

The world in brief

Catch up quickly on the global stories that matter



Photograph: AFP

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, warned America that an [attack on his country](#) would spark a “regional war” as officials signalled they would enter talks to try to avoid military action. Earlier, Donald Trump said Iran was “seriously talking” to America. He has sent significant naval forces to the region and threatened Iran with attack if it does not abandon its nuclear programme.

Israeli officials said they were carrying out “preliminary preparations” to reopen the **Rafah border crossing** between Egypt and Gaza. Limited numbers of pedestrians are expected to be able to enter and leave the enclave from Monday. Israeli forces have controlled the crossing since May 2024. Israeli strikes killed at least 30 people in Gaza on Saturday, according to Palestinian officials.

India's finance minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, announced big raises in manufacturing and infrastructure spending in her annual budget, with an increase to capital expenditure of roughly 9%. The government is trying to [boost trade and investment](#) in response to America’s 50% tariffs on some Indian goods. Ms Sitharaman said

she wanted to enhance productivity and build “resilience to volatile global dynamics”.

Pakistan’s security forces killed at least 145 insurgents in Balochistan, local officials said, after a burst of attacks in the south-western province. The Balochistan Liberation Army, a militant group, claimed responsibility for the attacks, which struck 12 cities, including the provincial capital, Quetta. Balochistan’s chief minister, Sarfraz Bugti, added that 32 civilians and 17 members of the security services had also died.

Elon Musk said that his rocket firm, SpaceX, had stopped the “unauthorised use” of its satellite network, **Starlink**, by Russia’s armed forces. His comments came after Ukrainian officials suggested they had spotted Russian drones equipped with the firm’s technology over Ukraine. Meanwhile Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, said [talks with Russia and America](#) would continue in Abu Dhabi next week.

Britain’s prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, implied that Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, brother of King Charles, should testify before America’s Congress over his ties to Jeffrey Epstein, a dead sex offender. Sir Keir was responding to the latest tranche of Epstein-related material released by America’s Justice Department. Mr Mountbatten-Windsor was stripped of his royal titles because of his friendship with Epstein. He denies any wrongdoing.

Carlos Alcaraz won the Australian Open title to become the youngest male player to win all four of tennis’s biggest tournaments, a feat known as a **career grand slam**. The 22-year-old Spaniard beat Novak Djokovic, a Serbian veteran with 24 grand-slam titles, including ten wins in Melbourne. Mr Alcaraz took the record from his compatriot, Rafael Nadal, who completed a career grand slam aged 24.

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.](#)



Photograph: Getty Images

Will Colombia join South America's rightward shift?

The election campaign for Colombia's next president officially begins this weekend. Voters face a crowded calendar: they must first elect a new Congress on March 8th, and then cast ballots in the first round of the presidential poll on May 31st. If no candidate wins a majority, a run-off will follow on June 21st.

The election will test the strength of [the wave of right-wing sentiment](#) sweeping South America. The current president, Gustavo Petro—a fiery leftist who has often clashed with Donald Trump—is constitutionally barred from running again. His coalition's new standard-bearer is Iván Cepeda, a senator and human-rights campaigner who shares Mr Petro's politics but not his heated rhetoric. Polling is patchy, but he often comes out on top. Mr Cepeda's closest rival is Abelardo de la Espriella, a combative right-winger who promises to crack down on crime like Nayib Bukele, the authoritarian leader of El Salvador. Sergio Fajardo, a centrist, is running third. A bruising three-way battle lies ahead.



Photograph: Getty Images

India's new economic priorities

On Sunday Nirmala Sitharaman, India's finance minister, presented the latest budget to parliament. Indians paying income tax—a small sliver of the population—were watching closely, though in the event Ms Sitharaman made no significant changes. She announced an increase in spending for manufacturing and infrastructure. Last week India finalised its [largest-ever trade deal with the EU](#) and Ms Sitharaman has hinted that she is looking to “clean up” its complicated customs regime.

The government said it had reduced its deficit substantially. Now it must work out how to boost investment which, as a share of GDP, has been stagnant for years despite India's decent growth. Foreign investors, especially, have pulled out of the country in recent years. Indian stocks are expensive, boosted by domestic buyers and the country lacks the sort of artificial-intelligence companies that have attracted inflows into American and Chinese markets.



Photograph: Reuters

Is Japan heading towards a fiscal crisis?

The Japanese economy faces a paradox. As inflation has risen, the Bank of Japan has raised interest rates from -0.1% to 0.75% over the past two years. Normally, that would strengthen a currency, especially as the Federal Reserve has cut rates over the same period. Yet the yen remains close to its mid-2024 lows against the dollar, prompting speculation that the government will intervene to prop up the exchange rate. Some economists say the weak yen shows that Japan, which has large public debts, is facing a [slow-burning fiscal crisis](#).

