



Japan’s former Emperor Akihito turns 92

TOKYO (AP) — Japan’s beloved former Emperor Akihito marked his 92nd birthday in December as his heart condition stabilized, palace officials said, following health concerns earlier last year. Akihito, the father of Emperor Naruhito, was diagnosed in May with insufficient blood flow to the heart muscles but has been in stable condition since he started a new medication in July, the Imperial Household Agency (IHA) said in a statement. He still enjoys scientific research into goby fish, career work in which he found 10 new species, and he visits a biology lab on the palace compound twice a week, the agency said. Akihito has held the title of emperor emeritus since his abdication in 2019. Known for his efforts to make amends for Japan’s wartime past, Akihito has repeatedly prayed for its victims and the survivors who faced hardships as he marked the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. Akihito and his wife, Empress Emerita Michiko, offered a moment of silence on four key dates of the war 80 years ago — the end of the Battle of Okinawa, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the day marking Japan’s surrender — the IHA said. He has said the war, fought in the name of his father Hirohito, should not be forgotten. In August, Akihito and his wife visited a central Japan resort in Karuizawa, where he temporarily evacuated as a child during the war, and where the couple started a romance years later.

Blackmailer of South Korean soccer star gets 4 years in jail

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — A woman has been sentenced to four years in prison for blackmailing soccer star Son Heung-min, according to a South Korean court. The woman, identified only as Yang, was charged with extorting 300 million won (\$204,000) from Son in 2024 after sending him an ultrasound photo of a baby that she claimed was his and demanding money to stay silent. She later conspired with a man, identified as Yong, to try to extort more money from Son. The Seoul Central District Court said Yang “lied” to Son, although she hadn’t confirmed whose child she was carrying. The court said Yang denied the charges of extortion and attempted extortion. Yong, who confessed, was sentenced to two years in prison, according to the court. The 33-year-old Son is among Asia’s greatest players. After a decade at Tottenham Hotspur in the Premier League, the South Korean star joined LAFC in August. South Korean news agency, Yonhap reported in May that a women in her 20s and a man in his 40s had been detained on suspicion of attempting to blackmail Son in June of last year while he was still at Tottenham.

Messi’s India tour kicks off chaotically

KOLKATA, India (AP) — Lionel Messi’s much-hyped tour of India got off to a rocky start in mid-December with angry fans throwing bottles and attempting to vandalize a stadium after many of them failed to get more than just a glimpse of their hero. The *Times of India* reported that many ticketholders said they failed to see Messi at all — either in person or on the stadium’s big screens — despite waiting for hours. West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee apologized to the Argentine soccer star for the “mismanagement” of the event. “I am deeply disturbed and shocked by the mismanagement witnessed today at Salt Lake Stadium,” Banerjee wrote on social media, where she also apologized to fans who had expected more after paying for tickets. Banerjee said a committee would be constituted to “conduct a detailed enquiry into the incident, fix responsibility, and recommend measures to prevent such occurrences in the future.”irate fans — many of whom wore Messi Argentina shirts — threw seats from the stands, then forced their way past security fences onto the field and attempted to cause more damage before overwhelmed security personnel chased them away. Messi had already left. Messi’s three-day “GOAT India Tour” was to bring the World Cup winner from Kolkata to Hyderabad and then Mumbai before concluding in New Delhi. He was joined by longtime teammates Luis Suárez and Rodrigo De Paul. Messi also remotely “unveiled” a 70-foot statue of himself in Kolkata.

High-speed train kills 7 elephants crossing railway tracks

GUWAHATI, India (AP) — Seven wild Asiatic elephants were killed and a calf was injured when a high-speed passenger train collided with a herd crossing the tracks in India’s northeastern state of Assam, according to local authorities. The train driver spotted the herd of about 100 elephants and used the emergency brakes, but the train still hit some of the animals, Indian Railways spokesman Kapinjal Kishore Sharma told The Associated Press. Five train coaches and the engine derailed following the impact, but there were no human casualties, Sharma said. Veterinarians carried out autopsies on the dead elephants, which were to be buried later in the day. The accident site is a forested area around 78 miles southeast of Assam’s capital city of Guwahati. Railway tracks in the state are frequented by elephants, but Indian Railways said in a statement the accident location wasn’t a designated elephant corridor. The Rajdhani Express train, travelling from Sairang in Mizoram state bordering Myanmar, was bound for the national capital of New Delhi with 650 passengers onboard when it hit with elephants. “We delinked the coaches which were not derailed, and the train resumed its journey for New Delhi. Around 200 passengers who were in the five derailed coaches [were] moved to Guwahati in a different train,” Sharma said. Speeding trains hitting wild elephants is not rare in Assam, which is home to an estimated 7,000 wild Asiatic elephants, one of the highest concentrations of the pachyderm in India. Since 2020, at least a dozen elephants have been killed by speeding trains across the state. Wild elephants often stray into human habitations this time of year, when rice fields are ready for harvesting.



