

Catch up: Biden's Iran hopes; Georgia's fractious election



President Joe Biden expressed his hope that Israel's [retaliation against Iran](#) over the weekend, which he said appeared to have been limited to military targets, could mark “the end” of the countries’ tit-for-tat. Iran sought to downplay Israel’s attack, which focussed on the Islamic State’s air-defence systems, saying it had caused only “limited damage”. Israeli officers claimed the action now meant their air-force could operate freely in Iranian airspace.

Voting in **Georgia’s** [keenly watched](#) parliamentary election wrapped up with rival sides claiming they had won based on divergent exit polls. The central electoral commission said the governing, pro-Russia Georgian Dream stood on 53%, with more than two-thirds of the vote counted. The party’s billionaire founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, claimed a victory. The opposition said the vote had been “stolen”.

A paramilitary outfit known as the **Rapid Support Forces** killed 120 people in **Sudan** during one of the deadliest raids of the past [18 months](#) of civil war. Activists say that a recent surge in attacks

in al-Jazira state, south of the capital, Khartoum, is revenge for the surrender of a high-ranking RSF officer, Abuagla Keikal, to the national army last Sunday.

The **Democrats'** chances of winning the **House** fell from 61% to 54% in the past three days, according to *The Economist's* [prediction model](#), following a shift in recent polling. The average "generic ballot" of nationwide voting intent in America was tied for the first time since August.

On the campaign trail, **Michelle Obama** spoke at a **Kamala Harris** rally in the [key swing state](#) of Michigan. The former first lady admitted that the presidential race had become "too close", while warning of Donald Trump's "obvious mental decline". Ms Obama also questioned why Ms Harris was held to a "higher standard" than her opponent.

China threatened "resolute countermeasures" after **America** agreed to sell **Taiwan** \$2bn-worth of weapons. The arms package, agreed on Friday, includes a missile air-defence system. China, which [claims](#) the democratic island state as its own, said the deal violated its sovereignty. It did not give details of what any retaliation might involve.

Mike Jeffries, the former boss of [Abercrombie & Fitch](#), pleaded not guilty to sex-trafficking charges in a New York court. Mr Jeffries, who led the fashion brand between 1992 and 2014, is accused, among other things, of offering non-existent modelling jobs to men in return for sex. Mr Jeffries, and his partner Matthew Smith, are expected to appear in court at a later date.

Word of the week: Demure, once a term for Victorian modesty, it is now used by youngsters in TikTok to describe everything from sunsets to Saturn. [Read the full story.](#)

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Japan's cliffhanger election



When Ishiba Shigeru became leader of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (and thus prime minister) last month, he was expected to boost the party's flagging support. But since taking up the post, he has done little to win over voters. A poll by Jiji, a newswire, suggested his cabinet's approval rating was 28% in October—unusually low for a new government. Surveys suggest the LDP may struggle to maintain a majority in parliament at a snap general election on Sunday.

That brings uncertainty to a country where the LDP has dominated politics for almost seven decades. The party's image has been tarnished by a [scandal](#) in which groups of lawmakers were accused of systematically under-reporting ticket sales at fundraisers and kicking back the proceeds to members. Mr Ishiba has attempted to clean up the party's image by not officially endorsing party members involved in the scandal. But if enough voters are dissatisfied, he will need to negotiate a broader coalition to stay in power.

Israel's government fights to survive



The Knesset, Israel's parliament, begins its winter session on Sunday. Binyamin Netanyahu's government must pass a state budget by the end of March. Failing to do so will trigger an early election. But ultra-Orthodox parties, a crucial part of Mr Netanyahu's coalition, have threatened to pull their support unless legislation is passed exempting religious seminary students from military service.

Israel's Supreme Court has already ruled that the exemption is unconstitutional. And any attempt to pass such a law will cause public outrage. After all, most Israeli families have sons and daughters in the armed forces, which are fighting wars both in Gaza and Lebanon. The exemption also faces opposition from a faction led by Yoav Gallant, the popular defence minister and Mr Netanyahu's main rival in the government. Even if Mr Netanyahu succeeds in passing the legislation, the process will be politically damaging for the prime minister.

