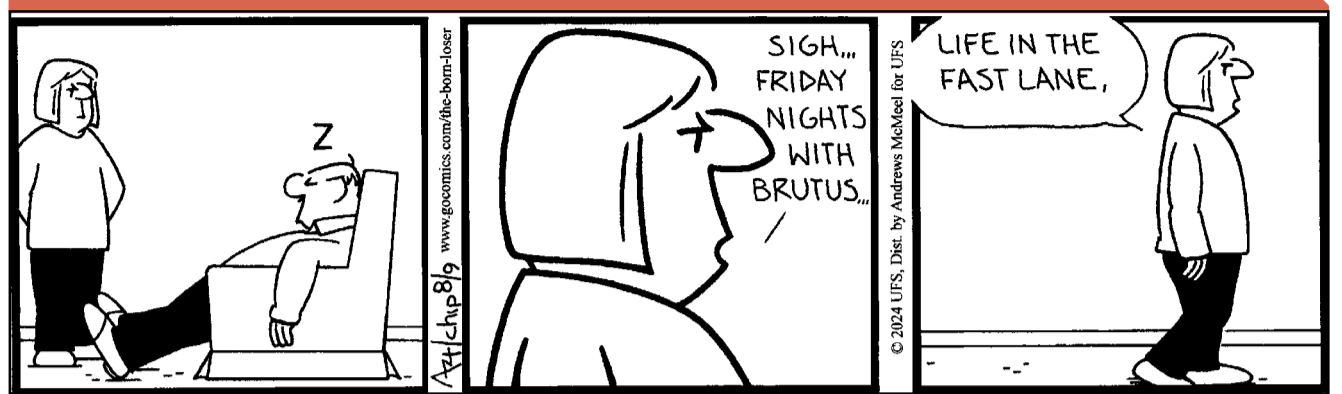


PISCES

Feb. 19-Mar. 20

Take charge at work. Consider professional possibilities. What would it take? Consider options and potential. Draw upon hidden resources. Invest in your career.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

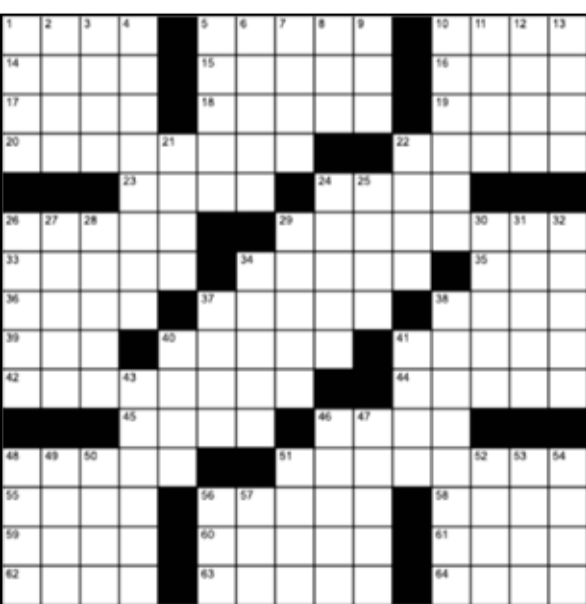
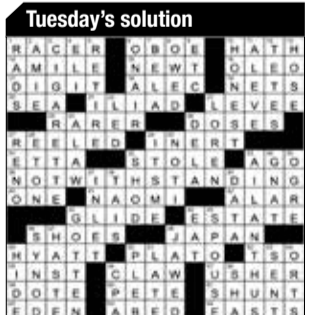
WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-5	7	fine
Changchun	-11	-5	fine
Chengdu	2	15	cloudy
Chongqing	8	12	cloudy
Fuzhou	9	21	fine
Guangzhou	7	21	fine
Guiyang	4	7	overcast
Haikou	15	22	cloudy
Hangzhou	1	15	fine
Harbin	-16	-8	snow
Hefei	-3	12	fine
Nanjing	-1	12	cloudy
Shanghai	2	13	fine
Taipei	12	20	cloudy
Wuhan	-3	13	cloudy
Hong Kong	18	22	sunny
WORLD			
Moscow	-1	2	snow
Frankfurt	-2	1	cloudy
Paris	1	2	cloudy
London	8	9	cloudy
New York	4	13	sunny

