



THE DSPA REAFFIRMS ITS COMMITMENT TO THE EXISTING NOISE LEGISLATION, DESPITE ACKNOWLEDGING THE CHALLENGES IN ENFORCEMENT

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EXPORTS IN DECEMBER UP 10.7%, BEATING ESTIMATES AS HIGHER US TARIFFS LOOM

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AP PHOTO



Taiwan's intelligence bureau says China's main spy agency is working with shell companies and other partners to gain intelligence on Taiwan's defenses, resulting in a major rise in those arrested for alleged espionage on the island. Current and retired Taiwanese military personnel are a special concern, accounting for around half of the 64 alleged spies put on trial last year, it said.

AP PHOTO



Japan's Coming of Age Day is a sure sign of winter, arriving after New Year celebrations and ahead of the cherry blossom parties of early spring. The national holiday is held on the second Monday of January. Citizens around the nation turn out to admire the elaborate outfits young people don to celebrate the milestone from child to adult.

AP PHOTO



Pakistan Rescuers recovered the bodies of 11 coal miners who died last week after a methane gas explosion caused a coal mine to collapse in southwestern Pakistan, officials said yesterday. An operation is still underway to find a 12th worker who has been missing since late last week, when the mine collapsed in Singidi city in Balochistan province.

AP PHOTO



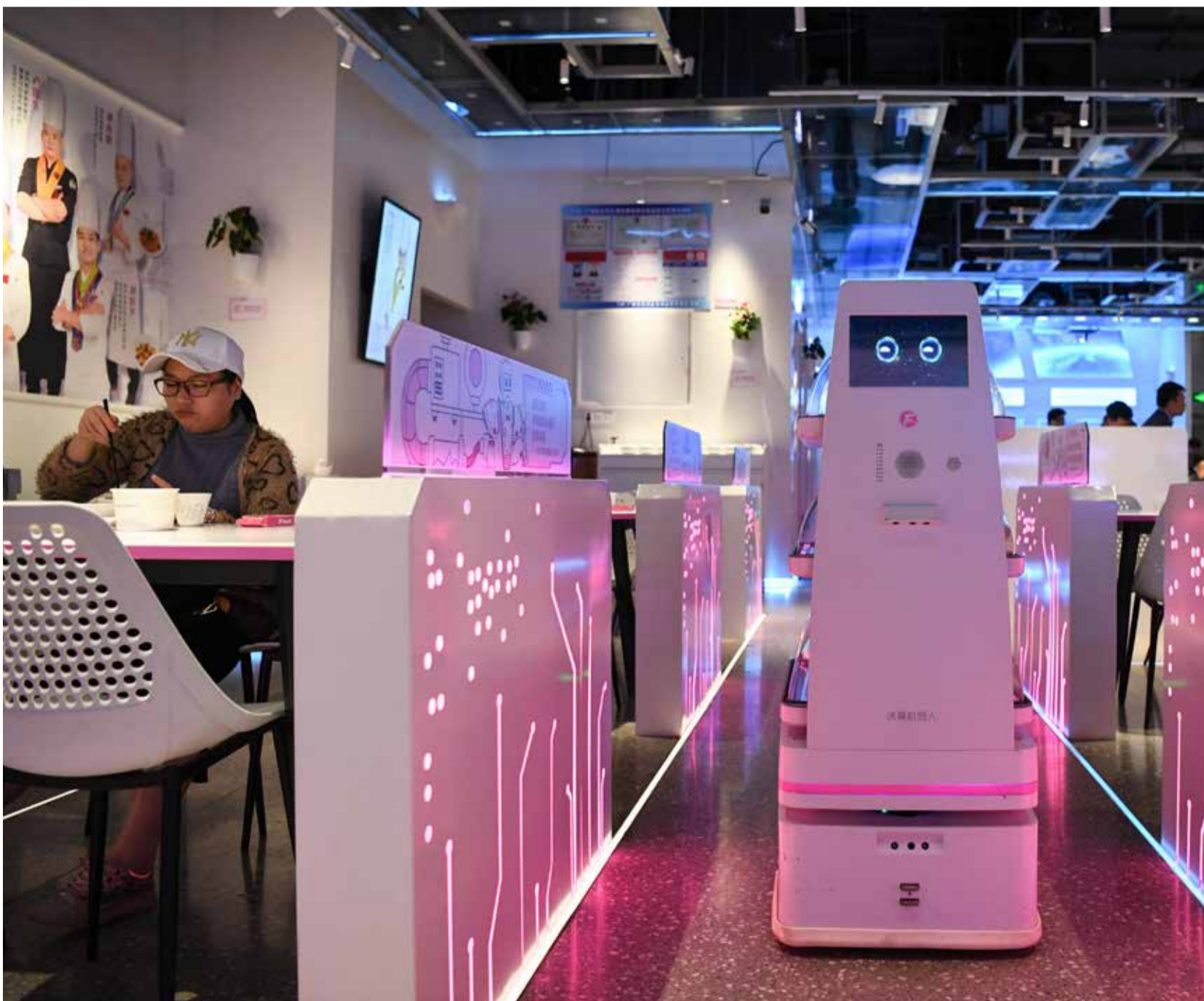
European Union foreign ministers will meet in late January to discuss easing sanctions imposed on Syria, the bloc's foreign policy chief said Sunday. However, she said the move would depend on Syria's new rulers carrying out an inclusive political transition after last month's overthrow of President Bashar Assad.

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GAMING

TOUTED AS MACAU'S THREAT, THAILAND APPROVES DRAFT BILL TO LEGALIZE CASINOS

LYNZY VALLES

THAILAND'S Cabinet approved a draft bill yesterday to legalize casinos with the aim of boosting tourism and addressing a sluggish economy.

Currently, some forms of gambling, such as betting on boxing and horse racing, are permitted, but casinos remain illegal in the Southeast Asian country.

Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra told reporters following the Cabinet meeting that the bill would also attract investments and address issues related to illegal gambling. "It will benefit society as a whole in the future," Paetongtarn said, according to the Associated Press.

"This is part of the government's policy to support sustainable tourism or man-made destinations, which was addressed in Parliament."

Gaming analysts have described Thailand as Macau's most significant emerging competitor. With plans for new gaming legislation expected by May, Thailand is poised to introduce multiple licenses



for casinos.

According to gaming expert Ben Lee, Thailand's favorable gaming tax structure could enable casinos to offer substantial comps and incentives to gamblers. "If we look at what gaming did to Singapore, they put Singapore on the map. Gaming would basically propel Thailand into a gaming

powerhouse in this region, without a doubt," Lee said during a talk held last month.

In Thailand, Paetongtarn noted that the Finance Ministry, which sponsored the bill, would later provide more details about the plans, promoted as "entertainment complexes."

The current government, which

took office in September, has pledged to make resolving the country's economic challenges its top priority.

The draft law, published online for public viewing, proposes that a casino operate within a complex that also houses businesses such as hotels, convention halls, malls, or theme parks. Entry will be prohi-

bited to those under 20 years old. Foreigners will have free access, but Thai citizens must pay an entrance fee of 5,000 baht (\$148), according to the draft.

The bill will be submitted to the Office of the Council of State for review before being discussed and voted on by the House of Representatives and the Senate, government spokesperson Jirayu Hoangsub stated. "Isn't it time for Thailand to acknowledge that there are gambling places, both legal and illegal, in the country and neighboring nations? This project aims to generate revenue for the country's tourism sector," Jirayu said in a statement.

Tourism is the primary driver of Thailand's economy and has been a key focus for successive administrations seeking economic improvement.

According to Lee, international casinos have long recognized Thailand's potential and established marketing operations there. He added that Thailand represents the greatest challenge for any gaming jurisdiction in Asia.

ENVIRONMENT

DSPA stands firm on noise law despite enforcement challenges

VICTORIA CHAN

THE Environmental Protection Bureau (DSPA) has reaffirmed its commitment to the existing noise legislation, despite acknowledging the challenges in enforcement.

This statement follows a written inquiry from lawmaker Ella Lei, who sought a review of the law aimed at mitigating domestic noise disturbances.

Since the implementation of the noise law in 2015, the DSPA reported a general decline in noise-related complaints.

However, officials noted that the nature of



such disturbances—often sudden and random—complicates enforcement efforts.

