

The world in brief

Catch up quickly on the global stories that matter



Photograph: Getty Images

Volodymyr Zelensky said he would visit **Donald Trump** at Mar-a-Lago to discuss ending Russia's four-year invasion of Ukraine on Sunday. "A lot can be decided before the New Year," said Ukraine's president. On Thursday Mr Zelensky held talks with [Steve Witkoff](#) and [Jared Kushner](#), Mr Trump's envoys, having previously suggested that Ukraine could accept a demilitarised zone in the country's east.

Najib Razak was sentenced to 15 years in prison for abusing power and money laundering in the largest trial yet related to Malaysia's 1MDB scandal. The country's high court ruled that the [former prime minister](#) used his office to move vast sums from the country's sovereign-wealth fund to his personal accounts a decade ago. Mr Najib, who denies wrongdoing, has been in prison since 2022.

Precious metals are set for a sparkling end of the year. **Gold** prices rose to more than \$4,500 per ounce and **silver** exceeded \$75 per ounce, both records. The price of [silver](#) has risen by more than 150% in the past year, driven by nervous investors looking for a haven and industrial buyers using the metal to make solar panels.

America launched strikes against the **Islamic State** group in north-western **Nigeria**. Donald Trump said the “powerful and deadly” attacks were aimed at protecting the country’s Christian population. Nigeria’s government confirmed that it was co-operating with America by providing intelligence for the strikes, but rejected [America’s claims](#) that they were linked with any “particular religion”.

Japan’s cabinet approved a record ¥122trn (\$779bn) budget for the next fiscal year. Tax revenues are expected to rise by 7.6%. The heavily indebted country faces rising bond yields, a weak yen and higher inflation. Investors are becoming fretful about the [big-spending instincts](#) of Takaichi Sanae, Japan’s new prime minister. The Japanese government’s net debt is around 130% of GDP, though it has fallen in recent years.

During his first Christmas sermon to worshippers in the Vatican, **Pope Leo XIV** denounced conditions in Gaza, which see those in “tents...exposed for weeks to rain, wind and cold”. He also urged Ukraine and Russia to find the “courage” to hold “sincere, direct and respectful” talks to find peace. It was an [unusually political *urbi et orbi*](#) from the American-born pontiff.

Figure of the day: 750, the number of languages in which the Bible is available in full. [Read the full story.](#)



Photograph: Getty Images

Israel looks inwards

Until January 2nd we are looking ahead to next year's big stories. Today, what will shape the Middle East, Africa and Europe

If the two [ceasefires](#) Donald Trump imposed on Israel in 2025, with Iran and with Hamas, hold, the country may have a chance to focus on its internal affairs in 2026. Israel's next election must take place by the end of October. Binyamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, will fight yet another desperate campaign for re-election.

His coalition of hard-right and ultra-religious parties is trailing in the polls. He can, to a degree, use national-security issues for his political advantage. But he cannot claim total victory in either war, and the security lapses that led to Hamas's attack on October 7th 2023 will now face more scrutiny. As a distraction, Mr Netanyahu is trying to [revive the polarising debate](#) between liberal, mainly secular Israelis who support the Supreme Court and the religious-right camp, who want to diminish its power. That could make the election campaign toxic. It may also be Mr Netanyahu's last: he is 76.



Photograph: Reuters

Sudan cries out for peace

Sudan, site of the world's [worst humanitarian disaster](#), ended the year on a particularly bloody note. The Rapid Support Forces, a rebel paramilitary group, [captured the last stronghold](#) of the Sudanese Armed Forces in the western region of Darfur. The RSF butchered civilians, drawing fresh accusations of genocide.

Peace talks failed in 2025, but things may be different in 2026. Donald Trump, keen on winning a Nobel peace prize and fresh from his successes in the Middle East, has signalled an interest in a Sudan deal, too. America is the only actor able to force the war's belligerents—and their foreign backers—into the same room. The RSF now controls a landlocked rump state. Some analysts reckon its leaders would sign a peace deal that gives them Darfur (and its gold) along with a share of power at the centre, leaving the east to the SAF. Such a deal might silence the guns, but would not bode well for Sudan's return to civilian rule.



Photograph: Getty Images

The Hungary games

It's always election year somewhere in the European Union, a club of 27 democracies; governments from Athens to Helsinki frequently lose. Such changes of power can paralyse the EU, but the most important vote of 2026 could have the opposite effect. That is because it may remove one of Europe's most awkward actors.

In the spring Viktor Orban and his Fidesz party will be on the ballot for the seventh time. The “proudly illiberal” prime minister of Hungary has held office since 2010. His kinship with Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, Russia’s president, are anathema to most other EU leaders. Mr Orban has not blocked EU [sanctions against Russia](#) or membership talks with Ukraine, but he has extracted a high price for letting them go ahead.

Most leaders would therefore like to see him go. That now seems a distinct possibility. Fidesz is polling a distant second to Tisza, a party that presents itself as a unified [anti-Orban front](#). Europe will watch the contest closely. So, with different emotions, will the White House.



Photograph: Reuters

Broadening Russia's war in Ukraine

A spectre is haunting Europe: that of direct conflict with Russia. Cyber-attacks and sabotage are increasing. Russian drones have recently flown over Poland, Germany and Denmark, causing shutdowns of civilian airports. Baltic countries are practising mass evacuations in case Russia invades.

Russia's [grey-zone provocations](#), which will intensify in 2026, are signs of weakness rather than strength. Bogged down on the battlefield in Ukraine, Mr Putin will want to escalate elsewhere. He calculates that the greater the threat Europeans perceive to themselves, the more they will prioritise their own rearmament over providing support to Ukraine, thereby undermining its defence.

Mr Putin's [resources are not infinite](#). A fall in oil revenues is constraining his military spending and opinion polls show that Russians are tired of his "special military operation". Mr Putin may decide his best option is to freeze the active phase of the war and turn it into a permanent struggle with occasional flare-ups.



Illustration: The Economist

Daily quiz

We will serve you a new question each weekday. All five have a common theme. We won't pick any winners this week; normal service will return next week. Look for the answers in tomorrow's edition.

Friday: After which 1957 film, also featuring Cyd Charisse, did Fred Astaire announce his retirement from movie musicals?

Thursday: Bert, played by Dick van Dyke in the film “Mary Poppins”, was a member of which profession?

I have no friends. The more you learn about the dignity of the gorilla, the more you want to avoid people

Dian Fossey