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GULF TIMES
published in QATAR since 1978
SATURDAY Vol. XXXXVI No. 13910
October 31, 2026
Jumada I 20, 1448 AH
www.gulf-times.com 2 Riyals

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Pope Leo makes history with US midterm vote

Pope Leo XIV, the Catholic Church's first US-born pontiff, has voted in the United States midterm elections, the first known time a pope has voted in a political election. The head of the world's 1.4bn Catholics, who has clashed with US President Donald Trump, submitted his mail-in ballot in Chicago, the Vatican said yesterday. The Chicago-born pontiff "has exercised his right to vote as a United States citizen, whenever he was eligible to do so" and believes in "the right and the duty of citizens to participate in democratic processes," it said. A rift earlier this year between US President Donald Trump and the pope sparked global headlines.

Leo and Trump repeatedly clashed over papal criticism of the harsh crackdown on immigration in the United States and of the war on Iran, with Trump calling the pontiff "weak" on crime and "terrible" on foreign policy. The pope said he was "not afraid" of Trump.

In April, after Trump's threat to destroy Iran, Leo called on everyone to do their part for peace. (**AFP**)

Minister meets top EIF official



HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Dr Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad met yesterday in Geneva with Kadra Hassan, the Permanent Representative of Djibouti to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and Chair of the Executive Board of the Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF) for Trade-Related Assistance to Least Developed Countries (LDCs). During the meeting, the two sides reviewed prospects for co-operation between Qatar and the Enhanced Integrated Framework, alongside several topics of mutual interest. (**QNA**)

Qatar's delegation in Iran diplomacy push

AFP
Tehran

A Qatari delegation was in Tehran yesterday for talks with Iranian officials as mediators press efforts to revive peace talks with the United States. According to the IRNA state news agency, the delegation, headed by a senior adviser to Qatar's prime minister, came to discuss "bilateral relations... as well as regional developments" with senior Iranian officials.

Senior officials from several countries have flown to Tehran in recent days as fears rise of a return to hostilities in the Middle East war, which started eight months ago. The Qatari visit came a day after Iranian media said Iran had received a letter from US Vice-President J D Vance addressed to security chief Mohsen Rezaei. *The Wall Street Journal* said the letter focused on a possible framework for negotiations rather than specific terms for a peace deal. The *New York Times* reported that Vance "made the outreach in a letter sent last week via Qatari mediators and delivered to Gen Mohsen Rezaei". Qatar and Pakistan have been mediating efforts to revive peace talks following a ceasefire agreement in April. Also earlier this week, senior officials from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkiye — which signed a defence alliance in Makkah in August — flew to Tehran for talks.

On Wednesday, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said Tehran was discussing a plan with both mediators, Qatar and Pakistan, to end the war and reopen the waterway.

Tehran insists that Washington meet seven conditions for reopening the strait, including a ceasefire across the Middle East, unfreezing Iranian assets abroad, lifting sanctions on its oil sector and ending the US naval blockade.

Tankers catch fire in Hormuz

Iran's Revolutionary Guards Navy said yesterday that three oil tankers had caught fire and exploded while attempting to use what it described as unauthorised routes through the Strait of Hormuz, Iranian state media reported. An IRGC Navy statement said one of the tankers, which was carrying 2mn barrels of crude oil, had hit a mine. Reuters was unable immediately to verify the statement. (**Reuters**)

Qatar urges stronger maritime security to promote global peace

QNA
New York

Qatar has stressed the need to place maritime security at the heart of joint international efforts and harness technological innovation to promote international peace and security.

This came in a statement delivered by HE the Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations, Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani, during a high-level open debate of the UN Security Council on 'Emerging Technologies and Maritime Security: Implications for Peace and Security', held at UN Headquarters in New York.

HE Sheikha Alya said Qatar attaches great importance to maritime security as a fundamental pillar of international peace and security. She noted that emerging technologies, including AI, autonomous systems, and advanced surveillance, offer major opportunities to improve maritime safety, while their misuse threatens commercial shipping, critical maritime infrastructure, and trade security.

She said developments in the Middle East this year had demonstrated the serious consequences of threats to maritime security and freedom of navigation, particularly in the Strait of Hormuz. She stressed the need for full compliance with international law and Security Council Resolution 2817, including its provisions concerning navigational rights and freedoms under international law.



HE Sheikha Alya reiterated Qatar's categorical rejection of using the Strait of Hormuz as a means of political pressure, calling for its unconditional reopening. She emphasised that freedom of navigation and transit passage rights through this vital waterway, in accordance with international law, are firmly established principles that are not subject to negotiation.

She added that Qatar believes the responsible use of emerging technologies in the maritime domain must fully comply with international law, particularly the UN Charter and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and be supported by appropriate safeguards, effective human oversight, and clear accountability.

She also stressed the need to strengthen cybersecurity, protect maritime navigation and communications systems, enhance information-sharing and early warning, and ensure developing countries benefit fairly from technological progress through technical assistance, capacity-building, and partnerships with the private sector and maritime transport industry.

HE Sheikha Alya noted that the Security Council has an important role to play in addressing these challenges within its mandate, building on its August 2021 presidential statement on maritime security and its October 2024 presidential statement on the consideration of scientific developments.

She added that the council's credibility depends on ensuring the implementation of its resolutions and responding consistently and without selectivity to threats to maritime security.

She affirmed that Qatar continues to participate actively in the work of the International Maritime Organisation, including meetings of its Maritime Safety Committee.



Traditional wooden dhow boats sail along Doha's waterfront as the sun sets over the city skyline, casting a warm golden glow across the waters of the Corniche. The scene captures Qatar's maritime heritage against the backdrop of its modern urban landscape. **PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam

Qatar researchers develop AI platform to transform maternal healthcare

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

A group of researchers from Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU) has developed an artificial intelligence (AI)-powered platform aimed at making maternal and foetal healthcare more efficient, consistent and accessible by bringing ultrasound analysis, clinical knowledge, decision support and medical reporting together in a single system.

AI Scholar MaternaCare, developed by HBKU's College of Science and Engineering (CSE), uses AI to analyse foetal ultrasound images, identify anatomical structures and extract clinically relevant measurements and indicators. MaternaCare recently secured second place in the Ghain Mena Scale-Up Award and a $17,500 grant, providing additional support for its transition from research innovation towards clinical application.



The MaternaCare research team.

The researchers involved in the project are: Dr Mowafa Househ, professor; Dr Marco Agus, associate professor; Dr Mahmood AlZubaidi, post-doc researcher; and Dr Zain Tariq, post-doc researcher; all from College of Science and Engineering, HBKU.

"MaternaCare is designed to support doctors rather than replace them, with clinicians retaining responsibility for reviewing AI-generated information and making final decisions based on each patient's individual circumstances," said Dr Househ. By providing an additional layer of analytical support, MaternaCare could help clinicians identify structures, measurements and potential indicators that may warrant closer attention, while also reducing the time spent on repetitive documentation.

The platform then combines these findings with evidence-based medical knowledge to provide structured information that can assist healthcare professionals in interpreting results and preparing clinical reports. "For expectant mothers and their families, the potential impact is more consistent and timely care. MaternaCare is being developed as an end-to-end clinical informatics and decision-support platform rather than simply an AI tool that analyses ultrasound images," explained Dr Househ.

Its capabilities include AI-assisted foetal ultrasound analysis, anatomical segmentation and measurements, foetal assessment support, image-quality enhancement, evidence-based clinical intelligence, automated and structured medical reporting, explainable AI outputs, and maternal-health education and awareness.

A key element of MaternaCare is the incorporation of responsible-AI safeguards, including human oversight, privacy and security mechanisms, auditability, performance monitoring and assessment of potential bias across different patient populations, institutions and ultrasound equipment. "These safeguards are particularly important because the technology is intended to operate in clinical environments where AI-generated information can contribute to medical decision-making. The project forms part of the broader HikmaTech research ecosystem at HBKU, which explores AI-based approaches to knowledge discovery, healthcare and education," highlighted the researcher.

Rather than focusing solely on automation, the initiative seeks to use AI to help healthcare professionals manage complex information, reduce repetitive work and make relevant evidence more readily available at the point of care. "The next stage of MaternaCare is expected to focus on expanding its imaging capabilities and integrating them more closely with clinical decision support, evidence-based reasoning, automated reporting and responsible-AI safeguards.

An important part of the scale-up will be testing the platform in real healthcare environments to assess not only technical performance but also usability, workflow integration, clinical relevance and safety across different users and ultrasound equipment," continued Dr Househ.

The researchers have adopted a phased approach to deployment, with clinical validation, governance, privacy, safety and institutional requirements taking priority over a fixed public launch date. "Healthcare AI, particularly when technology contributes information to clinical decision-making, requires safety, validation, governance, privacy and clinician acceptance," the researchers said, stressing that the objective is to develop a system that can be deployed responsibly and sustainably in real clinical settings.

QATAR

Qatar urges stronger international support for LDCs to hit 2031 target



Qatar has called for stronger international co-operation, increased development financing and targeted technical support to help the world's least developed countries achieve sustainable economic growth and graduate from their current classification.

Speaking at a high-level dialogue in Geneva yesterday, HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Dr Maryam bint Ali al-Misnad said that progress in helping the world's poorest countries move beyond least developed country (LDC) status remained slow.

The session took place as part of the World Trade Organisation (WTO)'s 10th Global Review of Aid for Trade and examined the effectiveness of initiatives to deliver tangible trade impact for Least Developed Countries.

HE Dr al-Misnad highlighted the scale of the challenge, noting that only eight countries had graduated from the LDC category since it was established in 1971, while 44 countries remained on the list, with several others at different stages of the graduation process.

The figures, she said, highlighted a significant gap between international ambitions and actual progress, underscoring the need for more effective action to address structural barriers to sustainable development.

HE Dr al-Misnad said that the Doha Programme of Action for the LDCs (2022-31) provided an important international framework for accelerating progress and supporting countries in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

She also pointed to the midterm review of the programme, scheduled to take place in Doha in March 2027, as a key opportunity to assess achievements, identify implementation gaps and move beyond political commitments towards tangible results.

The meeting should serve as a turning point in international efforts to accelerate graduation, the minister said, outlining three key priorities.

These are developing tailored national graduation plans, strengthening technical assistance and institutional capacity, and ensuring sustainable financial support both before and after countries graduate from LDC status.

HE Dr al-Misnad stressed that each country should have a national roadmap based on its specific needs and challenges, identifying necessary reforms, resources, timelines and measurable progress indicators.

She also called for a distinction between countries close to meeting graduation criteria and those facing deeper structural challenges, arguing that international assistance should be better targeted to reflect their different circumstances.

On technical support, the minister said that sustainable graduation depended on stronger institutions and productive capacity, improved education and healthcare, and greater access to technology and innovation.

She urged the United Nations system, international institutions and development partners to provide direct technical assistance aligned with national priorities.

HE Dr al-Misnad emphasised that graduation must be supported by long-term and affordable development financing, alongside greater investment in productive sectors, infrastructure and human capital.

She called for increased development funding, expanded grants and concessional finance, and stronger co-operation with multilateral development banks and international financial institutions.

The minister also urged the international community to translate commitments made at the Fifth United Nations Conference on the LDCs into practical programmes and projects, backed by clear implementation timelines, defined responsibilities and transparent monitoring of financial and technical commitments.

She highlighted several initiatives under the Doha Programme of Action that require renewed attention, including sustainable investment support, improved food storage systems, stronger food security and the proposed establishment of a dedicated virtual university for least developed countries.

Other priorities include strengthening resilience and crisis management, as well as establishing international and regional centres to promote innovation and knowledge transfer.

HE Dr al-Misnad said that these initiatives would require adequate funding, technical expertise and effective governance arrangements to ensure their long-term sustainability.

She also highlighted the growing importance of technology and innovation as drivers of economic growth, calling for greater investment in digital infrastructure, Internet connectivity, digital education and technological skills.

The minister stressed the need to improve access to modern technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI) applications suited to the development needs of least developed countries, while ensuring local capacity-building and data protection.

She said that the March 2027 meeting in Doha should provide an opportunity for the international community to agree on concrete measures based on national plans, targeted technical assistance and sustainable financing.

HE Dr al-Misnad added that progress should be assessed not simply by the number of countries graduating from LDC status, but also by their ability to sustain economic and social gains, withstand crises and achieve long-term sustainable development.

The Doha Programme of Action runs until 2031 and aims to address the structural challenges facing the world's least developed countries, accelerate implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and enable more countries to achieve sustainable graduation. – **QNA**

Qatar reaffirms commitment to mediation, de-escalation, humanitarian diplomacy

Qatar has reaffirmed its commitment to mediation, de-escalation and humanitarian diplomacy, emphasising that lasting peace is essential to protecting lives, preserving human dignity, and ensuring the rights to health and development for all.

This came in Qatar's statement delivered by the second secretary at Qatar's Permanent Mission to the United Nations Office in Geneva, Abdulaziz Mohammed al-Mansouri, during a panel discussion on protecting the right to health and development in the context of armed conflicts, held as part of the 2026 Social Forum of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

He stressed that the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health is a fundamental human right that must be guaranteed without discrimination in times of peace and conflict.

Al-Mansouri warned of increasing attacks on healthcare facilities and personnel despite clear protections under international humanitarian law, depriving civilians of essential care, undermining health systems and infrastructure, and obstructing development, with particularly severe consequences for women, children, displaced people and persons with disabilities.

He noted that the Human Rights Council unanimously adopted, during its 62nd session, the resolution "Protecting Health Care in Armed Conflicts", initiated and led by Qatar, which also spearheaded negotiations and submitted the text.

The resolution was co-sponsored by 62 countries, reflecting broad international support for concrete action to protect healthcare amid continued attacks, despite existing international commitments, including UN Security Council Resolution 2286 of 2016.

Al-Mansouri called on all parties to armed conflicts to comply with international humanitarian and human rights law, protect hospitals, medical transport and healthcare workers, ensure their safe and unhindered access to those in need, and maintain essential health services.

He also stressed the importance of strengthening mechanisms to monitor, document and report attacks, ensuring accountability and prosecuting those responsible to end impunity and prevent recurrence.

Al-Mansouri highlighted the need to integrate the right to health into peace negotiations, recovery and reconstruction plans, while strengthening international co-operation and investing in resilient and inclusive health systems.

He underscored the importance of partnerships among states, international organisations and humanitarian actors to secure sustainable funding, support healthcare workers, rehabilitate damaged facilities and strengthen communities' capacity to address health crises.

Al-Mansouri added that accurate and timely documentation of attacks is essential to establishing responsibility, improving the international response and preventing further violations. – **QNA**



Al-Misnad holds meeting with Norwegian deputy minister

HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Dr Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad met yesterday in Geneva with Norway's Deputy Minister for International Development at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Stine Renate Haheim.
During the meeting, the two minsters reviewed co-operative relations between Qatar and Norway and discussed ways to further enhance and support them across various fields, alongside several topics of mutual interest. – **QNA**

Minister meets EBRD official

HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Dr Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad met in Geneva yesterday with European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)'s vice-president (Policy and Partnerships) Mark Bowman.
During the meeting, the two sides reviewed prospects for Qatar-EBRD co-operation, alongside key regional and international issues of mutual interest. – **QNA**

Qatari official receives GCC award for legislative work



The Standing Committee of Officials of Legislation Departments in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states have honoured the assistant director of the Legislation Department at the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, Mohammed Abdullah al-Hajri, representing Qatar, as a recipient of the excellence award for technical staff of GCC Legislation Departments, in recognition of his outstanding performance and contributions to legislative work.
The honour was presented during the committee's 31st meeting, held in Bahrain.
The recognition reflects efforts to acknowledge distinguished national talent in the legislative field and promote institutional excellence, contributing to the development of legislative work and improved legal performance across GCC countries. – **QNA**

Sheikha Alya meets senior UN official



HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani met with United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo in New York. During the meeting, HE Sheikha Alya reaffirmed Qatar's commitment to working closely with the UN and international partners to support global efforts to achieve stability in Afghanistan. DiCarlo reviewed the latest political and humanitarian developments in Afghanistan and related international efforts, in light of her recent visit to Kabul. – **QNA**

Qatar reaffirms support for UN's International Law Commission



Qatar has reaffirmed its support for the International Law Commission (ILC) and its mandate, expressing its readiness to continue engaging constructively with the Commission and the Sixth Committee to strengthen an international legal order rooted in the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter.

This came in a statement delivered by Al-Jazi Rashid al-Nuaimi, a member of Qatar's delegation to the 81st Session of the UN General Assembly's Sixth Committee, during the discussion of agenda item 78, titled "Report of the ILC on the work of its 76th and 77th sessions", at United Nations headquarters in New York.

Al-Nuaimi noted that Qatar attaches great importance to the ILC's mandate to codify and progressively develop international law, underscoring the importance of continued co-operation between it and the Sixth Committee, which provides a platform for member states to examine the Commission's work and express their views.

She emphasised that the Commission's work should remain grounded in the practices and views of states and, wherever practicable, reflect the diversity of legal traditions and perspectives, as well as the specific characteristics of national legal systems along with the importance of seeking consensus on the Commission's texts to the greatest extent possible to secure broad acceptance of its outcomes.

Al-Nuaimi reiterated Qatar's position on the criteria previously outlined during the Sixth Committee's deliberations.

These criteria stipulate that any international instrument must not compromise the independence of national judiciaries; must respect the constitutions and sovereignty of states; should draw on definitions and standards established in existing international agreements; must complement existing international instruments; and should include procedural safeguards to prevent the politicisation or misuse of such procedures.

States must also be given sufficient time to study the instrument, with a view to achieving the broadest possible consensus.

Noting that the Committee's work on the codification and progressive development of international law is rooted in state practice, she said that Qatar contributes to this practice through its efforts to promote respect for international law and support its implementation at the national and international levels.

At the national level, al-Nuaimi noted that Qatar has established a National Committee for International Humanitarian Law, which plays a key role in co-ordinating national efforts to implement the rules of international humanitarian law, raising awareness of those rules through legal training and education, and ensuring that national legislation aligns with relevant international obligations.

At the regional and international levels, she highlighted that Qatar has become the first state to chair the Arab Permanent Committee for International Humanitarian Law.

