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Amir, Deputy Amir send congratulations to Ireland president

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani sent cables of congratulation to Ireland President Michael Daniel Higgins on the occasion of his country's National Day. HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent a similar cable of congratulations to Ireland Prime Minister Leo Varadkar on the occasion. (QNA)

Hassad Food named official partner of Expo 2023 Doha

Expo 2023 Doha signed a partnership agreement with Hassad Food on the sidelines of the 10th edition of AgriteQ, Qatar's major agricultural event. Announced during a ceremony held at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre, the new official partner in agricultural investment will work with the expo to cement its position as a leading food security and agriculture-focused platform. Page 2

Turkiye, Hungary put Finland on course to join Nato

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ended months of diplomatically charged delays yesterday and asked parliament to quickly back Finland's bid to join Nato. A simultaneous decision by fellow holdout Hungary to schedule a Finnish ratification vote for March 27 means the US-led defence alliance will likely grow to 31 nations within a few months. Page 11

Ex-Pakistan PM appears in court

Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan appeared at court yesterday after an arrest warrant against him was suspended, allowing him to end a days-long holdout at his residence. Khan was ousted by a no-confidence vote last year. Attempts by police this week to arrest the 70-year-old former international cricket star in the eastern city of Lahore led to pitched battles with supporters outside his home. Page 7

Kite Festival concludes today

The second day of the Kite Festival saw a dazzling array of uniquely patterned kites at the Museum of Islamic Art Park Hills. The three-day Kite Festival features teams from France, India, Indonesia, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkiye, the UK and the US. The festival concludes today. PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam Page 12



ICC issues arrest warrant for Putin over war crimes in Ukraine

Reuters Amsterdam

The International Criminal Court (ICC) yesterday issued an arrest warrant against Russian President Vladimir Putin, accusing him of being responsible for the war crime of illegal deportation of children from Ukraine. Moscow has repeatedly denied accusations that its forces have committed atrocities during its one-year invasion of its neighbour and the Kremlin branded the court decision as "null and void" with respect to Russia. Neither Russia nor Ukraine are members of the ICC, but Kyiv granted it jurisdiction to prosecute crimes committed on its territory. The tribunal, with 123 member states, has no police force of its own and relies on member countries to detain and transfer suspects to The Hague for trial. While it is unlikely that Putin will end up in court any time soon, the warrant means that he could be arrested and sent to The Hague if travelling to any ICC member states. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia found the very questions raised by the ICC "outrageous and unacceptable". Asked if Putin now feared travelling to countries that recognised the ICC, Peskov said: "I have nothing to add on this subject. That's all we want to say." Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on her Telegram channel that the arrest warrants had "no meaning for our country" as it is not a party to the Rome Statute, the treaty underpinning the world's permanent war crimes tribunal. In its first warrant for Ukraine, the ICC called for Putin's arrest on suspicion of unlawful deportation of children and unlawful transfer of people from the territory of Ukraine to the Russian Federation. "The crimes were allegedly committed in Ukrainian occupied territory at least from February 24, 2022. There are reasonable grounds to believe that Putin bears individual criminal responsibility for the aforementioned crimes," it said. The court also issued a warrant yesterday for Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights, on the same charges. She responded to the news with irony, according to RIA Novosti agency: "It's great that the international community has appreciated the work to help the children of our country." Ukraine has said more than 16,000 children have been illegally transferred to Russia or Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine.



Russian President Vladimir Putin.

3,000 delegates to attend Mideast healthcare forum beginning today

The Middle East Forum for Quality and Safety in Healthcare 2023 will officially open today at Sheraton Grand, Doha. HE Dr Hanan Mohamed al-Kuwari, Minister of Public Health, will attend and speak at the opening ceremony of the forum and more than 3,000 healthcare professionals are participating in the activities of the 2023 edition of the forum. Organised by Hamad Medical Corporation in co-operation with the Institute for Healthcare Improvement in the US, it is considered the largest forum of its kind in the region dedicated to the quality of healthcare. Following the opening session, there will be a plenary session titled 'Redefining Leadership for Health: leading in Extraordinary Times' delivered by Dr Don Berwick, a renowned clinical professor of paediatrics and healthcare policy. The panel will highlight how healthcare executives and clinical leaders in recent times have had to address a range of important matters affecting health and care beyond their classical roles in delivering medical care. Such topics include, for example, climate change, social determinants of health, equity, workforce burnout and preparedness for 21st century threats. This lecture will explore structures, processes, and cultural changes that can support this broadened portfolio. It aims to identify and explain newer concerns about determinants of health that today's healthcare leaders must address; identify some best practices in addressing social determinants of health and explain healthcare's footprint on climate change and ways to mitigate that impact. Another prominent session on the opening day is "How Qatar's unique approach to healthcare resilience and teamwork helped deliver the best World Cup." The participants at the session are: Dr Ahmed al-Mohamed, Dr Abdullatif al-Khal, Dr Muna al-Maslamani, Prof Roberto Bertolini, Dr Mariam Abdulmalik, Mariam al-Mutawa and Dr Robert Owen. The forum in its 10th edition this year has the participation of a group of the most prominent international and local healthcare experts. It focuses on the issue of the healthcare system's ability to adapt in exceptional circumstances, through five learning paths. They are: Healthcare Resilience in Extraordinary Times with learning tracks on Improvement Science; Person-Centred Care; Flow, Safety and Value Improvement; Leadership, Resilience and Sustainability and Population Health. The forum, which started from March 16 with pre-conference sessions and activities, is being held both in-person and virtually with an unrivalled line-up of international and local experts. The activities during the forum so far included field tours during which participants learnt about the key role played by the healthcare sector in hosting the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. The field trips focused on specialised care for athletes during the tournament and preparedness to respond to major incidents during the World Cup. This year's forum will connect a large number of physicians, nurses, quality leaders, healthcare administrators, hospital executives, patient and family advisers and other allied health professionals.

Middle East Forum on Quality & Safety in Healthcare 2023

16-19 March, Doha

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Artists in Residence showcase talents at Fire Station

By Joseph Varghese Staff Reporter

The Fire Station has opened its doors to the works of a group of Artists in Residence who are showcasing a number of artworks at the Open Studios of the museum as part of its Spring 2023 programme. This is the 7th cohort of Artists in Residence at the museum and there are 15 of them in the present group. The participating artists are: Abdulaziz Yousef; Sharefa Almanna; Charlene Kasdorf; Lucy Martin; Abdulrahman AlMuftah; Arman Mansouri; Noor AlKharaan; Aya Battiri; Luke Webb; Mohamed Abdullah Alhammadi; Hind al-Obaidli; Simon Mortimer, N&LS; Fatima Javed and Yousef Fakhroo. In addition, there are four artists showcasing their works in the category of Curator in Residence. They are: Ahmad Soliman; Abdullah al-Mutairi; Jumanah Abbas and Rola Khayyat. Speaking to Gulf Times, several Artists in Residence explained their concepts and how they are inspired by their thought and dreams. Qatari artist, al-Obaidli said that she paints portraits and underwater figures. "I am interested in portraying how the human body changes in certain environment and I am using water as an example of how environment can be suitable or unsuitable," she said. "Most of my ideas come from my dreams. I read books like fiction and I dream about it. I go to bed and dream about them. Once I wake up, I write notes about it and some of these notes turn to be paintings or sculptures or installations," said, Arman Mansouri, who left his commercial pilot training to become an artist. AlKharaan said that she took to painting to tell the Qatari story and society capturing some of the elements of the culture and religion while Battiri is highlighting her interest in film making especially telling the stories of Palestine. "My main focus is sculptor. It also has some certain multidisciplinary practices that include some painting and several other things from fantasy. It caters to people of all ages and accessible to everyone. It is contemporary art with some serious message," said, Webb, an artist from the UK. Another Qatari artist, Almanna said that she was inspired by a Khaliji song to paint a tree of clouds.



Some of the works of artist, Luke Webb. PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam

turn to be paintings or sculptures or installations," said, Arman Mansouri, who left his commercial pilot training to become an artist. AlKharaan said that she took to painting to tell the Qatari story and society capturing some of the elements of the culture and religion while Battiri is highlighting her interest in film making especially telling the stories of Palestine. "My main focus is sculptor. It also has some certain multidisciplinary practices that include some painting and several other things from fantasy. It caters to people of all ages and accessible to everyone. It is contemporary art with some serious message," said, Webb, an artist from the UK. Another Qatari artist, Almanna said that she was inspired by a Khaliji song to paint a tree of clouds.

"The line in the song 'I am picking the stars for you' made me paint a tree. I initially picked up the idea of a girl climbing the tree to pick up stars and started drawing the concept. Then I thought it must be magical tree and I am working on picturing the tree. So I came up with the idea of a tree made of clouds and I am working on it," said Almanna. The exhibition is open to the public who will also have the opportunity to visit the artists from the Artist in Residence programme in its 7th edition as well as the Curators in Residence, and other programmes such as Ruwad Artists and the Fannon/Emerge Artist in Residence. The event will give access to the studios to meet the artists and get a close look at their artworks and current projects. Page 12



Al-Ansari meets US deputy assistant secretary of state



Adviser to Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, and official spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr Majed bin Mohamed al-Ansari met in Washington with US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Peninsula Affairs Daniel Benaim. The two sides discussed the strategic relations between Qatar and the US, and the latest developments in a number of regional and international issues, most notably negotiations with Iran. **(QNA)**

Chief of staff meets Egyptian counterpart



HE the Chief of Staff of the Qatar Armed Forces Staff Lieutenant-General (Pilot) Salem bin Hamad bin Aqeel al-Nabit met yesterday with Chief of Staff of the Egyptian Armed Forces Osama Askar, during his visit to Egypt. The meeting dealt with discussing issues of joint interest, bilateral co-operation and the means to enhance them. The meeting also included the first meeting of the Qatari-Egyptian military committee. **(QNA)**



Military Strategic Partnership summit concludes in Doha

Military Strategic Partnership Conference 2023 concluded yesterday. The five-day conference was hosted by Qatar in co-operation with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato).

A total of 37 countries that are partners and allies of Nato took part in the conference, which shed light on new ways of enhancing that partnership, particularly given the political and economic challenges the world is seeing. The conference participants focused on the significant growth and transformation that Nato has witnessed since 2014,

and the speed of this transformation after overcoming the Covid-19 crisis and the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The participants also reviewed the features of the alliance's strategy, and the development of proactive plans that help speed up military decision-making, and contribute to good preparation for emergency events, noting at the same time the strong participation in this conference, which reflects the assistance of the international community in implementing the law and maintaining international peace and security. **(QNA)**

Camel race shows richness of Qatari culture: Shell



The 2023 Camel Race season, which culminated with His Highness The Amir's main race, was the best ever, said Shell, who are a lead sponsor of the event. Shell's Misfer al-Bidaiwi, vice-president of Pearl GTL, said: "Every year, I look forward to His Highness The Amir's main race, and this year proved to be one of the best. I praise the professionalism of the Camel Racing Organising Committee for putting on an exciting, well-executed festival. Shell is proud to support this culturally important sport of Qatar which shows the richness of Qatari culture." Qatar Shell contributes to a variety of social and cultural activities in Qatar and understands the importance of preserving the country's traditions. "Our involvement in this race is just one of the many initiatives Shell supports, either through sponsorship or social outreach, which makes me proud to be Qatari and to work for a company that supports and preserves our heritage," continued Misfer. His Highness The Amir's Main Race - the most prestigious race of the year - took place at the Al Shahaniya Camel Racetrack on March 16.

QNA

Nouakchott

Qatar participated in the 49th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC) in Mauritania's capital Nouakchott.

Qatar was represented in the meeting by HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi.

In his speech, HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs extended thanks to the government of Mauritania for its hospitality, preparation and successful organisation of the work of the 49th session of the Council of OIC Foreign Ministers, and to Pakistan for its distinguished organisation of the work of the previous session.

HE al-Muraikhi also thanked Secretary-General of OIC Hissein Ibrahim Taha and the staff for the good preparation and organisation for the success of this session.

He expressed Qatar's solidarity with the brothers in Turkiye and Syria, who are still suffering from the effects of the earthquake disaster.

Qatar has provided urgent humanitarian and relief aid to them, and will continue to provide more, he said, calling on OIC member states to provide more support for the Turkish government's efforts to overcome the effects of this disaster, and to provide assistance to the Syrian people.

HE al-Muraikhi added that this session is taking place amid the complex international challenges due to political crises and conflicts, the faltering efforts to achieve sustainable development, the food security crisis, the exacerbation of the climate crisis, and the continued vulnerability

of countries to the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Qatar always affirms the importance of giving priority to assisting developing countries, foremost of which are Islamic countries, to achieve the sustainable development goals, which are essential for political and social stability and prosperity, he said, highlighting that Qatar is proud to continue its active role in upholding the values and principles of co-operation, partnership and solidarity by helping countries, peoples, and communities suffering from economic crises, conflicts, poverty, and debt.

In this context, HE al-Muraikhi highlighted Qatar's hosting of the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in early March, a gathering that saw high-level participation from various countries of the world and led to the announcement of pledges of more than \$1.3bn in the form of grants, investments, loans, aid, development projects and technical support, with a focus on implementing the Doha Program of Action (DPOA) and the Doha Political Declaration, which includes areas of co-operation in the field of development and reducing the consequences of economic crises and natural disasters in the LDCs within the next 10 years.

Coinciding the hosting of LDCs, the UN House was opened March 4 in Doha, which includes offices of 12 international organisations whose activities cover peace-building, counter-terrorism, development and humanitarian support, he added, highlighting that other international organisations are expected to join the UN House in Doha.

He noted that Qatar is making efforts, through its presidency of the Executive Council of the



HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi attends the 49th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC) in Mauritania's capital Nouakchott.

Islamic Organisation for Food Security (IOFS), in the continuous search to develop technological and research solutions that help agricultural activities achieve food security and address environmental challenges and sustainability, by taking advantage of renewable energy and technologies for processing by-products, recycling waste and using treated water and progress in monitoring technologies and artificial intelligence, expressing Qatar's praise for the announcement of Dec 11 as an annual IOFS Day.

HE al-Muraikhi expressed the pride of the State of Qatar as the first Islamic country to host the FIFA World Cup 2022 and the outstanding success of the tournament, which, through the participation of more than a million fans and hundreds of millions of followers around the world, deepened the interaction of civilisations and cultures and highlighted Islamic culture in its best

form and enhanced the image of the State of Qatar, the generosity of its people and its Islamic values.

HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs said: "The Palestinian issue remains the first central issue for the Arab and Islamic nations, and the State of Qatar stresses its positions in support of all international efforts aimed at reaching a solution to the Palestinian issue."

