

Catch up: France's government collapses; American CEO killed



France's minority government **collapsed** after **Michel Barnier**, the **prime minister**, lost a vote of no confidence. He is expected to resign shortly. Left-wing and hard-right parties had submitted **no-confidence motions** on Monday after Mr Barnier tried to force through a proposed **budget** without parliamentary approval. It is the first time the National Assembly has brought down a government since 1962.

Brian Thompson, the boss of UnitedHealthcare, an American health insurer, was killed in Midtown Manhattan. He was shot in the chest and leg, in what the police believe was a targeted attack. Police are still searching for the suspect. **UnitedHealth Group**, UnitedHealthcare's parent company, is the largest private health insurer in America, with a revenue of \$371.6bn in 2023.

South Korea's opposition party presented a bill to impeach the president, Yoon Suk Yeol. They said his **short-lived coup** attempt was an "unforgivable crime". On Tuesday Mr Yoon declared martial law, banning all political parties and curbing media

freedom. But six hours later, after opposition politicians had barricaded themselves inside parliament and protesters had flocked to the streets, he reversed course.

A UN official told AFP, a news agency, that 115,000 people have been newly displaced in **Syria** since [last week](#). State forces reportedly pushed back rebel groups close to Hama, the country's fourth biggest city, on Wednesday. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that the army had retaken towns in Hama province which had been captured by rebel groups on Tuesday.

Donald Trump picked Paul Atkins to serve as chair of America's **Securities and Exchange Commission**. Mr Atkins, a former SEC regulator under George Bush, is expected to take a lighter approach towards crypto regulation than [Gary Gensler](#), the SEC's current chair. Meanwhile Mr Trump is reportedly considering nominating Ron DeSantis, Florida's governor, for secretary of defence, replacing his original choice of [Pete Hegseth](#).

The Philippines said that **China's** coastguard fired water cannon at one of its patrol vessels in the [South China Sea](#). America called China's actions "unlawful" and "dangerous". The incident happened at Scarborough Shoal, a strategic lagoon which is controlled by China but close to Manila, the capital of the Philippines. Tensions are rising over the region's disputed territories.

Business activity in the euro zone slowed in November, according to a benchmark survey. S&P Global's purchasing-managers index fell to 48.3, down from 50 in the previous month. (A reading below 50 denotes contraction.) The services sector suffered its first decline in output since January. Big European economies such as [Germany](#), France and Italy all registered contractions.

Figure of the day: 190, the number of lawmakers who barricaded themselves inside South Korea's parliament, after the president,

Yook Sun Yeol, declared martial law. [Read the full story.](#)

Mercosur's future hangs in the balance



Javier Milei, Argentina's president, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, his Brazilian counterpart, will travel to Uruguay for a [Mercosur](#) summit that begins on Thursday. The customs union, made up of those three countries plus Bolivia and Paraguay, is struggling. It has high external tariffs and other barriers to trade within the union.

Before the summit there had been talk of a big boost for the bloc. Rumours swirled that leaders would finalise a trade deal—25 years in the making—with the European Union. But with no formal announcement, that remains uncertain. France, keen to protect its farmers, continues to oppose an agreement.

Uruguay and Argentina want freer trade with the rest of the world. If Mercosur cannot deliver, they aim to strike independent trade deals. They would prefer to also stay in a more flexible version of Mercosur. But [Mr Milei](#) is already threatening to leave entirely. A moment of truth beckons.

Starmer's overdue “plan for change”



On Thursday Sir Keir Starmer, Britain's prime minister, will unveil several targets for his government to achieve before the next election. The “plan for change” is intended to serve as a blueprint for the rest of his term, outlining measurable milestones in areas such as health care, crime and education.

Since coming to power in July, [Sir Keir's government](#) has been criticised for appearing directionless and overly academic. The initiative, officials say, is designed to “deliver real, tangible improvement to the lives of working people”. The big question is why it has taken months to produce such a plan.

Sir Chris Wormald, who on Monday was named as the next cabinet secretary, will be responsible for implementing it. A career civil servant with extensive experience leading the health and education departments, Sir Chris has become Britain's most senior unelected official. Sir Keir will hope he can rise to the challenge.

Pole position in Europe



On Thursday Donald Tusk, Poland's prime minister, hosts Roberta Metsola, president of the European Parliament, in Warsaw. They will discuss Poland taking over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union in January. Mr Tusk, a former president of the European Council, has clout in Brussels. In October his opposition to the EU's liberal asylum policy won praise from other European leaders. And Poland's long-running calls for Europe to expand defence budgets (the country spends the most in NATO, at 4.1% of GDP) have [gained currency](#) as Donald Trump's presidency looms.

Mr Tusk will use Poland's presidency to push for more political, financial and military [guarantees for Ukraine](#). But he might also use the position to further his domestic political goals. In an election in May his liberal alliance will seek to win the [Polish presidency](#), which has for a decade been in the hands of the Eurosceptic opposition. A high profile in Europe may help.

OPEC's conundrum



On Thursday the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies will meet to set production quotas for early 2025. The group, which supplies half the world's oil, is expected to continue restraining production, postponing a planned hike of 180,000 barrels per day—already delayed from October—until at least after the first quarter of 2025.

Since 2022 the Saudi Arabia-led cartel has cut output by 5.9m b/d—more than 5% of global demand—in an effort to prop up prices. Yet, despite these cuts, [oil prices](#) have remained mostly around \$70-\$80 a barrel since January. Sluggish global growth and the rising adoption of electric vehicles have curbed demand. Meanwhile, non-OPEC producers, especially America, have increased output. It's unclear when the cartel will raise output again. Last month it cut its forecast for global oil-demand growth this year and next—its fourth downward revision in 2024.

Peculiar pollinators



There is no denying that *Balanophora subcupularis* is a bizarre plant. Although it is a flowering plant, it is a parasite that feeds on the roots of other botanical species. It produces dull, yeast-scented flowers and tiny seeds that could be dispersed by the wind—if there were any in the dense Japanese forests it inhabits. No one has known which species pollinates it or spreads its seeds—until now.

After observing the plants for more than 100 hours and studying tens of thousands of nocturnal photos taken by automated cameras, Suetsugu Kenji of Kobe University in Japan has solved the mystery. He reports in *Ecology*, a journal, that ants and crickets, attracted by the yeasty scent, pollinate the plant. Later they disperse its seeds while feeding on its leaves. Such bugs rarely perform either of these roles, let alone both for the same plant. Such dual functionality has never been observed before, making *Balanophora subcupularis* a natural marvel.

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. We'll pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners on Saturday.

Thursday: The regime which ruled France from 1852 to 1870 is generally known by which title?

Wednesday: Which two acts, with the same name, were passed by the US congress in 1793 and 1850, only to be repealed in 1864?

**The more I live, the more I regret how
little I know.**

Claude Monet