

## ► Move to enhance tourism, trade and exchanges

# China, Thailand sign mutual visa exemption agreement

By Zhao Yusha

China and Thailand signed on Sunday in Bangkok, Thailand a mutual visa exemption agreement, which will come into effect on March 1, 2024. The signing, which coincides with the ongoing wave of visa exemption agreements between China and other Southeast Asian countries, demonstrates China's commitment to expanding its openness. Experts believe the move aims not only to enhance tourism but also foster trade and facilitate exchanges.

During a media briefing after attending the signing ceremony in Bangkok with his Thai counterpart Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that the agreement would not only benefit tourism in Thailand and Chinese tourists but also enhance mutual understanding between the two peoples.

Wang said that as both countries

have entered the "visa-free era," it is believed that it will usher in a new peak in people-to-people exchanges between the two countries.

The number of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand will definitely increase significantly, said Wang, and that Thai friends are warmly welcomed to visit China and experience the vitality of China and the warmth and hospitality of the Chinese people.

Shortly after the news was released at noon on Sunday, data from Ctrip, one of China's largest online travel agencies, showed that the search popularity of keywords related to Thailand increased more than seven times compared to the previous day.

As of press time, the number of bookings from Chinese tourists traveling to Thailand for the 2024 Spring Festival has increased by more than 13 times compared to the previous year, according to Ctrip.

The hashtag "mutual visa exemption between China and Thailand" has been read more than 95 million times on China's X-like platform Sina Weibo as of press time.

On Thursday, China and Singapore also signed an agreement on mutual visa exemption, which will officially come into effect on February 9, 2024. Malaysia has also exempted Chinese citizens from visa requirements.

Mutual visa exemption policies between China and those Southeast Asian countries since the beginning of this year is another demonstration of China's efforts and determination to open up, Gu Xiaosong, dean of the ASEAN Research Institute of Hainan Tropical Ocean University, told the Global Times on Sunday. He noted that Southeast Asia, which is geographically adjacent and enjoys warm ties with China, is China's priority choice for further opening-up.

## Halting financial aid for UNRWA a greater challenge to UN authority: experts

By Xu Yelu

Following the announcements of US and Canada, Italy, the UK, Finland, Australia and the Netherlands, Germany also announced the suspension of financial assistance to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).

Experts said on Sunday that the humanitarian issues such as refugee relief brought about by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are anticipated to become even more complex, posing a greater challenge to the authority of the United Nations (UN).

At least eight countries have paused future funding to the UNRWA in the Near East amid an investigation into allegations that some workers of the UN agency participated in the October 7 attack on Israel in 2023.

A senior Palestinian official on Saturday urged countries that have announced the suspension of support for UNRWA to reconsider their decisions to avoid political and humanitarian risks, according to the Xinhua News Agency.

On Saturday, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said the funding pause from countries that accounts for much of its budget will serve to exacerbate the region's humanitarian crisis, fueled by the cutting-off of fuel and supplies.

"It is shocking to see a suspension of funds to the Agency in reaction to allegations against a small group of staff, especially given the immediate action that UNRWA took by terminating their contracts and asking for a transparent independent investigation," Lazzarini said in a statement.

Chinese experts said that since the outbreak of the latest Israeli-Palestinian conflict, UNRWA operations have encountered significant difficulties. Its difficulties in terms of funding, security and personnel will further exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the living difficulties in the West Bank, Liu Zhongmin, a professor at the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, told the Global Times on Sunday.

Additionally, humanitarian issues such as refugee relief are anticipated to become even more complex, posing a greater challenge to the authority of the UN, Liu said.

The UNRWA, established in 1949 as a subsidiary organ of the UN General Assembly, serves to support the relief and human development of Palestinian refugees and is entrusted with the mission of providing humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestinian refugees in the agency's operational areas until a just and lasting solution to their plight is achieved.

## ► Commemorating Leningrad liberation



**Russian President Vladimir Putin (right) and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko lay flowers as they attend the opening ceremony of a monument to civilians killed during World War II, as part of events marking the 80th anniversary of the 1944 liberation of Leningrad from a Nazi blockade near the village of Zaitsevo, Leningrad region, Russia on January 27, 2024.**  
Photo: IC

## Experts worry nuclear arms race as US reportedly to station weapons in UK

By Zhang Changyue

After UK media reported over the weekend that the US plans to station nuclear weapons for the first time in 15 years in the UK amid the "increasing threat" from Russia, experts said the move will only trigger more turbulence in Europe and a potential nuclear arms race.

The US plans to place the B61-12 gravity bomb, three times as strong as the Hiroshima device, at RAF Lakenheath air base in Suffolk in case of a

potential war between NATO and Russia, The Telegraph reported.

A UK ministry of defense spokesperson said that it remains a longstanding UK and NATO policy to neither confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear weapons at a given location when responding to the disclosure.

The disclosure comes as several officials from the US and UK called on the UK to be prepared for the possibility of a war between NATO and Rus-

sia. Earlier this week, General Sir Patrick Sanders, the head of the British army, said its 74,000-strong ranks need to be bolstered by at least 45,000 reservists and citizens in order to be better readied for possible conflict, the Guardian reported.

In September 2023, the Russian foreign ministry said Moscow will view any move to return US nuclear weapons to the UK as an escalation and will respond with "countermeasures" for its own security when responding to an item

in the 2024 US air force budget for building a dormitory at RAF Lakenheath for personnel on a "potential surety mission" – military jargon for nuclear safety and security.

The US' reinforcement of tactical nuclear weapons deployment in Europe is an established strategy, and the re-deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in the UK is highly likely to happen as it suits the practical needs for both the US and the UK to target Russia, Song Zhongping, a Chi-

nese military expert and TV commentator, told the Global Times.

The US is pushing for more military competition between NATO and Russia, even at the level of nuclear weapons. The actions by the US is making the security environment in Europe more challenging, said Wei Dongxu, a Beijing-based military expert.

