

Develop AI cooperation with China

Putin orders Russian govt, top bank

REUTERS, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin has ordered Russia's government and the country's biggest bank, Sberbank, to build cooperation with China in artificial intelligence.

Putin's instructions were published on the Kremlin's website yesterday, three weeks after he announced that Russia would team up with BRICS partners and other countries to develop AI.

He told the government and Sberbank, which is spearheading Russia's AI efforts, to "ensure further co-operation with the People's Republic of China in technological research and development in the field of artificial intelligence".

Western sanctions intended to restrict Moscow's access to the technologies it needs to sustain its war against Ukraine have resulted in the



world's major producers of microchips halting exports to Russia, severely limiting its AI ambitions.

Sberbank CEO German Gref acknowledged in 2023 that graphics processing units (GPUs), the microchips that underpin AI development, were the trickiest hardware for Russia to replace.

By partnering with non-Western countries, Russia is seeking to challenge the dominance of the US in one of the most promising and crucial technologies of the 21st century.

Putin said on December 11 that a new AI Alliance Network would bring together specialists from BRICS countries and other interested states.

Russia currently ranks 31st of 83 countries by AI implementation, innovation and investment on a UK-based Tortoise Media's Global AI Index, well behind not only the United States and China but also fellow BRICS members India and Brazil.

On Tuesday, Putin told Russians in a New Year address that the country would move forward with confidence in 2025, though he offered no specific promises on the economy or the war in Ukraine.



Displaced Palestinian children walk through a puddle of rain water at a makeshift camp housing displaced Palestinians in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Gaza babies die from winter cold

Say medics, families as Israeli attacks push healthcare 'to brink of collapse'

AFP, Deir el Balah

Yahya al-Batran clutched the tiny clothes of his dead newborn son Jumaa, just days after the baby died from the cold in their tent in war-torn Gaza.

"We are watching our children die before our eyes," said the 44-year-old. Their baby was one of the seven children who died from the cold within the span of a week, the Hamas-run territory's health ministry said on Monday.

"We fled the bombing from Beit Lahia, only for them to die from the cold here," said the child's mother Noura al-Batran, referring to their hometown in northern Gaza.

The 38-year-old is still recovering from giving birth prematurely and she said the doctor decided to take the babies out of the incubator despite the family not having access to heating.

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On a rain-soaked mat, the father hugged his older children tight with blankets and worn-out cloth in a corner of their tent.

He then placed a small pot of water on the stove to make tea, which he then mixed with dry

weather expected in the coming days, saying it posed a "real threat to two million displaced people," the majority of whom live in tents.

In southern Gaza's Khan Yunis, Mahmoud al-Fasih said he found his infant daughter, Seela, "frozen from the cold" in their small tent near al-Mawasi beach, where they were displaced from Gaza City.

He rushed her to the hospital in



bread to make a meagre lunch for his family with a little cheese and the thyme-based spice blend called zaatar. Like thousands of other families enduring dire conditions, they face shortages of food, fuel, and medicine, with the United Nations warning of an "imminent collapse" of the healthcare system.

The Hamas government press office in Gaza warned on Monday of the impact of more harsh

weather expected in the coming days, saying it posed a "real threat to two million displaced people," the majority of whom live in tents.

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the area that Israel has designated a "humanitarian zone", but she was already dead. Ahmad Al-Farra, a doctor and director of the emergency and children's department at Nasser Hospital, told AFP that the three-week-old baby arrived at the hospital with "severe hypothermia, without vital signs, in cardiac arrest that led to her death".

Plea deals related to 9/11 attacks may proceed

Says US military appeals court

REUTERS, Washington

A US military appeals court has ruled that plea deals related to the man accused of masterminding the September 11, 2001, attacks and two accomplices can proceed after Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had earlier moved to invalidate the agreements.

In August, Austin rescinded plea deals that the Pentagon had entered into with the trio, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

In November, a US military judge ruled that Austin acted too late on revoking the plea deals and that they were still valid. The order late on Monday by the US military appeals court upheld that ruling.

The Pentagon declined to comment. It has previously said Austin was surprised by the plea deals and that the secretary was not consulted because that process is independent.

Under the deals, it is possible that the three men could plead guilty to the attacks and in exchange not face the death penalty.

Mohammed is the most widely known inmate at the US detention facility known as Guantanamo Bay on the coast of Cuba.

