

Catch up: Biden commutes death sentences; North Korea to send more soldiers to Ukraine



President Joe Biden commuted the sentences of 37 people on federal death row. The men, all of whom were convicted of murder, will instead serve life sentences without the possibility of parole. Donald Trump, the president-elect, has promised to restart federal executions, [which Mr Biden had paused](#). Mr Biden said he could not “let a new administration resume executions that I halted”.

North Korea is planning to [send more soldiers](#) to support Russia in Ukraine, according to South Korea’s armed forces. North Korea is also believed to be developing military equipment, including drones, with which to supply Russia. South Korea estimates that some 11,000 North Korean soldiers have already been sent to Ukraine, of whom around 1,100 have been killed or wounded.

Honda and **Nissan** said they would begin merger talks, with the aim of completing the tie-up by 2026. It would make [the world’s third-biggest carmaker by sales](#), after Toyota, another Japanese

firm, and Germany's Volkswagen, and would have a market capitalisation of \$54bn at current prices. Nissan and Honda, which have struggled to keep up with Chinese firms offering [cheap electric vehicles](#), will hope pooling resources can help them to compete.

Robert Fico, **Slovakia's** hard-right prime minister, met **Vladimir Putin** in the Kremlin. Their meeting comes as supplies of Russian gas via pipelines through Ukraine are set to end on January 1st, when a [long-term deal between Russia and Ukraine expires](#). Mr Fico, an ally of Mr Putin, has criticised Ukraine for refusing to renew the agreement. Slovakia still imports lots of Russian gas via Ukraine.

Donald Trump said the fees charged to use the [Panama Canal](#) were “ridiculous” and that it should be handed back to America unless the “rip-off” stops. America, which built the canal in the early 20th century, returned it to Panamanian control in 1999. José Raúl Mulino, Panama's president, responded that “every square metre” of the canal belonged to his country.

Britain's economy did not [grow](#) in the third quarter of 2024, according to revised figures from the Office for National Statistics. The ONS previously estimated a 0.1% expansion. A fall in production offset a rise in construction output. The figures pile more pressure on the Labour government. Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, said it faced a “huge” challenge.

News Corp will sell its majority stake in Foxtel, an Australian cable television company, to DAZN, a sports streaming firm, for A\$3.4bn (\$2.1bn). Foxtel, which has broadcast rights for the Australian Football League and Australian cricket, has struggled to compete with streaming services. News Corp, [Rupert Murdoch's](#) conglomerate, plans to focus on its other businesses, such as book publishing.

Figure of the day: 15%, the proportion of employees at Agnico Eagle, Canada's biggest mining company, who are women. [Read the full story.](#)

A year of hellfire in Gaza



We are looking back on 2024. On Friday we covered conflicts around the world. Today we're focusing just on the Middle East.

It has been a year of horror in Gaza. Israel has killed at least 45,000 people, most of them civilians, since it began its assault in response to a massacre of Israelis by Hamas on October 7th 2023. Israel has destroyed 70% of Gaza's housing. Polling by Zogby, a research firm, suggests that three-quarters of Gazans have been displaced at least three times during the war. Many have paid thousands of dollars to flee the enclave.

Western attempts to broker a ceasefire have so far been futile. Hamas continues to hold around 100 of the hostages it seized. Israel killed its leader, Yahya Sinwar, in October this year. Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has rejected any ceasefire on terms Hamas would accept. He may reckon that [Donald Trump](#) will give him free rein. Mr Trump has promised to end the war, but it is not clear how he plans to do that.

Israel's ceasefire in Lebanon



When Israel's war in Gaza started 14 months ago, Hizbullah, a Lebanon-based militia, promised to fight in solidarity with Hamas. Thousands have been displaced on both sides of the border between the two countries. In September Israel decapitated Hizbullah's leadership and sent troops across the border, further intensifying the conflict. Israel has killed 4,000 people in Lebanon this year. But on November 26th the Israeli cabinet approved a ceasefire.

The [deal](#), which took effect on November 27th, called for a 60-day halt to the fighting. It was a rare bit of good news. But within days both sides had accused the other of violating it. And hopes that it might lead to a deal in Gaza may be misplaced. Binyamin Netanyahu's far-right allies dream of rebuilding settlements that were dismantled in 2005. Now Mr Netanyahu has broken the link between the two fronts. That makes it easier to continue his war in Gaza.

Iran's next move?



[Iran](#) analysts live by two core assumptions: that the country wants to fight Israel through proxies, rather than directly, and that it doesn't want all-out war. Both now look fragile. Iran launched missiles at Israel in April and October, both in retaliation for Israeli attacks. Most of the missiles were intercepted.

But now Iran appears weaker: Israeli strikes on Iranian military facilities on October 26th struck a blow to its defences and its strategy. And the killing of Hizbullah's top ranks dealt a blow to the "axis of resistance", a group of militias backed by Iran. Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, needs to come up with new ideas to deter Israeli aggression. One option would be to boost Iran's own capabilities, possibly by developing nuclear weapons. But the return as American president of Donald Trump—an advocate of crippling sanctions and fan of threatening to attack Iran—may well encourage Mr Khamenei to negotiate.

The fall of Syria's dictator



The regime of Bashar al-Assad, for decades Syria's brutal dictator, was toppled in less than two weeks. Rebels, led by an Islamist group called Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, began their offensive in the north-west on November 27th. By December 8th they had reached Damascus, the capital. Mr Assad fled to Russia.

The group named Muhammad al-Bashir, its chief administrator in Idlib, as caretaker prime minister. But real power rests with Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, the leader of HTS. Some Syrians worry that the group might impose its vision of Islamic rule, but it has promised to respect minorities. Moreover, HTS has no experience of running a big, diverse country.

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. We'll pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners on Saturday.

Monday: Which Charles Dickens novel features the long-running court case Jarndyce v Jarndyce?

**The biggest room in the world is the room
for improvement.**

Helmut Schmidt