

## Catch up: European leaders rally behind Zelensky; “suspected terror attack” in Israel



European leaders rallied behind **Volodymyr Zelensky** after **Donald Trump** called him “a dictator without elections” on Wednesday. Pedro Sánchez, Spain’s prime minister, said he would visit Kyiv to “reaffirm” support. Germany’s Olaf Scholz rejected Mr Trump’s claim that Ukraine was to blame for [the war](#). Ukrainian opposition figures also dismissed calls for elections, calling them “impossible and immoral” during war.

**Israeli** police said they were investigating a “suspected terror attack” after three empty buses exploded in Bat Yam, a city south of Tel Aviv. No casualties have been reported. The incident comes hours after **Hamas** handed back the bodies of four Israeli hostages, including a mother and her two children; Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel’s president, threatened to “settle the score” with their killers.

**America’s** Senate narrowly confirmed **Kash Patel** by 51-49 to lead the FBI. Two Republicans opposed. Mr Patel’s [overt](#)

[partisanship and affinity for conspiracy theories](#) make him a controversial choice to oversee law enforcement. He once called the organisation that he now runs “one of the most cunning and powerful forces of the deep state”.

**Russia** retook 800 square kilometres in Kursk, reversing 64% of **Ukraine’s** gains from last year’s offensive, local media said. In Ukraine, [Russian strikes](#) killed at least seven and injured 30. The worst attacks hit Kherson in the south and Kharkiv in the north. In [Odessa](#), 49,000 were left without power after strikes on energy infrastructure.

**Mercedes-Benz** warned of a sharp profit drop in 2025. Operating profit margins, which fell to 8.1% in 2024 from 12.6% the year before, could shrink to 6% this year. The [German](#) carmaker is struggling with weak demand in China and Europe; rising trade tensions will deepen the downturn. It announced a plan to cut production costs by 10% by 2027.

**Mexico** arrested a leading player in the Sinaloa [drug cartel](#). José Ángel Canobbio, otherwise known as “El Güerito” (little blond one), is said to have managed security for a son of “El Chapo”, the notorious drug lord. The arrest of Mr Canobbio—who was indicted in absentia in America last year—came after the Trump administration designated the cartel a foreign terrorist organisation.

**Luis Rubiales**, the former head of Spain’s football federation, was found guilty of sexually assaulting Jenni Hermoso, a footballer, with [a non-consensual kiss](#) after her team won the 2023 World Cup. He was fined €10,800 (\$11,300) and ordered to stay 200 metres away from her for a year. He was acquitted of coercion: the court found no proof he pressured Ms Hermoso to say the kiss was consensual.

**Figure of the day:** \$18bn, the amount America’s biggest consultancies received from the federal government last year, up

from \$5bn a decade ago. [Read the full story.](#)

## Concrete action in Gaza



The shockwaves from President Donald [Trump's plan for Gaza](#)—which envisaged an American takeover and eviction of Palestinians—continue to be felt across the Middle East. Arab leaders from Egypt, Jordan and several Gulf states are gathering in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, on Friday, to discuss alternatives. Proposals include a \$20bn fund to rebuild the devastated strip over three years and a Palestinian administration independent of Hamas and the Palestinian Authority.

Syria and Lebanon are seeking Gulf funding for their own reconstruction. And there is no shortage of companies, especially in Egypt, eager to profit from contracts. But reconstruction projects will face huge difficulties. Israel is still barring the entry of supplies including surgical gloves, caravans and mobile warehouses, which it thinks Hamas could use for no good. Getting any heavy machinery in will be hard while Hamas still controls affairs on the ground. [Mr Trump's startling initiative](#) galvanised Arab states (as he probably intended). But a post-war plan is still far from settled.

# Has Japan escaped low inflation?



Few central banks hope for signs of sticky inflation. But that is exactly what the Bank of Japan will be looking for when the country's statistics agency releases inflation figures for January on Friday. It wants further evidence that the much sought-after “virtuous cycle” of rising wages and prices—which is needed to [bury Japan's deflationary decades](#) for good—remains under way.

