

# The world in brief

Catch up quickly on the global stories that matter



Photograph: AFP

**American airlines** resumed flights through Caribbean airspace after America's aviation agency lifted a ban. The Federal Aviation Administration had imposed restrictions following [America's strikes on Venezuela](#), which led to the capture of the president, Nicolás Maduro early on Saturday. Tens of thousands of travellers had been stranded after hundreds of flights were cancelled.

Venezuela's Supreme Court ordered **Delcy Rodríguez**, the country's vice-president, to assume the role of president temporarily. Earlier Mr Trump said that Americans were going to [run Venezuela](#) "until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition". He said Ms Rodríguez, who had called for the release of Mr Maduro and his wife, had no choice but to [co-operate with America](#).

As Mr Maduro arrived in New York, where he has been indicted for drug-trafficking and supporting terrorism, the [UN](#) said America's intervention had set a "dangerous precedent". It called for a meeting of its Security Council on Monday. **China** said it was firmly opposed to America's "hegemonic behaviour"; Russia condemned its "act of armed aggression". Meanwhile **Argentina's** Javier Milei praised Mr Trump's advancement of "freedom".

The Saudi-backed **Yemeni** government said that its forces had retaken control of Mukalla, an important port and the capital of Hadhramaut province. The Southern Transitional Council, a separatist group backed by the United Arab Emirates, had taken the city as part of a push last month across a large chunk of south-east Yemen. The conflict has deepened a rift between **Saudi Arabia** and the **UAE**.

**North Korea** fired a ballistic missile towards its eastern waters, according to South Korea's army. The test launch comes just a day before Lee Jae-myung, South Korea's president, meets Xi Jinping, his Chinese counterpart. The pair are expected to discuss regional security issues. **North Korea** is reportedly seeking to double its production of tactical-guided weapons.

**Swiss** authorities opened criminal investigations into the managers of the bar where a **fire** on New Year's Eve killed 40 people. Prosecutors said they are suspected of manslaughter and arson by negligence. A preliminary investigation found that sparklers on champagne bottles were the likely cause of the blaze. Officials are still identifying the dead and the injured.

Ministers in France reported “sexual” content generated by **Grok**, the AI chatbot developed by the social-media platform x, to the country’s media regulator. Several users have also flagged sexual images of children and women in recent days. x has not yet responded to the allegations, but Grok has been designed to have fewer **guardrails**. Elon Musk, x’s owner, has called it a “maximally truth-seeking AI”.

**Word of the week:** Brutalism, an architectural style characterised by hulking, exposed concrete, now in Donald Trump’s crosshairs. [Read the full story](#).



Photograph: Getty Images

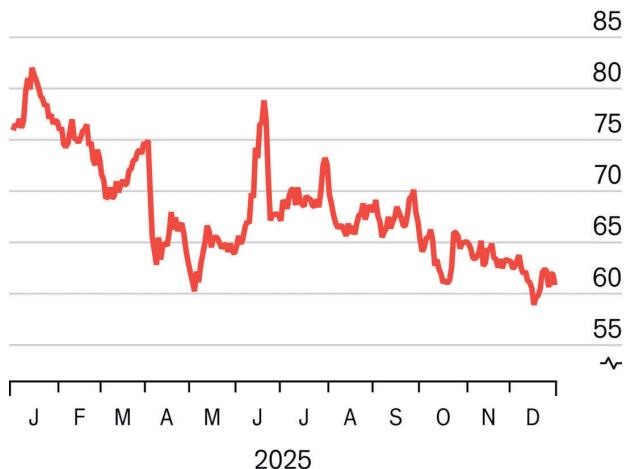
## OPEC meets amid geopolitical turmoil

Eight members of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, which includes Venezuela, and their allies held up their November decision to not increase oil production in the first quarter of 2026 during a meeting on Sunday. The group, which produces [40% of the world's crude oil](#), wants to prevent a price crash. The [oil market](#) faces a glut as exporters outside the cartel, notably America and Guyana, are pumping at record rates. The International Energy Agency, an official forecaster, expects supply to exceed demand by 3.8m barrels per day during 2026. Benchmark crude prices, which are around \$61, already fell by roughly 18% in 2025, the steepest annual drop since covid-affected 2020.

Geopolitical tensions are nonetheless making it more difficult for the cartel to act in concert. After toppling the regime in Venezuela, Donald Trump said his administration will [run the country's oil industry](#). Meanwhile, the rift between Saudi Arabia, the group's leader, and its neighbour, the United Arab Emirates, over the [conflict in Yemen](#) is deepening. Such profound fractures could unsettle oil diplomacy.