He added: "We express our belief that a just and comprehensive peace and stability in the Middle East will not be achieved until after the Palestinian people obtain their legitimate rights, foremost of which are the right of return of refugees and self-determination, an end to illegal occupation and illegal settlement operations, and the establishment of an independent State of Palestine, with east Jerusalem as its capital, and on the basis of the two-state solution and the Arab peace initiative and in implementation of

the resolutions of international legitimacy, in addition to ending the Israeli occupation of all occupied Arab lands, including the Syrian Golan."

From this standpoint, he added, Qatar condemns the repeated attacks on the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque by the occupation forces and Israeli settlers, and stresses that these attacks constitute a flagrant violation of international law and a provocation of the feelings of Muslims, with Qatar refusal to prejudice the existing historical and legal status of Islamic and Christian holy places in occupied East Jerusalem.

He affirmed the State of Qatar's condemnation in the strongest terms of the statements of the Israeli Minister of Finance, in which he called to erase a Palestinian town, saying that Qatar also condemn the repeated aggression against Palestinian refugee camps and plans to expand illegal settlements.

Host of activities draw visitors to AgriteQ

QNA

Doha

The 10th Qatar International Agricultural Exhibition (AgriteQ) 2023 witnessed a great turnout by visitors as a large number of citizens and residents visited the pavilions of national and foreign companies, which offered many food commodities to the public at special prices.

Many visitors expressed their happiness with the exhibition, which is being organised by the Ministry of Municipality between March 15-19 at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Center.

They expressed their admiration for the pavilions that introduce the methods of agriculture and animal production, whether in national or foreign companies, and pointed out that it is a unique experience. Qatar International Agricultural Exhibition aims to support agricultural development projects, food security, achieve sufficiency and enhance environmental protection in Qatar, and provide an opportunity for those interested, participants and decision-makers in the public and private sectors to meet



Glimpses from AgriteQ 2023.

and exchange relevant experiences and knowledge locally and internationally, display products, equipment and technologies and stand on indicators and developments in the sector of agriculture in Qatar.

Qatar International Agricultural Exhibition comes at the forefront of the comprehensive platforms that provide players in the agricultural sector with the opportunity to explore the latest trends and developments and win business opportunities in this vital sector. In this regard, the Pub-

lic Works Authority (Ashghal) participates in the exhibition as a golden sponsor and presents its most important projects and initiatives, including the implementation of green buildings, recycling of demolition waste, excavation and car tyres, and its use in the implementation of road projects and wastewater treatment for use in irrigation, beautification and cultivation of green spaces, in addition to some awareness campaigns that seek to improve behaviours in dealing with wastewater. Hassad

Food Company is also participating in the exhibition as a golden sponsor. The company's pavilion received visitors, and they were briefed on the expansion plans that the company intends to carry out during the coming period. The event hosts a group of scientists, consultants, researchers, government officials, experts from the private agricultural sector, and experts from the academic sector.

The exhibition dealt with a number of initiatives, opportunities and projects in the agri-

cultural sector around the world. Speakers from El Salvador, the Russian Federation, Kyrgyzstan, Kenya, Iran and Kazakhstan reviewed their experiences and expertise in the field of agriculture and food security.

The activities included reviewing some scientific papers from the Ministry of Municipality, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, companies operating in the agricultural sector, and some scientists in national universities and research centres.



Hassad Food named official partner of Expo 2023 Doha

Expo 2023 Doha signed a partnership agreement with Hassad Food on the sidelines of the 10th edition of AgriteQ, Qatar's major agricultural event. Announced during a ceremony held at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre, the new official partner in agricultural investment will work with the expo to cement its position as a leading food security and agriculture-focused platform. Expo 2023 Doha is set to run between October 2023 and March 2024 in Al Bidda Park with an aim to attract over 3mn visitors and will be the first of its kind to be held in Qatar, the Middle East, and North Africa. Hassad Food will join the Expo 2023 Doha as an official partner, showcasing the country's success in strengthening its food security over the recent years and spreading its know-how globally. Hassad Food chief executive officer, Mohamed Badr al-Sadah, commented: "We are pleased to sign an agreement with the Ministry of Municipality to join Expo 2023 Doha as an official partner. The event will be a global platform that introduces visitors from all over the world to the outstanding achievements made by the different companies in Qatar. We should also have the opportunity to exchange experiences and improve communication with many of the international institutions and countries participating at the event." Furthermore, al-Sadah pointed out that the pavilion of Hassad Food will highlight the main local and international achievements of the company in the field of food and agricultural investment. Hassad Food will also share its future plans and explain to visitors the company's role in supporting Qatar's food security. Expo 2023 Doha secretary general, Mohamed Ali Alkhoori, added: "Agriculture and food security are at the core of Expo 2023 Doha, set to become the main highlight for Qatar in 2023 and 2024. With the support of Hassad Food, we will showcase Qatar's experience in ensuring food security on the national level and foster the global discussion on this topic at the Expo 2023 Doha".

'Expo Doha 2023 to attract 3mn visitors'

Around 3mn visitors are expected to come to Qatar for Expo Doha 2023, set to be held from October 2, 2023 to March 28, 2024, the event's general secretary engineer Mohamed Ali al-Khori told the Central Municipal Council, as reported by local Arabic daily *Arrayan*. Expo Doha 2023 enjoys the participation of 80 countries, he explained while pointing out that this is considered the most environment-friendly major event as part of Qatar Vision 2023. The motto of the event "Green Desert, Better Environment" aims at encouraging and inspiring people

to adopt innovative solutions and limit the spread of desertification. Al-Khori noted that the 179-day expo at Al Bidda Park covers four sub-topics: modern agriculture, technology and innovation, environmental awareness, and sustainability. It is also the first edition of the expo that will be held within a desert climate. Expo Doha 2023 will have three main areas that include the cultural area of 500,000sq m, family area of 500,000sq m, and an international area of 700,000sq m. The family area will host many activities

and events including sponsors' area, crafts market, sculpture garden, sustainable agriculture, greenhouse expo, and others. The cultural area includes a conference centre, an environmental centre, the cultural arena, biodiversity and agriculture museum, photography museum, fungus world, recycled plastic arts exhibition, botanic gardens, rock desert, and a restaurant. The intentional area t includes the expo building, the green tunnel, the innovation centre, aquaponics, culture bazar, internal gardens, the administrative building and others, al-Khori added.

QatArt Handmade Community holds 60th market at Katara

By Peter Alagos
Business Reporter

QatArt Handmade Community recently held its 60th market at Katara - the Cultural Village.

QatArt committee member Janiththri Perera said the market was "a great opportunity" for community members to come together and share their experiences, ideas, and products. She said many people attended the event, including small business owners, entrepreneurs, hobbyists, and more.

"The market also provided an opportunity for people to get to know each other better and build relationships through networking. It also allowed them to learn more about the different products that were being sold at the event. The vendors offered a wide range of items, such as handmade jewellery, artwork, clothing, and other items.

"We invited few vendors as visitors to join our market because we wanted to give a chance for young kids who have entrepreneurial skills, some of whom already have experience when they joined QatArt's 'FIFA World Cup' market last year," Perera told Gulf Times.

Perera also said the market was highlighted by a 'charity table', which was led by a 'visitor vendor', as well as the first-time participation of a 'kid entrepreneur'. QatArt committee members, Jaya Elizabeth Jacob and Noha Aly Abdel-Moneim, facilitated workshops for kids during the event, along with two other members. The workshops were on bead art, abstract painting, blowing technique, stenciling of geometry shapes in fabric bags, and felt bird making.

QatArt membership co-ordinator Somaiya Ansari offered henna art and free Ramadan lan-



Members of QatArt Handmade Community during the group's 60th market held recently at Katara - the Cultural Village. **Supplied photo**



QatArt's 60th market at Katara offered a wide range of items, such as handmade jewellery, artwork, clothing, and other handmade products. **PICTURES:** Peter Alagos

tern-making for kids. QatArt's Sara Yaacoub, on the other hand, offered face painting, which was enjoyed by many children.

QatArt's new member Marwa Labib said: "I'm beyond thrilled to have joined the incredible QatArt Community. I was referred here by a good friend and the experience has definitely been worthwhile. "We celebrated our 60th market and it was nothing short of amazing. Each artist brought something truly unique to the

table, and it was a pleasure getting to know them all. The leadership team worked hard to secure an excellent location within Katara, and it was so wonderful to feel the beautiful energy among us all."

Another new member, Sara Bassiouny, said: "The market was a very nice event; the event was beyond perfection and the huge efforts that came from all the organisers were very well-felt and seen. I was surrounded by amazing, kind, and talented vendors.



The whole community is lovely. Overall, it was a successful event that brought together members of the community in one place." Shakira Vadakke said: "I enjoyed the 60th market. I can definitely say it was one of the best markets I attended because of its amazing vibe, lively crowd, and unique handmade products. Each item is a creation of love and creativity." QatArt is planning to organise another handmade market at Katara during Ramadan and, if the weather permits, another market might be held in April, Perera added.



The event provided an opportunity to help Qatar's skateboarding community flourish.

PSG's Fire Station event enthralled skateboarders

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

The unveiling of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) Football Club's newest collection at the Fire Station in Doha on Wednesday provided an opportunity to help Qatar's skateboarding community flourish, according to Clown Skateboards co-founders.

"We hope it's gonna grow, we've met a lot of people here and it's special, a lot of local skaters they're very accommodating, they're very nice," Jeff Boardman, also the company curator, told *Gulf Times* on the sidelines of the event during Qatar Creates Week 2023. "But skating in general across the world is a very acceptable community and it doesn't see any barriers. I think we could all learn a little bit from skating because you learn to deal with things together, and it's about enjoyment together and you connect with people," he explained.

Co-founder Vikas Malik shared Boardman's view saying that one of the key drivers for the celebration at the Fire Station - in partnership with a female artist - is to help educate and empower women. The skateboarding event happened along with the unveiling of the newest collection from Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) Football Club, stemming from their collaboration with the UK brand, Clown Skateboards. Qatar Creates is the year-round national cultural movement that curates, promotes, and celebrates the diversity of cultural activities in the country.

Inspired by the art of calligraphy artist Fatima al-Sharshani, the Doha capsule range uses a unique pattern that reflects Qatar's creative culture, and forms part of the PSG x Clown Skateboard Collection. It highlights cities such as



Vikas Malik and Jeff Boardman at the event on Wednesday. **PICTURES:** Thajudheen



A group of girl skaters at the event.

Paris, New York, and Los Angeles; and now, Doha - locations where PSG maintains a year-round presence through its flagship retail stores.

Malik stated that Clown Skateboards "want to teach girls how to skateboard so there's no block or obstacles for them to learn and thanks to Qatar and Qatar Creates."

"It's fantastic to be invited here. Jeff and I started this a long time ago and we really believe in putting money back into the community and help-

ing people by doing what we love, we love doing this and watching everyone benefit from it," he said.

Malik underlined the importance of partnering with institutions and local skaters to help popularise such an endeavour, providing "what we can in terms of equipment, skills and knowledge."

This unique celebration at Fire Station provides free skateboarding and art lessons that will continue until April 1, according to the organisers.



Prof Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Sulaiti along with other dignitaries.

Katara launches mural by Dominican artist

Prof Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Sulaiti, general manager of Katara - the Cultural Village Foundation, has launched a mural by the Dominican artist, Jerson Jimenez at a facade of Katara building 16 in the presence of Dominican ambassador Georges Bahsa Hazim and a number of other diplomats to Qatar.

Prof al-Sulaiti said the launch of the mural is part of Katara's project to decorate the buildings of Katara with artistic works inspired by different cultures and arts of people. He added that Katara has always been keen to be a meeting point for different cultures and people. He noted that there will be number of artistic activities besides the mural to enhance friendly communication between Qatar and Dominican Republic.

Ambassador Hazim said that the launch of the mural is part of the Dominican week held annually to affirm the friendly relationship between Qatar and the Dominican Republic, expressing his thanks and appreciation for Katara for its role to enhance bilateral co-operation between the countries. He pointed out that the mural depicts the Bayahibe Rose (Pereskia



The mural on display at Building No 16 at Katara.

quisquenyana, which is considered the national rose of the Dominican Republic).

In the meantime, artist Jimenez expressed his happiness to launch his mural at Katara, stressing that he opted for using bright acrylic colours to enhance the spirit of love, joy and positive energy.



Some of the participants in the meeting.

ConocoPhillips, QSTP co-host meeting of Petroleum Environment Research Forum

ConocoPhillips and Qatar Science and Technology Park (QSTP) co-hosted the 106th meeting of Petroleum Environment Research Forum (PERF) under the theme 'Circular Economy in the Energy Industry: Converting Waste By-Products into Valuable Products'.

Managing Director of the Global Water Sustainability Center (GWSC) at ConocoPhillips Qatar and a member of the PERF Board of Directors Dr Samer Adham and QSTP Relationship Manager Essa al-Jamali opened this year's edition of the PERF. The event included workshops on global projects, innovative research, and case studies in the areas of beneficial water reuse, waste management, and emerging technologies.

Representatives from the industry, including Qatargas and ConocoPhillips Qatar led panel discussions and project brainstorming sessions and discussed the best means to achieve the circular economy within the energy industry.

They examined the Qatargas Wastewater Recycling and Reduction (WRR) project, the various integrated waste management approaches adopted by Qatargas, and innovative technologies within the energy sector. Additionally, participating companies had the chance to discuss the different means to support the environment via waste by-product recycling techniques, with the overall goal of promoting circular economy principles in the energy industry.

Commenting on the event, Dr Adham said: "We are proud to be hosting the 106th meeting of PERF. This edition's agenda is packed with productive dialogue to generate meaningful ideas and projects to reduce the energy industry's environmental impact and achieve a circular economy that negates wastage. Our panel of experts is determined to contribute toward enhancing Qatar's water security and safeguarding its environment toward the achievement of Qatar's National Vision 2030, as well as bol-

stering the country's efforts to ramp up the development of a circular economy in its growing energy sector and working toward creating developments."

Executive Director of QSTP Yosouf al-Salehi stated: "As a globally renowned technology development hub, we are honoured to host this year's edition of the PERF with our anchor member company, ConocoPhillips, and drive discussions forward on the creation of a circular economy in the energy sector. At QSTP, we believe that anything is possible when the best ideas are given opportunities to deliver impact, and we will always provide a platform for knowledge exchange and positive dialogue on issues that impact Qatar, the environment, and our future. Discussing the environmental footprint of various industries, especially the energy industry, is crucial today and it is imperative that we drive productive discourse to create the solutions to some of our most pressing problems."



Portuguese community gathering



The Portuguese ambassador to Qatar, Paulo Neves Pocinho, recently received at the embassy a community group in a celebration event on Portugal. The event featured the presentation of the new interim management team of the Portuguese Business Council and the new initiative group 'Gente da nossa terra' (People of our Land).

Annual food carnival at PISQ



Pakistan International School Qatar (PISQ) held its 'Annual Food Carnival.' Students set up stalls with a variety of food items. The event was aimed at inspiring children to eat good food by providing them with an opportunity to cook it themselves. Principal Nargis Raza Otho opened the day.



PPS student wins badminton titles

Samiha Shetty, a class VIII student of Podar Pearl School (PPS) Doha, won the Under 15 Girls Singles and the Under 15 Girls team event at the QBF National Championship 2023 held at Middle East International School, Doha, in February 2023. She also teamed up with a partner from Dubai to lift the winners title in the Under 15 Girls Doubles category of the Karnataka State Ranking Tournament held at Mysore, India, in January 2023. Samiha is also the winner of Under 15 Girls Singles and runner-up Under 17 Girls Singles of QBA National Circuit Tournament held in Doha from October 12-15, 2022. Her other titles are winner of Under 15 GS, U15 GD and runner-up GS U17 of India Cup Badminton Tournament held in Doha from August 28 to September 2, 2022.



GU-Q hosts public talk on Israel's apartheid against Palestinians

Georgetown University in Qatar (GU-Q), a Qatar Foundation partner, recently hosted a public event featuring Omar Shakir, Human Rights Watch's (HRW) Israel and Palestine director, who reflected on the impact of his organisation's major report on Israel's human rights record.

The latest event in the university's Palestine Speaker Series, titled 'Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians,' featured Omar Shakir sharing how HRW reached its determination that Israel's actions amount to the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution. He also shared details about the global attention generated by the report, and the experience of being deported by the Israeli government for his human rights advocacy.

In his opening remarks, Dr Safwan Masri, dean of GU-Q, highlighted the university's commitment to providing opportunities for its students and the broader community to engage with experts in various fields and to foster critical thinking and meaningful dialogue about important issues.

"Omar Shakir's insight into the plight of Palestinians and the persistent violations of their human rights at the hands of the Israeli state was incredibly



Omar Shakir during the event.

educational, and a powerful reminder that we must continue to strive for peace and justice for all people," he said.

Shakir is the author of the report released by Human Rights Watch in April 2021 titled 'A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution.' He explained the methodology used to reach this conclusion and outlined the legal basis for defining Israel's actions as apartheid. He also provided a historical context for the situation in Israel and Palestine, with examples of the ways in which the Israeli government has used its power to deny Palestinians their rights.

The presentation was followed by a lively question and answer session, during which members of the audience had the opportunity to engage with Shakir and ask him questions about

his report, the current human rights situation facing Palestinians, and what's needed to help bring an end to apartheid and to forge a path to a peaceful future.

Led by associate professors Abdullah al-Arian, Karine Walther, and visiting assistant professor Nadya Sbaiti, and with the support of dean Masri, the Palestine Speaker Series is part of a larger project at GU-Q which aims to provide a platform for dialogue and analysis of the historical and contemporary issues facing Palestine.

A former Fulbright Scholar in Syria, Shakir was the 2013-2014 Arthur R and Barbara D Finberg Fellow at HRW. He holds a Juris Doctorate and a Bachelor's degree from Stanford University and a Master's degree in Arab Studies from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Washington, DC.

Doha Toastmasters marks International Women's Day



Doha Toastmasters celebrated International Women's Day with the 'Embrace Equity' meeting. President Nagaraja Sekar M opened the meeting anchored by toastmaster of the day Rangamani Ravi. The prepared speeches were presented by Priya Bhedi, Smitha Abraham, Mohamed Zubair and Manzoor Moideen. Table topics session was conducted by Lina Salah. The speakers were Anil Nair, Adam Abdi, Beena Manzoor, Kamal, Fauzia, and Shahbant. The best speaker was Smitha Abraham, the best table topic speaker Beena Manzoor, and the best evaluator Jayakumar Menon.

BPS joins Turkiye quake relief



Birla Public School (BPS) initiated a charity drive to support the survivors of the recent earthquake in Turkiye. Various life support items contributed by students were donated through Qatar Charity.

IIS teams bag football championship



Ideal Indian School's (IIS) boys and girls football teams emerged as champions in the 'Ramadan Goals4Good Football Tournament' organised by Education Above All at Doha College, Al Wajba, recently. The boys category 3 team triumphed over Qatar Academy Doha in the finals. Shahzad Hassan (XI D) of IIS won the best goalkeeper award. The category 3 girls team from IIS beat Assalam School to win the championship title. Ann Mary Deljo (class XII E) scored the winning goal. Minha bint Mohamed (XII E) won the best player award and Noon Mohamed (X F) the best goalkeeper award. Vijayant Thapa and Suman Panwar from the department of physical education were the coaches of the boys' and girls' teams, respectively. Principal Shaik Shamim Saheb congratulated the winners.

PICE Qatar holds fun run



In celebration of the World Engineering Day for Sustainable Development, the Philippine Institute of Civil Engineers, Qatar Chapter (PICE Qatar) in co-ordination with the PICE National Chapter and Philippine Technological Council, held a Fun Run towards Sustainable Development Goals. The event at Um Al Seneem Park in Al Rayyan saw 42 participants comprising PICE Qatar executive committee led by president Elvin Fajutagana. The finishers, in the order of fifth to first places, respectively: 2.5km men - Eduardo V Francisco, Nestor C Malinao Jr, Allen O Nacario Jr, Jaymuel Sagun, Remigio Alan O Nacario. Women: Belinda E dela Cruz, Phoebe N A Boceta, Melanie Suresca, Sheila Medel, Jude Christine A Torralba. 5km men - Arman A Tolentino, Rolan E Benvod, Allen L Nacario, Brian V Borja, John "Fahad" M Cepe. Women - Giroshele Rose Miciano, Melanie Suresca, Sheila Medel, Mary Grace Santiago, Sheryl Miciano.

Indian Institute of Quantity Surveyors Qatar CPD event organised



Indian Institute of Quantity Surveyors (IIQS) Qatar, hosted its first physical continuing professional development (CPD) of the year recently. Focused on the methods of delay analysis, the event which had Hareesh Jayanth from Rathmore Consulting as the presenter, was attended by 60 members of IIQS Qatar. Jayanth elaborated on the methods of delay analysis, which are essential in the construction industry. He explained the various techniques used to identify, analyse, and measure delays, and the importance of accurate delay analysis in resolving disputes and claims. Chapter officials Abdul Basith, Avinash Gaikwad, Kiran Kumar Sunil Kumar, Venkat, Ganesh, John and Rahul were present.



Doha College brings 'Qatar School Choir of the Year' back

After a two-year pandemic-imposed hiatus, British international school Doha College brought 'Qatar School Choir of the Year' back to the music scene. Inaugurated in 2017 to add new breadth to the music education in Qatar, the competition exploded in popularity and participation, with choirs doubling in size or forming specially for the occasion. Hosted for the first time on Doha College's new Al Wajba campus, this edition involved 16 choirs from all around the country; they sang in three age categories, 5-8, 7-11 and 11-18.

Newcomers Vision International School from Wakra received the 'Stagecraft Award' on their first participation.

Lead adjudicator Greg Beardsell, international musician and conductor involved in an astounding number of music education and performance initiatives, has been with the competition from the very beginning. This year, he was assisted by long-time panel member Olga Protopopova, principal of the International Centre for Music, and Zlatan Fazlic, director of the Qatar Music Academy.



Overall winners 'Dragon Voice Squad' of ASD.

According to Greg, the standards were incredibly high, on par with many reputable international competitions. The choirs put their own unique imprint on their performances that were engaging and fun. Doha College 'Prestos' won the youngest category, American School of Doha took the 7-11 trophy, and Dukhan English School choir, called 'DES SING!' - well familiar to the QSCoY podium - won the 11-18 category. The overall 2023 title went to the well-deserving ASD choir, conducted by Brita Fray.

Steph Gomaa, director of music at Doha College, shared her sense of accomplishment at the end of another successful edition: "It was absolutely wonderful to welcome 16 choirs from across Qatar - it highlights how strong the support for music and arts is in the country. Students from all the choirs gave fantastic performances and wowed audiences across the heats and the final. I would like to extend congratulations and thanks to all the parents, the students for all their hard work, and the teachers for their hours of dedication."



Doha College 'Prestos' - winners of the 5-8 category



Dukhan English School 'DES SING!' - winner of the 11-18 category.



American School of Doha 'Dragon Voice Squad' - winners of the 7-11 category.



Lead adjudicator Greg Beardsell.

Meet the Alumni programme organised at MES



To equip students with the knowledge and confidence required for building a future and update them about the diverse opportunities available, the MES Alumni Association organised a 'Meet the Alumni' event for

students of class XII. The panellists spoke fondly of their experiences and took the attendees down the lane of what it means to be a proud student of their alma mater, MES Indian School. Students were advised to be

consistent in their endeavours as steadfastness in ambition is the key to realising one's goal. They were encouraged to enrol as members in MES Alumni Association and the MESA Toastmaster Club. The members also spoke in honour of

the late B K Mohamed Kunhi, a former principal whose name is most cherished and revered in the annals of the school's history. The panellists were MES Alumni president Shaheen Mohamed Shaifi, vice-president

Fazil Hameed, Mavericks365 founder Vineeth Nambiar (moderator), Cisco country channel leader Ahmed Sha, popular blogger Ajay John, Mission20 Group CEO Amanat Solanki, EY director Anuja Sawant, Radio Olive Suno Network RJ Ashta-

mi, Multitech manager Shafeek Mohamed, Safari Group director Shaheen Backer, and Mannai Infotech associate vice president Valine Fernandes. Speaking on the occasion, principal Hameeda Kadar congratulated the alumni for making

a mark in the field of their choice by attaining exceptional success and thanked them for guiding the students beyond the school. Rema Devi, co-ordinator, department of English, welcomed the gathering and also proposed a vote of thanks.

MES College of Engineering Qatar Alumni anniversary celebration

MES College of Engineering Qatar Alumni (Mesceq) celebrated 'Mesmerize 2023' to mark their 20th anniversary. President Jamsheer Aboobacker inaugurated the event in the presence of managing committee members and other invitees. Sponsors and champions of various competitions held recently were felicitated. Various in-house programmes and a music fiesta by Arya Dhayal and Niranj Suresh were among the highlights.

Blood donation campaign at MES

A blood donation campaign was organised at MES Indian School by the Hamad Medical Corporation. A number of teaching and non-teaching staff donated blood. Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar stressed the essential contribution that blood donors make in saving lives and improving others' health.

MES Olympiad launched

MES Indian School organised the first edition of the MES Olympiad recently to hone students' analytical skills, assess their power of reasoning, and aptitude knowledge, and enable them to understand the core subjects. Students were provided with question banks entailing 200 questions for the subjects English, Mathematics, and Science. The virtual preliminary exam saw the participation of 1,200 students from grades V-VIII. Fifty top scorers from each class were shortlisted for the main exam conducted in digital mode in the school's computer labs. A total of 14 students (nine boys and five girls) secured top positions and bagged gold, silver, and bronze medals. They were felicitated by principal Dr Hameeda Kadar at the valedictory function. Boys' Section headmaster Jas M A and Girls' Section headmistress Soudha Jaleel along with members of the MES Olympiad Committee, co-ordinated the exercise.



200 take part in free medical camp

Around 200 people attended a free medical camp organised by NIARC Qatar Chapter and Moodadi Panchayat Pravasi Associations Qatar (MPPAQ) in collaboration with Reyada Medical Centre recently. A health awareness session saw Dr Manjunath speaking on 'Lifestyle diseases and their control'. Indian Cultural Centre president A P Manikandan, Indian Community Benevolent Forum president Shanavas Bava, Indian Sports Centre president Abdul Rehman E P and Sabit Shaheer, K K Usman, Fuwad Usman, Ghafoor Calicut were present. NIARC global chapter chairman Ashraf K P Wellcare and Reyada managing director Jamsheer led the camp. MPPAQ president Sihass Babu, general secretary Shaji Peeves, NIARC chairman Thaha Hamza and general secretary Shanahas Edodi controlled the activities. Mustafa Eenam, Shahjahan, Basheer V P, Najeed E K, Siraj Palur, Ahmed Moodadi, Raziq K V, Shihass U K, Tariq E K, Ismail N K, Zeenath Ashraf, Shamseena Shanahas, Munira Sihass, Nasila Najeed and Shaheera Ismail were the volunteers.

Dancing fountain



People watch the dancing fountain at the Al-Shaheed park in Kuwait City, yesterday.

11 children killed in South Sudan blast

AFP
Juba

Eleven children were killed and one injured in an accident involving unexploded ordnance in South Sudan, the spokeswoman for the UN mission in the violence-wracked country (UNMISS) said yesterday.

The accident occurred on Thursday in a remote village in Western Bahr el-Ghazal state, northwest of the capital Juba, spokeswoman Linda Tom told Radio Miraya, a station owned and operated by UNMISS.

“As many as 11 children died

and one is still receiving medical treatment,” Tom said.

“The scale of this drama is immense, we convey our deepest condolences to the families of the victims,” she added.

South Sudan was plunged into a brutal civil war in 2013, two years after achieving independence from Sudan.

The conflict lasted five years and killed nearly 400,000 civilians before the warring leaders Salva Kiir and Riek Machar agreed to lay down their arms.

Landmines and unexploded bombs still cover large areas of the world’s youngest country, posing yet another threat to a population already grappling

with armed violence, natural disasters and hunger.

Globally, “every year, large numbers of civilians are killed and injured by ‘explosive remnants of war’ – unexploded shells, grenades, bombs, etc left behind after a conflict,” according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

In June 2022, the United Nations Office for Refugees said that experts from the United Nations Mine Action Service had destroyed more than 1mn explosive devices in South Sudan, including “40,121 mines, 76,879 cluster bombs and 974,968 other unexploded devices”.

Malawians fear storm Freddy could make deadliest cholera outbreak worse

Reuters
Blantyre

Despite her fears, Fyness Afiki joined other women drawing dirty water from a well in Malawi’s second-biggest city Blantyre, which is still reeling from the devastation caused by Tropical Storm Freddy.

“I am fearful of cholera but there is no potable water and I have no option.

I don’t have money,” she told Reuters yesterday in Blantyre’s Ndirande township.

Malawi seemed to be getting its deadliest cholera outbreak yet under control, with World Health Organisation figures showing a decline in cases and deaths, but locals and health experts worry that trend could quickly reverse in Freddy’s wake.

One of the strongest and deadliest storms ever in Africa, the storm has killed over 320 people in Malawi alone, with heavy rains, floods and mud-



Malawi Defence Force (MDF) soldiers and civilians work to recover body of a victim of a mudslide which resulted due to heavy rains resulting from cyclone Freddy during an MDF and Malawi Police Service rescue operation at Manje informal settlement up the slopes of Soche Hill in Blantyre, yesterday.

slides making access to clean drinking water impossible for many.

Cholera spreads through contaminated water and food. Many people have mild symptoms, but it can kill within

senior health policy analyst at WaterAid.

Eunice Mselemu, a nurse who works at a cholera camp in a health facility near Blantyre, said she had observed cases already increasing and is concerned overwhelmed health workers will be unable to cope.

Robert Hanjahanja, chief executive of the city’s water board, which is battling to fix broken water pipes, said there was a crisis. Malawi has conducted two oral cholera vaccination campaigns, but a global surge in cholera outbreaks has meant vaccines are in short supply.

WHO officials say the best that countries like Malawi can do is to stretch their meagre resources and try to contain outbreaks as they emerge. Another Ndirande resident, Francis Moyani, said he was determined to get the cholera vaccine as he was scared of contracting the disease.

“As things are, cholera will rise and I want to be fully protected,” he said.

Vaccine-derived poliovirus detected in Burundi, Congo

Reuters
Johannesburg/London

Health officials in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have detected cases of vaccine-derived poliovirus, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Global Polio Eradication Initiative said.

The WHO said the Burundian government had declared the detection of the virus a national public health emergency, after cases were confirmed in an unvaccinated four-year-old boy in

Isale district in western Burundi and two other children who were his contacts.

Five other samples from environmental surveillance of waste water confirmed the presence of circulating poliovirus type 2 in Burundi, the WHO added in a statement.

Circulating poliovirus type 2 is different to wild poliovirus, with infections occurring when a weakened strain of poliovirus contained in the oral polio vaccine circulates among under-immunised populations for long periods.

The detections are signifi-

cant as they are the first linked with the use of a new vaccine, the novel oral poliomyelitis vaccine type 2 (nOPV2), which was developed specifically to reduce this risk. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) said in a statement that circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 was found in six children in the DRC’s eastern Tanganyika and South Kivu provinces.

Burundi plans to conduct a polio vaccination campaign in the coming weeks for all eligible children aged up to seven years with help from the WHO and GPEI, the WHO said.

“While detection of these outbreaks is a tragedy for the family and communities affected, it is not unexpected with wider use of the vaccine,” said the GPEI, a partnership made up of the WHO, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other global health bodies.

It said 600mn doses of the new vaccine had been administered in 28 countries since March 2021, and reiterated that the vaccine was safe and effective.

The DRC has scheduled a vaccination campaign for April, the GPEI said.

Mine blast kills three soldiers, injures 11 in northeast Nigeria

AFP
Kano

Three Nigerian troops were killed and 11 other people, including seven civilians, were injured by a highway bomb in northeast Nigeria near the border with Cameroon, where militants are active, military and militia sources said yesterday.

A military patrol vehicle hit

a mine on the highway 10 kilometres from Banki in Borno state late Thursday, killing three soldiers and seriously injuring four others, said the sources.

A truck carrying residents from the regional capital Maiduguri to Banki for governorship and state assembly elections yesterday was also caught in the blast, with seven passengers sustaining shrapnel injuries.

“Three soldier died in the explosion and four others were badly injured while seven civilians were also injured,” anti-militant militia Usman Hamza said. Hamza accused the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) group, which is active in the region, of planting the bomb.

A military officer and another militia member who asked not to be identified gave the same toll.

Rap battle: young Tunisians fight stigma with the arts

AFP
Daouar Hicher

“We’re sick of being seen as thugs,” said Mohamed Ali Ayari, a rapper from a down-at-heel Tunis district, where jobless youth are finding a voice through music, cinema and photography.

The Tunisian capital’s working-class districts have suffered from decades of state neglect and poor services, and residents say the stigma attached to their neighbourhoods shuts them out of the job market.

“This contempt and these prejudices really complicate our lives,” said Ayari, a resident of the overcrowded Douar Hicher suburb.

The 23-year-old works as a security guard, but his dream is to become a famous rap artist.

“I want to come out into the light,” he raps in a recent video clip, produced with the help of peace-building charity International Alert.

Ayari was among the winners of a recent competition by In-

ternational Alert, asking young people from four neglected Tunis districts to express themselves through music, documentary or photography, focusing on the theme of violence.

“People...experience violence on a daily basis – some practice it and others suffer it,” said Houcem Ayari of International Alert. “We decided to channel that into cultural activities.”

In a drab building in Douar Hicher, rapper Ayari sits in a tiny room converted into a studio and records his latest track, with backing vocals from neighbourhood friends.

Ayari and his friends agreed a lack of cultural spaces makes it easy for people to be dragged into crime.

Wassim Tayachi, 22, said he and his friends “chose music to talk about ourselves and our lives, the lost youth and those of us who want to succeed, the police who attack us verbally and physically, the state that neglects us and society that stigmatises us”.

He said coming from poorer neighbourhoods makes it harder



Mohamed Ali Ayari (centre), a rapper from a down-at-heel Tunis district, stands at a recording studio in Douar Hicher. **Right:** Mariem Chourabi poses for a picture in Fouchana near Tunis.



to find a job or get official paperwork.

“A state that doesn’t listen to its young people can’t give them anything,” Tayachi added.

Ayari said he wants to become a successful rapper. But he doubts he can achieve his dreams in the North African nation, where a long-running socio-economic crisis has pushed

many young people to try to reach Europe – including on dangerous and overcrowded inflatable boats across the Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, he said he uses rap as “therapy against depression and illegal temptations”. Another winner of the competition was a documentary depicting social and economic injustice, sexu-

al harassment, shabby public transport and school absenteeism in the district of Fouchana.

They are issues close to the heart of Mariem Chourabi, who has qualified as a tax accountant and has set up a centre to give children extra education support – all by the age of 24.

Many young people here “want to succeed more than

others because their difficult circumstances push them harder”, Chourabi said.

Belhssan Jabri, a qualified civil engineer, won the photography category of the competition. “We deserve not to be neglected,” said the unemployed 26-year-old from the working-class district of Sidi Hassine.

Jabri’s work focuses on what

he calls “environmental violence”, showcasing public spaces near his home strewn with trash.

“These could be places for sports or cultural activities, or gardens, instead of being permanently cluttered with overflowing rubbish bins,” he said.

Jabri said those in power should find “real will” to change things for the better.

Mountain forests vanishing at alarming rate: study

AFP
Washington

Logging, wildfires and farming are causing mountain forests, habitat to 85% of the world's birds, mammals and amphibians, to vanish at an alarming rate, according to a study published yesterday.

Mountain forests covered 1.1bn hectares (2.71bn acres) of the planet in 2000, the authors of the study published in the Cell Press journal *One Earth* said.

However, at least 78.1mn hectares – an area larger than the US state of Texas – have been lost between 2000 and 2018, with recent losses 2.7-fold greater than at the beginning of the century.

Key drivers of the loss are commercial logging, wildfires, “slash-and-burn” cultivation and commodity agriculture, said the authors from China's Southern University of Science and Technology and the University of Leeds.

Of particular concern, they said, is that heavy forest losses have occurred in mountain areas that are “tropical biodiversity hotspots” – refuges for rare and endangered species.

High elevations and steep slopes have historically restricted human exploitation of mountain forests, the authors said.

However, they have increasingly been targeted for timber and used for agriculture since the turn of the century.

Commercial forestry was responsible for 42% of mountain forest loss, followed by wildfires (29%), shifting cultivation (15%), and permanent or semi-permanent commodity agriculture (10%), the study said.

Shifting cultivation involves growing a crop on a plot of land for a few years and then abandoning it until it becomes fertile again.

“The drivers are different for different regions,” said Zhenzhong Zeng, a co-author of the study, with wildfires the main cause of loss in boreal forests found in high latitudes.

“For boreal areas, it’s caused by climate change, because there’s an increase in temperature and a decrease in precipitation,” Zeng told AFP. “We have to reduce the use of fossil fuels to slow down global warming.”

Commodity agriculture was a main driver of mountain forest loss in Southeast Asia, the authors said.

“People plant more rubber or palm farms to make more product,” Zeng said. “People need to have more land to grow corn to feed their chickens.”

Shifting cultivation is preeminent in tropical Africa and South America.

The authors said the greatest amount of forest loss observed during the study period using satellite data was in Asia – 39.8mn hectares – more than half the global total.

South America, Africa, Europe and Australia also all suffered significant losses.

“The mountain forest loss in the tropical areas is increasing very fast, much higher than other regions,” Zeng said. “And the biodiversity is very rich there so the impact is huge.”

“For tropical areas, we have to make people live with the forest, not cut the forest,” he said.

Xinyue He, another co-author, said that regrowth has been observed in some areas but it does not always involve native species and is not keeping pace with forest loss.

She said there needed to be greater forest management including stricter enforcement of laws and regulations.

“Protecting areas can help to reduce the loss,” she said.

Wet winter eases California drought, giving way to spring flood risks

Reuters
Los Angeles

The mixed blessing of California's exceptionally wet winter is likely to play out this spring with somewhat heightened flood risks in a state left largely drought free for the first time in three years, US government forecasters reported on Thursday.

The higher odds of minor to moderate flooding across most of California from rain and runoff of melting mountain snow this spring is roughly in line with forecasts for much of the US, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

It also illustrates a dramatic swing in weather conditions for a state that has been preoccupied with drought, heat

and wildfires for much of the past three years.

“Climate change is driving both wet and dry extremes,” NOAA Administrator Rick Spinrad said in a statement.

The agency's spring outlook shows that 44% of the United States as a whole faces a greater-than-50% chance of flooding in April, May and June, mostly east of the Mississippi River and the bulk of it classified as minor, meaning with little or no serious property damage likely.

“We're not calling for catastrophic and major widespread flooding,” said Ed Clark, director of the NOAA's National Water Centre.

Still, the NOAA projects that 6.4mn people are at risk of “moderate flooding”, defined as when some structures and roads near overflowing streams end

up under water, with scattered evacuations to higher ground.

A large zone over central California and eastern Nevada accounts for most of that moderate flood risk, along with smaller scattered regions across the upper Midwest, the NOAA said.

A comparatively small region, and home to some 1.4mn people, along the upper Mississippi from Minneapolis south to the Iowa-Missouri border faces a higher probability of major flooding, a catastrophic event in which inundation of buildings and roads is extensive and evacuations are widespread, the NOAA concluded.

It was that level of extreme flooding that devastated an entire community of migrant farm workers last weekend when a levee failed along the Pajaro River in Monterey, California.

California's winter was marked by a punishing succession of so-called atmospheric river storms, the product of vast, dense airborne currents of water vapour funnelled in from the tropical Pacific.

The storms have unleashed widespread flooding, mudslides, power outages, fallen trees, surf damage, road wash-outs and evacuations since late December.

More than 20 deaths statewide have been attributed to the onslaught.

However, those storms also replenished California's sorely depleted network of reservoirs and its Sierra Nevada mountain snowpack, a critical source of water for the state.

“Winter precipitation, combined with recent storms, wiped out exceptional and extreme drought in Califor-

nia for the first time since 2020, and is expected to further improve drought conditions this spring,” the NOAA explained.

The drought picture elsewhere in the West had also improved, the NOAA said, including the Colorado River Basin, where the winter snowpack ranges from 110% to 150% of average, Clark said.

Runoff of melting snow over the next three months is expected to boost unregulated river flows enough to push several major reservoirs on the Colorado, including Lake Powell, to well above normal.

Still, Clark said the Colorado basin, critical to the water supplies of seven US Western states and Mexico, has “long way to go” before it turns to robust levels last seen in the late 1990s.

Minnesota nuke plant leaked radioactive water last year

AFP
Washington

The operator of a nuclear facility in Minnesota said on Thursday that the plant suffered a leak last November of water containing radioactive tritium, but that contamination was largely limited to the plant itself.

Xcel Energy, operator of the nuclear plant northwest of Minneapolis in the Midwest state of Minnesota, did not say why it waited more than three months to acknowledge the leak to the public.

The company said it notified state officials and the federal Nuclear Regula-

tory Commission (NRC) once it learned of the leak on November 22.

“While this leak does not pose a risk to the public or the environment, we take this very seriously and are working to safely address the situation,” Chris Clark, the utility's president, said in a statement.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency said the company told it that some 400,000 gallons of water containing tritium leaked at the site, but none “reached the Mississippi River or contaminated drinking water sources”.

State officials “are actively reviewing data” from the site and “overseeing remediation efforts”, the agency said.

The company said it has “recovered about 25% of the tritium released and will continue recovery over the course of the year”.

The leak originated in “a water pipe between two buildings” at the Monticello nuclear plant.

Tritium is a radioactive isotope of hydrogen that is a byproduct of the production of electricity at nuclear plants.

It can also occur naturally in the environment.

Monticello is 63km northwest of Minneapolis, the largest city in the state.

Xcel said it detected the spill while doing routine groundwater testing.

It said it contained the leak by divert-

ing water to an in-plant treatment facility, and will need to build “large storage tanks... to store recovered water until it can be treated and reused”.

The company said it is conducting more frequent tests from some two dozen groundwater monitoring wells in and around the site.

The US has suffered one major nuclear accident in its history – the meltdown of the Three Mile Island reactor in Pennsylvania on March 28, 1979.

Some 92 nuclear reactors provide power to tens of millions of US homes.

Smaller accidents have occurred over the years but usually contained with localised impacts.

Northeast Brazil sees more gang violence

AFP
Sao Paulo

Marauding attacks by gang members in northeast Brazil continued for a third night despite a beefed up presence of security forces, authorities said on Thursday.

Media reports carried images of public buses and buildings in flames in nine cities – including state capital Natal – in the northeastern Rio Grande do Norte state.

The unrest, which began late on Monday, was orchestrated by imprisoned gang leaders as a protest against jail conditions and new regulations cracking down on criminal activity within the state penal system.

In Natal, a garbage collection centre, a supermarket and a gas station were all set ablaze, the G1 news site said.

“Never in my life have I seen something like this going on. We left for work ... and we came across this. It is very sad,” Reinaldo Silva, a mason in Natal, told AFP.

Authorities dispatched an additional 220 federal police to the state but reinforcements may climb as high as 800 in coming days, Justice and Security Minister Flavio Dino told CNN.

At least 28 urban areas in the state have been hit by the disturbances this week, authorities said.

Local media have carried footage of vehicles in flames, and of police cars, businesses and public buildings riddled with bullets.

Leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has not spoken public about the disorder.

At least two people died in clashes with police earlier in the week, and 67 people have been arrested.

Ex-PM Khan appears in court

AFP
Lahore

Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan appeared at court yesterday after an arrest warrant against him was suspended, allowing him to end a days-long holdout at his residence.

Khan was ousted by a no-confidence vote last year and has been snarled in dozens of legal cases as he campaigns for early elections and a return to office.

Attempts by police this week to arrest the 70-year-old former international cricket star in the eastern city of Lahore led to pitched battles with supporters outside his home.

