

Catch up: judge limits DOGE's access to payments data; Hamas frees more hostages



A federal judge temporarily blocked **Elon Musk** and some of his team at the [Department of Government Efficiency](#) from accessing sensitive Treasury payment systems. Last week Mr Musk claimed DOGE was cancelling “illegal” payments, sparking concerns that he had gained access to systems handling trillions in Social Security and Medicare funds. The ruling follows a lawsuit by 19 state attorneys-general challenging DOGE’s authority.

The **Israel Defence Forces** said that **Hamas** had handed over three Israeli hostages to the Red Cross in central [Gaza](#) on Saturday. In exchange, Israel will release 183 Palestinian prisoners, including 18 serving life sentences and 111 detained during the war. The announcement came nearly three hours late after Hamas accused Israel of delaying the humanitarian provisions of the agreement.

In a meeting with Ishiba Shigeru, **Japan’s** prime minister, **Donald Trump** suggested [levying tariffs](#) against Japan if its trade deficit

with America (valued at \$68bn last year) does not fall. Tariffs, he said, would be “reciprocal”. He also said Nippon Steel would invest in, rather than buy, US Steel. Its \$15bn bid for the American steelmaker was blocked by the Biden administration.

A separate judge temporarily blocked the Trump administration’s attempt to put 2,200 workers from the **US Agency for International Development** on leave. The order also pauses a plan to recall most of [the agency’s](#) overseas staff to America. Earlier the Trump administration reportedly told USAID workers to expect their numbers to drop from 10,000 to a few hundred.

Mr Trump revoked **Joe Biden’s security clearance**, preventing him from receiving daily intelligence briefings. The president also recently ended security clearance, as well as government protection, for [John Bolton](#), his former national security adviser. Mr Biden pulled Mr Trump’s security clearance after the attack on America’s Capitol on January 6th 2021.

More than 100,000 people across **Slovakia** protested against Robert Fico, the prime minister, for the second time in two weeks. The demonstrations followed the discovery that he had secretly visited Russia’s president, **Vladimir Putin**, in December. Mr Fico previously stopped military [aid to Ukraine](#) and criticised EU sanctions targeting Russia.

Venezuela’s foreign ministry said that Marco Rubio, America’s secretary of state, had gone “from mercenary of hate to aircraft thief”. On Thursday Mr Rubio supervised the seizure of a plane belonging to the Venezuelan government in the Dominican Republic. America said the plane violated sanctions against the regime of [Nicolás Maduro](#), Venezuela’s dictator. Last week Mr Trump sent an envoy to the country to press it to accept deported migrants.

Word of the week: pig-butcher, a scam in which fraudsters build trust with victims over weeks or months before luring them into fake investments and stealing their money. [Read the full story.](#)

The BJP set to finally win in Delhi



The [Bharatiya Janata Party](#) has ruled India from Delhi for more than a decade. Yet for all its national dominance, the party has not run the capital's local government for 27 years. That could change on Saturday when results from Delhi's assembly election, held earlier this week, are revealed. Early counting points to a BJP victory.

Should that trend hold, it would be a big setback to the ruling Aam Aadmi Party. The AAP, which emerged in 2012 out of a national anti-corruption movement, had insisted its welfare-focused governance would help it secure a third straight term.

Such confidence belied recent struggles. Awkwardly, the anti-graft party's second term running Delhi had been marred by a corruption scandal involving kickbacks over a liquor excise policy. The party has also stumbled in Punjab, a northern state, since taking power there in 2022. After a decade in power, perhaps the biggest hurdle for the AAP will be anti-incumbency, which runs strong in India.

Our interview with Syria's new president

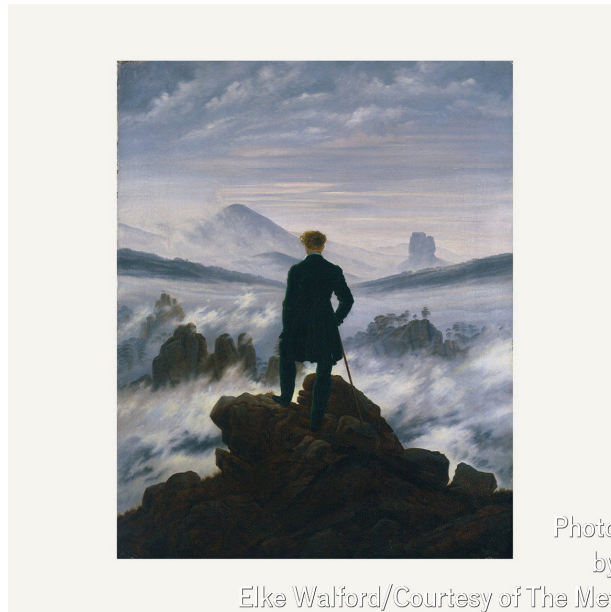


In his [first interview](#) since assuming the Syrian presidency on January 29th, Ahmed al-Sharaa told *The Economist* his vision for the country—and discussed the difficulties ahead. He wants to re-establish central authority over Syria's fractured states. But capacity is stretched thin, making it difficult to negotiate with the Kurds and curb the excesses of jihadists who hitherto formed his base.

Another big challenge will be the economy. Recovery can only come with help from abroad. He is eyeing up support from Saudi Arabia and America, whose sanctions, he said, pose “the gravest risk” to his plans.

It is not clear whether he will fulfil his promises on democracy. When speaking to *The Economist*, he palmed off the issue of *sharia* to one of his appointed bodies and was non-committal on the rights of women. He so far has Syria's goodwill, but Mr Sharaa still needs to prove that he is its best hope of a fresh start.

Caspar David Friedrich wanders to America



It's the painting that launched a thousand memes and an untold number of inspirational posters. Caspar David Friedrich's "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog", from 1818, depicts a man in a green tailcoat on a craggy mountain peak, looking over a valley cloaked in mist. A classic Romantic work, it considers the relationship between the self and the sublimity of nature. Friedrich, who died in 1840, could hardly have foreseen just how much his interest in the environment would resonate two centuries later.

"Wanderer" finally comes to America for "The Soul of Nature", a show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the country's first major exhibition of the artist. (Only five of his paintings reside [in museums] in America; most are in his native Germany.) Around 75 other works, from early drawings to Friedrich's characteristic paintings of vast landscapes, also feature. These are sometimes populated by one or two people facing away from the viewer, who similarly stands back in awe.

The secret to a good egg



Is there such a thing as a perfectly boiled egg? Italian scientists reckon they have cracked the code. The trick, revealed in a study published this week, is to move an egg between a pan of boiling water kept at 100°C and a nearby bowl of 30°C water every two minutes. Their findings are backed by nuclear magnetic resonance, high-resolution mass spectrometry imaging—and a taste test.

But the process, which needs repeating for 32 minutes, requires patience. It may also require a deeper wallet. In America the average price of a dozen eggs is now more than \$4, up from \$2.50 a year ago. That price is expected to rise a further 20% this year, thanks to the spread of H5N1 bird flu. Many are already feeling the pinch. This week Waffle House, a diner chain, added a 50-cent surcharge to each egg it sells. The stakes are high for a good breakfast.

Weekend profile: Corneille Nangaa, Congo's rebel leader



A career technocrat, [Corneille Nangaa](#) seems something of an imposter in the jungle fatigues of a Congolese [rebel leader](#). The 54-year-old heads the Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC), the political branch of M23—an armed group that, alongside Rwandan troops, captured the biggest city in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo last week. “We’re here to stay,” he announced from a plush hotel in Goma, as aid workers gathered up bodies decomposing in the streets. “We will continue the liberation march to Kinshasa”—Congo’s capital, some 1,500km west.

It’s an unlikely statement from the mouth of a trained economist. Mr Nangaa spent years working as an elections expert, including for the UN Development Programme, before becoming the head of Congo’s electoral commission in 2015. It was in this role that he first dirtied his hands in the ruthless world of Kinshasa politics. He declared the incumbent president, Felix Tshisekedi, the winner of Congo’s 2018 presidential election, for example, despite observers agreeing that Mr Tshisekedi had lost it. Shortly after, America imposed sanctions against Mr Nangaa for embezzlement.

But Mr Nangaa and Mr Tshisekedi fell out. Mr Nangaa was replaced at the elections commission in 2021, and two years later he was talking openly about the backroom deal that allegedly brought the president to power (which Mr Tshisekedi denies). Claiming that the president wanted him dead, he told one journalist at the time, “The song has always been the same: Nangaa knows too much.”

In December 2023, after a halfhearted attempt to run for president himself, Mr Nangaa sprung up in Nairobi, Kenya, where he announced the creation of the AFC alongside M23 leaders. He has since emerged as the figurehead of M23’s rebellion, which he calls a “revolution” against corruption and the ethnic discrimination against some communities, especially Congolese Tutsis. A military court in Kinshasa has sentenced him to death in absentia and his property has been seized.

Mr Nangaa is almost certainly not calling the shots inside M23. But sharp, polished, facetious and chatty, he serves to broaden the appeal of the group beyond its traditional base of Tutsis. Guerrilla life, so far, hasn’t changed him much: even in casual conversation he speaks French with an oratorical flourish. He may be waging a war, but he remains every bit a Kinshasa politician.

This week's crossword



Cryptic clues

- 1 down* King has work uncovered—not bad author! (6,6)
- 1 across* Bakery has a little Greek and Russian breakfast food (6)
- 2 across* Meal I regurgitate as form of communication (5)
- 3 across* City has some nylon donations (6)

Factual clues

- 1 down* Who wrote that book blurbs are “disgusting tripe” (6,6)
- 1 across* A British bakery chain (6)
- 2 across* Medium by which many American federal employees were recently offered “deferred resignation” (5)
- 3 across* Where those wishing to travel between Oxford and Cambridge by train must go via (6)

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:

Lungile Twalo, Johannesburg, South Africa

Héctor Romero, Santiago, Chile

Jeannette Duplessis, Calgary, Canada

They all gave the correct answers of A Knight's Tale, the opening, first mate, Joey Bishop and Stephen King. The theme is terms associated with chess: knight, opening, (check)mate, bishop and king.

The questions were:

Monday: Which Hollywood film, set in the Middle Ages, stars Heath Ledger as a character named William Thatcher and Paul Bettany as Geoffrey Chaucer?

Tuesday: Al-Fatiha, the first chapter of the Koran, has what literal meaning?

Wednesday: What is the common term for someone who is second-in-command of a ship?

Thursday: Which comedian was the fifth member of the Rat Pack, alongside Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Junior, Dean Martin, and Peter Lawford?

Friday: Which famous writer has also used the pen name Richard Bachman?

Pig-butchering

A scam in which fraudsters build trust with victims over weeks or months before luring them into fake investments and stealing their money.

Read the full story.

**Anything one man can imagine, other men
can make real.**

Jules Verne