

Catch up: France's government collapses; South Korean defence minister resigns



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.

Kim Yong-hyun, **South Korea's** defence minister, resigned over his role in the **short-lived coup attempt** by Yoon Suk Yeol, the president. Mr Kim was reportedly an important figure behind Mr Yoon's declaration of martial law, which the country's opposition has called an "act of treason". On Thursday lawmakers will discuss a motion to impeach the president.

The value of **bitcoin** surged above \$100,000 for the first time. Investors have piled into the **cryptocurrency** since Donald Trump's election, driving up its price by more than 40%. The president-elect has vowed to make America the "the bitcoin superpower of the

world”. On Wednesday he picked Paul Atkins, a crypto champion, to run the Securities and Exchange Commission, America’s main market regulator.

Mexican authorities said they had seized more than a tonne of **fentanyl** this week, their biggest-ever haul of synthetic [opioids](#). Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico’s president, is cracking down on illegal drugs ahead of Mr Trump’s inauguration as America’s president. He has threatened to impose a 25% tariff on goods from Mexico until it stops drugs and irregular migrants from crossing the border.

Mr Trump’s lawyers argued that his [election-interference case](#) in **Georgia** should be dismissed, insisting that sitting presidents are immune from criminal prosecution. The case is already on hold while an appeals court weighs whether the prosecutor who brought the charges should be removed for alleged impropriety. The two federal indictments against the president-elect have [been dropped](#).

Police are hunting a gunman who killed **Brian Thompson**, the boss of UnitedHealthcare, an American health insurer, in Midtown Manhattan. He was shot in the chest and leg outside a hotel. Investigators described it as “a brazen, targeted attack” and said the gunman was last spotted in Central Park. [UnitedHealth Group](#), UnitedHealthcare’s parent company, is the largest private health insurer in America.

The **popemobile** is getting an upgrade. Mercedes-Benz, which has been making cars for the pontiff for nearly a century, presented the latest model to [Pope Francis](#). The open-top SUV is fully electric and features a heated seat and hand rail to keep the 87-year-old pope comfortable while greeting crowds. Francis generally avoids bulletproof popemobiles; Mercedes did not comment on this iteration’s security features.

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