POLLS INTERFERENCE

US imposes sanctions on Iran, Russia groups

AFP, Washington

The United States unveiled sanctions Tuesday against Iranian and Russian organizations, alleging they had sought to interfere in the US election.

The groups targeted were the Cognitive Design Production Center, a subordinate organization of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the Moscow-based Center for Geopolitical Expertise.

"The Governments of Iran and Russia have targeted our election processes and institutions and sought to divide the American people through targeted disinformation campaigns," said Bradley Smith, Acting Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence.

State Department spokesman Matthew Miller added in a separate statement that the United States closely monitors "efforts by malicious actors to influence or interfere in the integrity of our elections."

"We remain committed to promoting accountability for state sponsored actors who attempt to undermine public trust in our democratic institutions," Miller said.

The groups, which are affiliates of the IRGC and the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) respectively, "aimed to stoke socio political tensions and influence the US electorate," said the US Treasury Department.

South Korea to send Jeju Air crash black box to US

AFP, Seoul

South Korean investigators probing a Jeju Air crash which killed 179 people in the worst aviation disaster on its soil said yesterday they will send one of the retrieved black boxes to the United States for analysis.

The Boeing 737-800 was carrying 181 people from Thailand to South Korea Sunday when it issued a mayday call and belly-landed before hitting a barrier and bursting into flames, killing everyone aboard except two flight attendants pulled from the burning wreckage.

South Korean and US investigators, including from Boeing, have been combing the crash site in southwestern Muin since the disaster to establish a cause. "The damaged flight data recorder has been deemed unrecoverable for data extraction domestically," said South Korea's deputy minister for civil aviation, Joo Jong wan.

"It was agreed today to transport it to the United States for analysis in collaboration with the US National Transportation Safety Board."

Joo earlier said both of the plane's black boxes were retrieved, and for the cockpit voice recorder "the initial extraction has already been completed".

"Based on this preliminary data, we plan to start converting it into audio format," he said, meaning investigators would be able to hear the pilots' final communications.

The second black box, the flight data recorder, "was found with a missing connector", Joo said.

Officials initially pointed to a bird strike as a possible cause of the disaster, but they have since said the probe was also examining a concrete barrier at the end of the runway, which dramatic video showed the plane colliding with before bursting into flames.



KSA executes six Iranians for drug trafficking

AFP, Dubai

Saudi Arabia has executed six Iranians sentenced for drug trafficking, the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) announced yesterday.

The Iranians were put to death in Dammam, on the kingdom's Gulf coast, for having "clandestinely introduced hashish" into Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Interior said in a statement published by the SPA, without specifying the date of the executions.

Riyadh has executed 117 people in 2024 for drug trafficking, according to an AFP tally of official figures.

In 2023, the authorities in the Gulf monarchy launched a highly publicised anti-drugs campaign involving a series of raids and arrests.

The execution of traffickers has increased since the end of a moratorium on the use of the death penalty for drug charges two years ago.

Channel migrant crossings soar by 25pc in 2024

UK govt data shows

AFP, London

The number of irregular migrants crossing the Channel to Britain in small boats in 2024 soared by a quarter compared with the previous year, the UK government data showed yesterday.

The steep rise highlights the challenge facing Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who swept to power in July and has pledged to crack down on the dangerous journeys.

Some 36,816 people were detected in the Channel last year, a 25 percent jump from the 29,437 who arrived in 2023, provisional figures from the interior ministry showed.

The total, however, was still well below the record 45,774 undocumented migrants who arrived on the UK's shores in 2022.

Migration to Britain, irregular and regular, was a major issue at last summer's general election, when Labour returned to government after 14 years in opposition.

Upon entering office, Starmer scrapped the previous Conservative government's controversial scheme to send the irregular migrants to Rwanda.

He branded it a "gimmick" and called it "dead and buried" during his first press conference as prime minister.

Starmer has pledged to "smash the gangs" of people traffickers running the crossings and has signed a number of agreements with foreign countries to co-operate on law enforcement.

In December, Britain and Germany signed a joint action plan aimed at tackling the smuggling gangs, while the interior ministers of Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Britain held talks to boost cooperation.



Demonstrators raise placards during a rally by university students and faculty denouncing strikes on Yemen and in solidarity with Palestinians, in the Houthi-controlled capital Sanaa yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP