

The world in brief, June 20th 2024



America reportedly plans to halt deliveries of [air-defence interceptors](#) to other allies in order to rush more of the munitions to **Ukraine**. The country is under heavy bombardment by Russia, which is targeting its power stations. Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, has said that Ukraine needs at least seven more Patriot systems in order to defend against the Russian attacks. Earlier on Thursday, Romania announced it would send one such system to its neighbour.

Mark Rutte, the outgoing prime minister of the Netherlands, was confirmed as the next secretary-general of **NATO** after winning the endorsement of all the alliance's members. Klaus Iohannis, the president of Romania and Mr Rutte's sole competitor for the position, withdrew his candidacy. Mr Rutte will succeed [Jens Stoltenberg](#) in the role by October 2nd.

The **Israel Defence Forces** bombed several refugee camps in the [Gaza Strip](#) and moved further into **Rafah**, according to reports. Earlier Daniel Hagari, an IDF spokesperson, appeared to cast doubt on Binyamin Netanyahu's strategy in Gaza, saying that "anyone

who thinks we can eliminate Hamas is wrong”. The IDF later clarified that Mr Hagari was referring to Hamas as an ideology—not to its military capabilities.

The **European Union** has announced that it will impose sanctions on [Russia’s natural gas sector](#) for the first time. The measures forbid Russian tankers from using the bloc’s ports to transfer liquefied natural gas to smaller vessels that can then transport the fuel to other countries. The sanctions are designed to stymie Russia’s gas exporters, which funnel valuable funds towards the Kremlin.

Switzerland’s central bank cut its main interest rate from 1.5% to 1.25%. The bank previously pared its key rate in March, making it the first major central bank to loosen monetary policy after a [prolonged period of high inflation](#). The decision comes two weeks after the European Central Bank cut rates for the first time since 2019.

America’s **Supreme Court** upheld a Trump-era **tax law** on foreign investments. A couple from Washington state brought the challenge, arguing that a one-off tax on their gains from an overseas investment was unconstitutional. Some reckoned the court’s decision might offer insight into whether [wealth taxes](#), endorsed by President Joe Biden’s administration, were constitutional. The justices declined to weigh in on [that debate](#).

Opinion polls have sometimes been badly wrong in **Britain**. The Conservatives must hope that’s true of the latest forecast from Savanta, a polling firm, which predicted that the Labour Party could win a staggering 516 out of 632 in the general election on July 4th. The poll also suggests that the Conservative prime minister, [Rishi Sunak](#), could be ousted from his own constituency. *The Economist’s* [forecast](#) gives the Tories less than a 1% chance of winning a majority.

Figure of the day: 11,000, the number of containers filled with arms that North Korea has shipped to Russia since September, according to American officials. [Read the full story.](#)

In the run-up to America's presidential election, we've launched The US in brief—a daily update to help you keep on top of the political stories that matter. Sign up here to receive it as a newsletter, each weekday, in your inbox.

Malaysia and China strengthen ties



On Thursday Li Qiang, China's prime minister, wraps up a three-day visit to Malaysia. The countries are marking the 50th anniversary of their establishing diplomatic relations. Today [ties between them](#) are strong. On Wednesday Mr Li met Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's prime minister, who earlier this week described Xi Jinping, China's ruler, as an "outstanding leader". Mr Anwar also announced that Malaysia would like to join the BRICS, a bloc of ten economies that includes China.

Investment is why Malaysia wants to be close. China is its largest trading partner. On Wednesday China agreed to buy Malaysia's [fresh durian](#), a pungent fruit adored by Chinese consumers. China wants other things, too, including influence in South-East Asia. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, China has ploughed money into Malaysian infrastructure. Mr Li visited the East Coast Rail Link, a China-funded venture, during his trip. Such projects are, however, becoming less popular. Malaysia increasingly courts Chinese financing for new priorities, such as e-commerce.

No rate cuts before Britain's election



Rate-setters at the Bank of England met on Thursday, a day after the welcome news that the headline annual inflation rate in Britain had returned to its 2% target. Nonetheless, the majority of the Monetary Policy Committee did not vote for a cut in the bank's benchmark interest rate, which remains at 5.25%.

