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SPORT | Page 1

Al-Attiyah in cruise control after first stage of Saudi Baja-Hail



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Northeastern US girds for 'epic' Arctic blast

The northeastern United States was steeling itself yesterday for an "epic" arctic blast that could see some areas record their lowest ever wind chill temperatures. The National Weather Service (NWS) warned that parts of Maine state might see wind chills of minus 51C (minus 60F). "This is an epic, generational arctic outbreak," the NWS office in Caribou, near Maine's border with Canada, wrote in an advisory. It said the chills are "something northern and eastern Maine has not seen since similar outbreaks in 1982 and 1988. Most stations are forecast to see their lowest wind chills in decades or, in some cases, the lowest ever recorded." **Page 7**

IMF giving Pakistan tough time, says PM

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said yesterday the International Monetary Fund was giving his country a "tough time" over unlocking stalled funding from a \$6.5bn bailout at a time of "unimaginable" economic crisis. "Our economic situation is unimaginable," the premier said, adding the IMF visiting mission was giving Pakistan a "tough time." "The conditions we have to fulfil are beyond imagination," he said, but admitted that the country has no option but to accept them. **Page 11**

UN urges end to 'illogic of escalation'

UN rights chief Volker Turk yesterday called for an end to the "illogic of escalation" between Israel and the Palestinians, amid a spike in deadly violence between the two. Turk criticised Israel for measures that "can only lead to further violence and bloodshed", following a surge in attacks and fighting that have drawn calls from the international community for calm and restraint. Since the start of this year, the conflict has killed 36 Palestinians as well as the six Israeli civilians and one Ukrainian. **Page 6**

Gibraltar accuses Spain of 'sovereignty breach'

Gibraltar yesterday accused Spain of a "gross violation of British sovereignty" after an incident on one of its beaches involving Spanish customs agents who were attacked by smugglers, during which shots were fired. "The evidence surrounding this incident discloses a gross violation of British sovereignty and, potentially, the most serious and dangerous incident for many years," said Gibraltar's Chief Minister Fabian Picardo in a statement.

Missing monkeys: man arrested by Dallas police

Dallas police arrested a 24-year-old man over the disappearance of two South American monkeys from the city's zoo earlier this week and charged him with six counts of animal cruelty, authorities said yesterday. Police identified the man as Davion Irvin, with whom the department wanted to speak after the disappearance of the emperor tamarin monkeys from the Dallas Zoo on Monday. Thanks to a tip, the animals were found the next day in an abandoned house in the Dallas suburb of Lancaster and returned to the zoo.

COMMUNITY

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Star stallions, magnificent mares in spotlight



Superb stallions and mares along with junior colts and fillies were in the spotlight as the Katara International Arabian Horse Festival (KIAHF-2023) continued to showcase finest purebreds in the Arabian Peninsula Horse Show on the third day of the 11-day extravaganza at the brilliantly lit-up arena at the Katara Esplanade yesterday. **Page 12**

Allies pledge rockets, missile systems to Kyiv

By **AFP**
Kyiv, Ukraine

Western allies yesterday pledged precision rockets and missile systems to Ukraine, after President Volodymyr Zelensky called for sophisticated weapons to help retain control of embattled eastern city of Bakhmut.

The European Union agreed to introduce price caps on Russian petroleum products to try to further limit Russian President Vladimir Putin's war chest by targeting his key exports.

The announcements came shortly after Zelensky told a summit with EU leaders in Kyiv: "No-one will surrender Bakhmut. We will fight as long as we can."

"If weapon (deliveries) are accelerated — namely long-range weapons — we will not only not withdraw from Bakhmut, we will begin to de-occupy Donbas," he said of the eastern region of Ukraine.

The United States announced a

new \$2.2bn package of arms and munitions, which the Pentagon said included a new rocket-propelled precision bomb that could nearly double Kyiv's strike range against Russian forces.

The ground-launched small-diameter bombs (GLSDB), which can fly up to 150km (93 miles), could threaten key Russian supply lines, arms depots and air bases far behind the front lines.

Ukraine had been asking Washington for munitions that can fly farther than the HIMARS rockets, which have an 80-km range.

The GLSDBs potentially give Kyiv's forces an ability to strike anywhere in the Russian-occupied Donbas, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, and the northern part of occupied Crimea.

The French defence ministry said France and Italy would deliver mobile surface-to-air missile systems in response to an urgent request from Kyiv to help protect "civilian populations and infrastructure from Russian air attacks."

The systems, called MAMBA or

SAMP, are a vehicle-mounted battery of medium-range missiles designed to offer protection from airborne threats such as missiles and manned or unmanned aircraft.

Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov, who had requested the weapons, tweeted his gratitude, saying they would "help us save thousands of lives" from Russian attacks.

Kyiv is also asking for fighter jets.

It has already secured promises from the West for deliveries of modern battle tanks and after months of hesitation, Germany authorised the delivery of Leopard 1 tanks.

In Brussels, EU negotiators agreed to cap the price of Russian refined oil products to accompany an embargo on ship deliveries of the products that comes into force on Sunday.

Already in December, the EU imposed an embargo on Russian crude oil coming into the bloc by sea and — with its G7 partners — imposed a \$60-per-barrel cap on Russian crude exports to other parts of the world.

Page 11

Doha Learning Days Festival to be an annual standalone event

By **Joseph Varghese**
Staff Reporter

Doha Learning Days (DLD) Festival, an initiative of Qatar Foundation's World Innovation Summit for Innovation (WISE), will be a standalone annual event hereafter, disclosed a top official.

"Earlier we used to have it as a precursor to the WISE summit. From this year, it will be a standalone annual event with more and more partners from across Qatar," said Stavros N Yiannouka, WISE CEO.

DLD is focusing more on innovation and out of the box thinking for all the participants and the event is open to the public in the evenings, he said.

"At Doha Learning Days Festival, we are very much focused on innovative and experiential learning that can take place not just in the class rooms alone but outside the class rooms as well. So there are activations involving sports, activations involving technology, virtual reality or the metaverses as they are called. It also includes arts, creativity, and storytelling among others. Our partners include the Qatar Museums, the Qatar National Library and others. Several hundreds of students are participating in the programmes and it is open to the public in the evenings," Yiannouka explained.

He also noted that 2022 WISE Awards winners were honoured at the DLD launch event and plans and actions are afoot for the 2023 WISE summit.

The DLD continued with several activities yesterday and with a special focus on youth empowerment and DLD is creating a lively, stimulating space for meaningful experiential education.

The festival, which concludes today is encouraging everyone in the community to embrace lifelong learning with over 50 activities that cater to all ages and interests. The programme is open to all from 5pm-9pm with free admission.



Stavros N Yiannouka

Helping to create a vibrant atmosphere for youth empowerment, Qatar Sports for All Federation is hosting fitness sessions, an obstacle course, target shootout, badminton and tennis, and self-defence for a fun and wholesome family experience. Further emphasising personal well-being, "Well, well, well, what do you know?" presented by The Learning Centre's DARB initiative, can give participants the tools to prioritise their mental health.

There are many activities to look forward today at DLD, including immersive activities across science and technology, environment and sustainability, arts and culture, sport and well-being, and social awareness.

Each of the festival's activities engages participants fully in the learning experience, and one example is "Empowering Insaniyat". The session will involve youth in a collaborative activity and create a positive environment to discuss Insaniyat (our humanity). It forms part of Insaniyat's aim to educate youth on the importance of equal access for people with disabilities and encourage innovative ideas relating to people with intellectual challenges and physical disabilities.

Interactive awareness exercises by the Best Buddies Friendship volunteer programme will put participants' knowledge of social inclusion issues to the test. **To Page 12**

Aquarium in Grand Terminal captivates cruise passengers

By **Joey Aguilar**
Staff Reporter

The mega cruise ships that continue to make calls at Old Doha Port have become major attractions for residents frequenting the area while the large aquarium inside the Grand Terminal has been captivating many cruise passengers.

Many visitors often find time to gaze at several rare fish and other marine species at the aquarium before leaving the terminal for a tour or a visit to the Mina District.

Exploring the Doha Port, visitors who prefer to stay within the area can be seen dining at various restaurants and cafes at the Mina District while others look for souvenirs at several retail shops and boutiques.

A few metres away from the Mina District is the Box Park, which remains appealing to both cruise passengers and residents, particularly during the cold season. The two areas offer a sce-

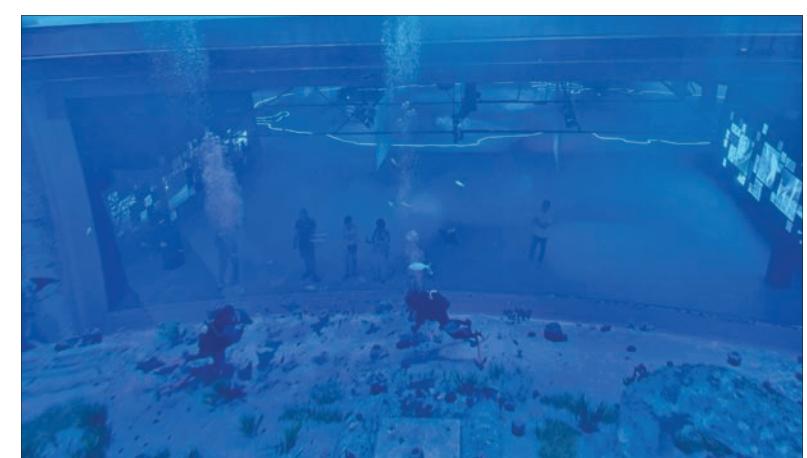


The large aquarium inside the Grand Terminal has been captivating many cruise passengers. **PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam

nic view not only of the Doha skyline but also of nearby popular touristic spots.

The Doha Port is also home to an

other large public park just behind the Flag Plaza - a place to hang-out, exercise and spend the day with families, colleagues, or friends.



Another view of the aquarium inside the Grand Terminal. **PICTURE:** Joey Aguilar

As one of the latest popular destinations in Qatar, it is learnt that the Old Doha Port has been attracting a huge number of visitors, including those from outside the city such as Al Khor. The port recently hosted the 3rd edition of the Qatar Balloon Festival, which also drew crowds.



Ashghal receives Kuwaiti delegation



Health minister meets Malaysian counterpart

HE the Minister of Public Health Dr Hanan Mohamed al-Kuwari met with Minister of Health of Malaysia Dr Zalihah binti Mustafa, on the sidelines of her participation in the 152nd session of the Executive Board of the World Health Organisation (WHO), currently being held in Geneva, Switzerland. During the meeting, they reviewed the relations between the two countries in the health fields and ways to enhance and develop them, in addition to discussing the topics on the agenda of the 152nd session of the WHO Executive Board. (QNA)

'Smoking affects many aspects, including physical endurance'

Quitting smoking and exercising are healthy behaviour patterns that safeguard health and prevent diseases. Smoking and exercise are two factors that affect each other. Participating in exercise has been associated with the reduction of cigarette craving, as exercise reduces stress and pressure, and many believe this is a contributing factor to smoking.

Performing regular physical activity and exercise can reduce nicotine withdrawal symptoms experienced by people who are trying to quit smoking by smoking less cigarettes or quitting smoking. Doing exercises helps distract one from cravings to smoke and reduce their intensity. On this matter, head of Wellness

for Community Interventions at the Primary Health Care Corporation (PHCC), Abdul Hameed al-Khenji, says smoking leads to long-term effects on the ability to engage in exercise and physical activity, as smoking weakens muscle strength and reduces its flexibility.

"Smokers suffer from shortness of breath three times more often than non-smokers. This makes exercising normally more difficult for smokers. Smoking also increases the risk of osteoporosis, which hurts your athletic performance, in addition to the possibility of developing arthritis, which causes pain during exercise," explains al-Khenji.

Further, smoking slows down the healing of many common sports



Abdul Hameed al-Khenji

injuries, requiring more time for those injured to recover from their injury or they do not recover at all.

Al-Khenji notes that studies and statistics have shown the extent of the effect of smoking on

patients infected with Covid-19, as smoking in its various forms affects body systems, including the cardiovascular and respiratory systems. Covid-19 can also affect the same body systems. Information shows that cardiovascular and respiratory patients are more likely to develop severe symptoms of Covid-19 due to tobacco use. Laboratory research has shown that the initial death rate due to Covid-19 is much higher among patients with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, chronic respiratory diseases and cancer, compared to those who do not suffer from chronic medical conditions.

Regardless of age, quitting smoking is associated with substantial health benefits for the smoker. The benefit partly depends on the intensity and duration of previous exposure to tobacco smoke. Smokers who stop smoking are less likely to develop tobacco-related diseases, including coronary heart disease, cancer and lung disease.

Smokers also benefit from quitting even after developing a smoking-related illness, such as coronary heart disease or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Many smokers who suffer from chronic cough and phlegm notice an improvement in these symptoms during the first year after stopping smoking. Complete smoking cessation reduces the risk of developing lung cancer within five years.

New QU research reveals link between vitamin D deficiency and inflammation

A new study from Qatar University (QU) has revealed the link between vitamin D deficiency and inflammation. The research also shed light on the role of High Density Lipoproteins (HDL) associated lipoproteins during sepsis and the resulting inflammation.

Understanding the physiological mechanism helped the researcher in designing new therapeutic agents preventing sepsis and septic shock. The study was done by Dr Hanaa Mousa, the second PhD candidate from QU's College of Medicine.

She completed her oral defence of the theses entitled 'Vitamin D Immune Modulatory Effect on the Anti-inflammatory potential of HDL associated Proteins' at an event attended by a number of faculty members and students from QU Health.

The research also highlighted the interaction between HDL and vitamin D, and the link between



Dr Hanaa Mousa (third left) with QU officials at the event.

vitamin D deficiency and dyslipidemia, which will allow the clinician to better understand and manage both dyslipidemia and vitamin D deficiency. Dr Mashael al-Shafei, director of Graduate Studies, QU Health, lauded Dr Hanaa for her work and announced the opening of the new admission cycle for the graduate

programmes including a PhD in Health Sciences (open until February 16).

In a statement, Dr Susu Zughaiher, associate professor of Basic Medical Sciences, College of Medicine, and the main supervisor for Dr Hanaa, also congratulated the researcher. Dr Hanaa described her PhD journey as a

very challenging one, full of joy and tears, hopes and dreams, sweet times and sour ones.

"I was a new mother, working a full-time job in research, on top of being a PhD student. This requires immense effort to fulfil all my duties.

"I feel lucky to have had individuals around me, who support

and help me to reach my goals." Prof Asad Zeidan, Dr Mohamad Emara, and Dr Simon Jackson from the College of Medicine in the Medical and Health Sciences Sector at QU, in addition to Dr Nahla Afifi from Qatar Biobank, were members in the supervisory committee of this doctoral dissertation.

Regional session of 5th round of Qatar-US strategic dialogue held



The regional session of the 5th round of the Qatar-US Strategic Dialogue was held in Doha. The Qatari side was chaired during the session by HE Assistant Foreign Minister for Regional Affairs Dr Mohamed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi, while the American side was chaired by Under Secretary of the US State Department for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland. During the session, they discussed the close strategic relations between the two countries and ways to support and develop them, and the latest regional and international developments, especially developments in the Iranian nuclear file, security and energy issues, as well as the latest developments in Libya, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Syria. The latest developments in Palestine were also discussed. In this context, the two sides stressed the need for calm and de-escalation. (QNA)

Unauthorised cabin removed



The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change's (MoECC) Department of Natural Protectorates has spotted and removed an unauthorised portable cabin from a state-owned property and took the necessary legal procedures against the violator according to Law No 10 of 1987 with regard to Public and Private State Property. The MoECC maintains various patrols across all the land and marine areas in the country to monitor such violations and take immediate action against the illegal fixed and portable cabins, especially those that block the public beaches. There are certain designated areas for these cabins at the public beaches and other areas, it has been pointed out.

'Mein Schiff 6' in Doha on third voyage



A total of 2,435 tourists arrived at Doha Port yesterday aboard the German cruise ship 'Mein Schiff 6' on its third voyage of the 2022/23 cruise season, which lasts until the end of April, Mwani Qatar tweeted. With a capacity of more than 2,500 passengers and a length of 295m, the Maltese-flagged 'Mein Schiff 6' is one of the largest vessels of the Hamburg-based TUI Cruises. It offers a variety of amenities and facilities to its passengers, including luxurious cabins, various dining options, and a range of entertainment and recreational activities.



Rains rejuvenate wild lawns across Qatar



Greenery in Al Jemailiya, about 68km from Doha. PICTURES: Gulf Times news editor Bonnie James



The rainy season has given new life to the wild lawns across the country, making them full of lush green grass with their trees getting rejuvenated, local Arabic daily *Arrayah* reported. The amazing scenery has also given rise to renewed calls for promoting these areas as eco-tourism destinations for both residents and the visitors. Saleh al-Marri said that the rainfall Qatar has enjoyed over the past weeks has given a new life to the wild lawns across the country, even some of the areas that used to be barren desert are now covered with green grass. But, he said that some visitors to these places are so careless and leave behind garbage and waste materials. "These are natural open places and should be protected," he said, while observing that it is highly challenging for the entities concerned to send cleaning teams on a regular basis. Al-Marri stressed that more awareness campaigns should be launched to urge people to maintain the cleanliness of such environments while enjoying them. Saleh al-Azba pointed out that these natural lawns are different from the public parks and gardens, which make them unique. He suggested that the entities concerned should make short documentaries on the various lawns across the country and post them online with directions to reach the locations.

UDST set to take part in GCC Sports Tournament

University of Doha for Science and Technology (UDST) will participate in the ninth edition of the GCC Sports Tournament for Universities and Higher Education Institutes, which begins today.

The tournament, taking place until February 10 at Aspire Zone, will host 22 universities and educational institutes from across the GCC region. This year marks UDST's first appearance in the tournament.

UDST teams will compete at football, volleyball, table tennis, track and field, padel and swimming events.

A total of 45 athletes from the university will compete across these six sports, with a mix of students from the College of Engineering Technology, College of Business Management, College of Computing and Information Technology and College of Health Sciences.

Staying in the dedicated Games Village for the duration of the tournament, they will experience the truly international and cultural spirit of the event.

The UDST delegation also has coaches and administration and leadership support from the Sport and Wellness Department.

"Sport plays a major role in



This year marks UDST's first appearance in the tournament.

UDST's well-being strategy and is an important pillar of the university," president Dr Salem Al-Naemi said.

"Our sports programmes and services have been recognised by the International University Sports Federation International Healthy Campus Programme as first in the GCC region, and the university is proud to have been awarded platinum status. As the nation's first applied university, this is one of the many ways we give our students an immersive educational experience," he added.

At UDST, the men's and women's varsity teams for multiple

sports compete in both intercollegiate and community leagues, and tournaments across Qatar. The University FITClub programme is the biggest club on campus offering one-on-one consultations, nutrition advice and exercise programming. Students can take advantage of state-of-the-art sport and wellness facilities including swimming pools, sports halls, tennis courts, turf and natural grass football pitches, an international calibre cricket ground and practice cages, indoor and outdoor padel-tennis courts, and a beach volleyball court – all of which are available to the public.

QU College makes efforts to promote culture of dialogue and coexistence

World Interfaith Harmony Week is an annual event observed during the first week of February, which is a way to promote harmony between all people regardless of their faith, as mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of a culture of peace.

Qatar University (QU), through the College of Shariah and Islamic Studies, has been keen to promote the meanings of dialogue and coexistence among religions and civilisations to focus on joint initiatives, activities, events, workshops, seminars, visits and meetings, which aim to replace misconceptions among followers of religions and cultures with a more objective, credible and respectful view that distances from fanaticism and rejects the idea of clash, and establishes the values of coexistence, understanding, tolerance and harmony, according to a QU press statement.

One of the most important initiatives being the establishment of the ISESCO Chair in the Alliance of Civilisations, housed at

the university's College of Shariah and Islamic Studies in 2016. This agreement paved the way for QU and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO) to collaborate on developing studies and databases in areas of the alliance of civilisations specialisation, and in providing scholarships for graduate students involved in relevant research activities, and awards of appreciation for distinguished research projects.

The establishment of the ISESCO Chair in the Alliance of Civilisations also serves to implement a course on the alliance of civilisations within QU academic curriculum. The College of Shariah and Islamic Studies also launched the first-ever 'Encyclopedia of Occidentalism' Executive director of the 'Encyclopedia of Occidentalism', Dr Azzeddine Mamiche, shed some light on the project, saying: "The encyclopedia highlights the important role of Qatar in promoting the spirit of dialogue and alliance between civilisations at the regional and international levels.



Dr Azzeddine Mamiche

This project, which is the first of its kind, reflects Qatar University's commitment to advance a culture of dialogue in Qatar and the Islamic and Arab world. It will deliver tangible benefits to research centres, universities and academic institutions."

The college has also established the Qatar Global Award for Dialogue Among Civilisations alongside the Qatar Committee for the Alliance of Civilisations

at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The award aims to achieve various educational, research and development goals and outcomes, serving as the driving force for channelling people's energies towards progress, prosperity, openness to human horizons, and spreading a culture of harmony, tolerance, coexistence, understanding and mutual respect among nations and peoples.

DI hosts career fair with employers from various sectors in Qatar

The Deanship of Student Affairs at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (DI) organised its sixth career fair, under the title 'Meeting Future Partners', on Wednesday, with the participation of more than 38 employers from various sectors in Qatar.

The list of participants included government and private sector organisations in the fields of finance and business, education, services and social work, and the medical sector, in addition to other major employers in the country. DI president Dr Abdelwahab El Affendi launched the fair in the presence of Administrative and Financial Sector executive director Iman al-Sulaiti and other officials.

In his statement, al-Dosari extended thanks to HE the President of the Qatar Olympic Committee Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, and the President of the Qatar Paralympic Committee Sheikh Abdulrahman bin Saoud al-Thani, for the support and growing interest in the sport for people with special needs, to elevate the name of Qatar in international forums.



requirements and needs of the market.

Student's Career Advising & Skills Development specialist Alia Chebaro said the event provided an opportunity for those interested to explore available career options, communicate directly with potential employers,

and learn about the most important professional opportunities offered by the labour market in Qatar. She stressed that the event witnessed an increase of 58% in participation compared to last year with 13 new organisations joining. As a side event, a workshop entitled "The Do's and

Don'ts of Job Searching" was delivered by Paige McDong, a professional development specialist from Qatar Career Development Centre, in which information and guidance were provided to students and graduates on ways and means to develop the skills required in the labour market.

Traffic Dept concludes training workshop



The General Directorate of Traffic on Thursday concluded its "Creativity and Innovation" programme. The programme was organised by the Training and Development Section of the Traffic Awareness Department and it comes within the framework of the implementation of the operational plan to develop the capabilities of cadres.





BSI organises first international Urdu literary festival in Doha

Poets and writers from various countries enthralled a Doha audience at a two-day Urdu literary festival and awards ceremony organised by Bazm-e-Sadaq International (BSI).

The first day featured an international seminar and panel discussion on the topic "Urdu literature: A messenger across the global culture".

The event started with a welcome speech by BSI president Dr Nadeem Jilani. In his inaugural speech, chairman Shahabuddin Ahmad announced the names of the awardees. He explained how BSI is bringing together Urdu writers from all over the world through such events and is also recognising writers who have made significant contributions.

Ahmad appreciated the contributions of all members of the Doha chapter, especially Mohamed Sabahuddin, Mohamed Irfanullah, Rafat Jahan and Imran Asad. Chief patron Hassan Chougule presided over the award ceremony.

BSI director Prof Safdar Imam Quadri, who travelled from India for the event, in his keynote address outlined how the Urdu language evolved through the



Some of the participants at the literary festival and awards ceremony.

amalgamation of cultures and its literature enriching the world's civilisation. All international guests were felicitated with shawls and mementos. The BSI award was presented to the renowned poet from Canada, Prof Shahida Hassan.

The BSI new generation award was given to academic and poet from Pakistan, Dr Ambareen Salahuddin. A well-known poet from Abu Dhabi, Zahoorul Islam Javed was presented with the BSI Sabih Bukhari award for the Urdu Movement for 2022, for his service towards the promotion of the Urdu language and literature in the UAE. Dr Mohamed Gauhar

(Chief Editor, *Taasir Urdu* daily), a guest of honour, was also felicitated by BSI.

Panelists who took part in the interactive discussion included Dr Shakil Ur Rahman, Prof Shahida Hassan, Dr Amatul Mannan Tahir, Dr Ambareen Salahuddin, Masood Hassas, Hassan Kazmi, Khalid Irfan, Ahmad Ashfaq and Professor Safdar Imam Quadri.

The international poetry symposium (*Mushaera*), featuring renowned poets from abroad and Doha, was presided over by Prof Shahida Hassan and conducted by Ahmad Ashfaq.

The other participants included Raquim Azmi, Wasil

Haq Wasi, Maqsood Anwar Maqsood, Dr Nadeem Jilani Danish, Ateeq Anzar (Qatar), Shadab Azmi, Hassan Kazmi, Prof Safdar Imam Quadri, Azm Shakiri (India), Masood Hassas (Kuwait), Khalid Irfan (US), Ali Zarrioun, Ambareen Salahuddin (Pakistan) and Zahoorul Islam Javed (UAE).

The programme was well attended. The audience included dignitaries and heads of many literary and social organisations. BSI patron Prof Sophia Bukhari, Azim Abbas, Abdul Haque and Prof Syed Jawaid Zaidi were among those present. Dr Jilani presided over the ceremony.

PISQ conducts eighth edition of inter-school literary competition



After a hiatus of three years, on account of Covid-19, Pakistan International School - Qatar (PISQ) organised the 8th edition of Inter-School Literary Competition at its premises recently, featuring 91 participants from 27 schools around Doha.

Pakistan ambassador Muhammed Aejaz was the chief guest and was accompanied by head of chancery Masood Gul. Principals of Turkish School and Iranian School also attended the event along with members of Iranian School's Supervisory.

The programme started with the national anthems of Qatar and Pakistan followed by the recitation of a few verses from the Holy Qur'an. The host school's compere, Moazzam Jah, stressed that such competitions instil confidence and

resilience in students leading them to face the challenges of life fearlessly.

The winners, in the order of first, second and third are as follows: Dramatic declamation - Abdulrehman Grewal (PISQ), Maielle Racie C Tabula (Philippine International School), Syed Mohid Hassan (Bright Future International School).

Essay writing (senior): Manal Rauf (PISQ), Maryam al-Qudeimat (Palestinian School), Samantha Nicole T Lantics (Philippine International School).

Essay writing (junior): Umaiama Ahmed Ali (Pak Shaheed School), Farah Khan (The Next Generation School), Al Wakrah, Khadeja Samy Toukan (Iqra English School for Girls).

PISQ conferred certificates on the judges and all participants. Ambassador Aejaz appreciated the participants for their talents and hoped that their unique perspective of the world will bring positive change.

Storytelling: Rehana Juhd. hadji Ali (Philippine International School), Unica Raija A De Vera (Philippine School),

Doha, and Ayesha Mushtaq (PISQ) shared second place and Bassem Hannoush (Global Academy), stood third.

Essay writing (senior): Manal Rauf (PISQ), Maryam al-Qudeimat (Palestinian School), Samantha Nicole T Lantics (Philippine International School).

Essay writing (junior): Umaiama Ahmed Ali (Pak Shaheed School), Farah Khan (The Next Generation School), Al Wakrah, Khadeja Samy Toukan (Iqra English School for Girls).

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PISQ principal Nargis Raza Otho, also appreciated the efforts of the contestants and congratulated the winners.

PICE Qatar inducts officers at ceremony

The Philippine Institute of Civil Engineers (PICE) Qatar chapter inducted its 2023 officers, board of directors, and committees' chairpersons and committee members at a recent ceremony. Founding president Roy L. Baquiran and Don Albert Philippe Pangcog, officer-in-charge of the new department of Migrant Workers Office in Doha, officiated. The new officials are: Elvin D. Fajutagana, president; Maria Michelle A. Revillo, 1st vice-president; Dave G Sanchez, 2nd vice-president; Mario S. Oligo, secretary; Danica Rose M Alcantara, treasurer; Belinda E. Dela Cruz, auditor; Jowell C. Cando, business manager; Angelo D. Eda, public relations officer; Victoria P. Bago, Jr., sergeant-at-arms; Reynante P. Apolinario, director - membership; Arman A. Tolentino, director - PICE Qatar affairs; Felipe D. Catinoy, director - Ways and Means; Meliza M. Ortiguerre, director - Honours and Special Professional Licensure Examinations; Ron Carlo Y. Pingol, director - continuing professional advancement; Eduardo V. Francisco, director - publications and information; and Rolan E. Nevada, immediate past president. In his speech, Fajutagana highlighted his vision for PICE Qatar and presented his 2023 set of officers, organisational structures, and 63



Front row from left: Eduardo V. Francisco, Ron Carlo Y. Pingol, Melisa M. Ortiguerre, Jowell C. Cando, Danica Rose M. Alcantara, Dave G. Sanchez, Marvin M. Tejada, Cherry Cureg, Elvin D. Fajutagana, Don Albert Philippe Pangcog, Maria Michelle A. Revillo, Mario S. Oligo, Belinda E. Dela Cruz, Arman A. Tolentino, Reynaldo P. Apolinario, Felipe D. Catinoy, Rolan E. Nevada. **Second row from left:** Allen L. Nacario, Sheila L. Medel, Mark Anthony P. Abendan, Roy L. Baquiran, Aileen A. Buenafior, Helario S. Amoguis, Noel T. Jumawan, and Geraldo T. Managuelod. **PICTURES:** Johnson Sanchez

points of agenda as he thanked the industry partners for their support in making the induction successful. In her speech, PICE national president April Frances Agatha G. Flores underlined the continued successes of PICE Qatar, noting it consistently bagged "meritorious achievements, several awards, and accolades, including the recent achievement of International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) 9001:2015 standard certification for good leadership, governance, advancement, and continual improvement. This latest certification is the first among the 119 chapters (106 in the Philippines and 13 in the international level). She said PICE Qatar strives towards continual

excellence in engineering and community service. Pangcog acknowledged the continued community services of PICE Qatar chapter in contributing to nation-building back in the homeland. Philippine embassy's vice consul Monica Remy Calangian, the guest of honour, lauded PICE Qatar chapter's spirit of volunteerism.

Philippine Professionals Organisation - Qatar (PPO-Q) 2023 chairman architect Marvin Tejada commended PICE Qatar chapter's 2023 set of officers and cited the certification completion with ISO 9001:2015 standard as a benchmark to all 17 active member professional organisations in Qatar.

