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SPORT | Page 1

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US to set limits on Egyptian bank in bid to pressure Iran

The Treasury Department is due to cut off a major Egyptian bank's operations in the United Arab Emirates from the US financial system, an official confirmed yesterday, as Washington pushes to choke Iran off economically. The move impacts UAE branches of Egypt's second biggest bank, Banque Misr, blocking their banking access to US financial institutions. US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent laid out plans this week for Iran's "economic asphyxiation," six months into a war on Tehran that is now locked in a stalemate. The Treasury Department's action will only take effect after a month-long public comment period. In a statement first reported by the Financial Times, Bessent said Washington has "warned that Iran's enablers cannot continue to enjoy access to the US dollar and the global financial system." "Banque Misr UAE decided to find out the hard way and, today, we are taking the first step in holding it accountable for its continued, egregious support of the Iranian regime." (AFP)

COMMUNITY

See Page 4

6 months into war, Iran still open to diplomacy

■ **US should build trust, acknowledge our rights and uphold commitments: Iran FM**

AFP
Tehran

Iran left the door open to diplomacy yesterday, six months into a war with the United States that has upended the Middle East, but only if Washington abandons its pressure campaign. "Putting diplomacy back on track isn't impossible. It hinges on US understanding of one simple fact: pressure doesn't work," Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi posted on X yesterday. Diplomatic efforts, spearheaded by mediators including Pakistan and Qatar, have tried for months to bring an end to the war started by the US and Israel in late February to no avail. While a ceasefire was agreed in April and a memorandum of understanding towards a final peace deal was signed in June, no agreement has been forthcoming and Washington has since declared "economic warfare" against Tehran. In the latest effort to reinvigorate diplomacy, Araghchi met his Qatari counterpart on Thursday in the Iranian capital to discuss the Strait of Hormuz, closed by the Islamic republic at the start of the war, at the tail end of a week of intense Iranian talks with Oman and Pakistan. A US naval counter-blockade of Iranian



Iranian FM Abbas Araghchi. (AFP)

ports is squeezing petrol supplies in Iran, amid a shortfall of domestic production, as the US ramps up pressure on its foe, declaring an "economic D-Day". The April ceasefire put an end to the most intense fighting, but sporadic attacks, mainly around the Strait of Hormuz, have dimmed the prospects of a final peace agreement. In a statement yesterday, US Senator Jack Reed criticised President Donald Trump over the war. "Six months later, not a single objective has been achieved," said Reed, the top Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee. "Indeed, he has weakened our position in the Middle East and the world significantly." Tehran has for weeks been holding talks on the future of Hormuz with Muscat, whose territorial waters account for the other half of the strait, while insisting that Hormuz will remain closed so long as Washington

has not fulfilled its commitments under the June memorandum, which calls for lifting the US counter-blockade and removing sanctions. "The US should build trust, speak respectfully, acknowledge our rights and uphold commitments," Araghchi said. Iranian lawmaker Esmail Kowsari reiterated to state television yesterday that if the memorandum was not implemented and the US "does not respect its commitments, not only will the Strait of Hormuz remain closed, but the United States must be ready for our offensive actions and we will seek them in the most distant places". While Washington now aims to crush Iran economically, Tehran has weathered decades of international sanctions and experts remain sceptical about how much more pressure the US can bring to bear. Analysts say the US plan to isolate Iran would require unlikely cooperation from trading partner China, which has defended its co-operation with Tehran and vowed to safeguard its interests. China remains able to buy Iranian crude, an important source of revenue for Tehran, via overland routes not reliant on the Strait of Hormuz. US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent has said "no one is above the reach of US sanctions" when asked if Washington would target Chinese banks that do business with Iran, ahead of an expected September visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to the US capital.




PM discusses peace efforts with Kuwait FM

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani and Kuwaiti Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Jarrah Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, have held a phone conversation. The two sides discussed bilateral relations and ways to support and strengthen them, as well as the latest regional developments, particularly the diplomatic efforts and joint co-ordination aimed at de-escalating tensions and enhancing security and stability in the region. During the call, HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs reiterated Qatar's support for all diplomatic efforts and endeavours aimed at reaching a resolution that ensures the freedom of maritime navigation and paves the way for a comprehensive agreement that achieves lasting peace in the region. (QNA)

Floral tributes to King Harald

A small photograph of King Harald V of Norway is seen among flowers at a makeshift memorial at the Royal Palace square in Oslo yesterday. Thousands of people gathered outside Norway's royal palace to pay their respects to King Harald, who died yesterday aged 89 after a reign of three and a half decades. (AFP) Page 9



Qatar Airways, Uber partner to smoothen corporate travel

Qatar Airways has launched its latest partnership with Uber for Business to enhance the corporate travel experience by delivering greater flexibility and convenience for businesses and corporate travellers worldwide. Through this partnership, members of Qatar Airways' corporate travel programme, Beyond Business, can redeem Qrewards for Uber ride vouchers, which are credited directly to the user's Uber wallet and utilised for global business travel. By transforming corporate ground transportation and employee mobility, Uber for Business delivers the seamless, premium travel experiences that modern workforces expect. Simultaneously, its intuitive central dashboard gives travel managers the precise oversight and automated expensing needed to effortlessly enforce policy compliance and maximise savings. This integration extends Qatar Airways' premium corporate offering beyond air travel, offering businesses of all sizes greater flexibility in managing end-to-end journeys and providing corporate travellers with priority services and seamless access to ground transportation. The collaboration creates additional opportunities for corporate travellers to save and earn rewards while travelling for business. It also allows businesses to better track and control travel spending. Beyond Business members can enjoy free of charge, high-speed Wi-Fi on up to 323 Starlink-enabled daily flights, earn and redeem Qrewards, access Privilege Club tier offers, and receive priority baggage benefits. (QNA)

HMC cuts specialist appointment wait from 58 days to 16

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) has reduced the average waiting time for patients to secure their first specialist appointment from 58 days in 2024 to about 16 days, HMC director-general Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Suwaidi has said. The reduction followed a series of operational measures aimed at improving access to healthcare, increasing efficiency and enhancing the patient experience, he said. Al-Suwaidi was speaking during the fourth episode of the National Planning Council's 'Development Podcast', which examined HMC's readiness and its contribution to the objectives of Qatar's Third Na-

tional Development Strategy and Qatar National Vision 2030. When al-Suwaidi assumed responsibility for HMC in 2024, more than 70,000 patients were on appointment waiting lists, with referred patients waiting an average of about 58 days for their first specialist consultation. HMC subsequently introduced a package of measures to reduce waiting times, including co-operation with private-sector hospitals, referrals of selected cases to the private sector, evening clinics and two-shift operations. These measures brought the average waiting period down to about 16 days. HMC's target is to provide patients with a specialist appointment within 14 days. HMC has also taken measures to strengthen the continuity of medicine supplies



HMC director-general Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Suwaidi.

during periods of regional instability. The corporation temporarily reduced the dispensing period for chronic-disease medication from three months to one month in 2026 as a precaution while it reorganised its relationship with suppliers

and adjusted its supply chains. Al-Suwaidi said the supply system was stabilised within about a month and a half, after which the normal three-month dispensing period resumed. The measure was intended to safeguard the availability of medicines, treatments and medical supplies without interrupting patients' access to essential medication. Meanwhile, HMC has incorporated patient feedback more directly into its operational management through a system of telephone calls to citizens after they leave emergency departments. The calls, which average about one minute and 45 seconds, allow officials to identify problems that may not emerge through conventional electronic surveys. Patient feedback is recorded and monitored through a performance dashboard.

Al-Suwaidi said the system has helped identify and address problems involving appointments, procedures, equipment, cleanliness, security and other aspects of service delivery. The emphasis on measurable performance extends across HMC's 14-hospital network. Al-Suwaidi said the corporation has developed interactive monitoring systems covering performance indicators from the institutional level down to individual hospitals, departments, specialities and, in some cases, individual doctors. The indicators track metrics such as patient volumes, consultation times, and surgical activity. Emergency department data cover patient numbers, waiting times after triage, the time taken to see a

physician, bed availability and the period between admission decisions and transfer to an appropriate department. HMC provides more than 22,000 specialised health services across its network, serving both citizens and residents. Al-Suwaidi said HMC's management approach is centred on teamwork, data, technology, continuous performance measurement and direct engagement with patients, with operational initiatives contributing to broader strategic objectives. He also said Qatarisation extends beyond administrative positions to medical and technical professions, with HMC supporting the development of Qatari doctors and other healthcare professionals across general and specialised fields. **To Page 2**



Arab Group backs Syria's unity and stability at UNSC meeting

Qatar, in a statement on behalf of the Arab Group at the United Nations, has renewed its firm position in support of Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, rejecting external interference in its internal affairs and any attempt to undermine its security and stability.

It affirmed that Syria's unity and stability constitute a pillar of regional security and stability.

This came in a statement delivered by HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani, before the UN Security Council's monthly briefing on the situation in the Middle East (Syrian Arab Republic), in New York.

She said that the Arab Group commends the steps taken by the Syrian government to extend state authority across the country, advance transitional justice and accountability, address the issue of missing persons, and create conditions for the return of refugees and displaced persons.

HE Sheikha Alya called for supporting the Syrian government, increasing international assistance and investment, and strengthening economic co-operation to support recovery and reconstruction, as well as creating con-



ditions for the safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return of refugees and displaced persons.

She also highlighted the importance of removing remaining obstacles to Syria's economic recovery and international integration.

HE Sheikha Alya further praised host countries for sheltering Syrian refugees and called on the international community to expand support for these countries.

She also welcomed growing co-operation between the Syrian government and the UN, highlighted by the recent visit to Syria by the UN secretary-general and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, as well as co-operation with the International

Atomic Energy Agency and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

HE Sheikha Alya said that the Arab Group condemns the bombings in Damascus and its countryside and all criminal acts threatening security and stability.

She commended measures taken by the Syrian government to counter these threats, combat terrorism and terrorist groups, and maintain security and stability, stressing the importance of supporting these efforts.

The Arab Group, she continued, also welcomes the US announcement removing Syria from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, 47 years after its designation, describing the move as a positive development that supports efforts to achieve stability in Syria and the region.

HE Sheikha Alya also said that the Arab Group strongly condemns Israeli airstrikes targeting Abu Al Duhur military airport in northwestern Syria, stressing that the attacks represent a dangerous escalation and a flagrant violation of Syria's sovereignty, security, stability and territorial integrity.

The Arab Group, she said, stresses that Israel's continued violations of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity

risk increasing tensions, undermining regional peace and stability, and weakening respect for international law and the principles of the UN Charter.

She affirmed that the Arab Group calls on the international community to take a firm, clear and principled position against the ongoing aggression against Syria and to take concrete steps, in accordance with international law and the UN Charter, to end these violations, ensure full respect for the 1974 Disengagement Agreement, and secure the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the areas they have occupied, in order to prevent further escalation and protect regional peace and stability.

HE Sheikha Alya also noted that the Arab Group reaffirms that the Golan Heights are occupied Arab territory, and that Israel's imposition of its laws, jurisdiction and administration over the Golan is null and void and without legal effect, in violation of relevant UN resolutions, particularly Security Council Resolution 497 (1981).

She said that the Arab Group reaffirms its support for Syria and its people in building a stable and prosperous state based on justice, equality, the rule of law and the protection of the rights of all Syrians. - QNA

Amir sends cable of condolences to Algeria's president

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and HH the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani sent yesterday cables of condolences to Algeria's President Abdelmadjid Tebboune on the victims of wildfires that raged in some eastern and central states of Algeria, wishing them a speedy recovery.

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani also sent a similar cable to Algerian Prime Minister Sifi Ghrieb, wishing the victims a speedy recovery. - QNA

Amir condoles with King Haakon of Norway on death of father

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and HH the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani sent cables of condolences to King Haakon VIII of Norway on the death of his father, King Harald V.

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani also sent a similar cable to Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store. - QNA

Experts hail govt move on real estate tokenisation

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

Qatar's real estate market could attract a broader pool of investors under a proposed regulatory framework for real estate tokenisation and the trading of real estate tokens approved by the Cabinet.

Prepared by the Ministry of Justice in co-operation with the Ministry of Municipality, Qatar Central Bank, the Qatar Financial Markets Authority and the Real Estate Regulatory Authority, the draft law is being viewed by industry experts as an important step towards modernising property investment in Qatar.

At the centre of the proposed framework is a model that allows real estate assets to be divided into digital units, enabling investors to acquire fractional interests in properties rather than purchasing entire assets.

Experts said that the approach could lower the financial barrier to entry and allow investors with smaller amounts of capital to participate in projects that would otherwise be beyond their reach.

They also said that a clear regulatory framework could strengthen transaction security, transparency and investor confidence while creating new forms of property ownership and investment.

Ahmed al-Kubaisi, chairman of a contracting and real estate company, said that the initiative could provide a significant boost to the property market by bringing new categories of investors, particularly smaller investors, into the sector.

He said an important issue that remains to be clarified is whether participation will be limited to Qatar citizens or extended to residents.

Opening the market to residents, al-Kubaisi said, could generate additional demand and stimulate activity in areas where investor interest remains relatively weak, including parts of northern Qatar.

The ability to purchase a fraction of a property rather than an entire asset, he added, could support investment in residential, commercial and administrative properties, generating wider economic activity.

Real estate expert Yousef Hamad al-Suwaidi described tokenisation as a major development for property investment, particularly for individuals with limited income or capital.

Under the model, a property can be divided into digital units representing fractional interests.

For example, a property valued at QR10mn could be divided

into 10,000 units, each worth QR1,000, allowing investors to purchase units according to their financial capacity.

Al-Suwaidi said the units are offered through nine companies approved by the real estate registry, while blockchain technology forms part of the infrastructure supporting the tokenisation process.

Real estate expert Khalifa al-Maslamani said the proposed system could substantially expand the ownership base by allowing investors with different levels of capital to participate in large-scale projects.

An investor with QR100,000, for example, could acquire a stake in a major property alongside investors contributing significantly larger amounts.

Specialised, approved companies, he continued, would manage the property and organise the relationship among the different owners.

Al-Maslamani noted that the concept represents a more advanced and structured form of traditional co-ownership, replacing the need for several investors to jointly own an entire building with a system in which ownership can be divided into clearly defined digital interests.

Certified real estate appraiser Faisal Meshaal al-Dosari said the Cabinet's approval represents an important development for Qatar's property sector and reflects the country's efforts to keep pace with global trends in digital investment.

He said that the significance of the proposed legislation lies in establishing a clear regulatory framework for real estate tokens, including the rights and obligations of token holders, their relationship with the underlying property, and the procedures governing issuance, trading and settlement.

Tokenisation, al-Dosari added, could diversify Qatar's real estate and investment products while creating new forms of participation in property assets.

However, he stressed that the success of the model will depend on regulatory clarity, particularly regarding ownership rights, investor obligations and the mechanisms governing issuance, trading and settlement.

Real estate expert Ali al-Ajlan al-Marri said the proposed legislation represents a regulatory step that helps integrate digital innovation into Qatar's property and investment sectors.

He highlighted the potential of combining the reliability of the real estate registry with financial and regulatory oversight and distributed-ledger technology to create more efficient and transparent investment models.

QNL, Wifaq celebrate family storytelling heritage

To celebrate the enduring power of family narratives, the Qatar National Library (QNL), in collaboration with the Family Consulting Centre (Wifaq), hosted the "A Story from a Loved One: Family Cohesion and Storytelling Heritage" event on Thursday.

The gathering underscored how the simple act of sharing stories serves as a vital bridge between generations, strengthening emotional bonds, cultivating shared values, and preserving cultural knowledge.

The event opened with a panel discussion, where specialists examined the impact of storytelling on family dynamics.

A key focus of the session was the newly launched book, *Qissa Min Ghali (A Story from a Loved One)*, highlighted as an exemplar for chronicling human experiences and transmitting core social and familial values.

The panel underscored the vital importance of preserving family memory for future generations, while spotlighting the pivotal role of cultural and community institutions in championing and safeguarding this rich heritage.

Writer and novelist Issa Abdullah discussed how family stories transfer values and build intergenerational belonging.

Wifaq community awareness director Lolwa al-Yazeedi highlighted the human messages embedded in the newly launched book and the role of real-life stories in fostering family dialogue.

Rounding out the panel, Doha International Family Institute (Difi) executive director Dr Sharifa Noaman al-Emadi explored strategies for preserving family folktales for future generations.

Reflecting on the initiative's core objectives, al-Yazeedi said: "At Wifaq, we believe that family cohesion is built on the details of daily life. The stories passed down through generations create a vital space for dialogue, carrying values, memories, and shared experiences that foster a deep sense of belonging."

"Through this session, we aim to encourage families to reclaim that space," she said. "By giving youth the opportunity to listen to, engage with, and document the stories of their parents



and grandparents, we are strengthening inter-generational communication."

"Ultimately, this initiative underscores the importance of involving young people in preserving their family's heritage-transforming spoken memories into a lasting written legacy that binds generations together," al-Yazeedi stated.

Adding to this sentiment, Maram al-Mahmoud, the QNL's manager of Programmes and Services for Children and Young Adults, said: "Every family carries its own archive of stories that shape our identities and what matters to us, long before anyone writes them down."

"Partnering with Wifaq on this event enabled us to remind families that the everyday narratives they share are as much a part of our national heritage as the works on our shelves," she said.

This vision was brought to life through the official launch of the book *Qissa Min Ghali*, which features a unique collection of stories written by children and young adults between the ages of 12-14.

These young authors drew direct inspiration from the oral histories and tales shared by their parents and grandparents, translating oral heritage into written works.

Safwat al-Ghasham chronicles his theatre journey from Yemen to Qatar

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

The Ministry of Culture has published *The Theatre That Dwelled Within Me... From Yemen to Qatar*, a memoir by theatre artist and director Safwat al-Ghasham, tracing a career shaped by the stage across two countries.

Blending personal recollection with artistic history, the book follows al-Ghasham's early experiences in Yemen, his move to Qatar and the productions, relationships and cultural settings that influenced his creative outlook.

Theatre emerges not simply as a profession, but as the space in which his memories and artistic identity were formed.

Al Jasra Cultural and Social Club's cultural salon co-ordinator and writer Hanan Badie praised Qatar's evolving artistic landscape in an interview with *Gulf Times*.

Speaking on local creative growth, she stated: "The Ministry of Culture plays a pivotal role in encouraging and promoting books in Qatar, and this latest publication by Safwat al-Ghasham is very important in its relation to keeping pace with progress in the field of theatre and developing the capabilities of Qatari actors, and it deserves to have a lecture organised to discuss its dimensions and analyse it from the perspective of theatrical criticism."

Al-Ghasham earned a bachelor's degree in acting and directing from Kuwait's Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in 1986.

He later worked as an actor and director at the National Theatre in Sana'a from 1996 to 2007, contributing to a generation that helped advance Yemen's theatre movement.

His stage work included *Yemeni*

Wisdom, Peace in Peace and *The Last Supper*, as well as the operetta *The Dam of Wadi Saba* and the cultural tableau presented at the opening of the 20th Gulf Cup in Yemen.

In 2013, he directed *O Listeners of the Voice*, a production engaging with national dialogue and social concerns.

Al-Ghasham also appeared in television drama, including the 1994 series *The Story of Saadia*.

His leadership roles included managing the Yemeni-Gulf Company for Cultural and Media Production and chairing the General Organisation for Theatre and Cinema in Yemen.

After joining Qatar's theatre scene in 2008, al-Ghasham worked in local theatre until 2013 and was appointed cultural adviser at the Yemeni embassy in Doha in 2014.

He also led the Yemeni community theatre group and direct-



ed *Al-Tahesh* for the Doha Theatre Festival.

He currently supervises acting workshops at the Ministry of Culture's Theatre Affairs Centre, including "The Art of Acting and its Techniques" and "The First Step to Acting".

Drawing on the Stanislavski method, the sessions emphasise close reading of the script, an actor's understanding of character, truthful performance, breathing and physical presence.

The play *Layla* was among the works to emerge from the programme.

HMC cuts specialist appointment wait from 58 days to 16

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He said that Qataris hold about 99% of leadership positions across the HMC's sectors.

The medical and nursing sectors are among the largest components of the healthcare system and have their own sector-level leadership structures.

Al-Suwaidi said the HMC's longer-term strategy places the patient at the centre of investments in technology, equipment and healthcare services, with particular attention to chronic diseases including cancer, cardiovascular

conditions and genetic disorders.

These priorities are linked to Qatar's national health strategy and are measured through defined performance indicators, with service quality, patient experience and health outcomes among the key objectives.

The HMC is also seeking to improve public understanding of appointment scheduling.

The corporation has stressed that a follow-up appointment scheduled several months after an initial consultation does not necessarily indicate a long waiting list.

Such appointments may be clinically deter-

mined as part of a treatment plan, with physicians scheduling patients for reassessment after one, two or three months depending on their condition.

The HMC is revising appointment messages to make it clearer when a later appointment reflects planned clinical follow-up rather than a delay due to capacity constraints.

The measures underline the HMC's broader effort to improve access to healthcare, using data, technology, and patient feedback to identify operational challenges and improve services.

IMO calls for practical solution to restore freedom of navigation in Strait of Hormuz

QNA
London

The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) yesterday called for practical solutions to restore freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz as the conflict in the Middle East continues to affect shipping and maritime security.

IMO Secretary-General Arsenio Dominguez said in a statement marking six months since the conflict began in the region that the organisation had verified at least 70 attacks on international shipping since the start of the conflict, resulting in the deaths of 19 seafarers.

He added that the situation in the Strait of Hormuz remained unresolved, while thousands of seafarers continued to live and work under conditions of heightened risk and uncertainty.

Dominguez explained that



while some ships and their crews had been able to leave the Gulf, as many as 400 vessels carrying around 6,000 seafarers had been unable to depart safely since the conflict began on Feb 28.

He warned of the serious short-term and long-term repercussions of the crisis, noting that disruptions to vital supply chains for fuel, fertilisers and other commodities were affecting communities and economies around the world.

The IMO secretary-general stressed the need for renewed political will and co-operation to fulfil this commitment, calling on all member states and the shipping industry to work with the IMO and the UN system to advance practical solutions for restoring freedom of navigation through the strait.

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most strategically important maritime energy corridors, with around 20mn barrels per day of crude oil and petroleum products passing through it, equivalent to nearly a quarter of global seaborne oil trade, in addition to around one-fifth of global liquefied natural gas trade.

Disruptions in the strait since late February have reduced oil and gas flows and increased volatility in global energy prices, heightening concerns over security of supply and international trade flows.

Lunar eclipse in Saudi Arabia



The moon during a partial lunar eclipse in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, yesterday. (Reuters)

Al-Sharaa appoints Kurdish leader Abdi as his adviser

AFP
Damascus

Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa appointed Kurdish leader Mazloum Abdi as a presidential adviser, state media said yesterday, days after Abdi announced the dissolution of his Kurdish forces under an integration deal with Damascus.

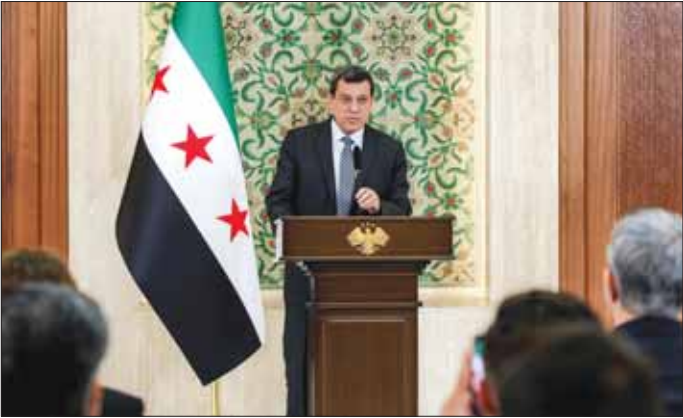
The education ministry also published a decision authorising Kurdish-language instruction in public and private schools.

"Mustafa Khalil Abdi is appointed as adviser to the presidency of the republic," announced the decree, signed by Sharaa and published by state news agency SANA.

Abdi, who has been known by several different names, was for years the leader of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Washington-backed fighters at the forefront of the battle against the Islamic State jihadist group.

On Tuesday, he announced the SDF's dissolution as part of a January deal with al-Sharaa to integrate the Kurds' forces and civilian administration into the state.

Syria's new Islamist authorities who toppled longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad in 2024 have



Mazloum Abdi, leader of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, speaking during a televised speech at the People's Palace in Damascus on Tuesday. (AFP)

been seeking to extend state control across the whole country.

The integration deal was a major victory for al-Sharaa but ended the Kurds' long-held hopes for official autonomy.

US special envoy to Syria Tom Barrack said on Tuesday that "this is what real integration looks like... former counterparts with differing points of view crafting a diplomatic solution to strengthen the sovereign nation of Syria".

"Securing substantive roles for our valued partners" includ-

ing Abdi within the government "pays due respect to their leadership, the sacrifices of our Kurdish partners, and the constructive contribution they have made to regional stability", Barrack added, without indicating what role Abdi would have.

Abdi said on Tuesday that the SDF's dissolution followed "the completion of the process of integrating our forces into the brigades of the Syrian army".

Abdi signed up to the January integration deal following clashes

in which the Kurds lost swathes of territory to government troops, and as their longtime backer Washington drew close to the new authorities in Damascus.

On Thursday evening the education ministry issued a decision authorising Kurdish-language classes in public and private schools in areas where "Kurdish citizens make up a significant percentage of the population", alongside Arabic and English.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD), Syria's most powerful Kurdish party, yesterday welcomed the "positive and important" developments on the SDF's integration and the Kurdish language but warned these were "not sufficient".

"Syria's new constitution must include clearly the recognition of the Kurdish people as a native people and partner in Syria, and recognition of the Kurdish language and the Kurdish people's political, cultural and national rights," it said in a statement.

It also urged the completion of the merger of the Kurdish Women's Protection Units (YPJ) into the state, after the female fighting force, which is part of the SDF, said it had discussed its integration into the interior ministry with government officials this week.

New Israeli strikes kill 5 in Gaza, authorities say

AFP
Gaza City

Israeli strikes killed five people in Gaza yesterday, authorities in the Palestinian territory said, in the latest day of attacks despite international appeals to move ahead on a peace plan.

The civil defence agency, which serves as a rescue service under Hamas, said that the bodies of three people were recovered in pieces after Israeli strikes in the town of Al-Qarara, east of Khan Yunis.

Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis named the three people and said they all belonged to the same family, with two aged 42 and one aged 28.

An Israeli military spokesperson, contacted by AFP, said that the military was looking into it.

Gaza authorities later reported two additional deaths, including in a drone attack near Gaza City.

The latest deaths came the same day that Israel carried out a rare airstrike in the occupied West Bank, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying it killed militants planning attacks from the Palestinian territory.

Israel has kept striking the Gaza Strip and its forces have made further inroads despite a US-brokered ceasefire announced in October, with Israel insisting it must eliminate threats from Hamas.

Nickolay Mladenov, the high representative for Gaza under the "Board of Peace" established by President Donald Trump to implement the deal, said on Thursday that deadly Israeli strikes made it hard for the people of Gaza to feel the ceasefire, which he said was still holding.

"Every use of force that does not answer an immediate threat, and every incident that the deconfliction mechanism was not asked to resolve, costs this process something very hard to buy back," he told the UN Security Council.

He said Hamas also has not fulfilled its commitments including on disarmament, although the group promised late last month to do so.

Israel has warned that it will retaliate for the flying of kites in Gaza after a number crossed into Israel, leading some parents to stop their children from kite-flying.

In previous years, kites and balloons laden with explosives have been flown from Gaza. The latest did not contain explosives although at least one reportedly had a political message written on it.

Defence Minister Israel Katz said on Thursday that the deadline had passed to stop kite-flying, warning, according to Israeli media: "Any launch constitutes an act of terrorism in itself, and we will treat it as such."

Extensive power cuts hamper life in Sudan

Sudanese welder Shannan Mohammed has been building furniture for a family in Omdurman little by little as constant blackouts interrupt his work.

Pointing to half-built doors, chairs, and tables in the courtyard of a home, he says, "All this is money that has been frozen because of lack of electricity stopping the work." Army-controlled areas of Sudan have been plagued by blackouts that have worsened recently due to a combination of targeting of the power grid by the rival Rapid Support Forces (RSF)

and meagre government funding to carry out repairs. The blackouts have impeded the lives of hundreds of thousands who have returned to Khartoum since the army retook it last year and have undermined attempts to rebuild the devastated economy.

"They give you five hours [of power], and then it cuts. It comes back the next day. And it has no benefit for a working person because it comes at night," Mohammed said.

Even household tasks have become impossible, Mohammed's sister Awatef told Reuters.

"Every time I do the laundry, I don't get to finish it because the power cuts off," she said. "We only eat take-out from the street, so that nothing is left over for us to put in the refrigerator."

High gas prices put generators out of reach for many. Earlier this month, Sudan's prime minister exempted solar panels for personal use from customs and fees. The conflict in Sudan has increasingly turned into a drone war, with both sides targeting key civilian infrastructure in addition to military targets. The war has devastated livelihoods and spread famine in

multiple parts of the country.

"The targeting of the electricity sector in particular was very significant," said a spokesperson for the Khartoum state government, Altayeb Saadeldin, listing looting of copper wires and fuel and other components, as well as drone attacks, as reasons for the outages.

Sudan's main power source, the Merowe dam, had been among targets hit, he said.

Asked for comment, an RSF source said allegations that the RSF had targeted the power grid were "incorrect and army propaganda". (Reuters)



Israeli activists hold up posters as they demonstrate, calling for an end to settler violence, outside the European Union office in Jerusalem, yesterday. (AFP)

China's help critical, but unlikely, for US to choke off Iran

AFP
Beijing

The United States has threatened the "economic asphyxiation" of Iran, but analysts say that a successful chokehold would require unlikely co-operation from China.

Almost six months into the Middle East war, Washington this week laid out plans to expand sanctions against the Islamic republic, warning that any nation which continued to enable Tehran would become a "global pariah".

China is among countries whose entities have already been hit by the sweeping US plan, with Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent telling Beijing to "get with the programme".

But Beijing instead has defended its co-operation with Tehran and vowed to safeguard its interests.

The apparent impasse is likely to further strain ties between Beijing and Washington, ahead of an expected visit by China's Presi-

dent Xi Jinping to the US capital in September.

Iran has weathered sanctions for decades, using complex international financial networks to evade restrictions.

Cutting off Iran "would certainly require China's help", said political scientist Dylan Loh of Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

Beijing is a key customer for Iranian oil, while "a good amount of their trade also relies on (the Chinese currency) renminbi, which can be outside the reach of US sanctions", Loh told AFP.

Before the war, Tehran exported millions of barrels of oil a day, mostly to China.

"Oil is the central economic lever," said Nino Lezhava, a fellow at the Washington-based Center for European Policy Analysis.

Although most ship traffic in the vital Strait of Hormuz is still blocked, China is not totally cut off from Iran's crude thanks to the highways and railways of Central Asia, said Sun Degang, a professor



US President Donald Trump with Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent. (AFP/File photo)

of political science at Shanghai's Fudan University.

Despite Chinese purchases being lower than before, they remain an important source of revenue.

"Simply continuing to... maintain commercial channels and provide alternative payment mechanisms can substantially reduce the effectiveness of eco-

nom ic isolation," said Lezhava.

The United States is well aware of this.

Bessent said "no one is above the reach of US sanctions" when asked if Washington would target Chinese banks that do business with Iran.

However, while its sanctions announced on Monday targeted some Chinese entities accused of

helping Tehran procure "critical technology", Washington has so far held back from punishing major Chinese financial institutions.

The United States "can't expect to obtain China's support if it continues to implement sanctions on Chinese companies", said Fudan University's Sun.

"Sino-Iranian trade relations are legitimate and China will safeguard its economic sovereignty," China is already feeling some consequences from the Strait of Hormuz disruption, adding to economic strain from persistently sluggish domestic consumption.

Cutting off Iran would exacerbate that, as well as implicate Beijing in a messy conflict that has already weakened its strategic rival Washington.

Overall, China has "little reason" to co-operate with the United States on sanctions, said Chong Ja Ian, an associate professor of political science at the National University of Singapore.

On Tuesday, China's foreign ministry said its co-operation

with Iran has "always been conducted within the framework of international law and should not be interfered with or disrupted".

Chong said that "Beijing seems highly confident of its ability to push back successfully against the US", were it pressured.

China has expanded its capacities to deal "precisely with such scenarios", said Loh.

"China has its own tools to respond to protect its own interest as we have seen in the tit-for-tat export controls," he added.

China and the United States spent much of last year embroiled in an escalating trade war but reached a fragile truce when the two presidents met last October.