"By the time police officers arrive, the noise has usually ceased, and evidence is often unattainable due to a lack of cooperation from com-

plainants," the DSPA stated, highlighting the low prosecution rates.

To address these challenges, the Public Security Police (PSP) has increased patrols in areas frequently cited for noise complaints.

Officers are also col-

laborating with building management companies to monitor and address ongoing issues. "If noise problems persist, management can involve the PSP to take further action," the DSPA explained in the written response.

In addition to residential noise, the authorities acknowledged multiple complaints regarding disturbances in public spaces.

The PSP has assigned officers to enhance monitoring in these locations. When noise violations are detected, reports are submitted to the DSPA for further investigation.

TOURIST PRICE INDEX RISES 3% YEAR-ON-YEAR IN 2024

THE average Tourist Price Index (TPI) for 2024 increased by 3.15% compared to the previous year, reaching 146.23, according to data released by the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC). This rise is primarily attributed to higher prices in jewellery, clothing, and restaurant services.

The DSEC report indicated significant growth in specific categories.

The price indices for Miscellaneous Goods rose by 9.86%, while Clothing and Footwear saw an increase of 5.66%. Restaurant Services also experienced a 3.8% uptick. Conversely, the index for Entertainment and Cultural Activities fell by 13.76%, reflecting a shift in consumer spending.

In the fourth quarter of

2024, the TPI climbed to 152.05, marking a 1.05% increase year-on-year. This growth was driven by surging jewellery prices and rising restaurant service charges, although decreased hotel room rates partially mitigated the overall increase.

Notably, the Miscellaneous Goods and Restaurant Services price indices surged by 12% and 3.4%, respectively, while Entertainment and Cultural Activities and Accommodation saw declines of 11.5% and 3.75%.

When compared to the third quarter of 2024, the TPI rose by 3.29%. The Accommodation price index notably increased by 11.4% quarter-on-quarter, influenced by heightened hotel rates during the National Day holidays and the Grand Prix. VC

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Gov't launches subsidies for smart equipment upgrades in the catering sector

VICTORIA CHAN

STARTING next Monday, Jan. 20, the "Catering Industry Smart Upgrade Pilot Program" will open for applications, designed to provide subsidies for catering businesses. This initiative aims to support the city's catering enterprises in acquiring smart or automated equipment.

The program is designed to facilitate upgrades and transformations that will help reduce operational costs while enhancing operational efficiency and competitiveness within the industry.

Spearheaded by the Economic and Technology Development Bureau (DSED), with the United Association of Food and Beverage Mechanics of Macau, the primary goal of the "Catering Industry Smart Upgrade Pilot Program" is to encourage traditional catering businesses to adopt automation technologies, which are expected to reduce operational costs and improve efficiency.

The initiative will provide funding for the acquisition of intelligent and automated equipment, including cooking, cleaning, and preparation tools. This financial backing aims to facilitate the transition of up to 50 eligible catering



VICTORIA CHAN

outlets.

The program has a budget of MOP 4.8 million, of which MOP 3.5 million will be used to fund the upgrade of the equipment for the restaurants, while the remaining amount will cover administrative and other expenses.

"We hope to encourage Macau's traditional small and medium-sized catering enterprises to upgrade and transform, realize

operational automation, reduce operating costs, and improve operational efficiency and competitiveness to consolidate Macau's image as a gastronomic capital," said Mak Seng Hin, manager of the program.

The program will fund 80% of the costs associated with purchasing equipment, including installation and first-year warranty services, with a cap of MOP50,000

for each outlet and MOP100,000 for central kitchens. Eligible participants can submit applications for up to three catering outlets and one central kitchen under the same taxpayer number, provided they meet specific criteria.

To qualify, applicants must own an existing or planned catering outlet and hold an industrial license for food processing if they operate a central kitchen. Additionally,

their establishments must be registered for tax purposes and employ no more than 100 personnel.

"This catering store can be open or planned to open," Mak explained. "If it is already open, it will need a restaurant license issued by the Macao Government Tourism Office, or a fourth or fifth group of catering establishment licenses issued by the Municipal Affairs Bureau. If it is planned to open, there will be detailed documents, including an L1 opening declaration, a lease, and a declaration stating that you will open."

The application window is set to open on January 20 and will remain open until February 14. Interested parties are encouraged to submit their applications online, detailing their business operations and the equipment they wish to acquire. Documentation required includes business tax records, valid catering licenses, and photos of the premises.

Once the application is submitted, a lottery will determine which businesses will receive funding.

The Macau Productivity and Technology Transfer Center will execute the plan, supported by the Bank of China (Macau) Co., Ltd., and sponsored by the Industrial and Commercial Development Fund.

TRANSPORT

Average daily public bus passengers increased by 6% last year

STAFF REPORTER

NEARLY 230 million people rode on public buses in Macau last year, according to the Transport Bureau (DSAT).

A remarkable daily passenger average was achieved on October 3 and 4, with over 800,000 trips recorded each day.

This daily average reflects an increase of almost 6% from the previous year, which saw a daily average of 586,000 passengers.

The figures for 2024 returned to pre-pandemic levels, surpassing those of earlier years since 2020, with notable growth of 34% compared to

2022, 17% compared to 2021, and 36% compared to the onset of the pandemic.

Statistical data from DSAT's official WeChat account indicated that the two bus operators, Transmac and TCM, carried out a total of around 3.46 million bus trips.

The bureau emphasized that the peak ridership occurred on October 4, with a staggering 830,000 trips recorded in a single day.

DSAT has expressed its dedication to fulfilling the travel needs of the public, collaborating with the two bus companies to enhance services.

This includes route mergers, adjustments to service frequency and

hours, and the introduction of special routes. By the end of 2024, 75 new bus stops were estab-

lished, featuring newly installed restrooms and air-conditioned waiting areas for bus drivers at terminals in Barra, Rua dos Currais, Pérola Oriental, and Praceta 24 de Junho.

In terms of sustainability, the two public bus companies operate a fleet of 929 green buses, which make up over 92%

of all buses in Macau. In 2023, total carbon emissions dropped by 18.2% to 30% compared to 2019 levels.

Additionally, during the first three quarters of the previous year, emissions saw a further decline of 3.1% to 6.2% when compared to the same timeframe in the prior year.



RENATO MARQUES

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LOCAL YOUTHS FALL VICTIM TO FRAUD, LOSING MOP536,000

The Judiciary Police reported three recent cases of fraud involving local youths, resulting in losses totaling MOP536,000. Two young women were significantly affected, with one losing MOP486,000 after being duped by a scammer impersonating the Shanghai Municipal Public Security Bureau. The scammer accused her of spreading false information, leading her to isolate herself in a hotel and transfer funds as "bail." A young man also fell victim, losing MOP50,000 through a similar scheme. Fortunately, another individual avoided financial loss by heeding anti-fraud warnings. Police continue to investigate the cases and urge vigilance against scams.

JOB-MATCHING SESSIONS SHOW 20-30% SUCCESS RATE

Lee Chong Cheng, president of the Macau Federation of Trade Unions, emphasized the association's commitment to job seekers, revealing it holds two to three job matching meetings weekly in collaboration with the Labour Affairs Bureau. Despite a challenging job market, the success rate of these meetings is approximately 20-30%. Most job seekers this January are middle-aged individuals, many currently employed but seeking new opportunities, particularly in the service and retail sectors.

YUET TUNG SHIPPING LAUNCHES NEW FERRY SERVICE BETWEEN TAIPA AND ZHONGSHAN

Yuet Tung Shipping will launch a ferry service linking the Taipa Ferry Terminal and Zhongshan Port, offering two round trips daily starting Wednesday. The journey will take approximately 60 minutes, with the first ferry departing Zhongshan at 9:15 a.m. and the last at 5:00 p.m. From Taipa, ferries will leave at 10:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. This new service follows the recent inauguration of Zhongshan's ferry terminal, which is expected to reduce travel times by 20 minutes. The terminal, equipped with 12 berths, aims to accommodate 2.77 million passengers annually and plans to explore opportunities in low-altitude flights and cruise tourism.

