India to become world's most populous country this year **WORLD, PAGE 10**

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China, Gabon agree to bolster ties

Nations' friendship built on rock-solid foundations, says Xi

By XU WEI

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President Xi Jinping and Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba agreed to elevate bilateral ties to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership on Wednesday as the two nations pledged to bolster cooperation on infrastructure, agriculture and the response to climate change.

In talks with Bongo at the Great Hall of the People, Xi also reiterated Beijing's unwavering support for African nations in following an independent path of development and its firm backing for Africa's efforts in advancing food security, industrialization and green development. Before their talks, the president

gave the Gabonese leader, who is on a four-day state visit to China, a grand welcoming ceremony with a 21-gun salute, a review of the guard of honor and the performances of military bands.

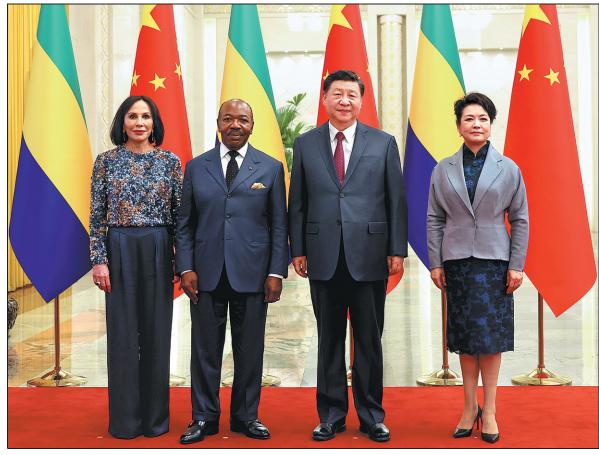
The two heads of state also witnessed the signing of bilateral cooperation agreements covering investment, agriculture, housing, urban development and climate

Xi told Bongo that the two sides, which are set to celebrate the 50th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations next year, have built their friendship on a rock-solid foundation.

Calling Bongo "an old friend" of the Chinese people, Xi said the Gabonese president was the first African head of state he had hosted since being reelected as the Chinese president, which fully demonstrates the importance and high level of the China-Gabon relations.

China is willing to enhance exchanges of state governance experience with Gabon, deepen strategic mutual trust, and extend firm support over issues concerning respective core interests and major concerns, Xi said.

He expressed readiness to further strategic alignment with the Gabon-



President Xi Jinping and his wife, Peng Liyuan, pose for a photograph with Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba and his wife, Sylvia Bongo Ondimba, in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Wednesday. FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY

ation in infrastructure construction, forestry, fisheries, the digital economy and the development of industrial parks and support the nation in the diversification of its economy and industry upgrading.

The two sides should step up people-to-people exchanges and work more closely together on tourism, rural vitalization and poverty alleviation, said the president.

It is important for the two countries to strengthen strategic cooperation on multilateral platforms such as the United Nations, safeguard global peace, development and

international fairness and justice and protect the common interests of developing countries, he said.

Speaking of China-Africa ties, Xi pointed out that with the world now facing multifaceted challenges and various crises, it is even more necessary than ever for China and Africa to reinforce unity and cooperation.

He appealed to both sides to resolutely oppose hegemony and power politics in any form, oppose interference in the domestic affairs of other countries and promote the building of a community with a shared future

Beijing firmly supports Africa becoming a key force in global political and economic development and is willing to offer new opportunities to Africa with its own development, he said.

According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, trade between China and Gabon reached \$4.55 billion in 2022, registering a year-on-year increase of 50.8 percent. China has been a major purchaser of crude oil, manganese ore and wooden products from Gabon.

Bongo noted that the two sides with a high level of political mutual trust, have always respected and supported each other.

He expressed his hope that both nations can further build up cooperation in infrastructure, agriculture and tourism, saying that his country welcomes Chinese businesses to take part in the construction of industrial parks and is willing to offer a good environment for Chinese firms.

Premier Li Qiang and Zhao Leji, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, also had separate meetings with the Gabonese president on Wednesday.

First flight



A Chinese-built COMAC ARJ21 jet is seen after it safely arrived at Denpasar International Airport in Bali, Indonesia, on Tuesday. The arrival of TransNusa flight 8B5112 from the capital Jakarta marks the first overseas commercial flight of the jet. LI ZHIQUAN / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

MUSIC SCENE ROCKS BACK TO LIFE

Crowds return to live house venues as country casts off COVID-19 shadow

By CHEN NAN

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fter China lifted its COV-ID-19 restrictions, live house venues are now back in full swing, hosting bands and large audiences.