A test of South America's most sensible voters



In Uruguay almost everyone will vote in Sunday's congressional and presidential elections. Voting, after all, is [compulsory](#). Yamandú Orsi of the Broad Front, a left-leaning coalition, will probably finish first in the presidential poll but fail to win outright. If so, a run-off will follow in November, probably against Álvaro Delgado, the former chief of staff to the current centre-right president. That will be a toss-up.

In a region tugged towards extremes—by leaders like libertarian [Javier Milei](#) in Argentina to leftist Gustavo Petro in Colombia—Uruguay stands out for its moderation. The main candidates offer mainstream policies. Still, Sunday's elections are not without jeopardy. Uruguayans will also vote in a constitutional referendum on whether to lower the pension age by five years and raise payouts. That could cause a fiscal blowout. Though the leading candidates oppose the change and public support for it is ebbing, markets will be watching nervously.

Britain's grape-picking robots



Makers of sparkling wine in Britain will soon pluck their delicate crop, while the sugar levels are just right for fermentation and before the grapes get overripe, or fall prey to pests, frosts or mildew. Typically the industry's labour force swells fivefold in the ten-day picking period. Workers contend with variable weather and early sunsets.

The job has been too delicate to automate: grapes, particularly those that go into fine wine, are soft and valuable. But that could change. Saffron Grange vineyard, Queen Mary University London and Extend Robotics, a British startup, are building a [robotic farmer](#). The machine will have cameras that use artificial intelligence to assess sugar levels, ensuring that it picks just the perfectly ripe grapes. It also has pressure-sensitive fingers that will not crush the fruit. The vineyard is planning to plant half a field for the robot to pick in a future harvest. It could be a vintage to remember.

“Conclave” goes behind closed doors



Not many films can grip audiences using nothing more than a handful of men talking politely in rooms and corridors. Yet “Conclave” works that particular miracle. Directed by Edward Berger, and adapted from Robert Harris’s novel, this glossy yet slyly intelligent thriller is all set within the walls of Vatican City, just after the death of the Pope. Ralph Fiennes is magnetic as Cardinal Lawrence, the reluctant overseer of the subsequent papal election. Stanley Tucci, John Lithgow, Sergio Castellitto and Lucian Msamati play the frontrunners who are more ambitious than they let on, and who may have other, deeper secrets.

Mr Berger’s previous film, “All Quiet on the Western Front”, won four Oscars in 2023. His confident and superbly acted follow-up could well match that total. Poor Cardinal Lawrence may be racked with uncertainty, but viewers will be in no doubt that Mr Berger and Mr Fiennes were the perfect people for the job.

Weekly crossword



Our crossword is designed for experienced cruciverbalists and newcomers alike. Both sets of clues give the same answers, all of which feature in articles in this week's edition of *The Economist*:

Cryptic clues

1 down Captain may muddle up capital (6,4)

1 across Device hidden in paragraph on escapism (5)

2 across Make every missive obvious initially to get the message (4)

3 across Unknown direction reveals active agent (5)

Factual clues

1 down Central American capital city (6,4)

1 across Ubiquitous gadget that may have a harmful effect on education (5)

2 across Brief report used especially in business (4)

3 across Tiny fungus that gives us cakes and ale (5)

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:

Teresa Weiler, Bogotá, Colombia

Ayako Fukui, Okinawa, Japan

Matthew Utting, London, Britain

They all have the correct answers of: Who Wants to be a Millionaire?, Hannibal, House of the Dragon, Crane fly and Thomas Watson. The theme is fictional doctors: Dr Who, Hannibal Lecter (from the novels of Thomas Harris), Dr House (from the American TV series, starring Hugh Laurie), Dr Crane (from Frasier) and Dr Watson (from Sherlock Holmes)

The questions were:

Monday: Which quiz show was originally hosted by Chris Tarrant in Britain and Regis Philbin in America?

Tuesday: Which Carthaginian general won a fabulous victory over the Romans at Cannae?

Wednesday: What is the name of the TV series that is a prequel to Game of Thrones?

Thursday: What insect is also known as a “daddy longlegs” or “mosquito hawk”?

Friday: Who was the founder of IBM?

Demure

*Once a term for Victorian modesty, it is now used by youngsters in TikTok to describe everything from sunsets to Saturn.
Read the full story.*

Nature never repeats herself, and the possibilities of one human soul will never be found in another.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton