

The world in brief

Catch up quickly on the global stories that matter



Photograph: Reuters

America evacuated some personnel from its military bases in the Middle East as a precaution against a possible retaliatory attack by **Iran**. Britain has also reportedly withdrawn troops. Iran remains gripped by [nationwide anti-government protests](#). Thousands are feared dead, although state-imposed internet blackouts have hidden the extent of demonstrations and authorities' vengeance. Donald Trump threatened "very strong action" following reports that Iran will execute protesters.

The foreign ministers of **Greenland** and **Denmark** visited the White House amid escalating [American threats to seize the territory](#). Ahead of their meeting with J.D. Vance, America's vice-president, and Marco Rubio, the country's secretary of state, Mr Trump insisted that America "needs" Greenland. Denmark announced that it would send more aircraft, ships, and soldiers to the semi-autonomous Arctic territory.

American retail sales rose by 0.6% year-on-year in November, considerably more than expected. The data suggest America's fourth-quarter economic growth was decent, despite rising fears about [a flagging job market](#) and Mr Trump's disruptive trade

policy. Specialty shops, petrol stations and hardware stores all saw healthy sales growth of more than 1%.

China's trade surplus reached a record high of **\$1.2trn** in 2025 according to data from its customs agency. Exports grew by 5.5% from 2024 despite Mr Trump's aggressive tariff policy choking off demand from America. Instead, China more than made up for the loss in other markets. This has been controversial, however; EU officials [have complained](#) about a flood of cheap imports.

Takaichi Sanae, **Japan's** prime minister, will call a snap general election next week. Ms Takaichi hopes to capitalise on her high approval rating to secure a stronger mandate for her Liberal Democratic Party, which rules as a minority government. She champions a sweeping [economic stimulus programme](#). The election is expected to be held in February.

The owner of **Saks**, a glitzy Manhattan department store, filed for **bankruptcy protection** as it struggles under a \$2bn debt burden. Saks Global took on the debt when it bought Neiman Marcus, a chain of department stores, in 2024, but the new conglomerate suffered from faltering sales. The firm said it has secured a \$1.75bn lifeline as it fights to survive.

BP said it will write down some of its **green-energy investments** by between \$4bn and \$5bn in its earnings next month. The British multinational has [been moving away](#) from renewables since 2023, abandoning climate targets and focusing instead on its core oil-and-gas business. The firm claims the impairment will not affect its profit figures.

Figure of the day: 4,500, the number of reports of suspected cult activity logged in France in 2024, more than double the level recorded in 2015. [Read the full story.](#)



Photograph: Reuters

Crisis talks on Greenland at the White House

It is hard to imagine a compromise between Donald Trump's desire to [buy or seize](#) Greenland from Denmark and the insistence of Mette Frederiksen, Denmark's prime minister, that he cannot have it. But on Wednesday, the Danish and Greenlandic foreign ministers will travel to Washington, DC to try to work one out. Lars Lokke Rasmussen of Denmark and Vivian Motzfeldt of Greenland are to meet with J.D. Vance, America's vice-president, and Marco Rubio, its secretary of state, at the White House.

In a joint appearance on Tuesday, Ms Frederiksen and Greenland's prime minister reiterated that the island is not for sale. Mr Vance has echoed Mr Trump's claims that Denmark underinvests in the Arctic territory and that Greenland faces threats from Russia and China. But Denmark and its European allies have offered to strengthen its security, and to let America deploy whatever forces it wants. Perhaps Mr Rubio may help facilitate such a [deal](#).



Photograph: AP

Hong Kong's rubber-stamp parliament convenes

Many fresh faces were on view when Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo) convened on Wednesday. The body, which enacts and amends the territory's laws, has a new president—Starry Lee, an experienced pro-Beijing lawmaker—and a crop of young politicians keen to make their mark. (Around a third of the previous council, mostly veteran bigwigs, bowed out at an election in December.)

First on the legislative agenda is the recovery effort from a fire at a public-housing estate in November, which killed 161 people. The authorities swiftly made arrests, but [public anger is still smouldering](#). Another issue is the poor turnout in December's poll—the second-lowest on record—seemingly in protest against the government's handling of the catastrophe. Many Hong Kongers remain sceptical that LegCo is anything more than a rubber stamp; since 2021 participation in the council has been restricted to “patriots” aligned with the Chinese Communist Party. The lawmakers may be new, but the problems they face will linger.



