

News in brief

◆ **South Africa's new unity** government under President Cyril Ramaphosa was sworn in on Wednesday, the first of its kind in the country after 30 years of rule by the ANC. Ahead of the 32 ministers -- from six parties -- making up the cabinet, Paul Mashatile, who has been re-appointed deputy president, was the first to take the oath during the televised ceremony in Cape Town. On Sunday, Ramaphosa, 71, unveiled his highly anticipated coalition government, which includes the leader of the former main opposition party and sees the number of ministries rise from 30 to 32. There are also 43 deputy ministers. His African National Congress (ANC), which has governed since the advent of democracy in 1994, sought to form a government of national unity after losing its outright parliamentary majority in May 29 elections. The historic party, which won just over 40 percent in the poll, keeps 20 cabinet positions, including foreign affairs, finance, defence, justice and police.



S.Africa inaugurates unprecedented unity government

◆ **Iran's Khamenei urges turnout** after voters shun first presidential round

◆ **Iran's supreme leader** Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called Wednesday for voters to participate in Friday's presidential ballot, saying that historically low first-round turnout was not an act "against the system". Reformist candidate Masoud Pezeshkian and ultraconservative Saeed Jalili will face off after leading the pack in the first round last week, in an election cycle brought forward by the death of president Ebrahim Raisi in a May helicopter crash. Only 40 percent of Iran's 61 million eligible voters cast their ballots in the first round, representing the lowest turnout in any presidential election since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Khamenei, in a video published by state TV, said it was "completely wrong to think that those who did not vote in the first round are against the system".

◆ **Egyptian President Abdel Fattah** al-Sisi swore in a new government on Wednesday, just months after starting his third six-year term. The 30-member cabinet, led by Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly, includes a new finance minister and fresh faces at the foreign and defence ministries. Four women are among the new ministers, sworn in during a ceremony broadcast live on state television. Ahmed Kouchouk, a former deputy finance minister, now heads the finance ministry, tasked with managing Egypt's struggle against the economic crisis and dire foreign currency shortages.

◆ **Egypt new government sworn in**



CURIOSER & CURIOSER

World's oldest artwork discovered in Indonesian cave

AFP | Paris, France

It may not look like much -- just a flaking image of three people around a big red pig.

But the humble cave painting discovered in Indonesia is the oldest known narrative artwork ever made by human hands, dating back more than 51,000 years, new research said on Wednesday.

"This is the oldest evidence of storytelling," Maxime Aubert, an archaeologist at Australia's Griffith University, told AFP.

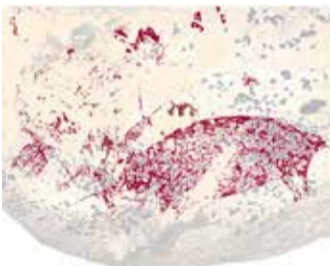
Aubert was part of the team that identified the previous record holder in 2019, a hunting scene found in a nearby Indonesian cave then estimated to be nearly 44,000 years old.

The latest discovery, which was dated using a new laser technique, marks "the first time we've passed the 50,000-year barrier," said Aubert, a co-author of a new study in Nature describing the find.

That early humans were able to tell such a "sophisticated" story through art could rewrite our understanding of human cognitive evolution, he added.

"Our discovery suggests that storytelling was a much older part of human history... than previously thought," study co-author archaeologist Adam Brumm told a press conference.

For the discovery, the researchers used a new method that uses lasers and computer software to create a "map" of rock samples.



This laser ablation technique is more precise, easier, quicker, cheaper, and requires much smaller rock samples than the previous uranium series method, Aubert said.

The team first tested the new technique on the previous record holder.

It determined that the hunting scene was actually at least 48,000 years old -- 4,000 years older than the uranium series method determined in 2019.

The team then tried the laser method out on a previously undated painting first spotted in a cave on Indonesia's Sulawesi island in 2017.

It was found to be at least 51,200 years old, smashing the previous record.

The painting, which is in poor condition, shows three people around a wild pig.

"We don't know exactly what they're doing," Aubert admitted.

He speculated that the paintings were likely made by the first group of humans who moved through Southeast Asia before arriving in Australia around 65,000 years ago.

"It's probably just a matter of time before we find samples that are older," Aubert added.

China leading surge in generative AI patents: UN

AFP | Geneva, Switzerland

The number of international patent filings for innovations using cutting-edge generative artificial intelligence have surged eightfold in six years, the UN said Wednesday, the majority from China-based innovators.

A total of 54,000 patents were filed for generative AI innovations in the decade leading to 2023, the United Nations' World Intellectual Property Organization said in a fresh report.