ROTARY CO-ORGANIZES CPR/AED TRAINING SESSION

Over 100 individuals from local clubs and service organizations recently participated in a CPR/AED training session at the Pou Tai Senior Citizen Support Services Complex in Taipa. The event was organized by Rotary International District 3450, the Rotary Club of Oriental Pearl Macau, and St. John Ambulance Hong Kong. During the opening ceremony, the director of the Health Bureau, Alvis Lo, commended the initiative and its potential to enhance community health. He also emphasized the need to disseminate knowledge about CPR and automated external defibrillators (AEDs), which can be vital in saving lives.

RENATO MARQUES



NEW SECRETARIES SHARE AMBITIONS AND GOALS FOR THE GOV'T TERM

RENATO MARQUES

SEVERAL new Secretaries from the sixth term of government have shared their ambitions and goals for the term that started just a few weeks ago.

Four Secretaries, André Cheong (Administration and Justice), Tai Kin Ip (Economy and Finance), O Lam (Social Affairs and Culture), and Raymond Tam (Transport and Public Works), have shared some thoughts and main lines about their roles in different statements from their respective offices.

CHEONG PROMISES REFORMS IN ADMINISTRATION

Taking as a background the recent speeches from President Xi Jinping and the director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, Xia Baolong, Cheong stated that the Administration and Justice Department will study and absorb the spirit of these speeches with great care, actively act and fulfill its responsibilities, and make every effort to promote the relevant work.

In response to President Xi's call to promote reforms in public administration to elevate the government's efficiency and respond promptly to the population's ambitions, Cheong said that the government would create a leadership mechanism to promote public administration reform.

He added that he will move forward in fostering public administration reform, optimizing the organizational structure, innovating governance concepts, perfecting governance methods, strengthening macro-coordination, and improving the management system for public service workers, focusing on raising governance efficiency.

The same official, the number

two of the government after the Chief Executive, is also said to promote continuous improvements, such as the legal system and the mechanisms for defending state security and, on the other hand, by strengthening coordination in the legal field.

He also stressed that, while maintaining Macau's original legal traditions, it will absorb the most recent results of the reform of the laws of the European continent, taking into account the reality of Macau, and perfect the regulatory system of the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) with an emphasis on optimizing the business environment, among other vital areas, as well as improving the legislative coordination mechanism between the Government and the Legislative Assembly.

TAI ALIGNED WITH DIVERSIFICATION EFFORTS

remarking on Xi's call to promote diversified economic development and create a platform for opening up to the outside world while maintaining social harmony and stability, the Secretary for Economy and Finance said that such guidance is fundamental to promoting actions that will boost Macau's development.

Tai added that a task force from his secretariat would pursue its duties diligently, persisting in the balance between development and social security, in favor of taking the initiative in terms of identifying changes, responding to changes, and seeking changes, raising the effectiveness of economic governance based on an open mindset, pushing forward the development of appropriate diversification of the economy, and making efforts not to disappoint the Central government.

The same official also said he

would make the best efforts to align with the national development strategies, enrich the elements and functions of the Sino-Lusophone platform, take more proactive actions in participating in the construction of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area, foster results in the development of the In-Depth Cooperation Zone, redouble efforts in promoting the development of appropriate diversification of the MSAR, and make more significant contributions to serving the motherland within the framework of the national development framework.

Concurrently, Tai also promised to launch various economic development projects to improve people's well-being, continuously improve the business environment, and support the development and upgrading of SMEs so that more residents and businesses can share in the fruits of economic growth.

O LAM EMPHASIZES IMPORTANCE OF FOSTERING YOUTH SUCCESS

In her turn, the new Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture highlighted that the speeches helped clarify the many tasks and duties she would have to perform.

O Lam noted that besides all the efforts to maintain the stability and harmony of the social environment in Macau and continue to promote the MSAR as a platform for the internationalization of China and the promotion of Chinese and Eastern culture to Western countries through exchanges, two main tasks interlink.

These tasks relate to integrating education, learning, and the development of sciences and technology as the main strategies for promoting the success of the younger generations.

She explained that these efforts are also linked to the training of highly qualified staff, which can help the MSAR achieve its goals and improve the State Key Laboratories.

"Based on the scientific research power of the State Key Laboratories, the development of education and scientific research will be promoted, spreading the deep integration of the chain of industries, qualified staff, and innovation to make Macau a place of gathering qualified staff in the world and introduce them to the country's needs, thus creating an outstanding hub at the international level," O Lam said.

She also stressed that Macau will fulfill its role and do its best to strengthen the country's strategy in the areas of education, science and technology, as well as in the development of qualified staff.

Concerning the work to be explicitly developed with youth, O Lam said that it "will focus on the physical and mental health and development needs of young people in Macau, listen more to their voices, and increase the channels of positive interaction between young people and the government to formulate more practical and popular youth policies."

Efforts also encourage the new generation to participate in constructing the Guangdong-Macau In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

This zone promotes the deep integration of Hengqin and Macau and the integration of young people into the country's development "so that they can understand the value of their lives in the wider world."

TAM TO FOCUS ON INFRASTRUCTURE INTERCONNECTION

Following a significant focus on the construction of new infrastructure in Macau in the past five years and the contracting of others that will extend for at least three to four more years, the new Secretary for Transport and Public Works, Raymond Tam, said that his primary focus will be interconnecting all these new infrastructures so that people in Macau can take the best advantage of them.

Tam's major tasks include "interconnecting infrastructures, fostering a more convenient and efficient flow of cross-border elements, and jointly boosting the high-quality development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area and the Guangdong-Macau In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin."

Additionally, Tam pledged to establish a patriotic and efficient team, focusing on optimizing services and facilities for the population's well-being and strengthening interdepartmental cooperation to build a better Macau with concrete actions.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER



EDUCATION

TIS gains full authorization for IB Primary Years Programme

STAFF REPORTER

THE International School of Macao (TIS) has received full authorization to implement the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP) following a thorough evaluation by the IB Organization.

Effective last week, TIS will operate as an authorized IB PYP institution, marking a significant milestone in its mission to provide high-quality international education.

As a PYP candidate school, TIS has worked diligently to incorpo-

rate the PYP framework into its teaching practices. This effort included extensive teacher training, curriculum refinement, and addressing feedback from IB officials.

The authorization process, conducted by the IB Organization, assessed various aspects of the school, including its educational philosophy, leadership and management practices, teaching methodologies, and the resources allocated to support the program.

TIS met all required criteria and received commendations in 12 specific areas, leading to its official authorization.

CRIME

Man caught smuggling 5kg of heroin from Macau to Hong Kong

RENATO MARQUES

A 68-year-old man from Russia was arrested while attempting to smuggle five kilograms of heroin from Macau to Hong Kong, the Judiciary Police (PJ) revealed yesterday during a special press conference.

According to the PJ, the man, acting as a drug mule, arrived in Macau on January 9 on a flight from Thailand, carrying the drugs concealed in his luggage. He reportedly planned to deliver them to an unknown individual in Hong Kong.

Authorities stated that they had been tracking the man's movements since his arrival. After landing in Macau, he checked into a hotel in the Central District and remained there without leaving or meeting anyone in person until



January 12, when he headed to the Outer Harbour Ferry Terminal.

It was at this location that officers intercepted him.

Upon searching his luggage, police discovered five kilograms of heroin hidden in coffee and biscuit packages.

The drugs have an estimated street value of approximately MOP7 million.

During questioning, the man confessed to being hired by an unidentified individual to transport the drugs from Thailand to Hong Kong via Macau. He revealed that he was offered USD 500 to complete the task.

The suspect has been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office for further investigation and is facing charges of drug trafficking.

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IN MACAU (2023)



TRADE

Exports in December up 10.7%, beating estimates as higher US tariffs loom

ZEN SOO & ELAINE
KURTENBACH, HONG KONG

CHINA'S exports in December grew at a faster pace than expected, as factories rushed to fill orders to beat higher tariffs that U.S. President-elect Donald Trump has threatened to impose once he takes office.

Exports rose 10.7% from a year earlier, according to official customs data released yesterday. Economists had forecast they would grow about 7%. Imports rose 1% year-on-year. Analysts had expected them to shrink about 1.5%. With exports outpacing imports, China's trade surplus grew to \$104.84 billion.

HIGHER TARIFFS ON THE HORIZON

Trump has pledged to raise tariffs on Chinese goods and close some loopholes that exporters now use to sell their products more cheaply in the U.S. If enacted, his plans would likely raise prices in America and squeeze sales and profit margins for Chinese exporters.