Established within the framework of the League of Arab States, the committee co-ordinates the efforts of national Arab committees working in this field of law.

Al-Nuaimi also noted that Qatar has joined the global initiative to renew political commitment to international humanitarian law by 2025.

Qatar co-chairs the initiative's third track, which focuses on the international humanitarian law and peace, reflecting its commitment to strengthening the role of international law in supporting international peace and security.

Al-Nuaimi said that Qatar views these national, regional, and international efforts as part of state practice that contributes to the progressive development of international law and offers new perspectives for the commission to consider in its work. – **QNA**

Qatar steps up drive for sustainable cities, better quality of life



As cities grapple with rapid urbanisation and growing housing needs, the focus is increasingly shifting towards creating urban environments that put people and quality of life at their centre.

This year's World Cities Day, observed on October 31 under the theme *Regenerating the City: Adequate Housing for All*, highlights the importance of urban regeneration, access to adequate housing and the creation of inclusive, safe and sustainable cities.

In Qatar, urban development and infrastructure expansion are central to the country's broader development strategy.

The State continues to advance strategic projects to upgrade existing residential areas, develop new communities, expand road networks and enhance public services and facilities, in line with Qatar National Vision 2030 and its sustainable development objectives.

Eng. Khalid Saif al-Khayareen, the director of Projects Affairs at the Public Works Authority (Ashghal), said that the authority's infrastructure projects are playing a key role in reshaping residential neighbourhoods across Qatar, improving connectivity and creating safer, more liveable communities.

In remarks to the Qatar News Agency (QNA), he said Ashghal's work spans the development of new residential areas and the upgrading of existing neighbourhoods, with a focus on delivering integrated infrastructure capable of keeping pace with urban expansion and meeting residents' needs.

The projects cover a broad range of infrastructure works, including local roads, stormwater drainage networks, street lighting, parking facilities and dedicated routes for pedestrians and cyclists.

Together, these improvements are designed to make neighbourhoods safer and easier to navigate, while strengthening links with main roads and nearby essential facilities, including government buildings.

Al-Khayareen said that the projects reflect the message of this year's World Cities Day, which highlights the need to bring housing, infrastructure and essential services together in the development of sustainable communities.

He stressed that well-planned residential areas must offer more than housing, providing the infrastructure and services needed to support residents' daily lives and improve their quality of life.

Ashghal, he continued, is currently undertaking a series of road and infrastructure projects across the country, aimed at serving citizens' residential plots and upgrading established and emerging neighbourhoods.

Among the areas covered are West Umm Salal, Al Ebb, Al Thumama, Al Waab, Al Meshaf, Al Maamoura, South-West Muaither, Al Kharaitiyat and Rawdat Al Hamama.

The projects involve expanding and upgrading road networks, improving connections to major roads and installing essential infrastructure.

Beyond improving access and mobility, the works are expected to enhance traffic safety, raise the efficiency of public services and improve the overall appearance of residential districts, while creating safer and more sustainable neighbourhoods that can accommodate future growth.

Sustainability is also shaping the way Ashghal plans and delivers infrastructure projects, with environmental considerations integrated into every stage, from initial design to implementation.

Al-Khayareen said that the authority is adopting innovative solutions, advanced technologies and best practices to conserve natural resources, reduce waste and carbon emissions, and minimise the environmental footprint of its projects, in line with Qatar National Vision 2030.

More than 75% of the materials used in Ashghal's projects are locally sourced, supporting national industries while reducing dependence on imports.

The authority is also expanding the reuse and recycling of construction materials, including excavated soil, concrete and asphalt, alongside the reuse of equipment and road signs.

Solar energy is being harnessed to power lighting at offices and project sites, further reducing the environmental impact of its operations.

Water management is another key element of this approach.

Ashghal is expanding rainwater drainage and collection networks and developing pumping stations to improve drainage capacity and limit water accumulation.

It is also putting water extracted during construction dewatering operations to use in other construction activities, helping reduce waste and make more efficient use of available resources.

Equally important is ensuring that urban infrastructure serves the needs of the wider community.

Ashghal's projects incorporate safer pedestrian walkways and road crossings, dedicated cycling routes, pavements and landscaped green spaces, improving access to public facilities and strengthening connections between residential neighbourhoods and surrounding services.

Together, these measures are intended to create safer, more accessible and environmentally sustainable communities, while encouraging healthier lifestyles and improving quality of life for current and future generations.

Looking ahead, Ashghal is preparing to expand its infrastructure programme significantly, with more than 30 road and infrastructure projects scheduled to be tendered over the next five years under its five-year plan.

The projects will serve new residential land allocated to citizens, covering approximately 33,000 plots.

Alongside the planned projects, the authority is pressing ahead with ongoing works and accelerating the delivery of delayed schemes, while upgrading road, sewerage and stormwater drainage networks.

The broader objective is to ensure that new and established residential areas are supported by integrated infrastructure capable of accommodating Qatar's continued urban expansion and population growth.

The next phase will also place greater emphasis on co-ordination with government bodies and service providers to align infrastructure investment with wider development and urban planning priorities.

Ashghal is also looking to expand the use of smart digital systems and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), to strengthen planning and execution and improve project efficiency.

These efforts form part of Qatar's broader development agenda under Qatar National Vision 2030, with a focus on building resilient, sustainable infrastructure, protecting the environment and raising the standard of public services. – **QNA**

4th Qatar Real Estate Forum and Cityscape Qatar 2026 conclude



The fourth edition of the Qatar Real Estate Forum 2026 concluded on Thursday after three days at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre (DECC).

The event was organised in partnership by the Real Estate Regulatory Authority (Aqarat), Informa Tharawat, and Cityscape Qatar 2026.

The forum addressed key topics, including diversifying investment portfolios across residential, commercial, and mixed-use properties; real estate financing and publicly traded real estate investment trusts (REITs); digital asset tokenisation; property valuation and market data; quality of life; infrastructure; and long-term urban planning.

It also featured interactive workshops and an innovation platform exploring how technology is transforming real estate ownership, management, and operations.

The final day included panel discussions on Qatar's advantages as an investment destination, health-focused real estate investment, the everyday impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on cities, Qatar's urban development strategy, and the Law on Owners' Associations.

Participants in one panel emphasised the importance of preserving the distinctive characteristics of Qatari residential neighbourhoods in urban planning to promote family cohesion and social harmony.

Assistant Undersecretary for Social Development Affairs at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Fahad bin Mohammed al-Khayarin stressed that security extends beyond the safety of roads and buildings to include family stability within residential neighbourhoods.

He highlighted the importance of convenient access to facilities and preserving residents' traditions, including the culture of majlis gatherings.

Director of Urban Development, Planning and Building Permits at Qatari Diar Real Estate Investment Company Mohammed al-Emadi said that successful residential neighbourhoods in Qatari cities depend on integrated services, while real estate developers must preserve urban plans and adhere to design standards.

During a panel on investment in Qatar, executive director of Strategy at the Investment Promotion Agency Qatar Hamad Rashid al-Nuaimi said the country offers foreign investors a comprehensive range of services and seeks to build long-term partnerships.

He added that investors receive support to grow their businesses and expand internationally from a base in the Qatari market.

Speaking at a session on "Live, Work, Play and Thrive: Why Should Qatar Be Your Next Destination", al-Nuaimi outlined the services provided by Qatar and the Investment Promotion Agency Qatar, from initial information gathering and company establishment to ongoing guidance, support, and business visits to the country.

He also highlighted Qatar's advantages in healthcare, security, and the quality of its education system and institutions, noting that investors often place greater weight on these factors than on economic considerations.

At a panel on the use of AI in real estate, Ooredoo Qatar chief corporate services officer Hassan Ismail al-Emadi said the company focuses on three key priorities when handling data: ensuring local data remains within Qatar, managing individual and corporate data transparently, and maintaining cybersecurity.

He added that Ooredoo verifies cybersecurity measures, follows applicable regulations, and complies with relevant requirements.

Speaking at a session on "The Livable City, Reimagined: The Everyday Impact of AI in Qatar", he said that the company works to address gaps early and integrate control centres, such as those managing electricity, with maintenance centres.

The official noted that Ooredoo seeks to enable connectivity among these services.

Ocgrow Ventures founder and chief executive Harish Consul said that Qatar is making significant progress in adopting AI, noting the sector's rapid growth and the considerable potential for further applications in the future.

On the relationship between real estate investment and health, regional general manager of Chiva-Som and JayaSom-affiliated companies Ammar Samad stressed the importance of investing in resorts and the wellness sector, which offers services beyond those provided by traditional hotels.

Speaking at a panel on "Healthy Real Estate: The Investment Case for Health-Centred Development", he said that wellness resorts can become valuable real estate assets by preserving authenticity, avoiding imitation, and conducting thorough market research.

He noted that such resorts differ from traditional hotels by offering specialised healthcare services and consultations throughout guests' stays.

Samad expected demand for wellness services to increase in the coming years.

He projected annual growth of 5-6% in the hospitality sector, compared with approximately 20% in the wellness sector.

The forum coincided with Cityscape Qatar 2026, which showcased more than 400 real estate projects from Qatar and international markets.

The exhibition provided investors, developers, and buyers with a direct platform to explore opportunities and establish partnerships, featuring interactive presentations and virtual project tours.

The event brings together decision-makers, regulators, investors, and developers under one roof at a time of rapid regulatory and technological change across the real estate sector. – **QNA**

Forum for labour market skills recommends unified strategy



The First Gulf Forum for Labour Market Skills, held under the theme *From Empowerment to Leadership*, recommended strengthening Gulf integration in skills development policies and preparing a unified Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) strategy in this field, as well as aligning education and training programmes more closely with labour market needs.

Participants at the forum, organised by the Ministry of Labour (MOL) in partnership with the Executive Bureau of the GCC Council of Ministers of Labor and Social Affairs and University of Doha for Science and Technology (UDST), called for investment in national talent, improved mechanisms for anticipating future skills needs, and measuring the impact of skills development programmes.

The recommendations included considering the establishment of a joint GCC committee for skills development to prepare a unified strategy that keeps pace with technological change and evolving workplace requirements while enhancing national talent's readiness for the skills and jobs of the future.

Participants stressed the importance of strengthening partnerships among educational and training institutions and the private sector, tailoring training programmes to the actual and anticipated needs of economic sectors, investing in professional, digital, and leadership skills, promoting targeted and sustainable localisation, and expanding career development opportunities for citizens in the private sector.

The recommendations also called for a greater private-sector role in identifying required skills, designing training programmes, and providing learning and professional development opportunities to ensure that training outcomes meet job requirements.

They further emphasised improving mechanisms to anticipate labour market needs, using data and indicators to identify future skills requirements, and continuously evaluating and improving the effectiveness of programmes and initiatives.

Participants also called for the forum to be held annually, rotating among GCC member states, to sustain dialogue, exchange expertise, and strengthen Gulf co-ordination in addressing shared challenges related to the future of skills and work.

The MOL's Assistant Undersecretary for National Manpower Affairs in the Private Sector Khames Mohammed al-Naimi underscored the importance of continued joint GCC efforts to develop skills systems and exchange expertise and successful practices among member states, enhancing national talent's readiness for changing labour market requirements.

He stressed the need for continued co-ordination and complementary roles among government entities, educational and training institutions, and the private sector, and for translating visions and proposals into practical, measurable initiatives that deliver a sustainable impact on skills development and national workforce readiness.

Al-Naimi also called for continued investment in people and the development of their ability to learn, adapt, and innovate in response to rapid advances in technology and digital transformation, while opening broader opportunities for GCC talent to contribute to development and shape the future. – **QNA**

Doha to welcome contemporary art and design gallery MIHAD next month

Doha is set to welcome MIHAD, a new contemporary commercial art and design gallery in Doha Design District, which will be open to the public on November 4.

Launched by QC+, the gallery will champion artists and designers from Qatar, the wider region and around the world, connecting their work with collectors and audiences under the concept of "Living with Art and Design".

A QC+ press statement said the gallery would offer artworks and design pieces for sale and commission, alongside a programme of exhibitions, talks, workshops and public events exploring the role of creativity in everyday life.

"MIHAD is a gallery built on a clear belief: great art and design deserve a home with a strong point of view," said QC+ chief executive Kirstin Mearns.

She added that the gallery aims to support exceptional creative talent and provide a space where artists, designers, collectors and the public could come together.

MIHAD's opening exhibition programme, running from November 5 to December 31, will feature three presentations: "rooted/ elsewhere", "Beyond the Letters", and "Traces of the Desert Light" by Sanae Collective.

The exhibitions will explore themes of landscape and belonging, Arabic and Persian typography, and the relationship between light, materials and traditional craftsmanship.

"rooted/ elsewhere" will bring together works by six artists across photography, textiles and mixed media, examining how landscapes shape memory, identity and a sense of home.

The exhibition will be presented in celebration of the Qatar, Canada and Mexico 2026 Year of Culture.

"Beyond the Letters", presented in collaboration with Design Doha Biennial 2026, will examine Arabic and Persian script through audiovisual installations, performances, textiles, sculpture, jewellery and experimental publications.

Curated by Ali Asali and Basma Hamdy, with VCUarts Qatar, it will explore the cultural and historical dimensions of typography beyond the printed page.

The third exhibition, "Traces of the Desert Light", will bring together works in textiles, ceramics, sculptural seating and wood.

Curated by Tine De Beck, the presentation will focus on craftsmanship, traditional techniques and the cultural memories carried by handmade objects.

Alongside the exhibitions, MIHAD will introduce a culinary programme designed to bring food and design into the gallery experience.

From November 4-15, Mexican chef Elena Reygadas will present a selection of signature breads and pastries from her Mexico City bakery, Panaderia Rosetta, at MIHAD Cafe.

Reygadas was named "The World's Best Female Chef" in 2023 by The World's 50 Best Restaurants.

The cafe will also feature ceramics by Mexican designer Perla Valtierra, whose work explores the relationship between materials, form and everyday use.

Selected pieces will be available exclusively through MIHAD Cafe.

The launch forms part of a wider cultural offering linked to Qatar's Years of Culture initiative, which promotes cultural exchange between Qatar and countries around the world. – **QNA**

WORLD

Oman rescues 25 from burning ship, Iran halts oil tankers

AFP
Muscat

Oman said yesterday it had rescued 25 sailors from a merchant ship that was targeted and set ablaze, as Iran reported three oil tankers were halted while crossing the blockaded Strait of Hormuz.

Muscat's navy "carried out an evacuation operation for 25 crew members of the merchant ship RITI, flying the Panamanian flag, after it was targeted, which led to a fire breaking out on board", Oman's Maritime Security Centre said in a statement.

The crew members were provided with medical care, the Omani statement said, without giving details. The Marine Traffic ship-tracking website described the RITI as a crude oil tanker.

Tehran has restricted maritime traffic through the strait since the Middle East war began on February 28 with US-Israeli strikes on Iran.

The narrow strait, which normally carries a fifth of global oil, has become a focal point of the war with ships regularly coming under Iranian fire.

In a video released yesterday, US Central Command chief Brad Cooper said US forces had "successfully cleared the strait's internationally recognised primary transit routes of Iranian sea mines" and remain "present to ensure that all primary transit routes in the Strait of Hormuz remain free and clear".

Cooper said he visited some of the more than 50,000 US service members in the region, repeating earlier statements that the US has helped Gulf countries export more than 1.5bn barrels via the strait since the summer.

Earlier Iran's Revolutionary Guards said three oil tankers had been halted after encountering unspecified "incidents" or hitting mines.

"Two offending oil tankers, one in the eastern part and the other in the western part of the Strait of Hormuz, which were attempting to pass through the unauthorised route, encountered incidents and were brought to a halt in the waters south of the strait," the IRGC said in a statement.

Iran has demanded that vessels use a designated route through the strait and co-ordinate their passage with the country's armed forces, labelling a southern corridor closer to Oman's shores as unauthorised.

The tankers had "switched off all their navigation and positioning systems and, with the support of the terrorist US military, were attempting to exit through the unauthorised route", the Guards' statement said.

The Guards did not specify the nature of the incidents, which came a day after Iran's armed forces said at least four tankers had stopped in the area after hitting mines.

They said yesterday's incidents occurred after the vessels received several radio warnings but disregarded them.

The IRGC later said in a separate statement that a supertanker carrying two million barrels of oil had stopped following an explosion "after striking a naval mine while navigating an unauthorised route through the Strait of Hormuz".

"This is the third oil tanker to have exploded and caught fire today as a result of attempting to pass through an unauthorised route," it added.

The United States has responded to Iran's blockade of the strait with a counter blockade of Iranian ports, further restricting Tehran's ability to export oil and conduct trade.

Five children among seven dead in eastern Syria floods

Reuters
Damascus

Seven people, including five children, have died and seven others were injured after torrential rains triggered flash floods in eastern Syria, authorities said yesterday.

Four people remain missing and rescue teams are continuing to search flooded areas, Emergency and Disaster Management Minister Raed al-Saleh said in a statement on X.

The five children drowned in pools of water formed by the floods, while another person died in a traffic accident, Saleh said, without providing details of the seventh death.

Flooding has hit the eastern provinces of Raqqa, Deir al-Zor and Hasakah, as well as parts of Aleppo, damaging infrastructure, cutting off roads and forcing families to leave their homes.

Syria's civil defence teams have carried out more than 550 emergency operations since the storms began, rescuing 60 people trapped by floodwater and responding to more than 900 distress calls, Saleh said.

Emergency crews evacuated more than 350 students from two schools and helped 375 families leave camps in Raqqa province. Teams also responded to flooding at camps in rural Aleppo and Idlib, and pumped water from around 250 homes and public buildings.

In Deir al-Zor, the floods damaged roads and telecommunications infrastructure, disrupting transport and communications, state news agency SANA reported. Heavy rainfall also caused seven culverts to collapse, cutting off access to several areas.

Authorities suspended classes in Raqqa, Hasakah and Deir al-Zor on Thursday, while forecasters warned unsettled weather could continue into today.

Dodging fuel price hikes, Damascus drivers turn to electric cars

AFP
Damascus



Plug-in hybrid vehicles (PHEV) operating under ride-hailing application 'Yalla Go!' are seen parked on a street in Damascus. (**AFP**)


A man looking at electric cars at a car dealership in Harasta near Damascus. (**AFP**)

Taxi driver Mohammed Kanaan drives his shiny new electric car around Damascus's rundown streets, hoping for higher profits as spiking petrol prices made his old car too expensive to run.

He is among some in the Syrian capital who are steering towards electric cars — mostly Chinese-made — after repeated fuel shortages during the country's civil war and petrol price hikes, most recently due to the Middle East war.

"I used to have a car that ran on petrol but lately fuel quality has been low and prices have gone up," said Kanaan, 42, who had barely been covering his operating costs.

"In the end, I decided to buy an electric car and set up a charging point," he told AFP.

Before the overthrow of longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad nearly two years ago, it was rare to see modern cars in Damascus, particularly after civil war erupted in 2011.

The economy tanked, and imports of new vehicles screeched to a halt due to Western sanctions, which have largely been lifted since the new authorities took power.

When the new authorities came to power and reduced tariffs, some 100,000 cars were imported, before they halted imports of used cars due to concerns over quality.

Not all Syrians can afford to make the switch to electric, with the percentage remaining negligible as most still live in poverty.

Some Syrians took to the streets in protest last month after petrol costs jumped by 26% following a government decision to increase prices amid global surges due to the regional conflict.

Kanaan said his old gas-guzzler needed $26 worth of petrol to drive around 200 kilometres (around 125 miles), but he can now cover the same distance for around $6 by charging his car through the state power grid.

During the civil war, Damascus experienced lengthy power cuts, but supply has improved in recent months as authorities seek to revive the economy and ailing infrastructure.

Still, some people with electric cars have set up solar charging stations to dodge the problem altogether.

Other issues persist. Drivers told AFP that a few weeks earlier, a batch of poor-quality petrol caused problems and breakdowns for hundreds of cars.

The energy ministry subsequently said the sub-par petrol had reached markets due to an "operational error", pledging accountability and compensation for affected motorists.

Syria depends partly on imported petrol, leaving its people susceptible to shortages and long lines at stations.

Citing energy ministry figures, state news agency SANA said last month that Syria's average daily petrol supply was around 2.32mn litres, around a third of it imported.

Walking between vehicles at his family company's showroom outside Damascus, Hamza Sukkar, 25, said electric car purchases had accelerated recently.

"For around eight months, the demand for electric cars and plug-in hybrid vehicles has increased due to the rise in petrol prices and its low quality, pushing people to turn to electric cars," he told AFP.

The cheapest petrol-powered car in his showroom costs more than $12,000, while the electric cars start at $9,000, making them an increasingly attractive choice.

"We now sell three to four electric cars for every petrol-powered car," Sukkar said.

This reflects global figures, where one in four new cars sold worldwide in 2025 was electric, according to the International Energy Agency.

Though Syria as a whole is far from that proportion, the market for electric cars is growing rapidly.

Transport companies are also noticing a shift in gear.

At the headquarters of Yalla-Go!, a leading ride-hailing app in Damascus, local operations manager Rami al-Hamad said "the number of electric cars registered with us has risen by around 20 percent" in recent months.

He attributed the change to "lower operating costs compared to running petrol-powered cars", allowing drivers a chance of higher profits.

But many Syrians lack the funds to buy the cars in the first place, while ensuring regular charging and maintenance can also be a challenge, Hamad noted.

Taxi driver Ahmed al-Lahham, who has been using an electric car for three months, was among those who appeared satisfied with the change.

"Electric cars are new and economical. Passengers are happy with a new car, and I'm happy with the lower costs... so everybody is happy," he said.

DR Congo says Rwanda flouting pact, US sanctions justified

AFP
Moscow



Democratic Republic of the Congo Foreign Minister Therese Kayikwamba Wagner talks to an AFP reporter during an interview in Moscow. (**AFP**)

The Democratic Republic of Congo's foreign minister told AFP Thursday that US sanctions on Rwanda were justified as Kigali had failed to withdraw its troops from Kinshasa's territory as pledged.

Therese Kayikwamba Wagner said DR Congo had made progress in its promise, made under the same US-brokered deal with Rwanda, to neutralise a militia that Kigali says is a cross-border threat.

"We think it's very important to have sanctions. First of all, the sanctions establish the truth! Rwanda signed the Washington agreement and has been consistently violating them," she said.

"Rwanda has fallen short of its main commitment under Washington agreement to withdraw troops that are illegally in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the consequences are being felt," she told AFP in an interview.

"The fact that there are sanctions establishes the fact that there have been violations."

In December, DR Congo and Rwanda endorsed a Washington-brokered peace agreement but it did not end the fighting.

Kinshasa is seeking the withdrawal of Rwandan forces from its territory.

Kigali makes this conditional on the neutralisation of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), an armed group founded by former Rwandan Hutu officials responsible for the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi, and active in eastern DRC.

The US on Wednesday imposed sanctions on the Rwandan defence ministry and a financial institution in the central African country over their alleged ties to the M23 armed group fighting in DR Congo.

The M23 movement has seized swathes of the eastern DRC — home to valuable minerals coveted by world powers — since it took up arms again in 2021.

An offensive by the M23 and the Rwandan army in eastern DRC in early 2025 resulted in the capture of Goma and Bukavu, the capitals of North and South Kivu provinces.

Since then, the front line has stabilised, though South Kivu in particular has seen fierce clashes.

Wagner said Kinshasa had "committed" to neutralise the FDLR and "eliminate the pretext that Kigali has been using and recycling for over 30 years in order to violate our territorial integrity and in order to occupy parts of our country".

Former president Joseph Kabila this month joined forces with the Rwanda-backed M23 movement to take a direct role in an insurgency ravaging the DRC's mineral-rich east, returning to the fray at a febrile time for Congolese politics.

Taking aim at the government in Kinshasa, the new Kabila-helmed Front for the Refoundation of the Nation (FRN) vowed to put "an end to tyranny by any means, including force".

Referring to Kabila and the supposed backing of foreign countries, Wagner said: "Aiding and abetting a criminal has consequences.

"These leaders will have with time to own the role that they played or didn't play to stop violence, suffering in the eastern part of the DRC," she said.

"They will also have to answer to their very own people, because we believe that no African people think that the suffering of the Congolese people is justified."

Lebanon charges 13 over seized shipment of Hezbollah explosives

AFP
Beirut

A Lebanese military court yesterday charged 13 people for their alleged involvement in shipping explosives to Hezbollah, a judicial source told AFP, after authorities seized the half-tonne cargo earlier this month.

The charges come as pressure mounts on the group, which has been weakened by back-to-back wars with Israel and faces a push from authorities in Beirut to disarm its military wing.

Hezbollah yesterday called the charges "unjust".

Only two of the 13 have been detained and only eight have been identified, with the remaining five known only by their noms de guerre.

Proceedings have been opened "against 12 members of Hezbollah, and one of their spouses," a judicial official told AFP.

They were charged with "violating government decisions, possession of arms and explosives, and criminal conspiracy to undermine the authority of the state," the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The case has been transferred to a military judge who is authorised to issue arrest warrants, the judicial official told AFP yesterday.

Two suspected Hezbollah members were arrested on October 8 in a vehicle headed towards Beirut from eastern Lebanon.

"Will deal with weapons outside the legal framework with the required firmness"

In a rare admission, the group said the vehicle and its cargo "belong to the resistance" against Israel and demanded the shipment be returned.

"These accusations are unjust and unfair," Hezbollah member of parliament Hussein Hajj Hassan said.

Those charged "did not undermine the security or integrity of the state, but rather confronted the Israeli enemy that threatens Lebanon's existence," Hassan said.

Two Hezbollah officials were called in for questioning by a judge last week over the incident, a judicial source previously told AFP.

Lebanese authorities have announced the seizure of three large shipments of explosives this month alone.

The country's Prime Minister, Nawaf Salam, has vowed the authorities "will deal with weapons outside the legal framework with the required firmness".

In June, Lebanon and Israel signed a framework agreement which included the disarmament of Hezbollah, a gradual Israeli withdrawal from territories it occupies in the south and the deployment of the Lebanese army to the area.

Oil tanker off UAE coast has stopped leaking: state media

AFP
Dubai

A tanker that has been spilling crude oil into the Gulf since it was attacked on October 9 has stopped leaking, Emirati state news agency WAM said yesterday, citing the energy ministry.

"According to the latest field assessments, no new oil leakage has been detected from the tanker, while maritime and aerial monitoring operations are continuing," WAM said.

According to the agency, satellite images captured yesterday show the oil slick is concentrated off the coast of Umm Al Quwain, an emirate north of Dubai, partially extending towards coastal areas in nearby emirates Ras Al Khaimah, Ajman and Sharjah.

It said work was ongoing to contain and treat the oil slick, adding that the "observed concentration of pollution has declined significantly".

Satellite images taken on October 21 and analysed by AFP showed what appeared to be a slick of about 180 square kilometres. Three days later images showed it had quadrupled in size to about 750sq km.

Since the start of the Middle East war in February with US-Israeli strikes on Iran, Tehran has claimed control over the Strait of Hormuz and regularly targets ships that transit there without its authorisation.

Trump, Obama serve up a food fight in final days of midterm campaign

Reuters
Washington

Former president Barack Obama and President Donald Trump are having a food fight in the closing days of the midterm election campaign, trading barbs over the Cheesecake Factory as voters prepare to decide control of Congress.

Obama struck a nerve with Trump by mocking his gold-heavy White House renovations, saying during an October 24 campaign stop in Ohio that the president had the place "looking like Saddam Hussein opened a Cheesecake Factory." Trump clapped back at Obama this week with lengthy defences of both his renovations and the restaurant chain.

The restaurant flap is the latest offbeat detour in a campaign in which Trump has warned darkly about communism, commented on the physique of men's bodies and joked that the $5,000 payments he is promising Americans if Republicans keep Congress would barely cover a meal at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida.

Both men are trying to portray the other party as disconnected from voters' economic anxieties as Americans struggle with high prices, a central issue heading into Tuesday's election.

Campaigning for Democrats in Morrow, Georgia, on Wednesday, Obama said Trump and his followers were focusing on his Cheesecake Factory remarks instead of on inflation "and hope that you won't notice your bills are higher and your life is tougher."

"They mobilised a whole-of-government response to that joke, not to inflation, but to that joke," Obama said.

"They don't have solutions to actual problems, so they'd rather have the media and you talking about the Cheesecake Factory."


Former US president Barack Obama greets Democratic Senator Jon Ossoff (D-GA) at a rally in Georgia. (**Reuters/File Photo**)

Responding to conservative critics who suggested his joke mocked patrons of the restaurant chain, Obama said: "I am the father of two daughters. Do you think I could have survived their childhood without going to the Cheesecake Factory?"

Trump, never one to let a personal jibe go unanswered, seized on Obama's remarks during campaign stops in Texas and Mississippi.

"Every piece of lettuce he eats has to be perfect, and I'm not that choosy," Trump said in Corpus Christi, Texas, waving his arms around as if in the shape of a lettuce leaf.

Trump accused Obama of being elitist for mocking the restaurant chain, known for its multi-paged menu and an eclectic decor that can include Egyptian-style columns and palm trees, and dismissed complaints about his White House renovations.

"For you to say it's a Cheesecake Factory, that just shows why you were a lousy president," Trump taunted Obama in comments to reporters on Monday.

US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent joined the fray on Tuesday, eating a French dip cheeseburger at the Cheesecake Factory in Washington and saying "the Martha's Vineyard set" should give the chain a try. Obama owns a home on the upscale Massachusetts island.

The episode is the latest flare-up in a rivalry that stretches back to 2011, when Trump gained political prominence by falsely accusing Obama of not being born in the US and Obama later mocked him in remarks at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner.

During this year's midterm campaign, Democrats have accused Trump of being out of touch with everyday Americans' concerns, while Trump has repeatedly played down higher gas prices since the war with Iran began.

Trump provided his opponents another opening this week when he talked in Texas about how people should spend the $5,000 checks he has proposed sending to Americans if Republicans retain control of Congress.

"You could even come to Mar-a-Lago," Trump said. "The problem is that for $5,000 the most you'll be able to buy is a hamburger and maybe a small dessert."

Trump escalates legal efforts before election

Reuters
Washington

US President Donald Trump stepped up legal efforts that could help his fellow Republicans challenge results in next week's midterm congressional election, and scrambled his schedule for the campaign's final days yesterday, restoring planned rallies he had scrapped a day earlier.

Early voting outpaced 2022 totals, with even the American-born Pope Leo casting a ballot by mail for the November 3 contest in which nonpartisan analysts believe Trump's Republicans are likely to lose their current majority in the US House of Representatives, with control of the Senate expected to be hard fought.

The Trump administration pushed forward in legal cases in Alaska, home to a Senate contest that may play a pivotal role in determining the majority, and California, which historically takes more time than most other states in counting ballots.

The Justice Department filed an amended lawsuit in Alaska on Thursday seeking to block the certification of results in the event of a narrow Republican loss, citing a *New York Times* report that Democratic operatives recruited a spoiler candidate with a nearly identical name to the Republican incumbent.

In California, meanwhile, the Justice Department is escalating its pressure campaign against state election officials, issuing subpoenas as part of a criminal probe into alleged voting by non-citizens, according to copies of documents seen by Reuters.

Taken together, the moves are an extraordinary federal intervention in state-run elections, which are administered locally under the US Constitution. Election officials around the country have told Reuters they are bracing for further legal challenges from Washington.

The dispute in Alaska, home to one of about 10 highly competitive Senate races, could leave control of the chamber unclear for weeks. Democrats need a net gain of four seats to win back the majority from Republicans.

If Democrats take one or both chambers of Congress, they could launch investigations into Trump's administration and increase pressure on the president to end the war against Iran.


Supporters cheer on Trump at a midterm election rally in Lubbock, Texas. (**Reuters**)

Yesterday, Trump campaigned in Florida, hoping to galvanise his supporters in a state he won handily in 2024 but where early voting has tilted toward Democrats.

It was his latest stop in a state Republicans usually expect to win, following campaign events earlier this week in Mississippi and South Carolina.

Former Vice President Kamala Harris, whom Trump defeated in the 2024 election, was at a rally for Democrats in Atlanta yesterday.

"The last year and a half, it's been difficult," she told the crowd on Thursday at an event in Macon, Georgia. "Now we're in the phase where we can do a whole lot."

More than 46mn Americans had already voted early as of Friday morning, according to the University of Florida's Election Lab, surpassing the total from the 2022 midterms. Among them was Chicago native Pope Leo, who became the first pontiff to vote in a US election.

In its revised lawsuit in Alaska on Thursday, the Justice Department wrote that operatives for Democratic candidate Mary Peltola orchestrated a "sham campaign for the purpose of misleading Alaskan voters."

The New York Times reported on Wednesday that the operatives convinced a retired teacher living in a remote fishing village named Daniel J Sullivan Jr to appear on the ballot alongside the Republican incumbent, Dan S Sullivan.

Peltola's campaign asked a judge to dismiss the Justice Department's updated lawsuit. "Nothing in these new allegations changes DOJ's utter lack of any legal claim, any legal authority to bring this case, or any entitlement to the relief it seeks," Peltola's lawyers wrote in their motion. Her campaign has previously said it had "no involvement with either Sullivan campaign."

The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee has denied involvement and accused Republicans of propping up candidates of their own in other races. Daniel J Sullivan, listed on the ballot as unaffiliated with any party, has previously denied that his aim was to cause confusion or divert votes from Dan S Sullivan.

Julie Wyatt, a 62-year-old logistics manager who lives in the capital Juneau, said such trickery was nothing new in Alaskan politics, and she still planned to vote for Peltola. "If the Republicans are this desperate, Mary has them on the ropes," she wrote in an email.

In California, meanwhile, the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder's office received grand jury subpoenas last week in the Justice Department's investigation into alleged non-citizen voting.

"At every step, the US Department of Justice has taken a confrontational, adversarial approach," Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder Dean Logan said in a statement on Thursday. "Election officials are acting in accordance with state and federal law."

Rubio hosts G20 ministers as wars divide members

AFP
Atlanta

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio opened talks yesterday with G20 counterparts including Russia's Sergei Lavrov, in meetings set to be fractious as wars in Ukraine and Iran, alongside surging energy costs, fan discord.

The foreign ministers' meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, takes place just days before crucial US midterm elections, setting the stage for a December G20 leaders' summit in Miami at President Donald Trump's Doral resort.

But ongoing conflicts have deepened rifts even as the US seeks to focus on economic growth, trade imbalances and supply chain challenges in areas like energy and critical minerals.

Rubio warned at an opening plenary session that the world faces "interconnected economic and geopolitical crises, many of which pose severe threats" to the global economy. He urged the G20 to work together against threats including strains to global energy and food supply chains, and on freedom of navigation.

Still, few breakthroughs are expected this week from the Group of 20 economies — which include China, India, Russia, Japan, Germany and France — as officials face divisions over Moscow's war on Ukraine and fallout from the conflict with Iran.

Russia has been shunned by most of the West after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and Lavrov himself remains under international sanctions.

Rubio's encounter with Lavrov — whose presence adds an additional layer of tension — will be closely watched as Washington pursues diplomacy on Ukraine while seeking Moscow's cooperation on reining in fuel prices, a key campaign issue in the midterms.

A diplomatic source said that instead of a final declaration, this week's meeting is likely to conclude with the publication of a chair summary drafted by the US.

The Trump administration is set to hand the rotating G20 leadership to Britain and sees the platform as having strayed from its core mission.

A US State Department official earlier stressed the importance of energy access for technologies such as AI and spoke of a "shared resolve to... keep critical sea lanes



Secretary of State Marco Rubio during the G20 meeting. (**AFP**)

open to commerce without threats or tolls."

Global energy prices have rocketed since US-Israel strikes on Iran from late February triggered Tehran's blockage of the Strait of Hormuz.

"This is the last test case the G20 has, at least under the US G20 presidency, until Miami," Alisha Chhangani of the Atlantic Council told AFP. Its outcomes will affect how the December summit shapes up. She expects Washington will seek to argue that security shocks are also economic shocks.

It will likely push for agreement on what "freedom of navigation" means within and beyond Hormuz, a crucial waterway for oil and gas transit, she said. But this could face objections from China, which dissented against wording on free navigation in Hormuz and worldwide at an earlier gathering of finance ministers.

China's top diplomat Wang Yi will not be in Atlanta, and is instead sending his deputy, the US State Department said.

Meanwhile, the possibility of further escalation in the Middle East is mounting, with Israel threatening to strike Iran and Trump signalling he could attack after Tuesday's midterm elections.

The appearance of Lavrov, who plans to argue against international sanctions at the gathering, will likely frustrate European ministers, Chhangani said.

His meeting with Rubio comes ahead of fresh negotiations between Moscow, Kyiv and Washington in November. It is not surprising, however, as Washington has welcomed Russian officials to this year's G20 events — while excluding member South Africa — and Trump has invited his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to Miami in December.i The diplomatic source stressed that Russia's G20 presence "in no way legitimises its actions."

Cost of Iran war to US rises to $47bn

Reuters
Washington

The US military has spent over $47bn so far to prosecute the war in Iran, more than 25% higher than the Defence Department's estimate in July, according to Pentagon data obtained by Reuters.

The Pentagon did not immediately respond to a request for comment on its estimate, which has not been shared publicly.

The disclosure about the rising cost of the Iran war comes as Republicans wrestle with the political fallout of the unpopular conflict ahead of the November 3 election that will determine control of Congress for the next two years.

The war's impact on global energy costs has weighed on support for Republican candidates and hurt President Donald Trump's approval ratings. Trump's Republican Party holds a narrow majority in both chambers of Congress.

The Pentagon's latest estimate was tied to the operational costs of carrying out the war, with a projected cost of more than $29bn to replace expended munitions used in the conflict.

More than $6bn would be needed to replace military equipment and so-called "platform losses," which include the loss of aircraft including many drones lost during the war.

Trump launched the Iran war jointly with Israel in February, predicting that the conflict would last a short time.

Trump's initial strategy in the Iran war focused on first using expensive, high-end precision missiles to bomb Iran's defences so it could later use less expensive munitions, including gravity bombs like the air-launched JDAMs, which are plentiful.

S African court limits anti-migrant demonstration

AFP
Durban, South Africa

Hundreds of protesters gathered outside a court in South Africa's coastal city of Durban yesterday as the government sought judicial intervention to rein in anti-migrant demonstrations that have turned deadly, leaving one person dead last week.

Durban, the Zulu heartland, has emerged as a focal point of anti-migrant agitation led by the March and March movement, which has organised demonstrations against undocumented foreigners across the country for months.

Some demonstrations have turned violent, including last week when a mob of about 50 people beat a foreign national to death, prompting President Cyril Ramaphosa to deploy more than 500 soldiers to support the police.

Protesters sang and chanted outside the high court, waving placards reading "reclaim our country" and sticks as police officers kept a close watch.

Supporters of several political parties, including the centre-right ActionSA and the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) party led by former president Jacob Zuma, also turned out in solidarity.

Judge Peter Olsen allowed March and March movement to proceed with its planned demonstrations, but under tighter conditions following amendments to the government's application.

Under the revised terms, the group may march between 9am and 3pm, with participants barred from carrying weapons or covering their faces. The group was also prohibited from destroying property or setting fire to buildings.

The matter is expected to return to court next year.

The court action was brought by acting Police Minister Firoz Cachalia, who was seeking to stop the demonstrations on the grounds that they threaten public order and the safety of foreign nationals.

He cited police intelligence about an alleged plot to set fire to the Home Affairs Refugee Reception Centre in Berea, an inner-city suburb of Durban where asylum seekers go to seek documentation.

The unrest has been fuelled by misinformation about a July Constitutional Court ruling that asylum seekers cannot be denied access to South Africa's asylum system solely on procedural grounds, according to the police.

Counsel for the police told the court yesterday that the situation in Durban had "degenerated into lawlessness" that reactive policing could no longer contain.

More than 400 police officers had been deployed, but this had "proved structurally unable to stem the widespread violence", they said.

March and March defended its right to demonstrate under the constitution, distancing itself from the violence and insisting it should not be held responsible for the actions of those involved.

"The agenda is to try and silence the people," March and March legal representative Xolani Zuma told reporters ahead of the court decision.

"The real problem are illegal immigrants who are here in the country and terrorising people," he said.

The court battle comes days before local elections on November 4, with lawyers warning that police are already stretched thin ahead of the vote.

G20 ministers skip group photo op

Foreign ministers from the G20 skipped a traditional group photo ahead of their meeting in Atlanta yesterday after European representatives objected to the presence of Russia.

A US official said the State Department had taken the family photo off the official agenda because Washington did not want it to become a spectacle or distraction.

A third of the participants, including Australia and Canada, made clear they opposed the idea of being photographed alongside Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, a Western diplomat said.

"In no case will there be a family photo with European partners and Mr. Lavrov together because ... there is no normalcy with Russia," German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul told reporters before the first session yesterday.

European officials had earlier suggested there might be two separate pictures – one with Lavrov and one without.

European G20 members back Ukraine, which has objected to United States President Donald Trump's recent decisions to ease some sanctions on Moscow, including a deal to buy diesel as prices soared, squeezing Americans before midterms. (**Reuters**)

WORLD

Machado says Trump opened 'floodgate to freedom' for Venezuela

AFP
Caracas



Venezuela's opposition leader Maria Corina Machado. (**Reuters**)

Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado on Thursday thanked the government of US President Donald Trump for opening the "floodgate to freedom" by capturing president Nicolas Maduro in January.

The Nobel Peace Prize laureate made her comments after returning to Venezuela from 10 months in exile.

"Thanks to their vision, their courage, and their action on January 3, the floodgate to freedom has been opened," Machado told a press conference, naming Trump, his administration and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

The opposition leader has repeatedly lavished praise on the US leader for launching the risky operation to detain Maduro, and even gave him her Nobel medal — a prize he has long coveted for himself.

But for now, Trump appears to prefer interim leader Delcy Rodriguez, Maduro's former deputy who took over from her deposed boss.

Machado, who slipped out of hiding in Venezuela last December to receive her Nobel, said she had returned home to "mobilise society." Rubio "has set out a sequence of events aimed at moving toward a democratic transition that makes clear the holding of presidential elections in 2027," she said.

"The date of the election is the date of liberation," she added.

Machado however was more critical of a massive oil deal struck between Washington and Caracas earlier this year, which will see Venezuela hand over 20% of its vast oil reserves to the US.

"This agreement does not reflect the levels of transparency that Venezuelan society wants," she said.

The opposition leader's return home poses a threat to the US-backed interim government, which has repeatedly promised to hold elections without setting a date.

Rodriguez reiterated the promise, again without laying out a timeline, on Thursday.

"There will be elections... with the world as witness," Rodriguez said shortly before Machado's press conference.

Machado's party wants elections in 2027 and for her to be allowed to run, unlike the last presidential vote, when she was barred from being a candidate.

Jubilant crowds greeted her motorcade, which travelled through Venezuela upon her return.

Rodriguez voiced distaste for the fanfare.

"The show could have been avoided — the airports are right here," she said on state television.

Also on Thursday, Rodriguez named Olivier Blanco as her new foreign minister, replacing Felix Plasencia, who will become a top aide in Rodriguez's office on international affairs.

EU, Canada pledge to stand together with new alliance

AFP
Montreal



Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, European Council President António Costa (L) and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen arrive dat the 21st EU-Canada summit in Montreal. (**AFP**)

EU chiefs Ursula von der Leyen and Antonio Costa held talks with Canada's Mark Carney in Montreal yesterday to finalise a new partnership in a world dominated by the US and China.

The two parties are set to unveil a series of deals — from critical minerals to artificial intelligence — and lay the groundwork for a broader alliance open to other democracies seeking to better navigate global trade tensions.

"It means affordability, more competition, more choice, easier access. It means opportunity," Carney, the Canadian Prime Minister, said of closer co-operation with the European Union, as he arrived at the talks.

"And it means, at its base, sovereignty, greater resilience, ability to withstand shocks together."

Already sharing a free trade agreement, Canada and the European Union have sought to move closer together since President Donald Trump's return to the White House upended relations with Washington's traditional allies.

Both Canada and the EU have been hit with US tariffs and territorial threats.

Von der Leyen, the European Commission president, said Canada could not become a "full-fledged" EU member due to its geographical location, but said the bloc wanted to bring it "as close as possible".

A senior EU official explained the new relationship would be unique to Canada.

It entails aligning policies, such as on climate and artificial intelligence, Canada joining some EU programmes, and creating a stable governance framework, the official said.

The partners were expected to kick off with a series of deals yesterday.

Critical minerals are a key focus of the two-day summit which officially began Thursday evening.

They are needed for green technologies such as batteries and wind turbines that Europe sources mostly from China but are also in plentiful stock in Canada.

But Canada needs massive infrastructure investment to jumpstart its mining industry.

An agreement allowing the European Investment Bank to back Canadian critical mineral projects is expected to be unveiled at the summit.

Brussels and Ottawa also want to collaborate on AI, a field where they are playing catch-up with the US and China.

Europe is ready to open its supercomputing infrastructure to Canadian researchers, industry and start-ups, von der Leyen said.

On Thursday, Ottawa announced a C$1.6bn ($1.1bn) investment in the Canadian AI firm Cohere.

The company has recently partnered with Germany's Aleph Alpha in a move that Carney said was an example of what Europe and Canada could do together.

"We are not waiting for the future of AI to be decided somewhere else by those we don't know or by those we don't trust," Carney said.

A digital trade deal allowing faster and cheaper online transactions is also in the offering.

The two parties should also work towards Canada's participation in EU initiatives like the Erasmus programme, which allows university students to spend a semester abroad, and the Galileo satellite programme — an alternative to the American Global Positioning System (GPS).

The summit will additionally establish the basis for a larger "Alliance for the Future" open to other "trusted partners" such as Japan, Republic of Korea or Australia, the senior EU official said.

This idea is to form a "common space for economic prosperity" and better co-ordinate trade policies such as tariffs to avoid mutual harm, the official said.

"There is always a risk that inadvertently you hit one of your partners with your economic measures," the official noted.

De la Espriella orders militarisation in border city in wake of recent violence

AFP
Bogotá



Colombian soldiers patrol the streets of Cucuta, Norte de Santander Department, Colombia, (**AFP**)

Colombian President Abelardo de la Espriella on Thursday ordered the temporary "militarisation" of a city bordering Venezuela after a wave of recent violence linked to criminal groups.

Over the past few days in Cucuta, the capital of the Norte de Santander department, a mayoral candidate was murdered and a bombing left four police officers injured.

De la Espriella ordered "the immediate militarisation of Cucuta," adding: "It will be temporary while we stabilise public order."

The move, which will see an unspecified number of police and military personnel surge into the city, is the second time the right-wing president has ordered such an action since assuming office on August 7.

The first "militarisation" was in the coastal city of Santa Marta, a popular tourist destination which saw a wave of violent attacks on businesses and vehicles by a drug trafficking gang in September.

Several armed groups engage in drug trafficking, illegal mining and smuggling along Venezuela and Colombia's porous 2,200km border, including dissident members of the now-defunct FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN).

Since taking office on a pledge to confront Colombia's armed groups that have survived subsequent Colombian governments, De la Espriella, who is close to the present US administration, has ramped up bombings and ground operations around the country.

Bolsonaro's getaway plane paid for from US bank

AFP
Brasília



Senator Flavio Bolsonaro. (**AFP**)

The plane that whisked Brazil's Flavio Bolsonaro to the US after his shock election defeat was paid for by an intermediary from a US bank account, the head of the airline has told AFP.

Bolsonaro, the eldest son of far-right former president Jair Bolsonaro, was blindsided by his election defeat to leftist incumbent Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva on Sunday, after leading a first-round vote earlier this month.

Following the vote, the 45-year-old snuck out of Brazil via Argentina and Ecuador in a cloak-and-dagger operation, after being ordered to surrender his passports due to several ongoing investigations against him.

The specifics of his escape have been murky, but on Thursday the head of the Argentine airline that flew him and his family to Florida revealed some of the details to AFP.

"I was hired by a broker that I've known for 10 years, who lives in the US," said Luis Grande, head of the Baires Fly airline, speaking by phone from Florida.

The intermediary, who holds US and Argentine passports and whose identity Grande declined to reveal, transferred $150,000 from his company's account at a US bank to an Argentine bank.

Grande said he did not know for whom the intermediary was working.

Some United States media organisations, including *the New York Times* and *the Wall Street Journal*, have reported that the plane was chartered by Jason Miller, an adviser to Donald Trump.

The White House has not commented on the matter.

Lula set to attend UN COP31 summit

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva will attend the COP31 climate summit in Antalya, Turkiye on November 11, the Brazilian presidency said yesterday.

The confirmation came shortly after Lula was re-elected president of Brazil. After the climate summit, he will travel to the Philippines on November 13 for the Asean summit, which he was invited to attend for the second consecutive year.

Lula will hand over the COP presidency to Turkiye, which will oversee the conference over the next year under a shared arrangement with Australia, which is co-ordinating the diplomatic negotiations.

So far, 77 heads of state and government have confirmed their participation in the summit.

In addition to Brazil, United Kingdom Prime Minister Andy Burnham said he would attend. (**Reuters**)

Pentagon tells Europeans to cool rhetoric on Russia as Trump eases sanctions

Reuters
Washington



Aerial view of the US military headquarters, the Penatagon. (**Reuters**)

Pentagon officials have in recent weeks asked several Nato countries to tone down their rhetoric regarding the threat posed by Russia, arguing that some statements by European leaders and officials have undermined continental security, four people familiar with the matter said.

Among the nations that have received messages urging them to keep public statements in check are Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, said the people, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

It was not clear if the messages, which were delivered in bilateral meetings, were conveyed to other European governments.

The US requests come as the Trump administration restarts an effort to press for a negotiated end to the full-scale war in Ukraine, now well into its fifth year.

The latest push has blended incentives for Russia — including sanctions relief — with pressure on Ukraine to halt its attacks on Russian energy infrastructure.

Asked for comment, a Pentagon official said: "Private conversations among allies are just that, so we will not comment on these allegations."

Among the comments that have drawn US officials' attention are suggestions by European leaders that Russia is cornered and resorting to increasingly desperate measures as its invasion of Ukraine slows to a crawl, one of the people said.

Pentagon policy chief Elbridge Colby, a key figure in an ongoing review of US troop levels in Europe, was one of the US officials delivering the message, the people said.

Reuters could not determine what other officials were involved.

None of the people, who include three European officials and a US official, suggested the advice was communicated in a confrontational manner.

The US messages reflect a debate within Nato regarding how to publicly address the threat of an increasingly assertive Russia.

Some Western officials have argued that emphasising the threat posed by Moscow could play into the hands of the Kremlin, which they say seeks to sow fear and undermine support for Ukraine.

Others argue European governments must be transparent to show their electorates that sacrifice and resources are needed to keep Moscow at bay.

That is especially true as Russia appears to accelerate a covert campaign of sabotage throughout the continent.

Russia has denied that it is pursuing such a campaign.

One of the people familiar told Reuters that Colby told a Baltic official recently that there should be no "poking" directed at the Russians.

The person said Colby pointed to Europeans publicly suggesting that Russia was "cornered like a rat" as an example of unhelpful rhetoric.

It was not clear what specific statement Colby was referring to.

However, Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal referred to Putin as a "rat in a corner" in late September, suggesting the Russian leader was resorting to sabotage efforts in Europe as Russia had become increasingly bogged down in Ukraine.

"We are helping you. The Americans are there," said a separate European official, describing the Pentagon's recent private messaging. "Just don't be loud. Don't make noise."

In a separate recent meeting, the Pentagon urged an Estonian delegation to be "measured" in its communications, according to a person briefed on the encounter, though the person did not say Pentagon officials complained about any specific statement.

The defence ministries of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia did not respond to requests for comment, while Nato declined to comment.

One of the European officials said that the Pentagon's advice, while cordial, was baffling, given that intelligence services in the Baltic states have in recent months consistently played down the probability of Russia testing Nato's mutual defence provisions.

Other Nato intelligence services, by contrast, have publicly warned that Russia could dramatically ramp up its sabotage campaign in the near future.

The Pentagon messages to Nato officials come at a fraught time for European security.

Moscow has recently intensified its campaign of deniable attacks on Nato countries, Western intelligence officials have said.

On Wednesday, German prosecutors said two Belarusians were arrested for allegedly planning to set fire to a building or critical infrastructure facility in the Nuremberg area.

In September, the German government blamed Russia for an attempted drone attack at Leipzig/Halle Airport, allegations Moscow has denied.

At the same time, US officials have been discussing potential business deals with Russia as part of the Trump administration's push for peace in Ukraine.

Those efforts have drawn mixed reactions from European officials, many of whom are pushing for the Kremlin's continued economic isolation.

Pentagon planners, meanwhile, are reviewing Washington's force posture in Europe, a process that could see a sharp drawdown in America's troop presence on the continent.

US officials have said European Nato members need to assume more responsibility for their own defence, particularly as the US focuses on threats in the Middle East, Latin America and East Asia.

Korea to prosecute students cheating with smart glasses

AFP
Seoul

Republic of Korea will file criminal complaints against students caught cheating on a national university entrance exam with smart glasses and toughen penalties for their use, a government official told AFP yesterday.

Sales of smart glasses — which allow the wearer to shoot photos and videos, and interact with an AI assistant among other abilities — are growing worldwide.

But so is a backlash around the gadgets, including concerns over people being filmed without consent and their use by exam cheats.

Korea's notoriously gruelling college entry exam, known as the "Suneung", is essential for admission to top universities and widely regarded as a gateway to economic security and even a good marriage.



Smart glasses are pictured on display at the Eyedaq eyewear store in Seoul yesterday. (**AFP**)

"The ministry will seek criminal charges against students caught cheating with smart glasses" in the future, Lee Joon-hyuk, an education ministry official, told AFP.

Under authorities' plans, students caught cheating with smart glasses will not be able to retake their exams for three years, an extension from the current penalty of one year.

But the new rules are unlikely to apply to next month's college entrance tests, Lee said.

"With only about 20 days left until the exam, it would be realistically difficult to amend the law before then. However, we plan to push for the changes to take effect from next year's exam," he said.