The warrant relates to his non-appearance in an Islamabad court to answer a case brought by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) accusing him of not declaring gifts received during his time as premier, or the profit made from selling them.

“The Islamabad High Court has suspended a non-bailable arrest warrant,” said Faisal Chaudhry, a senior member of Khan's legal team, confirming that he will appear before judges in Islamabad today.

After the warrant was lifted, Khan left his home for the first



Security personnel use a bulletproof shield to protect former prime minister Imran Khan as he leaves after appearing at the high court in Lahore.

Right: Supporters former prime minister Khan gather around his car as he leaves the high court in Lahore.



time in days to appear in court in Lahore in a case related to this week's clashes.

Dozens of supporters mobbed his convoy as it slowly exited the compound, cheering and waving flags of Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party.

“They came up with another eight terrorist cases ... in all those cases the bail has been allowed,” Fawad Chaudhry, a senior PTI leader, told AFP.

Overnight on Tuesday police officers and paramilitary rangers clashed repeatedly with PTI supporters in the plush Zaman Park neighbourhood, firing fusillades of tear gas and dodging rocks thrown at them by angry crowds.

Since then, PTI supporters have kept a vigil outside his home, wary of police returning to arrest him.

Khan says he fears for his life if detained, and that authori-

ties want him jailed to prevent him from contesting an election that must be held by October this year.

“We have serious reservations about his security,” Shibli Faraz, Khan's chief of staff, said yesterday.

As the political drama unfolds, Pakistan is in the grip of a stark economic downturn, risking default if help cannot be secured from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

New chief judge in Washington to oversee secret Trump proceedings

Reuters
Washington

A new judge is taking over leadership of the US trial court in Washington, inheriting oversight of secret proceedings involving special counsel criminal investigations into former president Donald Trump's retention of classified documents and efforts by him and his allies to undo his 2020 election loss.

James “Jeb” Boasberg becomes chief judge of the US District Court for the District of Columbia, replacing Judge Beryl Howell as her seven-year term comes to an end.

The judge has sole discretion over sealed federal grand jury proceedings.

That means Boasberg will immediately take over responsibility for handling certain issues that may arise in the special counsel investigations involving Trump, who in November announced he was seeking the 2024 Republican presidential nomination.

Boasberg also would assume the same responsibilities if a grand jury is formed in a separate special counsel investigation into President Joe Biden's handling of classified documents after leaving the vice-presidency.

Biden, a Democrat, is expected to seek re-election in 2024.

As chief judge, Boasberg is poised to make rulings on certain legal arguments raised in the grand jury probes, including efforts to restrict witnesses from testifying.

Grand jury proceedings are kept from public view.

In an interview, Boasberg declined to comment on his impending grand jury oversight duties.

He praised his predecessor, saying that the court was fortunate to have had Howell as its leader “in this very fraught period”.

“She's led the court in a terrific way through coronavirus (Covid-19) and dislocations, and she also has maintained a very cohesive court not driven by partisan divides,” Boasberg said.

Boasberg, an appointee of Democratic president Barack Obama, has served on the court since 2011.

He previously was picked in 2002 by Republican president George W Bush for the local DC Superior Court.

Both times he was easily confirmed by the US Senate.

Special Counsel Jack Smith, appointed by Attorney-General Merrick Garland in November to handle the two Trump investigations, is presenting evidence to multiple grand juries.

At issue are Trump's retention of classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida after leaving office in January 2021 and attempts to interfere with the peaceful transfer of power following Trump's loss to Biden.

Another special counsel, Robert Hur, was named by Garland in January to look into classified records found at Biden's home in Delaware and former office in Washington.

No sitting or former president has ever been indicted.

Howell praised Boasberg's readiness to take on high-profile and novel issues, “whether arising out of the grand jury or not, that draw the spotlight of national attention”.

During her tenure as chief judge, Howell regularly heard legal arguments in special counsel investigations.

These legal arguments included a challenge by an unidentified, foreign-owned company to a grand jury subpoena issued by then-Special Counsel Robert Mueller as he examined the 2016 Trump campaign's contacts with Russians and, more recently, Republican congressman Scott Perry's attempt to block investigators from accessing his cellphone and messages relating to actions involving the 2020 election results.

Alphabet Incorporated-owned YouTube said yesterday that it lifted restrictions on former US president Donald Trump's channel, following a more than two-year suspension after the deadly Capitol Hill riot on January 6, 2021.

Trump now has access to key vehicles for political fundraising and the ability to reach his combined 146mn followers across three major tech plat-

forms as he makes another run for the presidency in 2024.

“We carefully evaluated the continued risk of real-world violence, while balancing the chance for voters to hear equally from major national candidates in the run up to an election,” YouTube said in a tweet, referring to the move.

Meta Platforms Incorporated had reinstated Trump's Facebook and In-

YouTube restores Trump's channel

stagram accounts earlier this year, while his Twitter account was restored in November by new owner Elon Musk.

Trump's campaign team did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The video streaming platform banned Trump in 2021 for violating

its policy of inciting violence after his supporters stormed the US Capitol when Congress began to certify Joe Biden's victory in the presidential election.

The former reality TV star had spent weeks falsely claiming that the presidential election had been stolen from him and he was subsequently im-

peached for inciting the riot.

Trump is regaining access to social media accounts that he used throughout his 2016 campaign and presidency to lash out at rivals and build his base of followers just as the Manhattan District Attorney's office is considering criminal charges, which Trump and his allies are arguing without evidence are politically motivated.

The former president has yet to

post on the Meta-owned platforms or Twitter.

Instead he has stuck to Truth Social, the platform he founded in late 2021, where he has nearly 5mn followers.

Opponents of Trump's return point to his messages on Truth Social as evidence that he still poses the same risk that led various social media platforms to suspend him before. – **Reuters/**AFP

First German minister to visit Taiwan in 26 years: ministry

AFP
Berlin

German Education Minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger will travel to Taiwan next week, Berlin said yesterday, as the first cabinet member to visit in 26 years in a move set to spark tensions with China. A ministry spokesman told reporters Stark-Watzinger would make a two-day visit to the democratic island state which China sees as part of its own territory.

“The aim of the visit is to bolster and expand co-operation

with Taiwan on science, research and education,” he said, noting Taiwan’s strengths on high-tech manufacturing.

The trip comes two months after a high-ranking German parliamentary delegation travelled to the self-ruled island in a move strongly criticised by Beijing.

China’s Communist Party regards Taiwan as belonging to Beijing and has vowed to one day take the island. Under President Xi Jinping, Beijing has ramped up military, economic and diplomatic pressure on Taiwan because its current elected government regards the island as an

already sovereign nation and not part of “one China”.

The deputies on the Taiwan visit in January came from the pro-business Free Democratic Party (FDP) – a junior partner in Germany’s coalition government to which Stark-Watzinger also belongs. The MPs had described their stay as a “sign of solidarity” with the democracy. China routinely opposes official exchanges with Taiwan, and has reacted with growing anger to a flurry of visits by Western politicians.

Last year saw a spike in tensions as Beijing ramped up military pressure and launched its

largest war games in decades to protest against a visit by then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August. Also in August, the German air force boosted its presence in the Indo-Pacific with the deployment of 13 military aircraft, one year after it dispatched a frigate to the region for the first time in almost two decades.

A German foreign ministry spokesman stressed on Friday that Berlin maintains its “One China” policy while maintaining “close and good ties with Taiwan”.

“Taiwan is a democracy and an important trade and invest-

ment partner for Germany which is why regular exchange and also mutual visits from ministers are completely normal,” he said.

The announcement came as Chancellor Olaf Scholz was set to embark with six ministers on a visit to Japan for talks on economic security.

Bitten by its reliance on Russian energy, Germany has been battling to pivot away from other economic dependencies, in particular on China, in the wake of Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. It has also been ramping its overtures to other Asian nations including Indonesia and India, as it

seeks to diversify its supplies and exports alike. A senior German official on Thursday noted the significance of Japan’s economic security promotion act enacted last year.

This is aimed at shielding supply chains from disruption by either ensuring that supplies are sourced from within the country or by relying on allies or partners rather than on China. The government source underlined that while the tensions surrounding Taiwan would “not explicitly be part of the consultations”, the ministers will discuss military co-operation.

Meanwhile US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told AFP that Taiwan had a “lot to offer” the world after Honduras became the latest nation to cut ties with Taipei and recognise Beijing. “I think it’s in the interest of people to be able to engage in the world. Taiwan has a lot to offer, including, for example, in international institutions, where remarkably talented people have tremendous experience and expertise,” Blinken said in an interview late Thursday in Niger.

“Countries have to decide for themselves whether and how they want to benefit from that.”

Xi Jinping to visit Russia next week

AFP
Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping will make a state visit to Moscow next week, where he will hold talks with his strategic ally Vladimir Putin just over a year into Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Xi will be in Russia from Monday to Wednesday, Beijing’s foreign ministry and the Kremlin said yesterday. Recently re-appointed for a landmark third term, Xi last visited Russia in 2019. Putin attended the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Beijing last year and the two leaders also met at a regional security gathering in Uzbekistan in September.

Xi will conduct “an in-depth exchange of views with President Putin on bilateral relations and major international and regional issues of common concern”, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said yesterday. The visit will “promote strategic co-ordination and practical co-operation between the two countries, and inject new impetus into the development of bilateral relations”, Wang said.

“At present, changes not seen in a century are rapidly evolving, and the world has entered a new period of turmoil,” he said. “As... important major countries, the significance and influence of China-Russia relations far ex-



In a file picture, Russian President Vladimir Putin (left) and Chinese President Xi Jinping pose for a photograph during their meeting in Beijing.

ceed the bilateral scope.” Also on Friday, the Kremlin said the two presidents would speak about “strategic cooperation” and “discuss deepening the exhaustive partnership and strategic cooperation between Russia and China”. It added that “important bilateral documents” were expected to be signed. The visit comes just over a year after Russia invaded Ukraine, kicking off a war that has isolated Moscow on the international stage.

China, a major Russian ally, has sought to position itself as a neutral party in the conflict, urging Moscow and Kyiv to resolve it through negotiations.

In a 12-point position paper on the war last month, China called

for dialogue and respect for all countries’ territorial sovereignty. But Western leaders have repeatedly criticised Beijing for failing to condemn the invasion, accusing it of providing Moscow with diplomatic cover for its war. The United States has accused China of mulling arms shipments to support Russia’s war – claims Beijing has strongly denied.

Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky said in February he was planning to meet Xi after Beijing called for talks. The Chinese foreign ministry did not confirm on Friday whether he planned to do so.

However, the two nations’ foreign ministers held a phone call on Thursday, the first since

China’s Qin Gang took office. Qin urged Kyiv and Moscow to restart peace talks “as soon as possible”, adding that “China is concerned that the crisis could escalate and get out of control”, according to an official readout.

His Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba said the call included discussion of “the significance of the principle of territorial integrity”, without giving details. Formerly socialist allies with a tempestuous relationship, in recent years China and Russia have deepened cooperation in the economic, military and political sectors as part of what they call a “no limits” partnership. Both sides have frequently emphasised the close relationship between Putin and Xi, who began a third five-year term as president this month in a break with longstanding precedent.

Xi, 69, also helped spur a China-mediated deal to restore ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran last week.

“Whether (China) is actually stepping up its efforts to play peacemaker in a meaningful way will depend on the substance of what it proposes during meetings with leaders from Ukraine and Russia,” said Ja-lan Chong, an associate professor at the National University of Singapore.

“Their previous peace plan was more about general principles than actionable proposals,” the specialist in Chinese foreign policy told AFP.



An event held to unveil Pheu Thai’s candidates list and announce their policies for the upcoming general election, in Bangkok.

Thailand prepares to dissolve parliament ahead of election

Reuters
Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha said yesterday he had prepared a decree seeking to dissolve parliament ahead of an election, an expected step as his government heads into the last week of its four-year term.

The decree would require approval of Thailand’s monarch and would take effect once published in the Royal Gazette.

An election must take place 45-60 days after dissolution. “I have prepared (the decree), we have to wait. We have to wait for the announcement in the Royal Gazette,” Prayut told reporters in the northern city of Chiang Mai.

Asked when this would be, he said: “We have to wait.”

The election will again pit the billionaire Shinawatra family against parties backed by the royalist military and old money conservatives, in what has been a bitter, 18-year power struggle in Southeast Asia’s second-biggest economy. Prayut, a retired general who has been in charge since leading a coup against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra in 2014, will run under the new United Thai Nation party. He will be up against Paetong-tarn Shinawatra, the daughter of



Panthongtae Shinawatra and Paetongtarn Shinawatra, son and daughter of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra; Srettha Thavisin, a local property tycoon and Pheu Thai Party’s new adviser; and Chonlanan Srikaew, Pheu Thai Party’s leader, wave during an event to unveil the party’s candidates list and announce their policies for the upcoming general election, in Bangkok.

former premier Thaksin Shinawatra and Yingluck’s niece. Paetongtarn, 36, has led Prayut in opinion polls for months as the top choice for Thailand’s next prime minister.

Speaking yesterday at an event to introduce Pheu Thai’s candidates, she said she was confident of winning the election by a landslide, with the aim of averting any political manoeuvring against her party.

Pheu Thai and its previous in-

carnations have won every election in the past two decades, but three of their administrations were cut short by judicial rulings or military takeovers.

“I have a strong hope that we can form a government for sure, that’s why we go ourselves to campaign about a landslide,” Paetongtarn said. Asked about the prospect her opponents might try to block her party from ruling, she said “of course, of course”.

New Zealand set to ban TikTok on devices linked to parliament

Reuters
Wellington

New Zealand said yesterday it would ban TikTok on devices with access to the country’s parliamentary network due to cybersecurity concerns, becoming the latest nation to limit the use of the video-sharing app on government-related devices. Concerns have mounted globally about the potential for the Chinese government to access users’ location and contact data through ByteDance, TikTok’s Chinese parent company.

The depth of those concerns was underscored this week when the

Biden administration demanded that TikTok’s Chinese owners divest their stakes or the app could face a US ban. In New Zealand, TikTok will be banned on all devices with access to parliament’s network by the end of March.

Parliamentary Service Chief Executive Rafael Gonzalez-Montero said in an email to Reuters that the decision was taken after advice from cybersecurity experts and discussions within government and with other countries. “Based on this information, the Service has determined that the risks are not acceptable in the current New Zealand Parliamentary environment,” he said. Special arrangements can be made for

those who require the app to do their jobs, he added.

ByteDance did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment.

Speaking at a media briefing, Prime Minister Chris Hipkins said New Zealand operated differently from other nations. “Departments and agencies follow the advice of the (Government Communications Security Bureau) in terms of IT and cybersecurity policies ... we don’t have a blanket across the public sector approach,” Hipkins said. Both New Zealand’s defence force and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade said on Friday they had already implemented bans on TikTok on

work devices. A spokesperson for the New Zealand Defence Force said in an email to Reuters the move was a “precautionary approach to protect the safety and security” of personnel. On Thursday, Britain banned the app on government phones with immediate effect. Government agencies in the US have until the end of March to delete the app from official devices.

TikTok has said it believes the recent bans are based on “fundamental misconceptions” and driven by wider geopolitics, adding that it has spent more than \$1.5bn on rigorous data security efforts and rejects spying allegations.

Japan PM pledges aid to boost birthrate

AFP
Tokyo

Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida yesterday pledged to boost child allowances and paid parental leave as he warned the country faced its “last chance” to tackle a declining population.

Like many countries, Japan has been battling a falling birth rate for years, with just under 800,000 babies born last year, the lowest since records began. The country is the world’s second oldest, after tiny Monaco, and in January Kishida warned Japan was “on the

verge of whether we can continue to function as a society.”

“Six to seven years from now is the last chance to reverse the declining birth rate trend,” he told reporters at a press conference to unveil new policy proposals. “I want to create a society where young people can marry as they wish, and everyone who wants to can have children and raise them without stress,” he said.

He unveiled proposals including increased allowances for younger children, efforts to boost wages for young people and measures to tackle the cost of higher education. Kishida said

the government would now have a goal of 50 percent of new fathers taking parental leave by financial year 2025, and 80 percent by 2030. In 2021, just under 14 percent of fathers took leave.

To achieve the increase, he proposed measures including offering allowances to companies encouraging paternity leave, and also pledged more pay when both parents take leave.

“This way, couples can share childcare and household chores, while the impact on income and career development is reduced,” he said. “More support for single parents is needed,” he added,

recounting a conversation with a young woman who said she feared marrying, having children, and then getting divorced. “The story was truly a reminder that times and the attitudes of young people are changing,” Kishida added, without outlining specific policies he plans on the issue.

Kishida offered no details on how would finance the additional measures, which come after several rounds of pandemic-related economic stimulus and a pledge to boost defence spending. His government plans to present a framework including the measures by June.

Tourists flock to Thailand



Tourists take pictures from a viewpoint on Thailand’s Phi Phi Don island yesterday.

PEOPLE
Prince Harry seeks to win libel case without trial

Prince Harry's lawyers told a London court yesterday that publisher Associated Newspapers had no viable defence to his libel claim over an article about his security arrangements, as the British royal seeks to win his case without a trial. Harry, King Charles' younger son, sued Associated Newspapers last year over an article in its *Mail on Sunday* newspaper that alleged he offered to pay for police protection only after bringing a separate legal fight against Britain's government. Harry's lawyers said Associated Newspapers had no factual basis for its defence, and asked the court to give a summary judgment, a ruling in Harry's favour without the need for a trial.

INDUSTRIAL ACTION
British passport officers to go on strike for five weeks

Most of Britain's passport office workers will go on strike for five weeks starting next month in a pay dispute, potentially disrupting the delivery of passports ahead of the summer holiday period. More than 1,000 members of the Public and Commercial Services union working across most of the UK's passport offices including in London, Liverpool and Glasgow will walk out from April 3 to May 5, the union said yesterday. They join workers in other sectors in Britain who have staged strikes in recent months demanding higher pay to cover surging inflation. Britain is seeing the worst wave of labour unrest since the 1980s, with strikes affecting almost every aspect of daily life.

LEGAL
UK parliament passes trophy hunting law

A planned law to ban the import of hunting trophies to Britain was yesterday passed by the UK parliament. The legislation was voted through by British lawmakers. It will now be scrutinised by the upper house of parliament before it can become law. Trophy hunting — where hunters pay for the right to kill usually big game animals — has long been controversial. Critics say shooting wild animals for fun is cruel and pushes endangered species closer to extinction. But communities and government officials across southern Africa are against the ban and claim that with reduced revenue from trophy hunting, poaching will increase.

GRANT
Rolls-Royce gets UK funds for 'Moon' nuclear reactors

British aerospace giant Rolls-Royce yesterday said it had secured UK funding to develop small nuclear reactors that could provide power on the Moon. Rolls said the UK Space Agency had offered it £2.9mn (\$3.5mn) to help research "how nuclear power could be used to support a future Moon base for astronauts". "Scientists and engineers at Rolls-Royce are working on the micro-reactor programme to develop technology that will provide power needed for humans to live and work on the Moon," the aerospace company added in a statement. Rolls forecast its first car-sized reactor would be ready to be sent to the Moon by 2029.

PROTEST
Maharashtra state staff seek higher pension benefits

Thousands of state employees in the Indian state of Maharashtra held protests yesterday, joining employees in other states who are demanding higher pension benefits. After opposition-ruled states increased pension benefits, government employees in other states, particularly those ruled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, including Haryana and Nagaland, began protesting to seek higher pensions. Workers are pushing for the restoration of a pension plan discontinued about two decades ago. In 2004, the federal government and majority of states scrapped a scheme that entitled employees to a state-funded life-long pension equivalent to almost half of their salary.

Northern Ireland peace deal saved 'thousands' of lives: ex-Irish PM

AFP
Dublin

The success of the 1998 peace accords in Northern Ireland can be measured in thousands of lives saved, said former Irish prime minister Bertie Ahern, as new tensions simmer ahead of the agreement's 25th anniversary.

The former Taoiseach played a pivotal role in negotiating and implementing the Good Friday Agreement with the UK government under Tony Blair.

"The last 25 years, thankfully, we've had some problems but small (ones)," Ahern, 71, said.

"We just hope that it keeps going the right way," he said, with Northern Ireland again locked in political gridlock and prone to isolated acts of violence.

"I think the thing you're most proud of...is that thousands of people are alive."

The April 10, 1998 agreement ended three decades of sectarian conflict over British rule in Northern Ireland, known as "The Troubles", that claimed 3,500 lives.

The negotiating teams under Ahern and Blair managed to bridge seemingly irreconcilable differences pitting armed pro-Irish nationalists against Northern Ireland's then pro-UK, Protestant majority.

The multiparty talks brokered by the US government ended in three weeks of "hectic", "night and day" negotiations, Ahern recalled.

"It was always a process, and the last 25 years have been so much more pleasant and so much more comforting than the previous 25 or maybe the previous 75," he added.

Twenty-five years later, while walls and watchtowers on the border have been torn down and British troops have departed, the province remains contested, albeit more peacefully these days.

But the UK's 2016 vote to leave the European Union, and the emergence of a pro-Irish majority led by the Sinn Féin party, have

upended political calculations in Northern Ireland.

For over a year, Northern Ireland's power-sharing devolved government — a central plank of the peace deal — has been paralysed by a boycott by the pro-UK Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), whose headline members were suspicious of the Good Friday Agreement.

"Since Brexit it has just been a roller-coaster," said Ahern, who led Ireland from 1997 to 2008.

"I was totally frustrated and disappointed with the Johnson government," he explained, referring to UK former prime minister Boris Johnson.

"We went through long periods where there was little or no dialogue between the EU and the UK."

Ahern is hopeful a new deal with the EU, clinched by UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, to reform post-Brexit trading rules in Northern Ireland, will be enough to bring the DUP back to power-sharing.

"The core issues have been dealt with," said the former Taoiseach, crediting Sunak with bringing "great energy" to the EU negotiations.

"Then I think they believed that they had a real partner," he said.

But in Northern Ireland itself, old sectarian tensions remain.

Last month, a senior police officer was shot in front of his son after coaching a youth football team. He remains critically injured in hospital. Police suspect a dissident nationalist paramilitary group called the New IRA was to blame.

"There'll always be, I think, some people on both sides who are opposed to the agreement," said Ahern. "I think the best we can do is to try to get them to oppose it from peaceful means."

"There's still work to be done on that," he continued. "The numbers are small...but any one incident is a problem."

After leaving office in 2008, Ahern applied his negotiating experience to help manage conflicts in Colombia, Myanmar, Spain's Basque region and others.

Royals attend parade



Britain's Prince William and Catherine, Princess of Wales attend the St Patrick's Day parade in Aldershot, Britain, yesterday.

Japan's premier to announce new Indo-Pacific plan, seek India support

Reuters
New Delhi/Tokyo

Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida will on Monday announce a new plan for an open and free Indo-Pacific in New Delhi and seek India's support to partner with Tokyo to check China's growing influence across the region.

Under the plan, which will be announced during Kishida's two-day visit to India, Japan will increase support to emerging economies, especially in the region, Japanese officials said.

India and Japan have been adding more depth to their re-

lations, especially in defence and strategic affairs, as both face threats from a dominant China.

Kishida's decision to announce his new plan during the annual summit between the two countries underlines the importance Tokyo places on New Delhi as a key player in the Indo-Pacific region.

Japanese officials said that Kishida believes that given India's strategic geopolitical location in the Indian Ocean, and as the world's largest democracy, it will play a significant role in realising his vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

India and Japan, along with the US and Australia, are

members of the so-called Quad which seeks to counter China's growing heft in the region.

Quad members say it is not a military grouping but they will jointly participate in the annual Malabar naval wargaming exercise in Australia this year, which will also host the Quad summit in May.

Former prime minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, shared a close relationship with Modi and Japanese officials said Kishida is keen to build a similar bond.

During his talks with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi, Kishida is expected to seek India's co-operation for the new plan, which will include steps Japan will take to

strengthen co-operation in countries that adhere to the principles of peaceful resolution of disputes and freedom of navigation.

This, officials said, also comes in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine and China's aggressive maritime posture.

While Japan has been pushing for more sanctions against Russia, India, which heads G20 this year, has been trying to prevent the forum from being used for any such announcement.

India has declined to blame Russia for the war and has sought a diplomatic solution while boosting its purchases of

Russian oil. Kishida also wants to improve the maritime warning and surveillance capabilities of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) countries and hopes India will actively join hands with Japan to develop infrastructure like ports in Asia and Africa.

Modi and Kishida met three times in 2022, including at Abe's funeral, and will meet at least three more times in 2023 on the sidelines of the G20, G7 and Quad summits.

The two countries have a comprehensive economic partnership and trade was worth \$20.57bn in 2021-2022, with India importing Japanese goods valued at \$14.49bn.

RBI may let rupee weaken amid global banking turmoil

The Reserve Bank of India has, on multiple occasions, intervened to protect the rupee from 83 levels over the last several weeks, holding the currency in a tight band

Reuters
Mumbai

The ongoing turbulence in the US and European banking sector may make the Reserve Bank of India more willing to let the rupee weaken below a key psychological level, analysts said.

The rupee declined to 82.80 to the US dollar on Thursday, its lowest in about two weeks.

The Reserve Bank of India has, on multiple occasions, intervened to protect the rupee from 83 levels over the last several weeks, holding the currency in a tight band.

"It's clear to us that the RBI will not defend the rupee at 83 or any

other level if there is a severe, broad episode of risk off," the head of trading at a private sector bank said.

"Against a barrage of dollar outflows and speculation that will follow if the (US and European) banking situation worsens, the Reserve Bank of India will definitely be more judicious on how it expends the reserves."

Concerns about the stability of banks are spreading outside of the US, pushing up the demand for the safe-haven dollar.

Following the collapse of US lender Silicon Valley Bank last week, Swiss National Bank had to come to the rescue of Credit Suisse.

A significant and persistent deterioration in risk appetite on account of the banking worries will have an impact on the Reserve Bank of India's intervention strategy.

"The RBI will reevaluate its stance with the objective of man-

aging volatility in USD/INR and keeping in mind the global situation and the forex reserves," said Bhaskar Panda, head of overseas treasury at HDFC Bank.

India's foreign exchange reserves stood at \$562.4bn as on March 3.

The reserves had dipped to near \$525bn in October from a record high of \$642bn.

The markets will be "volatile and news-driven," a trader at a public sector bank said, adding that if investors turn risk-off in case of more bank failures the central bank may have to let go of the 83 levels.

If the crisis persists, the Reserve Bank of India's main focus will be on seeing how the volatility expectations on the rupee "remain anchored," the private bank head said.

From the risk-reward perspective, it makes sense for Indian importers not to rely on RBI support in the current environment, the banker added.



A farmer checks damaged wheat crops after strong winds following heavy rainfall at a field on the outskirts of Amritsar yesterday.

India 'should keep lid on wheat exports to replenish local stocks'

India should extend a ban on wheat exports in place since last year to help ensure lower domestic prices and sufficient stocks for consumers, a flour millers' industry body said. Exports of the grain from India, the world's second biggest producer, surged after Russia's invasion of Ukraine boosted global prices, but a sudden rise in temperatures in March 2022 shrivelled the crop and cut yields, pushing local prices higher. India imposed a ban in May last year, within days of promising to supply large quantities of the grain to a host of countries reeling from sky-high prices and severe shortages of the staple. While there is no specific date for the ban to expire, government and industry sources have said it is scheduled to be reviewed next month.

It was last month reported that the Indian government was considering extending its term. "The government's efforts have paid off and local prices have fallen, giving relief to consumers and a wide range of industries, including bread and biscuit makers," said Pramod Kumar,

president of the Roller Flour Millers' Federation of India. "The wheat export ban must continue," he said. India's new season wheat has just started arriving on the market and the harvest will gather momentum in the next few weeks.

Last month India estimated wheat production in 2023 could rebound to a record 112.2mn tonnes, but some farmers and industry officials are less optimistic due to a sudden rise in temperatures in the past few weeks.

Last year's small crop size led to a 53% drop in government purchases to 18.8mn tonnes, pushing up local prices. The Food Corporation of India buys wheat to run the world's biggest food welfare programme and to keep a sufficient stockpile to meet any emergency requirements. Meanwhile, a leading trade body said the country's cotton stocks could fall by nearly 16% in 2022-23 from a year earlier to their lowest level in nearly two decades as adverse weather curtailed crop yields.

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GULF TIMES

A path out of the pandemic

We have made extraordinary progress in our fight against the Covid-19 pandemic since the dark days of 2020. Yet, in many ways, we are back to square one. Public-health precautions are virtually non-existent in most parts of the world, and the current vaccines and drugs can neither prevent nor even effectively treat infections in broad swaths of the population. Make no mistake: Covid-19 still poses a clear and present danger. Research shows that two or more Covid-19 re-infections doubles the risk for death, blood clots, and lung damage, among other negative health outcomes. The risk of cardiovascular events has been found to increase by 4.5% for up to 12 months after an infection, regardless of age, race, sex, obesity, smoking, or other factors.

Nearly one in five Americans are reporting ongoing Long Covid symptoms, and recent research estimates that as many as 4mn people with the condition are unable to work. The long-term social and economic impact of continual re-infections cannot be underestimated.

Make no mistake: Covid-19 still poses a clear and present danger. Research shows that two or more Covid-19 re-infections doubles the risk for death, blood clots, and lung damage, among other negative health outcomes

Although the mRNA vaccines have done an excellent job of reducing hospitalisations and deaths, questions remain regarding waning immunity, and public uptake has decreased with each new booster. A mere 18% of Americans over the age of 18 have received the bivalent booster.

Moreover, no authorised monoclonal antibody treatments are currently available, and the preventative drug Evusheld has been rendered ineffective. More than 17,000 immunocompromised Americans and other high-risk people thus have been left vulnerable to severe disease and high mortality rates. While Paxlovid has proven to be a powerful tool against death and

hospitalisation, it can have potentially negative interactions with many common medications, such as statins and blood thinners.

Paxlovid also must be taken within the first few days of an infection to be most effective. Owing to this limitation, as well as concerns about viral rebound and confusion about eligibility, uptake has been low, even among high-risk populations.

In 2022, fewer than one-third of Americans over 80 who contracted Covid-19 ended up taking Paxlovid. This is very worrying, considering that those over 80 make up a significant proportion of Covid-related deaths.

But all hope is not lost, because we have a successful blueprint to follow. HIV was once a death sentence, but patients nowadays can live almost unaffected by the virus, and the impact on life expectancy is relatively minimal. We owe this progress not to a successful vaccine but rather to a wide range of prophylactic and therapeutic antiviral drugs. More than 30 drugs are currently approved for the prevention and treatment of HIV, some of which provide durable protection for up to six months with a single injection.

We can use the hard-won lessons from the fight against HIV to combat Sars-CoV-2 drug resistance, thereby creating an insurance policy against future mutated variants. To that end, we must vastly expand our search for highly active, safe, long-lasting antiviral drugs, while also deepening our understanding of the cellular, molecular, and biochemical features of Sars-CoV-2.

Unlike previous waves of the pandemic, which were driven by a single ominous variant, current and future waves will be driven by multiple subvariants of Omicron. Each new subvariant accumulates mutations in similar parts of the receptor binding domain (a critical spot in the spike protein where virus-blocking antibodies dock), enhancing the virus's immune-dodging capabilities. We therefore need to focus on new groups of antibodies that can circumvent future Omicron variants by binding at alternative sites that rarely mutate. Not only could these antibodies neutralize all Sars-CoV-2 variants; they also would help us fight related coronaviruses such as Mers and Sars-CoV-1.

We should be taking advantage of advances in artificial-intelligence antibody modelling to reduce the time spent during the antibody identification process. Why sort through millions of B-cell receptor sequences manually when a software program can greatly expedite that work? While there is some research and development underway on broadly neutralising antibodies, these typically have a lower affinity for Sars-CoV-2. Fortunately, in a recent study using an AI pipeline, researchers demonstrated a nearly 20-fold increased affinity to an existing drug. Similar successes could be replicated to develop treatments for Covid-19.

The pandemic isn't over, and millions of people remain at risk. Only by accelerating and consistently funding research into these alternative drug-development avenues will we find our way out of the Covid-19 crisis once and for all. - Project Syndicate

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The high cost of carbon pricing

By Jayati Ghosh

New Delhi

Carbon pricing is all the rage these days, at least in the developed world. But while global leaders and experts – most of them from rich countries – increasingly embrace the idea of putting the “right price” on carbon, the concept remains vague and ill-defined.

Worse, its growing acceptance and increasingly protectionist bent may have the perverse effect of impeding efforts to decarbonise the global economy.

The idea of carbon pricing seems like a no-brainer.

Meeting even the least ambitious climate goals requires decarbonising developed and developing economies alike.

Changing the relative prices of carbon-intensive activities would encourage investors to finance renewable sources of energy and the technological innovation needed to achieve net-zero emissions.

Fossil fuels account for most of the world's greenhouse-gas emissions, so hydrocarbons seem like a good place to start.

But how? Should policymakers consider the relative price of fossil fuels, or production based on consuming them?

The two most commonly discussed forms of carbon pricing – cap-and-trade schemes and carbon taxes – are based on the carbon intensity of production.

A cap-and-trade system is designed to limit greenhouse-gas emissions by dividing the total target amount into allowances that can be traded among high and low emitters.

While this supposedly establishes a market price for carbon dioxide emissions, it does not consider their negative social and environmental externalities.

A carbon tax, by contrast, sets a price on carbon by taxing emissions-heavy activities.

But these two models reflect a very narrow (and possibly even distorted) view of how carbon should be priced into the economic system.

A 2017 report by the High-Level Commission on Carbon Prices, chaired by Joseph E Stiglitz and Nicholas Stern, provided a much more nuanced analysis.

In addition to cap-and-trade and carbon taxes, the report recommended reducing or eliminating fossil-fuel subsidies and creating new financial incentives for low-carbon projects; offsetting the negative distributional impact of carbon pricing by using the proceeds to finance policies to protect

poor and vulnerable populations; and complementary policies, such as investment in public transport and renewable power.

Perhaps most important, the authors noted, countries must be able to choose instruments that fit their specific circumstances, resources, and needs.

Amid the growing enthusiasm for carbon pricing and border adjustment measures, policymakers and experts have largely ignored these points.

The European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism is a case in point.

When the CBAM takes effect in October, it will impose a tax on carbon-intensive imports in order to “put a fair price on the carbon emitted during the production of carbon-intensive goods that are entering the EU” and to “encourage cleaner industrial production in non-EU countries” (emphasis added).

The CBAM will initially apply to imports of cement, iron and steel, aluminium, fertilisers, electricity, and hydrogen.

At first, firms will simply have to report the (direct and indirect) emissions embedded in the goods they import.

But, beginning in 2026, the EU will impose tariffs on these emissions based on the weekly average auction price of cap-and-trade allowances.

The stated purpose of this measure is to eliminate so-called “carbon leakage” and ensure that the EU's climate efforts are not undermined by production moving to countries with lower emission standards.

Effectively, it protects European firms from competitors in such countries.

By taxing imports to the EU, the CBAM imposes on exporters in other countries the nearly impossible task of measuring emissions.

Most developing countries (and many developed ones) lack granular data on firm-specific emissions, not to mention the ability to track the emissions of all the inputs used.

Even if such data were available, the costs of collecting and analysing it over time would be enormous.

As the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development noted in 2021, the CBAM attempts “to impose on developing countries the environmental standards that developed countries are choosing.”

The EU wants to be viewed as a global leader on climate change, but it is difficult to see the CBAM as anything but a protectionist device.

While the CBAM purports to encourage countries outside the bloc to reduce emissions by imposing their own carbon taxes, the EU has done nothing to help exporting countries attract new green investment or gain access to new technologies.

In fact, it has persistently reneged on its (paltry) promises on climate finance and the commitments European leaders made as part of the 1992 Rio Agreement, restricting access to green technologies controlled by EU-based companies.

For decades, advanced economies have exported their emissions to developing countries by offshoring carbon-intensive production and then importing those goods.

Now that greener technologies are available to (and largely controlled by) Western companies, developed countries promote reshoring without

sharing knowledge or finance, thereby undermining low- and middle-income countries' economic prospects and ability to achieve a green transition.

In February, Republican US senator Bill Cassidy said he would unveil an emissions tariff bill in the coming months, following similar proposals by senate Democrats.

Meanwhile, lawmakers on both sides of the Atlantic have done little to limit fossil-fuel production and trade – by far the biggest sources of CO2 emissions.

The CBAM does not cover trade in fossil fuels, and neither would the proposed tariffs in the US.

If decarbonisation is the real goal, rather than protecting domestic industries, then regulation and reducing direct and indirect fossil-fuel subsidies are far more promising policies.

For carbon pricing to succeed, developed countries must demonstrate their commitment to shared prosperity by enabling knowledge-sharing and fostering equitable climate finance.

If they continue to focus on border taxes on goods produced (mostly) in developing countries, their carbon-pricing efforts will fail.

Worse, they will exacerbate global inequality and reinforce the perception that all their lofty rhetoric about the need for international co-operation to fight climate change is merely a fig leaf for cynical and self-serving policies. - Project Syndicate

● Jayati Ghosh, Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, is a member of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism.



(Picture: pixabay.com)

The shakeup the World Bank needs

By Ana Palacio

Madrid

Major changes are afoot at the World Bank, but few people seem to be paying attention. Beyond devising a new, greener mission, the Bank is undergoing a leadership transition, with important implications for its relationship with the Global South and the institution's long-term relevance.

By the time David Malpass, the World Bank's president, announced his resignation last month, tensions over the Bank's stance on climate change had been building for months.

Chosen for the job by former president Donald Trump's administration, Malpass faced considerable pressure when Joe Biden took over, with the US Treasury expressing dissatisfaction with the Bank's failure to show genuine climate leadership.

Criticism of Malpass escalated in September, after he refused to acknowledge the role of human greenhouse-gas emissions in driving climate change.

While he subsequently did so, his backpedaling did nothing to diminish accusations that, under his leadership, the World Bank was not doing nearly enough to align its lending with global emissions-reduction goals.

A month later, a group of ten major economies – the G7, plus Australia, the Netherlands, and Switzerland – submitted a proposal for a “fundamental reform” of the Bank that would lead to greater progress on this front.

The Bank's climate action plan remains, according to many Western countries, too short on ambition.

Malpass's resignation was thus probably a relief – not least to the US.

Almost immediately, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen reiterated America's commitment to “evolve the World Bank” into an engine of the green transition.

Soon after, Biden nominated Ajay Banga – the Indian-born former Mastercard executive who oversaw the firm's emergence as a global payment platform – to succeed Malpass.

Banga was not necessarily an obvious choice.

The World Bank's Board of Executive Directors “strongly encouraged” the nomination of women candidates, of which there were several solid options with extensive development experience, including Gayle Smith, a former USAID administrator, and the agency's current head, Samantha Power.

In the world of multilateral development institutions, Banga is an outsider.

But Banga's selection may prove to be a shrewd move by Biden.

Yes, his confirmation would uphold the longstanding tradition of the US – the World Bank's biggest shareholder and the largest donor to its concessional



Ajay Banga: seeking support for candidacy. (AFP)

arm, the International Development Association – handpicking the Bank's head.

This custom, together with the tacit understanding that a European should lead the International Monetary Fund, has rightfully generated discontent in the Global South, with countries there calling for more representative multilateral governance.

Banga does represent a nod to India and the Global South more broadly.

The question is whether this will translate into more effective leadership on development, including the climate trends that threaten it.

The World Bank was originally conceived as a tool for reconstruction.

Development later became the Bank's primary focus, thanks not least to its former president and key architect, Robert McNamara, who sought to promote the Western model of economic development.

Despite being a signatory to the Bretton Woods Agreement, the Soviet Union never joined the World Bank, not least because it viewed the Bank as a platform for promoting the West's free-market philosophy.

What would it take to effectively support prosperity in the emerging world today? For starters, contentious debates about the possible expansion of the World Bank's agenda – including how climate action fits into it – will need to be settled.

At the same time, the Bank will have to overcome internal disagreements on debt relief and restructuring for distressed countries. (As it stands, discussions are effectively paralysed by Chinese demands that the Bank accept loan write-downs.)

While such discussions unfold – or stall – the crises

fuelling them continue to escalate.

The World Bank must mobilise adequate resources to help countries confront a perfect storm of climate, energy, food, and debt crises.

At a time of rising protectionism and global economic fragmentation, this will be especially difficult.

Only a leader with both technical and political savvy can hope to succeed.

Ambition and scale will be crucial. A compelling case has been made for a far larger World Bank.

But even barring such an institutional transformation, a dramatic increase in lending to clients across the income distribution is badly needed.

Though the Bank's commitments have nearly doubled since 2019 – reaching \$115bn – lending has been lagging behind global economic growth since 2017.

Reforming lending policy is particularly important for the Bank to regain influence in middle-income countries, which have long looked elsewhere to finance their development needs.

But more funding is just the beginning.

The World Bank must also do a much better job of listening to developing countries.

Barbadian Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley's Bridgetown Initiative – which recommends new terms for development financing and calls for increased funding for climate resilience, mitigation, and post-disaster reconstruction – is one proposal worth considering.

If the World Bank fails to listen to the ideas and demands of developing countries, the West will lose them – with consequences that extend far beyond the Bank.

And rebuilding relationships with alienated allies is both difficult and costly.

South Africa's drift toward the Sino-Russian nexus – and resistance to the West's hasty efforts to win it back – offers important lessons in this regard.

Banga is now on a “global listening tour.” But winning support for his candidacy is only the first step.

As president, Banga will have to find ways to meet the demands of a Global South that is eager for change, or else risk undermining the World Bank's long-term viability and jeopardising the West's ability to exercise its convening power.

Banga's outsider status may work in his favour, as he attempts to shake up the institution and bridge its traditional mandate with a 21st-century agenda.

But the “outsiders” who really need to be brought into World Bank decision-making are the countries that have been kept outside far too long. - Project Syndicate

● Ana Palacio, a former foreign minister of Spain and former senior vice president and general counsel of the World Bank Group, is a visiting lecturer at Georgetown University.

Kyiv obtains Soviet-era fighter jets

AFP/Reuters
Paris

Ukraine won promises this week of 17 Soviet-design MIG-29 fighter jets, which will replace planes lost in the war but not radically alter the balance of power on the ground.

On Thursday, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) member Poland said that it would make an initial delivery to Kyiv of four aircraft in the coming days.

Yesterday Slovakia, another member of the military alliance, pledged to send its fleet of 13 ageing fighter jets.

Slovakia's MiG-29 planes were retired last summer and most of them are not in operational condition.

It will send those that are operational and the rest will go for spare parts.

Slovakia will also supply part of its KUB air-defence system, Prime Minister Eduard Heger said.

"Today, the government decided and unanimously approved an international agreement (on the donation)," he said. "The process of handing over these fighter jets is closely co-ordinated with the Polish side, with Ukraine and, of course, with other allies."

Slovakia will receive financial compensa-

tion the European Union.

It has also reached an agreement with the United States on deliveries of military material worth around \$700mn, Heger said.

The West was initially been reticent to supply Ukraine with combat aircraft, fearful of being drawn into conflict with Russia.

The Kremlin reacted yesterday to the Polish and Slovak announcements by saying that their fighter jets would be destroyed.

"The supply of this military equipment – as we have repeatedly said – will not change the outcome of the special military operation," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists, using the official term for Moscow's military intervention. "Of course, all this equipment will be destroyed."

Yet a year of warfare has whittled away at Western hesitation at supplying equipment to Ukraine, as seen in January when Kyiv's allies finally agreed to supply it with heavy battle tanks.

The MIG-29s promised this week are Soviet-era aircraft which Ukrainian pilots are already accustomed to flying.