Are they right? On the one hand, inflation has recently helped the public finances. It has lifted tax revenues and kept down real (inflation-adjusted) interest rates, helping debt to shrink relative to GDP. On the other hand, if inflation falls, real interest rates could rise, putting debt back on an increasing path. And the prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, is fighting a campaign for re-election promising to increase spending and cut taxes. A bigger budget deficit would add to debts and increase inflation, making further interest-rate rises more likely. It is a strange time to loosen the purse strings.

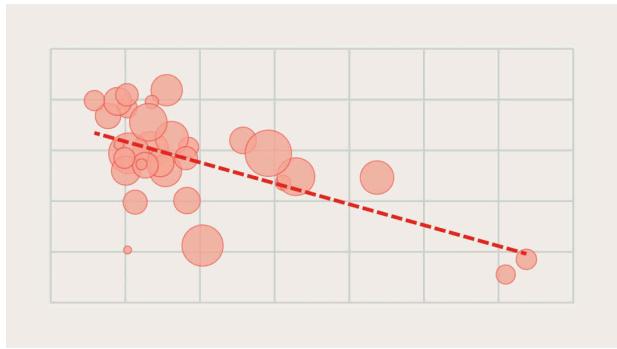


Photograph: Getty Images

Termites offer clues on how “superorganisms” evolved

Termites are among the most successful animals on Earth. Each colony is really a “superorganism”, in which millions of individuals operate interdependently. They thrive in harsh environments and proliferate rapidly. Some queens can lay more than 20,000 eggs per day, despite consuming only wood. A new study, published in *Science*, helps explain how these extraordinary insects came to be.

Researchers compared the genomes of termites to those of cockroaches and woodroaches, which live in much smaller groups. They found that both termites and woodroaches had simpler genomes than cockroaches, their common ancestor. They also discovered that termites have no genes for sperm tails, meaning that at some point the kings and queens became monogamous and lost the need for competitive sperm. All worker termites are, in fact, full siblings. Scientists have long debated whether the kind of low genetic variability caused by inbreeding was needed for the evolution of the most socially complex insects, like bees or ants. For termites, it seems to have been crucial.



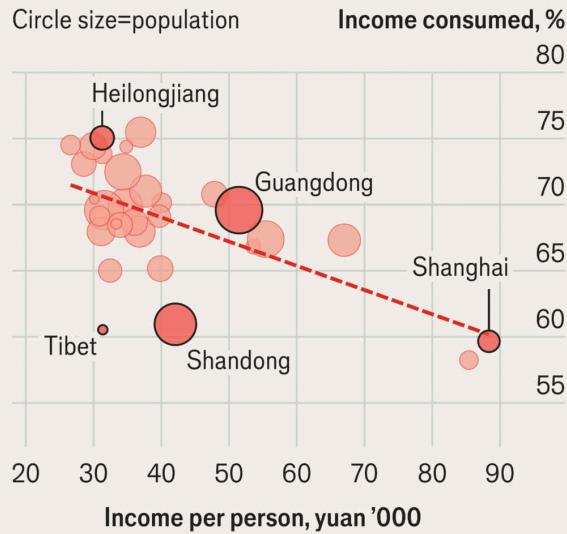
Photograph:

Data bite: Chinese spending

China's government wants to boost domestic consumption. But where it should direct their efforts is not obvious—[spending habits vary widely across regions](#). In Heilongjiang, a frigid northern province, disposable income per person is about 31,000 yuan, and roughly three-quarters of it is spent. But in Tibet, where incomes are similar, only three-fifths is. The chart plots disposable income per person against the share of that income spent in each province. Richer provinces tend to spend a smaller proportion. But policymakers could pay closer attention to regions that buck that trend, and spend unusually freely, or unusually little, given how well-off they are. That is where interventions might be most effective.

Hey big spenders

Chinese provinces*, 2024



*Includes province-level administrative divisions

Source: National Bureau of Statistics



Illustration: Sandra Navarro

The winners of this week's quiz

Thank you to everyone who took part in this week's quiz. The winners, chosen at random, were:

Samuel Onyoso, Nairobi, Kenya

Borislav Stefanov, Sofia, Bulgaria

Jorge Ferrando, Puerto Villamil, Ecuador

They all gave the correct answers of: the fourth estate, The World is Not Enough, Life on Earth, The Number of the Beast and Madrid. The theme is terms that start with real: real estate, real world, real life, real number and Real Madrid, the football team.

The questions were:

Monday: The press are sometimes referred to by which term, dating back to when the three main classes of society were the nobility, clergy and commoners?

Tuesday: What is supposedly the James Bond family motto, and comprises the title of a film starring Pierce Brosnan?

Wednesday: Which nature documentary series, presented by David Attenborough, and first shown in 1979, traced the story of evolution?

Thursday: Which phrase from Revelation, associated with the Antichrist, was the name of a song and album by Iron Maiden?

Friday: The Museo Nacional del Prado is located in which European city?

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

Franz Schubert