

The world in brief

Catch up quickly on the global stories that matter



Photograph: AP

America's **Senate** passed a spending package to fund most of the government, but not in time to prevent a partial shutdown over the weekend. The House of Representatives must still approve the agreement and is not expected to until Monday. Senators also voted to keep the Department of Homeland Security running for two weeks while Democrats and the White House negotiate over immigration enforcement.

America's **Department of Justice** released more than 3m additional pages of documents relating to **Jeffrey Epstein**, [a dead sex offender](#). Afterwards Democrats said the DOJ had withheld too many files. Todd Blanche, the deputy attorney-general, said the White House had “no oversight” over the review of documents and that his department “did not protect” Donald Trump. The president has repeatedly denied wrongdoing in relation to Epstein.

Mr Trump said that **Iran** “wants to make a deal” rather than face an American attack. The president has sent a naval “Armada” to the Middle East and threatened force if [Iran](#) does not abandon its nuclear programme. Earlier Abbas Araghchi, Iran's foreign minister, said the country was open to holding talks with **America** but suggested they could not be “conducted under threat”.

Israel said it would open the **Rafah** border crossing between [Gaza](#) and Egypt from Sunday. Officials said that Israeli and Egyptian authorities would screen individuals exiting and entering the enclave under the supervision of a European monitoring force. Israeli troops have controlled the site since May 2024. Reopening it was part of the ceasefire deal agreed between Israel and Hamas.

Mr Trump said [he would nominate Kevin Warsh](#) to become the new chair of the **Federal Reserve**. Mr Warsh is a former Fed governor who was appointed by George W. Bush. He is [much more likely](#) than the current chair, [Jerome Powell](#), to agree with Mr Trump that the Fed should cut interest rates rapidly. The president fell out with Mr Powell over the issue.

Chevron and **Exxon** both reported fourth-quarter results that revealed their annual profits were the lowest in five years. Chevron's profit for 2025 was 30% less than for 2024; Exxon's declined by around 14.5%. But, compared with the third quarter, both oil majors did better than many investors expected. Big Oil's performance is being watched particularly closely as Mr Trump tries to [encourage investment in Venezuela](#).

A federal judge in New York said that prosecutors could not seek the death penalty for **Luigi Mangione**, who is [accused of killing Brian Thompson](#), the boss of UnitedHealthcare, in 2024. Margaret Garnett dismissed two of four federal charges against Mr Mangione, including the only one that was punishable by death. The defendant, who separately faces nine state charges, denies wrongdoing.

Word of the week: *Marine-cloud brightening*, a form of solar geoengineering that would add tiny particles of sea salt to the lower part of the atmosphere. [Read the full story](#).

In which year did Mao Zedong die? Test your knowledge with our [latest history quiz](#).



Photograph: ROPI

Ukraine and Russia put off the hard questions

Trilateral talks in Abu Dhabi between America, Russia and Ukraine are tentatively set to resume on Sunday. They have some momentum behind them: Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, appears so far to have honoured Donald Trump's plea for a one-week pause in [missile attacks](#) on freezing Kyiv "and other towns". And all sides declared the first round of talks, held last weekend, "constructive".

But those talks focused narrowly on how various ceasefire scenarios could be monitored. The big question of whether Ukraine will give up land in exchange for American security guarantees was left for later. Few Ukrainians would accept giving up the country's "fortress belt"—four well-defended cities in eastern Donetsk—in return for a commitment from a president as unpredictable as Mr Trump. [Steve Witkoff](#), Mr Trump's envoy, recently said that a deal was "90% done". With Russia holding firm to its maximalist claims and still talking about regime change in Kyiv, that is wishful thinking.



Photograph: Reuters

Venezuela divides Latin America's literary elite

Colombia's intellectuals will rub linen-clad shoulders at the Hay Festival, a literary and arts celebration, in Cartagena this weekend. Geopolitics threatens to spoil the mood. Several Latin American writers are boycotting to protest against the organisers' decision to invite María Corina Machado, [Venezuela's](#) Nobel peace prize-winning opposition leader. They detest her support for Donald Trump's military intervention in her country, and see her as a traitor.