The reason for this is that much of the decline in headline inflation stems from a sharp decline in energy prices. That probably won't happen again. Other gauges of inflationary pressure are falling more slowly. Annual core inflation—which excludes volatile food and energy prices—remains well above target, at 3.5%. Wage growth and services inflation, which the MPC watches closely, are also high.

Still, cuts should be on the way soon. Unemployment is up to 4.4%, a post-pandemic high, and labour-market surveys suggest further weakening is ahead.

Colombia attempts to reform



Thursday marks the end of a [legislative session](#) in Colombia, after which any bills that have not progressed are thrown out. The country's first left-wing government, which came to power in August 2022, is racing to pass reforms intended to reduce inequality in one of the world's most unequal countries.

On Friday the lower house approved a pension bill, the biggest change to Colombia's social-security system since 1993. It will expand pension coverage to almost everyone of retirement age, from a quarter of them now. On June 11th legislators began the long process of debating a labour-reform bill; they have since approved the majority of its articles.

But it isn't all smooth sailing. The pension reform could face opposition in court. A new education law which seeks to improve access to schools and universities looks sunk. It enraged the largest teachers' union, which said a proposed change would have funnelled public money to private schools.

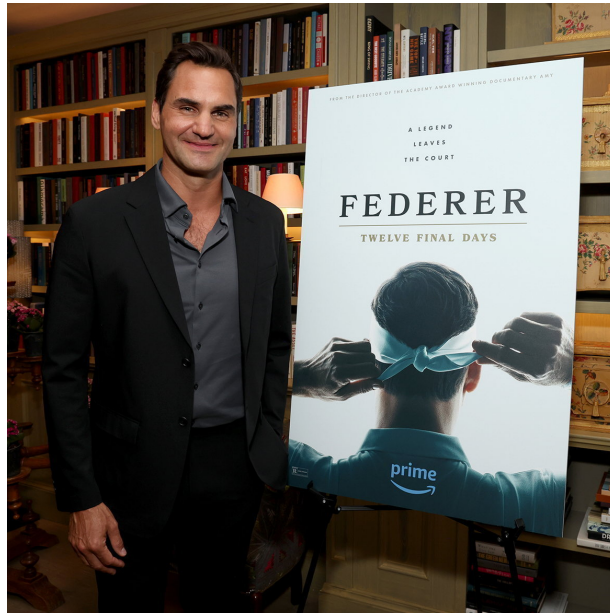
Solar season



On Thursday the northern hemisphere will enjoy its summer solstice, the moment in the year when it can expect most sunlight. Since the vast majority of the world's solar power capacity is in the northern hemisphere—almost half of it in China—this makes it, in principle, the technology's best week of the year.

To mark this midsummer abundance *The Economist* is this week looking at all manner of matters solar. An essay makes the case that the technology's exponential rise is far from over. A piece in the [Middle East and Africa section](#) considers the dramatic effects the technology is having in easing South Africa's brownouts. In the [Business section](#) we look at the troubled state of the Chinese solar industry, which has produced a booming technology without booming profits. And elsewhere we contemplate the way the sun has inspired artistic recognition from the stone age on.

Revisiting Federer's swansong



If you were to make a documentary about [Roger Federer](#), you might start at the beginning, showing his days as a ball boy, years as a junior champion and almost two decades competing at the highest echelons of tennis. You might look at how he developed his signature, graceful style, or his sweeping one-handed backhand.

Yet “Federer: Twelve Final Days”, released on Prime Video on Thursday, takes a different approach. The film focuses on the period up to and including Mr Federer’s last-ever game of high-level tennis at the Laver Cup in 2022. It takes his brilliance as given and does not analyse his technique; instead, the prospect of retirement prompts Mr Federer to reflect on the rewards and challenges of a life lived for sport. Mr Federer won plenty of silverware—including 20 grand slams—during his career. But the documentary suggests that his bond with Rafael Nadal, his longtime rival on the court, was as cherished a prize.

Daily quiz



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: Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, Marlon and Michael were the members of which musical group?

Wednesday: Which central American country was the first in the world to adopt bitcoin as legal tender?

11,000

The number of containers filled with arms that North Korea has shipped to Russia since September, according to American officials. Read the full story.

**For every man who lives without freedom,
the rest of us must face the guilt.**

Lillian Helman