It comes after three students were caught wearing or possessing smart glasses during institution-administered essay exams at universities in Seoul.

Their use is an emerging issue at schools worldwide. This summer, the prestigious National Taiwan University in Taipei reportedly disqualified an entrance exam candidate for cheating using AI smart glasses.

Seoul's education ministry's new measures to prevent cheating using smart glasses, announced on Thursday, included assigning a "designated staff member" at each examination centre to identify suspicious eyewear.

With so much at stake, on the day of the Suneung a 35-minute nationwide ban on flights is imposed during the English listening test, except in emergencies, while banks and public offices tell their workers to start an hour later to avoid traffic on the roads.

Enormous pressure placed on students in South Korea's ultra-competitive education system has been partly blamed for teenage depression and suicide rates that are among the highest in the world.

Philippines raises volcano alert level as blast sends ash skyward

AFP
Manila

One of the Philippines' most active volcanoes fired a dark column of ash thousands of metres into the sky yesterday in a "moderately explosive eruption" that lasted nearly six minutes, the state seismology office said.

There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage in towns and cities surrounding Mount Mayon, but the country's volcano institute raised the alert level from 2 to 3 on its 0-5 scale and called for evacuations within six kilometres (3.7 miles) of the crater.

The 3,000m (nearly 10,000 feet) ash column gradually drifted southwest onto nearby population centres, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology said in a bulletin.

"Mayon is in a new phase of magmatic eruption, with increased chances of lava flows and hazardous PDCs (pyroclastic density currents)... affecting the upper to middle slopes of the volcano in the immediate days to weeks," it said.

It urged local officials to evacuate areas near the crater "due to the danger of PDCs, lava flows, rockfalls and other volcanic hazards", with planes also advised to avoid flying close to the mountain.


Smoke billows into the sky as Mayon volcano erupts as seen from Legaspi City, Albay province, south of Manila yesterday. (**AFP**)

The 2,462m (8,000-foot) Mayon, rising in a near-perfect cone about 330km southeast of Manila, is one of three Philippine volcanoes that have shown elevated levels of activity this year, though no major eruptions occurred.

In June 2023, more than 12,000 people living on its lower slopes were moved to evacuation centres to protect them from ash and toxic gases spewing from its crater.

Earthquakes and volcanic activity are common in the Philippines due to its position on the Pacific "Ring of Fire", where tectonic plates collide.

The country's most powerful eruption in recent decades was Mount Pinatubo in 1991, which killed more than 800 people and produced an ash cloud that travelled thousands of kilometres.

China says stealth attack drone makes first takeoff, landing on assault ship

Reuters
Beijing

China's first carrier-based stealth reconnaissance and strike drone, the GJ-21, recently completed its first takeoff and landing on the Sichuan, the country's first Type 076 amphibious assault ship, state news agency Xinhua reported yesterday.

The trial underscores Beijing's push to integrate drone technology into its military modernisation drive, a decades-long effort in which China has developed advanced warships, fighter jets, missiles and increasingly capable unmanned systems.

Xinhua hailed the test as "a breakthrough in China's amphibious assault ship programme" and said it signifies the navy's ability to operate fixed-wing stealth drones from large naval platforms.

GJ-21 first appeared at a military parade Beijing held last year to mark the 80th anniversary of the end of World War Two, where it displayed different types of weapons.

State tabloid the *Global Times* reported on Friday that GJ-21 has a substantial combat radius despite having a smaller airframe than the stealthy J-35 and J-20 fighters, citing military expert Zhang Xuefeng.

"GJ-21 is also low cost and reusable. Unlike hypersonic missiles, it can be recovered and redeployed multiple times. It can also deploy small, low-cost glide-guided bombs. Under high-tempo operations, it offers greater fire delivery efficiency with better cost control," Zhang was quoted as saying.

The Sichuan, the lead vessel of China's Type 076 amphibious assault ship class, was launched in December 2024 and features electromagnetic catapult and arresting technology. It can carry fixed-wing drones, helicopters and amphibious equipment.

The vessel has a full-load displacement of more than 40,000 metric tons and features a full-length flight deck and twin-island superstructure.

China's state television CCTV said yesterday that the indigenously developed vessel conducted consecutive sea trials in late October. It did not disclose locations of the trials.

Chinese president praises new chapter with Germany

Reuters
Beijing

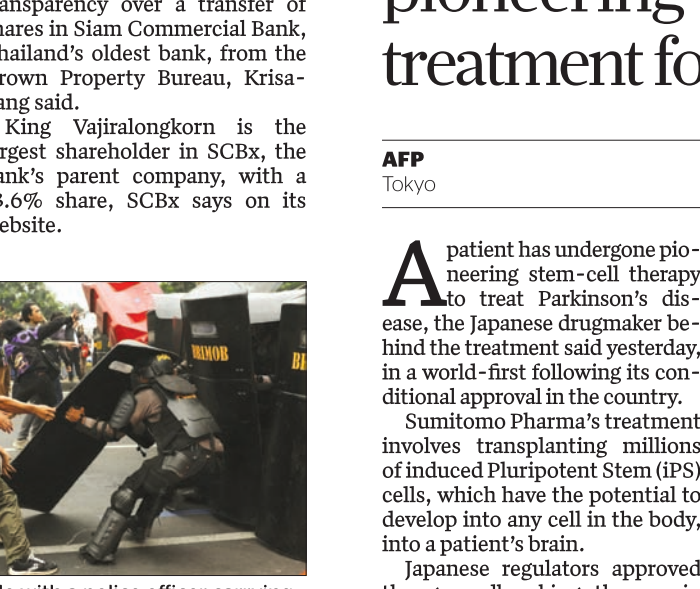
Chinese President Xi Jinping yesterday urged Germany to pursue a "rational, pragmatic and friendly" policy towards China, using talks with President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to push for closer ties despite growing trade frictions between Beijing and Europe.

Xi welcomed what he called a new chapter in relations between the two countries and expressed support for an "all-dimensional strategic partnership" based on equality, mutual benefit and strategic stability.

"This new paradigm sends a positive signal to the world: we favour openness over closure, and cooperation over confrontation," Xi told Steinmeier.

The German president's five-day visit is set against the backdrop of brewing trade tensions between the European Union and China. Brussels has warned that it will use every possible means to remedy its widening trade deficit with China.

Germany, along with France, has also proposed that the EU enact a new rapid-action measure against countries that harm it, with China likely in focus.


Chinese President Xi Jinping and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier attend a welcoming ceremony outside the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, yesterday. (**Reuters**)

On Thursday, Steinmeier warned that China's drive for greater economic self-sufficiency should not come at the expense of other markets. At the same time, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has been touring Singapore, Japan and Korea to deepen trade and security ties with like-minded partners amid concerns over US tariffs and China's state-backed industrial expansion.

The visit is part of a broader Chinese diplomatic push to shore up ties with European countries as Beijing faces mounting scrutiny over its trade practices.

A day before Steinmeier arrived to visit Volkswagen's plant in the eastern city of Hefei, the German automaker's China unit said it had obtained a permit to conduct Level 3 autonomous-driving road tests in the city, a key step toward its 2027 target for L3 readiness.

Beijing also hosted Swiss President Guy Parmelin to sign an upgraded free trade accord and welcomed Iceland's Foreign Minister Thorgerdur Katrin Gunnarsdottir with a new flight connection linking Beijing with Reykjavik.

But analysts said the diplomatic efforts may do little to reverse increasingly skeptical views of China in Europe.

"The real question is if this would be enough to counter the concern in the EU and its member states with China's overall mercantilist approach to economic ties," said Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute.

The German debate on China has become more critical, particularly on economic issues, said Eva Seiwert, senior analyst at the Mercator Institute for China Studies.

"Calls for a tougher China policy are now coming not only from politicians and security experts, but increasingly from the German industry itself, which has traditionally pushed for close economic ties with China," she said.

Thailand extends activist's jail term to more than 34 years

AFP
Bangkok

A Thai court sentenced a leader of 2020 protests to an additional two years in jail yesterday, a rights group said, bringing his total term to more than 34 years.

Human rights lawyer Arnon Nampa was convicted on a fresh count of lese majeste, the strict law that shields the Thai royal family from criticism but which critics say is used to muzzle dissent.

Arnon rose to prominence in youth-led protests that saw tens of thousands of people take to the streets in 2020, calling for reform of the military-drafted constitution and the monarchy.

The 42-year-old has been jailed since 2023 on multiple royal insult convictions linked to the protests and his social media posts.

Arnon and four others were sentenced to two years and eight months under lese majeste, campaign group Thai Lawyers for Human Rights said in a Facebook post.

Krisadang Nutcharut, a lawyer representing Arnon, confirmed the ruling to AFP, saying the charges stem from a 2020 protest in front of the Siam Commercial Bank headquarters.

Three of the five sentenced on Friday were already serving separate royal insult sentences, Krisadang said, adding that Arnon's total was now more than 34 years.

"It is now clear that the law has become a political tool used against opponents," he told AFP.

Arnon was calling for increased transparency over a transfer of shares in Siam Commercial Bank, Thailand's oldest bank, from the Crown Property Bureau, Krisadang said.

King Vajiralongkorn is the largest shareholder in SCBx, the bank's parent company, with a 23.6% share, SCBx says on its website.

First patient undergoes pioneering stem-cell treatment for Parkinson's

AFP
Tokyo

A patient has undergone pioneering stem-cell therapy to treat Parkinson's disease, the Japanese drugmaker behind the treatment said yesterday, in a world-first following its conditional approval in the country.

Sumitomo Pharma's treatment involves transplanting millions of induced Pluripotent Stem (iPS) cells, which have the potential to develop into any cell in the body, into a patient's brain.

Japanese regulators approved the groundbreaking therapy in March, following a successful clinical trial.

"The first transplant was performed at Kyoto University Hospital in October," the company said on Friday in an earnings press release, without giving further details.

Parkinson's disease is a chronic, degenerative neurological disorder that affects the body's motor system, often causing shaking and other difficulties with movement.

Worldwide, more than 10mn people are estimated to have the illness, according to the Parkinson's Foundation.

Currently available therapies "improve symptoms without slowing or halting the disease progression", it says.

iPS cells are created by inducing mature, already specialised cells to return to a juvenile state.

Under Sumitomo Pharma's treatment, iPS cells from healthy donors are developed into the precursors of dopamine-producing brain cells, which are no longer present in people with Parkinson's.

During a clinical trial, seven patients aged between 50 and 69 each received implants of either 5mn or 10mn cells on both sides of the brain.

They were then monitored for two years, and no major adverse effects were found. Four patients showed improvements in symptoms.

Sumitomo Pharma said yesterday it plans to carry out transplants on 20-30 patients by March 2029. It is also carrying out a clinical trial in the US.

The treatment will gain full approval in Japan if its safety and efficacy are confirmed over the next seven years, according to local media.

Yesterday's announcement comes a month after a hospital in Osaka carried out the world's first surgery using sheets of heart muscle iPS cells that can help form new blood vessels and restore heart function.

Japan also gave conditional approval to that therapy in March.

Singapore braces as Indonesia slaps back at neighbours amid haze, political woes

Indonesia's swipes at its neighbours are set to last as its embattled government tries to blunt criticism of its handling of welfare programmes, market regulation and persistent wildfires that have choked the region in haze.

Singapore, in particular has been the target of sharpened rhetoric from Jakarta, with Indonesian officials warning pilgrims to avoid transiting through the city-state.

Jakarta has also trimmed gas supply to Singapore with its energy minister saying "so-called brothers and sisters" should not lecture Indonesia on honouring contracts.

Singapore has tried to play down the spat and its foreign minister made a visit to Indonesia this week to meet President Prabowo Subianto.

But the city-state has also summoned representatives of companies suspected of having fires on their plantations in Indonesia.

Analysts say Jakarta's nationalistic rhetoric, which intensified when Singapore and Malaysia complained about the haze, will likely stay as long as Indonesia's woes remain.

Prabowo has often blamed foreign actors for problems and Singapore, with its majority Chinese population, is an easy target, said Yohanes Sulaiman, of Indonesia's Universitas Jenderal Achmad Yani.

"The intensity is pushed to 11 under this administration," he said. Syahganda Nainggolan, chief of the Indonesian government's communications office, told Reuters yesterday that Jakarta continues to seek close relations with Singapore, and the visit by the foreign minister proves the two countries' relations are not strained.

He said the gas cuts were due to domestic supply considerations and only "coincided with a seemingly tense situation."

Prabowo has pushed back against international criticism, including a downgrade threat from global index provider MSCI, which has sent Indonesia's markets into turmoil.

One former Indonesian official blamed Singapore sovereign wealth funds for having a role in the MSCI pressure, but offered no evidence, with the accusation amplified by social media accounts that were "liked" by prominent government figures. The funds denied any involvement.

Yohanes said the MSCI downgrade threat compounded problems for Prabowo's administration after the fires, as well as food poisoning and corruption issues at a signature free lunch programme.

Prabowo's popularity has fallen sharply, with his approval rating reaching 44.5% this month according to one survey, from 81.2% late last year.

Protests occurred in several Indonesian cities this week over his government's response to the fires.

Students scuffle with a police officer carrying riot shield during a protest against Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's policies and the government's handling of wildfires in Jakarta, Indonesia. (**Reuters/File Photo**)

Current and former officials from both countries sought to calm the waters this week.

"Differences are to be expected," Singapore's foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan told media on Wednesday. "Even polemic statements sometimes, from time to time," he said.

Suryo Pratomo, a former Indonesian ambassador to Singapore, said the comments made by some Indonesian ministers were immediate reactions and not administration policy.

"Indonesia and Singapore's relationship is complementary, not competitive," he said.

Singapore is Indonesia's largest source of foreign direct investment at $17.4bn last year. (**Reuters**)

WORLD

Zhang Shengmin – Xi's lone 'hatchet man' at the top of China's military

AFP
Beijing

Zhang Shengmin, the last general remaining in the highest echelon of China's military, has received an unexpected promotion to the Politburo, the rarefied group of about 20 Communist Party officials who run the country.

It is a significant milestone for the 68-year-old, who has risen from his modest upbringing to become a quiet architect of President Xi Jinping's decade-long anti-corruption campaign.

Zhang joined the People's Liberation Army aged 19, in 1978 — a time when China was beginning to move past the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and open itself to the world.

His surprise elevation on Thursday, after a major party meeting, has drawn attention to the loyal Xi supporter whose image often appears in the news but whose voice is rarely heard.

Zhang is vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the body that directs the armed forces and is headed by Xi himself.

From 2017 until July this year, Zhang headed the CMC's Discipline Inspection Commission, which leads anti-corruption work inside the military.


Zhang Shengmin. (**AFP/File photo**)

Under his authority, an unprecedented number of high-ranking officers have been removed from their posts, leaving just two members of the seven-strong commission remaining: Zhang and Xi.

China's armed forces have faced a range of corruption scandals over promotions, equipment contracts and budgets, problems that hinder its operations and modernisation, according to Xi.

Since Xi began his third term in 2023, some of the most prominent ousters have included former defence ministers Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu, as well as Zhang Youxia, formerly China's most powerful general, who fell from grace this year.

As Xi's "hatchet man" in the forces, Zhang Shengmin's "track record is clear for all to see in view of how the Chinese military at present is only left with a handful of 3-star generals", said James Char, an expert on the Chinese military at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

"He has spent almost a whole decade in charge of cleaning up the Chinese military... (and) likely Zhang has his commander-in-chief's trust," Char added.

The timing of the promotion is also unusual: Politburo appointments typically happen at party congresses held once every five years, while the last mid-term promotion was in 1994.

"The thing that marks him out is political loyalty to the party (centre)... rather than military professionalism," said Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute at the University of London, referring to Xi.

Zhang is careful to remain firmly in his boss' shadow.

At a military gala held for the Lunar New Year festival this year, Zhang could be seen standing several metres (feet) behind Xi as the president shook hands with retired officers.

"Zhang is also cautious about being perceived as being in the limelight," Char told AFP.

"Since the removals of his CMC colleagues... Zhang has been intentionally unobtrusive at official events with his CMC chairman."

China ruling party says it 'eliminated serious hidden dangers' after 33 expelled

China has eradicated "serious hidden dangers" in its Communist Party and military under President Xi Jinping's leadership, a senior official said yesterday, a day after authorities confirmed the expulsion of a record 33 figures.

In more than a decade in charge, Xi has cracked down hard on graft, ensnaring thousands of officials and purging dozens of members of the powerful Central Committee and a string of top military brass.

As a four-day plenum of the Central Committee wrapped up on Thursday, state media confirmed 33 more dignitaries had been ejected, including former Politburo member Zhang Youxia, once China's highest-ranking general.

The plenum adopted a decision on "advancing full and rigorous governance of the party", which includes reducing corruption among cadres, state news agency Xinhua said.

Proponents say China's corruption purge promotes clean governance, but analysts have said the moves were aimed at paving the way for Xi to extend his rule at a Party Congress due in the second half of 2027.

The Central Committee, "with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core", has "eliminated serious hidden dangers within the Party, the state and the military," Zhang Fuhai, deputy secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), said yesterday.

The Party, he told reporters at a news briefing, had been guided by the sense of mission that "we would rather offend thousands than let down 1.4 bn people", referring to China's population.

China had previously removed Zhang Youxia, then the highest-ranking general, from his position following a months-long graft investigation, with his expulsion from the party confirmed on Thursday.

Ma Xingrui, a former top Xinjiang official whose ouster was also confirmed, had previously been removed from all his posts over corruption allegations, including nepotism, bribery.

The CCDI's Zhang Fuhai said yesterday that discipline inspection and supervisory organs in the country have punished 7.9mn people since 2012.

Efforts to weed out corruption will be "deepened", he vowed, especially in sectors "characterised by the concentration of power, large amounts of funds and rich resource".

"We will prioritise the investigation of issues where political and economic problems are intertwined, collusion between government and business, and the infiltration of capital into the political sphere," he said.

"We will thoroughly investigate new forms of corruption and hidden corruption, and routinely address misconduct and corruption affecting the public at the grassroots level," he added.

'Fire pollution killed 3,560 in Indonesia in September'

AFP
Jakarta

Pollution from smoke emitted by months of wildfires across Indonesia caused an estimated 3,560 deaths in the vast Southeast Asian archipelago in September, according to a new study.

The same month, about 57.8mn people in Indonesia were inhaling unhealthy to hazardous air, said the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), a Helsinki-based think-tank.

"Worsening air quality due to forest and land fires in Indonesia pushed the estimated death toll to 3,560 cases in September 2026, a twofold increase from the August estimate," said a CREA statement on Thursday.

The CREA study estimated the number of deaths brought about by PM2.5 pollution in the short-term, meaning a matter of days.

PM2.5 particles are small enough to penetrate the lungs or bloodstream and the World Health Organisation has linked exposure to a higher risk for illness and premature death.

Most estimated deaths occurred on Indonesia's part of Borneo island as well as on Java and Sumatra islands and in the country's east, said the report.

The researchers also looked at non-fire pollution from urban power generation, industry, and transportation, and found it had caused a further 1,750 deaths in September for a total of 5,310 in the country of about 290mn people.



Climate activists hold placards during a rally demanding intergenerational climate justice and action against environmental destruction, in Jakarta yesterday. (**AFP**)

"In September alone, exposure levels breached the WHO annual PM2.5 threshold... by over seven times nationally, 10 times in Sumatra, and an alarming 24 times in Kalimantan" in Borneo, said the report.

More than 330,000 cases of acute respiratory infection have been recorded countrywide.

Gripped by drought worsened by the El Nino weather phenomenon, Indonesia has for months battled wildfires that deforestation monitor Nusantara Atlas says have consumed more than 1.9 mn hectares in the nine months to September.

The government has not confirmed or rejected the number.

The resulting haze has sent pollution levels soaring as far afield as Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and East Timor, clouding Indonesia's ties with its neighbours.

Experts say the wildfires can be blamed in large part on slash-and-burn land-clearing practices, often by timber, palm oil or mining companies.

For the island of Java, the most populated and home to the capital Jakarta, the CREA report said between 73% and 80% of air pollution deaths — a total of 1,530 in September — were attributed to non-fire sources such as industry, vehicle emissions, and waste burning.

"These figures underscore the stark reality that non-fire air pollution sources are as dangerous as smoke from burning forests and peatlands," it said.

In the report, the CEO of Landscape Indonesia consultancy, Agus Sari, pointed to the government's "weak preparedness" for what he described as a "predictable and avoidable" disaster.

Agus pointed to budget cuts hampering the efforts of the BNPB national disaster management agency.

"Indonesia should be able to prepare for what is going to happen. The fact that we are not prepared at all is purely a matter of lacking the will," said Agus.

The CREA report argued the government needs to shift from wildfire response to the restoration of peatlands left fire prone by extensive draining.

"This step must be accompanied by firm law enforcement against illegal land clearing through burning, as well as strengthened legal accountability for concession holders to prevent damage," it said.

For regions battling non-fire pollution, such as Java, it said the government must enforce stricter emissions standards.

The government on Wednesday defended its approach to the fires, saying in a statement more than 72,000 people had been deployed in cloud-seeding and firefighting operations, more than 2,100 doctors and health workers activated in hard-hit areas, and 5.3mn masks distributed.

N Korea displays drones, missiles as Kim urges AI push

AFP
Seoul

North Korea has test-fired attack drones, missiles and a multiple rocket launcher at a weapons demonstration, state media reported yesterday, as leader Kim Jong-un called for faster development of drone and AI technology for military use.

The event came a day after Seoul said Pyongyang had fired 'around a dozen' short-range ballistic missiles off its east coast, though it was not immediately clear whether the launches were linked to the demonstration.

At the event, Kim stressed the "aim to seize the absolute superiority in the drone technology is an indispensable option in the light of the ever-changing patterns of modern warfare," according to KCNA.

He added: "Strength precisely means peace and peace is guaranteed only by strength."


North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (centre) and his daughter Kim Ju Ae (second left) at the 'Unmanned Aeronautical Technology Development 2026' exhibition in the Wonsan Kalma Coastal Tourist Area in Kangwon Province in North Korea, on Thursday. (**AFP**)

The demonstration featured suicide attack drones, multipurpose drones firing air-to-surface missiles, cruise missiles and 600mm multiple rocket launchers. KCNA said the drones and cruise missiles hit an island target with 100% accuracy.

The event follows a slew of recent weapons tests by Pyongyang, including a new precision-guided torpedo system and an intermediate-range hypersonic missile, both of which were said to employ AI technology.

Republic of Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said its military detected "around a dozen short-range ballistic missiles fired from the Wonsan area of North Korea towards the East Sea", also known as the Sea of Japan.

The missiles flew about 250km (155 miles), and "South Korea and the US are conducting a detailed analysis of their exact specifications", Seoul's military said, adding it had stepped up surveillance of possible additional launches.

Seoul's National Security Office, meanwhile, said the launches violated UN Security Council resolutions, labelling them "serious acts that do nothing to help manage the current situation".

Swiss FM talks closer ties in rare North Korea visit

AFP
Geneva

Switzerland's Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis yesterday discussed normalising political relations with North Korea during a visit to Pyongyang, after formally reopening a diplomatic office in the country.

Cassis met his North Korean counterpart Choe Son Hui in Pyongyang, he said on X.

"We discussed reopening the Swiss diplomatic office in a new format, regularising political relations and reestablishing a political dialogue," said Cassis, who is Switzerland's vice-president.

"We also exchanged views on security on the Korean peninsula and broader Eurasian security challenges."

The diplomatic office, which has been operational since October 19 and was formally opened on Thursday, will not have an ambassador.

It reports to Switzerland's embassy in Beijing, which handles diplomatic and consular relations with North Korea.

Cassis called the office reopening "a new chapter for Switzerland's presence in Pyongyang" and "a concrete step towards strengthening direct dialogue", which "remains essential for peace and stability in the region".

He also said he met North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's close aide Jo Yong Won, and "discussed developments in the DPRK and the potential for strengthening bilateral relations".

Bern said that against a backdrop of heightened tensions and limited international contacts with North Korea, it intended to uphold its commitment to the region, as one of few Western countries to maintain a dialogue with Pyongyang.

"This office will help to strengthen direct contacts with the authorities of the DPRK and support political dialogue with them," the foreign ministry said.

Switzerland "rigorously applies UN sanctions" on North Korea, the ministry says.

In 1953, at the end of the Korean War, Swiss troops were appointed to monitor the demarcation line between North Korea and Republic of Korea.

Switzerland first established diplomatic relations with North Korea in 1974.

It opened a cooperation office in Pyongyang in 1997.

The last visit to North Korea by a Swiss government minister was in 2003.

North Korea maintains an embassy in Bern.

Cassis later landed in Seoul for talks on regional security. His visit ends today.

Between 1997 and 1999, Switzerland hosted talks between North and South Korea, China and the United States.

It also hosted three other meetings between Washington and Pyongyang on normalising their relations, and the conditions for resuming the six-party talks on denuclearising the Korean peninsula.

Asean envoy meets Myanmar minister, discusses civil war

The Southeast Asian bloc's special envoy met Myanmar's foreign minister during a visit to the country and discussed its civil war and humanitarian access, according to official statements.

Philippine Foreign Secretary, Ma. Teresa Lazaro, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) envoy on Myanmar, met Myanmar counterpart Tin Maung Swe in the capital Naypyitaw on Thursday

Myanmar's army-backed government wants a normalisation of ties with Asean , after its leadership was barred from summits in 2021 for failure to de-escalate conflict in the wake of a military coup

The state-run *Global New Light of Myanmar* yesterday said Lazaro discussed ways to restore Myanmar's original role and rights within Asean

Lazaro and Foreign Minister Tin Maung Swe "held substantive discussions on ways to restore Myanmar's original role and rights within Asean", according to a statement from Myanmar's foreign ministry.

Myanmar's government in August said there was no longer a need for an Asean special envoy

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the coup, which led to a civil war that has killed an estimated 100,000 people and displaced more than 3.5mn

Tin Maung Swe said Myanmar was working to implement Asean 's five-point peace plan, in line with its national interests and sovereignty, state media said

Lazaro had sought access to Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been detained since she was toppled from power in the coup. Lazaro's office made no mention of a meeting

The Philippines, which holds the rotating chair of the Asean, has repeatedly called this year for access to Suu Kyi, detained since 2021 military coup.

The status of 81-year-old has long been a sticking point for the 11-nation Asean bloc, which has frozen Myanmar's leaders out of its summits since the putsch.

"I asked about the situation of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the response was quite positive that she's doing well," Lazaro was quoted as saying by Philippine news outlet Bilyonaryo, which joined her on the trip.

The Philippines foreign ministry earlier said Lazaro had spent Wednesday in the eastern state of Shan, overseeing humanitarian schemes aiding those displaced in the civil war triggered by the coup. (**Reuters, AFP**)


Asean special envoy and Philippines' Foreign Secretary Maria Theresa Lazaro (centre) arrives in Taunggyi, southern Shan State on Wednesday. (**AFP**)

Reparations push tests King Charles' stance on slavery

Reuters
London

King Charles has since 2022 expressed sorrow for the suffering caused by slavery without crossing a line that Britain has long resisted: an apology.

That balancing act is likely to be tested at next week's Commonwealth summit in Antigua and Barbuda, where Caribbean leaders who back a reparations campaign through the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) are expected to press their case.

Buckingham Palace has indicated Charles would not apologise on behalf of Britain, which has repeatedly ruled out financial reparations over its role in the transatlantic slave trade.

Speaking in the Bahamas on Tuesday ahead of a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting that begins tomorrow, Charles said it was "only right that we should acknowledge the great suffering and injustices of the past," and said leaders from affected countries would discuss the issue at the summit.

But Niambi Hall Campbell-Dean, chair of the Bahamas' National Reparations Committee, said that did not go far enough. "We do not need more carefully crafted words about healing," she said in a statement. "We need action equal with the scale of the harm inflicted."


Britain's King Charles and Prime Minister of Guyana, Mark Anthony Phillips, at the Commonwealth War Graves during the king's state visit to Guyana yesterday, in Georgetown. (**Reuters**)

From the 15th to the 19th century, at least 12.5mn Africans were abducted and sold into slavery by European traders, with Britain transporting an estimated 3.2mn people across the Atlantic, making it one of the biggest slave-trading nations, according to the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database.

Alan Lester, a University of Sussex historian whose research spans the legacies of slavery and empire, said opponents of the reparations movement had "successfully weaponised" the idea that reparations simply meant writing a cheque, an idea that few Western governments will countenance.

Instead, Caribbean leaders often frame their demands in terms of debt relief, development finance, education, healthcare and climate resilience, measures they say would address inequalities rooted in slavery and colonialism.

"I think King Charles III is in a difficult position because you can express sorrow about something, but an apology goes much further," royal commentator Afua Hagan said.

Buckingham Palace said in 2023 that Charles had given his support to research that was examining the monarchy's links to slavery after the Guardian newspaper reported on a document showing a historical connection.

In a more recent finding, independent researcher Desiree Baptiste told Reuters her forthcoming book, "George IV, Empire, and Objects of Prestige," would cite House of Lords papers and other British government records showing that profits derived from enslaved labour helped fund furniture and decorative work commissioned by George IV at royal residences.

In a response, the Royal Collection Trust, a charity that maintains and displays artworks and historic objects held in trust by the king, said constant research helped it to keep its records "continually under review in order to improve the information presented on an object or subject".

Britain bars entry to Swedish academic ahead of appearance with Palestine Action founder

Reuters
London

Swedish climate academic Andreas Malm said yesterday he had been denied entry to Britain, where he was due to speak alongside the co-founder of Palestine Action, a group banned as a terrorist organisation.

Malm, an academic at Sweden's Lund University, has been a vocal critic of Israel and expressed strong support for the Palestinian movement.

Britain's Home Office (interior ministry) said it did not comment on individual cases.

Malm told the BBC's Radio 4 he had received a message from the Home Office saying his "presence in the UK is not conducive to the public good" with no further clarification.

He said he suspected he was barred because he had been due to appear at an event next Wednesday organised by a socialist magazine alongside Palestine Action co-founder Huda Ammori, where he said he had been due to speak about the war in Iran. He added he had not publicly endorsed, promoted or financially supported Palestine Action.

"I've been going back and forth to the UK for years, for decades, to do my scientific work, my archival research, my participation in conferences. This is the main purpose of my visit to the UK this time too," Malm said.

"What this means is that I am banned from doing my work as an intellectual, as an academic."

Asked by the BBC whether the ban could be linked to previous comments he made calling Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel "an act of liberation", Malm said "it could be".

Malm is most known for his book "How to Blow Up a Pipeline", which argues radical action is necessary to stop fossil fuel extraction.

Britain's Supreme Court is due to hear an appeal next week on the proscription of Palestine Action under terrorism laws, which has made expressing support for the group a criminal offence.

Earlier in October, Irish novelist Sally Rooney said her books will no longer be sold in Britain over her plans to use her royalties to support Palestine Action.

In June, Britain blocked left-wing Turkish-American media personality Cenk Uygur and his nephew Hasan Piker from entering the country to speak at events.

Irish govt to scope out possibility of unity with N Ireland for first time

Reuters
Dublin

Ireland will set up a government body that would for the first time undertake research and preparations for the possibility of future unity with British-run Northern Ireland, Prime Minister Micheal Martin was quoted as saying yesterday.

Martin told the Irish Times that the new body would be tasked with scoping out the models and challenges for different potential outcomes, including Northern Ireland remaining part of the United Kingdom or maintaining its devolved entity but as part of a united Ireland.

He was fleshing out an idea first referenced in a speech this week, when he said a new approach was required to carefully address the need for an "independent and dispassionate base of knowledge on which you can have a credible discussion about constitutional futures."

"What has concerned me about this push for a border poll since Brexit is that it's partisan, it's a one-sided advocacy approach," Martin told the *Irish Times*.

"It's sort of putting forward the idea that this would be easy and that it's inevitable and our time has come. And it's almost that this would be a victory for nationalism, as opposed to an approach which genuinely seeks to hear all voices."

Under the terms of the 1998 Good Friday peace agreement, the British government is obliged to call a referendum on Irish unity if it appears likely that a majority of Northern Irish voters would back it.

While opinion polls consistently show a majority in favour of remaining in the UK, the gap has narrowed since the UK voted to leave the European Union a decade ago and Irish nationalist parties like Sinn Fein stepped up calls for a referendum.

Martin's proposal, the first steps of which he said he would bring to cabinet before the end of the year, is the latest gradual move by the dominant government parties south of the border to consider what a united Ireland might look like.

His government partner Fine Gael will publish what it has described as a blueprint for a unified island at its annual conference next week.

Judge throws out Australian mushroom killer's appeal, imposes harsher sentence

AFP
Melbourne

Australian mushroom killer Erin Patterson failed to overturn a slew of convictions yesterday, and a judge instead imposed a heavier prison sentence for three "cold and calculated" poisoning murders.

Patterson was last year found guilty of murdering her husband's parents and aunt in 2023, deliberately lacing their beef Wellington lunch with lethal death cap mushrooms.

The strange nature of the "mushroom murders" fuelled intense global interest, with Patterson's 11-week trial drawing more publicity than almost any other Australian case in recent memory.

Patterson maintained her triple murder convictions were a "miscarriage of justice", urging the Court of Appeal in Victoria state to either set her free or have the case heard again.

But the court not only threw out her bid to have the convictions quashed, it found her "carefully planned and deliberate" killings deserved an even harsher sentence.


Convicted murderer Erin Patterson is escorted out of the Supreme Court of Victoria following the day's proceedings in a pre-sentencing hearing in Melbourne. (**AFP/File Photo**)

"This offending was extraordinarily cold and calculated," judge Stephen McLeish said as he dismissed Patterson's appeal.

"It stands to be denounced in the strongest terms."

The 52-year-old was originally sentenced to life in prison but was eligible to apply for parole after 33 years.

Highlighting Patterson's "shocking criminality", McLeish said she should spend life in prison with no prospect of parole.

Patterson did not front the trial in person, watching proceedings via video link from a maximum security prison on the outskirts of Melbourne.

Patterson hosted four people for lunch at her home in rural Victoria in July 2023, serving up a hearty meal of beef wrapped in pastry and smothered in mushrooms.

Her lunch guests that afternoon were Don and Gail Patterson, the parents of her long-estranged husband, Simon.

She also welcomed Simon's maternal aunt, Heather Wilkinson, and her husband, Ian, a well-known pastor at the local Baptist church.

Don, Gail and Heather died of organ failure within a week, while Ian fell gravely ill but survived.

Patterson was convicted of three murders and a further count of attempted murder, a jury concluding she deliberately laced the meal with toxic death cap mushrooms.

Death cap mushrooms are easily mistaken for other edible varieties and reportedly possess a sweet taste that belies their potent toxicity.

Patterson maintained the dish was accidentally contaminated with the world's most lethal fungus.

At an appeal hearing earlier this year, her lawyers argued the trial was marred by a litany of irregularities.

This included the fact that members of the jury had stayed in the same hotel as a witness for the police — as well as members of the prosecution.

Patterson's lawyers said this represented a fundamental failure of the legal process "in perhaps one of the most high-profile criminal trials this state has ever had".

They also criticised an "oppressive" cross-examination and unfair decisions on the admission of evidence.

Prosecutors, meanwhile, argued that the non-parole period of 33 years imposed by the judge was "manifestly inadequate".

Patterson's crimes involved "betrayal" and represented "worst-case offending", they told an appeal hearing earlier this year.

"Indeed, our submission is that for this offending the respondent should be sentenced to life without parole," Director of Public Prosecutions Brendan Kissane said at the time.

Helicopter crash kills six in India

A helicopter carrying six people from a Hindu holy town crashed in the Indian Himalayas yesterday, killing everyone on board, officials said.

Five passengers and one pilot were killed when the chopper came down near a valley in Joshimath during the flight from Badrinath in the northern state of Uttarakhand, according to state police.

"Efforts are currently underway to transport the bodies from the inaccessible crash site to the nearest road," police said in a statement.

Authorities did not say what caused the crash.

India's weather department had predicted "widespread" rainfall in the state yesterday, just two days after Cyclone Arnab made landfall along India's southeastern coast.