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Bar bills; 5- Aquarium building; 10- River in central Switzerland; 14- Smell ___; 15- Garr and Hatcher; 16- Asset; 17- Actor Rob; 18- Units; 19- Slippery swimmers; 20- Cabbage salad; 22- Host; 23- Golf stroke; 24- Annika Sorenstam's org.; 26- Marisa of "My Cousin Vinny"; 29- Cause to explode; 33- Belt site; 34- Unconscious states; 35- Monitor, for short; 36- "___ She Lovely?"; 37- Flaps; 38- Ayatollah's predecessor; 39- Never, in Nuremberg; 40- Composer Copland; 41- Napped leather; 42- Concentrated extracts; 44- One who uses an abacus; 45- Permits; 46- Auctioneer's cry; 48- Continue a subscription; 51- Segment of the spinal column; 55- Hgt.; 56- Inscribed pillar; 58- Metal fastener; 59- Exposed; 60- Monte ___; 61- Director Wertmuller; 62- Auth. unknown; 63- No bid; 64- Hanna-Barbera bear;

DOWN 1- Apply powder to oneself; 2- Buck follower; 3- Blubber; 4- Most precipitous; 5- Leaning; 6- Free to attack; 7- Increased in size; 8- Align the cross hairs; 9- Slalom curve; 10- Tarzan, e.g.; 11- One of the Baldwins; 12- Govern; 13- "___ quam videri" (North Carolina's motto); 21- Interview-wear; 22- Self-images; 24- Yellowish citrus fruit; 25- School orgs.; 26- Strong string; 27- Fertile area in a desert; 28- Floating bombs; 29- Bygone birds; 30- Felt sore; 31- Wall Street transaction; 32- Early anesthetic; 34- Apple centers; 37- Diplomat's forte; 38- Abruptly; 40- Again; 41- Preservative; 43- Cricket team; 46- Vends; 47- Cream-filled cookies; 48- First name in country; 49- Vivacity; 50- Fiddling emperor; 51- Aloe ___; 52- Scott of "Charles in Charge"; 53- Circular band; 54- Jai ___; 56- Biol. or chem.; 57- Faucet;



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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VA FAT (Taipa Village)
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77.10 m² / 830 ft² | HKD3,980,000



Nam Long (Taipa Village)
2 bed 1 bath
59.92 m² / 645 ft² | HKD3,650,000



Jade Garden (Taipa)
4 bed 3 bath
379.04 m² / 4,080 ft² | HKD 11,880,000



Ocean Garden Cattleya Court (Taipa)
2 bed 2 bath
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TENNIS

Djokovic says players have 'been kept in the dark' on Sinner, Swiatek doping breaches

ON the eve of his return to the court, Novak Djokovic has weighed in on tennis's high-profile doping cases and criticized what he perceives as double standards in the sport.

The former world No. 1, who is chasing a record 25th Grand Slam title at next month's Australian Open, expressed his frustration yesterday at being "kept in the dark" regarding top-ranked Jannik Sinner's doping case.

Djokovic is the top seed in the Brisbane International this week, making his first appearance at the event since 2009. He will also team up with Australia's Nick Kyrgios in doubles, with the duo headlining Monday's action.

Off the court, Djokovic lent his voice yesterday to Kyrgios's strong criticisms made a day



Serbia's Novak Djokovic, right, celebrates beating Australia's Nick Kyrgios in the final of the men's singles on day fourteen of the Wimbledon tennis championships in London, 2022

earlier, speaking out at length about the ongoing doping case involving current world No.1 Jannik Sinner.

"I'm not questioning whether (Sinner) took the banned substance intentionally or not," Djokovic said at a press con-

ference yesterday in Brisbane. "We've had plenty of players in the past and currently under suspension for not even testing positive to banned substances.

"Some players with lower rankings waiting for their case to be resolved for over a year.

I've been really frustrated ... to see we've been kept in the dark for at least five months (on the Sinner case)."

The International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) charged both Sinner and former women's world No.1 Iga Swiatek with anti-doping breaches earlier in the year.

Sinner tested positive twice for an anabolic steroid in March but avoided a ban after the ITIA ruled he was not at fault. The World Anti-Doping Agency has appealed the decision.

Swiatek accepted a one-month suspension in November after testing positive for the banned substance trimetazidine.

The Serbian further criticized the lack of transparency from tennis authorities regarding doping breaches.

"The ATP hasn't really talked in depth about it. Why have they

kept that case away from the public? We see Simona Halep's case on the WTA Tour, now Iga Swiatek's case," Djokovic said.

"It's not a good image for our sport. I'm just questioning the way the system works and why certain players aren't treated the same as others. Maybe some ranking reasons are behind it, or some players have more financial backing and stronger legal teams to tackle these cases."