That would help the BoJ move away from a policy of ultra-low interest rates, which it has maintained even though inflation has persistently exceeded its 2% target. The bank has been wary of moving too quickly as that would risk a premature appreciation of the yen, which would undermine the inflationary expectations the BoJ has worked so hard to achieve. But lately economic data have co-operated. After an above-expectations rise in wholesale prices reported last week, markets reckon that the BoJ will get what it wants.

## Sudan's parallel governments



The Rapid Support Forces, a Sudanese paramilitary group that has been [fighting the national army](#) for two years, is to formally launch a government in the areas under its control. On Friday some allied rebel groups and politicians opposed to Sudan's government are due to co-sign a political charter in Kenya's capital, Nairobi. The RSF's deputy leader, Abdul Rahim Dagalo (pictured), is expected to attend. His more famous brother and the leader of the RSF, Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo, better known as [Hemedti](#), is believed to be in Nairobi but is not appearing in public. Both warlords are under American sanctions for ethnic cleansing and probable genocide in Darfur.

The rebel government will not rule in Khartoum, Sudan's capital. The Sudanese Armed Forces are on the brink of retaking the city from the RSF. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the SAF's leader and Sudan's de facto president, recently made his first appearance there since 2023. On February 9th the SAF pledged to form a government of "technocrats". Sudan looks like a country on the verge of breaking up.



# The hobbling of USAID



A federal court's pause on the dismantling of [USAID](#), America's aid agency, is due to end on Friday. On February 4th USAID notified its workforce that they would be placed on paid leave. The court said USAID could not do this, but [the agency's](#) office is closed. Thousands of workers, including overseas contractors, have been laid off. Thousands more career civil servants remain in limbo while the courts work out whether Donald Trump has the right to unilaterally dismantle the agency.

The Trump administration had already caused havoc when on January 20th—the president's first day in office—it placed a blanket freeze on USAID payments. Another court order stopped this. But almost all funding remains frozen. The government says its actions are legal because each payment is being reviewed individually. Lawyers representing USAID contractors are having none of that argument: they have tried—so far, unsuccessfully—to hold the government in contempt of court.

## Fending for his music



As his career was rocketing in 2022, Sam Fender did something very unusual. The young singer-songwriter from North Shields, a British town, was already filling arenas. His second album, “Seventeen Going Under”, had in its release week sold more than every other album in Britain’s top ten put together. But in the midst of the North American leg of his tour, he simply stopped, pre-emptively cancelling the remaining concerts to protect his mental health.

Mr Fender’s new album, “People Watching”, vindicates this decision: he has come back stronger. It could even be heard as an attempt to make it up to American fans, so uncannily does it echo the style of 1980s American heartland rock. It follows the tradition of [Bruce Springsteen](#) and Bruce Hornsby, with songs that are impassioned and anthemic yet meticulously crafted, while retaining some distinct tones: Mr Fender’s Geordie accent, and his devotion to his Tyneside roots and neighbours.



## Daily quiz



*The Economist*

We will serve you a new question each day this week. On Friday your challenge is to give us all five answers and, as important, tell us the connecting theme. Email your responses (and include mention of your home city and country) by 1700 GMT on Friday to [QuizEspresso@economist.com](mailto:QuizEspresso@economist.com). We'll pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners on Saturday.

**Friday:** “The Defiant Ones” and “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”, two of the earliest Hollywood movies to tackle racial issues, were directed by which person?

**Thursday:** What rank did Columbo, played by Peter Falk, hold in the Los Angeles police force?

# The winners of last week's crossword



Thank you to everyone who took part in our weekly crossword, published in the weekend edition of Espresso. The winners, chosen at random, were:

**Joel Shapiro**, Toronto, Canada

**Meredith Angwin**, Melbourne, Australia

**Sebastian Agudelo-Restrepo**, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

They all gave the correct answers of [Bridget Jones](#), [bishop](#), [Egypt](#), and [stymie](#). Check back tomorrow for this week's crossword.

**All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.**

*Baruch Spinoza*