

Interior minister meets Iranian ambassador



HE the Minister of Interior and Commander of the Internal Security Force (Lekhwiya) Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani met yesterday with ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the State of Qatar Ali Salehabadi. The meeting dealt with the two countries' relations in the security fields and ways to bolster these relations, in addition to discussing a host of topics of mutual interest. (QNA)

Dutch PM expresses gratitude to Qatar for mediation in Gaza

QNA
Amsterdam

Prime Minister of Netherlands Mark Rutte (pictured) expressed gratitude to Qatar for its mediation in the conflict between Israel and the Hamas movement. In a post on "X" platform, Rutte said that he spoke, on the phone, with His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani about the desperate humanitarian situation in Gaza. He added that it is essential to



reach agreement, as soon as possible, on the release of hostages, and on an immediate pause in the fighting to enable a substantial increase in the supply of aid to Gaza. Last Tuesday, Official Spokes-

person for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Majed bin Mohamed al-Ansari affirmed the continuation of Qatari, regional and international efforts for a ceasefire in Gaza ahead of Eid al-Fitr, despite the complexity of situation on the ground, and the deteriorating humanitarian situation. Delivering the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' weekly media briefing, Dr al-Ansari said that there are still hopes for an agreement to reach calm before Eid al-Fitr, but the on the ground situation is highly complicated.

Qatar's natural gas output records five-fold growth

From Page 1

The outlook said Middle East could potentially see an addition of over 130mn tpy in liquefaction capacity by 2050, with Qatari expansion projects expected to be the primary drivers of this growth. By 2050, LNG exports from

the Middle East will reach 205mn tonnes, largely due to the expansion efforts in Qatar. The primary force propelling natural gas exports from the Middle East is set to be growth in LNG supplies, notably led by Qatar. "The upward trajectory of Qatar's position as a leading global LNG exporter in 2022 indicates a

growing momentum towards additional expansions or advancements post-2030s and 2040s following the North Field expansion projects. With ambitions to increase its current capacity of 77 Mtpa by 64%, Qatar aims to reach 126mn tpy through the North Field expansion by 2028," GECF noted.

AlKhater in Doha meetings

HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhater met with ambassador of Ukraine to Qatar Andriy Kuzmenko. During the meeting, they discussed relations between the two countries and the latest developments in Ukraine. They also discussed the role of Qatar in facilitating the process of reuniting children with their separated families, due to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhater met yesterday with French Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Frederic Clavier and his accompanying delegation during their current visit to the country. The meeting discussed relations between the State of Qatar and the French Republic, as well as developments in the Horn of Africa and ways of co-operation between the two sides. The meeting also covered the latest developments in Sudan, the challenges facing humanitarian work, and the necessity of intensifying efforts to deliver aid to the displaced in various Sudanese states, as well as emphasising the importance of bringing the international community's attention toward the largest displacement crisis around the world. HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated during the meeting Qatar's full support for the unity, sovereignty and stability of Sudan. The meeting was attended by ambassador of France to Qatar Jean-Baptiste Favre and French ambassador to Sudan Raja Rabia. (QNA)

Official

PM meets Omani ambassador

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met in his office on Thursday with ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the State of Qatar Ammar bin Abdullah bin Sultan al-Busaidi. During the meeting, the two sides discussed relations between the State of Qatar and the Sultanate of Oman and ways to support and develop them, in addition to discussing several topics of mutual concern. (QNA)



Turkish ambassador Dr Mustafa Goksu with editors at the Iftar reception yesterday.

Turkish ambassador hosts Iftar in honour of media professionals

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

Turkish ambassador to Qatar Dr Mustafa Goksu held yesterday at his residence an Iftar reception in honour of the media professionals in Qatar. On this occasion Dr Goksu valued the fruitful relations with the media and stressed the importance of their unremitting efforts made during the coverage of the war on Gaza calling on them to keep up this momentum to help our brothers in Gaza, until hopefully this war comes to an end. The Iftar reception was attended by Gulf Times Editor-in-Chief Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka, a number of editors from other publications, and media professionals.



Qatar stresses importance of protecting children in situations of peace and war

QNA
Geneva

Qatar has stressed the importance of protecting children under all circumstances and in all situations of peace and war alike, and condemned and denounced their continued exposure to serious risks due to armed conflicts that threaten their physical and psychological safety and normal development. This came in a statement by Qatar delivered by Eid Mubarak al-Sulaiti, third organisation affairs researcher in the Organisations Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the "Interactive Dialogue with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict," within the work of the 55th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. Al-Sulaiti said that Qatar has worked, within the framework of its regional and international strategic partnerships, to give priority to the protection of children affected by armed conflict, especially in the



context of the educational initiatives it is undertaking, such as the "Educate a Child" initiative, which has succeeded in enrolling 10mn children in schools in areas affected by conflict and disasters. He noted that children also received laudable attention in the mediation efforts undertaken by Qatar, which hosted a number of unaccompanied Afghan children and provided them with full care to spare them the negative effects of the conflict, pointing out that Qatar also contributed last December to the reunification of a number of Ukrainian children affected by the conflict with their loved ones. Al-Sulaiti explained that Doha's hosting of the Analysis and Outreach Hub of the Office of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for

Children and Armed Conflict, while providing financial support to the centre for the years 2018-2023, is a confirmation of the State of Qatar's interest in this important mandate. He pointed out that after the war on Gaza entered its 160th day, Palestinian children are still the weakest link in this tragedy which claimed the lives of more than 13,000 children who died under the rubble of homes because of Israeli missiles. He added that as a result of preventing the entry of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip, another chapter of the tragedy began represented by the death of children after they starved to the last breath, noting that the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) stated that the number of children who were martyred as a result of the ongoing war on the Strip Gaza has surpassed the number of children killed during four years of conflicts around the world, and he noted that Unicef said that the 'children of Gaza slowly perishing under the worlds gaze'.

QF's Zero-Waste Iftar gains pace

From Page 1

"We are also expanding our collaboration to transform food waste into compost, further contributing to a circular economy and nurturing the land that sustains us," Khan said. Among the volunteers who are crucial to the success of the com-

munity Iftar, and its zero-waste operation, is Abdulrahman al-Jumaili, financial accounting services director at QF, who said: "Myself and my team participate in this initiative as a volunteer unit, as it contributes to fostering a spirit of teamwork within and beyond the workplace environment. "We commend the Education

City Mosque's Iftar initiative, which encourages volunteering by making it easily accessible without the need for volunteer organisations. It also has a key role raising awareness and shedding light on the impact of the small actions that individual people can make to help preserve the environment and achieve sustainability."

CAUTIONARY NOTICE

Notice is hereby given that CJ CHEILJEDANG CORPORATION – a Korean Corporation - of (Ssangnim-dong) 330, Dongho-ro, Jung-gu, Seoul 04560 Republic of Korea, is the sole and exclusive proprietor in Qatar of the industrial design shown in the below drawings, entitled:

Packaging bag for foodstuffs

Perspective view	Front view	Rear view
Left side view	Right side view	Top view
Bottom view		

This design claims priority of the Korean Design Application No. 30-2023-0036707 filed on September 15, 2023. It is hereby declared that CJ CHEILJEDANG CORPORATION, claims for itself, its agents and licensees the full, sole and exclusive rights to make, use and sell the aforesaid design in Qatar, and that it will take all appropriate legal actions against any person, company or organization which infringe in any way such rights of the aforesaid design in Qatar.

This Notice is published for the particular purpose of protecting the rights of CJ CHEILJEDANG CORPORATION, in and to said design in Qatar.

Environment Ministry launches digital geographic database for nature reserves

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC), in co-operation with the Geographic Information Systems Centre at the Ministry of Municipality, has launched the digital geographic database project for biosphere reserves.

The initiative, according to an official statement from MoECC, enables scanning and uploading data from 1,273 biosphere reserves across Qatar in a digital geographic database. The inventory was carried out based on a form that seeks information about the location and area of the reserves and the type of trees and plants growing there. Also, the database has the type of threat faced by these reserves.

“This project comes as an important step towards enhancing the preservation of the rich plant diversity in the country while protecting vegetation and combating desertification. The project aims to collect and classify data related to reserves, know the plant diversity in each reserve and provide a central platform for exchanging information between the parties concerned through its availability on the national network of Geographic Information Systems,” the statement said.

The efforts made to protect the reserves were completed through a working team to develop a mechanism for constructing roads in wild areas and outside city limits. The team headed by the Wildlife Development Department had members from the planning sector, the Ministry of Transportation (MoT) and the Public Works Au-



The team headed by the Wildlife Development Department had members from the planning sector, the Ministry of Transportation (MoT) and the Public Works Authority (Ashghal).