Many on the left share this view. They think Ms Machado is willing to sacrifice the continent's sovereignty in exchange for wealth that is unlikely to end up in Venezuelan pockets. Ms Machado promotes the "subjugation of our peoples", wrote Laura Restrepo, a Colombian author, to Hay's organisers. Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Chile and Uruguay, all run by left-leaning leaders, also condemned the kidnapping of Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela's former autocrat, as "an extremely dangerous precedent". Yet by shunning Hay, Ms Restrepo and her peers squander the opportunity to convince audiences why Ms Machado's stance endangers the region.



Photograph: Getty Images

A top tennis player meets her match

The women's singles final of the Australian Open takes place on Saturday, with Belarus's Aryna Sabalenka (pictured) facing off against Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina. The last time they both reached the finals in Melbourne was 2023, when Ms Sabalenka defeated Ms Rybakina. She has since become the world's number one women's [tennis](#) player, winning the tournament again in 2024. This weekend will be her fourth consecutive final at the Australian Open.

If Ms Sabalenka's spot was all but assured, her opponent is more surprising. Ms Rybakina was once considered a rising star in tennis, following an unexpected win at Wimbledon in 2022, but she has struggled with injuries in recent years. Now she appears to be staging a comeback. After a string of failures in last year's grand slams she suddenly hit her stride at Women's Tennis Association finals in Saudi Arabia in November, where she beat Ms Sabalenka. So far she has retained that form—setting the scene for a dramatic rematch.



Photograph: Reuters

Weekend profile: Cheng Li-wun, the Taiwanese opposition leader who wants to reconcile with China

Risk comes naturally to Cheng Li-wun, [Taiwan's](#) opposition leader. As a fiery student activist in the 1990s, she sought independence for her homeland and castigated the Kuomintang (KMT), the ruling party at the time. Then, to the astonishment of many, she joined the very party she once railed against.

Now, as [the KMT's new leader](#), Ms Cheng is making her biggest gamble yet. As China [steps up military drills](#) around Taiwan, which it sees as its territory, she is blocking efforts to boost defence spending. She thinks Taiwan's people should accept that they are Chinese. And she hopes to bring her party back to power by pursuing reconciliation with China's leader, Xi Jinping.

Ms Cheng was born into a middle-class family in western Taiwan. But she calls herself a “daughter of Yunnan”. Her father hailed from the Chinese province but, as a soldier in the defeated Nationalist army, fled to Taiwan in 1949. The family settled in a village housing military families from the mainland. Ms Cheng's childhood was steeped in stories of a lost mother country. She describes her parents as “taro and sweet potatoes”—symbols of integration between the mainland and Taiwan.

At National Taiwan University's law school Ms Cheng honed her combative oratory as a participant in the Wild Lily, a pro-democracy student movement. She joined the Democratic Progressive Party, or DPP, which views Taiwan as a separate country. But she grew disillusioned and resigned over what she saw as corruption and intolerance of dissent within its ranks. She joined KMT three years later. She was considered an outsider going into the party's leadership election in October. But after losing the past three presidential elections, KMT members appear to have decided that they needed a more aggressive, outspoken kind of leader.

Since then Ms Cheng has caused controversy even with some KMT members who worry that her remarks on national identity and calls for closer engagement with the mainland are too closely aligned with China's position and could alienate younger voters. Some also fear that the DPP is managing to portray the KMT as undermining Taiwan's national security by blocking defence spending. But Ms Cheng says she supports "reasonable" military expenditure and is confident she can win over voters by pursuing dialogue with Mr Xi.

Whether Ms Cheng will be the KMT's presidential candidate in 2028 is unclear: she says she is focusing on her current job. But already, she is shaking up Taiwan's politics in ways that could alter the precarious balance of relations between Taiwan, China and America. The stakes have never been higher. And Ms Cheng is all in.

*No one feels another's grief, no
one understands another's joy.*

Franz Schubert