

## Saudi Arabia to host China-Arab summit

REUTERS, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia plans to host a Chinese-Arab summit on Dec 9 attended by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit to the kingdom, three Arab diplomats in the region familiar with the plans said yesterday.

Xi is scheduled to arrive in Riyadh on Dec. 7, two of the diplomats and a fourth source with direct knowledge of the visit said, on a trip that comes at a sensitive time for Saudi-US relations that have been strained by a dispute over energy supplies and concerns over growing Chinese influence in the Middle East.

Invitations have gone out to leaders in the Middle East and North Africa for the Chinese-Arab gathering, the diplomats said.

The Chinese delegation is expected to sign dozens of agreements and memoranda of understanding with Gulf nations and other Arab states on various fields.



## Former China leader Jiang Zemin dies

AFP, Beijing

Former Chinese leader Jiang Zemin died yesterday at the age of 96, state media reported, hailing him as a great communist revolutionary who helped quell the 1989 pro-democracy protests.

The major bodies of China's ruling Communist Party (CCP) bodies announced his death through a letter that expressed "profound grief".

"Jiang Zemin passed away due to leukemia and multiple organ failure in Shanghai at 12:13 pm on Nov. 30, 2022, at the age of 96," Xinhua reported.

When Jiang replaced Deng Xiaoping as leader in 1989, China was still in the early stages of economic modernisation.

By the time he retired as president in 2003, China was a member of the World Trade Organization, Beijing had secured the 2008 Olympics, and the country was well on its way to superpower status.



This photograph taken on Tuesday shows a destroyed building in Bakhmut, Donetsk region, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Once known for its vineyards and cavernous salt mines, Bakhmut has now been dubbed "the meat grinder" due to the brutal trench warfare, artillery duels and frontal assaults that have defined the brutal fight for the city for over six months.

PHOTO: AFP

# Half of world's democracies are in decline: report

White House announces int'l 'Summit for Democracy' in March

AFP, Stockholm

Half the world's democratic countries are experiencing an erosion of democracy, intensified by war in Ukraine and economic crisis, an international think tank said in a report yesterday.

"We're seeing extraordinarily severe headwinds for democracy now, intensified by the political fallout from the economic crisis that started with the pandemic and the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine", International IDEA secretary-general Kevin Casas-Zamora told AFP.

"It might be that the credibility of elections is challenged. It might be that the rule of law is under assault. It might be that civic space is being constrained", he explained.

The number of democracies with the most severe democratic erosion -- a group dubbed "backsliding" countries which has included the United States since last year -- increased from six to seven in 2022 with the addition of El Salvador to the list.

The others are Brazil, Hungary, India, Mauritius and Poland.

Casas-Zamora singled out the US as particularly worrying.

"I'm very concerned by what we're seeing in the United States", he said.

The country faces political polarisation, institutional dysfunction and threats to civil liberties, according to the report.

"It's quite clear by now that the fever didn't

break with the election of a new administration," he said, pointing to "the runaway levels of polarisation (and) the attempts to undermine the credibility of electoral results without any evidence of fraud".

India, the US among 7 countries listed as "backsliding"

27 countries seen moving towards authoritarianism



Casas-Zamora noted the US had also taken a "visible step backwards" in sexual and reproductive rights, "which is very exceptional because most countries, pretty much all other countries, are going forward in terms of expanding sexual and reproductive rights".

"The US is moving backwards", he said.

Of the 173 countries covered by International IDEA's report, 104 were democracies and 52 of those were in decline.

Meanwhile, the number of countries moving toward authoritarianism, 27, was more than double the number moving toward

democracy, at 13.

Almost half of all authoritarian regimes became even more repressive in 2022, with Afghanistan, Belarus, Cambodia, Comoros and Nicaragua singled out as experiencing a "broad decline".

In Asia, where only 54 percent of people live in a democracy, authoritarianism is solidifying, the report said, while Africa, despite a myriad of challenges, remains "resilient" in the face of instability.

A decade after the Arab Spring, the Middle East continues to be "the most authoritarian region in the world". It has only three democracies -- Iraq, Israel and Lebanon.

In Europe, almost half of all democracies, or 17 countries, suffered democratic erosion in the last five years.

It noted there were "troubling patterns" even in countries that were performing at middle to high levels of democratic standards.

In the past five years, progress has stalled across all of the indices IDEA studies, with some scores "the same as they were in 1990", it said.

"Democratic systems have really wobbled over the past couple of decades and it quite clearly has become a burning issue in our age", Casas-Zamora said.

Meanwhile, the White House on Tuesday announced an international "Summit for Democracy" to be held next March, co-hosted with Costa Rica, the Netherlands, South Korea and Zambia.

## Three-quarters of people over 10 own a mobile phone: UN

AFP, Geneva

Nearly three quarters of people over the age of 10 now own a mobile phone, potentially opening the way to broader internet use, the United Nations said yesterday. The UN's International Telecommunication Union has provided its first estimate of regional and global ownership, revealing that 73 percent of the world's population over 10 years of age owned a cellphone in 2022. Unsurprisingly, ownership was highest in wealthy countries, where 95 percent of people currently own a mobile phone, and lowest in low-income countries, where only 49 percent do, the ITU said. The UN's telecoms agency says roughly a third of the planet has still never been online. But the online population has been increasing and an estimated 5.3 billion people, or 66 percent of people worldwide, are now using the internet.

## US CAPITOL ASSAULT

## Two militia leaders guilty of sedition

AFP, Washington

Two leaders of the far-right Oath Keepers militia, including founder Stewart Rhodes, were found guilty of sedition on Tuesday in the most high-profile case yet stemming from the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol by supporters of then-president Donald Trump. A federal jury convicted Rhodes, 57, and Kelly Meggs, 53, leader of the militia's Florida chapter, of the rarely pursued charge of seditious conspiracy, which carries up to 20 years in prison. The 12-person jury acquitted three other members of the Oath Keepers who faced the sedition charge, but it convicted them of lesser offenses such as obstructing an official proceeding. Rhodes, an eyepatch-wearing former soldier and Yale law school graduate, and the four other group members were accused of plotting to keep Trump in power and overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election won by Democrat Joe Biden.

## CHINA TECH CRACKDOWN

## Jack Ma living in Japan: report

AFP, Tokyo



Alibaba founder Jack Ma has been living in Tokyo for almost six months after disappearing from public view following China's crackdown on the tech sector, the Financial Times reported yesterday, citing multiple unnamed sources.

The billionaire has kept a low profile since the crackdown, which has included Chinese regulators scrapping the IPO of Ma's Ant Group and issuing Alibaba with record fines. But the FT said he has spent much of the past six months with his family in Tokyo and other parts of Japan, along with visits to the United States and Israel. In recent years, Chinese officials have taken aim at alleged anti-competitive practices by some of the country's biggest names, driven by fears that major internet firms control too much data and expanded too quickly.

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## ‘Enough is enough’

### Australian PM urges end to Assange proceeding

AFP, SYDNEY

Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese yesterday said he had personally called on US officials to end legal proceedings against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, declaring: "Enough is enough."

Assange, an Australian citizen, has been held in a London prison since 2019 pending a US extradition request to face trial for divulging US military secrets in 2010 about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I some time ago made my point that enough is enough. It is time for this matter to be brought to a conclusion," Albanese told parliament.

"I have raised this personally with representatives of the United States government. My position is clear."

The Australian leader said he did not have sympathy for many of the 51-year-old's actions.

But he asked: "What is the point of this continuing, this legal action, which could be caught up now for many years into the future?"

Assange has been held in London's high-security Belmarsh prison since 2019, after serving time for skipping bail in a previous case and spending years holed up in Ecuador's embassy.

He could face decades in jail if found guilty in the United States.

Albanese compared Assange's treatment to that of Chelsea Manning, whose 35-year jail sentence for stealing secret documents was commuted by then-president Barack Obama in 2017.

Manning "is now able to able to participate freely in US society," Albanese said.

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