"We staged year-end shows annually, but not for the past three vears due to the pandemic. When I watched the performances at DDC on Dec 28, when our program began, I spoke to lots of people and we all had a great time," said Dusk

indepth

Dawn Club owner Zhang Jincan. On Dec 28, a weeklong program to mark the end of 2022 and the for thcoming new year attracted $18\,$ indie bands and seven disc jockeys to a small live-music venue near Ritan Park in Beijing. Hosted by DDC, the event featured a diverse range of music styles, including rock, punk, electronic and jazz. Some 800 music lovers flocked to the venue each day from noon

to midnight, with Zhang telling them, "The feeling is back." "For many of us, such experiences had become a distant memory,

as live house venues had been closed for about three years. ... Although shows were held occasionally, we had to be prepared to shut our doors at any time," Zhang

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HIGHER GROUND

Car consumption to drive stable recovery

By OUYANG SHIJIA

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China's top economic regulator announced on Wednesday it will take steps to encourage consumption and boost momentum, including stabilizing strong spending on cars, in a bid to consolidate the recovery trend this year.

Analysts said that the country's latest moves would further boost consumer confidence, fully release pent-up market demand and provide a strong impetus for the auto market, which will help drive the consumer-led recovery in the coming months.

They said that domestic demand, particularly consumption, will be the key driver propelling China's economic growth in 2023.

Meng Wei, a spokeswoman for the National Development and Reform Commission, said the country will make efforts to stabiautomobile consumption, including accelerating the construction of charging station and urban parking facilities, promoting new energy vehicles in rural areas, and encouraging automobile companies to develop models suitable for use in rural areas.

Meng told a news conference in Beijing on Wednesday that China is

studying and formulating a new document to spur consumption, which will mainly focus on key fields such as stabilizing spending on big-ticket items, enhancing service consumption and boosting rural consumption.

China's retail sales grew 10.6 percent year-on-year in March, up from the 3.5 percent growth in the first two months, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

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Beijing launches probe as hospital fire toll rises to 29

By DU JUAN

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The death toll from the fire at a private Beijing hospital rose to 29 on Wednesday morning, as the authorities detained 12 people and planned a thorough citywide safety inspection to eliminate potential fire risks in medical and other institutions.

Among the 29 victims of the

fire at the Beijing Changfeng Hospital, 26 were patients, one was a family member and two were medical workers, said Li Zongrong, deputy head of Fengtai district where the hospital is located, at a news briefing on Wednesday afternoon. The deceased patients were between the ages of 40 and 88.

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100 days to go until university games start

By ZOU SHUO

After four years of preparation, Chengdu is ready to host a safe and splendid International University Sports Federation Summer World University Games, the organizing committee said on Wednesday, starting the 100-day countdown.

A store for official games merchandise was inaugurated at the National Stadium in Beijing to mark the countdown, while Dong'an Lake Sports Park in Chengdu, Sichuan province, hosted sports events and concerts.

The 31st World University Games will be held from July 28 to Aug 8 after being deferred twice due to COVID-19. The city will be the third on the Chinese mainland to host the biennial Summer Universiade, following Beijing in 2001 and Shenz $hen, Guang dong\ province, in\ 2011.$

University athletes from across the globe are expected to compete for 269 gold medals in 18 sports, the organizing committee said at a news conference held at the State Council Information Office.

Wang Jiayi, vice-minister of the Education Ministry, said the organizing committee spent a lot of money and manpower to overcome difficulties and prepare for the event.

The games will be a significant event, greatly contributing to building a platform of competition, strengthening understanding and friendship, and promoting people-to-people exchanges, he said.

Chengdu has built high-quality venues, trained professional orga-nizers and planned various educational, cultural and sports activities, Wang said, adding that university athletes from across the world will not only realize their sporting dreams but also enjoy the charm of the city and China.

To boost deep interaction among young people from all over the world, there will be an art exhibition themed on Chengdu city park at the games village, an intangible cultural heritage exhibition, and music, dancing and Sichuan Opera, as well as events such as visits to the panda sanctuary and local museums, according to Wang.

The Chinese delegation is expected to comprise more than 800 members, including around 500 athletes competing in all 18 sports, he said.

"The team has trained very hard in order to achieve the best possible outcome, and we also have zero tolerance for doping," the vice-minister said, adding that they are looking forward to good and clean performances.

Zhou Jinqiang, deputy director of the State General Administration of Sport, said the organizing committee has paid great attention to anti-doping measures. It will strengthen inspections during the games, Zhou said.

Chengdu has built 13 new venues and renovated 36 existing ones for the games. All the facilities, including the Dong'an Lake Sports Park where the opening ceremony will be held, were put into use by April 2021.

Mayor Wang Fengchao said hosting the games will help promote the image of the city and boost the enthusiasm of its citizens for sports. He said that 9.4 million out of 21 million Chengdu residents regularly participate in sports.

Tickets for the games will be sold from early June and detailed information will be published on official channels, the mayor added.

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