Photograph: Getty Images

Carnage in Iran

The death toll keeps climbing. On Tuesday morning an Iranian human-rights group said that more than 600 people had been killed in the protests sweeping the country. Hours later Reuters quoted an unnamed Iranian official who put the number at 2,000. The internet [remains disabled](#) in Iran, but the stories that have leaked out suggest that the real number of fatalities is higher still.

Donald Trump has urged Iranians to keep protesting: “I have cancelled all meetings with Iranian Officials until the senseless killing of protesters STOPS,” he wrote on Tuesday. “HELP IS ON ITS WAY.” That would seem to rebuff an overture from Abbas Araghchi, the Iranian foreign minister, who last week proposed talks with America. What Mr Trump means by “help” remains unclear, though. He met advisers on Tuesday to discuss [his options](#), both military and non-military, but does not seem to have made a decision.



Photograph: Getty Images

Grok faces a global crackdown

“If X cannot control Grok, we will,” Sir Keir Starmer declared to his MPs on Monday. Britain’s prime minister has threatened tougher regulation on X (Elon Musk’s social-media platform) for allowing users to share non-consensual **sexualised images** generated by Grok (Mr Musk’s AI chatbot). In recent weeks the bot has created and spread deepfake bikini pics as well as sexualised images of children.

Such content has spurred action across the world. On Monday Malaysia and Indonesia became the first countries to temporarily ban Grok. Meanwhile the European Commission ordered X to retain all documents relating to Grok so the bloc can evaluate its compliance with EU rules. But the world’s richest man has so far shown little interest in co-operating. “Why is the UK government so fascist?” he asked over the weekend. The post, on X, received more than 15m views.



Photograph: Alamy

Two football matches to savour

Africa's biennial [football](#) competition, the Africa Cup of Nations, is reaching its climax. The semi-finals take place on Wednesday, and the organisers couldn't have hoped for juicier matches. In the first, seven-time winners Egypt take on Senegal, who have conceded just two goals in five matches so far this tournament. The match will be a face-off between Africa's two most celebrated players, Egypt's Mohamed Salah, of Liverpool, and his former Merseyside teammate, Sadio Mané.

On the other side of the draw, Morocco, this year's host and the favourite to win the tournament, play Nigeria. In 2022 Morocco was the first African country to reach a World Cup semi-final. They have been similarly dazzling during this tournament, with Real Madrid's forward, Brahim Diaz, scoring in every match so far. Nigeria had been unimpressive before AFCON. But their forward line of Victor Osimhen, Ademola Lookman and Akor Adams has sparkled at the tournament. Two [thrilling matches](#) await.

Africa Cup of Nations, 2025-26

Qualified Semi-finalists

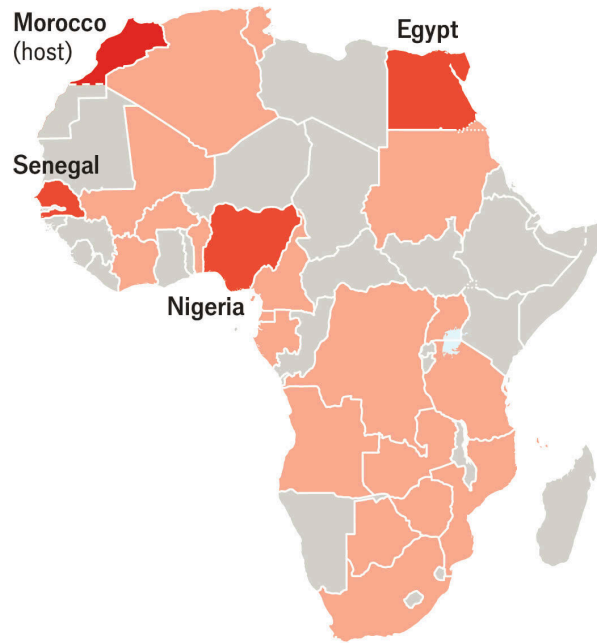




Illustration: The Economist

Quiz

We will serve you a new question each weekday. On Friday your challenge is to give us all five answers and tell us the theme. Email your responses (and your home city and country) by 1700 GMT on Friday to [\[email protected\]](#). We'll pick three winners at random and crown them on Saturday.

Wednesday: What form of radiation has a wavelength between 400 and 700 nanometres?

Tuesday: Which religious text begins “Our father, who art in heaven”?

*One of the deep secrets of life is
that all that is really worth doing
is what we do for others.*

Lewis Carroll