"It's a question of coherence – responding to Ukraine's urgent need to defend its airspace with aircraft they already know how to use," a European air force officer told AFP on condition of anonymity. "It's a ready-made solution that's more immediate than sending Western aircraft."

It takes an experienced pilot six months to learn to operate a modern combat plane.

That training could possibly be squeezed into three months but not less.

The time gained by using MIG-29s nevertheless comes with operational limitations.

"It's a fighter jet with a limited range," explained Pierre Razoux of the Mediterranean Foundation for Strategic Studies (FMES). "It's heavily armed but it needs to be deployed in the middle of Ukraine to be able to strike targets in the Donbass."

The heavily contested Donbass comprised the eastern industrial regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, which Russia claims to have annexed, and is at the heart of the fighting.

The most difficult task still to come for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is to convince Western nations to agree to provide modern warplanes – the United States' F15s, F16s, F18s and F35s, France's Rafale jet and the European Eurofighter.

There is no chance of obtaining J16s and J20s from China, given Beijing's strategic ties with Moscow.

Ukraine needs aircraft that can intervene to shore up ground offensives, using precision strikes far behind enemy lines.

"MiGs will not solve the tasks. We need F16s. But MiGs will help to strengthen our capabilities," Ukrainian Air Force spokesman Yuriy Ignat said on Thursday.

Turkiye, Hungary put Finland on course to join Nato

AFP/Reuters
Ankara

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ended months of diplomatically-charged delays yesterday and asked parliament to quickly back Finland's bid to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato).

A simultaneous decision by fellow holdout Hungary to schedule a Finnish ratification vote for March 27 means the US-led defence alliance will likely to grow to 31 nations within a few months.

Finland would represent the first enlargement since North Macedonia joined the trans-Atlantic pact in 2020.

Nato's expansion into a country with a 1,340km (830-mile) border with Russia will roughly double the length of the bloc's current frontier with its Cold War-era foe.

However, it also dashes the short-term hopes of fellow Nato aspirant Sweden – a Nordic power whose litany of disputes with Turkiye ultimately has sunk its bid to join the bloc before an alliance summit in July.

Washington and other Nato members had hoped the two Nordic countries would join the alliance at a Nato summit set for July 11 in Vilnius.

Helsinki and Stockholm ended decades of military non-alignment and decided to join the world's most powerful defence alliance in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Their applications were accepted at a June Nato summit that signalled the Western world's desire to stand up to Russia in the face of Europe's gravest conflict since World War II.

However, the bids still needed to be ratified by all 30 of the alliance members' parliaments – a process that got hung up once it reached the turn of Turkiye and Hungary.

Yesterday's breakthrough followed months of tense negotiations between Ankara and the Nordic neighbours that threatened to collapse several times.

Erdogan told Finnish President Sauli Niinisto that Helsinki had shown a strong commitment to addressing Ankara's security concerns.

"We decided to start the protocol of Finland's accession to Nato in our parliament," Erdogan told reporters after the talks.

Erdogan added that he "hoped" that parliament will approve the application before Turkiye's crucial general election in May.

The Turkish parliament is expected to end its current session in mid-April.

"I hope the decisions we make will be beneficial for our two countries and the alliance," Erdogan said.

Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed Turkiye's decision while stressing the importance of Sweden joining "as soon as possible".

"The most important thing is that both Finland and Sweden become full members of Nato quickly, not whether they join at exactly the same time," he said.

Erdogan had accused the Nordic neighbours of breaking the terms of a separate deal they reached in June 2022 under which Turkiye agreed to approve the bids.

Turkiye has sought the extradition of dozens of Kurdish and other suspects that it accuses of ties to outlawed militants and a failed 2016 coup attempt.

Erdogan's demands became more urgent as he neared a May election in which he will need a strong turnout from his nationalist supporters to extend his two-decade rule.

The Turkish leader voiced particular displeasure with Sweden – a country with a larger Kurdish diaspora and a longer history of disputes with Ankara.

Finland and Sweden had initially resisted the idea of breaking up their bids.

However, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson – who made Nato membership a priority after assuming office in October – acknowledged on Tuesday that the likelihood of Finland joining the bloc on its own had "increased".

The Finnish president called Erdogan's decision yesterday "very important for the whole of Finland".

However, he added: "Finland's application is not complete without Sweden."

Sweden expressed disappointment at being excluded from this round of Nato expansion.

"This is a development that we did not want, but that we were prepared for," Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom told reporters in Stockholm.

The talks in Ankara put more pressure on Hungary's parliament to end its own ratification delays.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban enjoys a close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin and has numerous disputes with both Nato and the European Union.

The Hungarian parliament began debating the two Nato bids at the beginning of the month.

However, the vote's timing was complicated by a separate dispute Budapest had with Brussels over blocked European Union funding and Hungary's commitment to fighting corruption as well as to the rule of law.

Hungarian government spokesman Zoltan Kovacs said Orban's ruling Fidesz party "supports Finland's Nato accession".

"The parliamentary vote will take place on March 27," Kovacs said in a Twitter message.

Orban's parliamentary group leader Mate Kocsis said that Fidesz "will decide on the case of Sweden later".

Pressure mounts on Macron after unrest grows over pension reform

Reuters/AFP
Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron faced the gravest challenge yesterday to his authority since the so-called "Yellow Vest" protests after his decision to push through a contested pension overhaul without a vote prompted a wave of protests.

On Thursday Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne invoked article 49.3 of the constitution to impose the pension overhaul by decree, sparking angry demonstrations nationwide that saw 300 people arrested, according to the interior ministry.

A new demonstration got underway in Paris yesterday evening as protesters gathered in the city's Place de la Concorde, near the Assemblée Nationale parliament building, following demonstrations on Thursday which were marred by violence.

Demonstrators started off a fire burning in Place de la Concorde yesterday as they faced up to a line of riot police, with some chanting "Macron, Resign!"

"Something fundamental happened, and that is that, immediately, spontaneous mobilisations took place throughout the country," hard-left leader Jean-Luc Melenchon said. "It goes without saying that I encourage them, I think that's where it's happening."

The pension overhaul raises France's retirement age by two years to 64, which the government says is essential to ensure the system does not go bust.

Unions, and most voters, disagree.

The French are deeply attached to keeping the official retirement age at 62, which is among the lowest in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

More than eight out of 10 people are unhappy with the government's decision to skip a vote in parliament, and 65% want strikes and protests to continue, a Toluna Harris Interactive poll for RTL radio showed.

Going ahead without a vote "is a denial of democracy ... a total denial of what has been happening in the streets for several weeks", 52-year-old psychologist Nathalie Alquier said in Paris. "It's just unbearable."

"We won't give up," said Philippe Melaine, a 49-year-old biology teacher. "There's still



CGT unionists march with flares and banners on the ring road in Paris, blocking traffic to protest after the French government pushed a pensions reform through parliament without a vote.

hope that the reform can be revoked."

A broad alliance of France's main unions said that they would continue their mobilisation to try and force a U-turn on the changes.

Protests are planned for this week, with a new day of nationwide industrial action is scheduled for Thursday.

Teachers' unions called for strikes next week, which could disrupt the emblematic Baccalaureate high-school exams.

While eight days of nationwide protests since mid-January, and many more local industrial actions, had so far been largely peaceful, the unrest on Thursday was reminiscent of the Yellow Vest protests that erupted in late 2018 over high fuel prices and forced Macron into a partial U-turn on a carbon tax.

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said some 310 people had been arrested by police and promised to crack down on troublemakers.

"Opposition is legitimate, protests are legitimate but causing mayhem is not," he told RTL radio.

Left-wing and centrist opposition lawmakers filed a motion of no-confidence in parliament yesterday afternoon.

However, even though Macron lost his absolute majority in the lower house of parliament in elections last year, there was little chance this would go through – unless a surprise alliance of MPs from all sides is formed, from the far-left to the far-right.

The leaders of the conservative

Les Republicains (LR) party have ruled out such an alliance.

None of them had sponsored the first motion of no confidence filed yesterday.

The far-right was expected to file another later in the day.

Individual LR lawmakers have said they could break ranks, but the no-confidence bill would require all of the other opposition MPs and half of LR's 61 lawmakers to go through: a tall order.

"So far, French governments have usually won in such votes of no confidence," said Berenberg chief economist Holger Schmieding.

He expected it would be the same again this time even if "by trying to by-pass parliament, Macron has already weakened his position".

Votes in parliament were likely to take place over the weekend or on Monday.

Macron will want to turn the page quickly, with government officials already preparing more socially minded reforms.

He can also choose, at some point, to fire Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne, who has been at the forefront of the pension debate.

However, either or both moves may do little to quell anger on the streets.

Neither of them had made public comments yesterday.

The influential *Le Monde* newspaper has accused Macron of "playing with fire".

"If the country slides into a new bout of anger or locks itself into vengeful paralysis, the executive will only have itself to blame," it said in an editorial.



Tourists and fishermen are seen at the Sau reservoir next to a previously submerged church of the village of San Roman de Sau, in Catalonia.

German parliament votes to shrink in disputed reform

The German parliament voted yesterday to cut the number of MPs sharply, in a reform blasted by the leader of Angela Merkel's conservative sister party as an "attack on democracy".

Under the reform, the number of seats in parliament would be slashed at the next elections to 630 from 736.

The plan, put forward by Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats as well as coalition partners Greens and the liberal FDP, was adopted with 399 votes in favour, 261 against and 23 abstentions.

The German parliament has been expanding at each election because of a voting

system which awards seats for direct mandates while also proportionally allocating seats according to the parties' score.

Each person gets to cast a vote for a candidate directly, and another vote for a party.

A 5% threshold has to be cleared for a party to send MPs to parliament.

That threshold can only be waived if a party wins three seats directly – a clause that the reform has removed.

Smaller parties like the far-left Linke and former chancellor Merkel's Bavarian sister party CSU were up in arms, as both risk missing the 5% hurdle. - **AFP**

Church tower reemerges from parched reservoir in drought-hit Spain

Spain is in the grip of a long-term drought after 36 months of below-average rainfall, with some parts so parched that officials have asked people to cut water use and meteorologists warn of worse to come.

Some reservoirs in Catalonia, which surrounds Barcelona, are so low that old constructions like bridges and a church bell tower have resurfaced, people are flying kites on lake beds and navigation apps show someone in the middle of the water when they are standing on dry land.

The weather will be drier and hotter than usual this spring along the northeastern Mediterranean coast, an area which includes Catalonia.

The dry weather will heighten the risk of wildfires even as it brings average rainfall nationwide, Spain's meteorological agency AEMET said.

"This is an area that we could describe as no-man's land because it is not getting affected by the storms coming from the Atlantic and the Mediterranean," AEMET spokesperson Ruben del Campo told Reuters, referring to Spain's northeast.

He pointed to climate change as one of the leading factors.

"Heatwaves in this geographical area of the planet are more frequent, are increasing more frequently than in other regions," he said.

Spain's drought nationwide measured over 12 months is no worse than it was in 2017, 2012 and 2005.

However, the average water level in Catalonia's reservoirs stands at just 27%, slightly above the level in parts of the southern region of Andalusia.

After 25 months without significant rain, Catalonia earlier this month asked most of its 7mn residents to cut water use by 8% at home, 15% in industry and 40% in agriculture.

In the Sau reservoir, 100km (62 miles) north of Barcelona, which is only 10% full, boats were catching tons of fish that would struggle to survive in the low-oxygen water in order to protect drinking water.

Invasive species will be euthanised while native ones will be released in nearby waters.

Access has been restricted over concerns that people will get trapped in the mud. - **Reuters**

Female entrepreneurs from across Afghanistan seek out foreign markets

Reuters
Kabul/Dubai

Dozens of Afghan businesswomen took part in an exhibition in Dubai remotely this week to promote carpets, jewellery, dried fruit and other handmade goods as part of a push to access international markets after work options for women shrunk in Afghanistan under the Taliban administration.

The three-day exhibition, held at a hotel in Dubai and supported by the

United Nations Development Programme, began on Thursday and includes 26 female-run businesses.

Due to visa and travel restrictions, most business owners joined via video link from the Afghan capital, where they said some restrictions on women in public life as well as the country's struggling economy were hampering their businesses.

Rayhana Karim, from Afghanistan's Women's Chamber of Commerce, attended the event in Dubai.

She said they are working to create a brand for products, labelling them

"Made by Afghan Women", to reach consumers abroad wanting to support women's rights.

"The end-consumers in Europe, the United States and the UAE, they want to support Afghan women, we need to provide them with an opportunity," Karim told Reuters. "You are supporting an Afghan woman when buying a quality product ... and you are enabling her to stand on her own two feet, to gain financial independence and to start to have a seat at the table."

The International Labour Organisation recently estimated that 25% of

women's jobs had disappeared since the Taliban took over as foreign forces withdrew in 2021.

Many women, they noted, had turned to home-based businesses, which had stopped the female employment figures falling further.

The country's economy has been severely hampered after foreign governments froze central bank assets and enforced sanctions on the banking sector.

The Taliban administration has banned many female non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers

and some Taliban-run ministries do not allow female staff to work in their offices.

Some, including the Taliban's acting commerce minister, have said they support female-led businesses.

The businesswomen involved in the expo said they would not give up.

"We lost our hope when Afghanistan collapsed ... but Afghan women are fighters, we will struggle and fight. We will never allow losing our business to happen," said Ziaagul Jahani, who produces handmade clothes and carpets from central Parwan province.

910 dolphins wash up on French coast

At least 910 dolphins have washed up on France's Atlantic coast since the start of the winter, an oceanographic institute reported yesterday.

Over the past week alone, more than 400 of the marine mammals were found stranded along the coast, the Pelagis oceanographic observatory based in the western city of La Rochelle said in a report.

Between 2017 and 2020, the average number of washed-up dolphins during the winter was 850. - **AFP**



Kite Festival concludes today

The second day of the 3-day Kite Festival continued to dazzle with its array of kites at the Museum of Islamic Art Park Hills. The festival concludes today.

PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



Lucy Martin's artwork.



Arman Mansouri's work.



Abdulaziz Yousef's paintings.

Works of Fire Station artists

The Fire Station is showcasing the works of a group of Artists in Residence at the Open Studios of the museum as part of its Spring 2023 programme. The participating artists are: Abdulaziz Yousef, Sharefa Almannai, Charlene Kasdorf, Lucy Martin, Abdulrahman AlMuftah, Arman Mansouri, Noor AlKharaan, Aya Battiri, Luke Webb, Mohamed Abdullah Alhammedi, Hind al-Obaidli, Simon Mortimer, N&LS, Fatima Javed, and Yousef Fakhroo. In addition, there are four artists showcasing their works in the category of Curator in Residence. They are Ahmad Soliman, Abdullah al-Mutairi, Jumanah Abbas, and Rola Khayyat.

PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



A piece by Hind al-Obaidli.



Fatima Javed with her ongoing work.