A full 25 percent of those were filed in the last year alone, WIPO said.

So-called GenAI, in which trained computer programmes create everything from text and videos to music and computer code in seconds on simple prompts, "has emerged as a game-changing technology", said WIPO chief Daren Tang.

GenAI patents still only represent six percent of all AI patents globally, but the number of filings is rising fast.

WIPO highlighted that GenAI patents had increased eightfold since 2017, when the deep neural network architecture behind large language models that have become synonymous with AI was first introduced.

Putin arrives in Kazakhstan for Shanghai alliance summit



Putin meets with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan
AFP | Moscow, Russia

Russian President Vladimir Putin has arrived in Kazakhstan, the Kremlin said yesterday, where he will attend a meeting of Shanghai alliance nations in the capital Astana.

The nine-member Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which encompasses a vast stretch of the globe from Moscow to Beijing, includes around half the world's population.

Its permanent members are this year's host Kazakhstan, India, China, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and, as of last year, Iran.

Labour predicted to edge

AFP | London, United Kingdom

Britain's political leaders made a final push for votes yesterday on the last day of an election campaign expected to return a Labour government after 14 years of Conservative rule.

Ex-premier Boris Johnson staged an 11th-hour rallying call for the flagging Tories but an ally of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak conceded their party was staring at an "extraordinary landslide" defeat.

Voters will cast ballots from 7:00 a.m.



Britain's Prime Minister and Conservative Party leader Rishi Sunak delivers a speech

(0600 GMT) today, with polls predicting that Labour will win its first general election since 2005 -- making its leader Keir Starmer prime minister.

That outcome would see Britain swing leftwards back to the centre ground after almost a decade and a half of right-wing Conservative governments.

Starmer was criss-crossing the UK on Wednesday with visits in England, Scotland and Wales in a bid to shore up Labour support and warn against complacency in the campaign's final hours.

"If you want change, you have to vote for it," the 61-year-old told reporters, adding that he was "not taking anything for granted".

The Tories have been going all out to play upon people's fears, warning of tax rises and weaker national security if they are voted out, in what Labour sees as a desperate last stand to cling on to power.

They have also increasingly urged voters in recent weeks to

stop the prospect of Labour winning a "supermajority" -- a claim Labour fears is intended to hit turnout.

Work and Pensions Secretary Mel Stride, one of Sunak's closest allies, said Wednesday the electorate would "regret" handing Labour "untrammelled" power without an effective Tory opposition.

Bigger than Blair?

"If you look at the polls, it is pretty clear that Labour at this stage are heading for an extraordinary landslide on a scale that has probably never, ever been seen in this country before," he told right-wing broadcaster GB News.

Labour has enjoyed a consistent 20-point lead in the polls over the past two years with many voters dissatisfied at the Conservatives' handling of a range of issues including the cost of living, public services, immigration and the economy.

Dubai rowers to brave Arctic to highlight plastic

AFP | Dubai, United Arab Emirates

At an indoor pool in Dubai, three rowers battle artificial rain and simulated waves as they train for an Arctic voyage intended to highlight the perils of marine pollution.

Their quest will take the team from one extreme to the next.

Home base is the United Arab Emirates, notorious for its sweltering heat, especially in summer.

And their destination is one of the world's coldest regions -- although because of climate change it is warming three times faster than the global average.

For leader Toby Gregory, it is a chance to sound the alarm about the scourge of plastic waste in the world's oceans, a mission he took on after a 2023 Atlantic Ocean rowing trip during which he saw "a lot more plastic than I ever imagined".

Last year Gregory founded The Plastic Pledge, which tries to educate students about plastic disposal.

'Arctic Challenge'

The "Arctic Challenge" will see 46-year-old Gregory, his fellow



Members of the The Arctic Challenge Expedition Team rowers based in the UAE practice in simulated circumstances at an aviation training center in Dubai

Briton Andrew Savill, 39, and 30-year-old Irishwoman Orlagh Dempsey embark late this month on a 1,500-kilometre voyage.

They will set off from the city Tromso in northern Norway and head for Longyearbyen, capital of the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard.

They plan to row for roughly three weeks aboard an eight-metre (26-foot) boat flying the UAE flag, and with no sail or engine.

During a recent session at Dynamic Advanced Training, a centre that focuses on aviation, they

tried to board a vessel in choppy waves as artificial rain, thunder and lightning produced storm-like conditions.

But with temperatures in Dubai these days topping 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit), Arctic weather has become "very hard to replicate", Savill said.

Once at sea in the Arctic, the mercury is expected to hover between zero and 10 degrees Celsius, Savill said, so to prepare they hope to take advantage of whatever climate-controlled spaces they can find.