A successful global campaign against Iran may require Washington "to provide incentives" to Beijing to join it, said Lim Tai Wei, a professor and East Asia expert at Japan's Soka University. China would only co-operate "if the costs of supporting Iran became significantly higher than the strategic and economic benefits", said Lezhava.

Filipino youth from Qatar takes his violin to Asia’s concert stages

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

At 18, Filipino violinist Willie Valdehueza Munar has already performed alongside some of Asia’s finest young musicians after earning a place in the Asian Youth Orchestra 2026, marking another milestone in a musical journey that began in Qatar.

For Willie, the journey started quietly when he picked up the violin at around the age of 10. What began as an early interest gradually became an important part of his life, eventually taking him from Doha to Manila and then to prestigious stages across Asia.

A student at the Philippine International School Qatar, Willie had the opportunity to study at Qatar Music Academy for a year. Much of his musical development, however, came through self-study, regular practice and the guidance of people who supported his talent, particularly his mentor, Lilya Bekirova of Arcovio Violin Shop in Doha.

“Much of my musical development came through self-study, consistent practice, and the guidance of people who believed in me,” Willie told Gulf Times. Growing up as a Filipino in Qatar has also shaped his musical journey. He said living in a multicultural environment allowed him to experience different cultures and meet people from diverse backgrounds, while his family and the Filipino community kept him connected to his roots.

One of the major turning points came in 2024, when Willie travelled to the Philippines to compete in the National Music Competition for Young Artists (NAMCYA). He won Third Prize in the Solo Violin category, with the competition culminating at the historic Metropolitan Theatre in Manila. The achievement gave him greater confidence and encouraged him to pursue music more seriously. “That experience gave me confidence and motivated me to continue pursuing music seriously,” he said.

His progress eventually led to the Asian Youth Orchestra, which brings together talented young musicians aged 17 to 28 from across Asia. Willie was

the only youth musician from his community in Qatar to audition in Manila for the 2026 programme, competing alongside musicians from some of the Philippines’ leading music organisations.

Being selected was both a personal achievement and a moment of reflection. He said preparing for the audition required long hours of practice, focusing on technique, musical expression and confidence. His experience at NAMCYA had also helped him become more comfortable with the pressure of performing and competing at a high level.

“I knew I would be auditioning alongside highly talented young musicians from different countries, so I focused on improving my technique, musical

expression, and confidence,” he said. When he learned that he had been selected for the 2026 orchestra, Willie said he felt “extremely grateful and excited.”

“I learned that being part of an orchestra is not simply about playing your own instrument well,” Willie said. “You have to listen carefully, communicate with your fellow musicians, follow the conductor, support your section, and understand how your individual part contributes to the entire orchestra.”

Among the highlights was performing at the Tianjin Juilliard School in Tianjin, China, the only Juilliard campus outside New York. The experience gave Willie a different perspective on the power of music to connect people from different backgrounds. “Standing on stage with musicians from across Asia made me realise how powerful music is as a universal language,” he said. “We may come from different countries and speak different languages, but when we perform together, we become one orchestra.”

For Willie, representing the Philippines while growing up in Qatar is a source of both pride and responsibility. Although Qatar is where he began learning and developing his musical abilities, he remains deeply connected to his Filipino identity. He sees his international performances as an opportunity to showcase the talent and determination of Filipino youth.

“I feel that I am carrying both places with me – the Philippines, my homeland, and Qatar, the country where I grew up and developed as a young musician,” he said. For him, representing the Philippines goes beyond carrying a national flag. It means reflecting values he considers central to his identity: discipline, humility, perseverance, respect and gratitude.

His journey has also reinforced his belief that young people do not need perfect circumstances to pursue their ambitions. Much of his own development came from practising independently, learning from others and continuing despite challenges. Willie hopes to continue developing as a violinist, perform on bigger stages and learn from accomplished musicians and teachers. More importantly, he hopes his journey can encourage other young Filipinos in Qatar to pursue their own talents.

“To the young Filipinos in Qatar who have a talent, a dream, or something they are passionate about, I would say: Believe in yourself. Be disciplined. Keep practising even when nobody is watching,” he said. He also urged young people not to be discouraged by humble beginnings or distracted by comparisons with others. “Don’t be afraid to start small, and don’t compare your journey to someone else’s,” he said.

For Willie, the path from a young boy learning the violin in Qatar to the international stage was never something he imagined. His story now includes a Third Prize at NAMCYA 2024, performances with the Asian Youth Orchestra and encounters with talented young musicians from across Asia. “I never imagined that the violin would take me to these places,” he said.

His advice to other young people is simple: “Dream big, stay humble, work hard, and never underestimate what is possible when you continue to believe in your talent.”

For an 18-year-old musician who began his journey with a violin in Qatar, the next destination may be another stage he has yet to imagine.

Violinist Willie Valdehueza Munar says Qatar shaped his development while his Filipino roots continue to inspire his journey

expression, and confidence,” he said. When he learned that he had been selected for the 2026 orchestra, Willie said he felt “extremely grateful and excited.”

“It was a moment when I realised that all the hours of practice, sacrifices, and challenges had a purpose,” he said. But joining the orchestra also carried a deeper meaning for the young musician. He understood that he would not only be developing his skills but also representing the Philippines internationally, carrying with him the experience of growing up and maturing as a musician in Qatar.

The orchestra experience exposed him to musicians from different countries, cultures and musical backgrounds. Inten-





The Stella Juva solar ambulance at the Amref International University during the Kenya launch in Nairobi. (AFP)

Solar-powered ambulance completes test run in Kenya

AFP
Nairobi

Dutch students yesterday celebrated a successful trial in Kenya of what they say is the world's first solar-powered ambulance, hoping to bring vital medical care to remote regions.

The futuristic yellow, black and white car – named ‘Stella Juva’ – is equipped with roof-mounted solar panels that power the engine.

It also carries testing kits for tuberculosis, cooled storage for vaccines, X-ray machines, and an ultrasound scanner.

The ambulance is designed to bring healthcare to the patient, rather than transport them to hospitals – vital in regions where medical facilities are few, and maternal health is still precarious.

“This vehicle will be a game changer,” said Geoffrey Sadera, of Amref Health Africa, which partnered on the project. Amref focuses on maternal and child health.

The two-seat ambulance can tackle off-road terrain, reach a top speed of 120 km/h, and on a sunny day has a range of roughly 715 km.

Its solar-charged battery ensures the car and its equipment remains operational even at night or in cloudy conditions.

Student Isabella Wanningen, who worked on the project, told AFP the trial run in Kenya had been a runaway success.

“We’ve driven more than 800 kilometres and tested her capabilities both in whether she is able to go off-road and how she can actually deliver healthcare,” she said.

Many team members put their studies on hold to work on this project, which took about a year to complete.

“We hope to inspire the industry, healthcare organisations and innovators to use sustainable technology to solve real-world problems,” said Wanningen.

“If we can do this with 23 students in one year, that really shows how much is possible,” she added.

US civil rights march targets Trump over voting changes

AFP
Washington

Civil rights activists gathered in Washington yesterday in a major show of opposition to Republican redistricting and restrictions on voting being pushed by President Donald Trump ahead of November's US midterm elections.

The “Defend the Vote” march brought protesters to the National Mall 63 years to the day after Martin Luther King Jr delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech during the landmark 1963 March on Washington.

Organised by veteran civil rights leader Al Sharpton and led by King's son Martin Luther King III, the demonstration was expected to draw support from more than 90 civil rights, labour, faith and community organisations.

Prominent speakers include left-wing Senator Bernie Sanders and Democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

“Defending the vote means defending the foundation of our democracy. Sixty three years after my father stood at the Lincoln Memorial, we are called to march again, not only in remembrance, but in action,” King III said ahead of the event.

Organisers say voting rights are under their most serious threat in decades following a Supreme Court ruling in April that weakened protections under the land-



A man holds a sign reading “democracy not Trumpocracy” during a “Defend the Vote” rally at the Lincoln Memorial. (AFP)

mark 1965 Voting Rights Act.

The decision cleared the way for Republican-led states in the South to redraw congressional districts in ways civil rights groups say dilute the political influence of Black voters.

“There are many strategies right now to limit our voting rights, but we’re not going to stop,” Alotta Taylor, vice chair for the National Council of Negro

Women, told AFP. “We’re going to push forward. We’re not going to let that happen.”

The demonstration also comes amid an escalating legal fight over Trump's attempt to tighten rules governing mail-in voting.

Civil rights organisations have challenged Trump's executive order, while courts have issued a rapid series of conflicting decisions over how much of it can take

effect before the November elections. Participating groups including the NAACP filed fresh legal claims this week, arguing that the changes could prevent eligible voters from casting ballots.

Sharpton has portrayed the march as the beginning rather than the culmination of an organising campaign intended to continue through Election Day.

“The right to vote, the very foundation of our power, is being chipped away in statehouse after statehouse,” he said.

Organisers are also trying to connect voting rights to economic concerns among younger Americans, particularly Black voters whose support for Democrats weakened in the 2024 presidential election.

Polling cited by Axios found that 36% of Black voters aged 18 to 29 named jobs and the economy as their top issue, compared with 11% who cited racism.

That challenge has shaped the message of yesterday's march, whose organisers have sought to link access to the ballot with wages, health care, housing and the affordability crisis.

“I’m extremely happy to be able to use my right to vote. That’s why we’re here – to try to defend that right,” said Howard University student Jessica Canty, 18.

“We’re doing it for the people who fought for the right to vote. Now to this day, we still face more struggle. So we just keep coming out (to) stand up for our right.”

Militants lay siege to Nigerian town

AFP
Kano, Nigeria

Suspected IS-aligned militants have besieged a north-eastern Nigerian town for a third day, as troops enforce a round-the-clock curfew that has kept residents indoors, military sources and residents told AFP yesterday.

Fighters from Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) had an hours-long firefight with troops after attacking a base on the outskirts of Geidam – 180 km from the Yobe state capital Damaturu – early Wednesday before laying siege to the town, residents said.

Residents told AFP that they could not say if any troops or militants were killed in the gunfight.

“We have been forced to stay

indoors since Wednesday by soldiers who warned everyone not to step outside,” Abubakar Musa, a resident of Geidam, told AFP.

Two military officers, who spoke to AFP anonymously, said the curfew was necessary because ISWAP militants had “surrounded” the town of about 89,000 residents and could launch renewed attacks. “The militants are lying low outside the town while soldiers are patrolling inside. So the situation is really critical,” a military officer said.

But Geidam district deputy political administrator Kaka Bukar Zanna said troops did not inform residents before locking down the town.

In a post shared online, Zanna said soldiers assaulted and injured him when he ventured outside. A picture in the post showed a stitched gash on his partly shaved

head following the assault.

“We were not informed about any curfew beforehand, but I was assaulted and injured in the head by soldiers... despite identifying myself to them,” Zanna said in the post. The attack on the base began at around 1:30am when residents were asleep. They were told to stay indoors at daybreak, resident Usman Kabir said.

The curfew has left residents who depend on daily income in despair as most have “little or nothing to eat”, he told AFP.

“Most people live on what they make daily and staying indoors without food and other essential needs has put people in a dire situation,” said Kabir.

Militant groups Boko Haram and its splinter group-turned rival ISWAP have attacked Geidam and the base on multiple occasions in the past.



Traders gather in downtown Nairobi to protest over a new Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA) customs valuation benchmark. (Reuters)

Kenya police fire tear gas to disperse protestors

Reuters
Nairobi

Police fired tear gas to disperse small-scale traders protesting against an import duty hike, a Reuters witness saw yesterday, while hundreds of businesses closed in central Nairobi.

The Kenya Revenue Authority said its decision to raise the duty with effect from August 20 aimed to curb under-declaration and undervaluation of imports, which it said disadvantages compliant businesses and local manufacturers.

Traders say the change would raise the cost of clearing goods and hurt small businesses that rely on consolidated shipments to reduce import costs.

“We are standing for our citizenship and our right to do business and our right to build our future,” said Muturi Kariuki, who joined the demonstrations.

Kariuki was among the traders who closed their businesses in order to protest. Others did so for safety reasons, traders said.

Police did not immediately respond to calls or requests for comment. The duty change raises the minimum customs benchmark for a consolidated 40-foot container to 3.2mn Kenyan shillings (\$24,700) from 2.5mn shillings.

The authority said the 3.2mn shilling figure was a minimum reference point, not a fixed value for every container. Importers whose goods exceed that value must declare their actual worth and pay the applicable duties.

US judge won't block Trump's new birthright citizenship order

A federal judge yesterday declined to immediately block US President Donald Trump's administration from implementing a new executive order limiting the number of people eligible for birthright citizenship that Trump issued after the US Supreme Court rejected his previous effort. US District Judge Deborah Boardman in Greenbelt, Maryland, rejected a request for a temporary restraining order sought by immigrant rights advocates who had last year secured a ruling from her blocking the Trump administration from enforcing his initial 2025 executive order curtailing birth.

49 killed in cattle raid in South Sudan

Reuters
Juba

At least 49 people were killed and 33 wounded in South Sudan after armed cattle raiders from Unity State in the country's north attacked a community of herders in neighbouring Warrap State at dawn on Thursday, officials said.

Inter-tribal and inter-communal violence is common in South Sudan, where herders compete with each other for scarce grazing lands and water for their cattle. An abundance of guns in civilian hands in the country exacerbates the violence.

The deadly raid in Warrap State started at about 5am local time on Thursday when assailants from Unity State and others carried out “a brutal attack” on a camp of cattle herders in Tonj North county, the state's information minister, William Wol Mayom Bol, said in a statement.

He expressed condolences to the families of the victims and appealed “for restraint as the two state governments establish co-operation to bring culprits to book”.

Unity State's information minister, Nyakenya Johannes, told Reuters the attackers were not all from Unity, but added that state officials were working hard to ensure peaceful co-existence between communities in both regions.

South Sudan expects to hold a presidential election in December, its first since the country gained independence from its northern neighbour Sudan in 2011.

Trump vows to break up ‘nasty monopoly’ in food processing

Reuters
Washington

US President Donald Trump yesterday said he was preparing a legal order to allow farmers and ranchers to be given the right to process their own food aimed at breaking what he called “a nasty monopoly” among the nation's top processors.

Trump did not name a particular food or industry in his post on Truth Social but said he was “authorising legal documents to be drawn” quickly. Earlier this week, Trump said on the Glenn Beck program that he would look into whether there are too many beef processing plant regulations.

Beck, who owns a ranch, suggested to Trump that Department of Agriculture regulations were impeding ranchers from processing their own animals, leaving them to rely on the nation's highly consolidated meat processing industry. Four companies control about 85% of US meat processing: Cargill; Tyson Foods; JBS USA and National Beef Packing Co.

The companies when contacted did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins posted on X that there would be “big announcements” related to beef processing beginning on Monday, including expanding ranchers' ability to sell across state lines, added support for smaller meat processors and rescinding “outdated guidance.”

Representatives for the White House did not immediately respond to a request for more details on the order, which comes as consumers continue to face rising grocery prices ahead of November's midterm election.

Meat is inspected by the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, which posts inspectors at meat processing plants to ensure products meet federal standards.

Ranchers are generally prohibited by federal law from selling meat from animals they have slaughtered and processed themselves, with some exceptions.

Farm and ranch groups have argued for years that consolidation in the meat processing sector has



President Donald Trump speaking in the Oval Office. (AFP)

made it difficult for small producers to stay afloat because there are not many companies competing to buy their cattle and they must transport their animals to USDA-inspected meat processing plants, sometimes at a high cost.

The Meat Institute, an industry group that represents meatpacking companies, said food safety could be at risk if more ranchers process their own meat. “Allowing uninspected meat to be sold to unwitting consumers is the wrong approach,

and risks undermining this country's reputation for producing the safest meat products in the world,” the group said. “If the goal is to lower beef prices for American families, lowering food safety standards is the wrong response.”

The administration of former President Joe Biden attempted to tackle consolidation in meatpacking in part through rules to promote competition and fairer pay for chicken farmers, which the Trump administration has indicated it will rescind.

Both the Biden and Trump administrations have steered funds towards supporting smaller meat processors, in an attempt to offer more options to ranchers.

Trump's move comes as the nation's meat processing sector grapples with a 75-year trough in supply as rising cattle costs outpace gains from soaring prices. Trump announced last week that more ground beef could be imported into the US without tariffs. The Justice Department has also said it is investigating whether meatpacking companies were illegally driving up consumer beef prices.

Hardship grinds on in post-Maduro Venezuela

AFP
Caracas

Eight months after US forces captured Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro, the prevailing national mood is bittersweet as delight at his fall gives way to impatience about ongoing economic hardship.

The South American nation remains mired in crisis, with precarious wages and sky-high food prices the norm for ordinary people despite the interim government's attempts at reform.

Marbelis Daliz and her husband Arlindo Da Silva run a pastry shop, where hyperinflation and regular power cuts cast a long shadow over business.

Following Maduro's ouster, "we had such expectations and happiness," Daliz told AFP, hurriedly preparing food for a customer in a race to beat the next blackout.

"Unfortunately, reality crushed us."

The 54-year-old pastry chef has no intention of abandoning her business despite barely scraping by on its meagre profit margins.

"The economy is a disaster," she said. "I hope that at some point this will pass and we will rise again."

The Venezuelan economy has been undergoing a de facto dollarisation since 2019 due to the enormous devaluation of the bolivar.

Many were hoping for an influx of dollars after the US raid to depose Maduro, but annual inflation in bolivars is near 575%.

Price increases are "killing" Venezuelans, said activist Zaida Mujica. Mujica had "high hopes regarding the actions of the US when they took Nicolas Maduro away," the 61-year-old told AFP.

"They took away the dictator but not the dictatorship," she said, adding that "nothing has happened that benefits the people."

Interim leader Delcy Rodriguez, Maduro's former vice president, effectively governs under Washington's thumb.

She has opened several sectors up to foreign and private capital, and official figures show that daily oil production has increased by almost 29.8% since January.

"A political change was extremely important... but it is not enough to generate macroeconomic stabil-



A motorcyclist rides past a mural of ousted Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro flashing the V sign, in Caracas. (AFP)

ity and growth," said Jose Manuel Puente, a professor at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Administration (IESA).

For as long as Venezuela maintains "the highest inflation in the world," he said, its problems are here to stay.

Javier Chacon and his wife Delia celebrated Maduro's capture on January 3 in their own home, fearful of the repression that had marked his 13-year rule.

"Naturally, we thought there was going to be a change," Javier told AFP in the bustling Quinta Crespo market in Caracas.

"Unfortunately, in Venezuela we're just surviving," the 44-year-old seamster said.

The already difficult situation worsened when two earthquakes struck northern Venezuela within a minute of each other on June 24.

The disaster killed over 6,500 people, injured thousands more and destroyed hundreds of buildings.

The home of 40-year-old Carmen Ramirez, who sells hygiene products at a market in Caracas, sustained heavy damage from the quakes.

"You have to go out and keep fighting," Ramirez said, sorting through merchandise from the back of a pickup truck.

Pastry chef Daliz noted one important difference: people are less fearful than they were under Maduro, who oversaw mass repression

of dissent following his disputed re-election win in 2024.

This is cause for celebration, she said as the scent of freshly baked goods wafted through the air.

Before, "I didn't even dare to put up a post about politics on Instagram," she said.

"But now I do - now I post, 'How cool that Maduro is gone!'"

Since Rodriguez took over, teachers, healthcare workers, relatives of political prisoners and even left-wing activists have marched for their rights through public spaces.

The interim government is also taking part in US-backed political transition talks with selected opposition figures, with a view to eventually holding elections.

But not everyone feels more at ease.

The government "continues to keep people in prison for having different opinions," said Jerry Ostos, a 56-year-old former political prisoner released in March.

Ostos served two years for displaying an anti-Maduro banner and must appear in court every month over ongoing assassination charges against him.

The government says it has released 1,046 political prisoners since January, but the NGO Foro Penal maintains that almost 400 remain behind bars.

"The monster is still alive," said Ostos.

US uses laser to down 3 Mexican cartel drones

Reuters
Washington

The US military used a laser in southern Texas' Rio Grande Valley to shoot down three Mexican drug cartel drones this week near the US-Mexico border, US officials said on Thursday.

The North American Aerospace Defense Command and US Northern Command said in a statement that the operation took place late Tuesday and early Wednesday and used the Army Multipurpose High Energy Laser. The military did not give the precise location of the strikes nor make clear whether it took place over US or Mexican territory.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum has said any unilateral US action on

Mexican soil would be a grave breach of her country's sovereignty.

The military said the drones posed "a physical threat" to US military and US Customs and Border Protection personnel. "Cartel networks are increasingly employing unmanned aircraft systems to facilitate illicit human-smuggling and actively spy on our personnel and law enforcement partners," Major General Curtis Taylor, the commander of Joint Task Force-Southern Border, said.

The announcement comes as US President Donald Trump's administration seeks to clamp down on immigration and cartels, seeking to fulfill promises from his 2024 presidential campaign. Since its establishment in 2025, the border task force has conducted tens of thousands of detection and monitoring

Crisis-struck Cuba says schools to reopen next week

Cuba's education minister on Thursday confirmed that the new school year would begin as planned on September 1, despite a severe energy crunch underscored by another major blackout.

Minister Naima Trujillo admitted that restarting classes presented a "challenge" in a context of rolling blackouts and chronic food and fuel shortages that have brought the communist-ruled island to its knees.

She said that, in recognition of the crisis, which has brought life on the island to a near standstill, schools would be tolerant of students arriving late or not in uniform.

"The biggest challenge of this school year will be to simply have it at all," Trujillo said.

Shortly after she spoke, the national electricity company announced that power had been knocked out in four of eastern Cuba's five provinces - the latest in a relentless series of blackouts that have caused misery for millions.

The Union Electrica de Cuba utility said the blackout was caused by a transmission failure that severed electricity supplies from three power plants.

Several hours later, the company said that power had been restored.

Washington began blocking oil shipments to Cuba in January, as President Donald Trump tries to bring down the communist regime. The Trump administration has also tightened sanctions on the island, causing an exodus of foreign investors.

The measures have accelerated an already severe crisis, marked by draconian electricity rationing and drastic shortages of fuel, drinking water and subsidised food.

In recent weeks, power cuts have lasted for up to 30 hours at a time in Havana and for days on end in rural areas, leaving many with no respite from the suffocating summer heat.

Yannay Miranda, the mother of a six-year-old girl, said that despite the collapse in basic infrastructure, she would do everything possible to get her daughter to school next week "so that she doesn't stop learning" (AFP)



Jason Slothouber, Colorado Chief Trial Counsel, leaves the courthouse in Oakland with states' team members after Meta Platforms agreed to resolve claims by US states. (Reuters)

Meta's teen safety deal runs into an unsolved problem: Proving age

AFP
San Francisco, US

Meta's landmark settlement with nearly every US state promises curfews and time limits for teens on Instagram and Facebook - but rests on age and parent checks nobody has figured out how to make work.

The deal, which ended a federal trial in Oakland, California, on Wednesday, gives Meta one year to identify which of its users are 13 to 17 years old.

Those accounts will have curfews and time limits switched on by default, and only parents will be allowed to loosen them.

How that gets enforced is unclear - and any system Meta builds risks angering privacy advocates, who warn it hands platforms and governments yet another way to identify users, infringing on civil liberty.

For the new regime to work, Meta must determine the age of every user in the participating states and territories, adults included.

Methods could include identification documents, mandatory selfies, or analysis of user activity. Any account not verified within 14 days will face the same constraints as a teenager's.

These approaches have already faltered elsewhere.

Eight months after social networks were banned for under-16s in Australia, teen usage has climbed back almost to previous levels, thanks to virtual private networks, or VPNs, that conceal a user's real identity and location.

As for parents, the agreement offers no way to establish that a supervising adult is who they claim to be.

What would stop an older sibling from passing themselves off as a guardian, Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers asked Wednesday as she weighed Meta's plans.

"There is some fluidity, very intentionally," said Nicklas Akers, a California prosecutor, who added that there was no plan to require a birth certificate or identification from the parent.

With no reliable way of verifying ages and parents,

curfews and time limits remain theoretical.

"Teens are notorious for finding workarounds to these types of rules, and parents can also override some of the most stringent ones," said social media industry expert Jasmine Enberg.

"Looking ahead, that could take some of the responsibility away from Meta and put it on parents, with the goal of helping insulate the company from similar cases in the future," she added.

In France, where a ban on under-15s was just struck down by the Constitutional Council, many children get around the rules with their parents' help, according to the communications regulator Arcom.

If Meta cannot verify a user with identification such as a driver's licence or passport, it will estimate age by analysing that user's activity - collecting still more data in the process.

"This enshrines Meta's harmful surveillance into law, and it will compromise users' privacy and anonymity while increasing their exposure to data breaches and government data requests," the digital rights group Electronic Frontier Foundation said in a statement.

The settlement does include safeguards, limiting data collection to what age estimation requires and letting adults wrongly classified as minors appeal.

It is "the most significant intervention in children's online safety we have seen," said Iain Corby, head of the AVPA, an industry association for age-verification providers.

Identification documents carry their own risks. In October, a breach at a third-party age-verification company potentially exposed the government IDs of 70,000 Discord users.

With no reliable or trusted methods available, everyone is improvising.

OpenAI applies a restricted version of ChatGPT to minors by guessing a person's age from their usage patterns, an approach Meta's settlement allows.

In the European Union, where the tracking of minors is tightly constrained, it has delayed the rollout for months.

Once a legend, humpback whales make comeback in Brazil

AFP
Parque Nacional Marino de Abrolhos, Brasil

Female humpback whales off the coast of Brazil now have their pick of mates, who slap the water with their tails and jostle for attention - a scene that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago.

Driven to near-extinction in the 1980s, there are now about 35,000 humpback whales in the South Atlantic, almost half of the world's total.

The warm waters off the coast of Brazil are the largest breeding ground for Southern Atlantic humpbacks. Males compete for the chance to mate, and females give birth and nurse their calves.

They also offer a bonanza to scientists who come each year to the Abrolhos archipelago off the coast of the state of Bahia to record and study hundreds of the cetaceans.

Four decades ago, no one even knew there were whales in Brazil, said Enrico Marcovaldi, founder of the Humpback Whale Institute (IBJ) - one of leading organisations in Brazil researching



A team of researchers search for whales to collect genetic material in the Abrolhos Archipelago, Bahia State, Brazil. (AFP)

and protecting the species.

The first time he saw one, he mistook it for a rock. "They were legends. We had never seen one," Marcovaldi told AFP.

Humpback populations have thrived since a worldwide moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986.

The following year, Brazil banned the practice by law and later declared the Abrolhos breeding

grounds a protected area.

In 2014, the humpback whale was removed from Brazil's list of threatened species, and its population has continued to thrive ever since.

Wearing a life jacket and helmet, and armed with a crossbow, biologist Fabio Fontes pursues a group of males who are competing to mate with a female.

From his small boat, he fires an

arrow that pierces the back of one whale before dropping into the water. He retrieves it with a sample of skin and blubber attached.

A team of scientists and journalists, including AFP, follows Fontes's moves from a catamaran.

Milton Marcondes, the IBJ's research co-ordinator, explained that the samples can be used to establish family ties between the whales, known for one of the longest migrations of any mammal on the planet.

Years ago, the researchers discovered that a humpback born in Abrolhos was related to another spotted off South Georgia, a remote island some 4,000 km to the south.

The finding helped establish the migration route of the animals, which can reach up to 16 meters long as adults and weigh as much as six elephants.

A pattern of white markings against the black of a humpback's tail is its fingerprint - a unique pattern that allows researchers to identify individual whales from photographs.

The comparison, which once required many pairs of eyes and hours of work, can now be done in

seconds by Happy Whale, an artificial intelligence platform that has already identified 8,300 Brazilian humpbacks.

The tool helped uncover a world record: one humpback identified in Brazil was spotted more than 15,000 km away off Australia's east coast, according to research published in May.

"We are seeing that populations in the Southern Hemisphere are much more interconnected than we imagined," Marcondes told AFP.

These days, the whales face threats from maritime traffic, fishing nets, and warming seas caused by climate change, which threatens the krill they survive on.

The IBJ has received financial support from Brazil's state oil company Petrobras for 30 years.

Petrobras, which drills for oil off Brazil and recently made new discoveries off the coast of the Amazon, supports several species recovery projects in the country.

In October, the Abrolhos archipelago was designated a "Hope Spot" by Mission Blue, founded by oceanographer Sylvia Earle, recognising its rich biodiversity and importance to marine conservation.

Police detain over 300 in Jakarta after unrest following protest

Reuters
Jakarta

Police in the Indonesian capital Jakarta have detained over 300 people for questioning and named dozens of suspects following street protests that had turned into late-night rioting, officials said yesterday.

Demonstrations by various groups started on Thursday morning near parliament amid heavy security on the anniversary of deadly anti-government protests last year, which lasted two weeks and gave an early test to the administration of President Prabowo Subianto.

Thousands of police were deployed in Jakarta ahead of Thursday's rallies, where demonstrators vented their frustration at various government policies and demanded harsher punishment for corrupt officials.

The rally dispersed on Thursday evening, but local media outlets reported individuals in black shirts remained on the streets long after, setting fire to a police post and two motorcycles, closing roads and hurling rocks and sticks at police, who responded with water cannon and tear gas.

A Reuters witness heard several loud bangs near the area of the reported unrest.

Jakarta police have detained 322 people, including 160 people younger than 18 years old, Jakarta police spokesperson Budi Hermanto told a press conference.

"After the majority of the

crowd had dispersed, a group of rioters arrived and tried to disrupt public order and security," Budi said, adding that a number of them were allegedly carrying makeshift weapons.

Budi also said one man was evacuated from the scene after losing consciousness and later died at a hospital.

Police were "gathering facts" regarding the fatality, another official, Iman Imanuddin, said at the same briefing.

Police have named 45 people as suspects for allegedly causing damage to public facilities and conducting acts of violence, Iman added.

Several routes on the commuter rail line in Jakarta were suspended or diverted on Friday while the city's bus system said its routes near the parliamentary building were impacted by road closures. The affected bus routes have since returned to normal operation, the operator said.

The protest came at a difficult time for Prabowo, a retired general who was elected in 2024 with a huge majority but is battling to restore the confidence of the public, business and investors anxious over the economic impacts of his ambitious, populist programmes.

Prabowo's approval rating slumped to 38% this month in a poll by investigative news outlet Tempo.

Videos posted early yesterday and circulating on social media, which Reuters could not immediately verify, showed police using tear gas, some hunkered behind shields.

Indonesia escalates battle against fires, putrid haze

Over 5mn people on Borneo and Sumatra islands were directly exposed to the risks of a putrid haze

AFP
Palangkaraya

Indonesia has intensified efforts to fight wildfires with cloud seeding and water bombing as thousands of people countrywide battle to breathe in the smoke and haze, officials said yesterday.

More than 5mn people on Borneo and Sumatra islands were directly exposed to the risks of a putrid haze coming off dozens of fires across the vast archipelago, according to deputy health minister Dante Saksono Harbuwono.

Some 13,500 people were treated for respiratory infections in July and August, Dante said.

Several schools had been closed intermittently and the haze has also made people in Singapore and Malaysia unwell.

"Vulnerable groups that must be evaluated are children, the elderly, pregnant women with asthma and outdoor workers," Dante said.

NGOs have set up two shelters in Palangkaraya, the capital of Central Kalimantan on Borneo island, for babies and children affected by the haze, with more planned.



Motorcyclists ride on a haze-shrouded road caused by forest and land fires in Palangkaraya city, Central Kalimantan, yesterday. (AFP)

The shelters, which can accommodate only five children at a time, were equipped with baby formula and oxygen tanks, medicines, and a playground.

Katharina Abi, 30, brought her two small children, aged one and five, to one of the shelters on Friday as thick smoke blanketed their home.

"There's a lot of smoke at my house. In the morning it's not too bad, but in the afternoon and evening there's so much dust, like there's a fire nearby. It really bothers my breathing," she told AFP.

"My children often have coughs and colds, maybe because there is a lot of smoke."

Dante said prolonged exposure to toxic air can cause serious long-term health complications. He said the ministry has dis-

tributed more than five mn masks across Indonesia — a country of 289mn people dealing with the effects of a super-charged El Nino weather event dubbed "Godzilla".

Disaster agency BNPB said yesterday the government has intensified efforts to battle wildfires, with some success.

"Cloud seeding remains one of the measures to support efforts to tackle forest and land fires. Its implementation depends heavily on atmospheric conditions and the presence of rain-bearing clouds in the target areas," BNPB spokesman Berton Suar Pelita Panjaitan told AFP.

"However, cloud seeding is not the only effort, because the ground and air task forces continue working in the field to carry out extinguishing and cooling operations," he said.

Seoul backs Trump bid to revive North Korea talks

Korea, Japan and the US will conduct joint military drills from September 9-11

Reuters
Seoul

Republic Korea supports US President Donald Trump's efforts to resume dialogue with North Korea, but aims to ensure its security posture is not weakened and that Seoul is not sidelined, Korea's national security adviser said yesterday.

Seoul believes the resumption of talks between the US and North Korea should focus on progress on the North Korean nuclear weapons issue and must not undermine the country's security readiness, Wi Sung-lac told reporters. "One point to keep in mind is the need to co-ordinate with the US to ensure that any resumption of US-North Korea dialogue leads to substantive progress on the North



US Navy aircraft carrier USS George Washington is pictured during Freedom Edge trilateral exercise among United States, Japan and Korea in the East China Sea, south of the Korean peninsula and west of Japan's main islands. (Reuters/File photo)

Korean nuclear issue, alongside efforts to establish a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula," Wi said.

To achieve these aims, policy coordination and communication between South Korea and the US were more important than ever, he said.

Wi cited Trump's order earlier this month to substantially scale back major joint military drills between the two allies, saying the US president was signalling a willingness to engage with North Korea.

At the same time, Seoul should

ensure it was not "sidelined" in Washington's efforts to restart talks with Pyongyang, Wi said.

Trump cited in part Seoul's refusal to offer help in the Iran war for cutting short the Uchi Freedom Shield drills this month and said they sent a wrong message to North Korea. Trump has been seeking a new summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

The two met three times in 2018 and 2019.

Korea, Japan and the US will conduct joint military drills from September 9-11 to test readiness against North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons threats, Korea said yesterday.

Wi said Korea is seeking to deepen co-operation with Washington on a range of issues that have sometimes caused friction between the allies.

These include Korean investment in the US agreed under a trade deal, the treatment of US-listed e-commerce firm Coupang, security co-operation, intelligence sharing and the transfer of war-time operational control, he said.

China removes high-ranking officers from key military body

China removed two high-ranking officers from the country's main military body yesterday, state media reported, seven months after it was announced that Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli were being investigated for "serious violations of the law". Zhang's position as the more senior of two vice chairmen on the Central Military Commission (CMC) had made him China's highest-ranked general. In January though, the defence ministry said that Zhang and Liu were "suspected of serious violations of discipline and the law", a common euphemism for corruption. The announcement fit into the sweeping anti-graft drive that has defined President Xi Jinping's time in power — but Zhang's fall from grace in particular shocked observers, given his seniority and the perception he was close to Xi. Yesterday, state news agency Xinhua said in a report on a meeting of the standing committee of China's parliament that "the meeting decided to remove Zhang Youxia from the post of Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the

People's Republic of China". Liu, who was chief of staff of the CMC's joint staff department, which oversees combat planning, was also removed, it said. The CMC is China's most important military decision-making body, chaired by Xi. "For practical purposes, however, they are treated as one (and) the same in (China's) bureaucracy," Asia Society's Lyle Morris has written. Friday's announcement relates to Zhang and Liu's positions in the state CMC rather than the Party one. Their removal will leave the CMC, which is supposed to have seven members, with only two known representatives: Xi and anti-corruption chief Zhang Shengmin. Zhang and Liu's whereabouts are unknown, and no details have been given regarding the accusations against them. At the time the investigation was announced, an editorial in the *People's Liberation Army* (PLA) *Daily* said the two men had "seriously trampled on and undermined the system of ultimate responsibility resting with the CMC chairman" — that is, Xi. (AFP)

Cambodia shuts more than 700 cyberscam locations

AFP
Phnom Penh

Cambodia said yesterday it had closed more than 700 online scam centres in a crackdown over the past year, detaining nearly 30,000 suspects including a clutch of senior government officials.

The Southeast Asian country has emerged as a hub for crime syndicates running fake romantic relationship and cryptocurrency investment schemes in which scammers — some willing, others trafficked — defraud internet users around the world.

But under pressure from several countries including the US and China, Cambodian authorities say they are cracking down on the industry.

A government statement said on Friday authorities had cleared more than 700 compounds and deported 58,266 foreign nationals over the past year.

It said nearly 30,000 suspects had been arrested, including 15

high-ranking officials and law enforcement officers.

More than 3,400 suspects from 29 nationalities, including citizens from China, Vietnam, Australia, France, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand, were in custody awaiting trial.

"Although large-scale sites have been completely cleared, criminal groups have altered their tactics to decentralised, small-scale activities, hiding in guesthouses, condominiums, rental houses, vehicles, and coffee shops," the government said.

Cambodia extradited alleged scam boss Chen Zhi, the Chinese-born chairman of multi-billion-dollar Cambodian conglomerate Prince Holding Group, to China in January after he was sanctioned by the US and UK governments.

In April, Cambodia also extradited to China Li Xiong, the Chinese-born former chairman of Huione Group, whom Beijing accuses of playing a key role in a major transnational gambling and fraud syndicate.

Taiwan lawmakers approve \$7.6bn budget for locally made drones

Lawmakers in Taiwan approved a \$7.6bn budget for locally made drones yesterday as the island democracy seeks to strengthen its defences against a potential Chinese attack.

A spending proposal backed by opposition parties — the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) — cleared parliament after a plan submitted by President Lai Ching-te's government was rejected. (AFP)

Thailand warns 'problematic' tourists could face deportation

AFP
Bangkok

Thailand's government has warned that "problematic" tourists could face deportation as new rules on removing foreigners convicted of illegal activities came into effect on Friday.

The changes come amid growing scrutiny of the behaviour of visitors to the southeast Asian country, whose beaches and culture attract tens of millions of tourists each year.

"Problematic foreign tourists or workers who break the law must leave," Tourism Minister Surasak Phancharoenworakul said in a social media post late Thursday.

His comments came ahead of the implementation of new rules

on how foreigners could be deported from Thailand after being convicted and serving sentences for certain crimes.

These include overstaying a visa, working or operating a business unlawfully, using or making forged documents, or any other offence that carries a prison sentence of more than five years.

The measures, approved by Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul's government in July, are intended to "safeguard Thailand's cultural values", officials said.

Previously, deportation cases were largely considered on a case-by-case basis.

"Thailand has a policy of welcoming foreigners to travel, work and conduct business. However, it has been found that some foreigners have not acted in accordance

with the law," read the new regulation published in the kingdom's Royal Gazette.

Surasak said the rules were intended to deal with "low-quality foreigners" who disrupt public order.

In May, Thailand announced it was halving the time that tourists from most countries could visit without a visa from 60 to 30 days.

The move came after a series of high-profile arrests of foreigners for drug offences, sex trafficking and for unlawfully operating businesses such as hotels and schools.

Since then, a number of incidents have provoked public debate.

In July, Italy's embassy apologised after a video of a group of

Italian students being loud and rude on a Bangkok train went viral.

In May, authorities deported a Spanish and a Peruvian national after the couple were caught having sex in public, an act that can constitute a public indecency offence under Thai law.

However, experts warn the country needs to balance tighter oversight with its reliance on tourism, which accounts for 13% of GDP.

Thailand expects about 33.5mn foreign tourists in 2026, up from nearly 33mn visitors in 2025, the government has said.

The country has attracted 18mn foreign tourists since the beginning of the year, but arrivals were down 3% from the same period last year, according to the latest figures.

Japan to survey animal cafes over hygiene, welfare concerns

Japan plans to probe popular animal cafes, where visitors can interact with anything from cats to capybaras, following concerns about hygiene and the creatures' welfare, authorities said on Thursday.

Japan has hundreds of the cafes where campaigners say animals are sometimes kept in cramped spaces, and that their popularity encourages the capture and illegal trade of rare wildlife.

A fact-finding survey will begin as early as next month, starting with obtaining basic facts such like the number of establishments and what animals they keep, an environment ministry official told AFP.

The ministry will examine whether they comply with relevant laws, including whether animals have enough space and how often cleaning takes place, said the official, without wishing to be named.

"We may then do on-site inspections if we find facilities that appear to be breaching rules" stipulated by the animal welfare law, he said.

The decision to launch the survey followed recommendations by members of an expert panel about animal welfare.

Animal welfare groups have long been alarmed by the cafes, where visitors can pet and play with a dizzying array of animals including micro-pigs, hedgehogs, owls and snakes.

A 2025 survey by World Wide Fund for Nature Japan said that some kept endangered species listed on the Red List of the International Union for Conservation.

They also included species covered by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, which regulates international trade in wildlife.

Some shops had inadequate hygiene man-



A Japanese youth feeds a cat at a 'cat cafe' in Tokyo. (AFP/File photo)

agement without nudging users to handwash after contact with animals, and its "microbiological testing detected pathogenic bacteria in multiple facilities", the report said. (AFP)



Nepal, China flood toll nears 600

Reuters
Nuwakot

Nepal and China resumed rescue operations that had been suspended briefly in the flood-hit Himalayas yesterday after risks from an overflowing lake were found to be manageable, easing fears of fresh devastation. A glacier collapse on Wednesday unleashed a huge torrent of rock, ice, mud and debris through Himalayan mountain river systems, killing at least 579 people in Nepal and five in China's Tibet.

The number missing in Nepal has nearly doubled to 1,924, the country's disaster authority said yesterday. At least 558 were missing in Tibet's Gyirong County, including 260 foreign nationals, Chinese state broadcaster CCTV said on Thursday.

More than 90,000 people are estimated to have been affected by the disaster, the Red Cross said.

The flooding led to the formation of a lake, which yesterday began overflowing into the Lhende Khola and Trishuli rivers.

The overflow sparked panic and warnings from authorities in Nepal, leading to rescue operations being suspended for about three hours. The risk prompted all Chinese rescue personnel and vehicles to withdraw as well, CCTV said.

Both resumed rescue operations after the threat eased, with Nepali officials saying that they were still hopeful of finding survivors.

Nepal is continuing to monitor two barrier lakes upstream of the flood zone, with an official warning that flood risks will persist until both lakes fully drain.

Satellite imagery showed the second lake growing larger with no visible outlet, raising concerns that water pressure could still be building.

China's state-run Xinhua news agency said that the first barrier lake was reducing in size, citing analysis by the water resources ministry.

A Chinese government geohazards expert warned, however, that the lake may be un-



A drone view of a broken bridge and damaged houses after the flash floods and mudslide, at Devighat, Nuwakot district, yesterday. (Reuters)



Chinese Premier Li Qiang visits a mudslide-hit area in Gyirong county, Shigatse, Tibet Autonomous Region. (Reuters)

stable and that over 100 glacial lakes scattered throughout the area could pose a threat.

Wednesday's flood ripped through villages and valleys, destroying power stations, roads and bridges along a route that links Kathmandu with Lhasa in Tibet and is popular with trekkers and pilgrims. Of those missing, at least 540 are foreigners, many of them pilgrims from India headed to the holy Mount Kailash and Lake

Mansarovar in Tibet.

In Beijing, a Politburo meeting chaired by President Xi Jinping called for stronger monitoring of glacier lakes and landslide risks, and for closer international disaster co-operation, Xinhua reported.

China's Premier Li Qiang, the country's No. 2 official, arrived in the disaster-stricken area of Gyirong on Thursday afternoon, Xinhua said. The visit suggested Beijing

was treating the disaster as a matter of the highest national priority.

Chinese rescuers had yet to reach the worst-hit site on the Chinese side of the border, the Gyirong border crossing, by Thursday evening, state media reports indicated, as crews worked to clear a key access road.

Dramatic footage on Wednesday showed torrents of water and debris tearing through the border crossing, engulfing people trying to flee.

Earlier, Nepalese rescue teams used helicopters to search for survivors and drop emergency supplies to thousands cut off in towns and valleys, while emergency services recovered dozens of bodies swept down into the plains.

Dibga Tamang was among the last people rescued from Rasuwa on Thursday, airlifted along with three others to an army camp in Nuwakot.

"All of our people have gone. They are dead," Tamang said. "I have no one left waiting for me. Everything and everyone is gone. The end."

A large number of people arrived at an army base in the area seeking information about missing and dead family members.



Army soldiers help women and children to disembark a helicopter after they were evacuated from an affected area following flash floods and mudslide, at the Maitihali Barrack, an army training centre, at Trishuli in Nuwakot district, yesterday. (Reuters)

India recovers 7 bodies swept downstream after Nepal floods

Indian authorities recovered seven bodies from rivers flowing from Nepal, believed to be victims of devastating floods, officials said yesterday, underscoring the scale of the deadly disaster. The bodies were found floating in rivers in the Maharajganj and Kushinagar districts of Uttar Pradesh state, which borders Nepal's southern flood-hit Chitwan region. "Four unidentified bodies were recovered in the district on Thursday," Maharajganj district magistrate Gaurav Singh Sogarwal told AFP.

"We think they have been swept into India from Nepal following flash floods there." Three more bodies were recovered in Kushinagar district, around 70 kilometres (43 miles) downstream from the frontier, a police official confirmed. Authorities are working to identify the bodies. At least 472 people were killed in the floods, including 469 bodies recovered in Nepal, and three in China. At least 1,400 others are missing. The seven bodies in India are not included in that toll. (AFP)

Bodies were brought into the barracks and lists of rescued people were posted outside.

Around the world, relatives of those missing were desperate for information.

"Where are they?" said Sneha Sudhir, one of 10 women whose husbands had set out from Nepal on a trek to Tibet's Mount Kailash. The men, all from northern Virginia, are among dozens of Americans missing.

"Everybody is taking turns in shedding their tears, wiping it off and getting back to work," Sudhir said tearfully from her

home in Chantilly, Virginia.

While offers of search-and-rescue assistance are pouring in, Nepal said it does not need help from other nations.

A Republic of Korea rapid response team in Kathmandu has not been deployed because Nepal does not have a plan to accept foreign rescue yet, the foreign ministry in Seoul said.

The Kathmandu Post reported that India, China, the United States, Britain, Japan, Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh had asked the government to allow their search-and-rescue teams to assist.

India signs deal with US to buy Javelin anti-tank missile systems

Reuters
New Delhi

The Indian Army has signed an agreement with the US to purchase Javelin anti-tank missile systems, the US Embassy in India said yesterday, without disclosing the value of the deal.

The medium-range guided missile system, jointly produced by Lockheed Martin and RTX, is designed for use against a range of targets, including armoured vehicles, the embassy said.

The missile system is already in service with the US Army and Marine Corps, as well as several international customers, the embassy added.

The agreement creates new opportunities for the defence industries of both countries to work together, US ambassador Sergio Gor said.

"We see tremendous potential for future co-operation that strengthens the defence industrial bases of both countries," he said.

New Delhi was not immediately available for comment on the agreement.

India is the world's fifth-largest military spender and the second-largest arms importer after Ukraine, according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

India and the US signed a 10-year defence framework agreement in October.

Although ties between the countries have deteriorated in recent months, with Washington imposing high tariffs on Indian goods, punishing New Delhi for purchasing Russian oil, and engaging closely with India's arch-rival Pakistan, the defence relationship has remained unaffected.

Australian police arrest two men accused of software hacking

Australian police announced charges on Thursday against two men accused of participating in a cybercrime syndicate that targeted widely used open-source software to compromise thousands of global businesses. The Australian men face a combined 14 charges for their alleged roles in TeamPCP, a hacking collective that inserted malicious code into popular tools to compromise businesses, according to a statement from the Australian Federal Police. Some of the businesses were later extorted, according to a July FBI advisory. The police did not name the men, but the Australian Broadcasting Corp identified them as Ruben Ian Thomson, 21, and Louis Michael Gaebler, 23. Nick Scerri, a lawyer for Thomson, referred questions to another attorney, Paul Homes, who declined to comment. James Gatti, an attorney for Gaebler, declined to comment. The malicious code potentially compromised more than 1,000 organisations globally, enabling the theft of more than 500,000 credentials and more than 300 gigabytes of data, according to police.

The police said they conducted a parallel investigation into the men with the FBI starting in April after receiving information from multiple unnamed cybersecurity threat assessment companies. "We are proud to work with the Australian Federal Police and the Western Australia Police Force to impose cost on criminal actors and combat the growing threat of software supply-chain attacks," FBI Cyber Division Assistant Director Brett Leatherman said in the police statement. The FBI declined further comment. Late Thursday, the US Attorney's Office for the Northern District of California, announced a US indictment against Thomson on charges of conspiracy to commit Computer Fraud and Abuse Act violations and obtaining information from a protected computer. Austin Larsen, a principal threat analyst with Google Threat Intelligence Group, called TeamPCP "one of the most impactful threat actors of 2026" in a message posted to LinkedIn. Larsen described TeamPCP as a "peer community of individually skilled actors with one clear centre of gravity," rather than a single, unified group. (Reuters)

Nepal army works to rescue 100 trapped in hydropower tunnel

AFP
Kathmandu

Nepali army teams searched yesterday for more than 100 people trapped inside a hydropower tunnel two days after devastating floods struck the site, as India offered to send a specialised rescue team.

India has extensive experience with difficult Himalayan tunnel rescues, including specialised teams of "rat-hole" miners.

However, the uncertainty was agonising for families waiting for news.

"I have not heard from him since I spoke to him at 7:00am that day. We have not had any news about them either, if they are being rescued or not," Sita Adhikari, whose husband was trapped in the hydropower tunnel, told reporters.

"We will have hope as long as we have our breath... We need them to be rescued as soon as possible," she said.

Two army helicopters were sent to the Trishuli 3A hydropower project in the mountainous Rasuwa district.

"Our focus is on search and rescue of people... some people are trapped in the tunnel of Trishuli 3A hydropower project," Nepal Army spokesman Raja Ram Basnet told AFP.

"Two helicopters have been dispatched but it is challenging because it is tough to even locate

the entry points of the tunnel," he said.

Nepal's prime minister's office said the army had already rescued 350 people from the site under "extremely risky and challenging conditions", but that more than 100 remained trapped.

It did not give further details about the nationalities of those rescued or those still inside.

India's specialised tunnel rescue team will be preceded by a reconnaissance team to assess conditions and determine what equipment is needed, New Delhi said.

"As requested by Nepal, we are preparing to send a tunnel rescue team," India's foreign ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal told reporters.

In 2023, Indian engineers and skilled miners rescued 41 workers stuck in a tunnel in the northern state of Uttarakhand after a marathon 17-day operation.

After repeated setbacks, including falling debris, fears of further cave-ins and drilling machine breakdowns, military engineers and miners dug the final section by hand using the "rat-hole" technique — a team worked at the rock face inside a metal pipe, just wide enough for someone to squeeze through.

Nepal appealed earlier yesterday for international financial assistance after devastating floods near its border with Tibet, but said it was coping without



The Nepali Army rescuing a person trapped inside a tunnel at a hydropower project following a flash flood in Nepal's Rasuwa district. (AFP)

foreign rescue teams.

"If Nepal needs any specialised help or expertise, then we will request it," Nepali foreign ministry spokesman Lok Bahadur Chhetri told AFP.

India is also sending a medical team, and engineers bringing in a portable metal Bailey bridge.

The scale of destruction was becoming clearer yesterday, with roads, bridges and hydropower infrastructure destroyed and survivors describing scenes of extraordinary devastation.

The damage also extended to Nepal's key hydropower sector,

with several projects — both operating and under construction — hit hard.

The Nepal Electricity Authority said 11 hydropower stations and one solar power station had stopped operating, with a combined capacity of 431.1 megawatts.

That is about 10% of Nepal's installed electricity generation capacity, according to the authority.

Another 15 power projects under construction, with a combined planned capacity of 470 megawatts, have also been damaged, according to preliminary information.

Australia to evacuate sub-Antarctic research base

Australia said yesterday it would evacuate workers from a research station on a remote island over the "psychosocial" risk caused by a potential outbreak of the highly contagious H5N1 avian influenza. Macquarie Island lies halfway between Tasmania and the Antarctic and is home to an Australian research station as well as thousands of elephant seals. The mammals are highly susceptible to H5N1 bird flu and while no cases have been detected on the island, officials said many were expected to die during the breeding season from September through November. (AFP)

UK blocks export of £71mn Rembrandt painting

AFP
London

The British government has temporarily banned the export of a Rembrandt portrait valued at over £71 mn (\$97mn), in a bid to keep the "national treasure" in the country.

The UK culture minister can place a temporary export ban on any work of art designated a national treasure, giving a local museum or collector time to raise money to buy it.

This painting is the most expensive object ever given this status.

The government announced Thursday it has blocked the paint-

ing being permanently taken out of the country, at least until December 26, "with the aim of keeping an important work in the UK and on public display."

It hopes a British museum or other "appropriate" buyer will express interest in acquiring the painting for £71.7mn within that period.

The government statement said an export licence application for the painting had been lodged, but did not divulge to which country it would be sent. It said a decision on the export licence was being deferred to at least December 27.

Painted by Rembrandt in 1657, the oil painting called "Portrait of Catrina Hooghsaet", depicting a Dutch woman in a white cap and

collar and dark gown, is one of the artist's "most exceptional later works", the government said.

In 2015, the painting was first subject to a temporary export ban when its long-term owner in Wales sold it privately at Sotheby's to an unnamed overseas buyer for £35mn.

Fundraising attempts fell through, but the buyer then kept the painting in the UK.

Last year the painting was again sold privately at Christie's for £71mn, the auction house confirmed to AFP yesterday.

In 2022, Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum acquired a Rembrandt self-portrait for 175mn euros after Paris cleared the sale despite it being considered a "national treasure" in France.

Norway mourns King Harald

AFP
Oslo

Laying flowers and embracing, thousands of people gathered in Oslo yesterday to pay their respects to Norway's King Harald, who died yesterday aged 89 after a reign of three and a half decades.

Harald's 53-year-old son immediately succeeded him on the throne, announcing he would reign under the name King Haakon VIII.

Haakon takes over a monarchy long hailed for its modernity and modesty, but beset by a string of scandals in recent years.

A motor procession with King Harald's casket left Oslo University Hospital yesterday evening, taking the late monarch on the 20-minute ride to the royal palace, televised images showed.

Members of the public braved the rainy weather to line the streets to catch a glimpse of the procession, which included the royal family.

King Haakon VIII had arrived at the palace just before lunch with his 22-year-old daughter Ingrid Alexandra — the new crown princess — to formally inform the government of his father's death.

In a statement, Haakon thanked "the government and Norwegian people for their support and sympathy for the Royal Family at this time".

"An era has ended. A new one begins. The king is dead. Long live the king," Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store said in a speech shortly after meeting the new monarch.

"We will remember King Harald for his love for his people, for his humour and warmth, and for his unwavering faith in us," he said.

Store was later seen laying down flowers in front of the palace.

Norway's parliament said the new monarch would take an oath of allegiance in its main chamber on September 1.

The government announced a period of national mourning until Harald's funeral, the date of which is yet to be set.

Europe's oldest reigning monarch, King Harald had been in hospital in Oslo since August 17, suffering from haemolytic anaemia, a condition caused by an abnormally rapid destruction of red blood cells that leads to fatigue and shortness of breath.

Store said Harald, who ascended to the throne in 1991, was "a



A drone view shows mourners gathering to pay their respects outside the Royal Palace, following the death of Norway's King Harald, in Oslo, yesterday. (Reuters)



People line the street as the hearse with the coffin of late King Harald V of Norway in a motorcade drives along Hegdehaugsveien street in Oslo yesterday. (AFP)

king of his time and for his time", noting that he accompanied Norway through decades of enormous change during which the country "grew richer, we became more numerous, and we became more diverse".

Thousands of Norwegians massed outside the palace in Oslo as it began to rain. They laid down mountains of flowers, cards and red, white and blue national flags, and many hugged

and held each other.

"He was the king of the people," mourner Kristoffer Hamre told AFP.

The palace lowered its flag to half-mast after Harald's death was announced, but raised it again after Haakon arrived for the meeting with the government.

Another flag on the royal balcony and those at other official buildings will remain at half-mast until after Harald's burial.

Like many mourners, Vigdis Haug, 65, said she valued Harald's ability to unify people.

"I think he has been such a down-to-earth king who has cared about all of us, and the words he always uses when he gives a speech are so wise and so valuable," she told AFP.

Harald was widely seen as the embodiment of an open and tolerant Norway.

Many of those AFP spoke with pointed in particular to his speech after neo-Nazi Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people in twin attacks on July 22, 2011, in Norway's worst massacre since World War II.

"He was someone who always seemed to find the words that brought us together and gave us a sense of security," Caroline Vagle, a reporter for magazine *Se og Hør*, told AFP.

Tributes poured in from leaders around the world, including those of France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Jordan and Ukraine, as well as the royal houses of Europe.

Harald faced mounting health problems in his final years, forcing him to scale back his official schedule.

But he ruled out abdicating, arguing that he took a lifelong oath before the Norwegian parliament.

Monarchs, world leaders pay tribute to King Harald

AFP
Oslo

European monarchs and world leaders paid tribute yesterday to Norway's King Harald, after the royal palace announced his death at the age of 89.

Harald was the continent's oldest reigning monarch. His son Haakon automatically succeeded him to the throne.

Here are some of the main tributes:

Britain's King Charles III hailed "dear cousin", who he said had served "with unwavering dedication, guiding Norway through times of great change with warmth and humility".

"As Norway mourns the loss of so towering a figure, my whole family join in remembering a much-loved kinsman and friend whose kindness, compassion and deep sense of duty echoed from across the sea and across the decades," the king said in a statement, personally signed Charles R.

The kings of Denmark and Sweden called Harald an "extraordinary" leader and good friend who unified his country.

"Both as head of state and a successful athlete, he was an outstanding representative of his country. He gave 'All for Norway,'" Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustaf said, referring to Harald's royal motto.

Denmark's King Frederik X said the late monarch was "an extraordinary man" who "joined duty and responsibility with presence and compassion".

The Dutch royal family recalled "unforgettable" journeys with King Harald around Oslo and the rest of Norway. "We cherish the memory of our special friendship with him in our hearts. King Harald served his country with love, pride, and conviction," said the family in a statement.

Harald's "humour, humanity and sincerity made him a truly special man", Belgium's King Philippe and Queen Mathilde said.

"Generations of Norwegians grew up with him. For decades, he was a familiar and reassuring presence, a beacon of stability for his country. He fulfilled his role with unwavering dedication, loyalty and dignity," they said in a statement.

Spain's royal family hailed King Harald as an "example of respon-

sibility, dignity, simplicity, and tireless dedication to the service" of his country.

"With respect and admiration for him, as well as deep sadness, we offer our condolences" on the king's death, they wrote on social media.

Jordan's Royal Hashemite Court said it mourned the passing of King Harald "may his soul rest in peace".

The court "expresses the deepest sympathies of His Majesty and the Jordanian people, as they stand with Norway and its people at this difficult time".

King Abdullah ordered his court to observe three days of mourning, a statement from the court added.

Harald "showed himself to be a dedicated leader," posted Mark Rutte, head of the Nato alliance that includes Norway.

"His own military roots made him a champion of the Norwegian military and a long-time friend of Nato," he wrote online.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that Harald "served his country with warmth, humility and an unwavering sense of duty".

Harald "worked tirelessly throughout his reign to strengthen the ties uniting Norway and France", Emmanuel Macron wrote on X, recalling a "warm welcome" on his visit to Oslo in June 2025.

"His Majesty embodied dignity, wisdom, and an unwavering commitment to his country," said Volodymyr Zelensky in a statement.

"Ukraine will always remember his steadfast support and solidarity with the Ukrainian people during the darkest days of Russia's aggression."

"Canada mourns with you," said a statement from Mark Carney, offering the condolences of his government.

"I had the privilege of meeting his Majesty last March in Oslo, and he spoke of the ties between our nations with great warmth and affection."

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, in a post on X, called Harald: "A monarch who served his nation with equanimity, authority and a deep sense of institutional duty, helping to strengthen the ties between Norway and Italy throughout his long reign."

The Swiss president Guy Parmelin wrote on X that Harald "will be remembered for his steadfast leadership and devoted service to his country".

Thieves buy tickets to rob Vienna museum necklace

AFP
Vienna

Two men bought tickets to enter Vienna's Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) before smashing a display case, grabbing a 200-carat platinum and diamond necklace and walking away, police said yesterday.

Austrian media said the Van Cleef and Arpels necklace, with 673 precious stones, was worth several million dollars. It is the latest in a series of high-profile heists to hit European museums.

Police said the two men did not wear masks, paid to enter the museum and were clearly seen on surveillance cameras in Thursday's heist.

They "smashed a glass display case" with a hammer before "fleeing with the jewellery in an unknown direction," said a police statement.

The MAK museum confirmed the theft but said it would not comment while the investigation went ahead.

The necklace had been part of an exhibition devoted to the

French designers Van Cleef and Arpels. Some 500 pieces had been on display since June. The exhibition is scheduled to end on September 27.

Despite the MAK announcing the exhibition would remain closed until further notice, the wing where the theft occurred reopened hours later. AFP saw the smashed display case covered with a blue panel but no notice on it explained the theft.

The stolen necklace was designed for the former Egyptian royal family, and was worn by Queen Nazli in 1939 for the marriage of her daughter Faiza to the future Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

On its website, Van Cleef and Arpels called the stolen piece a "triumph of white jewellery". The French company did not immediately comment on the theft.

European museums have been hit by a series of spectacular thefts since thieves in October broke into the Louvre museum in Paris in broad daylight, escaping in less than eight minutes with jewellery worth \$102mn.

France offers weather-hit farmers hundreds of millions of euros in aid

Reuters
Paris

France will provide several hundred million euros in compensation to farmers after extreme summer heat and drought caused major crop losses, agriculture ministry officials said yesterday.

The aid package, due to be detailed next week, comes after one of the worst hot and dry spells in France and western Europe in history, which damaged crops, pastures and water supplies.

Some 65% of French territory faced drought conditions estimated to occur only once every 25 years, while 60% of groundwater reserves were below normal levels, they said.

France's average temperature reached 24.9 degrees Celsius (76.8 degrees Fahrenheit) in July 2026, or 3.8C above the seasonal norm. That exceeded the previous records of 2003, at 24.3C, and 1976, at 23C.

Crop losses of 50% or more



French firefighters work to extinguish burning haystacks in a field at a farm near Loretz-d'Argenton, in the Deux-Sevres department, during a heatwave affecting a majority of the country. (Reuters/File Photo)

compared with the average of recent years have already been recorded in several areas, reaching 70% to 80% locally.

Grain maize production is expected to fall 34% and forage maize output 30%, while some vegetable crops, including leeks, cauliflower, garlic, onions, shallots and beans, face losses of about 50%.

French growers have said the potato crop could shrink by 23%

and the sugar beet one by over 20% due to the severe weather.

Small red-fruit crops such as cherries, blackcurrants and redcurrants have in some cases been entirely lost, as have certain non-irrigated artichoke crops locally.

More than half of pastures, used to feed livestock, are severely degraded in most regions. Pasture growth was 36% below the 1989-2018 average as of August 20.

Belgium sounds alarm after spate of shootings

Brussels' chief prosecutor called yesterday for a tougher crackdown on drug trafficking gangs, after a spate of shootings that have rocked the Belgian capital.

The city, home to the headquarters of the European Union, has seen an eye-catching rash of gun violence in recent days.

Masked assailants have fired off automatic weapons in a string of incidents, leaving several people wounded and seeing a police station targeted.

"Anyone could get shot," prosecutor Julien Moinil told journalists.

Moinil said that there have been 69 shooting incidents in Brussels so far this year, and 170 in total since the start of 2025.

Moinil said that most of the violence appeared to be linked to a turf war between two rival drug gangs.

"Clearly, they appear to be in conflict, and so we are seeing a cycle of retaliation," he said. (AFP)

Spain urges calm after anti-migrant protesters clash with police

AFP
Madrid

Spain's interior minister called for calm yesterday after residents of Ceuta clashed with police during protests against migrants who have remained in the North African enclave following a mass influx.

Tensions have been high in the territory of 80,000 people since at least 60,000 people crossed into Ceuta over several days in July, triggering a Europe-wide migrant alert.

Spain's leftist government says most have since left the enclave of 18.5 square kilometres (seven

square miles) but thousands remain wandering the streets and sleeping on beaches.

Demonstrations have intensified in recent days, with some protesters clashing with police on Thursday at a beach where migrants have been sleeping. Some of their belongings were burned.

A soldier was injured in a separate incident on Thursday when migrants threw stones at troops, while 12 Moroccan migrants were arrested.

Two more arrests were made after migrants attacked a police officer, sources said.

"Violence is not the answer," Interior Minister Fernando



Law enforcement personnel watch while protesters hold Spanish flags, as Ceuta residents destroy migrant camp by the beach, in Ceuta, in this screen grab taken from a handout video. (Reuters)

Grande-Marlaska told parliament yesterday.

