

Catch up: Pentagon shake-up; Hamas releases hostages



Donald Trump fired General Charles “CQ” Brown as chairman of the joint chiefs of staff and said he would replace people in five other senior positions, in an unprecedented shake-up of the Pentagon. Mr Trump is cracking down on those he blames for [pushing diversity, equity and inclusion policies](#). The Pentagon [was already braced for sweeping cuts](#) to its budget and staff.

Hamas released six hostages in the final part of the first phase of its ceasefire agreement with Israel. In return Israel is expected to free 602 [Palestinian prisoners](#). Israel’s army confirmed that a body repatriated on Friday was that of Shiri Bibas, another of those abducted on October 7th. The militant group had failed to return her remains on Thursday with those of her two young children.

The **Vatican** said that **Pope Francis** was in critical condition, after suffering a long asthma-like respiratory crisis on Saturday morning. He remains “alert”, but he is “in more pain” than in previous days. Francis was admitted to hospital on February 14th. The 88-year-old

pontiff has pneumonia in both lungs, one of which was partly removed by surgeons when he was young.

Sergei Ryabkov, **Russia's** deputy foreign minister, said American and Russian officials would meet again within a fortnight to discuss ending the war in **Ukraine**. A first meeting took place—without Ukraine or its European allies—in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday. On Friday Donald Trump said Ukraine's president, [Volodymyr Zelensky](#), and Russia's, Vladimir Putin, should “get together” to end the war. Mr Trump has been fiercely critical of Mr Zelensky in recent days, while making friendly overtures towards Mr Putin.

New Zealand said that the **Chinese navy** had fired live rounds in international waters near the country, having conducted a similar drill in the sea between New Zealand and Australia on Friday. Three Chinese naval vessels have been stationed near Australia's shores since last week. New Zealand's prime minister, Christopher Luxon, said that his country was “shadowing and tracking” the fleet.

The **Rapid Support Forces**, a Sudanese paramilitary group that has been [fighting the national army](#) for nearly two years, said it would on Saturday sign a charter with its allies to establish a government in territories under its control. The rebel government will not rule in Khartoum, Sudan's capital. The Sudanese Armed Forces are on the [brink of retaking the city](#) from the RSF.

In his annual letter to shareholders in Berkshire Hathaway, **Warren Buffett** defended the size of the investment firm's cash and its equivalents: \$334.2bn at the end of 2024, after cutting back on equities. Shareholders should “rest assured” that Berkshire would “never” prefer cash to “good businesses”. Operating profits jumped by 71% in the fourth quarter, to \$14.5bn, buoyed partly by higher profits from insurance underwriting.

Word of the week: *guang gun*, a Chinese term meaning “bare branches”, used to describe unmarried men who are unable to continue their family line. [Read the full story.](#)

What to watch in Germany's election



Two outcomes of Sunday's parliamentary election in Germany seem certain. One is that the centre-right Christian Democratic opposition, led by [Friedrich Merz](#), will win. That will clear the way for Mr Merz to take over from Olaf Scholz as chancellor. The second is that the hard-right Alternative for Germany will chalk up its best-ever result: perhaps 20% or more.

Yet two big uncertainties loom. One is whether Mr Merz will be able to form a two-party coalition, probably with Mr Scholz's Social Democrats, or if he will be [forced into another awkward throuple](#) of the sort that collapsed last November. The second is whether the new government will be able to relax Germany's constitutional "debt brake" to boost defence spending and investment. That will be hard if opponents secure a one-third blocking minority in the Bundestag. In both cases, the answer will depend on the performance of three smaller parties. Mr Merz will be watching the minnows closely.

Could Pope Francis resign?



Pope Francis remains in critical condition, after suffering a long asthma-like respiratory crisis on Saturday morning. The Vatican said he was “in more pain” than in previous days, and will not appear in public to lead Sunday prayer for the second consecutive week. He was admitted to hospital on February 14th. The 88-year-old pontiff has pneumonia in both lungs, one of which was partly removed by surgeons when he was young.

If the pontiff is discharged, it is not clear whether he will be able to cope with the workload of a pope. This year he will have a busier schedule than usual: 2025 is a jubilee year for the Roman Catholic church. More than 30m pilgrims are expected at the Vatican. Gianfranco Ravasi, an Italian cardinal, has aired the possibility of a resignation like that of the pope’s predecessor, Benedict XVI. Francis will want to see out the jubilee. But it may prove too demanding.