China's exports are likely to remain strong in the near-term, said Zichun Huang of Capital Economics, as businesses try to "front-run" potentially higher tariffs.

"Outbound shipments are likely to stay resilient in the near-term, supported by further gains in global market share thanks to a weak real effective exchange rate," she wrote in a note.

Chinese exports to the U.S. jumped 15.6% in December compared to the same time last year, while exports to the European Union jumped 8.8%. Outbound shipments to Southeast Asia grew almost 19%.

But exports will likely weaken later in the year if Trump follows through on his threat to impose tariffs, Huang said.

RECORD EXPORTS AND TOTAL TRADE

Officials who briefed reporters in Beijing said the total value of China's imports and exports reached a record 43.85 trillion yuan (nearly \$6 trillion), up 5% from a year earlier. China is the world's largest exporter and the main trading partner of more than 150 countries and regions, said Wang Lingjun, the Customs Administration's deputy director general.

China's economy has slowed following the pandemic, partly



because of job losses and a downturn in the housing industry, while exports have surged. Under leader Xi Jinping, the ruling Communist Party is promoting upgrading of factories and a shift to more high-tech manufacturing. The report Monday said China's export of mechanical and electrical products increased by almost 9% last year from a year earlier, with growth in exports of "high-end equipment" jumping more than 40%.

Exports of electric vehicles rose 13%, exports of 3D printers jumped almost 33% and shipments of industrial robots surged 45%. E-commerce trade, including sales by companies including Temu, Shein and Alibaba, registered 2.6 trillion yuan (\$350 billion), more than twice the level in 2020.

WHAT ABOUT IMPORTS?

China does not pursue a trade surplus and wants to increase its imports, the officials said. But while imports edged higher last year, they still lagged exports, partly due to lower prices for key commodities such as oil and iron ore.

Lagging imports also reflect weak demand as consumers and businesses cut back on spending.

"Regarding this year's imports, we believe that there is still a lot of room for growth. This is not only because my country's market capacity is large, there are many levels, and it has huge potential," said Lv Daliang, a Customs Administration spokesperson.

China also is blocked from exporting and importing some products due to trade restrictions, Lv said, alluding to con-

trols by the U.S. and some other countries on strategically sensitive exports to China, such as sales of advanced semiconductors and items that can be used for military purposes.

"In addition, some countries politicize economic and trade issues, abuse export control measures, and unreasonably restrict the export of some products to China, otherwise we will import more," he said.

WHERE ARE ALL THOSE EXPORTS GOING?

The officials emphasized China's efforts to expand trade with countries participating in its "Belt and Road" initiative to expand infrastructure construction and trade across much of the globe. Trade with those countries accounted for about half of China's total trade last year.

They noted that China has completely eliminated tariffs on imports from the world's poorest countries.

But China also values trade with traditional markets like Europe and the United States, and two-way trade with the U.S. grew nearly 5% last year.

"We imported agricultural products, energy products, medicines, and aircraft from the United States, and exported clothing, consumer electronics, and household appliances to the United States, achieving mutual benefit and win-win results," Wang said.

CHINA AND THE OVERCAPACITY ISSUE

U.S. officials and other critics say Beijing has pushed an expansion of exports to help

make up for sluggish demand inside China as the economy has slowed. With factories in some industries operating well below capacity, they contend that the country has an "overcapacity" problem, while Chinese officials reject that contention.

"Whether from the perspective of comparative advantage or global market demand, there is no so-called 'China's overcapacity' problem. This problem is a pure false proposition," Wang said when asked about the issue.

China has made its industries more efficient through upgrading, investment and innovation supported by research and development, he said. "We have ensured the stability of the global production and supply chain with our own complete manufacturing industry chain, and driven technological progress and industrial upgrading around the world."

China's trade figures for December comes ahead of its full-year and fourth-quarter gross domestic product (GDP) figures that are due on Friday. Beijing had a growth target of about 5% for 2024. MDT/AP

ELECTRIC CAR SALES GROW IN 2024, AS SALES OF GASOLINE CARS PLUNGE

SALES of all types of electric vehicles rose more than 40% in China last year, while those of gasoline-powered automobiles plunged, industry data showed yesterday.

A total of 31.4 million vehicles were sold last year in the world's biggest market by sales, up 4.5% compared from a year earlier, the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers reported. Growth in sales outpaced production, which rose 3.7%.

China's exports of passenger cars jumped almost 20% in 2024, to almost 5 million vehicles. Out of that, exports of what China calls "new energy vehicles," including battery EVs, fuel-cell cars and plug-in hybrids -- electric vehicles with a small gasoline-powered engine to back up the batteries -- reached 1.28 million. That was a 6.7% increase from 2023.

Domestically, sales of passenger cars rose 13.6% in December, driven in part by rebates for trade-ins, raising sales of all passenger cars in China by 3.1% for the



year, to 22.6 million.

Sales of traditional gasoline and diesel-powered vehicles sank 17% in 2024, from 14 million to 11.6 million. They accounted for 51% of overall new car sales.

Plug-in hybrids saw the most rapid growth in 2024, attracting a second generation of electric vehicle buyers who are nervous about buying pure EVs or looking for the more extended range that hybrids can provide.

Sinking demand for fuel-powered cars has proven to be a harsh blow for foreign auto-

makers such as Volkswagen AG and Nissan Motor Corp. that for years have counted on strong demand in China to burnish their bottom lines.

They are scrambling to develop electric vehicles for the Chinese market. Honda and Nissan recently announced plans to pursue a merger in part to meet the challenge of China's rising EV makers.

The continued rapid expansion of China's EV sales contrasts with the United States and Europe, where growth has slowed. MDT/AP

INDIA

Modi marks the opening of a strategic tunnel in disputed Kashmir

AIJAZ HUSSAIN, JAMMU

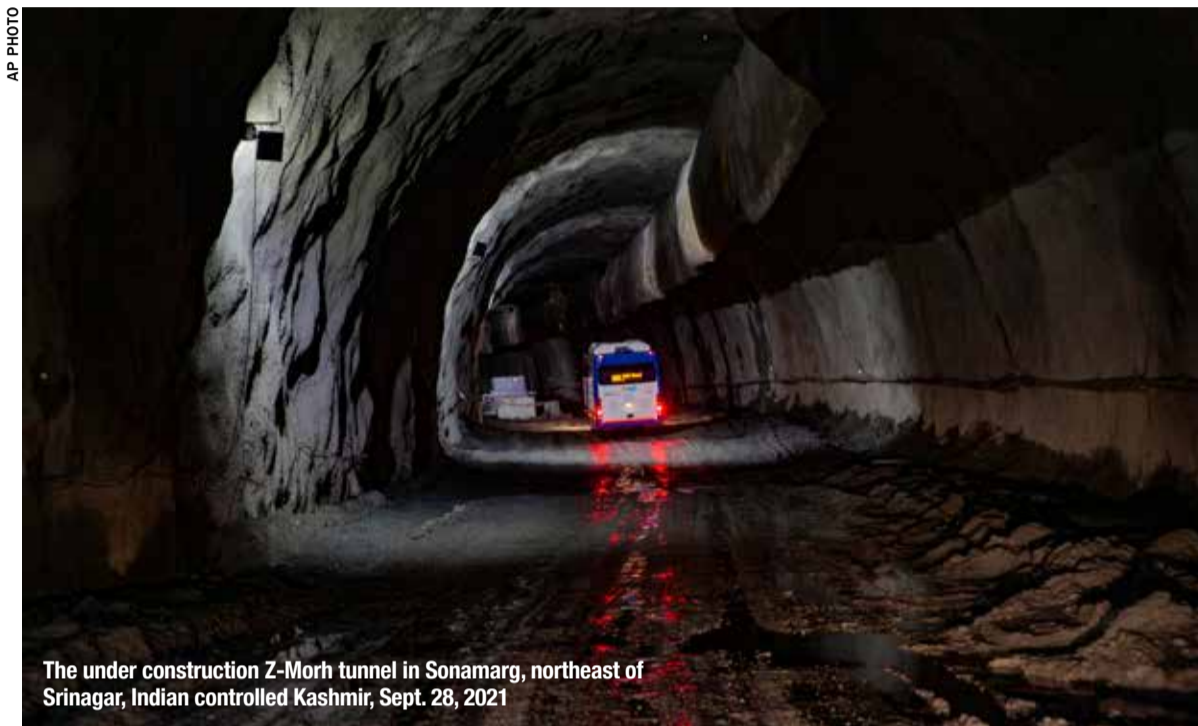
INDIA'S prime minister marked yesterday the opening of a tunnel in the northeast of disputed Kashmir that will grant all-year accessibility to a town that is isolated by heavy snow each winter.