The turnover ceremony also highlighted outgoing chapter president Nevada's PICE National

Award for the 'Most Outstanding International President 2022'. Baquiran also officiated the induction of a new set of officers and directors while Pangcog officiated at the formal oath of office of the 2023 PICE Qatar officers and board of directors.

Fajutagana led and successfully obtained PICE Qatar's standard certification for Quality Management System, following ISO 9001:2015 version with the support of its members and prominent industry quality managers.

In his speech, Sanchez challenged his fellow leaders to raise their game and make a difference to start worthwhile projects and programmes, and serve with passion, commitment, and a sense of responsibility.

PSSC student tops in inter-school event



Pak Shamaa School & College (PSSC) student Umaiama Ahmed (Grade 8) won the first prize in English essay (junior category) at the literary festival organised by Pakistan International School featuring 22 international schools. PSSC president M A Shahid and principal Nabila Kaukab congratulated Umaiama. Kaukab also lauded language skills committee in-charge Muzaffar Hussain.

BPQ new management panel holds inaugural event

Bangiya Parishad Qatar (BPQ), a socio-cultural organisation associated with the Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) under the aegis of the Indian embassy, representing the Bengal-speaking Indian diaspora residing in Qatar, celebrated the inaugural event of the new management committee (2023-24) at ICC's Ashoka Hall in Abu Hamour recently. Along with the members, the programme was attended by dignitaries such as the ICC president and past presidents of BPQ. The event, named 'Sheeter Haat' - or winter fair - was held on the dual occasions of Makar Sankranti and Basant Panchami and was celebrated with lots of fun and fervour.

A number of events were organised for children, such as group song, a sit-and-draw competition, etc. Winners of the art competition were given attractive prizes. Members of the Bengal community came forward to put up stalls of delicious homemade sweets, attractive sarees and jewellery. The programme was conceptualised on the theme of 'Go Green'. Locally produced



Glimpses from the event.



plants were gifted to members, conveying the message that it is important to protect plants. Special paintings known as 'Poto chitra', traditionally done by the indigenous tribal communities of West Bengal, and wonderfully crafted

paintings made of organic colour were also displayed. Saumya Sikdar, president of the management committee of BPQ, expressed sincere thanks and gratitude to all the dignitaries and members for making the event successful.

Tamuq Science and Engineering Roadshow inspires students

The Science and Engineering Roadshow, organised by Texas A&M University at Qatar (Tamuq), a Qatar Foundation partner university, aims to promote an interest in science and engineering in school students. Since its launch in 2017, the initiative has presented more than 160 shows to more than 25,000 students across Qatar.

The roadshow is led by Benjamin Cieslinski, STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) Initiatives and Laboratory manager at Ta-

muq with the support of Tala Katbeh, STEM instructor and programme co-ordinator.

The university maintains a dedicated STEM outreach team to provide teachers and students programmes and tools to grow their knowledge in science, technology, engineering, and mathematical topics.

The goal of the Roadshow is to entertain and educate students using engineering and science. It consists of demonstrations of chemistry, physics, and engineering using props and gear. Topics covered in

clude reactions, pressure, fluid dynamics, thermodynamics, polymers, and much more. Students have the opportunity to interact with some demonstrations for a fun, hands-on experience.

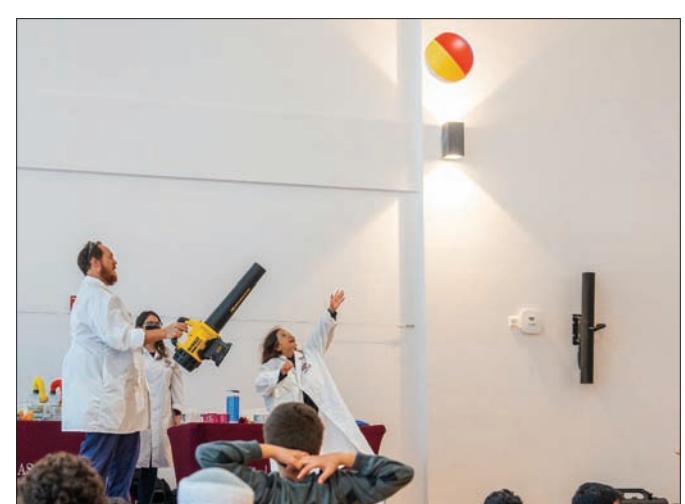
"Having the students witness science and engineering coming to life first hand makes them more inquisitive and eager. We hope it will make them more interested in understanding how everything around them works, and be a pathway to possibly pursuing careers in STEM," Cieslinski said.

The main campus of Texas A&M University in College Station has a chemistry roadshow running successfully for more than 30 years, and this was the inspiration to launch the initiative in Qatar. Eli Palm, a fifth grader at ACS International School, said that the roadshow was very educational. "They did some very cool experiments, and helped us learn a lot of interesting scientific facts. We learned about liquid nitrogen and about why a ball curves through the air. I really enjoyed the show," Jamila

al-Suwaidei, a year 11 student at Al Bayan Secondary School for Girls participated in the roadshow when it visited her school.

She said: "This helped me realise that I am interested in science and engineering."

Chelsea Mullan, STEAM Facilitator at Qatar Academy Doha Primary School, a Qatar Foundation school, appreciated how Cieslinski and Katbeh catered to their audience. Schools can register to have the roadshow presented for their students by visiting STEM.qa



The goal of the roadshow is to entertain and educate students using engineering and science.



MESIS donates to Qatar Charity



MES Indian School, Abu Hamour Branch (MESIS) handed over to Qatar Charity (QC) the funds from a food carnival organised in connection with Qatar National Day and World Millets Day. The amount was received by QC officials Habeeburahman Kizhissery, Radouane Labiod and Khairoddin Banaoi. Principal Pramila Kannan, teachers of Qatar History department and students were present.

Podar Pearl School hosts Expomite

Podar Pearl School (PPS) recently organised a Social Studies and Science Exhibition - Expomite 2022-2023 for students from Grade 6-8. The event was inaugurated by school president Sam Mathew and principal Manjari Recrival. The students showcased presentations and working models of solar energy, space satellites, hydroelectric generators, water cycle, sprout house, human evolution, Supreme Court, ancient tools, Mohenjo-Daro, robots, and life of Harappan people. The exhibition also featured The International Year of Millets-2023 with students bringing various millets and explaining their benefits and encouraging the visitors to have a healthy lifestyle.



Birla Public School wins TRAQuest quiz contest

Birla Public School won the The TRAQuest 2023 Quiz Competition recently.

The annual event was held by Thiruvananthapuram District Residents Association Qatar (TRAQ), a socio-cultural platform of residents hailing from the capital of the southern Indian state of Kerala.

The Birla team comprising Bhagat Krishnan Krishna Kumar (Grade X) and Rishab Murthy Viswanatham (Grade IX) bagged the rolling trophy.

The competition, open to Indian school students from Grade IX-XII, was held at Birla Public School. Manzoor Moideen was the quiz master.

The Birla team was guided and coached by senior teachers Rakesh Verma and Shyam Mohan. The first runners-up was DPS-Modern Indian School and the second runners-up was Bhavan's Public School. The winners were congratulated by

Birla Public School chairman Gope Shahani.



Project Day at MESIS

MES Indian School (MESIS), Abu Hamour, hosted a Project Day, Crescendo - Interdisciplinary Project-2023. The event featured working models, art gallery, automated toys and robots, flip charts, collage of scientists, men of letters, replicas of wonders of the world, pictures and photos of indigenous arts, and culture and lifestyle of people around the globe. The children showcased their vocational aptitude in science, social studies, mathematics, languages, ICT and robotics. A panel comprising cultural and co-curricular activities director M C Mohamed, Islamic Affairs director Faisal Mayan and principal Pramila Kannan appraised the exhibition.



MES bids farewell to Class 12 students

MES Indian School organised the graduation ceremony for its current batch of 563 Class XII students recently.

Although the overriding tone was festive, there was also a tinge of sadness about parting with their schoolmates, teachers and alma mater.

School president K Abdul Karim, the chief guest, congratulated the students on their successful completion of schooling and urged them to channelise all their energy, faith, talent and time into each opportunity that comes their way, while following their dreams, passions and living up to the expectations of their parents.

Principal Hameeda Kadar called upon the students to exercise discretion as the paths of life are diverse and advised them to adorn the mantle of perseverance and not to get carried away by the worldly attractions. Students who had 100% attendance during the academic year 2022-23 were presented with a certificate.

Representing the teachers, Ihsrat Fatima from the Department of English delivered an



inspiring speech. Students' representatives, Johnpaul Lorance and Ibtisam Haseeb highlighted the multifarious roles and valuable contributions of their alma mater in preparing them to face the future successfully and also expressed their gratitude.

All the major student officials, prefects, club secretaries and Campus Care Force (CCF) members were given certificates for their contributions to the school. The best outgoing students of various streams of Class XII, who excelled in their respective domains, were honoured with certificates and mementos. Edwin Siby (Science), Mathew Binoy Kadavil (Commerce) and Azhar Ismail (Humanities) were adjudged the best

outgoing students in the Boys' Section, while Sehla Theruvath Kallungal Kabeer (Science), Hiba Asif (Commerce) and Afifa Bint Mustafa (Humanities) won the best outgoing student title in the Girls' Section of the school.

Johnpaul Lorance (Boys section) and Aysha Hesham Mahmoud were declared the best all-rounders. Mohamed Roshan K M (Boys section) and Sree Nanda Vaniyan Kandy (Girls section) won the Talent of the Year award. Abdul Rahman Hazem (Boys) and Fanhal Fathima (Girls) were honoured with the title best outgoing prefects. Nikhil Manoj Kumar and Mohamed Nagi Mohamed Shaaban Mahmoud (Boys), Catherine Roy and Angelica Alex (Girls) were

declared as the best sports talents of the year.

Hamzah Nabeel Shekhani (Boys) and Norvia Jaya Shiju were adjudged as the best outgoing Scout and Guide, respectively. Jeril Chakkumchira Reji (Boys) and Irene Susan Ribu (Girls) were declared as the best outgoing CCF members of the school.

Dr Naeem K P (senior vice-president), Khaleel A P (vice-president), M C Mohamed (director, cultural and co-curricular activities), Firoz K (director, Transport), Abdul Fathah P O (director, sports and games), Faisal Mayan (director, moral education and Islamic affairs) and other members of the school governing board, and school of

officials were among others present on the occasion. Rema Devi, co-ordinator, Department of English, welcomed the gathering and Shiney Suresh

proposed a vote of thanks. A medley of songs, by the outgoing students added zest to the farewell function. The school management hosted a lunch in

honour of the outgoing students. Sudheesh N S and Galeena Binoth from the Physics co-ordinated the farewell function.

ACS Doha promotes STEAM-led learning



The integration of STEAM education in the early years of a child's education is essential for their overall development and future success.

CS International School Doha has always prioritised the importance of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM) Education, specifically in lower years, with several events and partnerships throughout the year to encourage both students and their parents to participate and learn about the various fields, a statement said.

The school recently hosted a Texas A&M Science and Engineering roadshow with grades 2-5, built to excite the students about science, and with several STEAM nights open to students and parents to actively participate in experiments and activities to develop their fascination with the field, as well as create an active learning community, it was explained.

STEAM education is a vital component of any well-rounded education. The integration of these subjects in younger grades is particularly important as it provides students with a strong foundation for understanding the world around them and for developing the skills they will need to succeed in the future. Research has shown that students who receive a strong STEAM education in the early years of their education have better academic outcomes and are more likely to pursue careers in these fields.

"STEAM education is crucial

for our lower school students because it not only teaches them the skills they need for the future, but it also helps them think creatively and critically, and encourages them to be curious about the world around them. It gives them the tools to be problem-solvers and innovators, and helps them see the connections between science, technology, engineering, art, and math in the real world," said Lisa Weatherhead, PYP Digital Learning/STEM Coach PYP Science Focus Lead.

A recent study by the National

Science Board found that students who participate in hands-on STEAM activities in the early years of their education are more likely to have positive attitudes towards science and math and are more likely to pursue careers in STEAM fields.

This highlights the importance of providing students with hands-on, experiential learning opportunities in these subjects in order to spark their interest and passion.

The integration of STEAM education in the early years of a child's education is essential

for their overall development and future success. Research has shown that students who receive a strong STEAM education have better academic outcomes, positive attitudes towards science and math, and are more likely to pursue careers in these fields.

By providing students with a strong foundation in science, technology, engineering, arts, and math, we are helping to prepare them for the future and providing them with the skills they need to succeed in the world, the statement added.

IIS organises 38th annual sports meet

The 38th Annual Sports Meet of Ideal Indian School (IIS) concluded recently with great fanfare and a fascinating performance by 1,200 students.

Earlier, some 3,000 students took part in the preliminary heats of various track and field events in sub-junior, junior, senior and super senior categories.

In the grand finale, the chief guest Nada Mohamed Wafa, Olympian and head of Qatar Olympic Solidarity Unit and secretary-general of Athletes Commission declared the meet open after taking salute of the marching athletes and hoisting the school flag.

The guest of honour was Wouley De Bie Oly, Olympian and technical director of Water Polo & Venues and Competition manager, Qatar Olympic Committee. They were presented a guard of honour by the four houses of the school. Principal Shaik Shamim Saheb and the heads of all sections were present.

A colourful mass drill by the Junior Section, a Yoga display by the students of the Girls' Section and a martial arts display



by the Boys' Sections enthralled the spectators. Students who brought laurels in national and international sports meets were honoured during the occasion.

House contingents of boys were led by head boy Ibrahim Ahmad and assistant head boy Ahmed Mohd Faisal. Head girl Hanif Shamshir and assistant head girl Mary Stenicka led the girls' contingents.

Girls' Section sports secretary Aseel Mohamedosman welcomed the gathering and Boys'



Section sports secretary Fahad Abdullah proposed a vote of thanks. Junior Section vice-principal Azam Khan and Physical Education head Nowfal V M co-ordinated the programme.



proposed a vote of thanks. A medley of songs, by the outgoing students.

Sudheesh N S and Galeena Binoth from the Physics co-ordinated the farewell function.

**Sunset ride**

Palestinians ride horses on a beach, in Gaza City, yesterday.

UN urges end to 'illogic of escalation' between Israel and Palestinians

AFP
Geneva

UN rights chief Volker Turk yesterday called for an end to the "illogic of escalation" between Israel and the Palestinians, amid a spike in deadly violence between the two.

Turk criticised Israel for measures that "can only lead to further violence and bloodshed", following a surge in attacks and fighting that have drawn calls from the international community for calm and restraint.

Since the start of this year, the conflict has killed 36 Palestinians – including attackers, fighters and civilians – as well as the six Israeli civilians, including a child, and one Ukrainian.

"Rather than doubling down on failed approaches of violence and coercion... I urge everyone involved to step out of the illogic of escalation that has only ended in dead bodies, shattered lives and utter despair," Turk said in a statement.

"Recent measures being taken by the Government of Israel are only fuelling further violations

Troops kill Palestinian fighter in West Bank

Israeli forces shot dead a Palestinian in the West Bank yesterday, the Palestinian health ministry said, in what the army described as an "attack" by an unarmed "suspect" on a military outpost, AFP reported from Nablus. Abdullah Sami Qalalweh, 26 was killed by "Israeli occupation bullets near the town of Huwara, south of Nablus", the Palestinian ministry said in a statement.

An AFP photographer saw Qalalweh's body at the morgue of a Nablus hospital.

The Israeli army meanwhile said soldiers had "shot live fire into the air" after a suspected "walked towards a military outpost adjacent" to an army base in the Huwara area.

The army confirmed to AFP that Qalalweh was unarmed.

Since the start of the year, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has claimed the lives of 36 Palestinian adults and children - including attackers, fighters and civilians. Six Israeli civilians, including a child, and one Ukrainian civilian have been killed over the same period.

and abuses of human rights law," he continued. "We know from experience that the proliferation of firearms will lead to increased risks of killings and injuries of both Israelis and Palestinians."

The UN rights chief was referring to measures to ease access to firearms announced by Israel's government last week following a shooting by a Palestinian in east Jerusalem that killed six Israelis and one Ukrainian.

The following day, a 13-year-

old Palestinian boy shot and injured two Israelis in the Silwan neighbourhood just outside the walled Old City in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem attacks followed the deadliest Israeli army raid in the West Bank in almost 20 years that on January 26 left 10 Palestinians dead in Jenin, including armed fighters.

Israel's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Meirav Eilon Shahar, complained

that the UN rights chief's statement "does not even have the decency to describe the attacks last week for what they were, acts targeting the Jewish people".

"It does not even have the courage to condemn the death of innocent worshippers," she added. In his statement, Turk urged "all those holding public office or other positions of authority – indeed everyone – to stop using language that incites hatred of the other."

He added that other measures announced by Israel in response to the Jerusalem attack, including "punitive forced evictions and house demolitions" may amount to "collective punishment". US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited the region last week, urging de-escalation following the deadly upsurge in violence.

The latest uptick follows the deadliest year in the West Bank since the United Nations started tracking fatalities in the territory in 2005.

Some 235 people died in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict last year, with nearly 90% of the fatalities on the Palestinian side, according to AFP figures.

Iranian filmmaker Panahi released after hunger strike

Acclaimed Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi has been released on bail after starting a hunger strike to protest against his almost seven-month detention, supporters said yesterday. AFP reported from Paris. The director had been arrested months before the current anti-regime protests erupted, but his imprisonment became a symbol of the plight of artists speaking out against the authorities. Panahi has been released from Tehran's Evin prison "two days after starting his hunger strike for freedom", the US-based Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) said on Twitter, while Iran's reformist *Shargh* newspaper posted an image of Panahi jubilantly embracing a supporter. His wife Tahereh Saeedi posted a picture on Instagram of Panahi being driven from prison in a vehicle. The director was arrested in July and went on a dry hunger strike on Wednesday to protest his continued detention. "Mr Panahi was temporarily released from Evin prison with the efforts of his family, respected lawyers, and representatives of the cinema," Iran's House of Cinema said in a statement.

Pope urges South Sudan leaders to make 'new start' for peace

AFP
Juba

Pope Francis yesterday urged the leaders of South Sudan to make "a new start" for peace, warning that history would remember them for their actions, as he began a three-day visit to the violence-wracked country.

"The process of peace and reconciliation requires a new start," the 86-year-old pontiff said in a speech at the presidential palace in Juba, calling for intensified efforts to end conflict in the world's newest nation.

"Future generations will either venerate your names or cancel their memory, based on what you now do," he told an audience that included President Salva Kiir, his rival and deputy Riek Machar, as well as diplomats, religious leaders and traditional kings.

Since South Sudan declared independence from Sudan in 2011, peace has eluded the impoverished country, with a five-year civil war between forces loyal to Kiir and Machar leaving



Pope Francis and the President of South Sudan Salva Kiir attend meeting with authorities, leaders of civil society and the diplomatic corps, in the Presidential Palace in Juba, South Sudan, yesterday.

380,000 people dead and 4mn displaced.

"No more bloodshed, no more conflicts, no more violence and mutual recriminations about who is responsible for it, no more leaving your people astir for peace," Francis said.

The "pilgrimage of peace" is the first ever papal visit to South Sudan since the predominantly

Christian nation gained independence from Sudan after decades of war.

It follows four days in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where a brutal conflict in the mineral-rich east was high on the Pope's agenda.

Crowds of people, who began lining the streets of Juba hours before the Pope's arrival, cheered as his convoy drove

Family of slain Lebanon activist urges UN probe into port blast

AFP
Beirut

The widow of Lebanese intellectual Lokman Slim called yesterday for a UN fact-finding mission to determine whether his assassination and two other murders are linked to the Beirut port explosion.

A secular activist 58-year-old Slim was found shot dead in his car on February 4, 2021, a day after his family reported him missing.

Beirut's catastrophic August 4, 2020 port blast killed more than 200 people, injured thousands and ravaged swathes of the capital.

Nobody has been held responsible in either case.

Slim's widow Monika Borgmann urged the UN Human Rights Council "to commit itself" to a "fact-finding mission to support Lebanon and its people in its calls for justice and accountability". Lebanon's own investigation into the blast "is not advancing and is hampered", Borgmann said at a ceremony marking the second anniversary of Slim's killing at his

home in the southern suburbs of Beirut.

In one of Slim's last TV appearances, he accused the Syrian regime of having links to an ammonium nitrate shipment that caused the blast.

Borgmann urged any UN fact-finding mission to investigate Slim's killing and two other deaths that she said "could be linked to the port explosion". She was referring to Munir Abu Rjeil, a retired colonel from the customs administration, and amateur military photographer Joe Bejjany, the circumstances of whose December 2020 deaths have also not been clarified. "The culture of impunity and lack of accountability has gripped Lebanon for far too long," Borgmann said.

Slim's body was found in southern Lebanon – a stronghold of Hezbollah, which is also an ally of Syria's regime.

Last month, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International called on the UN Human Rights Council to "urgently pass a resolution to create an impartial fact-finding mission" into the port explosion.

Amnesty's Middle East deputy director, Aya Majzoub, said

yesterday that Slim was "the victim of a decades-long pattern of impunity in Lebanon".

"The perfunctory efforts by the Lebanese authorities to find his killers are yet more evidence of this," Majzoub continued in a statement.

The UK-based group called on the Lebanese authorities to launch an "effective, transparent, impartial and independent" investigation into his death. Lebanese authorities have rejected calls for an international inquiry into the 2020 blast, while the domestic investigation has been repeatedly stalled as high-level officials have mounted a slew of political and legal challenges.

An outspoken activist and researcher passionate about documenting the civil war that raged from 1975-1990, Slim was a divisive figure.

His sway over foreign diplomats in Lebanon often sparked the anger of Hezbollah and its loyalists.

On Thursday, UN rights experts voiced deep concern at the slow pace of the investigation into Slim's death, demanding that Beirut ensure accountability.

Eco-friendly Nigerian artist turns plastic flip-flops into portraits

Reuters
Abeokuta

Eugene Komboye, a Nigerian artist, is turning discarded plastic flip-flop sandals into colourful portraits in an effort to help clean up the environment in a country where plastic pollution is prevalent.

What started as an assignment in college in 2017, has become a full time job for Komboye, whose studio in the southwest state of Ogun now trains aspiring artists who want to follow in his footsteps and create flip-flop portraits.

Nigeria produces at least 2.5mn tonnes of plastic waste annually, according to government figures, with some of it finding its way into the ocean and rivers. Flip-flops



Nigerian artist Eugene Komboye creates artworks using discarded plastic flip-flop sandals in his studio in Abeokuta, Ogun state.

are the footwear of choice for many Nigerians and Komboye, 30, sources his material mostly from dump sites, landfills and river banks.

Back in his studio he disinfects and washes his findings

At least 41 dead in Nigeria after gunmen and vigilantes clash

At least 41 people were killed when gunmen clashed with a vigilante group in Nigeria's northern Katsina state, the home state of President Muhammadu Buhari, a police spokesperson said yesterday, the latest violence ahead of a presidential vote, Reuters reported from Lagos. Insecurity has become widespread and a major concern for voters ahead of a Feb 25 election to choose new members of parliament and a

successor to Buhari, a former military ruler who came to power eight years ago promising to end insecurity. Katsina state police spokesperson Gambo Isah said an armed gang, known locally as bandits, attacked a village in Katsina's Bakori local government area, rustled cattle and sheep and fled into the bush. Isah said a local vigilante group mobilised and pursued the gunmen which led to the clash on Thursday.

prayers and an outdoor mass that is expected to draw large crowds.

The visit – Francis's fifth to Africa – was initially scheduled for 2022 but had to be postponed because of problems with the Pope's knee.

The affliction has made him dependent on a wheelchair and has seen him use a cane to get around in both countries.

The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland have also joined the Pope in South Sudan. Francis promised in 2019 to travel to South Sudan when he hosted warring leaders Kiir and Machar at a Vatican retreat and asked them to respect a hard-fought ceasefire for their people.

Some wore traditional clothing or the garb of religious orders, while others ululated, blew horns and whistles, and sang hymns.

As well as the political leaders, the pontiff is also expected to meet victims of conflict, and church officials, between

would "push us over the line on our journey for a peaceful and prosperous South Sudan."

21 KILLED
But in a sign of the challenges facing the nation, at least 21 people were killed in a cattle raid on the eve of his visit, in what authorities termed a reprisal attack in South Sudan's state of Central Equatoria.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has urged the church leaders to put pressure on South Sudan's leadership to "address the country's ongoing human rights crisis and widespread impunity".

"They should also press South Sudan's leaders to take concrete steps to end attacks on civilians and to ensure accountability for serious abuses," Mausi Segun, HRW's Africa director, said in a statement released yesterday.

At the meeting with the Pope, Kiir announced that his government was willing to enter into peace negotiations with a coalition of rebel groups, which did not sign the 2018 agreement to end the civil war.

Bird flu detected in mammals but risk to humans low, say experts

AFP
Paris

Experts have warned that the recent detection of bird flu in mammals including foxes, otters, minks, seals and even grizzly bears is concerning but emphasised that the virus would have to significantly mutate to spread between humans.

Since late 2021, Europe has been gripped by its worst-ever outbreak of bird flu, with North and South America also experiencing severe outbreaks.

This has led to the culling of tens of millions of domestic poultry worldwide, many with the H5N1 strain.

The global outbreak is also responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of wild birds.

Tom Peacock, a virologist at the Imperial College London, told AFP that it constitutes a "panzootic" – a pandemic among animals, in this case birds.

"We are not fully sure why it's happening now but we think this might be driven by a slightly different strain of H5N1 which is spreading very effectively in wild, migratory birds," Peacock said.

It is rare that bird flu jumps over into mammals – and rarer still that humans catch the potentially deadly virus.

On Thursday, the UK Health Security Agency said that a fox had recently tested positive for H5N1.

It joins eight foxes and otters which tested positive in the UK last year, all of which had a PB2 mutation.

Peacock said that this mutation "allows the virus to replicate better in mammalian cells".

However, further mutations would be "required for the virus to cause a flu pandemic" in humans, he added.

France announced last week that a cat had been put down after testing positive for H5N1.

And last month, the US state of Mon-

tana's parks service said three grizzly bears with bird flu had been euthanised.

All of these mammals were suspected to have eaten infected birds.

Paul Wigley, a professor of animal microbial ecosystems at the UK's Bristol University, said that while "there is no transmission within mammalian populations, the risk to humans remains low".

However two recent larger scale infections have raised concerns that bird flu has the potential to spread between mammals.

One was an outbreak of H5N1 with the PB2 mutation at a Spanish farm in October that led to the culling of more than 50,000 minks.

Research published in the journal *Eurosurveillance* last month said that its findings "indicate that an onward transmission of the virus to other minks may have taken place in the affected farm".

Transmission between the minks has

not been confirmed, with further research ongoing.

The mass death of some 2,500 endangered seals found along Russia's Caspian Sea coast last month has also raised concern.

A researcher at Russia's Dagestan State University, Alimurad Gadzhiev, said last week that early samples from the seals "tested positive for bird flu".

He added that they were still studying whether the virus caused the die-off.

Peacock warned there have been mixed reports from Russia about the seals, which could have contracted the virus by eating infected seabirds.

However, if the seals did give bird flu to each other it "would be yet another very concerning development", he added.

"The mink outbreaks, the increased number of infections of scavenger mammals and the potential seal outbreak would all point to this virus hav-

ing the potential to cause a pandemic" in humans, he said.

David Heymann, an infectious disease specialist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, urged caution.

More bird flu cases could be being detected in mammals because countries have ramped up testing, he said.

"This may have been going on for years and nothing has really occurred," he told AFP.

However, it is always concerning when a flu virus enters mammals "because they're often the mixing point of influenza viruses, or they create an environment where mutations can occur and then can become adapted in humans", he added.

Even if that did occur, he said there were excellent surveillance systems in Europe and North America, and that H5N1 has been heavily researched since it first emerged in China and Hong Kong in 1996.

If H5N1 did mutate into a strain that could circulate among humans, the current seasonal flu vaccine could be fairly easily updated to include it, he said.

The UK Health Security Agency said "there is no evidence of sustained human to human transmission" of bird flu.

Over the last two decades, there have been 868 confirmed H5N1 cases in humans with 457 deaths, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

There were four confirmed cases and one death last year.

Last month, Ecuador reported South America's first case of the A(H5) bird flu virus in a human – a nine-year-old girl who was in contact with backyard

The experts have called for continued surveillance of avian influenza in wild birds, poultry and mammals, in order for humans to limit their exposure to the virus.

Arctic blast sweeps northeast US, threatening record lows

Reuters
Worcester, Massachusetts

A powerful arctic blast swept into the US Northeast yesterday, threatening to push temperatures to record lows in many spots, including New Hampshire's Mount Washington, where the wind chill could drop to -110° Fahrenheit (-79° Celsius), forecasters said.

A National Weather Service (NWS) advisory said the mass of frigid air would keep temperatures at life-endangering levels through the day today, warning of "extremely dangerous" conditions from the "short-lived blast".

Boston and Worcester, the two largest cities in New England, were among the school districts closed yesterday over concerns about the risk of hypothermia and frostbite as children waited for buses or walked to school.

Boston Mayor Michelle Wu declared a state of emergency throughout this weekend and opened warming centres to help the city's more than 650,000 residents cope with what the NWS has warned could shape up to be a "once-in-a-generation" cold front.

The bitter cold forecast forced a rare closing of a floating museum that presents a daily re-enactment of the 1773 Boston Tea Party, when a band of colonists disguised as Native Americans tossed crates of tea taxed by the king into the harbour.

"It's too cold for that, we're closed," a receptionist at the museum said yesterday.

Earlier yesterday, the core of the cold air mass, driven from Arctic Canada into the United States by high-altitude air currents, was centred over the US Plains, said



An Arbor Experts crew clears ice-laden branches from power lines after ice storms and freezing rain in the south of Texas left thousands without power and turned roadways into ice rinks, in San Antonio, Texas.

weather service forecaster Bob Oravec.

International Falls, Minnesota, was the coldest spot as of 7am, with temperatures hovering around -36F (-38C).

Dry air meant snowfall would be limited, he said.

"It's moving into the Northeast" and temperatures will drop throughout the day, he said. "That's the biggest story of the day."

In Mount Washington State Park, atop the Northeast's highest peak, temperatures were expected to fall to a record low of -50F (-46C) later, officials for the New Hampshire park service said.

By comparison, air temperatures in Eureka, Canada's northernmost Arctic weather station, were hovering at -41F (-41C) in the morning.

The wind chill, which describes the combined effect of wind and cold temperatures on exposed skin, could register at -110F (-79C) at Mount Washington's peak, typically one of the coldest places in the country.

Boston was about 22F (-6C) in the morning, with temperatures expected to plummet throughout the day and hit -3F (-19C) by midnight.

In Worcester, Massachusetts, 40 miles

(64km) to the west, temperatures were expected to drop to -14F (-25C) before starting to moderate today.

Despite the extreme cold, Nhon Ma, a Belgian native, was out yesterday with his Zinneken's food truck near Boston University selling Belgium waffles made from homemade dough, and keeping warm with three or four waffle irons going at once.

"Those create heat, but of course it's cold, it's going to be cold, but we're here," Ma said.

In a frigid Biddeford, Maine, about 95 miles (150km) north of Boston, Katie Pinerd, owner of a coffee and book shop, said business was brisk as customers came in from the cold, with some opting to work from her shop, Elements: Books Coffee Beer, rather than commute.

"Yeah, Mainers are pretty hardy, but talk to me tomorrow and we'll see if we're busy or not," she said, looking ahead to the morning today, when temperatures were expected to drop to -18F (-28C). "I think people are out and doing what they need to get done before the real cold hits."

While the Northeast was hunkering down, Texas and parts of the South were starting to warm up in the aftermath of a deadly winter ice storm that brought days of freezing rain, sleet and ice, causing massive power outages and dangerously icy roads.

More than 300,000 homes and businesses in Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee remained without power yesterday, according to Poweroutage.us, after ice toppled power lines and trees.

However, the weather was warming up, with temperatures in Austin, Texas hitting 52F (11C) yesterday and expected to reach 71F (22C) by tomorrow, forecasts say.

had been able to contact his family.

Mashal – a lecturer for more than a decade at three Kabul universities – was detained on Thursday despite having "committed no crime", Fazli said.

"He was giving free books to sisters (women) and men," he added. "He is still in detention and we don't know where he is being held."

Footage of Mashal destroying his certificates on private channel TOLnews went viral on social media.

In recent days, domestic channels showed Mashal carting books around Kabul and offering them to passersby.

"Mashal was mercilessly beaten and taken away in a very disrespectful manner by members of the Islamic Emirate," Mashal's aide Farid Ahmad Fazli told AFP, referring to the Taliban government.

A Taliban official confirmed the detention.

"Teacher Mashal had indulged in provocative actions against the system for some time," tweeted Abdul Haq Hammad, director at the Ministry of Information and Culture. "The security agencies took him for investigation."

Hammad said he had visited Mashal in detention and found he was being held in good conditions including heating, and

A small group of male students also held a brief walkout protesting the ban.

The UN special rapporteur on human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, has criticised Mashal's arrest and called for his release.

Top Brazil judge confirms senator told him about election conspiracy

Reuters/AFP
Lisbon/Sao Paulo/Rio de Janeiro

Brazil's Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes has confirmed that Senator Marcos do Val told him about an election conspiracy meeting he allegedly attended with former president Jair Bolsonaro and former lawmaker Daniel Silveira last year.

Do Val said on Thursday that Silveira, a close ally of Bolsonaro, tried to persuade him to join a conspiracy to overturn the far-right leader's electoral loss, asking him to try and get Moraes to make compromising comments in a taped conversation that could lead to the judge's arrest.

Bolsonaro had made baseless attacks on the integrity of Brazil's electronic voting system, which Moraes – also the head of the country's top electoral authority (TSE) – defended in decisions that the former president blamed for his defeat.

Moraes said during an event held in Lisbon that Do Val approached him to talk about the meeting.

The justice said he then asked

the senator to testify formalising the allegations, but Do Val declined to do so.

"I asked the senator if he would reaffirm that and put it on paper, because then I would immediately take his testimony," Moraes said. "But he told me it was an intelligence matter and that unfortunately he could not confirm it."

"So I just thanked him and said goodbye, because in my view what is not official does not exist," he added.

Do Val told reporters on Thursday that Bolsonaro, narrowly defeated by President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in an October vote, "sat in silence" while Silveira laid out the plot against Moraes at the meeting.

Silveira was arrested by police on Thursday on a warrant issued by Moraes, who accused him of disobeying court rulings.

Bolsonaro left Brazil for Florida 48 hours before Lula took office, without ever conceding defeat.

Bolsonaro is being investigated by Moraes at the Supreme Court for his alleged role in inflaming riots by his supporters, who stormed government buildings

on January 8 to provoke a military coup.

On Thursday Lula alleged that Bolsonaro actively participated in planning for his supporters to storm government buildings on January 8.

"Today I am well aware and will say it loud and clear: that citizen [former president Bolsonaro] prepared the coup," Lula said in an interview with broadcaster RedeTV!

"I am certain that Bolsonaro actively participated in that and is still trying to participate," the president added when questioned about his predecessor's role in the assault.

Lula's allegations against Bolsonaro – who has been in the US state of Florida since late December – came the same day that Senator Do Val accused the former president of attending a meeting on how to prevent the handing over of power.

Do Val, a former Bolsonaro ally, initially told Veja magazine that it was Bolsonaro who presented the plan to him, but later changed his version of the story, saying that the former president remained "silent" during the meeting.

Bolsonaro is being investigated by Moraes at the Supreme Court for his alleged role in inflaming riots by his supporters, who stormed government buildings

Peru Congress rejects new bid to earlier vote

AFP
Lima

Peru's Congress has voted down another proposal to advance elections to this year, a day after a similar proposal aimed at quelling deadly nationwide unrest also failed.

In addition to moving elections up from April 2024 to July 2023, the proposal rejected on Thursday included the calling of a referendum on forming a constitutional convention – another key demand of protesters.

The proposal by the Free Peru party was rejected with 75 votes against and only 48 in favour, with one abstention.

The vote on Wednesday on a proposal to advance elections to October 2023, without the constitutional convention referendum, had been backed by President Dina Boluarte.

The president's office said on Twitter that it regretted the failure of the vote on Wednesday and vowed to immediately present another bill to hold general elections this year.

Peru has been embroiled in a political crisis with near-daily demonstrations since December 7, when then-president Pedro Castillo was arrested after attempting to dissolve Congress and rule by decree.

In seven weeks of demonstrations, 48 people – including a police officer – have died in clashes between security forces and protesters, according to the rights ombudsman's office.

Roadblocks erected by protesters have caused shortages of food, fuel and other basic commodities in several regions of

the Andean nation.

Demonstrators, who were out in the capital Lima again on Thursday, demand the dissolution of Congress, a new constitution, and the resignation of Boluarte, who as vice-president took over with Castillo gone.

Jaime Quito, the leftist sponsor of the bill that failed on Thursday, said after the vote that "Congress must close".

"What will happen is that Dina Boluarte will have to resign," he added.

In December, lawmakers moved elections, originally due in 2026, up to April 2024, but as protesters dug in their heels, Boluarte called for holding the vote this year instead. Her proposal will be reviewed by a congressional committee.

The unrest is being propelled mainly by poor Indigenous Peruvians from southern areas of the country.

They perceive Castillo, who is also from that region and has Indigenous roots, as an ally in their fight against poverty, racism and inequality.

Before Wednesday's vote, two previous bills to advance the election had also faltered in Congress.

Boluarte said that if it failed a third time, as it did Wednesday, she would propose a constitutional reform allowing a first voting round to be held in October and a runoff in December.

She declined to comment on the resignation.

Five ministers in Boluarte's government have resigned since she came to power in December.

Call of Duty maker Activision Blizzard to pay \$35mn SEC fine

Activision Blizzard Incorporated has agreed to pay \$35mn to settle US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) charges that it failed to have systems in place to properly handle disclosures of employee complaints and violated whistleblower protection rules, the regulator said yesterday. The SEC said that the company knew employee retention issues were "a particularly important risk in



New Zealand floods add to inflation challenge for new PM

Reuters
Wellington

The worst flooding in New Zealand's biggest city Auckland is heaping more inflationary pressure and is posing a fresh cost-of-living headache for Prime Minister Chris Hipkins, who is trying to win back support for his party ahead of elections this year.

Hipkins, who replaced Jacinda Ardern as prime minister and leader of the Labour Party last month amid a backlash over Covid-19 restrictions, rising cost of living and a worsening housing crisis, has his work cut out, analysts and political observers say.

"Following the floods a lot of prices will be going up, left, right and centre. It was the perfect storm and for the government that we have, they are really up against it in terms of the economic questions and the cost of living," said Grant Duncan, a professor at Massey University.

International Tower Jump



Base jumper Chris McDougall of Australia leaps from the 300-metre high open deck of Malaysia's landmark Kuala Lumpur Tower during the International Tower Jump in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

"Inflation is going to be very important in the next election," he said.

Although monetary policy implications are likely to be limited, the floods are "yet another unhelpful inflationary shock," ANZ said in a note, with many observers warning it will take several months to recover from the significant damage to thousands of houses, roads and veg-

etable crops. The central bank has already raised interest rates by 400 basis points since October 2021 in its most aggressive tightening since the cash rate was introduced in 1999, and analysts expect it will treat the floods as a one-off event.

Policy rates are still expected to be raised by 50 basis points to 4.75% at the next meeting on February 22.

Food prices were up at more than a three-decade high of 11.3% in December year-on-year, and the flooding in Auckland and much of the upper North Island will add to the overall costs for a range of consumer items from cars to couches and onions, analysts say.

The nation's largest opposition party National has criticised Labour's handling of inflation and

has pledged to reduce spending.

Hipkins, who took office just 10 days ago, has already reformed his government on providing relief for New Zealanders struggling with inflation.

Polls taken in the days after he was appointed saw the Labour Party enjoy a strong bump in popularity and put them ahead of National for the first time in nearly a year.

'Frank' talks on Myanmar dominate Asean meet

Reuters
Jakarta

The conflict in Myanmar dominated the year's first meeting of Asean foreign ministers in Jakarta yesterday, with Indonesia's top diplomat saying that member states had "frank" discussions on the issue.

The foreign minister of Indonesia, which chairs the Association of Southeast Asian Nations this year, said the bloc was pushing for inclusive dialogue between all stakeholders in Myanmar, with Asean candidly discussing the issue yesterday.

Retno Marsudi spoke after the opening of a retreat with her regional counterparts, which Myanmar's junta leaders have been barred from attending.

"The meeting is dedicated to discuss the Myanmar issue in an open, in-depth, and frank manner as one family," she said in a news conference.

Since seizing power in a February 1 coup two years ago, Myanmar's junta has plunged the country into chaos and violence, and failed to implement an Asean peace plan, which includes the cessation of conflict and the start of dialogue.

Reducing violence and allowing humanitarian aid would be key to ensuring talks could begin, Retno said.

Asean chair Indonesia has vowed not to be "held hostage" by the Myanmar issue.

But just days after the junta announced an extension of emergency rule, the regional bloc faces tough questions about how to handle the crisis as frustration grows with the junta's lack of progress on a so-called five-point peace plan they agreed to.

Junta leaders have been barred from attending high-level Asean meetings but representation at other events would continue to be discussed, said Indonesian foreign ministry official Sidharto R Suryodipuro, on the sidelines of yesterday's event.

"As to other meetings, it will be an ongoing consultation," he said. "But the principle is that at the moment, no side has the legitimacy to sit in the Myanmar chair."

Blinken scraps Beijing trip over tension on Chinese balloon

AFP
Washington

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday scrapped a rare Beijing trip aimed at easing escalating tensions between the two global powers, after the Pentagon said that China sent a balloon over the US.

Moments before the decision, China issued a rare statement of regret and blamed winds for blowing over what it called a civilian airship.

But President Joe Biden's administration was not impressed and, with the rival Republican Party already on the offensive, Blinken postponed his two-day visit that would have started tomorrow.

"We have noted the PRC statement of regret but the presence of this balloon in our airspace is a clear violation of our sovereignty as well as international law and it is unacceptable," said a senior US official, referring to the People's Republic of China.

The official said Blinken personally conveyed the decision and would still go ahead with his visit to Beijing once "conditions are right," although no date was set.

The official voiced confidence that the delay would not set back communication between the two powers, a top goal of the trip.

"Candidly speaking in this current environment, I think it would have significantly narrowed the agenda that we would have been able to address," he told reporters.

Blinken would have been the first top US diplomat to visit China since October 2018, signalling a thaw following in-

tense friction under former president Donald Trump.

Last month, Blinken said he would use the trip to help establish "guardrails" to prevent the relationship from escalating into all-out conflict.

Republican lawmakers quickly pounced on the balloon incident, casting Biden — who has largely preserved and at times expanded Trump's hawkish policies on China — as weak.

"President Biden should stop coddling and appeasing the Chinese communists."

"Bringing the balloon down now and exploit its tech package, which could be an intelligence bonanza," tweeted senator Tom Cotton, a prominent hardliner who had urged Blinken to call off his trip.

The Pentagon said Thursday it was tracking the balloon which flew far above the western state of Montana and decided for safety reasons not to shoot it down.

After initial hesitation, Beijing admitted ownership of the "airship" and said it veered off course due to the winds.

"The airship is from China. It is a civilian airship used for research, mainly meteorological, purposes," said the statement attributed to a foreign ministry spokesperson.

"The Chinese side regrets the unintended entry of the airship into US airspace due to force majeure," it said, using the legal term for an act outside of human control.

"The Chinese side will continue communicating with the US side and properly handle this unexpected situation."

A US defence official said earlier that Biden had asked for military options but that the Pentagon believed shooting the

object down would put people on the ground at risk from debris.

The balloon has "limited additive value from an intelligence collection perspective," the defence official told reporters on condition of anonymity.

The northwestern US is home to sensitive airbases and nuclear weapons in underground silos.

Pentagon spokesman Pat Ryder said that, as of Thursday, the balloon was "travelling at an altitude well above commercial air traffic."

"It does not present a military or physical threat to people on the ground," Ryder said in a statement.

Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, who was visiting the Philippines, held discussions on Wednesday with top Pentagon officials after Biden asked for options.

In the Philippines, Austin agreed to expand the US military presence, weeks after a separate troop deal with another regional ally, Japan.

The US military moves show that the US is preparing for potential conflict over Taiwan, the self-governing democracy China claims as its own, despite diplomatic efforts.

Biden held a surprisingly cordial meeting in November with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of a summit in Bali, where they agreed to send Blinken to Beijing.

A US military officer recently told his forces to be ready for war with China.

"I hope I am wrong. My gut tells me we will fight in 2025," Air Mobility Command chief General Mike Minihan wrote in a memo, saying that US elections in 2024 would also "offer Xi a distracted America."

Lanka bondholders ready for debt restructuring talks

Reuters
Colombo

Private international bondholders are ready to hold debt restructuring talks with Sri Lanka consistent with the parameters and targets set out in the International Monetary Fund's programme, their legal adviser said yesterday.

Global investment companies Amundi Asset Management, BlackRock, HBK Capital Management, Morgan Stanley Investment Management and T Rowe Price Associates are among the group of around 30 bondholders being advised by White & Case LLP, a New York based law firm.

The combination of the pandemic, which ruined the tourist sector, the Ukraine war, which drove up the price of imported fuel and food, and economic mismanagement pitched the Indian Ocean island of 22mn people into its worst financial crisis in more than seven decades.

And having run out of foreign currency to pay for basic imports, Sri Lanka defaulted on its foreign debt in May. It secured a preliminary deal on a \$2.9bn extended fund facility with the IMF on September 1, though no funds have been disbursed as yet.

The government has received financing assurances from key bilateral lender India, and it is also seeking assurances from the Paris Club of creditor nations, while China's export-import bank has offered two-year moratorium on debt repayments.

The IMF is likely to begin disbursing funds once all of those assurances are in place, analysts say.

Sri Lanka has to restructure debt payments on about \$1bn in bonds. And it has also sought assurances from private creditors.

"The Bondholder Group... stands ready to engage quickly and effectively with the Sri Lankan authorities to design and implement restructuring terms that would help Sri Lanka restore debt sustainability and allow

the country to re-gain access to the international capital markets during the IMF programme period," White & Case said in a statement.

Bondholders have also called for Lanka's domestic debt to be "reorganised in a manner that both ensures debt sustainability and safeguards financial stability," the statement said.

They also requested the opportunity to express their views on the "overall design" of the IMF programme, it added.

"The bondholders appear to be indirectly seeking a domestic debt restructuring, which Sri Lanka is yet to agree to," said Udeesha Jonas chief strategist at CAL Group.

"The requirement seems to be more tilted towards reprofiling the domestic debt through maturity extensions rather than coupon or principal haircuts to bring down Sri Lanka's overall gross financing needs."

Sri Lanka secured financing assurances from India last month.

Rescued



Three men clinging to a cooler box were rescued off Eclipse Island, south of Albany, Western Australia, after their boat capsized and started sinking. The men were fishing near Eclipse Island when their vessel capsized in heavy seas.

Ex-Korean minister gets jail over graft scandal

Reuters
Seoul

A disgraced former South Korean politician, Cho Kuk, was sentenced to two years in prison yesterday for forging documents to facilitate his children's school admissions in a scandal that has deepened political divides and frustrated many young voters.

A star law professor, Cho was a key aide to former president Moon Jae-in and briefly served as a justice minister before resigning and being indicted on a dozen charges, including bribery and document fraud, in late 2019.

The Seoul Central District Court convicted Cho of falsifying documents to send his son and daughter to prestigious high schools and universities, and peddling influence to interfere with a corruption investigation involving a Moon confidant.

The court also imposed fines of 6mn won (\$4,900), which it said Cho had taken from his daughter's medical school as bribes in the form of a scholarship.

ing inequality and growing calls for fairness.

It eventually gave rise to incumbent President Yoon Suk-yeol, who then as prosecutor-general investigated Cho and other graft scandals.

Cho, who has denied any wrongdoing, said he would appeal.

"I humbly accept the verdict and I will fight for my innocence in the parts where I was found guilty in the appeals court in a more sincere and honest manner," he told reporters after the ruling.

The court said Cho colluded with his wife, Chung Kyung-shim, also a university professor, in manipulating documents to get their son into a specialised high school and a law school, and daughter into a medical school.

Chung has already received a four-year sentence over those charges and irregularities over family investment.

The court also imposed fines of 6mn won (\$4,900), which it said Cho had taken from his daughter's medical school as bribes in the form of a scholarship.

INDUSTRIAL ACTION

Disruption across England as train drivers strike

Railway commuters across England faced travel misery yesterday as train drivers staged their second stoppage over pay this week, the latest in a wave of UK industrial action. Millions of people were forced to make alternative travel plans or work from home as the majority of train companies on the country's fragmented network said they were running no services. Central London railway stations such as Euston were nearly deserted, with rail hubs elsewhere in England also emptied. Following a strike on Wednesday, members of Aslef and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) walked out again in a long-running dispute over pay and conditions.

CONTAMINATION

US FDA issues alert on India-made eye drop

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has warned against using an India-made eye drop that has been linked to the outbreak of a drug-resistant bacteria leading to adverse events in at least 55 patients including infections, blindness and one death. The agency said that Artificial Tears eye drop manufactured by India's Global Pharma Healthcare has a potential bacterial contamination and the company has violated current good manufacturing practices. The company, based in India's southern city of Chennai, said it had issued a voluntary recall at the consumer level of unexpired lots of the eye drop, which was distributed in the US by EzriCare LLC and Delsam Pharma.

CORPORATE

India takes stake in Vodafone's local arm

India approved the conversion of nearly \$2bn in dues owed to the government by Vodafone's local unit Vi into equity, bringing relief to the cash-strapped telco. Vodafone has been losing money in India since Mukesh Ambani, Asia's richest man, kicked off a price war in the vast market when his conglomerate Reliance launched telecoms arm Jio in 2016. Vi, formerly known as Vodafone Idea, first unveiled the plan in January 2022, and had been waiting for regulators and New Delhi to sign off on the announcement. The communications ministry has passed an order to cover the interest owed on spectrum fees and other dues "into equity shares to be issued to the government of India", Vi said.

CRIME

Assam police arrest 2,000 over child marriages

Police in Assam have arrested more than 2,000 men for marrying or arranging marriages to underage girls, launching what the eastern Indian state's chief minister said yesterday was the start of a sustained crackdown on the practice. Police began the arrests on Thursday night, and more were likely, including of people helping to register such marriages, Himanta Biswa Sarma said. "Child marriage is the primary reason behind child pregnancy, which in turn is responsible for high maternal and infant mortality rates," he said. Marriage under 18 is illegal in India, but the law is openly flouted.

CORPORATE

India's duty change 'to lift local phone production'

India expects to manufacture more mobile phones this year after the government eliminated import tariffs on some components used to assemble high-end phones from global companies such as Apple, a tax official said yesterday. Indian mobile phone exports nearly doubled year-on-year to \$5bn between April-October in 2022, primarily supported by the government's key scheme to offer incentives to local manufacturers. At the annual budget for 2023-24 on Wednesday, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman eliminated the 2.5% customs duty on select parts of mobile camera phones.

Adani turmoil a key test for Modi's 'India Inc'

AFP
Mumbai

The market rout suffered by Indian tycoon Gautam Adani is the latest corporate scandal to plague one of the world's largest economies despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's efforts to root out corruption.

Properly investigating the claims of fraud that triggered the sell-off in Adani's companies will be a key test for "India Inc" as the country seeks to attract foreign investment and rival China economically in the 21st century, analysts say.

In its breakneck expansion Adani's vast business empire conducted "brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud" that amounted to "the largest con in corporate history", according to US short-seller group Hindenburg Research.

Adani has denied the explosive claims, which accuse the companies of inflating stock prices using offshore tax havens.

But an avalanche of selling by spooked investors has wiped more than \$100bn from the group's market value since last week.

Most damning for Modi's government is Hindenburg's assertion that Adani's dodgy activities "seem to be enabled by virtually non-existent financial control".

Adani has used his "immense power to pressure the government and regulators to pursue those who question him", the group said, with investors, journalists, citizens and even politicians "afraid to speak out for fear of reprisal".

The list of corrupt past Indian moguls is long, from fugitive jeweller-to-the-stars Nirav Modi to Vijay Mallya, the "king of good times" behind Kingfisher brand.

Nirav Modi fled India in 2018 after being accused of defrauding one of India's largest state-backed lenders out of \$1.8bn. Mallya left the country in 2016 owing more than \$1bn after allegedly defaulting on loan payments to a state-owned bank and misusing the funds.

Both saw their empires collapse under Modi, which helped

raise hopes that along with giving regulators more powers he was serious about tackling wrongdoing.

Modi's demonetisation drive in 2016 – withdrawing almost 86% of banknotes – was catastrophically handled but the stated aim was to root out corruption and bring all transactions out of the shadows.

"I would actually really compliment Prime Minister Modi," Tim Buckley, an Australian energy analyst who monitors India, said. "Seven years ago, crony capitalism was endemic in India."

But Adani's rise could be seen as telling another story, with the mogul's ascent mirroring the meteoric political career of Modi, a fellow native of Gujarat.

Having linked hands while Modi ran the state, when he became prime minister their close co-operation went national, enabling Adani to expand into virtually every area of the economy.

That includes ports, coal and solar power, with critics saying Adani was able to out-compete rivals to win more and more business – with insufficient oversight – and take on ever more debt.

But independent market analyst Ambareesh Baliga said that he believes Adani is an isolated case, pointing to India's strong economic growth under Modi.

"As of now, I wouldn't paint India Inc with the same brush, because the report was basically on the Adani Group," Baliga said.

In India, corporate governance has improved a lot over the last decade or more. It's not the same as what it was two or three decades back."

Nonetheless other special-ists said authorities must still be seen to investigate Hindenburg's claims properly.

Capital markets regulator the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) did not respond to request for confirmation yesterday on whether it was probing Hindenburg's allegations.

Hindenburg's report said that Sebi had been investigating suspicious Adani stakeholders based in Mauritius back in 2021 but had not taken any action more than a year later.



Art school teacher Sagar Kambli gives final touches to a painting of Indian businessman Gautam Adani highlighting the ongoing crisis of the Adani group in Mumbai yesterday.

Markets 'well regulated', says India govt after Adani storm

AFP
Mumbai

Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman yesterday said her country's markets were "well regulated" and she did not expect the controversy around tycoon Gautam Adani's business empire to affect investor confidence.

The combined market cap of Adani Group's listed units has collapsed by more than \$120bn – about half of the group's value – since US short-seller Hindenburg Research released an explosive report last week.

It accused Adani of accounting fraud and artificially boosting its share prices, calling it a "bra-

Ministry reviews group's financial statements

India's ministry of corporate affairs has started a preliminary review of Adani Group's financial statements and other regulatory submissions made over the years, two senior government officials said yesterday. Adani Group has denied allegations by US-based short-seller Hindenburg Research of improper use of offshore tax havens and stock manipulation, saying it has "no basis" and is due to an ignorance of Indian

zen stock manipulation and accounting fraud scheme" and "the largest con in corporate history".

India remained "an absolutely well governed" country and a "very well regulated financial market", Sitharaman told broadcaster News18.

"One instance, however much talked about globally, I would think is not going to be indicative of how well Indian financial markets have been governed," Sitharaman said.

The minister said public sector financial institutions had released detailed statements showing they had limited exposure to Adani Group and would not be significantly affected by the share crash.

"I think the investor confidence which existed before should continue even now," she added.

Earlier, both houses of India's parliament were adjourned yesterday amid chaotic scenes as some lawmakers demanded an inquiry following the meltdown of shares in Adani's group com-

panies, which some fear could spark wider financial turmoil.

Adani Group, one of India's top conglomerates, has rejected the criticism and denied wrongdoing in detailed rebuttals, but that has failed to arrest the unabated fall in its shares.

For Adani, a former school drop-out from Gujarat, the western home state of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the crisis presents the biggest reputational and business challenge of his life, as his firm struggles to assuage investor concerns.

Credit ratings agency Moody's warned yesterday the share plunge could hit the group's ability to raise capital, although peer Fitch saw no immediate impact on its ratings.

Man admits treason charge over Queen crossbow threat

Reuters
London

A man caught carrying a loaded crossbow at late Queen Elizabeth's Windsor Castle home pleaded guilty in a London court yesterday to an offence under the Treason Act and threatening to kill the monarch.

Jaswant Singh Chail, 21, said "I am here to kill the queen" when he was arrested dressed in black clothing and wearing a hood, metal mask and gloves in the grounds of the castle to the west of London at about 8am on Christmas Day, 2021.

Elizabeth, who died at age 96 in September last year, was at the castle on the day of the incident, along with her son and now King Charles and other close family members. Chail had spent months planning the attack, prosecutors said. After he entered the grounds of the castle, he was confronted by a protection officer in an area where the

intruder would have access to the private quarters.

The recovered crossbow was a "Supersonic X-bow", the discharged bolt from which has the potential to cause serious or fatal injuries. Chail, from Southampton in southern England, had recorded a video before he entered the grounds of the castle, which he sent to his contacts list about 10 minutes before his arrest.

"This was a serious incident, but fortunately a rare one."

Prosecutors said electronic devices were also recovered that showed Chail had previously applied to the ministry of defence and the Grenadier Guards in an effort to make contact with the royal family. Chail appeared at yesterday's hearing at London's Old Bailey court via video link wearing a black jacket and spoke only to confirm his name and enter guilty pleas to the three charges of making threats to kill, possession of an offensive weapon, and an offence under the Treason Act.

Indians have long demanded a formal apology from Britain for what is also known as the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, when British forces opened fire on un-

armed civilians who had gathered to protest against a colonial law.

"Chail entered the protected areas within Windsor Castle after making threats to kill her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Thankfully police officers intervened and nobody was hurt," said Nick Price, head of the Crown Prosecution Service's special crime and counter terrorism division.

"This was a serious incident, but fortunately a rare one."

Prosecutors said electronic devices were also recovered that showed Chail had previously applied to the ministry of defence and the Grenadier Guards in an effort to make contact with the royal family. Chail appeared at yesterday's hearing at London's Old Bailey court via video link wearing a black jacket and spoke only to confirm his name and enter guilty pleas to the three charges of making threats to kill, possession of an offensive weapon, and an offence under the Treason Act.

Indians have long demanded a formal apology from Britain for what is also known as the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, when British forces opened fire on un-

Camilla visits charity



Britain's Camilla, Queen Consort, marks stamps on books during her visit to Book Aid International in London, Britain. Camilla, 75, met Book Aid International staff members and learned more about their mission. The organisation sends a wide variety of books to communities in need around the world, from children's books to personal development reading material and textbooks.

India to spend \$79.6mn to strengthen drug regulatory system

India will spend \$79.6mn on strengthening its drug regulatory system, the health minister said yesterday, after the World Health Organisation raised concerns about domestically produced cough syrups being linked to the death of 89 children in two countries. India is known as the "pharmacy of the world" and its pharmaceuticals exports have more than doubled over the past decade to \$24.5bn in 2021-22. The death of at least 70 children in Gambia and 19 children in Uzbekistan last year have dented that image. Government data shared by Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya yesterday showed that out of nearly 89,000 drug samples tested in 2021-22 by states and territories, more than 2,500 did not meet standards and close to 380 were declared spurious or adulterated. Mandaviya said the federal government has allocated funds to his ministry for measures including setting up new drug testing laboratories and upgrading existing ones. "The government has taken various regulatory measures to ensure the quality of medicines in the country," he said in a written reply to a question in parliament. It was not immediately clear when the funds would be provided nor how they would be used. The health ministry did not immediately respond to a Reuters request seeking clarity. Last month the WHO called for "immediate and concerted action" to protect children from contaminated medicines. The WHO, the US Food and Drug Administration and foreign regulatory authorities have launched an investigation into the source of contaminated cough syrups that have killed more than 300 children in Africa and Asia. The companies whose syrups were linked to the death of children have either denied that their products were contaminated or declined to comment while investigations are ongoing. In the case of Gambia, Indian government inspectors found no contamination in test samples of the syrup linked to the death of children.

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GULF TIMES

From Meta to Microsoft, AI's big moment is here

Big Tech companies have a new obsession: artificial intelligence (AI). This week, chief executives across the sector packed earnings calls with mentions of the heavily hyped technology, which until recently existed more in the background than as a solid contributor to the bottom line.

In conference calls after financial results, tech execs uttered the phrases "AI," "generative AI," or "machine learning" from two to six times as often as they did in the previous quarter.

Executives from Microsoft Corp and Alphabet Inc, behind the latest big rivalry in tech, took their battle to the conference-call front lines.

In conference calls, tech execs uttered the phrases "AI," "generative AI," or "machine learning"

On Thursday, Alphabet appeared to edge out the competition.

The Google-owner's call referred to AI 45 times, up from 13 times at the end of the third quarter, outpacing Microsoft, whose call was peppered with 39 references, up from 15 in the previous quarter.

