



Monthslong festival season starts in Nepal

KATHMANDU, Nepal (AP) — Nepal’s monthslong festival season began last month with tens of thousands of devotees pulling a wooden chariot with a young girl revered as a living goddess. Families gathered for feasts and lit incense for the dead at shrines. Men and boys in colorful masks and gowns representing Hindu deities danced to traditional music and drums, drawing throngs of spectators to Kathmandu’s old streets. The Indra Jatra festival marks the end of the monsoon and rice farming season and signals the dawn of fall. It’s celebrated mostly by the Newar community, the native residents of Kathmandu. It is also known as the festival of deities and demons and especially honors Indra, the Hindu god of rain. The masked dancers, one of the highlights of the ceremony, can be fearsome, entertaining, and awe-inspiring, depending on the performers’ movements. Kumari, a young girl who is revered by both Hindus and Buddhists in Nepal as a living goddess, left her temple palace and was driven around the center of the capital in a wooden chariot pulled by devotees, who lined up to receive her blessing. Among the spectators were President Ram Chandra Poudel, officials, and diplomats. The weeklong Indra Jatra precedes months of other festivals in the predominantly Hindu nation. They include Dasain, the main festival, and Tihar, or Diwali, the festival of lights, in November.

China’s economy softens, Beijing’s lagging demand persists

BEIJING (AP) — China’s economy softened in August, extending a slowdown in industrial activity and real estate prices as Beijing faces pressure to ramp up spending to stimulate demand. Data published by the National Bureau of Statistics showed weakening activity across industrial production, retail sales, and real estate in September compared to July. “We should be aware that the adverse impacts arising from the changes in the external environment are increasing,” said Liu Aihua, the bureau’s chief economist in a news conference. Liu said that demand remained insufficient at home, and the sustained economic recovery still confronts multiple difficulties and challenges. China has been grappling with a lagging economy post-COVID, with weak consumer demand, persistent deflationary pressures, and a contraction in factory activity. Chinese leaders have ramped up investment in manufacturing to rev up an economy that stalled during the pandemic and is still growing slower than hoped. Beijing also has to deal with increasing pressure to implement large-scale stimulus measures to boost economic growth.

Myanmar military gov’t begins census considered bogus

BANGKOK (AP) — Myanmar’s military government began a nationwide census last week, saying it would be used to compile voter lists for a general election promised for next year, even though much of the country is engulfed in civil war. The census is widely seen as an effort to gather information to closely monitor opponents of military rule even more. Census enumerators, mostly schoolteachers and local administrative workers, went door-to-door in the capital of Naypyitaw, accompanied by soldiers and police. State television MRTV reported that the census was carried out in all 14 of the country’s regions and states, and the initial collected data is hoped to be released by the end of this year. A group that leads the struggle against military rule, the shadow National Unity Government, has advised people to use “caution” in complying with the survey. “Whether they are doing it for the fake elections or census, they are doing it to terrorize the people, so don’t collaborate with them in these matters,” said Kyaw Zaw, a spokesperson for the National Unity Government. “I would like to say that all those who cooperate with the military council will be punished according to the law because their action is similar to encouraging and cooperating with the military’s terrorist activities.” Pro-democracy guerrillas have also warned that those who help collect information will face reprisals. The Chin Brotherhood Alliance, which comprises five ethnic Chin militias from the northwestern Chin state, and the Dawei Defense Team, a group from the southern Tanintharyi region, warned in statements in September that they will take strong action against military government personnel who participate in the survey. Such guerrilla groups, which frequently target people associated with the military, carried out attacks during a three-week survey to compile voter lists in January 2023, when elections were still expected later that year. The military government is widely viewed as hoping the polls will legitimize its rule, which began after it seized power from the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021.

China is raising its retirement age

BEIJING (AP) — Starting next year, China will raise its retirement age for workers, which is now among the youngest in the world’s major economies, in an effort to address its shrinking population and aging work force. The Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, the country’s legislature, passed the new policy in September after a sudden announcement earlier in the week that it was reviewing the measure, state broadcaster CCTV said. The policy change will be carried out over 15 years, with the retirement age for men raised to 63 years, and for women to 55 or 58 years depending on their jobs. The current retirement age is 60 for men and 50 for women in blue-collar jobs and 55 for women doing white-collar work. “We have more people coming into retirement age, and so the pension fund is (facing) high pressure. That’s why I think it’s now time to act seriously,” said Xiujian Peng, a senior research fellow at Victoria University in Australia who studies China’s population and its ties to the economy. The previous retirement ages were set in the 1950s, when life expectancy was only around 40 years, Peng said. The policy will be implemented starting in January, according to the announcement from China’s legislature.



BOUNCY PORK. Two-month-old baby hippo Moo Deng plays with a zookeeper at the Khao Kheow Open Zoo in Chonburi province, Thailand, on September 19, 2024. Only a month after Thailand’s adorable baby hippo was unveiled on Facebook, her fame became unstoppable. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)

Thailand’s adorable pygmy hippo
Moo Deng has the kind of face
that launches a thousand memes

By Jintamas Saksornchai
The Associated Press

CHONBURI, Thailand — Only a month after Thailand’s adorable baby hippo Moo Deng was unveiled on Facebook, her fame became unstoppable.

Fans unable to make the two-hour drive to Khao Kheow Open Zoo from the Thai capital Bangkok to see her in person could watch her video clips online, or simply scroll through social media to savor meme after meme.

Zookeeper Atthapon Nundee has been posting cute moments of the animals in his care for about five years. He never imagined the zoo’s newborn pygmy hippo would become an internet megastar within weeks.

Cars started lining up outside the zoo well before it opened. Visitors travelled from near and far for a chance to see the pudgy, expressive 2-month-old in person at the zoo about 60 miles southeast of Bangkok. The pit where Moo Deng lives with her mom, Jona, was packed almost immediately, with people cooing and cheering every time the pink-cheeked baby animal made skittish movements.

“It was beyond expectation,” Atthapon told The Associated Press. “I wanted people to know her. I wanted a lot of people to visit her, or watch her online, or leave fun comments. I never would’ve thought (of this).”

Moo Deng, which literally means “bouncy pork” in Thai, is a type of meatball. The name was chosen by fans via a poll on social media, and it matches her other siblings: Moo Toon (stewed pork) and Moo Waan (sweet pork).

There is also a common hippo at the zoo named Kha Moo (stewed pork leg).

“She’s such a little lump. I want to ball her up and swallow her whole!” said Moo Deng fan Areeya Sripanya while visiting the zoo.

Artists have drawn cartoons, cakes, and latte art based on her, and social media platform X even featured her in its official account’s post.

Her image adorns memes by German soccer team FC Bayern, American basketball team Phoenix Suns, and American football team Washington Commanders, as well as the New York Mets. Simple photo manipulation puts her in a variety of headgear or human-like situations.

Businesses, too, have utilized her image. Sephora Thailand has a makeup tip — “wear your blush like a baby hippo” — highlighting her pink cheeks, while food delivery app Grab Thailand imagined with photos what kind of meal she could garnish.

With all that fame, zoo director Narongwit Chodchoi said they have begun copyrighting and trademarking “Moo Deng the hippo” to prevent the animal from being commercialized by anyone else. “After we do this, we will have more income to support activities that will make the animals’ lives better,” he said.

The zoo sits on 800 hectares (almost 2,000 acres) of land and is home to more than 2,000 animals. It runs breeder programs for many endangered species like Moo Deng’s. The pygmy hippopotamus that’s native to West Africa is threatened by poaching and loss of

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