"I call for calm and an end to any form of violence, because ... violence is not the way to resolve any problem with the complexity" of that facing Ceuta, he added.

The head of Ceuta's local government, Juan Vivas, said peaceful protests "to demand the return to normality" were justified, but warned that authorities would take action against anyone who commits acts of vandalism.

"We totally reject the use of any kind of violence," he said in an institutional address.

"No one can or should take the law into their own hands. The defence of Ceuta and the interests

of its people can only be pursued through legality."

Right-wing and far-right parties have demanded that all the migrants be rounded up and sent back to their home countries.

Grande-Marlaska accused them of "inciting hatred and confrontation" in Ceuta.

The government has warned that each individual must be identified to determine whether they are entitled to asylum or subject to deportation, while unaccompanied migrant children require special protection.

Ceuta and Melilla, another small Spanish territory in North Africa, form Europe's only land border with Africa.

Iraq may show how US can squeeze Iran’s trade partners

Iraq could serve as an example of how the United States could carry out its threat to force countries that continue trading with Iran out of the dollar-based financial system. Washington has already sanctioned a host of Iraqi banks accused of doing business with Tehran, though it has avoided measures that would devastate the economy of the strategic ally of both countries.

US President Donald Trump has warned that any country that provides Iran with an economic lifeline would face severe consequences. That could put Iran's main trading partners of recent years in the frame: China, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, India, Pakistan and Oman. US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent announced “an economic onslaught” against Iran with sanctions, saying its trading partners would be targeted, without naming them.

The United States, since its 2003 invasion of Iraq, has held effective control over the country's oil revenue dollars, primarily through the Federal

Reserve Bank of New York, giving Washington extraordinary leverage over Baghdad’s affairs. A rare ally of both the United States and Iran, with more than \$100bn in reserves held in the US, Iraq relies heavily on Washington's goodwill to keep its oil revenues and finances flowing.

While the US has uniquely strong leverage over Iraq compared with other major trading partners of Iran, the US dollar's status as the linchpin of global trade makes its reach formidable. In April, Reuters reported the US halted a \$500mn cash shipment to Iraq and suspended parts of security cooperation to pressure Baghdad over Iran-backed militias. In January, Washington reportedly threatened senior Iraqi politicians with sanctions — including on oil revenues — should such groups join the next government.

Successive US administrations have sought to choke that dollar stream with sanctions on Iraqi banks in recent years, though some of the largest banks were spared. Iraq’s current prime minister

emerged as a candidate seen as acceptable to the Trump administration, which has steadily pressured Baghdad to curb Tehran's influence. US pressure has raised the costs and risks of financial dealings with Iran, forcing Iraqi institutions to improve compliance, said Neil Quilliam, associate fellow at UK-based think tank Chatham House.

But it hasn’t broken Iraq’s economic ties with Iran, which extend beyond the financial system - leaving Baghdad caught between its dependence on both Washington and Tehran. “Countries such as China or Turkey have larger economies and more room to absorb pressure. Iraq has fewer alternatives and significantly less financial resilience,” Quilliam said.

“Its vulnerability comes less from the scale of its trade with Iran and more from its dependence on continued access to the US-led financial architecture.”

Iraq’s trade with Iran topped \$10bn in 2025, according to official figures, driven mainly by Iranian

exports of food and consumer goods to the Iraqi market. Trade has fallen in 2026 after the Iran war began, raising security risks, disrupting border crossings and increasing transport costs.

Energy is central to the relationship: Iraq pays Iran \$4bn to \$5bn a year for natural gas used to generate electricity, Iraqi energy officials say, and officials warn new US measures could jeopardise those payments. Iraq has long been an effective sanctions-evasion route for Iran, said Tom Keatinge, director at the Centre for Finance and Security at the Royal United Services Institute.

“As Iran’s connections with the international financial system are squeezed further, existing vulnerabilities will find themselves exploited to a greater extent. In that regard, Iraq, its banking system and its informal financial sector can expect to face mounting challenges,” he added. He said, however, that an approach based on incentives rather than punitive measures could be more effective. — Reuters

Decoding postpartum mental illness

After a month-long trial, a Massachusetts jury is deciding the fate of Lindsay Clancy, a mother who killed her three young children in 2023 and then tried to kill herself. Her defence lawyer says her actions were due to her suffering from the most severe form of postpartum mental illness, while a prosecutor called the tragedy a planned murder. Here is what to know about the range of mental health conditions that are associated with childbirth:

Postpartum mental health problems are emotional, psychological and behavioural conditions that can occur during pregnancy or after childbirth. They range from relatively mild and short-lived mood changes to serious illnesses requiring treatment. The most common condition is postpartum depression, but some new mothers also experience postpartum anxiety disorders, panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and, in rare cases, psychosis. Roughly one in eight US women experiences postpartum depression, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, while anxiety symptoms may affect an even larger number. Postpartum mental health conditions can affect people of any age, income level or background, including those who have never previously experienced mental illness.

Experts at the US National Institutes of Health and elsewhere say that these conditions are medical issues, not personal failures or signs of being a bad parent. Risk factors include a personal or family history of depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder or other mental health conditions. Complications during pregnancy or childbirth, a baby with health problems, lack of social support, financial hardship, and major life stressors can also increase vulnerability.

The “baby blues” are very common and affect up to 80% of new mothers. Symptoms can include mood swings, irritability, tearfulness, and feeling overwhelmed. These usually begin within a few days of delivery and improve within two weeks without treatment, according to ACOG.

Postpartum depression is more severe and lasts longer. Symptoms may include persistent sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest in activities, difficulty bonding with the baby, changes in sleep or appetite, feelings of worthlessness and thoughts of self-harm. Unlike the baby blues, postpartum depression typically requires professional evaluation and treatment.

Doctors urge parents to seek medical advice if symptoms last more than two weeks, are getting worse, interfere with daily life, or make it difficult to care for themselves or their baby. — Reuters

Looking back



A woman visits the memorial cemetery in the village of Potocari, following the death of former Bosnian Serb military chief Ratko Mladic near the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica. Mladic died in a prison hospital in The Hague aged 84 after suffering several strokes on Thursday. He was convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, was known as the “Butcher of Bosnia” for his role in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, Europe's worst atrocity since World War II. (AFP)

Syria heralds new era of financial integration

QNA
Damascus

The rescission of Syria's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism marks a significant shift in the legal and economic environment surrounding the country and paves the way for a new phase of rebuilding international financial and banking relationships and expanding trade flows, remittance flows, and investment, Syrian economic officials and experts told Qatar News Agency (QNA).

They pointed out that fully capitalising on the decision requires banking, legislative, and financial overhauls, in addition to strengthening confidence in the Syrian economy and investment climate. Dr Osama al-Qadi, Senior Adviser to Syria's Ministry of Economy and Industry, said the move does not imply an immediate infusion of funds into Syrian banks, but rather means removing the barrier that had prevented these funds from flowing through the SWIFT system.

He added that it has become easier for Oliver Wyman Financial to persuade companies and correspondent banks to conduct transactions with Syria through the SWIFT system, amid efforts by the Central Bank of Syria to upgrade the country's banking infrastructure and banking regulations. Al-Qadi expected Syria to see the entry of more Western, Arab, and Turkish banks by the end of this year and during the first six months of next year, along with a paradigm shift in electronic payment systems and banking services.

What matters more, he underlined, is compliance with international banking regulations, ensuring transparency, and eliminating any suspicions of money laundering, all of which would help build trust between non-Syrian and Syrian banks.

For his part, Syrian People's Assembly member Aqeel Hussein described the decision as a final shift in Washington's perspective on its relationship with Syria, suggesting that it would pave the way for rebuilding that relationship on the basis of confidence, friendship, respect, and cooperation.

The decision, Hussein noted, manifestly demonstrates a significant change in the US viewpoint and priorities toward Syria, highlighting that the United States had previously viewed

The removal of Syria's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism marks a significant shift in the legal and economic environment, and paves the way for new investments in the country



Syria as an adversary or a country with which cooperation, engagement, and assistance were not warranted, while the sanctions affected virtually every aspect of Syrians' lives.

The move also conspicuously unlocks prospects for Syria to return to playing its much-heralded role in the region as a partner in promoting stability and security in the Middle East, in addition to helping rebuild the region through positive cooperation and partnerships, Hussein noted. Hussein further suggested that, from a legal standpoint, the decision telegraphs that Syria is no longer legally blocked from allowing firms and nations to forge economic, political, and military deals with it.

He described the matter as a final ruling but contended that practical engagement with Syria will remain connected to how every nation, partner, and enterprise views the country in terms of shared interests. He stressed the importance of the decision from a moral standpoint after 50 years of sanctions and isolation, noting that countries, companies, and institutions interested in investment, technology, reconstruction, and other areas may not move quickly to engage with Syria. Instead, they will assess the situation and study conditions in Syria.

Hussein stressed the need for Syria's banking sector to strengthen the world's confidence in it and capitalise on the new circumstances Syria is experiencing, allowing the decisions and measures that have been taken to translate into tangible results on the ground and generate economic benefits.

Economic standpoint

From an economic standpoint, Dr Ibrahim Nafeh Qushji, an economic and banking expert, said that the lifting of sanctions and the rescission of Syria's designation herald a new era, bringing broad economic opportunities as well as challenges.

Qushji explained that removing the restrictions eliminates one of the biggest legal barriers that had prevented global companies and banks from engaging with Syria, expecting a direct impact on foreign trade flows through the removal of restrictions that had affected shipping and insurance operations, the resumption of financial transfers through official channels, and increased international interest in the energy and services sectors.

He noted that Syrian banks are now able to move toward reestablishing correspondent banking relationships with global banks, enabling them to receive transfers in foreign currencies, facilitate import and export transactions, and attract investment that requires a stable and secure banking environment.

International banks, in turn, will require updated systems to combat money laundering and terrorist financing, greater transparency in financial data, and regulatory assurances from the Central Bank of Syria, Qushji remarked, stressing that these requirements are not sanctions but rather standard operating conditions for any integration into the global financial system.

Qushji expected the decision to open

the door to investment, but noted that investors need clarity in investment laws, a judicial environment that ensures the protection of property rights, relative exchange-rate stability, and a banking sector capable of facilitating the repatriation of profits without restrictions.

He added that the energy, oil and gas, infrastructure, agriculture, food-processing, financial and banking, health, and pharmaceutical sectors could be among those to benefit from the new opening. For his part, Dr Firas Shabo, Professor of Financial Management at Basaksehir University in Istanbul, said the decision is not an isolated event but rather the outgrowth of a series of steps that began in 2025, considering it a removal of the legal barrier to investment, financial transfers, and international partnerships with Syria.

Favourable environment

He explained to QNA that the decision's immediate impact would not be an increase in exports within days, but rather a reduction in the risks of doing business with Syria and the removal of the legal barrier facing entities seeking to engage with Syria. Shabo noted that trade would be among the sectors to respond most quickly, expecting trade-financing costs to gradually decline as correspondent banks become less cautious about doing business with Syria.

However, this will hinge on Syrian banks' ability to implement international standards for combating money

laundering and terrorist financing and protecting customer accounts, thereby facilitating the establishment of correspondent banking relationships, financing letters of credit, and processing international transfers, he said.

Shabo further remarked that investment would not respond quickly because investors need to know the laws that protect their funds, their ability to repatriate their funds, the strength of the judiciary in the country, and the degree of monetary and financial stability, explaining that the decision removes a major obstacle but does not automatically restore Syria's integration into the global financial system.

He added that a correspondent bank's willingness to establish a relationship is different from, and partially independent of, the rescission of the designation and the lifting of US sanctions, as it is also governed by the requirements of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

Shabo pointed to the need for laws combating money laundering and terrorist financing, restructuring the banking sector, strengthening capital, and enhancing its capacity to conduct international settlements.

He expected the greatest impact in the initial phase to come from regional investors before gradually expanding to international investors, provided the key elements of the investment environment are clear, foremost among them security, the judiciary, property rights, taxes, customs, the exchange rate, profit repatriation, banking, governance, corruption, and competition.

By far, the most important challenge will be whether the much-heralded opening can produce a rock-solid legal, regulatory, and financial foundation capable of restoring confidence among international banks, investors, and businesses. The forthcoming changes will be closely watched as Syria seeks to grow out of decades of sanctions and isolation and reconnect its economy with global commerce.

The new phase is an outgrowth of the measures taken since 2025, but its success will ultimately hinge on whether Syria can turn those decisions and measures into concrete results on the ground. The sectors best positioned to benefit could fare well as the economy opens up, attracts investment, and gradually reintegrates into the global financial system.

Russia hits Ukrainian food storage in new logistics strikes

Reuters
Kyiv

Recent Russian air attacks have destroyed around 90% of retailers' food logistics, Kyiv's agricultural minister said yesterday, revealing the scope of Moscow's mounting attacks on Ukrainian logistics.

Both countries have stepped up strikes in recent weeks on economic targets like major retailers, with Russia targeting warehouses for Ukraine's premier supermarket chains, top postal service and home-goods stores.

"As of today, roughly speaking, 90% of food logistics operated by retail chains have been destroyed, but that doesn't mean Ukrainians will be left without food," farm minister Taras Vysotskyi was cited by the Ukrinform agency as saying. His comments to reporters in Kyiv are the most frank official assessment of the damage Russia's escalating strikes have brought on Ukraine's increasingly fragile economy in the fifth year of war.

In recent weeks, fresh fruit, vegetables, sugar, milk products and other food have occasionally disappeared from the shelves in some supermarkets in Kyiv as a result of strikes on logistics depots of food retailers.

Ukraine's long-range attacks have targeted Russia's top online retailers in addition to energy infrastructure and oil tankers in the Black and Azov Seas.

Over the past two days, Russia has been launching jet-powered drones almost non-stop across Ukraine, particularly at Kyiv and the surrounding region, where the situation is the most difficult, Interior Minister Ivan Vyhivskyi said.

In the past day, 16 people had



Firefighters work at the site of a household and construction item shopping mall, as smoke and fire rise after Russian drone strikes, in Zaporizhzhia, yesterday. (Reuters)

been killed across Ukraine in various attacks, he said on Telegram.

"They are hitting civilian businesses, food warehouses, hypermarkets, postal terminals, warehouses where books are stored," Vyhivskyi said.

In Kyiv region, Russian drone attacks yesterday damaged more than a dozen warehouse premises, killing one person, said Governor Tymur Tkachenko.

Strikes also destroyed sorting centres belonging to Ukraine's top private courier Nova Poshta near Kyiv and in the northern city of Sumy, the company said.

In the southeastern city of Zaporizhzhia, a Russian drone tore into major home-improvement store Epicenter, wounding at least

four people, Governor Ivan Fedorov said.

Russia also attacked a shopping centre in the city of Kharkiv in northeastern Ukraine, Mayor Ihor Terekhov said, the second such attack there in two days.

Also yesterday, a Russian drone attack destroyed a warehouse in Kyiv region for a major book retailer that shipped thousands of titles per day, the company said.

Frequent air-raid sirens blared throughout Kyiv into yesterday afternoon, a day after an hours-long missile and drone attack on Ukraine that targeted major retailers and consumer logistics in Kyiv and elsewhere.

Yesterday's attacks appeared aimed at prolonging the snarl-up

sparked by strikes a day earlier, which delayed trains across several regions and left passengers stranded for long periods.

"The enemy is launching small numbers of jet-powered UAVs in waves with the aim of paralysing Kyiv," said Andriy Kovalenko, head of Ukraine's Centre for Countering Disinformation (CCD), a branch of the National Security Council. "The aim – to wear down the air defences and the population."

Ukraine's state railway said yesterday that delays were gradually decreasing, but that the effects of frequent strikes and air-raid alerts would be felt at least another day. Kyiv spent nearly 15 hours under air-raid alert on Thursday, according to Ukraine's foreign ministry.

Zelensky says US gave Kyiv information about meetings in Moscow

Reuters
Kyiv

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday that the US had given Kyiv information about a number of meetings in Moscow over the last few days.

"Today we received information from the American side about the meetings in Moscow that took place these days. There were a number of meetings there," Zelensky said on Telegram, without going into detail on who was at the meetings.

"I thank them for the information and for the necessary tone of the conversation with Russia," Zelensky added, again without elaborating.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday that CIA Director John Ratcliffe had travelled to Moscow to warn Russia off any attack on a Nato member.

The Kremlin dismissed the report, while US President Donald Trump said Russian President Vladimir Putin would not attack a Nato country, playing down media reports on Ratcliffe's trip.