The priorities were protecting meadows and vegetation from infrastructure and road projects and limiting encroachments on them and updating their database

thority (Ashghal). The priorities were protecting meadows and vegetation from infrastructure and road projects and limiting encroachments on them and updating their database. The data was uploaded on the electronic urban planning system through which the external boundaries of all meadows have been re-

presented. Work is underway to classify and divide the meadows according to their areas of growth and the degrees of threat to which they are exposed. The digital geodatabase is a valuable source of scientific knowledge and environmental planning. It will identify areas of environmental and heritage

importance and enhance efforts to preserve rare and endangered plant species. In addition, it will help guide the rehabilitation of wild farming and biodiversity protection efforts to maintain the sustainable development of Qatar's environment.

It also enables government agencies, researchers and those interested in preserving the environment to access comprehensive and updated information about the fields and the types of plants that grow in them. This will contribute to enhancing environmental awareness.

Ibn Al-Shaybani Lecture Series on International Law launched

Qatar University's (QU) College of Law has launched the Ibn Al-Shaybani Lecture Series on International Law with Awn al-Khasawneh, Jordan's former Prime Minister and former vice-president of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), delivering the inaugural lecture.

Qatar's Supreme Judicial Council President HE Dr Hassan bin Lahdan al-Muhammadi, ambassadors, and representatives of various government sectors were present, a statement said. The series, organised in partnership with the International Law Association's Qatari Branch (ILA-Qatar), aim to delve into the jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice and the future of international dispute settlement.

In his opening address, QU Law dean Dr Talal al-Emadi underscored the objectives of launching the annual lecture series. These include, among other things, the focus on discussing developments in the international legal system from an Arab and Islamic perspective.

He emphasised the importance of adhering to and implementing the rules of international law, including the rules of state responsibility and dispute settlement, particularly in light of current challenging circumstances and flagrant violations, notably in Gaza.

Al-Khasawneh initiated the discussion by exploring the concept of self-defence in international law and its misuse by states. He underscored that self-defence cannot justify indiscriminate mass attacks or excessive use of force by states.



Regarding the settlement of international disputes, the speaker stressed the necessity of identifying the appropriate method for dispute resolution. He referred, for example, to the issue of reservations to the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ under Article 36 of its Statute, citing previous cases in which he was involved. Al-Khasawneh highlighted the challenge posed by reservations and states' efforts to avoid the Court's compulsory jurisdiction.

Consequently, most cases before the ICJ are brought based on compromissory clauses in international treaties or by mutual agreement between states. He also addressed the phenomenon of non-appearance before the Court during oral proceedings, citing Russia's absence in the case brought against it by Ukraine. Furthermore, he discussed the need to enhance the procedural rules of international courts and tribunals to enable them to effec-

tively fulfil their role in resolving disputes between states.

Al-Khasawneh underscored the significant role that regional organisations should play in settling disputes between their member states. He cited examples such as the League of Arab States and the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation, highlighting the possibility of submitting disputes to specialised courts, particularly in the fields of investment and arbitration.

In an open discussion with Dr Ioannis Konstantinidis, assistant professor of International Law at QU, al-Khasawneh addressed the ICJ's jurisdiction to provide advisory opinions. He noted the increase in requests for advisory opinions, including those related to the Occupied Palestinian Territories and climate change.

He also discussed the recent Provisional Measures Order issued by the Court in the South Africa v Israel case regarding the

situation in Gaza, expressing concerns about the absence of an explicit reference to a ceasefire. Nevertheless, he emphasised that adherence to the Court's provisional measures would practically lead to this if implemented in good faith.

Al-Khasawneh concluded his speech by expressing hope, despite his concerns about current events, and encouraging researchers, practitioners, and students to continue studying and developing the rules of international law.

The Ibn Al-Shaybani Lecture Series on International Law aims to host leading public international law experts annually to engage in dialogue with academics, scholars, and policymakers on contemporary issues of international law. These lectures seek to raise awareness of international law in the Mena region and encourage the application and development of its rules in the region and beyond.

'Preventing, resolving conflicts among top foreign policy priorities'

QNA
New York

Qatar has affirmed that preventing the outbreak of conflicts and resolving them through peaceful means is among its top priorities in its foreign policy, in implementation of the wise vision of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani.

This came in a statement by HE the Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations Sheikhha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani during an open debate of the United Nations Security Council on "Promoting Conflict Prevention - Empowering All Actors Including Women and Youth", at the UN headquarters in New York.

HE Sheikhha Alya stated that Qatar's rich and successful record in mediation, which includes a wide range of cases, from peaceful conflict resolution to border dispute settlements and reuniting children with their families, is a testament to its dedication to resolving international crises and investing in peace.

She conveyed Qatar's appreciation to the Secretary-General of the United Nations for giving priority to conflict prevention in the new peace plan, affirming Qatar's strong support for its inclusion in the Charter for the Future. She emphasised that Qatar's commitment to finding solutions to international crises goes beyond negotiations and mediation, as Qatar believes firmly that preventing conflicts should address their root causes.

She explained that the Sustainable Development Plan 2030 provides a comprehensive framework for addressing the multifaceted factors of conflict and violence.

HE Sheikhha Alya pointed out that Qatar continues to implement humanitarian and development projects related to human rights aimed at addressing the root causes of conflicts, investing more than \$6.4bn in over

100 countries, pointing out that these initiatives target the most vulnerable populations globally, focusing on education, health-care, economic development, and programmes specifically designed to support and empower women and youth.

She stressed that Qatar sees providing quality education not only as vital for empowering women and youth but also as a key tool for promoting peace and preventing conflicts. She added that neglecting education carries with it the risk of perpetuating cycles of violence and instability.

HE Sheikhha Alya said that for this reason, Qatar continues to prioritise educational initiatives, pointing out that Qatar succeeded in enrolling over 11.6mn children in schools in more than 57 countries through the prominent 'Educate a Child' programme by Education Above All. She explained that in 2023, Qatar and Education Above All committed to supporting education sectors in many African countries to provide quality education for over 2.3mn out-of-school children, adding that in 2023 also, Qatar donated \$20mn to support the Education Cannot Wait fund for education initiatives in emergencies and protracted crises.

In Qatar's statement, HE Sheikhha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani indicated that Education Above All recently successfully concluded a two-year project titled 'Improving Access to Education for Conflict-Affected Children in Northeast Nigeria', focusing on providing quality education to over 21,000 out-of-school children in Northeast Nigeria.

She explained that this acknowledgment of the serious repercussions of attacks on education in the context of preventing conflicts and maintaining peace, Qatar has taken a leading role in international efforts towards adopting General Assembly resolution 74/275 on May 28, 2020, which declared September 9 as the International Day to Protect Education from Attack. (QNA)



Qatar Airways to offer 15kg baggage free for Doha-Jeddah-Doha

National carrier Qatar Airways will offer an extra 15kg baggage allowance free of charge to passengers flying from Doha to Jeddah and vice versa during the holy month of Ramadan. This initiative reflects Ramadan's giving spirit and facilitates the journey for visitors as well as passengers travelling to Saudi Arabia to perform Umrah by accommodating their unique needs during this sacred period, the airline said in a statement.

By allowing additional baggage at no extra cost, passengers on Doha-Jeddah route and vice versa can now bring essential items for their spiritual journey and carry gifts for their loved ones with greater ease. "Renowned for its commitment to customer satisfaction, Qatar Airways recognises the spiritual significance of this holy month and is dedicated to offering seamless and unparalleled travel experiences to passengers." Qatar Airways operates 35 weekly flights to Jeddah onboard its modern fleet and through its award-winning hub, Hamad International Airport. Additionally, the national airline's extensive network covers 10 cities in Saudi Arabia including AlUla, Dammam, Qassim, Jeddah, Medina, Neom, Riyadh, Tabuk, Taif, and Yanbu.

Msheireb Museums, Youth Entrepreneur Club launch discussion platform

In line with its vision to be a platform for community engagement and education, Msheireb Museums has launched a programme in collaboration with the Youth Entrepreneur Club to create a space to discuss crucial topics related to entrepreneurship to further nurture the rapidly expanding community of young business leaders in Qatar.

The first event at Msheireb Museum examined how startups can leverage cutting-edge tools and digital transformation to gain a competitive edge, a statement said. Young local entrepreneurs, Reema al-Kuwari and Jassim al-Ejji, shared lessons learned through success and failure along

their personal journeys. "We are committed to highlighting stories of perseverance and success that empower our local community," stated Msheireb Museums' acting general manager, Abdulla al-Naama, "Innovation and vision have always been key drivers for Qatar's continued growth. Through insightful dialogue and sharing inspiring personal stories, we hope to cultivate an environment where our youth can thrive as business leaders and pioneers, following in the footsteps of their forefathers before them."

The Youth Entrepreneur Club is a non-profit organisation operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Sports and Youth and

the Qatar Chamber. The club is designed to support and empower Qatari youth involvement in the local economy, providing them with the necessary resources, guidance, and opportunities to develop their commercial ventures and enhance their leadership and creative skills.

Ibrahim al-Sulaiti, president of the Youth Entrepreneur Club, expressed his appreciation for the platform provided by Msheireb Museums: "At the Youth Entrepreneur Club, we aspire to a future where every young man and woman has an active role in building Qatar's vibrant economy. We focus on empowering youth by providing them with tools, knowl-

edge, and opportunities to become tomorrow's leaders and entrepreneurs who bear the responsibility of shaping our nation's future."

Amid the historical surroundings of Msheireb Downtown Doha, participants were reminded of the region's longstanding legacy as a hub for trade and business innovation. By nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit among the young people of Qatar, Msheireb Museums reinforces its role as a contemporary space for ideas that shape the future.

As the nation drives toward economic diversification, such collaborations strengthen the innovation-minded ecosystem in Qatar, the statement added.



Marriott International celebrates 13th ‘Iftar for Cabs’ initiative in Qatar

Marriott International celebrated the 13th edition of its ‘Iftar for Cabs’ initiative at across 20 participating hotels in Qatar, a statement said yesterday. During the hour of Iftar on Wednesday, cab drivers who drove through the main entrances of Le Royal Meridien Doha, Sharq Village & Spa – a Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and Sheraton Grand Doha Resort & Convention Hotel received complimentary Iftar packs to break their fast.

Catering teams at 20 Marriott International Doha-based properties prepared Iftar packs, which included a diverse selection of food and beverage items. Associates from across various departments within all hotels, including Catering, Administration, and Guest Services, joined forces to bring the ‘Iftar for Cabs’

initiative to life. This year, participating Marriott International properties in Qatar personally distributed over 1,200 Iftar packs to cab drivers.

Launched in 2010, the ‘Iftar for Cabs’ initiative has turned into an annual tradition for many cab drivers throughout the region. The initiative has been widely appreciated by hotel owners, local communities, and transport authorities.

The ‘Iftar for Cabs’ initiative falls under Marriott International’s Sustainability and Social Impact Platform, Serve 360: Doing Good in Every Direction, which guides how the company makes a positive and sustainable impact wherever it does business. From empowerment opportunities to sustainable hotel development, the platform is designed to foster business growth while balancing

the needs of associates, customers, owners, the environment and communities. One of the priority areas, or “co-ordinates”, of Serve 360 is Nurture our World. ‘Iftar for Cabs’ is an initiative that directly supports and brings this vision to life.

Hotels providing team support to the Iftar for Cabs initiative at the distribution locations were Al Messila, a Luxury Collection Resort & Spa, Delta Hotels by Marriott City Center Doha, Element City Center Doha, Element West Bay Doha, Four Points by Sheraton Doha, JW Marriott Marquis City Center Doha, Le Meridien City Center Doha, Le Royal Meridien Doha, Marriott Executive Apartments City Center Doha, Marriott Marquis City Center Doha, Qabila West Bay Hotel, Sharq Village & Spa, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel, Sheraton



Launched in 2010, the ‘Iftar for Cabs’ initiative has turned into an annual tradition for many cab drivers throughout the region.

Grand Doha Resort & Convention Hotel, The Ritz-Carlton Doha, The St. Regis Doha, The St. Regis Marsa Arabia Island, The Pearl Qatar, The Westin Doha Hotel & Spa, W Doha, Agora, Doha, Autograph Collection, and Al Samriya, Doha, Autograph Collection.

‘Surge in Ramadan charity initiatives in France reflection of Islam’s values’

QNA
Paris

Several representatives of the Islamic community, as well as heads of associations and charitable organisations in France, affirmed that humanitarian charity work during the month of Ramadan is witnessing a significant surge, a clear reflection of the values of compassion in Islam.

In exclusive statements to Qatar News Agency (QNA), they explained that the holy month represents a crucial opportunity for solidarity, fraternity, intensifying charitable activities, and providing social assistance to the Muslim community. They highlighted the remarkable participation of Muslim youth in France in attending mosques, performing Taraweeh prayers, and volunteering in charitable deeds, co-operation, religious practices, and commitments.

For his part, Aboubakr El Bakri, who serves as Deputy Chairman of the French Council for the Muslim Faith and representative of the Islamic community and Secretary-General of the Regional Council for the city of Nice (southeast France), pointed out the presence of around 40 mosques in the Alpes-Maritimes region (southeastern France), to which the city of Nice belongs. This region houses 20 mosques and associations divided into four major mosques: Al Rahma, Al Furqan, Al Nur, and Al Salam. He noted that these mosques experience a significant influx of worshippers during the holy month, especially during Taraweeh prayers and Fridays, with around 3,000 worshippers in each mosque.

El Bakri estimated the Muslim community in the city of Nice to be around 30,000 residents, compared to the total population of approximately 348,000. He emphasised the efforts of the Regional Council for Islamic Affairs in Nice

to provide social, humanitarian, and charitable support to this community, especially during such symbolic religious occasions.

He highlighted that mosques and associations in Nice allocate a considerable amount of charitable activities, providing social assistance to the Islamic community by offering about 300 Iftar meals in each mosque.

The number of Iftar meals provided by the four major mosques in Nice rises to around 1,200 daily, with a budget of approximately 20,000 euros, and over half a million euros throughout the entire month of Ramadan.

El Bakri emphasised that the last 10 days of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr witness a peak in donations, charitable activities, and humanitarian efforts, noting that what distinguishes charitable work in mosques in Nice is the strong bond among the Muslim community members, the spiritual enlightenment, and the joy that fills their lives as they donate and assist in bringing joy and smiles to orphans and those in need.

On the other hand, Abdel Salam Hamdouch, who represents the Muslim community in the city and mosque of Evry-Courcouronnes, and the Secretary-General of the Cultural Association of Muslims in Ile-de-France (Paris and its suburbs), emphasised that the association dedicates a lot of humanitarian charitable activities, providing social assistance to the Islamic community by offering Iftar meals to needy families.

He pointed out that the Evry-Courcouronnes mosque and the other nearby mosques in the city are open to all segments of society, including the needy, the poor, the homeless, and immigrants, especially students studying at the city’s university, providing them with over 300 Iftar meals daily.

Hamdouch clarified, in exclusive statements to the Qatar

Nice community representative El Bakri estimated the Muslim community in his city to be around 30,000 residents, compared to the total population of approximately 348,000. He emphasised the efforts of the Regional Council for Islamic Affairs in Nice to provide social, humanitarian, and charitable support to this community, especially during such symbolic religious occasions

News Agency (QNA), that the large cultural association, which includes about 43 mosques and associations, intensifies its solidarity charitable activities during the blessed month, witnessing a significant influx of volunteers and donors, especially during the last 10 days and Eid al-Fitr.

In conclusion, Hamdouch emphasised to QNA the significant humanitarian, scientific, cultural, and religious role played by the houses of Allah during the month of Ramadan, especially with the unprecedented interest of the youth of the Muslim communities in Evry-Courcouronnes city and in France in general, in doing good, solidarity, religiousness, and delving into the noble principles and values of Islam.

Meanwhile, Rashid al-Hallou, President of the International French Islamic Aid Organisation, pointed out that the charitable organisation’s activities encompass many countries around the world, especially those experiencing tensions, wars, disasters, and crises, explaining that they do not cease throughout the year but peak during the blessed month.

In exclusive statements to QNA, he emphasised that the trend of charitable activities of the organisation has been continuously increasing this year compared to the previous year, due to the numerous emergencies and crises currently experienced worldwide, with the number of beneficiaries during this year’s Ramadan exceeding 200,000 individuals and families,

compared to 192,000 vulnerable people internationally last year.

He added that the budget for social and humanitarian activities for 2024 exceeds 50mn euros, compared to 41.7mn euros last year and 37.5mn euros in 2021, with this budget divided into 38.5mn euros for international missions (in 20 countries), and 3.2mn euros for social missions in France.”

The president of the organisation, with a budget of 70mn euros, explained that the majority of the organisation’s budget allocated for international missions this year will be for Palestine, due to the ongoing war and difficult conditions in Gaza. He pointed out that the Islamic Relief has been distributing aid and vital food supplies to tens of thousands of people facing critical situations in Gaza and the occupied territories since last January.

The distributions continued in February and March, with the organisation distributing food aid to 7,000 individuals in the West Bank and Eid gifts to 670 children. He noted that the humanitarian situation in Gaza is extremely serious to the extent that everyone, without exception, needs assistance. Therefore, food parcels are vital support as they help beneficiaries to continue, both through their nutritional value and the comfort they provide them.

It is worth mentioning that the number of Muslims in France reached about 5mn, according to the latest official figures released in 2018. However, representa-

tives of the Islamic community in France told QNA that the correct number today exceeds 6.5mn Muslims, especially if we add to them Muslims without residency permits. The numbers also indicate the existence of about 2,500 mosques across France, including approximately 400 mosques in the Ile-de-France region (Paris and its suburbs) and about 350 mosques in the French overseas territories, according to the same previous sources.

Mohamed Heniche, who serves as President of the Union of Mosques and Islamic Associations in the Saint-Denis district of Paris, explained that Ramadan presents a significant opportunity to intensify humanitarian charitable activities and to get closer to the Islamic community, providing them with assistance to overcome the difficult economic conditions, especially in the suburban areas of Paris, which suffer from poverty, low incomes, and marginalisation amid the economic crisis and inflation affecting France and Europe.

Heniche, in exclusive statements to QNA, pointed out that the population of the Saint-Denis district, according to official statistics for 2019, is approximately 654.1mn residents, including over 900,000 Muslims. He highlighted that this significant number of Muslims provides a strong impetus for charitable activities, demonstrating great solidarity among the members of the Islamic community, especially during the holy month.

He confirmed that the Union, which overseas and includes more than 100 mosques in the Saint-Denis district, provides about 20,000 meals daily, averaging 200 meals in each mosque. Additionally, they distribute “Ramadan baskets” daily to 50 families, consisting of essential food items and supplies distributed to needy families throughout Ramadan.

He added that they also distribute approximately 500 ready-made meals shortly before the Maghrib prayer to the homeless and undocumented immigrants in specific locations such as Porte de la Chapelle, Porte de la Villette, and Gare du Nord, known for the concentration of these vulnerable groups deprived of care and social support.

Heniche emphasised that the holy month represents a crucial opportunity for mosques and charitable organisations to raise funds for mosque construction projects, expansion, and equipping, especially with the significant turnout witnessed during Taraweeh prayers and Eid al-Fitr.

He explained that Ramadan also presents an opportunity for municipal officials and representatives of districts to approach members of the Muslim community, showing their solidarity with them by sharing Iftar meals with them in mosques and places of worship.

In conclusion, Heniche emphasised to QNA that charitable activities in Ramadan this year will have a special focus on expanding and intensifying solidarity nights with the Palestinian people, particularly in Gaza, through a clear programme and strategy. He noted that each mosque in France, especially those in the Saint-Denis district, typically allocates nights to collect donations specifically for Palestine and Gaza through specialised associations in this regard.



Keep Waqf banks in pace with today’s requirements: Green Tent

QNA
Doha

The Green Tent of the ‘A Flower Each Spring’ programme, began its Ramadan activities this year with a session on endowment (Waqf) banks and keeping pace with the today’s requirements, held both virtually and in person at the Sealine Sports Club Circuit (Mawater).

Discussions covered the extent to which these endowment banks meet today’s requirements, the positive role of the Islamic endowment throughout history, in addition to discussing the eco-

nomical challenges faced by the Islamic endowment and the role of education and media in spreading endowment culture.

Head of the programme and session, Dr Saif Ali al-Hajri, spoke about the great importance that endowment has in the heart of every Muslim for its role in balancing spirit and matter. It plays a part in the lives of Muslims even after death.

With the intertwining of interests and the economic complexities of today’s society, it has become necessary to develop the work of the endowment in a way that aligns with current developments and confronts the challenges, Dr al-Hajri said.

He explained that, since the inception of the Green Tent, the focus has been to discuss Islamic endowments and assess the conditions of its banks and the necessity of expanding them to enhance the stability of society and ensure religious and social awareness.

Dr al-Hajri also acknowledged the role of the media in its ability to provide visual, audio and print coverage of the Green Tent and its subject matters, as well as the role of social media platforms in spreading lessons and directives on the culture of endowment that supports social life and protects people against the excesses of material life.

Lecture explores shift in international economic governance

Georgetown University in Qatar (GU-Q) and the College of Law at Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU) continued their collaborative lecture series “Foundations of International Thought” with an insightful talk on the recent dramatic changes in international economic governance.

The shift has been marked by an emerging trend among countries imposing taxes and regulations over the way goods and services are produced in another country.

According to Dr Timothy Meyer, the Richard Allen/Cravath Distinguished Professor in International Business Law at Duke University, and visiting professor at HBKU College of Law, the trend represents a departure from the general rule that countries have exclusive authority to tax and regulate productive activities within their own borders.