ATHLETIC ART. Peking opera actress Zhang Wanting performs during a show at the Jixiang Theatre in Beijing. Dressed in a red-and-white warrior costume, Zhang balances on one foot on the narrow handle of a rosewood chair. She bends forward, lifts her other leg high, and grasps the two long pheasant plumes on her helmet to strike a pose like a flying swallow. (AP Photo/Mahesh Kumar A., File)

In a breakneck digital era, the ancient art of Peking opera works hard to keep flourishing

BEIJING — Dressed in a red-and-white warrior costume, Peking opera actress Zhang Wanting balances on one foot on the narrow handle of a rosewood chair. She bends forward, lifts her other leg high, and grasps the two long pheasant plumes on her helmet to strike a pose like a flying swallow.

From more than 100 spectators in a modern Beijing theater, cheers and applause rise.

It is a Sunday afternoon in early September, and Zhang is leading *The Masked Heroine*, a signature play from the Song School of Peking opera, founded in the early 20th century as part of a Chinese tradition centuries old. It is the 30-year-old actress’s first time starring in the role in a full production, but also the fruit of more than a decade of hard work that began when she was a child.

“Ever since I first started learning this play,” she says, “I’ve always dreamed of performing it in full.”

A dazzling chair trick that takes a decade to master

Growing up in China’s northern Hebei province, Zhang first encountered Peking opera when she was 7 and saw children practicing at a cultural center. Fascinated, she joined them — and soon realized she had the talent and determination to pursue the art professionally. After primary school, Zhang left home for a theater school in Eastern China’s Jiangsu province.

Most performers in Peking opera — its name comes from a now-obsolete way of saying Beijing in English — start training at a very

young age to lay the foundation for good physical strength and flexibility. The process, full of repetitive practice, leaves participants soaked with “sweat and tears.”

The pose Zhang does on the chair requires balancing on one leg, arching backward, and stretching her arms forward with absolute stillness. It derives from a basic skill in Peking opera called tanhai — literally, “gazing over the sea” — that most performers learn at the beginning of their career. Originating in Chinese martial arts, the skill demands immense balance, flexibility, and control.

At theater school, Zhang started training at 5:00am daily. “After each session, I’d lie on the floor and cry,” she recalls.

Throughout the school’s training, Zhang had her first exposure to Song school’s plays and became fascinated. In 2015, at college, Zhang finally got the chance to study with a Peking opera artist named Song Danju, the daughter of the Song School’s founder. At a time when Peking opera troupes traditionally favored roles like qingyi (a role type for dignified, virtuous female characters) as headliners, the Song School brought female martial arts roles to the stage center with their creative stunts and a fresher performance style.

The chair trick is a Song family specialty. Zhang’s teacher learned it from her father and revived it by blending martial and acrobatic movements learnt from folk opera performers in northwestern China. The sequence includes moves like jumping through the chair’s frame

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Asian Currency Exchange Rates	
Units per U.S. dollar as of 1/02	
Bangladesh Taka	122.27
Cambodian Riel	4011.4
China Renminbi	6.994
Fijian Dollar	2.27
Hong Kong Dollar	7.7918
Indian Rupee	90.079
Indonesian Rupiah	16752
Iranian Rial	42083
Japanese Yen	156.81
Laos New Kip	21637
Malaysian Ringgit	4.054
Nepal Rupee	144.1
Pakistani Rupee	280.04
Papua N.G. Kina	4.26
Philippine Peso	58.847
Russian Ruble	80.239
Saudi Riyal	3.75
Singapore Dollar	1.2862
South Korean Won	1444.5
Sri Lankan Rupee	309.71
Taiwan Dollar	31.406
Thai Baht	31.39
Vietnam Dong	26305