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AP PHOTO



**Australia's** spy agency revealed yesterday that three foreign governments plotted to harm people in Australia. ASIO disrupted plans, including an attempt to lure a rights advocate abroad. The agency also worked with U.S. authorities to prevent cyberattacks and mass violence plots targeting American institutions.

AP PHOTO



**Japan** A court sentenced Ryuji Kimura to 10 years in prison yesterday for a 2023 assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Kimura threw a pipe bomb at Kishida during a campaign event, causing minor injuries. Prosecutors argued his actions posed a serious threat to democracy.

AP PHOTO



**Middle East** Hamas announced yesterday [Macau time] it will release six Israeli hostages on Saturday and the bodies of four others today. The agreement follows Israel's approval of mobile homes and construction materials for Gaza. The ceasefire's next phase remains uncertain as negotiations on Palestinian governance continue.

AP PHOTO



**Ukrainian** President Volodymyr Zelenskyy criticized former U.S. President Donald Trump yesterday, saying he is influenced by Russian disinformation. Trump recently downplayed Zelenskyy's approval ratings and suggested Ukraine should have avoided war. Zelenskyy reiterated that elections are postponed due to martial law.

# SAM'S CHALLENGES

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GOVERNANCE

# SAM HOU FAI ADMITS CITY IS FACING INTENSIFIED COMPETITION AMID GLOBAL UNCERTAINTIES

LYNZY VALLES

**C**HIEF Executive Sam Hou Fai emphasized the urgent need for economic adaptation amid global uncertainties as the city faces “intensified competition.”

In his speech at the first plenary meeting of the Economic Development Commission for 2025 yesterday, he highlighted the significant transformations expected in both domestic and international environments, warning that factors such as unilateralism, protectionism, and economic instability will continue to pose challenges for Macau.

He stressed that intensifying competition within Macau’s tourism and gaming industries adds further pressure, making it imperative for the region to implement proactive measures to safeguard its economic stability.

“As a small-scale economy, Macau cannot remain unscathed, especially as competition in tourism and gaming from neighboring cities intensifies and looms,” said Sam, stressing that the city is not immune to the impacts of an increasingly volatile global economy.

Revenues from local casinos dropped by 5.6% in January, totaling MOP18.254 billion, according to data from the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau.

This figure contrasts with the gross gaming revenue (GGR) of MOP19.337 billion reported in January last year. January revenues mark a cold start to a year in which the government projected a GGR of MOP240 billion, averaging MOP20 billion per month.

Additionally, the Chief Executive pointed out that the structural dominance of the gaming industry remains a persistent issue that will not fundamentally change in the near future.

For Sam, Macau continues to grapple with a limited visitor demographic, an imbalanced revenue structure, and a lack of innovation—problems that, he stressed, have yet to be effectively addressed.

During Sam’s political campaign, he outlined his vision for a balanced economic future, stating that “having only the gaming



industry dominate” is detrimental to Macau’s development.

He underscored that economic diversification is a critical issue that “cannot be ignored,” adding that “there is no turning back,” and emphasizing the importance of developing in a diversified manner.

During the meeting yesterday, he warned that Macau must find ways to manage its internal economic inconsistencies and imbalances as consumer behaviors and economic trends evolve.

He also acknowledged that efforts to develop a more diversified industrial sector have not met societal expectations and that local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face pressing challenges that need urgent attention.

Government data shows that in 2024, the number of new companies incorporated in Macau decreased, with a total of 4,555 newly registered businesses, representing a year-on-year drop of 456.

This decline was accompanied by a 37.5% reduction in the total value of registered capital, which fell to MOP1.03 billion.

Therefore, one key area of focus, he stated, should be fostering

stronger cooperation between Guangdong and Macau in the development of Hengqin.

By strengthening this collaboration, Macau could create new economic opportunities beyond its traditional sectors and work toward long-term stability.

Additionally, Sam noted that as

the United States raises tariffs on imports this month, the new U.S. administration’s international strategy and uncertain policies toward China could have negative economic repercussions for Macau.

“Our country’s economy continues to face many difficulties and challenges, including insuffi-

cient domestic demand, production and operational struggles for some enterprises, and difficulties in employment and income growth for residents,” he said.

“These new situations require us to pay close attention and respond appropriately, as Macau’s economy is based on the integrated tourism and leisure industry and is highly dependent on the visitor market from mainland China,” Sam added.

## CALL FOR CONSTRUCTIVE SOLUTIONS

Sam called on members of the Economic Development Commission and various sectors of the community to actively explore and propose practical, feasible, and effective long-term solutions to support the city’s sustained and diversified economic development.

“How can we properly address the issues of insufficient development and imbalance in Macau’s domestic economy during the economic recovery process? How can we resolve conflicts arising from industrial diversification falling short of societal expectations, as well as the common and urgent difficulties faced by small and medium-sized enterprises?” he questioned.

Sam concluded by expressing his hope that all sectors of society will put forward constructive proposals, and work together to “drive meaningful economic progress”

He called on stakeholders to take an active role in shaping Macau’s economic future, not just as questioners, but as “responders” to its challenges.

## CE ESTABLISHES FIVE NEW WORKING GROUPS TO ENHANCE GOVERNANCE, HEADS TWO

**C**HIEF Executive (CE) Sam Hou Fai issued an internal directive to establish five new government working groups aimed at enhancing governance capacity and efficiency.

The Government Information Bureau announced in a press statement that among the groups, the CE will personally lead two: the Leading Group on Public Administration Reform and the Leading Group for Promoting the Development of the Guangdong-Macau Intensive Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

The other three groups, led by Secretary for Administration and Justice André Cheong, include the Coordination Group for

Public Administration Reform, the Legal Coordination Working Group, and the City Beautification and Sanitation Working Group.

According to the statement, the establishment of these groups aligns with President Xi Jinping’s address at the 25th-anniversary celebration of Macau’s return to China and the inauguration of Macau’s sixth-term government.

The working groups will focus on strengthening interdepartmental and cross-sector cooperation to enhance governance, improve public administration reform mechanisms, and streamline legislative coordina-

tion and planning.

Additionally, they aim to refine the legal system, foster better interaction between administrative and legislative bodies, and optimize Macau’s overall governance framework.

The groups have been tasked with approaching their work with innovation and a proactive mindset. They are expected to leverage national-level support policies to help the Hengqin Cooperation Zone achieve its second-phase development goals.

A key priority is improving governance structures to enhance public welfare and ensure better living conditions for Macau residents. **RM**

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TOURISM

# MGTO to expand Hong Kong promotions to boost regional tourism

RENATO MARQUES

**T**HE Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) has announced plans to progressively roll out promotions targeting the Hong Kong market, aiming to increase visitation from the neighboring region.

MGTO Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes made the announcement during her speech at a Spring Luncheon for the tourism industry in Hong Kong.

Senna Fernandes emphasized the importance of Hong Kong as a key tourist source for Macau, noting that it has ranked as the second-largest visitor market after mainland China for many years.

In its announcement, MGTO stated that it is "forging ahead with online and offline initiatives across various channels to maintain and grow visitation from Hong Kong, Macau's second-largest visitor market."

Senna Fernandes highlighted that Macau welcomed nearly 35 million visitors in 2024, including over 7.1 million from Hong Kong,



making it the second-largest source market among the top ten. She expressed hope that MGTO will strengthen cooperation with Hong Kong's tourism authorities and industry operators to further drive tourism development in both destinations.

While specific action plans were not disclosed, Senna Fernandes noted that new promotions will feature a diverse range of attractions to

cater to different market segments in Hong Kong.

MGTO also revealed that it recently invited more than 20 micro-influencers to highlight Chinese New Year festivities. The Office also collaborated with several tourism media outlets and newspapers to increase coverage and boost Macau's visibility as a travel destination.

Starting today and continuing

through the weekend, MGTO will participate in the Holiday & Travel Expo 2025 in Hong Kong, where it will host a Mega Sale in partnership with several Hong Kong travel agencies, offering special deals on travel packages.

## PLANS FOR 2025 PROMOTIONS STILL UNCLEAR

At the same time, MGTO stated that it will continue to launch

a series of online and offline promotions both locally and internationally, organize various events and activities, enhance community tourism, and promote Macau's development as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy.

Similar to its Hong Kong promotions, MGTO has not yet disclosed a detailed plan, stating only that initiatives will include training opportunities for travel trade members and on-site industry inspections.

This year, MGTO also plans to proceed with the second-phase review of the Macao Tourism Industry Development Master Plan, focusing on enhancing the "tourism +" integration strategy, strengthening Greater China market contributions, and further expanding international reach.

The review aims to "enrich Macau's offerings as a global tourism and leisure hub and enhance its reputation as an international destination, aligning with the city's broader economic diversification strategy."

# Water supply hits record high in 2024, expected to rise further

LYNZY VALLES

**M**ACAU'S water supply surpassed 100 million cubic meters in 2024, marking a historic high and a 5.6% annual increase, according to Nancy Kuan, executive director of Macao Water.

The growth was largely driven by the recovery of the tourism industry.

Speaking at the company's 90th-anniversary celebration and New Year media luncheon yesterday, Kuan said the firm expects water consumption to rise by another 3% in 2025, fueled by development in Zone A, the gradual occupancy of newly built government buildings, and overall economic expansion.

This year, the company will continue to support the construction of the water supply ne-



Nancy Kuan

work and shared pipelines in Zone A.

Additionally, it plans to collaborate with Greater Bay Area water suppliers to explore innovative technologies and advance smart water services.

When asked whether there are plans for the firm to expand into Hengqin, Kuan remarked, "Due to constraints in the construction contract, we only supply water within Macau's territory. [...] But [...] if

the government invites Macao Water, [...] we are capable of providing water to Hengqin, of course, because our existing capacity is sufficient to meet this requirement."

Meanwhile, the company's low-rise building main water supply facility maintenance subsidy program, originally set to expire in March, will be extended for another three years.

The official noted that applications for the subsidy are expected to

increase by up to 30%, and the company will explore expanding the program's scope based on inspections and public feedback.

"I think it depends on residents' participation, but I believe that nowadays they have a greater awareness of the need to protect their property and maintain their buildings," said Kuan.

"We believe participation will be higher than in the current plan, likely increasing by 20% to 30%," she added.

Last year, in support of the SAR's Ká Hó Reservoir Expansion Project, Macao Water completed the installation of surrounding facilities and water pipelines, increasing the total effective capacity of local reservoirs to 2.64 million cubic metres, equivalent to 10 days of water consumption in the city.

## BUSINESS

# SMES' APPROVED CREDIT LIMIT PLUNGES 26%

LYNZY VALLES

**N**EW small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) credit limits approved by local banks in the second half of 2024 totaled MOP3.3 billion, down 25.9% from the first half of the year.

Statistics from the Monetary Authority of Macao show that as of 2024, the outstanding balance of SME loans fell by 3.2% from the end of June to MOP78.4 billion, mainly due to the repayment of high-denomination loans.

Compared to the previous survey period, outstanding SME loans to the "education" sector and the "transport, storage, and communications" sector increased by 15.8% and 9.2%, respectively, whereas those to the "wholesale and retail" sector and the "construction" sector decreased by 7.7% and 1.1%, respectively.

Amid economic recovery, several SMEs are still waiting for a boost in revenues, with several associations calling

for new rounds of subsidies.

Recently, the Economic and Technological Development Bureau (DSEDT) announced that it is exploring additional campaigns aimed at boosting business in community neighborhoods.

Government data show that the number of new companies incorporated in Macau declined, with a total of 4,555 newly registered businesses, representing a year-on-year drop of 456.

This decline was accompanied by a 37.5% reduction in the total value of registered capital, which fell to MOP1.03 billion.

Additionally, 1,098 companies were dissolved during the year, with their total registered capital amounting to MOP451 million.

At the end of 2024, the outstanding balance of delinquent SME loans was MOP4.9 billion. The fraction of delinquent loans compared to total SME loans outstanding (the delinquency ratio) was 6.2%.

SPORTS

# O LAM CLAIMS NATIONAL GAMES WILL BOOST REGIONAL INTEGRATION

RENATO MARQUES

**T**HE Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture, O Lam, believes that hosting the National Games in Macau will boost regional integration through exchange and cooperation between the organizing regions.

O Lam was speaking at the meeting of the Organizing Committee of the Macao Competition Zone of the 15th National Games, the 12th National Games for Persons with Disabilities, and the 9th National Special Olympics Games (collectively referred to as the National Games).

The Secretary emphasized that the National Games are major multi-sport events that promote the development of the sports industry,



showcase the nation's overall capabilities, and serve as a platform for regional exchange and cooperation.

She added that this edition—co-hosted by Guangdong, Hong

Kong, and Macau—demonstrates the central government's trust and support, encouraging the development of sports and the social and economic sectors in Macau.

She also expressed her belief that

Macau's role as an organizer will not only enhance its standing in the sports arena but also promote deeper cooperation between Greater Bay Area (GBA) cities in various fields, including sports, tourism,

and culture.

This, she noted, would inject new vitality into Macau's efforts toward economic diversification.

O Lam stressed that the games reinforce the GBAs positioning as "one point, two places" and boost Macau's integration into the national development strategy.

At the meeting, representatives from various government departments provided updates on preparations and exchanged views on sports venues, transportation arrangements, cross-border logistics, food safety, and medical services.

The Organizing Committee stated that it would fully leverage the coordination between government departments and social entities to prepare for the games, adhering to the motto "simple, safe, and spectacular."

In addition, Pun Weng Kun, coordinator of the Preparatory Office for Organizing the Macao Competition Zone, presented the Games' emblem, slogan, and mascot, as well as details about the competition schedule, venues, volunteer program, and test events.

CRIME

# Police impersonator arrested in casino fraud scheme

VICTORIA CHAN

**A** 22-year-old mainland man was arrested after allegedly impersonating a police officer to defraud a middle-aged victim of HKD60,000 in casino chips.

The suspect reportedly lured the victim with promises of a favorable exchange rate before claiming to be a law enforcement officer and confiscating the chips.

According to the Judiciary Police (PJ) yesterday, the incident occurred on Tuesday when authorities received a report from the victim, who claimed he had been approached by the suspect in the smoking room of a Cotai casino.

The suspect claimed to offer a "preferential exchange rate" and allegedly offered to help the victim exchange his casino chips. The victim, interested in the deal, followed the suspect to another hotel lobby where the exchange was to take place.



Once there, the suspect allegedly flashed a fake police badge, claiming to be a PJ officer.

He accused the victim of engaging in illegal foreign exchange activities, asserting that he needed to confiscate the HKD60,000 in chips as evidence. After taking the chips, the suspect ordered the victim to leave the casino and not return.

The victim, feeling uneasy and suspecting he had been scammed, later reported the incident to the police. The PJ launched an investigation, corroborating the victim's account of events.

By the afternoon, the suspect was intercepted at the Gongbei border checkpoint as he attempted to flee Macau.

Investigators confirmed that he was neither a Public Security Police officer nor a member of the PJ.

Following the arrest, it was revealed that the suspect had transferred the defrauded chips to an unknown associate in another Cotai casino, who then wired the funds to his account in mainland China.

During questioning, the suspect admitted that he had been planning the

elaborate scheme since November.

He revealed that he had purchased a fake police ID online for just RMB40 specifically to carry out the fraud and disclosed that he had lost approximately HKD300,000 in gambling since the end of last year.

The PJ stated that the suspect's criminal activities may extend beyond this single incident, and they are urging any other potential victims to come forward.

The case has been referred to the Public Prosecutions Office for further legal proceedings.

RESIDENTIAL

# REPLACEMENT SYSTEM FOR PUBLIC HOUSING UNDER DISCUSSION

VICTORIA CHAN

**T**HE Public Housing Committee is exploring amendments to the replacement system for public housing, sparking debate among stakeholders and community members.

Discussions on TDM's weekly radio program revealed a split in opinions regarding the proposed system. Some participants expressed support, while others raised concerns about its potential impact on housing access for new applicants.

Lawmaker Wong Kit Cheng highlighted that the ongoing discourse seeks to address the mismatch between residents and unit layouts.

Previously, as more one- and two-bedroom units were constructed, many families found themselves in one-bedroom accommodations, creating an imbalance in housing distribution.

The proposed replacement system would enable residents to swap their units through a points-based priority system.

Wong suggested that Macau could draw inspiration from Hong Kong's policy, which prioritizes families with newborns, thus integrating family considerations into the housing framework to encourage childbirth.

She stressed the importance of extensive community consultation in this process.

Chan Ian Ian, a member of the

North District Community Advisory Committee, echoed the need for a stable public housing supply and regular application processes.

She noted that most applicants are young families aged 23 to 44, who play a crucial role in Macau's social and economic landscape. Chan expressed concerns regarding the fairness and stability of the proposed system, cautioning that it might hinder other applicants' chances of securing housing.

Public opinion remains divided. One listener expressed support, citing their family's struggle in a one-bedroom unit, while another raised concerns that the replacement system could delay housing access for new applicants.

Experts emphasize that any new replacement system must be grounded in a reliable supply of public housing while carefully evaluating its effects on the broader housing market, particularly for young families, who represent a significant portion of recent applicants.

Under the proposed system, residents would need to reapply and update their family information, allowing for potential "small-for-big" or "big-for-small" unit swaps.

However, officials acknowledged challenges, including the need to balance housing demand with market stability and considerations related to bank loans.

XINHUA ANALYSIS

# New consumption frontiers energize China's market vitality

**G**LOBAL financial institutions are increasingly bullish on China's economic development, with multiple 2025 outlook reports highlighting the nation's accelerating transition to high-quality growth driven by a stronger consumer sector and service industry.

During the recent Spring Festival, China witnessed a burgeoning consumption market, marked by record-setting sales revenues in "Guochao" - or trendy merchandise inspired by traditional Chinese culture - along with new records in intangible cultural heritage experiences, the ice and snow economy, and consumer goods trade-in programs. Driven by digital transition and technological development, new consumption models have continued to emerge.

Analysts noted that emerging consumption trends - from product launches to winter sports and silver-haired consumer markets - demonstrate China's evolving consumer landscape and its potential for sustained growth.

## TRENDSETTERS TRADE UP

Shanghai's debut economy is transforming the city's retail landscape, increasingly led by home-grown brands launching global flagship stores. A notable example is SHUSHU/TONG, a local designer label that chose Shanghai's Jing'an District for its first global store. The store has since become a magnet for international visitors, especially from the Republic of Korea (ROK).

The store has evolved into a social media hotspot, where Korean visitors frequently create content for platforms like rednote, sharing their shopping experiences and



fashion discoveries. This organic promotion has significantly boosted the store's international profile.

"New customers now make up half of our foot traffic, with ROK visitors accounting for 80 percent of first-time shoppers," says Yu Yaqi, head of SHUSHU/TONG's offline operations. "To better serve our international clientele, we're streamlining membership registration for foreign customers and optimizing our product display and inventory to match visitor preferences."

China's policymakers have identified the debut economy as a key driver of growth, making it a 2025 priority at December's Central Economic Work Conference. This strategic focus aims to upgrade consumption quality and accelerate industrial transformation, with regional governments already implementing supportive measures.

Positioned as a global hub for

product debuts, flagship store launches and exclusive exhibitions, Shanghai is leveraging this innovative model. The policy blueprint includes an annual "FIRST in Shanghai" flagship event from March to May, designed to attract global attention as a premier platform for product launches.

Looking ahead to 2025, the city's government work report prioritizes scaling up the debut economy, along with emerging consumption sectors such as automobiles and green consumption.

## FROST TO FORTUNE

"Endless snow slopes stretch before my eyes, with the howling wind echoing in my ears: That feeling of free flight delivers a unique thrill," said 28-year-old Sun Hong, an avid skier who travels to different resorts each winter to seek fresh experiences.

Winter tourism has become a

major driver of China's economy, sparking nationwide interest in cold-weather activities.

Different regions have developed distinctive winter tourism offerings: Southwest China's Chongqing Municipality focuses on themed events and travel routes, southern Guangdong Province provides year-round indoor snow activities, while Xinjiang's Altay region features unique ethnic winter experiences.

Dai Bin, president of the China Tourism Academy, highlighted the role of technology and investment in promoting winter sports, with artificial snow and ice facilities making winter sports accessible even in the warmest regions.

A survey from the academy showed more than 70 percent of the respondents are willing to engage in winter leisure activities, with over 60 percent planning to

maintain or increase their spending on winter tourism. The 2024-2025 winter season is expected to attract some 520 million trips, generating over 630 billion yuan (about 87.86 billion U.S. dollars) in tourism revenue.

Winter has evolved from a season of dormancy to one of vibrant activities, Dai noted. "In the past, winter meant freezing temperatures and a pause in daily life. Now, people embrace the cold and explore northern regions."

## SILVER IS THE NEW GOLD

Local governments have prioritized expanding elderly care products and services in their 2025 agendas. Guangdong plans to enhance research and development (R&D) and promotion of senior-friendly products while accelerating the rehabilitation assistive devices industry.

Heilongjiang aims to boost service-oriented consumption in digital, elderly care and childcare sectors, with a focus on developing traditional Chinese medicine-based wellness and smart elderly care. Shanghai will deepen the application of technologies like smart nursing homes in elderly care scenarios.

The economic potential is substantial. According to a recent blue paper on China's silver economy, the sector is currently valued at 7 trillion yuan, with tourism being a key growth area.

Elderly adults in China had amassed wealth totaling 78.4 trillion yuan by 2023, according to the China National Committee on Ageing. The silver economy is projected to reach 30 trillion yuan by 2035.

The silver economy is creating new growth opportunities across multiple industries. "A growing number of seniors are demanding higher quality of life, prioritizing health and fashion, making the anti-aging industry particularly promising," said Chen Juanling, a Shanghai municipal lawmaker and public affairs general manager of cosmetics brand Chando Group. XINHUA

## CORPORATE BITS

### Melco spreads festive cheer through community outreach



Melco Resorts & Entertainment has been spreading Chinese New Year joy through its "Simple Acts of Kindness" volunteering initiative.

Since mid-January, Melco volunteers have engaged

with over 500 beneficiaries across nearly 20 events, supporting local elderlies, children, and families.

Volunteers provided haircut services at elderly centers and organized an

"Elderly Beauty Day" to help seniors feel refreshed for the new year.

As part of the "Teaching Children Values" initiative, parent-child volunteers assisted elderlies living alone with cleaning activities and delivered gifts and warm blankets.

Melco volunteers also visited local NGOs, bringing along the God of Fortune for festive celebrations. Additionally, young volunteers entertained beneficiaries with musical performances.

Festive pastry and arts and crafts workshops further fostered community spirit, allowing families and seniors to create traditional Chinese pastries and instruments together.

### Chefs from Ritz-Carlton Hong Kong and Macau unite for exclusive culinary collaboration



Chef Paul Lau of the two Michelin-starred Tin Lung Heen in The Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong, and Chef Jackie Ho of the one Michelin-starred Lai

Heen in The Ritz-Carlton, Macau, is set to present their first collaborative event, "Elevated Epicurean Journey". Taking place on March 7

and 28, this exclusive dining experience will feature two meticulously curated four-hand menus at the highest Cantonese restaurants in Hong Kong and Macau.

With over 40 years of experience, the chefs share a common mentorship and global expertise. Their collaboration showcases a six-course lunch menu focused on exquisite dim sum and seafood, and a nine-course dinner menu highlighting their refined Cantonese artistry. Signature dishes include steamed crabmeat with egg white dumpling, baked lobster puff, and poached fish maw in goose sauce.