Despite his frustrations, Djokovic remains focused on the season ahead. After undergoing knee surgery earlier this year, he returned to reach the Wimbledon final but skipped the end-of-year ATP Finals, where Sinner capped a dominant season with his eighth title.

Djokovic is looking to extend his legacy at Melbourne Park, where he has claimed 10 Australian Open titles, and has brought on former rival Andy Murray as his coach for the tournament.

"It's strange for me to share all these kinds of insights about how I feel on the court, some of the secrets of what I'm going through, what I'm thinking about, how I see my game, with somebody who has been one of my top rivals," Djokovic said.

"But I'm so glad and very thankful that he has accepted to work with me, and in Australia ... he's very meticulous, dedicated, and professional." MDT/AP

AD

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OPINION

The Conversation

Cavan W. Concannon, USC Dornsife



NEW YEAR'S EVE CELEBRATES ST. SILVESTER - THE 4TH-CENTURY POPE WHOSE LEGEND SHAPED IDEAS OF CHURCH AND STATE

On Dec. 31, while many people are preparing for their New Years Eve parties, some Roman Catholic Christians will also mark the feast day for St. Silvester.

Little is known for certain about Silvester's life, but he lived during a transformational period in the history of Christianity. From 314-335 C.E., Silvester was the bishop of Rome: what we now call the pope, although the role was not so powerful at the time. "Pope" comes from the Greek word for "father," and was widely used by bishops until the fifth century, when the bishop of Rome began to monopolize the title.

Silvester's era was one of both turmoil and transition for Christians living in the Roman Empire, as some Christian communities emerged from persecution into a powerful alliance with the Roman state. His story is deeply intertwined with this alliance, which would fundamentally change the trajectory of the movement initiated by the figure of Jesus of Nazareth three centuries earlier. Christianity would now become the faith of kings, states and empires.

A change in fortune

Trustworthy details of Silvester's life are hard to come by. The "Liber Pontificalis," a catalog of papal biographies that began to be compiled in the sixth century, tells us that he was from Rome and the son of an otherwise unknown man named Rufinus.

As a young man, Silvester lived through the persecutions initiated under one of the co-emperors at the time, Diocletian, which began in 303 C.E. These persecutions continued for several years after Diocletian stepped down.

Though many people picture early Christians being constantly persecuted by the Roman state, historians doubt these claims. The persecutions that began under Diocletian, however, are an exception. During this period, the state expected Christians to sacrifice to the gods for the well-being of the empire, or face consequences – sometimes violent ones.

According to the Christian theologian Augustine, some Christians later accused Silvester of having "betrayed" his faith during this period. Silvester was accused of turning over Christian sacred books to the Roman authorities and making offerings to the Roman gods.

The persecution came to an end in 313, when the co-emperors Constantine and Licinius signed the Edict of Milan, which granted tolerance to Christianity in the empire. Just a year later, Silvester became the bishop of Rome.

Constantine quickly became a major patron of Christians, though the extent to which he practiced Christianity is debated. With imperial support came a massive Christian building campaign in Rome – so much so that most of Silvester's biography in the "Liber Pontificalis" consists of lists of all the churches that Constantine gifted to the city.

Christian controversies

Both before and during Silvester's time as the bishop of Rome, there were many different Christianities in the empire. This diversity was troubling to Constantine, who wanted to promote unity and order in his domain. As such, he began to convene councils of Christian clergy to sort out contentious issues.

In 314, the year that Silvester became bishop, the emperor called the Council of Arles to address a dispute that had arisen among African bishops – what has become known as the Donatist Controversy. At issue was whether a priest who had betrayed his faith during the persecutions retained a valid ordination.

Silvester, though the bishop of an important city, did not attend, but sent representatives in his stead. It may be that, even at this early date, there were already rumors about what Silvester might have done during the persecutions. [Abridged]

Belgium will ban the sale of disposable electronic cigarettes as of Jan. 1 on health and environmental grounds in a groundbreaking move for European Union nations.

Health minister Frank Vandenbroucke said the inexpensive e-cigarettes had turned into a health threat since they are an easy way for teenagers to be drawn into smoking and get hooked on nicotine.

"Disposable e-cigarettes is a new product simply designed to attract new consumers," he said in an interview.

"E-cigarettes often contain nicotine. Nicotine makes you addicted to nicotine. Nicotine is bad for your health. These are fact," Vandenbroucke added.

Because they are disposable, the plastic, battery and circuits are a burden on the environment. On top of that, "they create hazardous waste chemicals still present in what people throw away," Vandenbroucke said.

The health minister said he also targeted the disposable e-cigarettes because reusable ones could be a tool to help people quit smoking if they cannot find another way.

Australia outlawed the sale of "vapes" outside pharmacies earlier this year in some of the world's toughest restrictions on electronic cigarettes. Now Belgium is leading the EU drive.



NORTH KOREA

KIM VOWS THE TOUGHEST ANTI-US POLICY BEFORE TRUMP TAKES OFFICE

HYUNG-JIN, SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

NORTH Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to implement the "toughest" anti-U.S. policy, state media reported yesterday, less than a month before Donald Trump takes office as U.S. president.

Trump's return to the White House raises prospects for high-profile diplomacy with North Korea. During his first term, Trump met Kim three times for talks on the North's nuclear program. Many experts however say a quick resumption of Kim-Trump summitry is unlikely as Trump would first focus on conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. North Korea's support for Russia's war against Ukraine also poses a challenge to efforts to revive diplomacy, experts say.

During a five-day plenary meeting of the ruling Workers' Party that ended Friday, Kim called the U.S. "the most reactionary state that regards anti-communism as its invariable state policy." Kim said that the U.S.-South Korea-Japan security partnership is expanding into "a nuclear military bloc for aggression."

"This reality clearly shows to which direction we should advance and what we should do and how," Kim said, according to the official Korean Central News Agency.

It said Kim's speech "clarified the strategy for the toughest anti-U.S. counteraction to be launched aggressively" by North Korea for its long-term national interests and security.

KCNA didn't elaborate on the anti-U.S. strategy. But it said Kim set forth tasks to bolster military capability through defense technology advancements and stressed the need to improve the mental toughness of North Korean soldiers.

The previous meetings between Trump and Kim had not only put an end to their exchanges of fiery rhetoric and threats of destruction, but they developed personal connections. Trump once famously said he and Kim "fell in love." But their talks eventually collapsed in 2019, as they wrangled over U.S.-led sanctions on the North.

North Korea has since sharply increased the pace of its weapons testing activities to build more reliable nuclear missiles targeting the U.S. and its allies. The U.S. and South Korea have responded by expanding their military bilateral drills and also trilateral ones involving Japan, drawing strong rebukes from the North, which views such U.S.-led exercises as invasion rehearsals.

Further complicating efforts to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear

weapons in return for economic and political benefits is its deepening military cooperation with Russia.

According to U.S., Ukrainian and South Korean assessments, North Korea has sent more than 10,000 troops and conventional weapons systems to support Moscow's war against Ukraine. There are concerns that Russia could give North Korea advanced weapons technology in return, including help to build more powerful nuclear missiles.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said last week that 3,000 North Korean troops have been killed and wounded in the fighting in Russia's Kursk region. It was the first significant estimate by Ukraine of North Korean casualties since the North Korean troop deployment to Russia began in October.

Russia and China, locked in separate disputes with the U.S., have repeatedly blocked U.S.-led pushes to levy more U.N. sanctions on North Korea despite its repeated missile tests in defiance of U.N. Security Council resolutions.

Last month, Kim said that his past negotiations with the United States only confirmed Washington's "unchangeable" hostility toward his country and described his nuclear buildup as the only way to counter external threats. MDT/AP



Bolivia's former leader Evo Morales (pictured) has a campaign pitch for 2025 that has worked elsewhere: Other politicians of recent years have brought you nothing but misery. It's time for a return to the past. His supporters are looking to Morales for a rescue from the five tumultuous years since his 2019 resignation.



USA At least two people were killed and six more injured as several tornadoes touched down in Texas and Mississippi on Saturday, damaging homes and flipping vehicles as the storm system moved east across Alabama yesterday. One person died in the Liverpool area, located south of Houston, and four people suffered injuries that were not considered critical.



Israel's army detained the director of one of northern Gaza's last functioning hospitals as overnight strikes elsewhere in the territory killed nine people, including children, Palestinian medical officials said Saturday. Israel's military alleged that Hamas militants were using the facility and said over 240 people were detained.



Syria's embassy in Lebanon suspended consular services Saturday, a day after two relatives of deposed Syrian President Bashar Assad were arrested at the Beirut airport with allegedly forged passports. Also on Saturday, Lebanese authorities handed over dozens of Syrians — including former officers in the Syrian army under Assad — to the new Syrian authorities after they were caught illegally entering Lebanon.