



**Indian teen becomes the youngest chess world champion**

NEW DELHI (AP) — Indian teenager Gukesh Dommaraju became the youngest chess world champion after beating the defending champion, Ding Liren of China, in the final match of their series in Singapore. Dommaraju, 18, secured 7.5 points against 6.5 of his Chinese rival in the contest, surpassing the achievement of Russia’s Garry Kasparov who won the title at the age of 22. The Indian teen prodigy has long been considered a rising star in the chess world after he became a chess grandmaster at 12 years old. He had entered the match as the youngest-ever challenger to the world crown after winning the Candidates tournament last year. After securing the victory, Dommaraju burst into tears and raised his arms in celebration. “I was dreaming this moment for the last 10 years. I am happy that I realized the dream (and made it) into reality,” he told reporters after his win. Dommaraju is now the second Indian to win the title after five-time world chess champion Viswanathan Anand. “It’s a proud moment for chess, a proud moment for India ... and for me, a very personal moment of pride,” Anand, who has been a mentor to Dommaraju, said in a post on X. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated the 18-year-old on his “remarkable accomplishment,” calling it “the result of his unparalleled talent, hard work, and unwavering determination.” “His triumph has not only etched his name in the annals of chess history but has also inspired millions of young minds to dream big and pursue excellence,” Modi said in a post on X. The match was a 14-round long-time classical event with a prize fund of \$2.5 million.

**Relic of the Buddha gets a warm welcome in Thailand**

BANGKOK (AP) — More than 2,000 people took part in a procession to escort a relic of the Buddha lent by China to a shrine in the Thai capital of Bangkok to honor the birthday of King Maha Vajiralongkorn and to celebrate half a century of diplomatic relations between Thailand and China. The tooth relic, considered sacred by Buddhists, was flown earlier in the day from the Lingguang Temple in Beijing, which normally houses it. Loans of the tooth as a show of friendship have been an effective form of soft diplomacy by China, even though competing claims from various countries on possessing the Buddha’s tooth raise questions about its provenance. The tooth was put into an ornate, golden container and placed on a flower-bedecked float as it was paraded through one of the oldest neighborhoods of the city. Attendants flanked the vehicle as it travelled about 1 1/2 miles to the relic’s temporary home, a soaring pavilion on Sanam Luang, a large field outside Bangkok’s famous Grand Palace. Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and members of her cabinet received the relic amid the sounds of chanting monks. Representatives of China, including Beijing’s ambassador to Thailand, were also present, according to local media. The loan was the latest in a series of events to mark the 72nd birthday of the Thai king. It also commemorates the upcoming 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Thailand and China. It was previously displayed in Thailand in 2002 to mark the 75th birthday of Vajiralongkorn’s father, King Bhumibol, who died in 2016. The relic will be on public display at the pavilion through mid-February.

**Elephant in Pakistan dies weeks after family reunion**

KARACHI, Pakistan (AP) — An elephant died of a bacterial infection at a Pakistani safari park, an official said, less than two weeks after being reunited with her sister. Sonia, who was almost 19, is the second elephant to die in two years in the southern city of Karachi, where she had lived since 2009. She was reunited recently with her sister Madhubala, who was transferred from the Karachi Zoological Garden to be with her family members. Madhubala was separated from sisters Sonia and Malika about 15 years ago. Pakistani veterinary surgeons found that a bacterial infection killed Sonia. Dr. Amir Khalil with Vienna-based Four Paws told The Associated Press that the infection spread through 19-year-old Sonia’s body from her foot, raising concerns about how Pakistani authorities handle animals “as such infections don’t spread in one day.” Pakistan has a troubled history with elephants in captivity. Noor Jehan, 17, was brought to Karachi with three other elephants more than a decade ago. She died in April 2023, days after undergoing a critical medical procedure by a team of international veterinarians. In 2020, Kaavan, dubbed the “world’s loneliest elephant” after languishing alone for years in a Pakistani zoo, was sent to a Cambodian sanctuary for the much-needed company of other elephants. Efforts to transfer him from Pakistan were supported by singer and actor Cher, who campaigned for his rescue.