The \$932 million project includes a second tunnel and a series of bridges and high mountain roads that will link Kashmir with Ladakh, a cold desert region nestled between India, Pakistan and China that has faced territorial disputes for decades.

Amid high security, Narendra Modi visited the resort town of Sonamarg where he inaugurated the 6.5-kilometer tunnel. The town denotes the end of the conifer-clad mountains of the Kashmir Valley before Ladakh begins across the rocky Zojila mountain pass. The tunnel, named Z-Morh, will now grant it accessibility for the first time all year round.

The second tunnel, about 14 kilometers long, will bypass the challenging Zojila pass and connect Sonamarg with Ladakh and is expected to be completed in 2026.

Sonamarg and Ladakh have



been plagued with severe snowfalls that close the mountain passes due to massive snowfalls, forcing them to remain cut off from neighboring towns for nearly six months every year.

Authorities on Monday deployed police and soldiers in the area and established multiple checkpoints at key intersections as an enhanced security measure for the prime minister's visit. Troops also stationed

sharpshooters at several points and carried out drone surveillance to ensure constant vigilance.

Modi later at a public meeting, attended by hundreds of people, said the ambitious project would improve road connectivity and boost tourism in the region. The meeting also was attended by some of Modi's Cabinet ministers and Kashmir's chief minister Omar Abdullah.

Experts say the tunnel project is important to the military, which will gain significantly improved capabilities to operate in Ladakh while also providing civilians with freedom of movement year-round between the Kashmir Valley and Ladakh.

In October, gunmen fatally shot at least seven people working on the tunnel project and injured at least five others. Police blamed insurgents fighting

for decades against Indian rule in the region.

In 2019, New Delhi stripped Kashmir's special status as a semi-autonomous region with a separate constitution and inherited protections on land and jobs. The federal government also downgraded and divided the former state into two centrally governed union territories, Ladakh and Jammu-Kashmir, the first time in the history of India that a region's statehood was downgraded to a federally administered territory.

India and Pakistan each administer a part of Kashmir, but both claim the territory in its entirety. Militants in the Indian-controlled portion of Kashmir have been fighting New Delhi's rule since 1989. Many Muslim Kashmiris support the rebels' goal of uniting the territory, either under Pakistani rule or as an independent country.

India insists the Kashmir militancy is Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. Pakistan denies the charge, and many Kashmiris consider it a legitimate freedom struggle. Tens of thousands of civilians, rebels and government forces have been killed in the conflict. **MDT/AP**

SOUTH KOREA

Spy agency says N. Korean soldiers captured in Ukraine haven't shown desire to defect

KIM TONG-HYUNG, SEOUL

SOUTH Korea's spy agency told lawmakers yesterday that two North Korean soldiers who were captured by Ukrainian forces while fighting alongside Russian forces in Russia's Kursk border region haven't expressed a desire to seek asylum in South Korea.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said he's willing to hand over the soldiers to North Korea if the country's authoritarian leader, Kim Jong Un, arranges for an exchange with Ukrainian prisoners of war in Russia. Zelenskyy said one of the North Korean soldiers wishes to stay in Ukraine while the other wants to return to his country, which

was consistent with interview videos released by his government. "If Kim Jong Un even remembers these citizens of his and is capable of organizing an exchange for our warriors being held in Russia, we are ready to transfer such soldiers. Undoubtedly there will be more POWs from North Korea," Zelenskyy said in an address late Sunday. He said in a separate posting on the social media platform X that "there may be other options" for North Korean prisoners who don't wish to go back.

In a closed-door briefing at South Korea's National Assembly, the National Intelligence Service confirmed its participation in the questioning of the North Korean soldiers by Ukrainian authorities. The agency



Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un

said the soldiers haven't expressed a request to resettle in South Korea, according to two lawmakers who attended the meeting.

The agency said it was willing to discuss the matter with Ukrainian authorities if the soldiers eventually do ask to go to South Korea.

About 34,000 North Koreans have defected to capitalist rival South Korea to avoid economic hardship and political suppression at home, mostly since the late 1990s.

Koo Byoungsam, spokesperson of South Korea's Unification Ministry, which handles inter-Korean

affairs, said facilitating the asylum of the North Korean soldiers would require "legal reviews, including on international law, and consultations with related nations."

"There's nothing we can say at the current stage," Koo said.

Seoul's spy agency believes that about 300 North Korean soldiers have died and another 2,700 have been injured while fighting against Ukrainian forces, in what represents North Korea's first involvement in large-scale conflict since the 1950-53 Korean War.

The agency assessed that the North Koreans are struggling to adapt to drones and other elements of modern warfare. They are further disadvantaged by the crude tactics of their

Russian commanders, who have thrown them in assault campaigns without providing rear-fire support, according to Lee Seong Kweun, a lawmaker who attended the agency's briefing.

The agency said memos found on dead North Korean soldiers indicated that they had been ordered to commit suicide before being captured, according to Lee. The agency said one North Korean soldier, facing the threat of being captured by Ukrainian forces, shouted "General Kim Jong Un" and tried to detonate a hand grenade before he was shot and killed.

Zelenskyy confirmed the capture of the North Korean soldiers on Saturday, days after Ukraine, facing a slow Russian onslaught in the east, began pressing new attacks in Kursk to retain ground captured in a lightning incursion in August — the first occupation of Russian territory since World War II. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



ISRAEL-HAMAS

Progress made in talks over ceasefire and hostage release, officials say

VICTORIA EASTWOOD,
SAMY MAGDY &
JOSEF FEDERMAN, CAIRO

U.S. and Arab mediators made significant progress overnight toward brokering a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war and the release of scores of hostages held in the Gaza Strip, but a deal hasn't been reached yet, officials said yesterday.

Three officials acknowledged that progress has been made and said the coming days would be critical for ending more than 15 months of fighting that has destabilized the Middle East. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the talks.

One of the three officials and a Hamas official said that there were still a number of hurdles to clear. On several occasions over the past year, U.S. officials have said that they were on the verge of reaching a deal, only to have the talks stall.

One person familiar with the talks said there had been a breakthrough overnight and that there was a proposed deal on the table. Israeli and Hamas negotiators will now take it back to their leaders for final approval, the person said.

The person said that mediators from the Gulf country of Qatar had put renewed pressure on Hamas to accept the

agreement, while U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's envoy, Steve Witkoff, was pressing the Israelis. Witkoff recently joined the negotiations and has been in the region in recent days.

The person said that the mediators had handed off the draft deal to each side and that the next 24 hours would be pivotal.

An Egyptian official said that there had been good progress overnight, but that it would likely take a few more days, and that the sides were aiming for a deal before Trump's inauguration on Jan. 20. A third official said that the talks were in a good place, but hadn't been wrapped up. That official also assessed that a deal was possible before the inauguration.

A Hamas official, however, said that a number of contentious issues still need to be resolved, including an Israeli commitment to ending the war and details about the withdrawal of Israeli troops and the hostage-prisoner exchange. The official wasn't authorized to brief media and spoke anonymously.

The Egyptian official confirmed that those issues were still being discussed.

MONTHS OF NEGOTIATIONS HAVE REPEATEDLY STALLED

The Biden administration, along with Egypt and Qatar, has spent more than a year

trying to broker an agreement to end the deadliest war ever fought between Israelis and Palestinians and secure the release of scores of hostages captured in Hamas' attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, which triggered the conflict.

But the sides have been divided over the details of the planned exchange of hostages for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, as well as the nature of the ceasefire itself. Hamas has said that it won't release the remaining captives without an end to the war, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to continue the campaign until "total victory" over the militant group.

Under discussion now is a phased ceasefire. Netanyahu has repeatedly signaled that he is committed only to the first phase, a partial hostage release in exchange for a weeklong halt in fighting. The possibility of a lasting ceasefire and other issues would be negotiated after the first phase begins. Hamas has demanded a full withdrawal and complete end to the war, and is hoping that this first phase will lead to that outcome.

