

## Catch up: Hamas releases more hostages; Noem confirmed as homeland-security secretary



After **Hamas** released four more Israeli hostages, all of them female soldiers, held in Gaza since October 2023, **Israel** freed 200 Palestinian prisoners. Most of the latter were sent to the West Bank, but others will be deported. 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.

**America's** Senate confirmed **Kristi Noem**, governor of South Dakota, as homeland-security secretary—overseeing [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#), among other agencies. Meanwhile **Donald Trump** reportedly dismissed more than a dozen **inspectors-general** of federal agencies as [the president](#) seeks to reshape America's civil service. Inspectors-generals monitor agencies' efficiency, as well as investigating instances of fraud;

Congress is supposed to receive notice of 30 days before any are sacked.

America's Central Intelligence Agency concluded "with low confidence" that **covid-19** was more likely to have emerged from a [lab](#) than from "a natural origin". The CIA had previously said that there was not enough information to reach a conclusion. The assessment was reportedly revised before John Ratcliffe was sworn as the CIA's new director on Thursday.

**Congo** cut all diplomatic ties with **Rwanda** after fighting continued between Congolese troops, their allies and M23, a Rwandan-backed [rebel group](#) that is advancing on Goma, a city in eastern Congo. Some 13 UN peacekeepers were killed in the attacks on Saturday, nine of them from South Africa. The UN Security Council will discuss the crisis on Sunday.

The Israel Defence Forces told residents of border villages in **southern Lebanon** not to return to their homes, as tensions grew over the enforcement of the **Israel-Hizbullah** [ceasefire deal](#). On Friday Israel said it would not fully withdraw its troops from Lebanon by the end of the weekend, as stipulated in the agreement; it claimed the militant group had not held up its end of the deal.

Volodymyr Zelensky said Mr Trump's attempts to halt Russia's invasion "will not work" if **Ukraine** is left out of talks. America's president has [vowed to end the war](#) quickly, and has said he is open to meeting his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. Ukraine's leader made the comments alongside Moldova's pro-European president, Maia Sandu, as she visited Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital.

[Robert Fico](#), **Slovakia's** populist prime minister, said he would not resign in the face of large protests. Demonstrations took place in more than 20 cities across the central European country on Friday—60,000 people gathered in Bratislava, the capital, according to organisers' estimates. [Since taking office for the latest time in 2023](#)

Mr Fico has shifted Slovakia away from the EU and closer to Russia.

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

# Belarus pretends to vote again



The most recent presidential election in Belarus, in 2020, plunged the country into chaos. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets when the incumbent, Alexander Lukashenko, claimed victory with an improbable 81% of the vote. For a moment it looked as though the protests could topple his regime. But hope soon gave way to terror. The regime locked up more than 1,200 political opponents and snuffed out independent media. Thousands fled the country.

On Sunday Belarusians will be offered another chance to trod down to polling stations to cast their vote. It will have [little bearing on the result](#). With no serious opposition candidate on the ballot paper, the veteran dictator will win a seventh term. The European parliament has already called the elections a “sham”; America’s outgoing secretary of state, Antony Blinken, said on January 17th that the country’s “repressive environment” discredited the process. Belarus has not seen a free or fair vote since Mr Lukashenko took power in 1994. This time will be no different.

## Italy's globetrotting prime minister



This weekend Giorgia Meloni visits Saudi Arabia with a newly acquired status: as Donald Trump's favourite European leader. Italy's prime minister was the only one of the continent's leaders at [Mr Trump's inauguration](#); she had already won his praise as a "fantastic woman". That endorsement may encourage Saudi leaders to look past her previous criticism of the kingdom. She once accused it of "creating the humus in which terrorism prospers".

Now she comes bearing, if not gifts, then loan guarantees agreed by Italy's state-controlled export-credit agency. They cover 80% of a €3bn (\$3.2) loan package assembled by international banks in support of Neom. The [dazzlingly ambitious project](#), which involves building a city in the country's north-west, is one of the main goals of the crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman. Her talks will probably also cover Saudi Arabia's conditions for joining Italy in a multinational project for the construction of a next-generation combat aircraft—and ideas for a lasting solution to the Israel-Hamas conflict.



# A culture war over Australia's national day



An angry political fight surrounds [Australia Day](#), which falls on Sunday. The national holiday commemorates the landing of the First Fleet of British settlers in Sydney, and so, as many indigenous activists and allies see it, the beginning of Aboriginal dispossession. For years debate has raged over whether to change the date. Thousands of Australians will join protests against “Invasion Day”. Companies increasingly allow staff to swap their holiday.

That creates fertile ground for conservatives to complain that pious lefties are dismantling Australian traditions. Peter Dutton, the leader of the opposition, grumbles about “woke CEOs” cancelling celebrations. His centre-right Liberal Party would force local governments to hold citizenship ceremonies on Australia Day as “a sign of pride and nationalism”. (Under the centre-left Labor government, they have not had to.) Australians, Mr Dutton argues, are “sick of being vilified” by the left. Indeed, polling suggests that a growing majority want to keep Australia Day on January 26th.

# The dangers of leaving the WHO



Donald Trump has reprised his efforts to [withdraw America from the World Health Organisation](#). On January 20th America's president signed an executive order accusing the WHO of mishandling covid-19, failing to reform and lacking independence. He tried to leave the WHO once before, in July 2020, a move that Joe Biden reversed. Mr Trump's latest order could weaken global health efforts and strain America's access to vital health data.

America has been a supporter of the WHO since 1948. It contributes an annual total of \$1.3bn to fund programmes it has prioritised, such as polio eradication, but its membership in fact costs just \$126m. That is still a fraction of the \$1.7trn the federal government spends on health. And working with the WHO ensures global disease monitoring and vaccine co-ordination, benefiting America and the world. The loss of American leadership in the organisation will hinder the response to health emergencies. Without co-operation, maintaining global health-security will get much harder.

## A spirited take on the ghost story



[Ghost stories](#) rarely centre on the ghost. “Presence,” directed by Steven Soderbergh and released in Britain and America this week, is an exception. Audiences see the narrative from the ghost’s perspective, provided by Mr Soderbergh’s camera work. He filmed it in just 11 days, using a small digital camera and slippers to hide the sound of his footsteps. The ghost—more of a gentle observer than a terroriser—watches as a family, wracked by grief, starts to fracture.

Since winning the Palme D’Or at Cannes for his first film, “Sex, Lies and Videotape” (1989), [Mr Soderbergh](#) has been a notable presence in Hollywood: mutable and hard-working. He directed the successful “Ocean’s” franchise (“Eleven”, “Twelve” and “Thirteen” starred George Clooney and Brad Pitt) but has also done smaller projects, such as the overlooked “No Sudden Move,” a stylish crime drama that was disrupted by the pandemic. “Black Bag”, his thriller starring Cate Blanchett, opens in March. Audiences should be grateful for Mr Soderbergh’s busy schedule.



# 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](mailto: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



*The Economist*

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?

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

*Robert Burns*