DIPLOMACY

# Cook Islands gives some detail of its China deal that has upset close partner New Zealand

CHARLOTTE GRAHAM-MCLAY, WELLINGTON

**T**HE South Pacific country of Cook Islands yesterday [Macau time] unveiled the details of a deal with China to boost cooperation on matters including mining seabed minerals, after the pact provoked a rare diplomatic clash with the nation's chief benefactor, New Zealand, and protests at home.

The public quarrel between New Zealand and Cook Islands — which share a passport, a military and constitutional ties — was a victory for Beijing's efforts to woo Pacific leaders and a blow to Western countries' efforts to counter China's sway, analysts said.

The deal does not mention joint security initiatives, unlike others China has made with small South Pacific nations. Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown signed it during a visit to Beijing this month. It also gives few details on the partnership such as promised funding from China.

Mihai Sora, director of the Pacific Islands Program at the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank, said the controversy reflected "an intense geopoliti-



Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown

cal contest for influence."

**REFUSAL TO SHARE DETAILS**

Cook Islands, with a population of 15,000, a tourism economy and a large exclusive economic zone, is a self-governing country in free association with New Zealand, which gives the bulk of development funding. The arrangement promises New Zealand's help with military and foreign affairs.

In return, Cook Islands must consult New Zealand on any matters that could affect Wellington.

Brown's refusal to show New

Zealand officials the text of the China deal ahead of his trip prompted censure from Wellington this month.

And about 400 people protested at the Cook Islands parliament in the capital, Avarua, after Brown returned from China, according to news outlets there. Footage showed demonstrators carrying placards that read "stay connected to New Zealand."

**OTHER PACTS REMAIN SECRET**

The strategic partnership for the next five years between Beijing and

Avarua was the only document released publicly by Brown, who earlier said he would sign multiple agreements.

The partnership document pledges more funding from China for infrastructure projects and educational scholarships. Cook Islands will help China to secure preferential treatment at regional meetings of Pacific nations.

The deal "does not replace our longstanding relationships with New Zealand, Australia and others, but rather complements them, ensuring that we have a diversified portfolio of partnerships," Brown told parliament earlier this week.

Sora, the analyst, said leaders of small island nations who believe they can "outsmart the Goliath policy and operational engines" of Beijing either have more resources than they let on or have "false confidence" about their ability to avoid being compromised.

**NEW ZEALAND STILL CAUTIOUS**

New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters was cautious about endorsing the deal Tuesday. A spokesperson said the government would review the text before

commenting, and urged Brown to publish any other pacts he signed.

"Consultation and transparency must lie at the heart of the New Zealand-Cook Islands relationship," the spokesperson said in a statement.

Brown has said he did not believe he needed to supply agreements' precise wording.

**BEIJING'S PACIFIC INTEREST**

The pace of China's deals in the Pacific has escalated in recent years as island nations that once recognized Taiwan have switched their diplomatic ties to solely acknowledge Beijing. That leaves Taipei with few remaining allies. Such moves are often followed by bilateral deals pledging cooperation.

Australia and New Zealand, the region's biggest donors, have security concerns. Some pacts — including those Beijing signed with Solomon Islands and Kiribati — have never been publicly shared.

"The reason that this one has been public I think is for the optics of the diplomatic victory that China can claim in having won over the Cook Islands to this level of intimacy," Sora said.

**SECOND DISPUTE IN A MONTH**

This is the second Pacific dispute in a month for New Zealand, which in January said it was reviewing all development funding to Kiribati after Peters' office said he was snubbed by the island nation's president ahead of a planned trip.

Taneti Maamau denied he had planned to meet with Peters personally. Kiribati has drawn increasingly close to China since severing diplomatic ties to Taiwan in favor of Beijing in 2019. **MDT/AP**

SOUTH CHINA SEA

# PLA says it warned off Philippine aircraft over island

**C**HINA'S military said Tuesday it warned off and expelled a Philippine C-208 aircraft that had entered airspace over a South China Sea island.

Tian Junli, spokesman for the People's Liberation Army's Southern Theater Command, said in a statement that the Philippine aircraft illegally entered airspace over Huangyan Island without China's permission.

The command dispatched naval and air forces to track, monitor, warn, and expel the aircraft, Tian said, accusing the Philippines of distorting facts and spreading false narratives about the incident.

"The actions of the Phil-



ippine side seriously infringe on China's sovereignty and severely violate international law and relevant Chinese laws and regulations," Tian said.

He reiterated China's sovereignty of the island, calling it "an inherent part of China's territory".

He accused the Philippines of using military provo-

cations to press its claims and attempting to "mislead international perception through hype and propaganda."

The theater command said its forces remain on high alert to defend China's sovereignty and security and to safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea. **MDT/CHINA DAILY**

TRADE

# US DISPLACED CHINA AS GERMANY'S BIGGEST SINGLE TRADING PARTNER

**T**HE United States was Germany's biggest single trading partner last year for the first time since 2015, displacing China from the top spot as exports to the Asian power declined, official figures showed yesterday.

Trade between the U.S. and Germany, which has Europe's biggest economy, ticked up 0.1% compared with 252.8 billion euros (\$264.3 billion) in 2023, Germany's Federal Statistical Office said.

Trade with China, which was Germany's biggest trading partner every year from 2016 to 2023, dropped 3.1% to 246.3 billion euros. The Netherlands took third place with a total trade volume of 205.7 billion euros, a 4.2% drop.

Germany hasn't seen significant economic growth in five years. The country for years expanded exports and dominated world trade in engineered products like industrial machinery and luxury cars.

But it's suffered from increasing competition from Chinese companies, along with many other factors, and the economy contracted in each of the last two years.

Fixing it will be one of the most urgent tasks of the government that emerges from Sunday's German election, which also will have to navigate the trade policy of the new U.S. administration.

Germany's trade surplus with the U.S. grew to 70 billion euros last year from 63.3 billion in 2023, the statistics office said. While the value of exports from Germany was up 2.2% to 161.4 billion euros, American imports declined by 3.4% to 91.4 billion euros. The U.S. has been Germany's biggest single export destination since 2015.

Germany saw its trade deficit with China widen, meanwhile. Chinese imports were down 0.3% to 156.3 billion euros, while German exports to China dropped 7.6% to 90 billion euros. **MDT/AP**

INDIA

# Police in disputed Kashmir raid bookstores, seizing books related to Islamic group

**P**OLICE in Indian-controlled Kashmir raided bookstores and seized hundreds of books linked to a major Islamic organization in the disputed region, where strict controls on the press have escalated in recent years.

The raids began on Friday in Srinagar, the region's main city. Police said in a post on the social media platform X that they acted "based on credible intelligence regarding the clandestine sale and distribution of literature promoting the ideology of a banned organization" and seized 668 books.

According to booksellers, the seized books were mostly published by New Delhi-based Markazi Maktaba Islami Publishers, which is affiliated with the Indian branch of one of the largest Islamic and political organizations in the Indian subcontinent, Jamaat-e-Islami Hind.

Indian authorities banned Jamaat-e-Islami in Kashmir as an "unlawful association" in Feb. 2019, months before New Delhi ended the region's semi-autonomy in Aug. 2019. In New Delhi's effort to shape what it calls "Naya Kashmir," or



AP PHOTO

a "new Kashmir," the territory's people have since been largely silenced as India has shown no tolerance for any form of dissent.

Most of the books seized were authored by Abul Ala Maududi, a prominent twentieth-century Islamic scholar and founder of Jamaat-e-Islami who advocated integration of state and religion.

Booksellers in Srinagar said police officers passed by their stores, ordering them to surrender any books by Maududi and to stop selling them in the

future. One shopkeeper said he told them the books were available across India and on online platforms, but they refused to entertain any argument and confiscated the books.

More books were seized as police teams also carried out raids in some other parts of Kashmir and conducted "stringent checks" of bookshops "to prevent the circulation of banned literature linked to Jamaat-e-Islami," a police statement said on Saturday.

"These books were found to be in violation of legal regula-

tions, and strict action is being taken against those found in possession of such material," police said.

Nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan each administer part of Kashmir, but both claim the territory in its entirety, while militants in the Indian-controlled portion 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 that militancy in Kashmir 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.

Jamaat previously sided with the armed rebellion against Indian rule, but in the late 1990s it said it distanced from it and instead advocated political means. During the time, when the rebellion and counterinsurgency measures were at peak, many Kashmiris were detained for keeping such literature. In response, some people got rid of the books while others bu-

ried them to protect themselves during anti-rebel raids.

In 2011, authorities filed charges against Kashmir education officials over a textbook for first graders that illustrated the word "tyrant" with a sketch resembling a police official.

Praveen Donthi, senior analyst with the International Crisis Group, said the most recent crackdown "reeks of naivete" and potentially could give such literature new traction by making Kashmir's alienated youth curious about the works.

"It's not very difficult to find a soft copy of the same," he said. "At a time when New Delhi has been trying to project normalcy and stability, the optics of this move don't do any good to its democratic credentials."

The crackdown on books has been widely criticized in Kashmir.

Several Jamaat leaders who contested a recent local election in Kashmir called the seizure of these books "unjust, unconstitutional and a violation of fundamental rights." In a statement, they said the seized books were legally published in New Delhi and were being lawfully distributed to bookstores across the region.

"If the government has any security concerns, we are fully prepared to cooperate with any investigation," the statement added.

Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, a key resistance leader in Kashmir, called the police operation "condemnable" and "ridiculous."

"Policing thought by seizing books is absurd to say the least, in the time of access to all information on virtual highways," Mirwaiz said in a statement.

MDT/AP

AUSTRALIA

# Experts give up hope for 157 false killer whales stranded on a beach in Tasmania

**M**ARINE experts have given up hope of rescuing more than 150 false killer whales that stranded on a remote beach on Australia's island state of Tasmania, officials said yesterday.

Experts including veterinarians were at the scene near the Arthur River on Tasmania's northwestern coast where 157 whales were discovered on an exposed surf beach on Tuesday afternoon, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment said.

Unfavorable ocean and weather conditions, which prevented the whales from



False killer whales which became stranded on a remote beach near Arthur River in the island state of Tasmania

being rescued yesterday, were forecast to persist for days, incident controller Shelley Graham said.

"We have been out in the water this morning and have relocated and

attempted to refloat two whales but didn't have success as the ocean conditions weren't allowing the animals to get past the break. The animals are continuously restran-

ding," Graham said in a statement.

Marine biologist Kris Carlyon said the survivors would be euthanized.

"The longer these animals are out stranded, the longer they are suffering. All alternative options have been unsuccessful," Carlyon said.

The department said there were 136 survivors yesterday morning but that assessment was revised down to 90 within a few hours.

The inaccessibility of the beach, ocean conditions and challenges to getting specialist equip-

ment to the remote area complicated the response.

The young whales weighed as little as 500 kilograms (1,100 pounds), while the adults weighed 3 metric tons (3.3 U.S. tons). Despite their name, false killer whales are one of the largest members of the dolphin family.

Department liaison officer Brendon Clark said the stranding was the first by false killer whales in Tasmania in since 1974. That was a pod of more than 160 whales that landed on a beach near Stanley on the northwest coast. Strandings in Tas-

mania are usually pilot whales.

Clark declined to speculate on why the latest pod might have stranded. Carcasses of dead whales would be examined for clues, he said.

A helicopter reconnaissance on Tuesday afternoon determined that there were no other whales within 10 kilometers (6 miles) of the stranded pod, he said.

Some could have been stranded for as long as 48 hours by early Wednesday.

Arthur River resident Jocelyn Flint said her son had discovered the stranded whales around midnight while fishing for shark.

She said she had gone to the scene in the dark hours of the morning and returned after dawn but the whales were too big to be refloat. MDT/AP

AP PHOTO



Former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro arrives for a luncheon with senators from his support base at the National Congress building in Brasilia

BRAZIL

# Former President Bolsonaro charged over alleged coup

ELÉONORE HUGHES & MAURICIO SAVARESE, RIO DE JANEIRO

**B**RAZIL'S prosecutor-general yesterday [Macau time] formally charged former President Jair Bolsonaro with attempting a coup to stay in office after his 2022 election defeat, in a plot that included a plan to poison his successor and current President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and kill a Supreme Court judge.

Prosecutor-General Paulo Gonet alleges that Bolsonaro and 33 others participated in a plan to remain in power. The alleged plot, he wrote, included a plan to poison Lula and shoot dead Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, a foe of the former president.

"The members of the criminal organization structured a plan at the presidential palace to attack institutions, aiming to bring down the system of the powers and the democratic order, which received the sinister name of 'Green and Yellow Dagger,'" Gonet wrote in a 272-page indictment. "The plan was conceived and taken to the knowledge of the president, and he agreed to it."

Bolsonaro is often seen in Brazil's yellow-and-green national soccer jersey and the colors have become associated with his political movement.

Bolsonaro's defense team

said it met the accusations with "dismay and indignation," adding in a statement that the former "President has never agreed to any movement aimed at deconstructing the democratic rule of law or the institutions that underpin it."

Bolsonaro's son, Flávio Bolsonaro, who is a senator, said on the social platform X that the indictment was "empty" and there was no evidence of wrongdoing. He accused the Prosecutor-General's Office of serving "the nefarious interests of Lula."

In November, Brazil's Federal Police filed a 884-page report with Gonet detailing the scheme. They allege a systematic effort to sow distrust in the electoral system, drafting a decree to provide legal cover for the plot, pressuring top military brass to go along with the plan and inciting a riot in the capital.

In the indictment, Gonet described the alleged crimes as part of a chain of events articulated with an overarching objective of stopping Bolsonaro from leaving office, "contrary to the result of the popular will at the polls."

The Supreme Court will analyze the charges and, if accepted, Bolsonaro will stand trial.

The far-right leader denies wrongdoing. "I have no concerns about the accusations,

zero," Bolsonaro told journalists earlier during a visit to the Senate in Brasilia.

"Have you seen the coup decree, by any chance? You haven't. Neither have I," he added.

As well as participating in a coup d'état, the 34 defendants are accused of participating in an armed criminal organization, attempted violent abolition of the democratic rule of law, damage qualified by violence and serious threat against the state's assets, and deterioration of listed heritage, according to a statement from the Prosecutor General's press office.

Gonet said the criminal organization he charged "had as leaders the (then) president himself and his running mate, Gen. Braga Netto."

"Both accepted, stimulated, and performed acts that are described in our criminal legislation as attacking the existence and the Independence of (the branches) of power and of the democratic rule," Gonet wrote in his report.

The crimes have varying penalties. If Bolsonaro is convicted of attempting a coup and the violent abolition of the democratic rule of law, he could be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison, according to the country's criminal code.

The indictments, based on manuscripts, digital files,

spreadsheets, and message exchanges, expose a scheme to disrupt democratic order, according to the prosecutor-general's office.

The charges are "historic," said Luis Henrique Machado, a criminal attorney and professor at the IDP university in Brasilia, adding that he expects the Supreme Court to accept the charges and put Bolsonaro on trial sometime before the end of next year.

"The charges show Brazil's institutions are robust, independent and agile," Machado said. "They are a role model for other countries where democracy is at risk."

Bolsonaro is barred from running in the 2026 election after judges with the country's top electoral court ruled that he abused his power and cast unfounded doubts on the country's electronic voting system.

Following the charges, Bolsonaro will "position himself as a victim," said Carlos Melo, a political science professor at Insper University in Sao Paulo. Bolsonaro has previously said his legal woes are an attempt to stop him from returning to office.

"There are polls saying he would be competitive in the 2026 elections against Lula, one of them published today," said Melo. "There's going to be political dust, but it will settle." MDT/AP

## this day in history

### 1986 SOVIETS LAUNCH SPACE STATION MIR



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Courtesy BBC News

## IN CONTEXT

The first crew arrived on board Mir on 15 March 1986 and it remained more or less continuously occupied until November 2000. Crew member Valeri Polyakov stayed up a record 439 days.

