

News in brief

◆ **Cyprus has launched a** national search-and-rescue operation after a yacht that departed Israel over a week ago went missing in stormy waters off the Mediterranean island, authorities said yesterday. The Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) said it triggered the search on Tuesday to locate the vessel, which set sail on December 2 bound for the Greek island of Crete. The yacht's last known position was recorded on December 8 inside the Cyprus Search and Rescue Region (SRR), about 89 nautical miles (165 kilometres) from the southwestern coastal town of Paphos, the JRCC said in a statement. "Vessels in the area have been tasked to assist in locating the missing sailboat," it said, adding that government air assets would join the operation Wednesday.



Cyprus launches search for missing yacht that set sail from Israel

◆ **South Korea, Japan protest over China, Russia aircraft incursions**

◆ **South Korea** and Japan reacted furiously yesterday after Chinese and Russian military aircraft conducted joint patrols around the two countries, with both Seoul and Tokyo scrambling jets. South Korea said it had lodged a protest with representatives of China and Russia, while Japan said it had conveyed its "serious concerns" over national security. According to Tokyo, two Russian Tu-95 nuclear-capable bombers on Tuesday flew from the Sea of Japan to rendezvous with two Chinese H-6 bombers in the East China Sea, then conducted a joint flight around the country.

◆ **The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** is conducting a broad investigation into deaths potentially linked to Covid-19 vaccines, a spokesperson for Donald Trump's vaccine-skeptic health secretary said Tuesday. Since Trump's appointment of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as health secretary, the US government has initiated a major overhaul of vaccine policy, prompting growing concerns among the medical community. "FDA is doing a thorough investigation, across multiple age groups, of deaths potentially related to COVID vaccines," a spokesperson for Kennedy's health and human services department, Andrew Nixon, told AFP. Bloomberg and the Washington Post had previously reported on the probe. The review, which was initially intended to focus on possible child deaths, has sparked controversy in recent weeks following the leak of an internal document in late November. Attributed to a senior FDA official, the memo claimed Covid vaccines are linked to at least 10 infant deaths, without providing any evidence. The efficacy and safety of Covid vaccines have been studied and documented worldwide, as have rare cases of severe side effects that do not undermine the vaccine's benefits for most age groups, according to various health authorities around the world.

Trump admin confirms probe of possible Covid vaccine deaths



SPOTLIGHT

Nearly 200 children conceived from sperm donor with increased cancer risk

AFP | Copenhagen, Denmark

A sperm donor, who is an asymptomatic carrier of a genetic mutation increasing the risk of cancer, was used to conceive nearly 200 children worldwide, Denmark's public broadcaster revealed yesterday.

Between 2006 and 2022, the man's sperm was sold to 67 clinics in 14 countries. In Denmark alone, 99 children were fathered by the donor.

"At least 197 children were born thanks to the sperm of an anonymous Danish donor using the alias Kjeld before the sperm bank discovered a serious genetic abnormality," public broadcaster DR reported.

According to DR, Denmark's European Sperm Bank, one of the largest in the world, was alerted in April 2020 that a child conceived via donation and diagnosed with cancer carried a genetic mutation.

It then tested a sample of the donor's sperm, but the screening did not detect the rare TP53 mutation.

Sales of the sperm, which had been suspended during testing, then resumed.

Three years later, the sperm bank was informed of at least one other child conceived from a donation with the mutation that had developed cancer.

It then tested several samples, which showed that the donor carried the gene, though



Representative picture

he was healthy. The use of his sperm was then blocked in late October 2023.



Many European countries have regulations limiting the number of children per donor, but there are no international regulations governing the number of children a donor can father across borders. At the end of 2022, the European Sperm Bank set a maximum of 75 families per donor.

Not lovin' it: **McDonald's pulls Dutch AI Christmas ad**

AI ad sparked a (Mc)flurry of criticism on social media

◆ **Sweetshop Films, which made the ad, defended its use of artificial intelligence in a post on LinkedIn**

AFP | The Hague, Netherlands

US burger chain McDonald's said yesterday it had removed an AI-generated Christmas advert in the Netherlands after it was filleted online.

The advert, "the most terrible time of the year", depicts Christmas chaos, with Santa caught in a traffic jam and a present-laden Dutch cyclist slipping in the snow.

The message: retreat to a McDonald's restaurant until January and ride out the festive season. But the generative AI ad sparked a (Mc)flurry of criticism on social media.



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"This commercial single-handedly ruined my Christmas spirit," said one user. "Good riddance to AI slop," posted another.

McDonald's Netherlands said in a statement to AFP: "The Christmas commercial was in-

tended to show the stressful moments during the holidays in the Netherlands.

"However, we notice -- based on the social comments and international media coverage -- that for many guests this period

is 'the most wonderful time of the year'."

Melanie Bridge, chief executive of The Sweetshop Films, which made the ad, defended its use of artificial intelligence in a post on LinkedIn.

"It's never about replacing craft, it's about expanding the toolbox. The vision, the taste, the leadership... that will always be human," she said.

"And here's the part people don't see: the hours that went into this job far exceeded a traditional shoot. Ten people, five weeks, full-time," added Bridge.

But this too sparked online debate.

Emlyn Davies, from independent production company Bomper Studio, replied to the LinkedIn post: "What about the humans who would have been in it, the actors, the choir?"

"Ten people on a project like this is a tiny amount compared to shooting it traditionally live action."

Earliest evidence of humans making fire found in UK

AFP | Paris, France

Excited scientists announced yesterday they have discovered evidence in the UK of humans deliberately making fire 400,000 years ago, dramatically pushing back the timeline for when our ancient relatives are known to have mastered this crucial skill.

Learning to light our own fires was one of the great turning points in human history, offering our ancestors warmth, a place to socialise and a way to cook food -- which helped us evolve our unusually big brains.

There are signs that humans were using fire more than a million years ago in Africa, but it is believed these flames were originally lit by natural causes such as lightning.

Finding solid evidence that our ancestors were sparking their own fires has proven extremely difficult, possibly because the tools did not last throughout the millennia.



Picture for representation only

That is why a team led by researchers from the British Museum were so pleased to find a human fireplace dating back 400,000 years near the village of Barnham, in Suffolk, eastern England.

Previously, the oldest evidence of fire-making anywhere in the

world was found in France -- and dated back 50,000 years.

"This is the most exciting discovery of my 40-year career," Nick Ashton, a curator at the British Museum and senior author of a study in Nature describing the find, told a press conference.

Interestingly, the researchers believe the fireplace belonged to perhaps the most-maligned member of the human family tree: the Neanderthal.

The Barnham archaeological site was first identified in the late 1800s, when ancient elephant tools were found there.

The first hint that the site could be home to a fireplace came in 2021, when scientists came across sediment that showed signs of being repeatedly heated.

But it took four years of painstaking work to prove that the heated clay was not caused by wildfire.

"The big turning point came with the discovery of iron pyrite," Ashton said.

This mineral is used to create the spark to light tinder. It is also very rare in the area, indicating that ancient humans brought it to the site, the researchers said.

They also found fire-cracked handaxes that could have struck the pyrite.

Instagram users given new algorithm controls

AFP | San Francisco, United States

Instagram yesterday unveiled a new AI-powered feature that lets users view and adjust the algorithm shaping their Reels feed, calling it a pioneering move toward greater user control.

The Meta-owned app is introducing "Your Algorithm," accessible through an icon in the upper right corner of Reels -- a user's video feed -- which displays the topics Instagram believes users are interested in based on their viewing history.



In a blog post, Meta said users can now directly tell the platform which subjects they want to see more or less of, with recommendations adjusting accordingly in real time.

Social media platforms have

faced mounting pressure from regulators and users alike to provide greater transparency around algorithmic content curation, which critics say can create echo chambers or promote harmful content.

But companies also see algorithms as their platform's 'secret sauce' for engaging users and have often resisted greater transparency.

"Instagram has always been a place to dive deep into your interests and connect with friends," the company said in its blog. "As your interests evolve

over time, we want to give you more meaningful ways to control what you see."

The feature shows users a summary of their top interests and allows them to type in specific topics to fine-tune their feed.

Instagram said it is "leading the way" in offering such transparency and control, with plans to expand the feature beyond Reels to Explore and other sections of the app.

The tool launched Wednesday in the United States and will roll out globally in English "soon," the company said.