A deal could weaken Netanyahu's coalition, which includes two far-right factions that have threatened to leave the government if Israel makes too many concessions. Members of the opposition have

promised to give Netanyahu the support that he needs to approve a hostage release, but the hardliners' anger could be a source of instability down the road.

Netanyahu is hoping that the prospect of a Trump administration — which includes allies of the West Bank settler movement — will persuade his partners to remain in the government.

U.S. President Joe Biden, who hopes to wrap up a deal before leaving office next week, spoke with Netanyahu about the talks on Sunday.

The head of Israel's Mossad foreign intelligence agency, David Barnea, and Biden's top Middle East adviser, Brett McGurk, were both in the Qatari capital, Doha. Barnea's presence meant high-level Israeli officials who would need to sign off on any agreement are once again involved in the talks.

McGurk has been working on final details of a text to be presented to both sides, Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, told CNN's "State of the Union." But he said that he would not predict whether a deal can be reached by Jan. 20.

"We are very, very close," he said. "Yet being very close still means we're far, because until you actually get across the finish line, we're not there." MDT/AP

this day in history

2002 UK DECLARED FREE OF FOOT-AND-MOUTH



The foot-and-mouth crisis that began almost 11 months ago will officially end at midnight, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has said.

There have been no outbreaks for more than three months - the last recorded case of the fatal and infectious disease was in Cumbria.

Also, tests on sheep flocks in Northumberland, where the disease was initially traced, have proved negative.

Farmers have said the decision by Defra gives them new hope for the industry's future.

But it will be several weeks before restrictions on livestock farmers can be lifted, and international clearance for the export trade in animals and animal products will take longer.

Currently, only limited exports are allowed within the European Union.

Rural Affairs minister Lord Whitty said: "It will be some time, probably months, before our international partners restore our trading status in the European Union and beyond as a fully foot-and-mouth free state."

Nevertheless, the National Farmers' Union says the end of the crisis removes a "long, dark shadow" from the countryside where more than 2,000 cases of foot-and-mouth have been recorded.

Since the first signs of the disease were discovered on 19 February 2001 at an abattoir in Essex, more than four million animals have been slaughtered - the majority of them sheep.

So huge was the cull, the army had to be called in to organise the burning of animals on mass pyres and their burial in mass graves.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The UK regained its international status as a foot-and-mouth free country, opening the way for the full resumption of exports, in January 2002 - sooner than expected.

Official figures from Defra show that six-and-a-half million animals were slaughtered.

It is estimated that the foot-and-mouth crisis cost the UK up to £8bn - the farming industry's financial loss was put at more than £900m.

More than £1.3bn has been given out to farmers as compensation.

In summer 2002, four reports were published into the outbreak.

The Lessons To Be Learned report criticised the government for failing to prepare for such an outbreak, and acting too slowly in their response after the first few cases were diagnosed.

Also, there had not been enough vaccines available for the millions of animals affected and the army should have been brought in sooner to deal with the crisis.

A report by the National Audit Office said warnings of a shortage of vets to deal with such an outbreak went unheeded.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

<p>ARIES Mar. 21-Apr. 19 Make repairs. Renovate and remodel under the Cancer Full Moon. Adapt around domestic changes for a few weeks. Nurture your home and family.</p>	<p>TAURUS Apr. 20-May. 20 Start another chapter. A two-week Full Moon phase highlights communications, connection and intellectual discovery. Adapt around challenges. Keep channels open. Write, edit and share.</p>
<p>GEMINI May. 21-Jun. 21 Make a shift around income and finances. Discover profitable opportunities in new directions under this Cancer Full Moon. Redirect attention toward fresh potential.</p>	<p>CANCER Jun. 22-Jul. 22 A challenge reorients you. This Full Moon in your sign illuminates new personal directions. Expand boundaries over a few weeks. Develop an inspiring possibility.</p>
<p>LEO Jul. 23-Aug. 22 Review priorities privately. This Full Moon illuminates the dawn of a two-week introspective phase. Process transitions. Adapt around changes. Consider the past and future.</p>	<p>VIRGO Aug. 23-Sep. 22 One social door closes and another opens under this Full Moon. Adapt with community and team changes for two weeks. Share appreciation and salutations.</p>
<p>LIBRA Sep. 23-Oct. 22 Consider new career opportunities. Make professional changes under the Full Moon. Redirect efforts over the next two weeks toward your talents, passions and purpose.</p>	<p>SCORPIO Oct. 23-Nov. 21 Your exploration changes and adapts. The Full Moon illuminates a shift in your educational direction. Experiment with new concepts for a few weeks.</p>
<p>SAGITTARIUS Nov. 22-Dec. 21 Collaborate for financial growth over the next two weeks following tonight's Full Moon. Shift directions for changing conditions. Deepen bonds by pulling together.</p>	<p>CAPRICORN Dec. 22-Jan. 19 Make adjustments together over two weeks. Collaborate for shared commitments around changes after tonight's Full Moon. Adapt for solutions. Love provides foundational strength.</p>
<p>AQUARIUS Jan. 20-Feb. 18 Begin a new physical health, work and fitness phase. Adapt practices for changing conditions over the next two weeks illuminated by tonight's Cancer Full Moon.</p>	<p>PISCES Feb. 19-Mar. 20 Express your heart, imagination and artistry. Tonight's Full Moon shines on a transition. Adapt directions with a romance, passion or creative endeavor. Shift perspectives.</p>

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

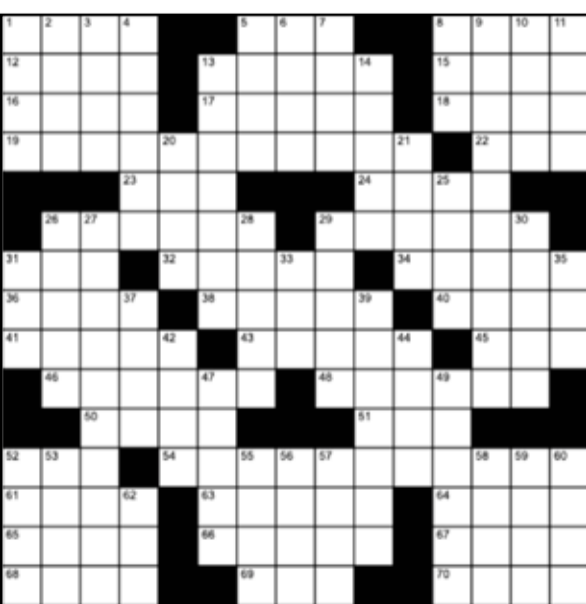
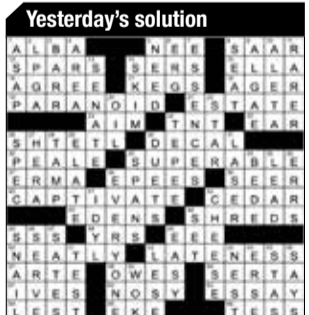
WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-3	2	fine
Changchun	-17	-8	fine
Chengdu	6	14	rain
Chongqing	8	10	rain
Fuzhou	7	21	fine
Guangzhou	5	20	cloudy
Guiyang	2	9	overcast
Haikou	15	19	overcast
Hangzhou	4	15	cloudy
Harbin	-22	-14	snow
Hefei	0	12	overcast
Nanjing	2	11	overcast
Shanghai	4	14	cloudy
Taipei	12	22	fine
Wuhan	2	13	cloudy
Hong Kong	15	18	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	-7	-3	snow
Frankfurt	-2	1	cloudy
Paris	-1	1	sunny
London	6	8	cloudy
New York	-4	1	cloudy

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Jester Jay; 5- Remote; 8- Pearl Harbor's island; 12- Pressing need?; 13- Wisdom tooth, e.g.; 15- Some TVs; 16- Film unit; 17- Rice-___; 18- Etcher's need; 19- An organization; 22- Significant period; 23- "You've got mail" co.; 24- Big name in PCs; 26- River in a Strauss waltz; 29- More spine-tingling; 31- Suffix for human; 32- Like some bears and icecaps; 34- Paddled; 36- Bard's river; 38- Brand name for a copying machine; 40- Prego rival; 41- Criminal; 43- Apple juice; 45- Spanish uncle; 46- Sharp reply; 48- Rubs out; 50- Rescue; 51- Eggs; 52- Tic-___-toe; 54- Nearly exact; 61- Pay attention to; 63- Best of a group; 64- Land map; 65- "Rule, Britannia" composer; 66- ___ lazuli; 67- "Damn Yankees" character; 68- Teeny bit; 69- Affirmative reply; 70- Sponsorship;