Humanitarian crises multiply across Colombia



Violence is tearing across Colombia as armed groups fight for control of territory with coca leaf and gold. In the southern region of Putumayo, for instance, the Border Command, an armed group, has been coercing residents in an attempt to sway Sunday's election of a new governor. In a bid to keep control, the government has sealed the region's borders with Ecuador and Peru for 24 hours.

In Chocó, in the north-west, the National Liberation Army (ELN), a guerrilla group, imposed an armed lockdown on thousands of people on Tuesday. The ELN's war against rival rebels in [Catatumbo](#), close to the border with Venezuela, has displaced more than 50,000 people. The simultaneous crises have blindsided the government, which has so far not come up with a coherent security policy. When Gustavo Petro, the left-wing president, took office in 2022, he promised "[total peace](#)". Many Colombians are instead facing calamity once again.

The rise of American soccer



Major League Soccer begins its 30th season this weekend. The mood in America's premier football competition is ebullient. Football has been around there for decades: such greats of the game as Pelé, Johan Cruyff and Franz Beckenbauer played for American clubs in the 1970s. But the MLS is now firmly established. Commercial income has risen thanks to a broadcasting deal with Apple, while in-game attendances also continue to grow.

Among the forces behind these trends was the arrival of Lionel Messi at Inter Miami in 2023. The 37-year-old Argentine playmaker will probably stay in the MLS until at least the end of the upcoming season. In 2026, when America co-hosts the World Cup with Canada and Mexico, his national team will attempt to defend the trophy they won in Qatar in 2022; three MLS grounds will stage matches. When America last hosted a World Cup in 1994, it did not yet have its own place in the football world. It does now.

Tapping fog in the urban desert



In even the driest places there is moisture in the air. Fog-harvesting can collect it. The technology is low-cost and low-maintenance: mesh panels suspended in the air collect droplets, which drip into guttering. Although fog-harvesting was pioneered in the 1980s, attempts to deploy it beyond rural settings have so far been limited.

Research published in *Frontiers in Environmental Science* calculates fog-harvesting potential in Alto Hospicio, in Chile's Atacama Desert. The city has nearly tripled in two decades. Demand for water has risen as a result. Climate change will make matters worse. Many families in Alto Hospicio are unconnected to the municipal water supply. Around 17,000 square metres of fog-harvesting mesh could meet the water demand of these urban slums.

Fog-harvesting will not wash away the world's water woes alone: it is seasonal and requires the right geography. But it could help quench the thirst of arid areas as urban sprawl and rainfall patterns fluctuate into the future.

Weekly crossword



We now publish an interactive edition of our crossword, allowing you to enter and check the answers, and see explanations, instantly. Try it [here](#). Or, if you prefer to do things the old-fashioned way, use the grid below.

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 Crazy: a hostile man has an enigmatic smile (3,4,4)

1 across Thanks, I want endless state (6)

2 across Impossible to get right country (6)

3 across Any fool remembers Irvine starts Californian continent (6)

Factual clues

1 down What most of the Louvre's visitors are there to see (3,4,4)

1 across Disputed island state (6)

2 across One of the countries which saw a large increase in the price of food in January (6)

3 across The continent that's home to "Generation Hustle" (6)

Email all four answers, along with your home city and country, by 9am GMT on Monday to crossword@economist.com. We will pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners in next week's edition. And please send any thoughts you may have about the new interactive version to the same address.

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:

David Harris, Powell River, Canada

Anand Mahajan, Mumbai, India

Jan van der Burg, Delft, The Netherlands

They all gave the correct answers of James Madison, “Africa” (by Toto), “Iron Man”, Lieutenant, and Stanley Kramer.

The theme is films for which Meryl Streep received an Oscar nomination: “The Bridges of Madison County”, “Out of Africa”, “The Iron Lady”, “The French Lieutenant’s Woman” and “Kramer vs Kramer”.

The questions were:

Monday: Which future US President wrote the Federalist Papers, along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay?

Tuesday: Which 1980s soft rock hit features the line “Sure as Kilimanjaro rises like Olympus above the Serengeti”?

Wednesday: Tony Stark is the real name of which Marvel super hero?

Thursday: What rank did Columbo, played by Peter Falk, hold in the Los Angeles police force?

Friday: “The Defiant Ones” and “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”, two of the earliest Hollywood movies to tackle racial issues, were directed by which person?

Art is anything you can get away with.

Andy Warhol