The end of the Cold War marked a new era of space co-operation.

In September 1993 US Vice-President Al Gore and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin announced plans for a new space station, which would later be called the International Space Station, or ISS. In preparation for this new project, the US became more closely involved with Mir.

From March 1995 seven US astronauts consecutively spent 28 months on Mir, during which time the spacecraft suffered a number of emergencies including a large fire on 23 February 1997 and a collision with an unmanned cargo ship on 25 June 1997. Mounting costs contributed to the decision to bring down Mir.



MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES Mar. 21-Apr. 19 Now is the time to be honest about your path and what is required for you to evolve and move forward.

TAURUS Apr. 20-May. 20 Even if you don't have any news to share, investing in your network through simple, short, and sweet exchanges will benefit you down the line.

GEMINI May. 21-Jun. 21 Show that you're willing to step up to the plate when it comes to manifesting prosperity and success, establishing yourself as a refined and reliable professional.

CANCER Jun. 22-Jul. 22 Second chances could lead you closer to aspirations you've been chipping away at for quite some time. Just be mindful to pace yourself, taking care to expend your energy wisely.

LEO Jul. 23-Aug. 22 Assess your impulses before following them. New commitments could arise as a result of your actions, but be mindful that they contribute to long-term visions for the future.

VIRGO Aug. 23-Sep. 22 Love has a chance to blossom, but you'll need to be direct about what you want for the future. Unexpected blessings and messages from beyond may take your breath away.

LIBRA Sep. 23-Oct. 22 Step into the workplace as a force to be reckoned with, using your influence to gain positive attention and move projects forward. Negotiations could take an unexpected turn.

SCORPIO Oct. 23-Nov. 21 Keep your eyes peeled for opportunity, as wishes you made long ago may show signs of manifesting. Just remember that most personal gains come with new responsibilities.

SAGITTARIUS Nov. 22-Dec. 21 Though you may feel tempted to close down, now is the time to let your nearest and dearest nurture and support you. Consider sharing your fears, hopes, and dreams with a trusted ally.

CAPRICORN Dec. 22-Jan. 19 People will find your ideas and visions quite compelling, and sharing them with peers or colleagues can help you bring them to life. Connections also play an essential role in your ability to get ahead.

AQUARIUS Jan. 20-Feb. 18 You'll also have plenty of opportunities to get ahead, especially when you step back to see the bigger picture. Let your mind drift toward the future.

PISCES Feb. 19-Mar. 20 Successfully navigate these cosmic tides by being direct, devoted, and unwavering while pursuing personal goals. Unexpected breakthroughs could find you.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

EASY

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

EASY+

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

MEDIUM

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

HARD

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

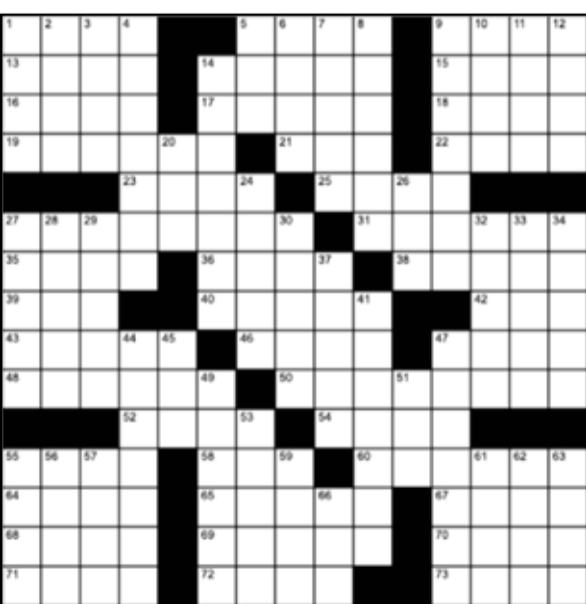
WEATHER

Table with columns: MIN, MAX, CONDITION. Rows include CHINA (Beijing, Changchun, Chengdu, Chongqing, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Guiyang, Haikou, Hangzhou, Harbin, Hefei, Nanjing, Shanghai, Taipei, Wuhan, Hong Hong) and WORLD (Moscow, Frankfurt, Paris, London, New York).

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Prefix with dextrous; 5- Word of regret; 9- James of "The Godfather"; 13- Tailor's line; 14- List of candidates; 15- Scandinavian capital city; 16- Heavenly strings; 17- Earth; 18- Defense grp. since 1949; 19- Online brokerage; 21- Spiegel; 22- Bridge; 23- Scottish refusals; 25- Sound rebound; 27- Tries; 31- Large stinging wasp; 35- Disturb; 36- Good earth; 38- Military camp; 39- Hockey's Bobby; 40- Devoured; 42- the ramparts...; 43- Concert venue; 46- Story; 47- Predictive sign; 48- Cash in; 50- Not a direct hit; 52- Home to most people; 54- Toiletries case; 55- we forget; 58- Monopoly quartet; Abbr.; 60- Main course; 64- Not working; 65- Country dances; 67- VCR alternative; 68- Son of \_\_\_; 69- Young hooter; 70- Paradise lost; 71- Radiation measures; 72- Peruse; 73- Reading rooms;

DOWN 1- Wimbledon winner, 1975; 2- Potatoes' partner; 3- Roseanne, once; 4- Form a jury; 5- Pub choice; 6- Cooking fat; 7- Up \_\_\_ (trapped); 8- Quest; 9- Spouse; 10- Pronto!; 11- Neighbor of Sask.; 12- Lunch time, often; 14- Spire; 20- Hoover \_\_\_; 24- Summer ermine; 26- Weed whacker; 27- Bellowing; 28- Baseball manager Joe; 29- Exhausted; 30- The devil; 32- Wynonna's mom; 33- Fencing swords; 34- Slender gulls; 37- Free-for-all; 41- Most tidy; 44- Tidies up; 45- DDE opponent; 47- Left out; 49- Reflecting surface; 51- Flee; 53- there yet?; 55- Untrustworthy one; 56- Verge; 57- Run-down quarter; 59- Actress Ward; 61- Travel on; 62- Not odd; 63- Ages and ages; 66- Showed the way;



Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

- Emergency calls 999
Taxi 28 939 939 / 2828 3283
Fire department 28 572 222
Water Supply - Report 2822 0088
PJ (Open line) 993
Telephone - Report 1000
PJ (Picket) 28 557 775
Electricity - Report 28 339 922
PSP 28 573 333
Macau Daily Times 28 716 081
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



Real estate advertisement for jml property. It features three photos of modern apartments: 'Nam Long' (HKD 6,988,000, 4 bed 2 bath), 'Hellene Garden w/ 1 CP' (HKD 7,500,000, 4 bed 3 bath), and 'Manhattan F Unit' (HKD 10,800,000, 3 bed 2 bath). The ad includes contact information: hello@jmlproperty.com, www.jmlproperty.com, and social media handles for jmlmacau and jmlproperty.

SPORTS POLITICS

# FRENCH LAWMAKERS MULL BANNING HEADSCARVES IN SPORT, AMNESTY SAYS IT'S DISCRIMINATORY

SAMUEL PETREQUIN,  
SPORTS WRITER

**A**MNESTY International is urging French lawmakers to reject a bill this week that would ban headscarves in all sporting competitions.

The bill is backed by right-wing senators and will be debated from Tuesday in the upper house of the French parliament. Its aim is to ban all "ostensibly religious" clothing and symbols during competitions. Amnesty International says the move would be discriminatory.

The vote is likely to refuel the lingering debate on secularism — still volatile more than a century after the 1905 law on separation of church and state that established it as a principle of the French Republic.

Until now, sporting federations have been free to decide whether or not to allow headscarves, with two of the country's most powerful sports, soccer and rugby, opting to ban them.

The bill is at an early stage and this week's vote marks the beginning of a long legislative process with an uncertain outcome. Even if senators vote in

favor, the bill's future will remain unclear since the lower house has the final say.

