

Catch up: Hamas releases more hostages; Hegseth confirmed as defence secretary



Hamas released four more Israeli hostages, all of them female soldiers, in Gaza. **Israel** is set to release some 200 Palestinian prisoners in return. But Israel said it would not allow Palestinians to return to northern Gaza until a female civilian, also due to be released today, had been freed. The exchange forms part of a six-week [ceasefire](#) between Israel and the militant group, which began on January 19th.

Pete Hegseth secured confirmation as **America's** next secretary of defence by the narrowest possible margin. He needed the casting vote of J.D. Vance, the vice-president, after three Republican senators voted against him. Mr Hegseth, a presenter on Fox News, thinks America's armed forces have [become too "woke"](#) and has opposed allowing women to take part in combat. He has also faced allegations about excessive drinking and sexual misconduct, which he denies.

[Marco Rubio](#), **America's** secretary of state, reportedly issued guidance freezing virtually all **foreign assistance**, including to

[Ukraine](#). The State Department cable apparently carves out exceptions for military and humanitarian aid to Israel and Egypt. The pause prohibits new government spending while Mr Rubio reviews whether aid programmes are “consistent” with Donald Trump’s “foreign policy”.

During a trip to **California** to see the damage caused by recent [wildfires](#), Mr Trump met local Democratic politicians—and continued to criticise their response to the catastrophe. He accused officials such as Karen Bass, the mayor of Los Angeles, of slowing down the recovery effort. In an earlier visit to **North Carolina**, Mr Trump threatened to abolish America’s Federal Emergency Management Agency, which sends aid to states during disasters.

Ukraine said it hit several strategic sites near the border with **Russia**, including an oil refinery and a microchip plant, during overnight strikes on Friday. Russia’s defence ministry said it intercepted 121 drones over several regions, including Moscow, making the attack one of Ukraine’s largest. Earlier Ukraine said that three people were killed in Kyiv by a [Russian drone](#) strike.

Tens of thousands of people protested against [Robert Fico](#), **Slovakia**’s populist prime minister, in 20 cities across the central European country. The protesters—who numbered 60,000 in Bratislava alone, according to organisers’ estimates—called on Mr Fico to resign. Since [taking office for the latest time in 2023](#) he has shifted Slovakia away from the EU and closer to Russia.

In October China sent two **pandas** to America for the first time in 24 years. After a period of quarantine they at last made their public debut to crowds at the National Zoo in Washington, DC. Such panda-monium has a long history: China has offered countries the bears as gifts [since the seventh century](#), often using them to emphasise political ties.

Word of the week: *Shunto*, annual wage negotiations between firms and unions in Japan. [Read the full story.](#)

Uncertainty in Gaza and the West Bank



On Saturday Hamas released four Israeli hostages, all female soldiers, in Gaza. Israel is set to release around 200 Palestinian prisoners in exchange. As envisaged in the ceasefire deal, aid has started to flow into Gaza and Israel has begun dismantling some of its outposts there. But the agreement is just one week into the first stage of a complex process to end the 15-month war in Gaza.

Donald Trump wants Binyamin Netanyahu to complete the deal. But the far-right coalition partners of Israel's prime minister have threatened to try to bring down his government if he agrees to the second stage of the ceasefire, which includes a full withdrawal of troops from Gaza. Meanwhile both Israeli settlers and Palestinian militants are stoking violence in the [West Bank](#). That heightens the risk of another conflagration just as Gaza may be calming down.

Egypt's unhappy anniversary



Saturday marks 14 years since Egyptians took to the street to demand the removal of President [Hosni Mubarak](#). They complained that there weren't enough jobs and that basic commodities were too expensive. Although Mr Mubarak resigned, very little has changed for Egypt's roughly 110m citizens.

The country's new strongman, [Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi](#), has run the economy into the ground. The inflation rate is hovering at 24% and the Egyptian pound has sunk to 50 against the dollar. Food inflation is higher than it was in 2011, although it has fallen from an enormous peak of 74% in late 2023. Unemployment has steadily fallen in the past decade, but that is in large part because fewer people joined the workforce; the employment rate also declined.

But the crowds aren't likely to gather again. There are tens of thousands of political prisoners in Egypt's prisons, including [Alaa Abd el-Fattah](#), a prominent British-Egyptian activist. The cost of living may be high, but the cost of dissent seems higher.

Greece's PM appeases the right



On Saturday Greece's 300 MPs will hold the first round of voting to elect Constantine Tassoulas, the speaker of Parliament, to be the country's president. He is not expected to secure sufficient votes in the first two rounds, when the constitution requires a large majority. But Mr Tassoulas, a member of the ruling conservative New Democracy party, should easily clinch the smaller majority needed in the third round.

The position is largely ceremonial, but the choice has provoked political anger in a country that has been [praised in recent years](#) for its stability and reforms. Normally Greece's ruling party proposes a candidate from a different political background. Last time, ND chose Katerina Sakellariopoulou (pictured), a left-of-centre judge. But [Kyriakos Mitsotakis](#), Greece's prime minister, hopes Mr Tassoulas's election can ease lingering resentment in ND over a gay-marriage law passed last year. Right-wingers blamed the law for ND's dire performance at the European elections in June—its worst ever showing at the polls.