Uttarakhand is home to several pilgrimage sites, including Badrinath, and attracts millions of pilgrims every year.

Helicopter charter firms serve wealthy pilgrims who want to visit mountainous shrines while avoiding arduous trekking.

In June last year, at least seven pilgrims were killed in a helicopter crash near Kedarnath, a Hindu pilgrimage site.

The same month, 260 people were killed when a passenger plane slammed into a residential area in the western Indian city of Ahmedabad. (**AFP**)

Luxon vows foreign aid cuts if re-elected

AFP
Auckland

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon told AFP yesterday planned cuts to foreign aid would make sure the country spends less money on "nice-to-do" but frivolous projects abroad, and he vowed to push for new free trade deals from Brazil to Bangladesh if re-elected next week.

New Zealanders go to the polls next Saturday, with Luxon's centre-right Nationals seen as neck-and-neck with the opposition centre-left Labour Party to lead the country for the next three years.

Luxon has vowed to slash the country's NZ$1.2bn (US$677mn) aid budget by 10% over four years if he wins.

The proposal has sparked fears that it could impact New Zealand's standing abroad — including from Luxon's own ruling coalition partners NZ First, who have dubbed it irresponsible.

The changes would come at a time of shrinking budgets worldwide for humanitarian aid — most notably from the US under President Donald Trump.

Speaking to AFP on the sidelines of New Zealand's T20 cricket win against India in Auckland, Luxon said the cuts would be made to fund new medicines back home and were about "making sure that what we're doing is the must-do stuff, not the nice-to-do stuff".

Luxon said money was going to "having Indigenous workshops in Patagonia, or actually putting climate change equipment into South African universities".



Thailand's Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul and New Zealand's Prime Minister Christopher Luxon pose in a CT/4E plane during a visit to aircraft manufacturing company 'NZ Aero' in Auckland. (**AFP/File Photo**)

"As interesting as that may well be, that is money that I'd sooner spend on Kiwis back here at home," he said.

Luxon's government this year signed a landmark but controversial free trade deal with India that also drew opposition from those within his ruling coalition.

He said his goal if re-elected was to "keep the foot on the accelerator" and get more deals signed.

"We want to open up to seven more markets over the next five years and ultimately get I think 13 markets over the next ten," he said.

He said his focus would be on markets like Brazil and Argentina — as well as in Europe and with Asian partners like Bangladesh.

"That would give us our next bn consumers around the world."

He admitted that New Zealand — home to five mn people — was a small country, and it's "easy for everybody to forget us".

Luxon said he saw himself as a "super salesman" for the country — "you've actually got to go out in the world and build back that rapport".

Polls this week suggested Labour are inching ahead of National and that former prime minister Chris Hipkins could replace Luxon in the top job.

But the indicators have swung wildly in recent weeks, and either of the leaders would almost certainly be forced to deal with New Zealand's multiple minor parties to govern.

Bhutan glacial lake outburst triggers flood, no injuries reported

Reuters
Kathmandu

A flood caused by the Shintaphu glacial lake bursting its banks has washed away infrastructure at the Gasa Tshachu natural hot springs in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, media reports said yesterday.

No injuries or loss of life have been reported, state broadcaster BBS said.

The hot springs at Gasa Tshachu are a major tourist attraction in the northern part of the country that is nestled between India and China.

BBS reported the extent of damage from the late night flash flood was not known because of "darkness and the strong flow" of floodwaters. Two bailey bridges — bridges built in portable, pre-fabricated sections — may have been washed away, the broadcaster reported.

Gasa Tshachu was also hit by a flash flood in 2021, when the Mochhu River changed course and swept through the area.

Kuensel, Bhutan's national newspaper, said part of the road to Laya village where the springs are located had been washed away, making it impassable. The road has been closed for traffic indefinitely, the newspaper said.

The area had been evacuated before the flood reached the area, Kuensel reported.

In neighbouring Nepal, in a similar mountainous area about 600km (370 miles) to the west, a flash flood on its border with China in August killed more than 1,500 people and left more than 5,000 missing.


A part of Punakha-Gasa highway is washed away after a flood caused by the Shintaphu glacial lake bursting its banks, in a location given as Punakha-Gasa highway, yesterday. (**Reuters**)

OPINION

Lula to gain from Bolsonaro flight

Flavio Bolsonaro did leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva a huge favour by fleeing his legal problems in Brazil to declare himself Brazil's rightful "leader" from his new home in the United States, analysts and Brazilian officials said. Bolsonaro's departure, which came after he refused to comply with a Supreme Court order to surrender his passports, weakens an emboldened conservative opposition in Brazil's Congress and lends credibility to Lula's accusations of US meddling to help the Bolsonaro family, they said.

Bolsonaro says he was a victim of an electoral coup, but has not provided evidence for electoral fraud. While Lula faces a groaning inbox of challenges, from taming growing debt to grooming a credible leftist successor, he now has one less Bolsonaro to worry about, allowing him to build a more transactional relationship with leaderless congressional opponents, they added. "Considering the local dynamics, Lula benefits from Flavio's escape to the US," said Rodrigo Russo, a Sao Paulo-based partner at consultancy firm Control Risks.

Lula's victory has been recognised by Brazil's federal electoral court, global leaders, international observers, and Bolsonaro's own party, which did not back Bolsonaro's claims of electoral fraud. On Thursday, the day after Flavio moved to the United States, his political allies sought to distance themselves from his claims of being Brazil's legitimate "leader."

Bolsonaro's exit is likely to spark a power vacuum over who will now lead Brazil's right that Lula may be able to exploit. "There's generally more willingness to engage with an administration that has secured a new term," Rafael Cortez, a political scientist and partner at Tendencias Consultoria, said. "An opening for dialogue emerges."

Flavio's father, Jair Bolsonaro, is currently serving a 27-year sentence for plotting a 2022 coup, while his brother, former lawmaker Eduardo Bolsonaro, is also based in the United States and unlikely to return to Brazil. Jair Bolsonaro's three other children are not currently seen as credible torchbearers of Bolsonarismo.

Michelle Bolsonaro, Jair Bolsonaro's wife and a prominent evangelical who appeals to millions of Brazil's faithful, is taking her first steps in Congress after being elected senator this month.

On Tuesday, the head of Flavio Bolsonaro's Liberal Party, Valdemar Costa Neto, posted a photo on X of him smiling alongside her, saying they had discussed "the future of our party and the challenges we face ahead."

Flavio's exit has weakened Bolsonarismo, a Lula aide said. — Reuters

Star struck in LA



People take pictures of The Hollywood Walk of Fame star of the late actor Patrick Stewart in Los Angeles, California, US, yesterday. Sir Patrick Stewart, the British Shakespearean actor who became a Hollywood megastar through roles in the *Star Trek* and *X-Men* franchises, has died at his home in Los Angeles. He was 86. His death on Wednesday came after a "brief and poignant journey" with Alzheimer's disease and Lewy body dementia, according to an official statement on his social media accounts. (**Reuters**)

Caught between AI job creation and destruction

While data centres are employing thousands of workers, the AI technology powered by such facilities is taking a toll: Self-driving Zoox and Waymos are replacing human-driven taxis, valets and other day jobs. In Nevada, the debate will reflect in the Nov 3 polls

By Valerie Volcovici
Reuters

On more than 100,000 acres of Nevada desert east of Reno, one of the world's largest concentrations of data centres is taking shape, providing years of work for thousands of electricians, pipefitters and other union tradespeople who are building it.

About 400 miles southeast, along the iconic Las Vegas Strip, the AI technology powered by such data centres is taking a toll: Self-driving Zoox and Waymos are replacing human-driven taxis and valets; casino floor bartenders are being replaced by robots; and MGM's massive call centre is slashing hundreds of jobs.

That split screen is challenging the Nevada Teamsters, a politically powerful network of local labor unions representing 30,000 workers across the construction, transportation and hospitality industries, many of whom will be voting in the Nov 3 elections. Some want to see new data-centre construction halted or slowed. Others view the boom as a gift.

"My job is to represent all of our unions," said Ross Kinson, the Nevada Teamsters' political director, adding the group had launched a process in April to find a unified stance ahead of the November polls. "This is a very, very important issue to the building trades, and it's providing a lot of jobs and creating good opportunities for a lot of people." But, he said, he has been encouraging members to consider the flip side: "What is it doing to our jobs?"

Nevada unions' soul-searching reflects the national debate underway over whether regulation should slow down AI development amid conflicting projections of job destruction and creation - and whether AI will ultimately lift humanity or harm it. It's likely to affect Nevada's voting on Nov 3.

The Nevada Teamsters interviewed more than 180 political candidates from both parties ahead of the election, Kinson said. Those who didn't support strong worker protections, or those looking for an outright ban on new data-centre construction, were unlikely to win the union's backing. "It's a political minefield for politicians to tiptoe through," said Kinson.

Nevada will also play a significant role in the 2028 presidential elections as the second state in the Democratic primary schedule behind South Carolina.

AI AUTOMATION

On a suburban street just off the Las Vegas Strip, 63-year-old Larry Goldfinger and a group of fellow Teamsters he jokingly calls "the walking dead" trudge through the desert heat, clipboards in hand. They're knocking on doors to promote candidates they believe will protect the city's workers from AI-driven job losses.

Goldfinger has spent nearly three decades as a valet at some of the Strip's most iconic casinos, and another decade in Vegas hospitality jobs — work he now fears will dry up as AI automation takes over everything from concierge services to bartending. "I raised my family, and I have had a good life doing it, and I feel like these guys that are 30ish aren't going to be able to do that," he said, wearing a Teamsters baseball cap to shield his head from the Nevada sun.

By 2035, AI and automation could put up to 92,000 Southern Nevada hospitality jobs at risk, or roughly one-third of that workforce, according to an analysis by RCG Economics. Teamsters Local 986 has already been losing call-center workers at casinos to AI automation, while taxi drivers and valets face pressure from the expansion of autonomous-vehicle fleets operated by Waymo and Zoox. Robot bartenders and touchscreen hotel check-ins have also become increasingly common.

MGM Resorts laid off around 200 call-centre workers last year, Kinson said. On a recent investor call, MGM International CFO Jonathan Halkyard said about 80% of guest interactions "now take place via AI/digital platforms."

MGM declined to comment for this story but directed Reuters to a labour contract it had reached with culinary union members in 2023. It promised advanced notice of AI-driven job losses along with health care and severance pay for those affected.

The Las Vegas economy is no stranger to booms, busts and technological change. But how it navigates the AI-era will have huge consequences, said John Restrepo, principal of RCG Economics. "If they use those tools to just do massive job displacement, that's not going to be good," he said. Goldfinger said he worries the rise of AI in Las Vegas will not only cost the city lots of jobs, but also ultimately hurt business by making it less welcoming to tourists accustomed to interacting with well-trained hospitality staff.



Pipefitting apprentice Christopher Williams, 20, poses for a picture at the UA Local 350 Training Center in Reno, Nevada.

"We are not against the changes," he said. "We just want to make sure we are involved in how it's changing."

NEW GOLD RUSH

Every morning, Christopher Williams joins the traffic along the USA Parkway in northern Nevada's high desert on his way to an expanding cluster of data centres owned by Google, Switch, Tract and others in the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center. The historic mining region was the site of a 19th-century gold rush, briefly earning Storey County the label of "the richest place on earth."

Williams, a 20-year-old with curly black hair and glasses, is part of the new rush, this time for high-paying data-centre jobs. He moved from northern California to Reno last year after struggling to get enough hours as a line cook earning $18.50 an hour. Now he's making more than $22 an hour and works 45 to 60 hours a week.

"I might not fully agree with data centres being built everywhere, but they are helping a lot of people," he said. "If I don't take the job, somebody else will, and it's a lot of money left on the table." For local officials, the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center has been a lifeline after a prolonged economic slump. "We're finding that our economy is more stable than it used to be as a primarily gaming and tourism economy, and it's providing opportunities, especially for young people that want to stay," said County Commissioner Clay Mitchell. According to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center has generated 850,000 work hours per month in 2026 - up from about the same number during all of 2022.

BABY AND THE BATHWATER

The Nevada Teamsters' internal discussions have led it to endorse Democratic Attorney General Aaron Ford for governor, Kinson said. Ford, who is seeking to unseat Republican incumbent Governor Joe Lombardo, has proposed halting new data-centre tax abatements and requiring developers to shield residents from higher energy costs, and also wants strong regulation protecting jobs from AI — the right balance to appeal to the spectrum of Teamsters unions, Kinson said.

Ford had consulted with the Teamsters before launching his data-centre platform this summer and hosted his first town hall about the issue at the Teamsters Local 14. Lombardo has championed data centres as a major economic driver, calling the industry a "new gold rush", but had been slower to embrace checks and balances on the industry, according to Kinson.

In September, Lombardo imposed new restrictions on some of the generous tax incentives that lured the industry to the state. Lombardo did not respond to requests for comment.

The union's influence tends to be significant. In 2025, union members accounted for about 13% of wage and salary workers in Nevada, compared to 10% nationwide, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In other parts of the United States, the data-centre issue has also been key to union endorsement decisions.

In Kansas, for example, Republican gubernatorial candidate Ty Masterson won backing from the state's largest transit and railroad union, as well as from a local chapter of the IBEW electrical workers union, after Democratic rival Cindy Holscher called for a moratorium on data-center development. It marked the first time in more than 50 years that the Kansas transit union backed a Republican candidate for governor. Sean McGarvey, president of North America's Building Trades Unions, said — just like in Nevada — there is a division in the wider labour community around AI and data centers. But banning new data centers, he said, will never get their support. "We don't throw the baby out with the bathwater," he said. "This is one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to reindustrialise the country."



Drone view of a retention pond for effluent water used in the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center in Sparks, Nevada.



Workers at the site of the Google Storey County Campus under construction in the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center in Sparks, Nevada, US. (**PICTURES: Reuters**)

GULF TIMES

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Pakistan military 'cautiously optimistic' on Iran-US mediation

Reuters
Rawalpindi



Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, Director-General of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media and public relations wing of the Pakistan Armed Forces, speaks during an interview with Reuters in Rawalpindi, yesterday. (**Reuters**)

Pakistan's military is "cautiously optimistic" about its mediation between Iran and the US, its spokesman said yesterday in his first interview since a high-level delegation visited Tehran this week.

Army chief Field Marshal Asim Munir — Pakistan's chief mediator in its efforts to de-escalate the now eight-month-old Iran war — has been to Tehran twice this month, most recently on Monday alongside Saudi and Turkish officials.

"Why would the Field Marshal be going twice if it is not for some positivity? So yes, of course," spokesman Lieutenant General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry said when asked whether the trips were a positive sign.

"The word that we would use is always cautiously optimistic," added Chaudhry, director general of Inter-Services Public Relations.

There were still "powerful spoilers and detractors," who believed conflict serves them, he added without naming them.

Speaking in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, where Pakistan's armed forces are headquartered, Chaudhry declined to say what was discussed or whether the US had backed the trip.

Saudi Defence Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman and Turkish intelligence chief Ibrahim Kalin joined Munir in Tehran on Monday.

Their two countries signed a joint defence pact with Pakistan on August 7, saying an attack on any signatory will be treated as an attack on all.

The Makkah Joint Defence Agreement has taken on added significance as the Iran war has redrawn regional alliances and raised fears of a broader Middle East conflict.

While the three signatories say the agreement is aimed at collective deterrence and regional security, analysts see its evolution as closely tied to efforts by regional powers to manage the fallout from the Iran-US confrontation.

After Monday's talks, Mohsen Rezaei, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, said regional security should be ensured by regional countries without foreign intervention.

The wording of the pact does not bar new members, Chaudhry said yesterday when asked whether Iran could join.

"Anyone who has a shared vision of collective deterrence and regional peace, why not? Everyone is most welcome," he said, adding that it was for the political leadership of the three principal parties to decide.

Asked whether more Pakistani troops were being sent to Saudi Arabia under the agreement, Chaudhry said that would depend on the situation and the decision of both countries' political leadership.

He said Pakistan was committed to defending Saudi Arabia and the holy sites of Makkah and Madinah. "We are not part of the Yemeni conflict, which is an intra-Yemen conflict," he added.

Fighting between Saudi Arabia and Yemen's Houthi group has been reignited by the Iran conflict, stoking fears of a wider war.

On the home front, the federal government suspended the provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, led by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), on October 11 and detained Chief Minister Sohail Afridi.

The government had accused the provincial administration of failing to tackle militancy. The PTI rejected the allegations and says its government took part in counter-terrorism efforts. PTI leaders called the move a pretext to crush protests.

Asked if there would now be larger military-led campaigns in the province, Chaudhry said that was not how the army conducted counter-terrorism.

"Our counter-terrorism operations are based on what we call IBOs, intelligence-based operations... The tempo of the freedom of action of (those) IBOs will further increase," he said.

Independents backed by Khan's PTI won the most directly elected seats in the February 2024 election but fell short of a majority. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was the only province controlled by Khan's party.

Khan has been in jail since 2023, and his supporters see the military behind his imprisonment and the dismantlement of the PTI. The army denies involvement in politics.

Spanish minister refuses to resign over second major train crash on his watch

Reuters
Madrid

Spain's transport minister yesterday rejected calls for his resignation over the second train accident on his watch to cause mass casualties this year, as authorities worked to identify the victims from a crash that killed at least 69 people.

Lawmakers from across the political spectrum this week condemned Transport Minister Oscar Puente for attributing Wednesday's crash to a break in protocol by control centre operators rather than accepting responsibility, with rail workers' unions calling for his immediate dismissal.

The crash, which happened near the town of Urda in central Spain, followed another accident involving the same rail companies on the same line that killed 46 people in January.

It has reopened a debate about safety and maintenance on Spain's high-speed rail network, the most extensive in Europe, as the country prepares for an election that left-leaning Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has called for November 29.

"My duty now is not to focus on discussing whether I will remain in office, but on solving the problem, determining exactly what happened and providing clear explanations," Puente said at a press conference yesterday.

At the scene of the crash, large cranes were lifting the mangled wreckage as the Civil Guard listed 64 people as missing in what is already Spain's deadliest train accident since 2013. It was unclear if all those missing were accounted for in the death toll.