## Crude reality

Brent crude oil, \$ per barrel



Source: LSEG Workspace



Photograph: Getty Images

## A fragile ceasefire on the Thai-Cambodian border

A week has passed since Thailand and Cambodia agreed to another shaky ceasefire in a conflict over their [disputed border](#). This time, the truce seems to be holding. On New Year's Eve Thailand released 18 Cambodian prisoners who had been detained since fighting broke out in July after more than 13 years of peace. Since then the conflict has claimed more than 100 lives and displaced around half a million civilians.

The ceasefire put an end to 20 days of combat in which Thailand used F-16 jets to strike Cambodian military targets and what it claims are scam centres along the border. Thailand blames Cambodia for [igniting the conflict](#) in response to its crackdown on scam centres. Cambodia denies this, arguing that the Thai army is trying to stoke nationalist sentiment ahead of a general election on February 8th. Mutual suspicion runs deep, raising fears that the calm may prove temporary.



Photograph: Getty Images

## Smartphone wars intensify

Roh Tae-moon, the head of Samsung's smartphone business, will unveil the division's plans for 2026 on Sunday, ahead of the Consumer Electronics Show which kicks off in Las Vegas next week. The South Korean electronics giant is expected to release its new Galaxy S26 smartphone line early this year. It has a hard act to follow: in September [Apple](#), its American rival, released the iPhone 17 to enormous global success. Counterpoint Research, a market analytics firm, believes Apple outsold Samsung on smartphones in 2025—the first time in 14 years.

Samsung also faces competition in the nascent folding-phone market, where upstart Chinese brands like [Huawei](#) are muscling in with strong alternatives. Apple plans to release a folding iPhone later this year. Whether “foldables” are the future of mainstream smartphones, or merely an expensive niche, remains to be seen. Either way, Samsung could have a big fight on its hands in the coming year.



Photograph: Eyevine

## Saudi Arabia's racing mania

The Dakar rally is the biggest misnomer in motorsport. The event, which began in 1978 as a race from Paris to Dakar in [Senegal](#), moved to South America in the 2010s and since 2020 has taken place in Saudi Arabia. In this year's Dakar, which starts this weekend, more than 800 competitors in souped-up off-road trucks or on knobbly-tyred motorbikes will tear across desert in stages for 13 days, covering almost 8,000km.

[Saudi Arabia](#) is keen to attract racing events (it hosted its first Formula 1 Grand Prix in 2021). But the Dakar doesn't offer much for spectators, unless you enjoy lungfuls of dust. Instead, manufacturers see it as the ultimate test of their mettle. This year Ford has entered v8-engine-powered trucks and Land Rover will debut a rugged version of its Defender 4x4. Failure is common. Last year two-thirds of the entrants went the distance.



Photograph: Getty Images

## New understanding of megafires

The most destructive wildfires occur when many isolated fires merge. Though rare, these “multi-ignition fires” have accounted for 31% of [California’s burned area](#) and 59% of the Arctic’s since 2012, according to a new study in *Science Advances*. In 2023, during Canada’s worst-ever fire season, the figure was 76%. As many as 29 “megafires” helped raze some 15m hectares—an area larger than England.

Using satellite data from 2012 to 2023, scientists found that these fires, which begin when dry thunderstorms spark clustered ignitions that later merge—made more common by warmer, drier conditions—behave differently from others. They grow quicker, last longer and are likelier to generate *pyrocumulonimbus* events (fire thunderstorms) than are isolated fires with the same number of ignition points, despite burning in similar environments. Longer active fire lines overwhelm ground crews, making matters worse. Better deployment of resources to [prevent](#) clusters from merging may help. But with a warming climate, that is just firefighting.



Illustration: The Economist

## 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:

**Jeannette Duplessis**, Calgary, Canada

**Bruce Fink**, Honolulu, Hawaii

**Roger Bailey**, Wadhurst, Britain

They all gave the correct answers of: Louis XIV, Lewis Carroll, foreman, Frasier and Ali MacGraw. The theme is heavyweight boxing champions: Joe Louis, Lennox Lewis, George Foreman, Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali.

The questions were:

**Monday:** Which French King was the longest-reigning monarch in history?

**Tuesday:** What pen-name was assumed by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, author of a children's classic?

**Wednesday:** What title is used by both the supervisor of a team of workers in a factory and the spokesman of a jury?

**Thursday:** Which sitcom title character moved back from Seattle to Boston when the show was revived in 2023?

**Friday:** Who plays Jenny, the doomed member of a romantic couple, in the 1970 film “Love Story”?

*If you aren't in over your head,  
how do you know how tall you  
are?*

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**T.S. Eliot**