I Spy a renaissance



After its release in 2023, “The Night Agent”, a suspenseful if schematic series about an FBI agent alerted to a mole in the government’s highest echelons, became one of Netflix’s most popular shows. In the second season, which premiered this week, the intelligence services are grappling with a leak. [Espionage](#) and action ensue.

The show is one of many spy series that have lately kept viewers’ hearts pounding: “Slow Horses”, about a motley group of MI5 screw-ups; “Black Doves”, about mercenary spies; and “The Agency”, an adaptation of a French show about undercover agents in from the cold. They delve into the spies’ private lives, modernising old tropes by showing agents’ vulnerability and personal limitations. They also have big budgets to make things go boom. Spy shows make for reliably great watching. But their popularity is perhaps also explained by a sense that the boundaries between good and evil are hazier than ever.

Weekend profile: Tom Homan, America's new border czar



In 2003 Tom Homan was in Dallas talking about a new agency he was helping to set up. It would eventually be known as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), part of the brand new Department of Homeland Security. But he was called away abruptly. In south Texas 19 migrants were found dead in the back of a lorry. They had suffocated on the drive across America's southern border. Among them was a little boy. "Don't let anyone tell you that illegal immigration is a victimless crime," Mr Homan wrote in his memoir published in 2020.

The book, "Defend the Border and Save Lives", may be required reading for those hoping to understand [President Donald Trump's immigration policy](#). Mr Homan is the president's "border czar", a nebulous position that, crucially, does not require Senate confirmation. Along with Stephen Miller, Mr Trump's deputy chief of staff and an anti-immigrant hawk, he will advise the president on immigration enforcement at the border and help carry out "[mass deportations](#)".

Long before he was border czar, Mr Homan was a police officer in his hometown of West Carthage, New York, near the Canadian border. He was born into a law-enforcement family: his father was a cop, and his father before him. He joined the Border Patrol in 1984 and never looked back.

It was no secret that Mr Homan believed America needed to crack down at the southern border. Jeh Johnson, Barack Obama's secretary for homeland security, remembers Mr Homan suggesting in 2014, when he led enforcement and removal operations at ICE, that separating parents from their children would help deter illegal crossings. Removals were historically high during the Obama administration, but Mr Homan's family-separation idea was not implemented.

Unable to stomach the thought of working for Hillary Clinton, the front-runner during the 2016 presidential campaign, he chose to retire. But he reversed course when he was asked to lead ICE for Mr Trump. This time he found a president and a colleague, in Mr Miller, keen to implement the family-separation policy. Nearly 4,700 children were removed from their parents, and at last count 1,360 were yet to be reunited with their families. A national outcry forced Mr Trump to swiftly shut it down. But Mr Homan continued to defend the policy, arguing that its deterrent effect was in the best interests of migrants themselves who were considering the dangerous crossing.

If you look closely there are still glimpses of moderation. He consistently talks about deporting "the worst first", by targeting national-security threats and criminals. But then he adds that "no one is off the table." He has no qualms with his boss's most extreme policies, such as [ending birthright citizenship](#), and has threatened to jail local officials who resist mass deportations. He is a loyal soldier in an administration full of them. Unlike previous presidents, Mr Homan writes, "President Trump walks the walk."

Weekly crossword



Our crossword has two sets of clues, one for seasoned cruciverbalists and the other for less experienced solvers. Both give the same answers, all of which feature in articles in this week's edition of *The Economist*:

Cryptic clues

1 down John Roberts's diary entry for Jan 20th: I anoint a guru drunkenly (12)

1 across Leading imam speaks lovingly and manifests religion (5)

2 across Your Duolingo includes this language (4)

3 across Plane changes route to land (5)

Factual clues

1 down Quadrennial swearing-in ceremony (12)

1 across The main religion in Syria (5)

2 across A "low-resource" language, according to some AI models (4)

3 across Asian country that sells electricity to Bangladesh (5)

Email all four answers, along with your home city and country, by 9am GMT on Monday to crossword@economist.com. We will pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners in next week's edition.

The winners of this week's quiz



Thank you to everyone who took part in this week's quiz. The winners, chosen at random, were:

Stuart Hoy, Sydney, Australia

Vlatka Papa, Duga Resa, Croatia

Zoe McCutcheon, Kesh, Northern Ireland

They all gave the correct answers of Tim Horton, ham, Christmas, fish, cat. The theme is Dr Seuss books: "Horton Hears a Who!", "Green Eggs and Ham", "How The Grinch Stole Christmas!", "One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish" and "The Cat in the Hat".

The questions were:

Monday: The Canadian restaurant and coffee chain, which now has branches in more than a dozen countries, is named after which ice hockey player?

Tuesday: York, Westphalian and Tyrolean Speck are all types of which meat product?

Wednesday: The original "Die Hard" movie is set during which

seasonal holiday?

Thursday: The Neon tetra, Harlequin Rasbora and Pea Puffer are all types of which animal?

Friday: The Egyptian deity Mut was sometimes depicted as which animal, a species that was frequently buried alongside humans in that culture?

Shunto

*Annual wage negotiations between firms and unions in Japan.
Read the full story.*

Suspicion is a heavy armor and with its weight it impedes more than it protects.

Robert Burns