Authorities have carried out 49 autopsies so far and formally identified five people, three women and two men, Esther Padilla, spokesperson for the Castilla-La Mancha regional government, said on state television network TVE.

No additional bodies were found when rescue teams overturned a train carriage on Thursday, Castilla-La Mancha regional leader Emiliano Garcia-Page said on TVE.

Identifying the bodies was proving difficult because many were in pieces, he said. On Thursday, rescue teams had placed partial remains in 31 bags.

The collision occurred after several trains were automatically stopped due to the failure of a signalling system, after which the central control centre in Madrid took over. A train operated by state-owned Renfe was authorised to proceed, even though there was a stationary Iryo-operated train ahead, according to Puente.

Audio of communications between the control centre and the train drivers obtained by *El Pais* showed how a controller authorised the Renfe train to continue on its journey at a normal speed, which Puente said disregarded a protocol to travel at no more than 40kph in such circumstances.

Residents evacuated from Oleshky as Melania-backed truce holds

Reuters
Kyiv

Starving and exhausted residents of a Russian-held town in southern Ukraine were being evacuated yesterday as part of a joint relief operation by the opposing sides, the first of its kind in four years and eight months of war.

Under a local ceasefire brokered by US first lady Melania Trump, an aid convoy arrived in the town of Oleshky and some residents set off for the Russian city of Anapa on their way to Ukrainian-held territory, according to a post from senior Kyiv lawmaker David Arakhamia.

He said they would then fly to Belarus before travelling back into Ukraine by bus.

Although it was a striking example of co-operation between the warring sides, a spokesman for Russian President Vladimir Putin described it as "difficult to extrapolate" to the wider search for peace.

Attacks continued elsewhere, with Russian strikes overnight targeting seven regions of Ukraine as well as the capital Kyiv and the southeastern city of Dnipro, officials said. On Thursday, a Russian drone killed at least 15 people on a rail platform in the Ukrainian city of Dnipro.

Russia said Ukraine had resumed strikes on its oil refineries despite a request from US President Donald Trump to stop such attacks, which Trump has blamed for raising the cost of diesel ahead of midterm elections next week. There was no comment from Ukraine.


A convoy carrying residents evacuated from the Russian-controlled town of Oleshky in Ukraine makes a brief stop on a roadside in Crimea, yesterday. (**Reuters**)

In Oleshky, Russian human rights commissioner Yana Lantratova said groups were boarding evacuation buses — some wishing to go to Russia and others to Ukraine. It was not clear how many were in each group, and how many planned to stay behind.

"The problem is that a lot of people are staying," one woman told Ukraine's human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets, who was on the ground to coordinate the operation with Lantratova.

"I've been told that it's their own choice," Lubinets replied. "At the very least, we'll do what we can to ensure that somehow humanitarian aid gets through."

In another video clip, he embraced a woman who gave her name as Anna, and asked if she was packed and ready to leave.

"Yes, we are on bus 20, my son is on bus 17. To Ukraine," she said.

Both sides have heaped praise on the US first lady for brokering the deal. Both have a strong interest in ensuring its success to avoid antagonising her husband Trump at a crucial moment, with the US elections only days away and US-mediated peace talks due to resume in November after nine months.

For Russia, which seized Oleshky in the first days of the war in 2022, the operation also provides a PR opportunity. Russian state TV has shown aid boxes destined for Oleshky, decorated with the Russian flag, being loaded by people wearing T-shirts reading "Putin's Team — The People's Front".

Oleshky, on the Dnipro River opposite the city of Kherson, has suffered extensive damage and was badly flooded after the destruction of the huge upriver Kakhovka dam in 2023.

Residents have given harrowing accounts of risking their lives travelling along mine-strewn roads — one known as the "road of death" — to get food and water. Some say they have survived on a cup of rice or buckwheat a day, sometimes with a tomato, cucumber or wild plants added.

Russia's Lantratova said food, hygiene products, medical supplies and fuel were being delivered to the town. Ukraine's Lubinets said everyone in need of help would get it.

Relations between the two were strikingly cordial — something not seen between Russian and Ukrainian officials since the start of the war — as they appeared side by side to address reporters.

They later spoke together to residents, some of whom were in tears. One woman switched hesitantly between Russian and Ukrainian, a moment that seemed to symbolise the plight of fearful people caught in the midst of a war.

The ceasefire had come into force in Oleshky and the Kherson region on Tuesday.

"This is the first time since 2022 that a ceasefire has been established across such an extensive stretch of the front line and has been maintained for such a significant duration," Lubinets said.

The arrival of the aid convoy was preceded by demining operations in which Lantratova said a Russian sapper and one other person were killed.

She said 25 buses were on hand for evacuations, with special provision for those who were bedridden, and 50 medical personnel were present. There was even a bus with pet cages.

Pope becomes first in history to vote in US election

Reuters
Washington

Pope Leo XIV cast a ballot by mail in the US midterm elections, the Vatican press office said yesterday, a historic first for the American-born pontiff.

"In keeping with this long-standing practice of civic participation, he has submitted his mail-in ballot in Chicago," the Vatican said. "The Holy Father expresses his belief in the right and the duty of citizens to participate in democratic processes."

The Vatican did not say which candidates Leo had voted for.

Leo, 71, was born in Chicago and is the first American-born Pope. The Pope voted by mail under his birth name, Robert Francis Prevost, according to the Will County Clerk's website.

President Donald Trump's sagging popularity is hurting his fellow Republicans' chances of holding onto their majorities in both chambers of Congress in the November 3 election, with the public unhappy about the high cost of living and the Iran war.

Trump repeatedly criticised Leo early in the new Pope's tenure, calling him "weak" and "terrible" on crime.

The Pope said in March that God rejects the prayers of those who start wars and have "hands full of blood." In April, he termed Trump's threat to destroy the Iranian civilisation as unacceptable and previously declined to join the US president's so-called "Board of Peace" initiative for Gaza.

Leo has also urged a "deep reflection" on the way migrants are treated in the US.

Voters in the solidly Democratic state of Illinois will select a successor for retiring US Senator Dick Durbin and choose whether to re-elect Governor JB Pritzker.

Leo was elected to lead the 1.4-billion-member Church by the world's cardinals in May 2025.

He is set to travel to South America next week.

EUFOR helicopter crash in Bosnia kills four

AFP
Brcko

A day of mourning was declared yesterday in the Bosnian district where four Italian members of the European Union Force (EUFOR) in the Balkan country were killed in a helicopter crash.

The Chinook CH-47 helicopter crashed on Thursday while on a "routine mission" in the Brcko region, about 180 kilometres (110 miles) north of Sarajevo, according to EUFOR.

The victims were two soldiers and two Red Cross volunteers, the Italian defence ministry said earlier.

Of the 15 people on board the helicopter, three died in the crash, while a fourth victim succumbed to their injuries in the hospital.

Health authorities said another 11 injured patients were treated in hospitals in Brcko and nearby Tuzla. Yesterday, Brcko district mayor Sinisa Milic declared a day of mourning to express "solidarity with the victims' families and the entire Italian people".

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, in a post on X yesterday, paid tribute to the victims.

"Four lives cut short while they were serving Italy. Today my thoughts are with them and with those who love them," she said.

Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto visited the injured and other Italian troops serving in Bosnia yesterday, accompanied by the Chief of Defence Staff and a team of Italian military doctors.

Yesterday morning, an AFP journalist saw the shattered remains of the military chopper lying in a grassy field, surrounded by emergency services.

The European military mission in the Balkan country, tasked with maintaining peace, has between 1,000 and 1,500 personnel.

EUFOR said earlier that a thorough investigation of the incident was underway, adding it would release "more information as it is verified, and when appropriate".

It said there was no civilian infrastructure damage and no injured civilians in the incident.

EUFOR has had a mission in Bosnia since 2004, when it took over from a Nato peacekeeping force that had been present since the country's 1992-95 war.

In June 2008, four EUFOR members in Bosnia, two German officers and two Spanish helicopter pilots, died in a crash.

Dockworkers strike in Europe and beyond against arms shipments, war deaths

Reuters
Athens

Dockworkers went on strike across Europe and beyond yesterday, disrupting shipping and ferries as they protested against the use of their ports for arms shipments and the number of seafarers killed in wars from the Gulf to the Black Sea.

Strikers across 113 ports in 22 countries also called for pay rises, better working conditions and the right to have doctors on board vessels crossing war zones.

"We will not work for their wars, and we will not become food for their cannons," Apostolos Kypraios, head of the Greek union of merchant marine engineers, told Reuters during a rally at the Greek port of Piraeus.

"We have felt it first hand, and our families have felt it too, living with the anxiety of whether a colleague will get back home," he added.

More than 25 unions have now backed the strike originally called in Italy, France, Greece, Spain's Basque Country, Turkiye and Morocco.

Yesterday, it covered major shipping hubs in Piraeus, Valencia, Le Havre, Algeciras and Genoa, as well as Morocco's Tangier Med and India's Nhava Sheva.

"Seafarers have suffered many casualties — numbering in the hundreds — including both the dead and the severely injured," the Greek seafarers' union PENEN said in a statement.


Seafarers and dockworkers chant slogans as they take part in a march from the port of Piraeus, near Athens, towards Greece's Ministry of Maritime Affairs yesterday. (**AFP**)

It said there had been 28 attacks on vessels in the Gulf in the first 21 days of October, a record since the start of the Iran war.

It said there had been 570 attacks confirmed in the Black Sea so far this year, leaving 40 seafarers dead and hundreds wounded.

A series of strikes in the western Black Sea has raised concerns about the widening scope of Russia's war in Ukraine.

Cargo operations were disrupted in Piraeus and ferry services to Greek islands were suspended, as about 3,000 dockworkers and seafarers joined the walkout.

Representatives of India's WTWFI union said about 15 Indian seafarers had died as a result of the Iran war, with many more stranded at sea as waterways were blocked.

A group of dockworkers and other activists, called 'No Harbour for Genocide' and campaigning to stop military cargo from reaching Israeli ports, said yesterday the protest would halt some 52,000 containers and snarl cargo worth $2.8bn.

Reuters was not able to independently verify the impact.

In May 2026, dockworkers' unions from over 35 European countries published the so-called Istanbul Declaration demanding that port facilities not be used to transport weapons destined for war zones.

Dockworkers said they were also worried about the rising cost of essential goods and energy, stemming from the ongoing conflicts.

QATAR

Event organised to honour cancer survivors, patients



Breast cancer survivors and patients were honoured at "Beyond the Ribbon: Awareness, Stories & Wellness", a community gathering that highlighted the importance of breast cancer awareness, early detection and community support through personal stories and health education.

Organised by Golden CMC Events & Management, in collaboration with the Qatar Cancer Society (QCS) and Doha Women Forum, the programme brought community members together for an afternoon focused on understanding breast cancer beyond statistics and traditional awareness campaigns by listening to people whose lives have been touched by the disease.

The programme featured Heba Ali Nassar, head of the Community Health Awareness Department at the QCS, who delivered an informative session on early detection and the importance of recognising warning signs and seeking timely medical advice.

An interactive online quiz encouraged audience participation, making the learning experience both engaging and memorable.

The top five participants were recognised following the activity.

A particularly moving part of the programme featured personal experiences from two speakers who offered different perspectives on living with breast cancer.

Musleh Abuazab spoke openly about his journey as a man living with breast cancer, broadening understanding that the disease is not exclusively a women's issue.

His willingness to share such a personal experience highlighted the importance of including men in breast cancer awareness conversations and making space for every patient's story.

Atty Chace Arcilla, a breast cancer survivor, shared her personal journey of faith and resilience.

She also offered practical insights on reducing breast cancer risk and taking proactive steps towards better health.

The gathering continued with a special tribute to members of Doha Wireless Warriors, a dragon boat team made up of cancer survivors.

The tribute honoured breast cancer survivors Yasmin Mohamoud, Naheed Farrukh and Margaret Osifo, recognising their personal journeys and perseverance while highlighting the importance of community support throughout illness, treatment and recovery.

The event also included a question-and-answer session, giving attendees the opportunity to engage with the speakers, ask questions and learn more about breast cancer awareness and prevention.

Through health education, personal stories and the recognition of survivors, "Beyond the Ribbon" brought people together to learn, share and honour the experiences of those affected by breast cancer.

The gathering reinforced the importance of early detection and community support, while reminding attendees that behind every diagnosis is a person whose story deserves to be heard.





Weekly bazaar

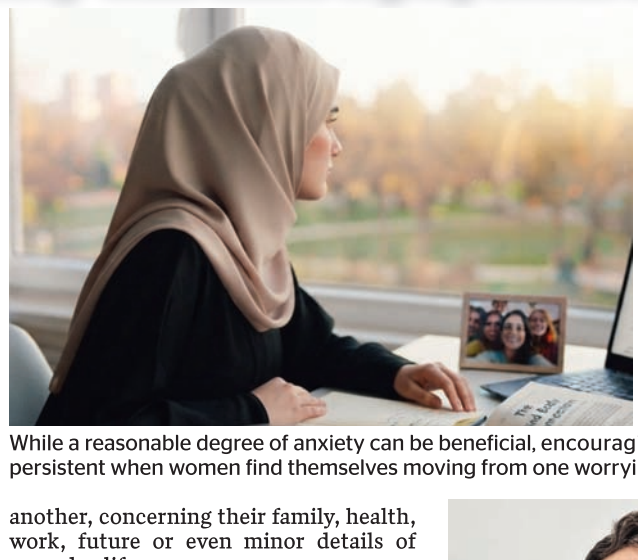
Visitors browse stalls featuring handmade crafts, locally made products, traditional accessories, toys and children's items at the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) Park's Weekend Bazaar, which opened yesterday. The weekly market brings together local vendors and creative businesses near the MIA, offering a variety of products every Friday from 4pm to 10pm and Saturday from 2pm to 9pm. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

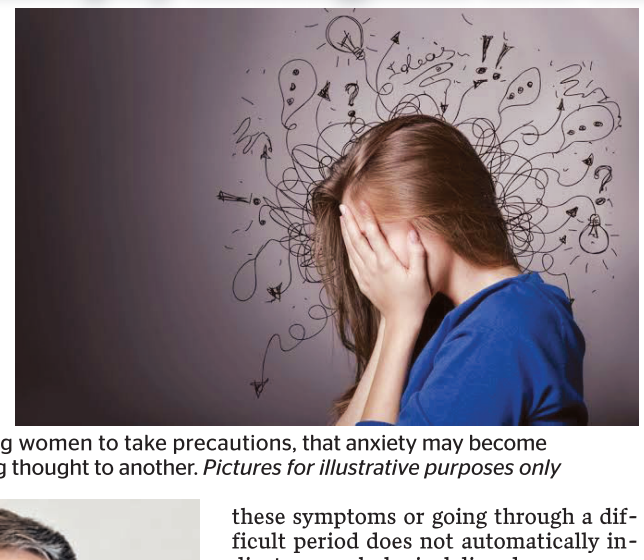






Prolonged anxiety can take a physical and psychological toll on women: expert





While a reasonable degree of anxiety can be beneficial, encouraging women to take precautions, that anxiety may become persistent when women find themselves moving from one worrying thought to another. *Pictures for illustrative purposes only*

Women should pay attention when anxiety begins to dominate their thoughts, disrupt their sleep or affect their daily responsibilities, as prolonged anxiety can have physical and psychological effects, a clinical psychologist at the Primary Health Care Corporation (PHCC) has advised.

Sedki al-Shazly al-Sheikh, a clinical psychologist at Al Mashaf Health Centre, said that anxiety is a natural human response that does not necessarily indicate a psychological problem.

However, when it becomes persistent, he said, difficult to control and begins interfering with everyday life, women should recognise the signs and seek appropriate support.

Worrying about medical test results, important decisions, children or work can naturally cause tension and uncertainty.

Such anxiety is usually linked to a specific situation and tends to subside once the circumstances pass or become clearer, Dr al-Sheikh said.

He added that a reasonable degree of anxiety can also be beneficial, encouraging women to prepare for important events, pay attention to details and take necessary precautions.

What matters most, Dr al-Sheikh continued, is how much anxiety occupies their lives and their ability to manage it.

He said that anxiety may become persistent when women find themselves moving from one worrying thought to another, concerning their family, health, work, future or even minor details of everyday life.

What begins as a simple question about what might happen can develop into a series of worst-case scenarios, the expert said.

Even when women recognise that some fears are exaggerated, they may struggle to stop or control these thoughts.

According to Dr al-Sheikh, the effects can extend beyond mental preoccupation, manifesting physically through muscle tension, heart palpitations, headaches, sleep disturbances, fatigue and difficulty concentrating.

Ongoing stress may also make women more irritable with those around them and leave them feeling drained throughout the day.



Dr Sedki al-Shazly al-Sheikh

However, he noted that experiencing these symptoms or going through a difficult period does not automatically indicate a psychological disorder.

The duration and severity of the anxiety, whether it can be controlled and how significantly it affects daily life, are more important considerations.

To manage anxiety, Dr al-Sheikh advised women to recognise how their thinking changes during stressful moments, particularly when they begin anticipating the worst possible outcomes.

He suggested pausing to identify the source of concern, distinguish what is known from what is feared and consider whether there is anything they can do about it.

If a genuine problem exists, taking practical steps to address it may help.

However, repeatedly analysing possibilities without evidence, particularly those beyond one's control, can increase exhaustion and anxiety without providing a solution.

Dr al-Sheikh also highlighted everyday factors that may aggravate stress, including insufficient sleep, excessive caffeine consumption, constantly following the news and social media, and not allowing enough time for rest.

Physical activity, calm breathing, maintaining a regular sleep schedule, spending time with family and engaging in enjoyable activities can help restore balance.

He said that prayer, reading the Holy Qur'an, remembrance of Allah and supplication may also provide comfort and reassurance to those who find solace in them.

Dr al-Sheikh encouraged women not to let anxiety build up, saying that talking to a husband, family member or trusted person can help put worries into perspective and ease the feeling of having to deal with everything alone.

Women experiencing prolonged anxiety that becomes difficult to control or significantly affects their sleep, work, relationships or daily responsibilities should consider consulting a mental health professional.

A professional assessment can help identify the nature of the anxiety, its contributing factors and the most appropriate approach to managing it.