To pass, the bill would need a coalition of forces that don't usually collaborate in the deeply divided lower house.

Amnesty International's calls come after French sprinter Soukamba Sylla said last summer she was barred from the opening ceremony at the Paris Olympics because she wears a hijab. She was eventually allowed to take part wearing a cap to cover her hair.

France enforces a strict principle of "laïcité," loosely translated as "secularism." At the Games, the president of the French Olympic Committee said its Olympians were bound by the secular principles that apply to public sector workers in the country, which include a ban on hijabs and other religious signs.

"At the Paris Olympics, France's ban on French women athletes who wear headscarves from competing at the Games drew international outrage," said Anna Bhu, an Amnesty International researcher on gender justice.

"Just six months on, French



authorities are not only doubling down on the discriminatory hijab ban but are attempting to extend it to all sports."

Experts appointed by the UN Human Rights Council have previously criticized the decision by the French soccer and basketball federations to exclude players wearing the hijab, and the French government's decision to prevent its athletes wearing headscarves from representing the country at the Paris Games.

Amnesty International said the bill in reality targets Muslim women and girls by excluding

them from sporting competitions if they wear a headscarf or other religious clothing.

"Laïcité...which is theoretically embedded in the French constitution to protect everyone's religious freedom, has often been used as a pretext to block Muslim women's access to public spaces in France," Amnesty International said.

"Over several years, the French authorities have enacted laws and policies to regulate Muslim women's and girls' clothing, in discriminatory ways. Sport federations have followed suit, imposing hijab bans in se-

veral sports."

Two years ago, France's highest administrative court said the country's soccer federation was entitled to ban headscarves in competitions even though the measure can limit freedom of expression.

Wielding the principle of religious neutrality enshrined in the constitution, the country's soccer federation also does not make things easy for international players who want to refrain from drinking or eating from dawn to sunset during the Ramadan, Islamic holy month.

Supporters of the bill cite growing attacks on secularism in sport, arguing that its core values are based on a principle of universality. To protect sports grounds from any non-sporting confrontation, they say, a principle of neutrality needs to be implemented to ensure that no political, religious or racial demonstration or propaganda can be promoted.

The bill also states that using part of a sports facility as a place of worship would be a misuse of its purpose, and bans the wearing of religious clothing, such as the burkini, in public swimming pools.

"By placing the wearing of a headscarf on the spectrum of "attacks on secularism", which range from "permissiveness" to "terrorism", this legislation, if passed, would fuel racism and reinforce the growing hostile environment facing Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim in France," Amnesty International said. **MDT/AP**

AD

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FOOTBALL | CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Feyenoord knocks AC Milan out and Bayern, Benfica, Brugge advance to last 16

**S**ELDOM has a player's sending off had such an influence on a game.

AC Milan was to rue Theo Hernandez's second yellow card — for diving — as Feyenoord advanced to the Champions League last 16 at the former European champion's expense with a 1-1 draw in the second leg of their playoff yesterday [Macau time], giving the Dutch team a 2-1 win on aggregate.

Bayern Munich, Club Brugge and Benfica also won their playoffs, eliminating Celtic, Europa League winner Atalanta, and French team Monaco, respectively.

"In soccer everything changes in a second," said Milan forward Santiago Giménez, who scored one of the competition's fastest goals against his former team, Feyenoord, in the first minute.

Hernandez was sent off for a dive in the 51st when Milan was dominating after Gimé-



nez's opener had leveled the tie. Feyenoord had won the first leg of the playoff 1-0 last week.

But Milan's defense looked anything but assured after referee Szymon Marciniak showed Hernandez another yellow card for his dive. The France defender had earned his first before the break for lashing out at a Feyenoord player after a foul on teamma-

te João Félix.

Hugo Bueno crossed for Julián Carranza to head Feyenoord level on the night in the 73rd, enough to put the Dutch team into the next phase.

"We're very disappointed. We started well and scored straight away. It seemed like Feyenoord couldn't hurt us," Giménez said of the game's pivotal moment. "Today it happened to Theo but it can ha-

ppen to anyone, this is soccer. We have the utmost respect for Theo. We will give him all our support."

Feyenoord's Givairo Read was shown a red card following another melee after the final whistle.

Feyenoord will play either Inter Milan or Arsenal in the round of 16.

Alphonso Davies scored in the fourth minute of stoppage time for Bayern to reach the last 16 with a 1-1 draw against Celtic.

Davies, a substitute, bundled the ball over the line after Leon Goretzka's effort was kept out, saving Bayern the ordeal of extra time after German player Nicolas Kühn had scored against his former club to draw Celtic level on aggregate.

Davies' goal gave Bayern a 3-2 win over two legs.

Next for the Bavarian powerhouse is either Bundesliga rival Bayer Leverkusen or

Atlético Madrid.

Club Brugge eliminated Atalanta with a 3-1 win in Bergamo for a 5-2 win on aggregate. The 19-year-old forward Chemsdine Talbi scored twice as the visitors gave Gian Piero Gasperini's team a lesson in efficiency.

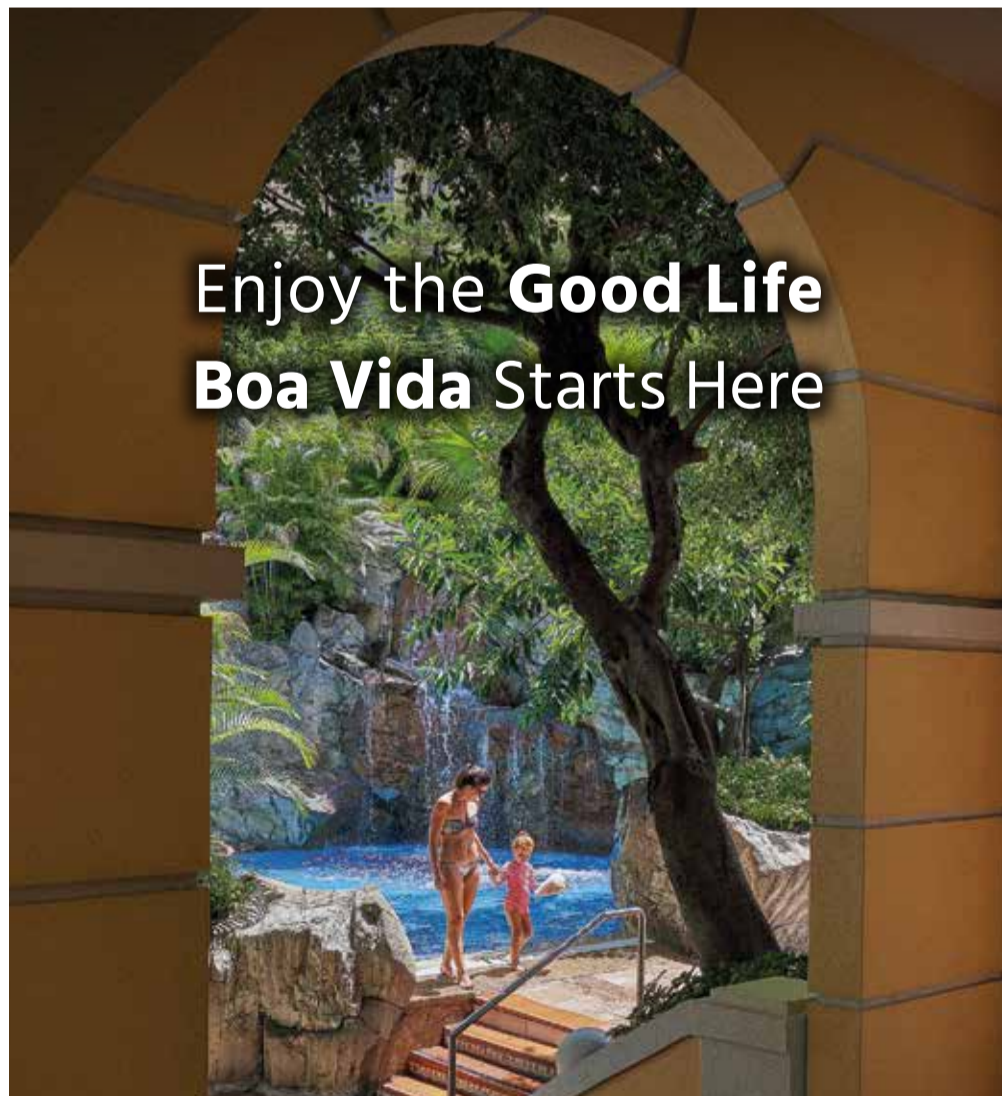
Atalanta had 29 efforts at goal, compared to seven from the visitors, and tried 89 attacks compared to 16 from Brugge.