The release of software that can generate virtually text and images, exemplified by ChatGPT, a chatbot

from the startup OpenAI, has set off a race to integrate AI into more products and for investors to bet on which company will emerge on top.

Microsoft's investment in OpenAI and aggressive efforts to make ChatGPT widely available to its cloud customers, among other plans, represent a new challenge to Alphabet.

Industry observers have said embedding human-like, ChatGPT-style responses in Microsoft's Bing search engine could give it a leg up on Alphabet's Google, long the information search leader.

In a potential nod to the public's ChatGPT fixation, Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai said Google remained in the game.

"We'll pursue this work boldly, but with a deep sense of responsibility," he said.

AI software will be an important focus for Alphabet, which is planning to make its own LaMDA chatbot software publicly available in the coming weeks, he added.

David Heger, an analyst with Edward Jones, said Google was opening up more about its large AI investments after staying quiet.

"They were much more vocal about how that benefits pretty much all parts of their business and how they expect that to be further integrated into their business going forward," he said.

Mark Zuckerberg called generative AI "an extremely exciting new area" on Wednesday during a conference call that referenced the phrase 30 times, up from 22 times in the previous quarter.

The Facebook founder and CEO of Meta Platforms Inc, whose shares rocketed 20% after reporting financial results, said users could expect the company to "launch a number of different things this year" in generative AI.

Meta plans to incorporate the new technology across almost all its products, such as generating images, videos, avatars and 3D assets, Zuckerberg said.

The software will help content creators produce more across Meta's apps, he added.

Even at Apple Inc, where hardware such as the iPhone has reigned supreme, AI is a big part of the future.

Asked by an analyst about Apple's AI strategy, Chief Executive Tim Cook said on Thursday the company is using such tech to power features like car crash detection in its iPhone and Apple Watch, and that it will be applied throughout Apple's products and services.

"We see an enormous potential in this space to affect virtually everything we do," Cook said. "It's obviously a horizontal technology, not a vertical. And so it will affect every product and every service that we have." — Reuters

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How to transform African agriculture

By **Safia Boly** and **Omid Kassiri**
Nairobi

The Covid-19 pandemic, compounded by supply-chain disruptions and surging inflation, has highlighted the fragilities of Africa's food systems, leading to a 60% increase in hunger across the continent in 2020 alone. And climate change, which is expected to degrade freshwater ecosystems and arable lands, rendering vast areas of Africa uninhabitable, will only make things worse.

While the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have exacerbated global food insecurity, throwing millions into extreme poverty and reversing decades of progress, the situation is even more dire in lower-income African countries. The continent's population has reached 1.4bn and could double by 2050, while agricultural productivity, despite improvement, remains significantly below global benchmarks. This has forced governments to rely more on food imports, pushing up prices.

But there are some bright spots. Ethiopia, Morocco, and Rwanda, for example, have managed to boost agricultural productivity by defining a vision for their domestic industries, bringing together public and private stakeholders, building the necessary infrastructure, and engaging in continuous learning and adaptation. As a result, these countries have increased agricultural output, improved food security, raised farmers' incomes, and strengthened local food systems' resilience to external shocks.

Consider Ethiopia, where domestic yields have increased by 76%, and total food production has risen by 50%, since the establishment of its Agricultural Transformation Agency in 2010. According to ATA estimates, agricultural reforms have saved 150,000 people from starving to death, reduced the number of undernourished Ethiopians by 11.5m, and lifted roughly 286,000 people out of poverty.

Similarly, Morocco's Plan Maroc Vert (Green Morocco Plan), launched in 2008 to modernise domestic farming and to promote sustainable economic growth, has revitalised the agriculture sector. The Agricultural Development Agency, set up to support the plan's implementation, estimates that agricultural GDP grew 5.25% a year from 2008-18, faster than the economy as a whole (3.8%). This resulted in a 117% rise in agricultural exports and 342,000 new jobs. Watershed management has also improved, with drip-irrigation systems quadrupling to 542,000 hectares.

Since 2004, Rwanda has been developing and implementing its Strategic Plan for the Transformation of Agriculture (PSTA). The International Food Policy Research Institute estimates that every dollar that the government spends on agriculture corresponds to a \$2.05 gain in GDP, implying that the program delivered \$730m in economic gains between 2018 and 2021, helping to lift 1.1m people out of poverty. Rwanda's Strategic Plan has also improved watershed management and soil conservation.

What these three countries have in common is a



deep understanding of the challenges ahead, a clear vision for meeting them, and a strong commitment to developing the effective governance mechanisms needed to implement solutions. Building on these examples, we have identified four key principles that could help other African countries successfully transform their own agriculture sectors.

For starters, consistent planning is critical.

Governments must establish clear mandates, spell out their priorities, align policies, and mobilise resources. In Rwanda, the PSTA's mandate was to use market-led growth to overhaul the country's largely subsistence-based agriculture. In preparing the latest version of its plan, known as PSTA 4, the government worked with development partners to devise a forward-looking strategy that aligned with Rwanda's commitments under the African Union's Malabo Declaration and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. PSTA 4 focuses on encouraging private-sector investment and shifting to higher-value agricultural commodities to increase profits and capture productivity gains, in line with the vision that the Rwandan government set out nearly 20 years ago.

Second, to ensure that projects are sustainable over the longer term, policymakers must secure the backing of top political leaders, relevant local governments, and other stakeholders such as development partners and civil-society groups. In Ethiopia, then-prime minister Meles Zenawi publicly backed the establishment of the ATA. Subsequent governments have continued to support the plan, even giving the ATA priority access to scarce hard currency to fund imports.

Third, by structuring agricultural plans around

a fit-for-purpose organisation, governments could create a governance structure that enables skilled staff to work with all stakeholders in leading the transformation effort. The ATA, for example, combines local and international expertise and coordinates with ministries responsible for land, water, agriculture, and industry to develop and implement policy.

Lastly, a results-oriented implementation process could lead to better outcomes. By developing a deep knowledge base of the agricultural sector and then adapting as new data emerge, governments can identify quick wins and programmes with high potential for expansion. Morocco, for example, devised specific plans for 16 regions and a roadmap setting out more than 700 projects. To track progress, officials monitored specific performance indicators such as yield and productivity for livestock, poultry, and other sectors.

Africa, of course, is incredibly diverse. Its countries vary in language, geography, population size, political systems, and economic policies, ruling out a one-size-fits-all approach. But Ethiopia, Morocco, and Rwanda, though very different from one another, have managed to improve food security and economic well-being by adhering to the four principles set out here. Their success shows that a sustainable, climate-resilient continent is not only possible but well within reach. — Project Syndicate

● **Safia Boly** is Executive Director of the Nairobi-based African Agriculture Transformation Initiative. **Omid Kassiri** is a partner in McKinsey & Company's Nairobi office.

Making Ukrainian victory possible

By **Josep Borrell**
Brussels

Almost one year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the war is entering a new phase. Following the failed attack on Kyiv last spring and the Ukrainians' stunning counteroffensive that liberated Kharkiv in the north and Kherson in the south, Russian President Vladimir Putin has embarked on a punitive campaign targeting civilians and energy infrastructure with drones and missiles. Stymied on the battlefield, Putin is seeking to maximise the number of Ukrainians forced to spend the winter in the cold and the dark.

The front line has not moved much in recent months. But the fighting remains fierce (with many casualties), and Russia seems to be preparing for a major spring offensive. The Russian economy is on a war footing, and the Kremlin propaganda machine has gone into overdrive, peddling a mix of apocalyptic threats and imperial delusions. Russia's last independent news outlet, Meduza, and its last human-rights organisation, the Sakharov Center, are being forced to spend the winter in the cold and the dark.

Under these circumstances, Ukraine's allies are right to scale up their military assistance, including by providing battle tanks. The goal is for Ukraine to prevail against its aggressor. But we cannot wish for that end without giving Ukraine the means to achieve it. The alternative is a prolonged war of attrition, leading to more deaths in Ukraine, greater insecurity for Europe, and continued suffering around the world (owing to Russia's weaponisation of energy and food supplies).

Ukraine's partners had already committed to provide advanced air defences like the US-made Patriot missile system, more capable howitzers, and additional armoured combat vehicles. But before the recent big breakthrough, there was an intense debate about whether to supply tanks like the German-made Leopard 2 or the US-made M1 Abrams. I, for one,



have long argued that we must provide Ukraine with the means to push Russia out. Tanks are necessary for Ukrainian forces to break through the current stalemate of trench warfare, and to regain the momentum they had last fall when they retook Kharkiv and Kherson.

Reaching the "tank agreement" took time and intense discussions, including at the European Union Foreign Affairs Council. The breakthrough came when Germany agreed to deliver Leopard 2s, in co-ordination with the United States, which will provide some 30 M1 Abrams. Although delivery of these assets will take time and require intensive training and maintenance, the result is not confined to the battlefield. We have sent another powerful signal to Russia that Putin was wrong — once again — to doubt our resolve.

Of course, some will argue that more weapons will prolong the war and risk further escalation, and that diplomatic negotiations are the only solution. But while Europeans will always remain open to anyone who is serious about seeking a negotiated and just end to the war, Russia so far has made clear that it intends to persist with its war crimes. Everyone who has tried to negotiate with Putin has come back empty-handed. Until that changes, we must conclude that the only way to end the war is to give Ukraine the means to drive out the invader.

The EU's task, therefore, is to do everything in its power to support Ukraine. And that is what we are doing. Together with EU member-state governments, we have already mobilised €12bn (\$13.1bn) worth of

weapons and related supplies for Ukraine, €3.6bn of which is coming from the European Peace Facility. When also accounting for macro-financial and humanitarian aid, our total support comes close to €50bn.

Moreover, the EU is now the leading provider of military training for Ukrainian personnel. Through the EU Military Assistance Mission in Poland and Germany, we are on track to have trained 15,000 troops by April, and we are prepared to double the effort and train another 15,000 — including in the use of tanks such as the Leopard 2.

The EU is also working on a tenth package of sanctions, having already cut our dependence on Russian energy imports within the space of just a few months. And make no mistake: the sanctions are working. Russian oil is selling at a \$40 discount to Brent, and its daily energy revenues are expected to fall from around €800mn to €500mn after our latest measures kick in this month. The war is costing the Kremlin dearly, and these costs will only rise the longer it lasts.

Last January, just before the invasion, I visited the Donbas region and saw the front line. For obvious reasons, that trip has stuck with me. On my way back through Kyiv, Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal acknowledged that "the invasion is coming, and we know you will not come to fight on our side." But, he hastened to ask, "Will you give us the weapons we need to defend ourselves?"

Frankly, I was not sure how to respond, because I did not know how strong European resolve would be. Today, the answer comes easily. As I travel to Kyiv this week for the EU-Ukraine Summit, no one doubts that Europe has risen to the occasion. Now, we must continue to give Ukraine the means to defeat the aggressor, restore its sovereignty, and find its place in the European Union. — Project Syndicate

● **Josep Borrell**, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, is Vice President of the European Commission for a Stronger Europe in the World.

IMF giving Pakistan tough time in 'unimaginable' economic crisis: PM

Reuters/AFP
Islamabad/Peshawar

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said yesterday that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is giving his country a "tough time" over unlocking stalled funding from a \$6.5bn bailout at a time of "unimaginable" economic crisis.

Hours after his remark, the Pakistani rupee hit a record low against the US dollar in a steep slide since last week.

"Our economic situation is unimaginable," the premier said, adding the IMF visiting mission was giving Pakistan a "tough time".

"The conditions we have to fulfil are beyond imagination," he said, but admitted that the country has no option but to accept them.

"You all know we are running short of resources," Sharif said, adding the country is "facing an economic crisis".

He made the comments in a meeting of civil and military leaders in the

northwestern city of Peshawar that he chaired to prepare a response to Monday's mosque bombing that killed more than 100 (see accompanying report).

He was speaking in the context of funds the country might need for any military or counter-terrorism response to the resurgent religious militancy.

The IMF's Pakistan representative did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment.

The IMF mission is visiting Pakistan to discuss fiscal consolidation measures the institution needs from Pakistan to clear a 9th review of its Extended Fund Facility, aimed at helping countries facing balance-of-payments crises.

Pakistan's central bank reserves at present stand at \$3.09bn, the lowest since 1998 and not enough to cover the cost of three weeks of imports.

The IMF's demands aimed at controlling the country's budget deficit have led Pakistan to leave its currency to market-based exchange rates and raise fuel prices.

The Pakistani rupee fell by 1.9% to

Pakistan leaders discuss response to deadly mosque blast

Pakistan's political and military leaders met in Peshawar yesterday to discuss responses to what the prime minister called a "new wave of terrorism", four days after a mosque blast killed more than 100 people in the city.

A suspected suicide bomber blew himself up during prayers in a highly fortified area of the northwestern city housing police and counter-terrorism offices on Monday. Police said the attacker wore a police uniform.

All but three of those killed were police, marking the single largest death toll of security forces by militants in the south Asian nation.

"The whole nation wants to know how to counter this menace and what measures can be taken to eliminate this new wave of terrorism," Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said in his opening remarks to military and intelligence command staff at the meeting. "We will use all resources in our capacity to fight this menace."

Pakistani authorities have blamed the bombing on the US-designated militant group Jamat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), a breakaway faction of the Pakistani Taliban, also known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

The TTP, which is an umbrella of several Islamist groups, has stepped up attacks since it revoked a peace deal with the government last year. - **Reuters**

a record low of 276.58 per dollar in the inter-bank market yesterday, according to the central bank.

The local currency has dropped 16.5% since the artificial cap was removed last week to allow its value to be

decided by a market-based exchange rate.

The rupee also shed 2.65% against the US dollar on the open market, according to the association of exchange companies.

An IMF delegation is in Pakistan to restart talks stalled since November for \$2.5bn funds yet to be disbursed.

Despite the economic situation, Sharif said his country will do whatever possible to fight militancy.

"We will use all resources in our capacity to fight this menace," he said.

The world's fifth-biggest population is no longer issuing letters of credit, except for essential food and medicines, causing a backlog of thousands of shipping containers at Karachi port stalled with stocks the country can no longer afford.

Data on Wednesday showed year-on-year inflation had risen to a 48-year high, leaving Pakistanis struggling to afford basic food items.

"Poor people will not be able to survive," said Samina Bhatti as she shopped at a market in Islamabad. "Petrol is so expensive, what will they do, will they start travelling on foot? A daily wage earner can't afford the rent on his home."

"Accepting IMF conditions will defi-

nitely increase prices, but Pakistan has no other choice," analyst Abid Hasan told AFP. "Otherwise, there is a fear of a situation like Sri Lanka and Lebanon."

However, friendly nations Islamabad that usually approaches for help have indicated they may open their books once the IMF is on board.

The tumbling economy mirrors Pakistan's political chaos, with former prime minister Imran Khan heaping pressure on the ruling coalition in his bid for early elections while his popularity remains high.

Khan, who was ousted last year in a no-confidence motion, negotiated a multi-billion-dollar loan package from the IMF in 2019.

However, he reneged on promises to cut subsidies and market interventions that had cushioned the cost-of-living crisis, causing the programme to stall.

It is a common pattern in Pakistan, where most people live in rural poverty, with more than two dozen IMF deals brokered and then broken over the decades.

France destroys seaside flats threatened by coastal erosion

AFP
Soulac-sur-Mer, France

French authorities have started demolishing a seaside block of flats that has come to symbolise the country's battle against climate change-linked coastal erosion.

When the four-storey building was built behind the beach in the southwestern Gironde region in 1967, it stood 200m (220 yards) away from the shoreline.

However, its 75 or so flats in the town

of Soulac-sur-Mer had to be evacuated in 2014 after the sea crept up to within 20m of the structure.

Local authorities scrambled to rid the building of asbestos in the following years, before a huge mechanical digger took a swing at its facade yesterday, as several former residents watched.

"It's the memories of four generations" that are being destroyed, said 76-year-old Vincent Duprat, one of the home owners.

The sea "has taken back what is rightfully hers", he added.

Environment Minister Christophe Be-

chu said the demolition is a sign of "what the rising waters and coastal erosion have in store for lots of other areas along the French coastline".

By 2100, 20% of the coastline and up to 50,000 homes would be affected, he said.

Erosion is a natural phenomenon that has shaped our continents over millennia.

However, scientists say it is being accelerated by the warming of the planet, exacerbated by rising sea levels brought about by melting ice caps and glaciers, and by the more powerful waves that warmer oceans hold.

The sandy beaches of the Bay of Biscay between France and Spain are expected to recede by 50m by 2050, the Observatory of the Nouvelle-Aquitaine Coastline says.

However, climate change and rising sea levels could increase this by an extra 20m in some areas, the Observatory's Nicolas Bernon said.

In 2020, after a seven-year legal battle, a court ruled that French authorities should compensate families who had been forced to evacuate the building in Soulac-sur-Mer to the tune of 70% of the original value of their homes.

Ukraine leader Zelensky vows to defend 'fortress' Bakhmut

AFP/Reuters
Kyiv

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday that his forces would hold out as long as possible in war-battered Bakhmut, as he hosted a summit with EU chiefs who praised Kyiv's push for reforms needed to join the bloc.

European Union chief Charles Michel, on his second visit in less than three weeks, doubled down on his backing for Kyiv's integration with Brussels, saying that "Ukraine is the EU, the EU is Ukraine".

The symbolic summit took place as Zelensky presses for a speedy accession to the EU as Ukraine fends off Russia's nearly year-long invasion.

The Ukrainian leader urged the West to supply Kyiv with more sophisticated weapons to help his forces retain control of Bakhmut, the city at the epicentre of the fighting and where Russia is pushing hardest.

"No one will surrender Bakhmut. We will fight as long as we can," said the Ukrainian leader, standing shoulder to shoulder with Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, describing the city as a "fortress".

"If weapon (deliveries) are accelerated – namely long-range weapons – we will not only not withdraw from Bakhmut, we will begin to de-occupy Donbas," the eastern Ukraine region, Zelensky said.

Shortly after he spoke, air raid sirens sounded once again in Kyiv and across the country – a regular occurrence during months of Russian missile attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure far from the battlefields in the east and south – but there were

no immediate reports of new air strikes.

In June last year, just months after the Kremlin launched its invasion of Ukraine, the European Union extended candidate status to Kyiv, but the path to full membership is likely to be fraught and could take years.

The EU in a statement yesterday acknowledged that Ukraine had made "considerable efforts" to advance towards membership but urged Kyiv to implement further reforms.

Graft is a key European concern and Ukraine has widened efforts to tackle corruption with highly-publicised raids this week targeting an oligarch with political connections and a former interior minister.

"You are at war, and while being at war, and defending your country against the aggressor, you're able to deliver one deliverable after the next that is necessary to move forward," von der Leyen said.

However, she cautioned that the process of accession was merit-based and said that there could be "no rigid timelines" put in place for Ukrainian membership or talks.

Zelensky has been clear he wants Ukraine to join as fast as possible and has said he wants the discussions to start this year. "Our goal is absolutely clear: to start negotiations on Ukraine's membership," he said yesterday. "We will not lose a single day in our work to bring Ukraine and the EU closer together."

A police official said that an investigation was under way but it could take several days to determine the identity of the victim, after reports that foreign nationals may have been involved.

He made the appeal for more weapons from EU member states and Washington, while in Bakhmut, the frontline of a prolonged battle between Ukrainian and Russian forces, there was no let-up in fighting.

Throughout the morning, AFP journalists heard a steady exchange of small arms fire and the



A firefighter walks amid rubble in a shopping mall yesterday, following Russian shelling in Kherson, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

He said that it is "clear" that the car, which was destroyed in the strike, was not a military target.

Locals involved in the rescue were also not soldiers, he added, but they also came under attack and were injured in a second strike as they tried to help.

"I don't know how we didn't get torn apart. I got shrapnel in my leg," added Tkachenko, limping towards a community centre with the help of a walking stick.

To compensate Ukraine for damage inflicted across the country since February last year, the EU vowed to ramp up efforts to divert Russia's frozen assets for use as compensation.

Von der Leyen announced in Kyiv this week that the EU planned to roll out its next package of sanctions to coincide with the anniversary of the invasion on February 24.

And she estimated that an oil price cap is costing Moscow around €160mn every day.

Separately, an EU ban on some Russian oil products – like diesel, gasoline and jet fuel – is set to come into effect tomorrow alongside a G7 price cap on these products.

The Kremlin warned yesterday that the measures would destabilise world markets rather than only impact Russia.

"This will lead to a further imbalance of the international energy markets, but we are taking measures to hedge our interests against the risks," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Kyiv has secured promises from the West for deliveries of modern battle tanks to fight Russian forces and is now asking for long-range missiles and fighter jets.

Pakistan threatens Wikipedia with ban over content

AFP
Islamabad

Pakistan has threatened to ban Wikipedia if it does not remove "blasphemous content" from its website. Social media giants Facebook and YouTube have been blocked in the past over content deemed blasphemous in Pakistan.

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) said on Wednesday that the

website had until late yesterday to heed the warning, without elaborating on the content in question.

In the meantime, Wikipedia would be "degraded", disrupting and slowing access to the free online encyclopedia, which gets billions of views each month.

"Given the intentional failure on part of the platform to comply with the directions of the PTA, the services of Wikipedia have been degraded for 48 hours with the direction to block/remove the reported contents," the notice said. "In case of non-

compliance by Wikipedia the platform will be blocked within Pakistan."

The website has previously faced restrictions on some of its pages.

Freedom of speech advocates have long criticised what they say is creeping government censorship and control of Pakistan's Internet and printed and electronic media.

"The ban is disproportionate, unconstitutional, and quite ridiculous," said Usama Khilji, a digital rights activist. "This will impact students, academia, the healthcare

sector, researchers, and downgrade investor confidence in Pakistan due to the uncertainty and arbitrariness of censorship."

Wikipedia did not immediately respond to a request for comment from AFP.

Pakistan blocked YouTube from 2012-2016 after it carried a film about the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that led to violent protests across the Muslim world.

In recent years, the country has also blocked the wildly popular video-sharing app TikTok several times over "indecent" and "immoral" content.

European police arrested 42 suspects and seized guns, drugs and millions in cash, after cracking another encrypted online messaging service used by criminals. Dutch law enforcement said yesterday.

Police launched raids on 79 premises in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands following an investigation that started back in September 2020 and led to the shutting down of the covert Exclu Messenger service.

Exclu is just the latest encrypted online chat service to be unlocked by law enforcement.

In 2021 investigators broke into Sky ECC – another "secure" app used by criminal gangs.

After police and prosecutors got into the Exclu secret communications system, they were able to read the messages passed between criminals for five months before the raids, said Dutch police.

"Those arrested include users of the app, as well as its owners and controllers," their statement added.

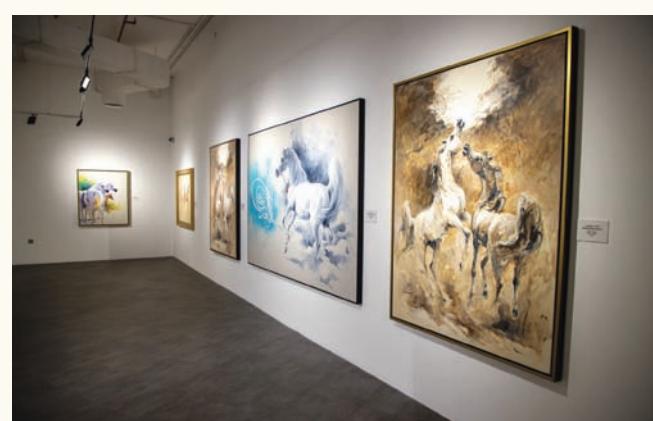
Police in France, Italy and Sweden, as well as Europol and Eurojust, its justice agency twin, also took part in the investigation.

The police raids uncovered at least two drug labs, one cocaine-processing facility, several kilogrammes of drugs, €4mn (\$4.3mn) in cash, luxury goods and guns, Dutch police said. - **AFP**

European police arrest 42 after cracking covert messaging app



The events and activities taking place alongside the KIAHF-2023 are seeing plenty of footfall.



KIAHF-2023 continues to see huge public turnout

A huge public turnout continues to follow the various cultural events on the sidelines of the 3rd edition of Katara International Arabian Horse Festival (KIAHF-2023), organised by Katara – the Cultural Village under the patronage of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani.

The events accompanying the KIAHF-2023, which runs until February 11, include about 35 activities, ranging from exhibitions, art workshops, artistic performances to various competitions.

Today, when the championship finals of the Arabian Peninsula show of the KIAHF-2023 will be taking place from 3.30pm, Katara will open an exhibition by Peter Upton, *The Journey ... the Tale of the Arabian Horse*, at 8.30pm in Building 13, Katara.

The exhibition of works by Upton, who is well-known for his paintings depicting the Arabian horse, presents a large collection of his paintings.

The waterfront of Katara continues to receive families engaged in various art

workshops for children of various age groups.

There are six artistic workshops – ranging from horse-related handicraft, cutting and pasting, sewing horse dolls, papier-mache, and nails and thread – have seen a great turnout of children.

Artwork by artist Tariq Maarkesh has been receiving positive reviews from the visitors of the KIAHF-2023.

The life-size horse figure is decorated with about 5,000 small pieces of glass.

The "Interactive Mirrors", showcasing top horse paintings have been introduced for the first time at Katara.

There are also eight artists who are painting a mural, measuring 75m x 1m, divided into two parts, wood and glass.

Hall (1) in Building (47) of Katara includes the "Symphony of Authenticity" exhibition by plastic artist Ali al-Mimar.

There are 15 plastic paintings in which the artist has used oil and acrylic colours as part of a artistic work that embodies everything related to the Arabian horse.

Al-Mimar's creative work is character-



ised by a distinguished artistic style with high accuracy and breathtaking aesthetics in various styles – whether realistic, influential or abstract, in which he highlighted and skillfully uses colour effects to form a mixture of beauty and creativity.

Al-Mimar, born in Baghdad in 1965, began his art studies at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 1985 and graduated

with distinction, and has since participated in many international exhibitions.

He is considered as one of the top artists in the world for his depiction of the Arabian horse.

His works reflect the magic of the originality of Arabian horses – mixed with realism and romantic imagination, a Katara statement added.

Competitors impress ahead of Arabian horse show finals



Snapshots from the events yesterday.



Super stallions and mares along with junior colts and fillies were in the spotlight as the Katara International Arabian Horse Festival (KIAHF-2023) continued to showcase finest purebreds in the Arabian Peninsula Horse Show at the brilliantly lit-up arena at the Katara Esplanade yesterday.

The third day of Arabian Peninsula qualifying classes had purebred Arabian mares and stallions on show in six categories from ages 4 to 11+ years.

The amazingly beautiful horses were applauded by the horse-owners, breeders and equestrian aficionados.

Doha Stud's mares Safiya Al Rayyan and Zawaher Fila claimed the first places in the Mares 4-6 years and Mares 7-10 years categories, respectively.

Sheikh Nawaf bin Nasser al-Thani's Maisa Al Nasser, of Al Nasser Stud, was declared as best in the Mares 11+ years category.

D Omnia of Dubai Arabian Horse Stud was a close second.

Mesfer Mohamed M A al-Hajri-owned Deema Al Nasser finished third.

Excelling in the day's show among stallions was D Memzer of Dubai Arabian Horse Stud, in the Stallions 4-6 Years category.

In a statement, HE Sheikh Ahmed bin Noah al-Thani, secretary-general of the Qatar Equestrian Federation and Modern Pentathlon (QEFP&MP), applauded the large participation of horse owners from within and outside Qatar during the qualifying portion, which saw strong competition with top posi-

tions being decided by close margins.

HE Sheikh Ahmed stressed that the KIAHF-2023 has become one of the largest and largest festivals in the region, and carries a high reputation.

The QEFP&MP official explained that the success achieved by the festival in the past two versions had had a great impact on the owners' keenness to take part in this edition.

HE Sheikh Ahmed also praised the great co-operation between the parties organising the festival, foremost of which is the Katara – the Cultural Village, with the Qatar Equestrian Federation and the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC).

He also expressed appreciation for the efforts of the Qatari cadres overseeing the organisation of the festival, as well as the supervision of the international arbitration committee, which has a long experience in the field of horse shows.

Horses at the KIAHF-2023 are judged by a team of international judges of the ECAHO (European Conference of Arabian Horse Organisation) according to international rules and standards.

The KIAHF-2023 Arabian Peninsula Show team of judges is made up of Elyas Ebrahim Faraj (Bahrain), Maritime Van Hee (Belgium), Ahmed Sobhi Hamza (Egypt), Klaus Beste G (Germany), Maria Annarotone Ferraroni (Italy), Majed al-Mehyawi (Saudi Arabia), Mohamed Machmoum (Morocco), Sufan Taha al-Husseini (Palestine), Alicja Poszepczynska (Poland), Anna Stefaniuk (Poland), Irina Stigler



(Russia), and Basil Jadaan (Syria).

The excellence of purebred Arabian horses at the KIAHF-2023 are judged based on type, body structure, head and neck, legs, muscles and movement.

The mares should have amazing balance, poise and beauty, while the stallions must have good structure, strength and excellent type.

Today will see the championship

classes of the Arabian Peninsula Horse Show, starting at 3.30pm in the following order: Yearling Fillies' Championship (Class YFC), Yearling Colts' Championships (Class YCC), Junior Fillies' Championship (Class JFC), Junior Colts' Championship (Class JCC), Senior Mares' Championship (Class SMC), and Senior Stallions' Championship (Class SSC).



An activity from DLD yesterday.

Doha Learning Days Festival to be an annual standalone event

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Accompanied by their peers without disabilities, the session will emphasise their organisational mission and vision of fostering friendship and inclusion, and building awareness of inclusivity and diversity.

Shahid Daulah, learning ecosystems associate at WISE, said: "Doha Learning Days strives to make experiential learning accessible and beneficial to people of all ages and backgrounds in the wider community."

"With the festival, WISE aims to cultivate a positive experience in which learning can have wider applicability in our everyday lives and within a community atmosphere," he said.

Amplifying the festival's aim to equip youth with beneficial skills, Microsoft will challenge participants to replicate stadiums in Qatar and compete as a team using the game-based platform, Minecraft Education.

Participants can unleash their creativity in a fun guided event by Trinity Talent Qatar, by following an artist step by step in creating their own work of art on a variety of media.

An exclusive masterclass with the six 2022 WISE Awards winners taking place today will explore holistic solutions in K-12 education and community action through education, an opportunity for teachers and practitioners to acquire practical tools and methods from a remarkable group of innovators.