

Catch up: Israel strikes central Beirut; India's state elections



Gaza's health ministry said that at least 120 people had been killed by **Israeli strikes** since Thursday. Hamas said an [Israeli hostage](#) was among the casualties; Israel's military said it was "unable to confirm or deny" that claim. Meanwhile an Israeli airstrike hit a residential block in central [Beirut](#). **Lebanese** officials said at least 15 people were killed and 63 wounded.

Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party edged towards winning state elections in Maharashtra, **India's** richest state. Congress, the opposition party, won Jharkhand, a mineral-rich state in eastern India, according to the election commission. The vote is a test of Mr Modi's clout after his party lost its majority in a general election [in June](#).

The Alliance of Small Island States pulled out of negotiations at **COP29**, saying that they had not "been heard". [Talks](#)—which have already overrun—appear to be on the verge of collapse. On Friday a draft text that suggested giving developing countries \$250bn per year by 2035 was criticised by negotiators from some developing

countries. Countries also disagree over how to make the transition from fossil fuels.

Donald Trump chose **Scott Bessent** to lead the treasury department. The hedge-fund manager [supports tariffs](#), at least as a negotiating tool, and yet investors regarded him as a safe pair of hands considering the more extreme candidates in contention. Mr Bessent also wants to cut taxes and cancel Joe Biden's green-energy subsidies. Unlike the president-elect, he has warned about yawning government debt.

Lloyd Austin, America's secretary of defence, said that North Korean troops may enter combat in Ukraine "soon". About 10,000 are believed to be in Kursk, a Russian border region. Meanwhile President Vladimir Putin said that Russia would carry out more tests of a new intermediate-range hypersonic missile known as [Oreshnik](#), which Russia used against the Ukrainian city of Dnipro on November 21st.

At least 33 people were killed and 25 injured in clashes between Shia and Sunni Muslims in **Kurram**, a district in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province northwestern **Pakistan**. Armed men torched shops and houses, according to local officials. On Thursday a gunman killed 42 Shias in Kurram. Sectarian clashes between Shias and Sunnis, the latter a majority in Pakistan, have killed dozens in recent months.

A team of **archaeologists** discovered a 4,000-year-old network of canals in **Belize**. They used drones and Google Earth to collect data from the largest inland wetland in the country. The network was probably built by predecessors of the [Maya](#), who later used by them. The canals were paired with holding ponds, which were used to catch freshwater species.

Word of the week: DOGE, previously a meme. Now Elon Musk's "Department of Government Efficiency", a new advisory body

tasked with cutting red tape and wasteful spending in America.

[Read the full story.](#)

Nationalism shakes Romania's politics



The first round of Romania's presidential election takes place on Sunday. The vote will decide which two candidates go to a run-off on December 8th. Polls point to a match-up between Marcel Ciolacu, the centre-left prime minister, and George Simion, the leader of the [Alliance for the Unity of Romanians](#), a nationalist party. Mr Simion would be the first hard-right candidate to reach a run-off in a presidential election since 2000.

Founded in 2019, Mr Simion's party has grown popular by attacking the government's economic record—Romania has one of the highest inflation rates in the EU—and arguing that European elites have exploited the country for cheap labour. The AUR is not openly pro-Russian, but Ukraine sees Mr Simion as a nationalist who wants to return Romania to its pre-1940 borders. Mr Ciolacu would probably beat Mr Simion in the final round. But with parliamentary elections looming, the AUR will have other chances to capitalise on its popularity.

A centrist battle in Uruguay



On Sunday Uruguayans vote in the presidential run-off. It pits Álvaro Delgado, the former chief of staff to the outgoing centre-right president, against Yamandú Orsi of the Broad Front, a left-wing party. The race is tight. Polls give Mr Orsi a lead of just a percentage point or two.

In contrast to the rest of the region, where radical figures such as Javier Milei in Argentina and Gustavo Petro in Colombia have won elections, both candidates are relatively centrist. Both have stressed their commitment to preserving [Uruguay's stable macroeconomic environment](#). Mr Orsi promises reform but adds that it will be “safe change”, nothing radical.

In a volatile region, Uruguay's stability has made the country an attractive destination for investors and wealthy people. Yet it faces serious problems, from stubbornly high school-dropout rates to violent crime, which successive governments have failed to tackle. A little radicalism—of a centrist variety—might be a good idea.

Taiwan strengthens European ties



Lin Chia-lung, Taiwan's foreign minister, wraps up a trip to Europe on Sunday. This week Mr Lin discussed semiconductors, an important Taiwanese export, with MPs and tech executives in Belgium. Next he led a delegation of Taiwanese defence-company bosses to Lithuania. They agreed to collaborate with Lithuanian firms on making drones.

Taiwan is trying to counter [China's efforts to isolate](#) the island by increasing co-operation with European democracies. Just 12 countries globally have formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Lithuania is not one of them, but it has recently strengthened relations. In 2021 it allowed Taiwan to set up a representative office in Vilnius, its capital.

But Gintautas Paluckas, Lithuania's incoming prime minister, has called that decision a "grave diplomatic mistake" and wants to restore full diplomatic ties with China. Taiwan will hope that its own relations with Lithuania can remain strong. If China tries to conquer the island, [drones](#) will be crucial to its defence.

Have you heard the one about the tickled monkey?



Many animals, including squirrel monkeys, macaques and chimpanzees, [laugh](#). However, they do so only when tickling one another. Humans, by contrast, chuckle at other things like jokes and sarcasm. Curious about whether the sound of laughter changes depending on what triggers it, Roza Kamiloglu of the University of Amsterdam studied it in different situations.

Dr Kamiloglu trained a machine-learning system on several recordings and tested whether it could distinguish between laughter triggered by various things. The system identified tickle-induced laughter as uniquely distinct, while differences in other types were too subtle to differentiate.

Writing in *Biology Letters*, Dr Kamiloglu suggests that the uniqueness of tickle laughter points to its ancient origins, which probably evolved early in primates. Other forms of laughter, tied to more complex triggers like irony, parody, and slapstick, apparently developed millions of years later as the human brain grew more

sophisticated. But he who laughs last, it would seem, laughs longest.

Cricket's high-stakes auction



On Sunday cricket coaches and analysts worldwide will travel to Saudi Arabia to attend a player auction for the 2025 [Indian Premier League](#), the world's most lucrative Twenty20 tournament. Its financial muscle is such that it will disrupt matches everywhere. Australia's assistant coach, Daniel Vettori, for instance, will skip his team's Test match against India, one of cricket's headline acts. (He is the head coach of the Sunrisers Hyderabad franchise, a team which plays in the IPL.)

This year's auction is particularly important. Every three years, the IPL resets the playing-field by requiring teams to redraft most of their squads. Franchises can keep up to six players, but holding onto fewer gives them more spending power at the auction. Given the number of stars available, it is likely a team will break the existing record contract of 24.75 crore (\$3m). Wicket-keeper and batsman Rishabh Pant and bowler Arshdeep Singh will probably fetch the most.

Weekly crossword



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 Oily, succulent merguez partly eaten by German politician (9,4)

1 across Can ref rebuild team? (6)

2 across Rank wind exits insides (5)

3 across City finds zero upside reinvesting in clearing house initially (6)

Factual clues

1 down Leader of the Christian Democrats (9, 4)

1 across Country that has recently been training Ukrainian troops (6)

2 across A weighted average of prices, say (5)

3 across Largest city in Switzerland (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.

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:

Iskriyana Vasileva, Berlin, Germany

Stan Seltzer, Trumansburg, New York

Giedrius Kazakevicius, Vilnius, Lithuania

They all gave the correct answers of: "The Master and Margarita", The Duke of Edinburgh, "The Lovely Bones", "Happy" and Sealed With a Loving Kiss. The theme is songs by Stevie Wonder: "Master Blaster (Jammin')", "Sir Duke", "Isn't She Lovely", "Happy Birthday" and "Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I'm Yours".

The questions were:

Monday: Mikhail Bulgakov is best known for which novel, oft cited as a 20th century classic?

Tuesday: What title is most associated with Prince Philip, the late husband of Queen Elizabeth II?

Wednesday: Which novel by Alice Sebold is narrated by a 14-year-old girl who is murdered in the first chapter?

Thursday: Which hit song by Pharrell Williams came from the soundtrack of the film “Despicable Me 2”?

Friday: For what words does the acronym SWALK stand?

DOGE

Previously a meme. Now Elon Musk's "Department of Government Efficiency", a new advisory body tasked with cutting red tape and wasteful spending in America.

Read the full story.

Train hard, fight easy.

Alexander Suvorov