DOWN 1- Old Italian money; 2- "___ Tu": 1974 hit; 3- Denials; 4- Borrowed; 5- ___ song (cheaply); 6- Thanks ___!; 7- Title bestowed upon the wife of a raja; 8- Man-mouse link; 9- Increase in speed; 10- "Aquarius" musical; 11- Meat-grading org.; 13- Letterbox; 14- ___ Janeiro; 20- ___ d'etat; 21- Whodunit hero Wolfe; 25- Perjurer; 26- Underwater worker; 27- Youthful; 28- Vote into office; 29- Eat away at; 30- Philbin of TV; 31- Stumblebum; 33- Shipping magnate Onassis; 35- Batman and Robin, e.g.; 37- ___ chance!; 39- Copies; 42- ___ Scotia; 44- Sitarist Shankar; 47- Beat back; 49- Specimen; 52- Spicy cuisine; 53- Dynamic start; 55- Drama; 56- Ready to pick; 57- Singer Redding; 58- Sleep like ___; 59- Anklebones; 60- JFK postings; 62- Narc's org.;



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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Jade Garden (Taipa)
 HKD 11,880,000 4 bed 3 bath

AD

RELIGION

INDIA KICKS OFF A MASSIVE HINDU FESTIVAL TOUTED AS THE WORLD'S LARGEST RELIGIOUS GATHERING

SHEIKH SAALIQ, PRAYAGRAJ

MILLIONS of Hindu devotees, mystics and holy men and women from all across India flocked to the northern city of Prayagraj yesterday to kickstart the Maha Kumbh festival, which is being touted as the world's largest religious gathering.

Over about the next six weeks, Hindu pilgrims will gather at the confluence of three sacred rivers — the Ganges, the Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati — where they will take part in elaborate rituals, hoping to begin a journey to achieve Hindu philosophy's ultimate goal: the release from the cycle of rebirth.

A RELIGIOUS GATHERING AT THE CONFLUENCE OF THREE SACRED RIVERS

Hindus venerate rivers, and none more so than the Ganges and the Yamuna. The faithful believe that a dip in their waters will cleanse them of their past sins and end their process of reincarnation, particularly on auspicious days. The most propitious of these days occur in cycles of 12 years

during a festival called the Maha Kumbh Mela, or pitcher festival.

The festival is a series of ritual baths by Hindu sadhus, or holy men, and other pilgrims at the confluence of three sacred rivers that dates to at least medieval times. Hindus believe that the mythical Saraswati river once flowed from the Himalayas through Prayagraj, meeting there with the Ganges and the Yamuna.

Bathing takes place every day, but on the most auspicious dates, naked, ash-smearing monks charge toward the holy rivers at dawn. Many pilgrims stay for the entire festival, observing austerity, giving alms and bathing at sunrise every day.

"We feel peaceful here and attain salvation from the cycles of life and death," said Bhagwat Prasad Tiwari, a pilgrim.

The festival has its roots in a Hindu tradition that says the god Vishnu wrested a golden pitcher containing the nectar of immortality from demons. Hindus believe that a few drops fell in the cities of Prayagraj, Nasik, Ujjain and Haridwar — the four places where the Kumbh festival has

been held for centuries.

The Kumbh rotates among these four pilgrimage sites about every three years on a date prescribed by astrology. This year's festival is the biggest and grandest of them all. A smaller version of the festival, called Ardh Kumbh, or Half Kumbh, was organized in 2019, when 240 million visitors were recorded, with about 50 million taking a ritual bath on the busiest day.

MAHA KUMBH IS THE WORLD'S LARGEST SUCH GATHERING

At least 400 million people — more than the population of the United States — are expected in Prayagraj over the next 45 days, according to officials. That is around 200 times the 2 million pilgrims that arrived in the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia for the annual Hajj pilgrimage last year.

The festival is a big test for Indian authorities to showcase the Hindu religion, tourism and crowd management.

A vast ground along the banks of the rivers has been converted into a sprawling tent city equi-

pped with more 3,000 kitchens and 150,000 restrooms. Divided into 25 sections and spreading over 40 square kilometers (15 square miles), the tent city also has housing, roads, electricity and water, communication towers and 11 hospitals. Murals depicting stories from Hindu scriptures are painted on the city walls.

Indian Railways has also introduced more than 90 special trains that will make nearly 3,300 trips during the festival to transport devotees, beside regular trains.

About 50,000 security personnel — a 50% increase from 2019 — are also stationed in the city to maintain law and order and crowd management. More than 2,500 cameras, some powered by AI, will send crowd movement and density information to four central control rooms, where officials can quickly deploy personnel to avoid stampedes.

THE FESTIVAL WILL BOOST MODI'S SUPPORT BASE

India's past leaders have capitalized on the festival to strengthen their relationship with the country's Hindus, who make up

nearly 80% of India's more than 1.4 billion people. But under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the festival has become an integral part of its advocacy of Hindu nationalism. For Modi and his party, Indian civilization is inseparable from Hinduism, although critics say the party's philosophy is rooted in Hindu supremacy.

The Uttar Pradesh state, headed by Adityanath — a powerful Hindu monk and a popular hard-line Hindu politician in Modi's party — has allocated more than \$765 million for this year's event. It has also used the festival to boost his and the prime minister's image, with giant billboards and posters all over the city showing them both, alongside slogans touting their government welfare policies.

The festival is expected to boost the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's past record of promoting Hindu cultural symbols for its support base. But recent Kumbh gatherings have also been caught in controversies.

Modi's government changed the city's Mughal-era name from Allahabad to Prayagraj as part of its Muslim-to-Hindu name-changing effort nationwide ahead of the 2019 festival and the national election that his party won. In 2021, his government refused to call off the festival in Haridwar despite a surge in coronavirus cases, fearing a backlash from religious leaders in the Hindu-majority country. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Jannik Sinner starts his title defense with a straight set win

AFTER wasting a set point in the second tiebreaker with an ill-conceived drop shot, Jannik Sinner quickly reverted to what's been working for him and finished off a straight-set win over Nicolas Jarry to begin his Australian Open title defense.

The 7-6 (2), 7-6 (5), 6-1 victory on Rod Laver Arena extended Sinner's winning streaks to 15 on both the tour and on hard courts in Grand Slams.

After all the pre-tournament attention on the 2024 doping cases of Sinner and long-time women's No. 1 Iga Swiatek, both started the year's first Grand Slam tournament about the same time on nearby courts on Day 2.

"Yeah, I was curious to see how it was," Sinner said of the reception at Rod Laver, where he became a fan favorite last year. "You never know what's happening. I was happy about the crowd. It was a nice atmosphere."

Top-ranked Sinner had to grind for two long, tiebreak sets against



Jannik Sinner

No. 35-ranked Jarry, a 29-year-old from Chile, before finding his touch.

"It was a very close one because the first sets, they can go both ways," Sinner said. "In the third set when I broke it the first time, that gave me a little bit of room to breathe."

"I'm happy how I handled the very tough situation."

Sinner has got a good record at Melbourne Park in that department. He rallied from two sets down in last year's final to beat Daniil Medvedev for his first Grand

Slam title, coming off a semifinal upset of 10-time champion Novak Djokovic.

While Sinner was deep into his match against Jarry, Swiatek, a five-time major winner from Poland, fended off top-ranked doubles player Katerina Siniakova 6-3, 6-4

on John Cain Arena.

Coco Gauff had a little difficulty adjusting to the sun at one end of Rod Laver Arena in Monday's first marquee match and dropped an early service game before quickly settling into a rhythm in a 6-3, 6-3 win over 2020 champion Sofia Kenin.

Third-seeded Gauff beat Swiatek to win the title at the WTA Finals last November and started this season by helping the U.S. to victory at the United Cup last week, against beating No. 2 Swiatek in the final.

Gauff, the 2023 U.S. Open champion is wearing a Marvel-inspired bodysuit and skirt at Melbourne Park and she's radiating confidence and calm.