Two sources told Reuters that Ratcliffe had raised the possibility of a Russian operation against a Nato member during the meeting, although it was unclear whether that was the primary purpose of the trip. The talks also covered Russia's support for Iran, one source told Reuters.

Also Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said yesterday that Warsaw was in constant contact with the CIA leadership and was not surprised by Ratcliffe's visit to Moscow.

"We are not taken by surprise by any information regarding the operations and initiatives the CIA Director is conducting," Tusk told a youth conference when asked if the visit should be a source of concern.

"Poland was also informed about the need for an urgent discussion on this matter at the highest possible Polish-American level," Tusk added without elaborating.

He said that there have been signals in the public domain that Russia is preparing to escalate tensions, both in the war with Ukraine and across the region, and that this autumn and winter are set to be pivotal for Russia.

Ukraine's Fedorov takes adviser role at Italian defence ministry

Ukraine's former Defence Minister Mykhailo Fedorov has accepted a role as innovation adviser at Italy's Defence Ministry, the ministry said yesterday. Defence Minister Guido Crosetto had disclosed the offer shortly after Fedorov was dismissed in July, praising him as a driving force behind military innovation

who helped Ukraine regain the initiative in its war against Russia. "I am therefore glad that Mykhailo Fedorov has accepted to offer his services as the defence innovation adviser," Crosetto said in a statement posted alongside a photograph of the two men on the ministry's account on social media platform X. (Reuters)

Le Pen seeks to win over French business leaders at first presidential debate

Reuters
Paris

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen sought to woo France's business leaders on Thursday, pledging during a first presidential debate with key rivals to put public finances back on track if she wins power next year.

The debate, organised by France's main business lobby MEDEF, started with Le Pen, hard-left candidate Jean-Luc Melanchon and other candidates smiling and shaking hands but it soon grew more tense, with contenders accusing each other of making dangerous proposals over debt and pensions. "The government must drastically cut its spending," Le Pen said when asked how she would fix France's ailing finances.

While Melanchon has said he would "chuck" some of France's debt in the fire, Le Pen stressed she would repay it. Since the pandemic, successive French governments have struggled to get the public finances under control, leaving the country with one of the highest fiscal deficits in the eurozone and record debt at 117% of national output.

Opinion polls consistently predict that anti-immigration, eurosceptic Le Pen will win the first round of the election next April by a large margin, and will also be well-placed to win the run-off in May. The latest polls suggest that Melanchon might be her rival in the run-off, while others have pointed to centre-right former

Prime Minister Edouard Philippe going to the second round.

Thursday's debate is seen as a big test for Le Pen before company chiefs, who have long been sceptical about her economic credentials. She said the details of her economic programme would be unveiled in the next few weeks.

Centre-left candidate Raphael Glucksmann drew some applause when he attacked Le Pen on her immigration plans, saying cutting immigration would not fix France's finances.

Earlier, Le Pen clashed with former prime minister Gabriel Attal, a centre-right candidate, over debt. Blue-chip French stocks hit a one-month low earlier in the day as investors fretted about the upcoming budget and political risks ahead of the 2027 election.

Melanchon said one way to slash France's deficit would be to scrap all subsidies to businesses. Philippe said this was a dangerous idea and he suggested that French people would need to work longer in order for the country to get its public finances in order.

An opinion poll carried out by OpinionWay for MEDEF ahead of the debate showed 82% of business owners are pessimistic about the impact of the next president's policies on the economy – whoever that president may be. Meanwhile, France faces a particularly perilous annual budget battle in the coming months as parties jockey for position ahead of the election, while anxious investors look for evidence Paris can regain control of its public finances.

War criminal Mladic's death lays bare Bosnia's wounds

AFP
Potocari

To survivors of the Srebrenica massacre, the death of former Bosnian Serb military leader and war criminal Ratko Mladic changes little about his legacy.

Mejra Djogaz, whose three sons, husband and grandson were killed by forces led by Mladic, lives at the edge of the memorial centre in Potocari, where thousands of marble gravestones mark the victims of the 1995 massacre.

"It's because of him that I was left alone. And I'm not the only one who was left alone: all the mothers in Srebrenica, and many others across Bosnia and Herzegovina, suffered the same fate," the 77-year-old told AFP.

Mladic died on Thursday while serving a life sentence in The Hague for war crimes committed during the 1990s Bosnian war; his conviction led international media to dub him the "Butcher of Bosnia".

Decades on from the conflict, Djogaz said she remains too afraid to return home to her village on the outskirts of the town, which has been left almost emptied by the wartime killings.

Instead, she stays with friends within walking distance of the memorial site, where she can visit the graves of her family.

"I would have liked him to live even longer, so that he could suffer more, as we mothers suffer," she said of Mladic.

Mladic experienced several strokes in recent months before



A column of surnames of victims is displayed at the memorial cemetery where the victims of the Srebrenica genocide are buried, following the death of Bosnian Serb Ratko Mladic, in Potocari, yesterday. (Reuters)

his death in hospital, as he served a life sentence for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity during the Bosnian War.

He became infamous for his role in the Srebrenica massacre, where more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys were killed and their bodies dumped in mass graves, Europe's worst act of bloodshed since World War II.

Sehida Abdurahmanovic, a member of the main association of mothers in Srebrenica, said knowing he died suffering was some solace to victims' families, but his conviction was more enduring.

"For us, the main thing is that he was convicted and that he was serving his sentence," said Abdurahmanovic, whose brother went missing during the massacre and has never been found.

lika Srpska army flags and carrying banners bearing his portrait.

In Visegrad, where thousands of Bosnian Muslims, or Bosniaks, were brutally killed in 1992, a group of young people unfurled a banner honouring Mladic from a bridge and lit flares.

In Serbia's capital of Belgrade, footage aired by a pro-government private television channel, Informer, which had rolling coverage in tribute to Mladic, showed dozens of men holding flares on the city's main bridge.

Serbian officials have remained largely restrained in their reactions, with President Aleksandar Vucic telling media yesterday that it was "not the day for song or for a celebration" after supporters greeted him with chants at an unrelated event in a western Serbian town.

"We tried and did everything we could to ensure that General Mladic would spend the end of his life in Serbia," Vucic said.

The court rejected requests for Mladic's release on health grounds, a move the populist leader labelled "unprecedented and unjustifiable behaviour".

Serbia's justice minister Nenad Vujic said Mladic "will receive all the military and state honours to which he is entitled", but Vucic did not confirm whether plans were underway for a state funeral.

"Should the family wish for him to be buried on the territory of Serbia, we will help ensure that this is done in a dignified and proper manner," he said.

Serbian officials were awaiting details on when authorities in The Hague would release the body, he added.

Windmills of change: Dutch raise mill in rare operation

Reuters
Waardenburg

"It has a right to the wind," says Dutchman Koen van der Kroon, supervising from his vantage point on a dyke as a centuries-old windmill is lifted painstakingly inch-by-inch.

The Waardenburg windmill – a rare hexagonal mill still grinding grain today – has graced the banks of the Waal on the Rhine delta for 250 years and is a listed monument in the Netherlands.

But a nearby dyke has been raised to protect against flood risks, choking the wind supply to the windmill and threatening to render it obsolete.

The solution: deploy hydraulic jacks to raise the windmill 80 centimetres (31 inches), at the snail's pace of 10 centimetres per hour.

"The Waal's water level is often very high, which is why the residents living behind the dyke want, above all, to be safe," said project manager van der Kroon.

"To guarantee safety in this area, the dyke must be raised. So the windmill has to be raised as well," he told AFP.

It is a dilemma becoming increasingly common with climate change in the Netherlands, where one third of the land lies below sea level.

As waters rise and flooding becomes more regular, authorities have to bolster the country's ingen-

ious system of dykes, with unintended consequences for windmills.

Raising dykes "has a major impact on iconic monuments," said van der Kroon, 44.

"We are ensuring that these magnificent windmills, which make the Netherlands famous, can continue to operate," he added.

This is the second time the windmill has been raised, after a similar operation in the 1990s.

The fact it needs to be lifted even higher shows the difficulty faced by Dutch authorities in juggling the safety of the population from flooding and preserving the country's heritage.

"We first displaced the old foundations. Then we put jacks underneath which allow us to lift

the windmill by about 10 centimetres an hour," said project manager van der Kroon.

"Then, we will install new piles for the windmill to rest on. After that, all that remains is careful backfilling," he added.

Once the mill is stable on its new base, it should receive enough wind to turn its sails, continuing a tradition that has endured for centuries in the Dutch countryside.

"It's a feat of engineering that we do not carry out every day and we are proud of the team effort," said Marcel de Kroon, from the company that owns the windmill.

"It's great that we are taking the trouble to keep this windmill in its historical context," he told AFP. "It's magnificent to see."



This aerial view shows workers taking part in the lifting operation of a 250-year old windmill in Waardenburg yesterday. (AFP)



Qatar expands its green spaces, creating more liveable, resilient cities

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Qatar's expanding network of parks, landscaped areas and tree-covered spaces is giving its urban landscape a greener character, while contributing to liveability, biodiversity and climate resilience.

The Ministry of Municipality reported that Qatar's green areas reached 21.9mn sqm in 2025, with the average green space per person rising to 6.8sqm.

The figures were highlighted as part of the ministry's environmental sustainability efforts.



The latest figures come as Qatar continues to invest in public parks, afforestation and landscaping as part of wider efforts to improve the urban environment and quality of life.

The National Planning Council also maintains an official open-data series covering cultivated green areas, re-cultivated land, trees, shrubs and date palms, as well as roadside vegetation and median strips.

The dataset provides a mechanism for tracking the development of green infrastructure across Qatar's municipalities.

The longer-term trend is notable, although various government sources use different definitions and metrics for green space.

Qatar's Nationally Determined Contribution 3.0 (NDC 3.0), submitted under the Paris Agreement, states that green spaces expanded from 3.5 sq km in 2015 to 16.7sq km in 2023.

It attributes the expansion partly to the One Million Trees initiative, launched in 2019 and completed in 2022, as well as planting and landscaping incorporated into highways, industrial areas, public parks, schools and residential complexes.

The expansion has continued through the Ten Million Trees Initiative, which Qatar launched in 2022 following the completion of the One Million Tree programme.

The initiative forms part of the coun-

try's wider efforts to restore ecosystems, increase vegetation and support biodiversity.

Qatar's 2025 Voluntary National Review submitted to the United Nations reported that 159 parks had been established by 2024, alongside nearly 3mn sqm of developed green space.

It also said the Ten Million Trees Initiative had planted 320,000 tree seedlings at the time of reporting.

The same review reported that 27% of Qatar's land was designated as nature reserves, covering 12 protected areas and more than 3,400 sq km.

Qatar has set a target of protecting 30% of its land and marine areas by 2030.

The expansion of greenery takes on added significance in Qatar, where extreme heat and arid conditions shape the urban environment.

For much of the year, high temperatures can make walking and outdoor recreation difficult, particularly in areas with little shade.

Trees and vegetation can provide shade and influence local temperatures, potentially making public spaces more comfortable for residents.

Research specifically on Doha supports vegetation's cooling potential.

A 2024 study published in *Sustainable Cities and Society* examined land-use changes and land-surface temperatures in Doha and Al Daayen from 2000 to 2023.

It found that green areas recorded lower mean land-surface temperatures than built-up and desert areas during both summer and winter.

The study also found that the mean summer land-surface temperature increased by 7.64° Celsius over the study period, underscoring the need for urban planning measures to address rising heat.

A separate 2026 study by researchers at Qatar University examined outdoor thermal conditions in and around Doha using satellite imagery and local climate zone data.

It found that bare soil and sandy areas reached temperatures of up to 40C, while

Trees, parks and landscaped areas are becoming a bigger part of Qatar's urban landscape, helping make cities more liveable while supporting biodiversity and protecting the environment. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulkam and Thajudheen



compact low-rise and heavy industrial areas recorded median summer land-surface temperatures of 37C to 39C.

In contrast, vegetated and open low-rise areas recorded lower temperatures and better thermal conditions, particularly during winter and spring.

The researchers said the findings support the strategic design of green spaces as part of climate-responsive urban planning.

International research also provides evidence that the quality and structure of greenery can influence its cooling performance.

A 2026 study in *Sustainable Cities and Society*, examining urban green spaces in Glasgow, found that taller trees and higher tree-cover ratios were associated with stronger cooling effects, while greater grass cover and uneven distribution of green space weakened the cooling response.

The researchers stressed that vegetation structure and surrounding urban conditions should be considered when designing climate-resilient green infrastructure.

Another 2026 review in *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* similarly found that the cooling performance of urban green infrastructure varies with scale, vegetation type, and density.

It was reported that large-scale green infrastructure can provide stronger cooling over wider areas, and that forests generally provide greater cooling than shrubs and grasslands.

For Qatar, however, the effectiveness of greenery is not simply a matter of adding more vegetation.

A 2024 study published in *Ecological In-*

formatics used satellite imagery and NDVI (normalised difference vegetation index) data to examine changes in Qatar's urban green space from 2000 to 2022.

It found that preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup contributed significantly to the growth and restructuring of urban green space.

The researchers estimated that the World Cup preparation and hosting period accounted for 73.2% of Qatar's overall urban green-space expansion during the study period and increased the minimum level of green exposure experienced by citizens by 8.7 times.

The study also found that green-space expansion was accompanied by changes in the pattern and fragmentation of green areas, highlighting the importance of how greenery is distributed across the urban landscape rather than simply measuring its total area.

The environmental value of Qatar's greening efforts extends beyond temperature.

Vegetation can provide habitat and food for birds, insects and other organisms, while connected parks and green corridors can help create more continuous urban habitat.

Qatar's broader conservation efforts aim to protect natural ecosystems and biodiversity, with nature reserves covering more than a quarter of the country's land area.

Qatar's NDC 3.0 also identifies afforestation and ecosystem restoration as part of its climate and biodiversity efforts, including large-scale planting, mangrove restoration and the integration of greenery into urban development.



Doha's waterfront remains active as summer temperatures gradually ease, with fishing boats, traditional traps and modern watercraft sharing the Gulf. **PICTURES:** Joey Aguilar



Doha's summer waters keeping old connection to the Gulf alive

By A Staff Reporter
Doha

Even as Qatar's summer temperatures gradually ease, life along Doha's waterfront remains closely connected to the sea.

The waters off the capital stay active with fishing boats, leisure craft and personal watercraft, offering a glimpse of Doha beyond its towers, traffic and polished skyline – and of a maritime tradition that has endured through the country's rapid transformation.

Personal watercraft skim across the bay, leaving trails of foam, while speedboats move between the harbour and open water.

Larger leisure vessels sit near-

by, alongside traditional wooden boats.

For residents and visitors, Qatar's waters remain a destination for boating, fishing and other water activities, including during the summer months.

The Gulf has long been closely connected to life on the peninsula.

The waterfront today, however, looks very different from that of earlier generations.

On one modest fishing boat, a marine radar and navigation system, lights and other electronic equipment are mounted above the roof.

Nearby, traditional fishing traps are stacked on a dock among ropes, plastic crates and coolers.

The scene brings together two



aspects of Qatar's maritime life: traditional fishing equipment and modern marine technology.

Across the water, Stadium 974 offers another reminder of the country's transformation.

The distinctive structure, built for the 2022 FIFA World Cup,

stands behind the bay, creating a striking backdrop to the boats and harbour activity.

From the water, the contrast is clear: fishing traps on a wooden dock, boats equipped with modern navigation systems, jet skis crossing the bay and traditional

vessels moored nearby, with one of Qatar's most recognisable modern landmarks in the background.

The Gulf that once sustained pearl divers and fishing crews is now also a setting for boating, recreational fishing and water-sports.

Along the waterfront, however, fishing boats and traditional equipment remain visible reminders of its working past.

It is a reminder of a maritime heritage that predates Doha's modern skyline.

For generations, Qatar's coastal communities depended on fishing, pearling and maritime trade.

The sea was central to livelihoods and daily life long before oil and gas transformed the country's

economy and accelerated Doha's development.

Today, the city's waterfront reflects both eras.

One side presents the modern capital, with major sporting venues and a rapidly changing skyline.

The other remains more practical, with fishing boats, wooden docks, ropes, traps and equipment associated with life on the water.

The two versions of Doha do not exist separately. They continue to share the same coastline and, in many places, the same waters.

As summer gradually gives way to milder temperatures, the continued activity along Doha's waterfront offers a simple reminder: while the city around it has changed dramatically, its connection to the Gulf remains.