

## Catch up: Bank of England holds rates; Syria's new leader speaks



The **Bank of England** held interest rates at 4.75%. The decision was expected, although three of the monetary-policy committee's nine members voted to cut them by a quarter of a percentage point. Britain's annual inflation rate was 2.6% in November, up from 2.3% in October. On Wednesday America's **Federal Reserve** lowered its benchmark rate, but sounded cautious about [future cuts](#).

Ahmed al-Sharaa, **Syria's** new de facto leader, urged Western countries to lift sanctions on his country, claiming that it is no longer a threat to the world. In an interview with the BBC, Mr Sharaa insisted that [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#), the group he heads, is not a terrorist organisation and dismissed concerns that it would turn Syria into a version of Afghanistan.

Steve Scalise, America's Republican House majority leader, said that a bipartisan deal to avoid a **government shutdown** had been scrapped. The bill was already unpopular among Republicans in Congress. But support collapsed after **Donald Trump** and **J.D. Vance** denounced the proposal, which contained \$100bn in [disaster](#)

[aid](#) and unrelated policy measures. Without a deal, many federal operations will shut down on Saturday.

**Israel** said it had struck **Houthi** “military targets” in **Yemen**, including ports and energy infrastructure. At least nine people died, according to Houthi-controlled media. Earlier, Israel threatened to retaliate after it intercepted ballistic missiles fired towards it by the [Iran-backed rebel group](#). The Houthis, who control much of Yemen, have been launching missiles at Israel [since October 2023](#).

**Ukraine’s** president, Volodymyr Zelensky, called on America and Europe to show “unity” in the face of Russia’s aggression, as he arrived in Brussels to attend an EU summit. Meanwhile the bloc’s top diplomat, Kaja Kallas, told the *Financial Times* that the West should not pressure Ukraine into peace talks; America’s president-elect, Donald Trump, has promised to [bring the war to a swift end](#).

Around 10,000 Teamsters union members at facilities run by **Amazon** will go on strike. [The union](#), one of America’s largest, claims the retailer has ignored contract negotiations. [Amazon](#) accuses Teamsters of illegally coercing workers to become members, according to a statement reported by some media. While the strike could threaten timely holiday deliveries, only a small fraction of Amazon’s hourly workforce is unionised.

A **French** court sentenced **Dominique Pelicot** to 20 years in jail after he admitted to drugging his wife, Gisèle, raping her, and recruiting online dozens of other men to rape her while she was unconscious. Almost all of those men were also found guilty of aggravated rape. Ms Pelicot has become a heroine for [waiving her anonymity](#) in the trial to make “shame swap sides”.

**Figure of the day:** 29, the number of strikes involving more than 1,000 workers in America between January and November. [Read the full story](#).

# Is a Gaza ceasefire finally in sight?



The Middle East has been here time and again. Meetings in Cairo and Doha; optimistic briefings of an imminent breakthrough; and then the breakdown of talks. But there is now reason to believe Israel and Hamas are at last close to a ceasefire agreement, or at least a truce. The deal might end the devastating war in Gaza, which began over 14 months ago with the October 7th attacks.

Obstacles remain, particularly the question of when Israeli troops will leave Gaza entirely. But the [fall of the Assad regime](#) in Syria, Hizbullah signing a ceasefire in Lebanon and Iran re-assessing its regional strategy have all isolated Hamas. Meanwhile Israelis are war-weary: many want the government to do more to secure the release of the roughly 100 hostages still held in Gaza. President Joe Biden wants a deal as one of his last acts in office; Donald Trump expects a ceasefire by his inauguration on January 20th. This time it may finally happen.

## Ueda Kazuo's balancing act



Foreign tourists are flooding to Japan, making merry with a yen languishing at around 150 against the dollar. But for the Bank of Japan, which concludes a two-day policy meeting on Thursday, the weak currency is no cause for celebration. Pricier imports are squeezing household budgets. Japan's annual inflation rate was 2.3% in October, down from 2.5% the previous month, but still above the bank's target of 2%.

Last month Ueda Kazuo, the central bank's governor (pictured), said that the time for another interest-rate rise is "nearing". But during its latest meeting, which concluded on Thursday, the BOJ decided to keep rates unchanged at 0.25%. That caused the yen to further slide to 155 against the dollar. The bank is treading carefully: when Mr Ueda unexpectedly raised rates in July, the [stockmarket crashed](#). Some think January may be a more appropriate time to increase rates. Yet even that is fraught: a new American administration brings with it threats of higher tariffs and more economic uncertainty.

# The year according to Putin



On Thursday Vladimir Putin hosts his annual press conference, in which he answers softball questions about the year's achievements at great length. Russia's president may be cheerful. His forces continue to progress in eastern Ukraine, albeit at a cost of many men. And Donald Trump's victory might provide a boon. Many people think he will keep his promise to end the war swiftly by imposing a bad deal on Ukraine.

Still, Mr Putin has plenty of problems. On Tuesday Ukraine [assassinated a Russian general](#) in Moscow, showing that its security services remain a threat. The Kremlin is also reckoning with the fall of Bashar al-Assad, its ally in Syria, where it hopes to hold on to crucial military bases. On top of all that, the economy is [under strain](#). Russia's central bank is expected to raise interest rates to 23% on Friday as it struggles to tame inflation fuelled by the government's war spending.



# France's harrowing rape trial ends



On Thursday a verdict was reached in a [rape trial](#) that has deeply disturbed France. Dominique Pelicot, a 72-year-old, was found guilty of aggravated rape against his wife, Gisèle, having drugged her and recruited online dozens of other men to rape her too while she was unconscious. He was tried along with 50 co-accused. In total 47 men were found guilty of rape, with two guilty of attempted rape and two of sexual assault. Mr Pelicot was given a 20-year prison sentence; the sentences given to the co-accused were generally slightly shorter than requested by prosecutors.

The trial has woken up the country to the horror of chemical submission, and exposed widespread misunderstandings about consent, and what constitutes rape. Mr Pelicot confessed to rape, but some of his co-accused claimed not to have considered it as such. Ms Pelicot, now divorced and applauded each day in court, has become a heroine for many women for her remarkable courage in forgoing anonymity and bringing the case into the open.

## MrBeast comes to Amazon



Jimmy Donaldson, a 26-year-old social-media star better known as MrBeast, will launch his latest video series on Thursday. The ten-part game-show, “Beast Games”, will appear not on YouTube, his usual platform, but on Amazon’s Prime Video streaming service. MrBeast is not the only social-media star to [embrace Hollywood](#). Last month Jake Paul, another influencer, appeared on Netflix in a boxing match against Mike Tyson. The Sidemen, a troupe of YouTubers, will make a reality show for the same streamer next year.

The overlap between social media and the professional sort is growing. Viewers increasingly treat them as interchangeable: nearly half of all YouTube viewing in America now takes place on a TV screen. Their business models are also converging. Streamers like Netflix are racing to build their advertising business, while social platforms are pushing subscriptions. YouTube now has over 100m paying subscribers—more than many Hollywood streamers.

## 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.

**Thursday:** Which Victorian poet had a secret courtship and marriage with the writer Robert Browning?

**Wednesday:** Which heavyweight boxer made a fortune promoting a grill after retirement?



**It is only when we are no longer fearful  
that we begin to create.**

*J. M. W. Turner*