**U.S. Navy ship makes first port call in Cambodia in 8 years**

SIHANOUKVILLE, Cambodia (AP) — A U.S. Navy warship arrived in Cambodia last month, the first such visit in eight years to a nation that is China’s close ally in Southeast Asia. Cambodia’s government has suggested the port call reflects an upgrade in often-strained relations. The *USS Savannah* docked at the port of Sihanoukville on the Gulf of Thailand for a five-day visit. The *Savannah*, classed as a Littoral Combat Ship, carries a crew of 103. “It’s great to be back, returning U.S. presence to here after eight years,” the ship’s commanding officer, Daniel A. Sledz, said in brief remarks to reporters. He was given a bouquet of flowers by a Cambodian officer and shook hands with a line of her colleagues. The United States for many years has had rocky relations with Cambodia, criticizing its government for political repression and human rights violations. There is particular concern about its close ties with China, which Washington fears may get exclusive access to a Cambodian naval base on the Gulf of Thailand, not far from where the *Savannah* docked.



**PANDA-MONIUM.** During a welcome ceremony of the panda-themed exhibition PANDA GO! FEST HK in Hong Kong, approximately 2,500 panda sculptures were displayed at the Hong Kong International Airport. Thousands of giant panda sculptures greeted residents and tourists last month in Hong Kong, where enthusiasm for the bears has grown since two cubs were born in a local theme park. Pictured in the bottom photo is Beijing-gifted giant panda An An making his debut appearance to media at Ocean Park in Hong Kong. (AP Photos/Chan Long Hei)

**HK displays 2,500 panda sculptures to capitalize on a local bear craze**

By Kanis Leung  
The Associated Press

HONG KONG — Thousands of giant panda sculptures greeted residents and tourists last month in Hong Kong, where enthusiasm for the bears has grown since two cubs were born in a local theme park.

The 2,500 sculptures were showcased in a launch ceremony of PANDA GO! FEST HK, the city’s largest panda-themed exhibition, at Hong Kong’s airport. They were publicly displayed at the Avenue of Stars in Tsim Sha Tsui, a popular shopping district, before setting their footprint at three other locations in December.

One designated spot was Ocean Park, home to the twin cubs, their parents, and two other pandas gifted by Beijing last year. The design of six of the sculptures, made of recycled rubber barrels and resins among other materials, was inspired by these bears.

The cubs — whose birth in August made their mother Ying Ying the world’s oldest first-time panda mom — may meet visitors as early as February.

In a separate media preview event, the new pair of Beijing-gifted pandas, An An and Ke Ke, who arrived in September, appeared relaxed in their new home at Ocean Park. An An enjoyed eating bamboo in front of the cameras and Ke Ke climbed on an installation. They met members of the public in early December.

The displays reflect Hong Kong’s use of pandas to boost its economy as the Chinese financial hub works to regain its position as one of Asia’s top tourism destinations.

Pandas are considered China’s unofficial



national mascot. The country’s giant panda loan program with overseas zoos has long been seen as a tool of Beijing’s soft-power diplomacy.

Hong Kong’s tourism industry representatives are upbeat about the potential impact of housing six pandas, hoping to boost visitor numbers even though caring for pandas in captivity is expensive. Officials have encouraged businesses to capitalize on the popularity of the bears to seize opportunities in what some lawmakers have dubbed the “panda economy.”

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 Units per U.S. dollar as of 1/03

Bangladesh Taka	119.99
Cambodian Riel	4030.1
China Renminbi	7.3206
Fijian Dollar	2.326
Hong Kong Dollar	7.7758
Indian Rupee	85.766
Indonesian Rupiah	16200
Iranian Rial	42003
Japanese Yen	157.3
Laos New Kip	21729
Malaysian Ringgit	4.50
Nepal Rupee	137.29
Pakistani Rupee	278.56
Papua N.G. Kina	4.038
Philippine Peso	58.077
Russian Ruble	110.41
Saudi Riyal	3.7556
Singapore Dollar	1.3702
South Korean Won	1467.2
Sri Lankan Rupee	293.82
Taiwan Dollar	32.93
Thai Baht	34.48
Vietnam Dong	25425