

## Catch up: Barnier resigns; Syrian rebels capture Hama



**Michel Barnier** resigned as France’s prime minister a day after parliament [toppled his minority government](#) in a vote of no-confidence sparked by a budget debacle. **Emmanuel Macron** has asked Mr Barnier to stay on until he [finds a successor](#) potentially able to rein in the fractured National Assembly. The president will address the nation on Thursday evening.

**Syrian rebels** captured **Hama**, a city strategically located between Aleppo, Syria’s second-largest city, and the capital, Damascus. After five days of fighting around the city, the Islamist militants entered from the east. The Syrian army confirmed that it had retreated, cementing the second major victory for the insurgents since the start of their [lightning advance](#) across the country’s northwest last week.

Police are [hunting a gunman](#) who killed **Brian Thompson**, the boss of UnitedHealthcare, an American health insurer, in Midtown Manhattan. The words “deny”, “defend” and “depose”—possible references to America’s insurance industry—were reportedly

written on bullet casings found at the scene and are being investigated. [UnitedHealth Group](#), UnitedHealthcare's parent company, is the country's largest private health insurer.

**Kenya's** central bank aggressively cut its benchmark interest rate by 75 basis points, to 11.25%. The larger-than-expected loosening reflects a shifting focus from fighting inflation—which stood at 2.8% in November, at the lower end of the bank's target range—to spurring [economic activity](#). Kenya's annual GDP grew by 4.8% in the first half of 2024, compared with 5.5% last year.

Kim Yong-hyun, **South Korea's** defence minister, resigned over his role in the short-lived [declaration of martial law](#) by Yoon Suk Yeol, the president. The opposition is seeking to impeach Mr Yoon. The police opened an investigation into the role of the president and three other officials (including Mr Kim) in the alleged coup.

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.

**Muhammad** became [Britain's most popular name](#) for boys, given to 4,661 babies in 2023, according to figures from the Office for National Statistics. Noah dropped to second place. For girls, Olivia was the most popular name for an eighth year running. Pop culture remained a source of inspiration for parents, giving Britain a growing number of Billies, Lanas, Mileys, Rihannas, Kendricks and Eltons.

**Figure of the day:** 190, the number of lawmakers who barricaded themselves inside South Korea's parliament, after the president, Yoon Sun Yeol, declared martial law. [Read the full story](#).

# A historic trade deal for the EU in South America?



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, has been struggling. It has high external tariffs and other barriers to trade within the union. Yet it may be about to land a big win.

At the last minute Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, said she would also attend the summit. That suggests that the leaders may finalise a trade deal—25 years in the making—between Mercosur and the European Union.

It could still fall through, but clinching a deal would reinvigorate Mercosur, which had been fraying as Uruguay and Argentina, keen to trade more with the world, pushed for the flexibility to negotiate their own independent deals with other countries. In Europe, however, any deal will face renewed protests, especially by angry French farmers.

## Starmer's overdue “plan for change”



On Thursday Sir Keir Starmer, Britain's prime minister, unveiled 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. At a morning meeting they discussed 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 met to set production quotas for early 2025. The group, which supplies half the world's oil, decided to continue restraining production, postponing a planned hike of 180,000 barrels per day—already delayed from October—until the end of March 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. The cartel said it would start raising production from April next year. But with oil-demand growth expected to continue slowing, whether it actually will is another matter.

## 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](mailto: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*