Halftime substitute Ademola Lookman scored seconds after the restart to unleash hopes of a miracle — Atalanta just needed three more goals to level the tie — but Simon Mignolet saved Lookman's penalty in the 61st as those hopes gradually faded.

Benfica reached the last 16 with a 3-3 draw against Monaco in Lisbon, giving the Portuguese team a 4-3 win on aggregate.

The last 16 draw takes place on Friday. **MDT/AP**

AD



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OPINION

World Views

Sarah Rainsford, BBC Eastern Europe correspondent



**MOSCOW BACK AT THE TABLE - AND APPEARING TO CALL THE SHOTS**

The sight of senior Russian and American officials back around a giant negotiating table is extraordinary.

For many, most of all Ukrainians, it will have been very hard to take.

In Saudi Arabia, Moscow achieved something major: after three years of all-out war on its neighbour and isolation by the West, it was back at the “top table” of global diplomacy.

Not only that, Russia looked for all the world like it was the one calling the shots.

Even as air raid sirens continue to sound across Ukraine, that’s exactly the image Moscow wants to project.

This was not a defeated Russia, forced to the negotiating table. It was more like the US inviting the aggressor to set out its terms.

True, US officials went into the process saying they wanted to feel out Russia, check whether it’s serious about peace.

But Donald Trump had already drawn his conclusions. Last week, after he spoke to Vladimir Putin by phone, he announced that the Russian leader “wants to see people stop dying”.

Trump could have responded by telling him to withdraw all his troops.

Instead, he clearly wants to cut a deal with Moscow to end the war, as he promised voters, and move on.

After more than four hours of talks in Riyadh, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio emerged to the press and announced the first steps towards negotiations had been agreed, with teams to be formed on both sides.

He’d concluded that Russia was ready to engage in a “serious process” to end the war.

But why was he so sure?  
 Across the table was Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, still under sanctions for what the US Treasury called Russia’s “brutal war of choice”.

When Lavrov met the Russian media, he told them the US had proposed a moratorium on attacking energy infrastructure.

“We explained that we have never endangered the civilian energy supply and only target what directly serves Ukraine’s military,” was the minister’s reply.

That’s not true.  
 I have personally walked through the ruins of civilian power plants that have been directly targeted by Russian missiles.

This is the country that the US is attempting to engage with, although there is ample evidence that it can’t be trusted.

Russia has also shown zero sign of conceding any ground: why would it, when the Trump administration has already agreed that Ukraine will never join Nato, as Moscow demands, and won’t get its occupied land back?

That’s why, for Ukraine’s allies, it won’t only be the image of US and Russian officials seated at the shiny Saudi table that jarred. It’s also how they talked.

“Laying the ground” for future investment sounds like a promise of dropping sanctions: no reckoning for Russia’s war of aggression, then, just reward.

These are, of course, the earliest of early days.  
 But in Moscow, officials and state media sense the start of Russia’s return to where it believes it belongs: face to face with the US, as an equal.

Courtesy BBC/Sarah Rainsford

A village in the densely populated Manila region launched a battle against dengue yesterday by offering a token bounty to residents for captured mosquitos — dead or alive.

The unusual strategy adopted by the Addition Hills village in Mandaluyong City reflects growing concern after the nearby city of Quezon declared an outbreak of the mosquito-borne illness over the weekend.

Eight more areas reported an upsurge in cases of the potentially deadly viral infection.

At least 28,234 dengue cases have been recorded in the Philippines this

year up to Feb. 1, a 40% increase compared to the same period last year, according to health department statistics.

Quezon City declared a dengue outbreak Saturday after deaths this year reached 10 people, mostly children, out of 1,769 residents infected.

A urban village of more than 100,000 residents living in crowded neighborhoods and residential condominium towers, Addition Hills has done clean-ups, canal de-clogging and a hygiene campaign to combat dengue. But when cases spiked to 42 this year and two young students died, village leader Carlito Cernal decided to intensify the battle.



Women try on the lipstick of the color they like as they take part in a special makeup class at a community center room in Tokyo

**BEAUTY MARKET SHIFTS TO TARGET THE YOUNG AT HEART IN A RAPIDLY AGING JAPAN**

YURI KAGEYAMA, TOKYO

**Y**OSHIKO Abe is about to turn 89, but that hasn’t stopped her from going to the gym every day and trying the free-of-charge makeup course at her housing complex.

“It was really helpful,” she said, all smiles and glowing after putting on foundation and pink lipstick, something she hadn’t done in years.

Japan is the fastest-aging society in the world, where more than a quarter of its population is 65 and older, at 36 million people. In about a decade, the ratio will be one in three.

No wonder the young-at-heart, like Abe, is a growing target for Japan Inc. The market for older people is estimated to grow to more than 100 trillion yen (\$650 billion) in size this year, according to a study by Mizuho Bank.

And that business isn’t just about remedies for sicknesses and old folks’

homes but taps into solid consumerism. The growth of artificial intelligence and robotics also offers promise for such services and gadgetry.

Akira Shimizu, professor of business at Keio University, calls them “cool grandpas and cute grannies” who remain sensitive to trends, including the latest luxury and health products.

“They think about the clothing and makeup that express their style,” he said.

From luxury cruises and “oldies” rock concerts, companies are leveraging the fact that older people these days remain active, go out with friends and on dates, so they want to dress up and look good, said Shimizu.

Maintaining one’s looks is good physical exercise because it takes hand agility to open cosmetics tubes and draw eyebrows nicely, and massaging the face gets one’s saliva glands going, according to Miwa Hiraku, the makeo-

ver class instructor from the Japanese cosmetics company Shiseido.

Shiseido Co., which started out as a pharmacy in 1872, said that makeup is not just good for your physical well-being but also your soul. The company has been holding free makeup courses for older people across the country.

“Putting on makeup works as a switch to turn on your energy at the start of your day,” said Hiraku, who vows to wear makeup even at 100.

“It’s not just about looking beautiful. It’s about living a long healthy life,” she said.

Yoshihiko Hotta, 85, the only man in the class of about 30 people, didn’t try the rouge but happily put on the hand cream and went along with all the exercise routines.

While acknowledging he felt some effects of aging like sore legs, he declared with conviction: “I don’t think age is relevant.” MDT/AP



**Saudi Arabia** Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman hosted high-level U.S.-Russia talks this week, positioning the kingdom as a mediator in the Ukraine war. Trump has praised Saudi Arabia’s role, fueling speculation that his first foreign trip this term could be to Riyadh for further negotiations.

**United States** A federal judge ruled that Elon Musk and the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) can access government data and proceed with layoffs. The court found no immediate legal harm. Democratic-led states challenged DOGE’s authority, arguing it oversteps executive power in handling sensitive information.



**United States** U.S. retail sales fell 0.9% in January, the largest drop in a year, according to data released yesterday [Macau time]. Cold weather, declining consumer confidence, and post-holiday cutbacks contributed to the decline. Economists see slower economic growth ahead but expect steady hiring and wage stability to continue.



**Panama** Nearly 300 deportees from the U.S. remain confined in a Panama hotel, authorities confirmed yesterday [Macau time]. The migrants, from ten countries including Iran and China, await repatriation arrangements. Some refuse to return home, prompting the UN to seek alternative solutions for their relocation or asylum.