"I knew going in it was going to be difficult, but you know I'm happy with how I played," she said of the 1-hour, 20-minute win over Kenin, who at No. 81 is a much tougher opponent than her ranking suggests.

"I mean (I) could serve better, but like on that side I was struggling to see the ball," Gauff said, pointing to one baseline on the main show court that was bathed in sun. "So I'm just happy that I was able to manage through that."

Another 20-year-old American, Alex Michelsen, produced the biggest win of his young career with a 7-5, 6-3, 2-6, 6-4 first-round upset of 2023 Australian runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas. **MDT/AP**

AD

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OPINION

Business Views

Shuli Ren, Bloomberg



HONG KONG-DOLLAR PEG MAKES LESS SENSE THAN EVER

Whenever the Federal Reserve turns more hawkish and the cost of dollar funding soars, debate over whether Hong Kong should change its currency's peg resurfaces. The fixed exchange rate system has been around for more than four decades, with a narrow trading ban of HK\$7.75 to HK\$7.85 introduced in 2005.

As the rate differential between the US and China hits a record high, it's increasingly clear that this currency regime, which inevitably ties the city's lending rates to those of the US, is outdated and needs a revamp. The US 10-year Treasury yield is flirting with 5%, while it's only a matter of time before China goes to sub-1%.

Because of the dollar peg, Hong Kong can no longer be Asia's go-to fundraising platform, eroding a key selling point for the financial center.

For blue-chip companies, borrowing in the mainland has become a lot cheaper than in the city, where benchmark lending rates move in lockstep with the fed fund rate.

Hong Kong-based flagship real estate developer New World Development Co., for one, has been ramping up its onshore yuan borrowings to lower interest repayments.

The company said in August that it obtained a 12-year yuan loan at only 3.1%, while the average rate of its offshore bank loans were roughly 1.1% above Hibor, or 5.2% at the prevailing rate.

Or consider what the peg does to the spluttering local economy. The \$3 trillion residential property market is in its fourth year of downturn.

But it still suffers from negative carry, which discourages home purchases because it's cheaper to rent than to buy. Adding salt to the wound, for the first time in history, new mortgage rates in Hong Kong are higher than in Shenzhen, the neighboring tech hub in mainland China.

In other words, when the Fed is making it clear that we won't go back to the zero-rate era after the Global Financial Crisis, it's time for the city to move on and get its monetary flexibility back.

The Hong Kong Monetary Authority said in a statement Thursday that it had no intention and no need to change the dollar peg.

The biggest roadblock is timing and perhaps political paralysis. Over the years, foreign hedge fund managers, including long-time China skeptic Kyle Bass, have bet against the Hong Kong dollar — and lost big. When market pressure is on, policymakers rightly worried that any tweak to the exchange rate — not carried out on their own terms — would encourage more speculative trades and trigger a financial crisis in the city.

As such, they would dig in and stay firm. But in better times, such as now when the currency is trading at the strong end, they tend to lose a sense of urgency and choose to just stay put. After all, few question Hong Kong's ability to defend the peg.

The government holds about HK\$4 trillion (\$515 billion) in reserves, with HK\$2.1 trillion in highly liquid, dollar-based assets to fully back its monetary base.

Nonetheless, it's not ability but suitability that counts.

It makes no sense for a financial hub to keep a rigid monetary regime when, in the foreseeable future, the source of cheap funding has flipped from the US to China. Behind closed doors, policymakers should start to prepare for an orderly change to its dollar peg.

Courtesy Bloomberg/Shuli Ren

Germany's foreign minister yesterday welcomed the release of a German-Iranian rights activist from prison in Iran and her return to Germany.

Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock wrote on the social media platform X that it's "a great moment of joy that Nahid Taghavi can finally embrace her family again."

Baerbock retweeted a post by Taghavi's daughter, Mariam Claren, with a photo of herself hugging her mother, which said: "It's over. Nahid is free! After more than 4 years as a political prisoner in the Islamic Republic of Iran my mother Nahid Taghavi was freed and is

back in Germany."

Taghavi was sentenced to 10 years and eight months in prison in Iran in 2021.

Rights group Amnesty International, which lobbied for Taghavi's release for years, said in a statement Monday that "after more than 1,500 days in arbitrary detention, Iranian-German women's rights activist Nahid Taghavi has been released."

"Since her arrest, Amnesty International had been campaigning for her unconditional release and an end to her persecution," the group said, adding that Taghavi landed in Germany on Sunday.



NO PANTS? NO PROBLEM. LONDON SUBWAY RIDERS BARE THEIR LEGS TO BRIGHTEN A GRAY WINTER DAY

DANICA KIRKA, LONDON

Mind the pants. Hundreds of Londoners headed down to the Underground on Sunday afternoon, stripped down to their underwear and travelled around a bit, trying to look as though nothing unusual was going on.

As if. This was the Official No Trousers Tube Ride, an annual event with no point other than injecting a little levity into the bleak midwinter. No deep meaning, no bigger motive. The only goal was to be silly, if but for one afternoon.

"There's so much bad, so much not fun going on," said ringleader Dave Selkirk, a 40-year-old personal trainer. "It's nice to do something just for the sake of it."

After gathering at the entrance to Chinatown, dozens of clothing anarchists trooped through the icy streets to the Piccadilly Circus Underground station in central London where they boarded their first train. The only hiccup was that the cars were so crowded some people couldn't shed their trousers.

Selfies were taken. Grins were exchanged. Tourists

looked puzzled.

The first stunt in this vein was held in New York in 2002, the brainchild of local comedian Charlie Todd. His idea was this: Wouldn't it be funny if someone walked onto a subway train in the middle of winter wearing hat, gloves, scarf — everything but pants? Or trousers as they're known in London, pants being synonymous with underpants in Britain.

"It would be unusual in New York, although you can see anything on our subway system, but what would really be funny is if at the next stop, a couple of minutes later, when the doors open and additional persons got on, not wearing trousers as well," Todd told the BBC. "And they act like they don't know each other, and they act like ... it's no big deal and they just forgot their trousers."

The idea took off, and no pants days have been held all over: in Berlin, Prague, Jerusalem, Warsaw and Washington, D.C., among other cities.

London hosted its first big reveal in 2009.

"You know, it's meant to be a bit of harmless fun," Todd said. "Certainly we are living in a climate whe-

re, you know, people like to have culture war fights. My rule in New York was always the goal of this event is to amuse other people, to give people a laugh. It's not to be provocative, it's not to irritate someone. So hopefully the spirit of that continues."

Basil Long, a lawyer, showed up at the meeting point in a down coat and hat on a freezing winter afternoon. But after his journey underground in the warm tunnels of the Tube, he had been transformed, wearing only a white shirt with bold rainbow stripes, pink underwear and Underground-themed socks.

"I just saw it online and I just thought, why not? It's always a question, isn't it?" he said. "When someone is asked why they climbed Everest, they were just like, why not?"

But Miriam Correa had a purpose. The 43-year-old chef wanted to come because she had seen pictures of previous no trouser rides that featured lots of thin, scantily clad women.

"I am a real woman," she said, adding that there was no reason to be ashamed of her shape. "All bodies are perfect." MDT/AP



Congo's Several towns that fell to armed groups in North Kivu and South Kivu provinces have been recaptured by government forces, a Congolese army spokesman said, even as the rebels have made advances in other areas amid intensified fighting in the conflict-battered region. Eastern Congo has been in conflict for decades with more than 100 armed groups, most of which are vying for territory in the vast and mineral-rich region near the border with Rwanda.



USA Weaker winds and intense firefighting efforts over the weekend boosted containment of fires burning in and around Los Angeles, but the effects of the blazes on the entertainment world continue. Several projects and awards shows have been delayed, with the Producers Guild opting not to announce its nominations Sunday due to ongoing effects of the fire.



Canada's outgoing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Sunday suggested that President-elect Donald Trump's remarks about Canada becoming America's "51st state" has distracted attention from the harm that steep tariffs would inflict on U.S. consumers. Trump has threatened to impose 25% tariffs on all Canadian imports. "The 51st state, that's not going to happen," Trudeau said in an interview with MSNBC.



Austrian far-right leader Herbert Kickl (pictured) and his prospective coalition partners said yesterday that they have reached an agreement to bring down the budget deficit, an important first step toward what would be the country's first post-World War II government led by the far right.