Dr Meyer shared his insight on “Consumption Governance: The Role of Production and Consumption in International Commerce and Economic Law” in conversation with Dr Emmanouil Chatzikonstantinou, assistant professor of International Economics at GU-Q, and Dr Georgios Dimitropoulos, associate professor of law and associate dean for academic affairs at HBKU. “The rule has



Recent dramatic changes in international economic governance were discussed in the lecture.

been under enormous stress primarily because large economies, particularly developed economies, led by the US and the EU, are increasingly interested in the kinds of activities that their consumption supports overseas,” Dr Meyer explained. He highlighted recent bans on products that violate environmental, labour, or other standards established by the US and EU.

However, developing nations perceive these regulations as unfair restrictions on their economic development strategies, as they create “massive non-tariff barriers to trade.”

They also limit these countries’ ability to set policies that ensure they have a comparative advantage in certain sectors;

for example, by being able to produce goods more cheaply.

Dr Chatzikonstantinou and Dr Dimitropoulos further discussed mechanisms to overcome increased international economic conflict and the challenges for international trade institutions like the World Trade Organisation in adapting to this evolving landscape.

For Dr Chatzikonstantinou, supply chain shocks are already having an effect. “You see its impact on the balance of power,” he said, cautioning that “the shift in power is probably going to increase an invisible divide between the Global North and the Global South and that we do not know what the institutional implications will be.”

SISQ fair a resounding success



The Swiss International School in Qatar (SISQ) Fair proved to be a resounding success, drawing together families and individuals from the local community for a day filled with entertainment, delicious food, and vibrant cultural experiences. The fair showcased a diverse array of vendors, offering an eclectic mix of arts and crafts, in addition to local food vendors and entertainment options. "The SISQ Fair is more than just an event; it's a tradition eagerly anticipated by all, deeply rooted in our school's vision and mission," affirmed Vlatka Kalecak, the head of school. "It embodies our commitment to fostering a strong sense of community, embracing diversity, and crafting unforgettable moments for everyone involved. We take great pride in upholding this tradition, as it stands as a testament to the resilience and unity of our school community."



510 MES kindergarten students felicitated

As many as 510 kindergarten students of MES Indian School were felicitated with graduation certificates at a ceremony. The evening began with a welcome dance by the tiny tots of KG I. The ceremony was inaugurated by the chief guest, director of academics Ashraf Sharafuddeen by releasing balloons, marking the school's 50 years. Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar, KG section co-ordinator Cheryl Soans, student Thahani Shareeqe and KG II student Shinu Azeez's parent Joaan Shinu Azeez spoke. Lahan Latheef from KG I bid adieu to the little graduates on behalf of all junior kindergarteners. The students of KG I performed a ramp walk in the attires of the various participating countries of Expo 2023 Doha. Teacher Jesna Siju proposed a vote of thanks.



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATIONS



200 expat women attend WCLF event

The Women Community Leaders' Forum (WCLF) in Qatar brought together more than 200 expatriate women from nine countries to mark International Women's Day (IWD) recently. The attendees came from diverse sectors, including construction, household services, hospitality and medical field services, among others, according to a statement from WCLF. The event, themed 'Hold the Line: Educate, Inspire and Engage Your Community', was supported by Workers Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF), Building and Wood Workers International (BWI) and International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). It featured poster design competition, presentations and cultural dances from the participating countries comprising the Philippines, India, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Nepal, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda. Kenya got the first place in the poster design competition while Nigeria won the grand prize for the cultural presentation and traditional dance.

The celebration also included a special performance from the teachers and students of Skills Development Centre, showcasing Indian classical dance. Qatar's WSIF executive director Khulood Saif al-Kubaisi said: "It is my understanding that this is your 5th year commemorating this day which is a good indication that indeed, you are holding the line as one united front of women leaders from various national migrant communities in Qatar." Other special guests who joined the celebration online included Gemma Freedman, International Officer of Unison for the UK; and Samaney Menso, BWI World Board member, who expressed their support for women workers in Qatar and encouraged them to continue to excel in their various occupations. WCLF chairperson and Women Programme Co-ordinator Myla "Mags" Laja said: "Our theme, 'Hold the Line: Educate, Inspire, Motivate Your Community,' is a powerful call to challenge all women in our community to take up the mantle of leadership and advocacy in

building bridges, advancing and collaborating towards improvement of women's welfare to promote decent work." Noimot Omolara Olayiwola, chairperson of the IWD 2024 Organising Committee and founder of the Nigerian Expatriate Women Forum in Qatar, encouraged women to keep holding the line no matter what they are experiencing in life. "As women, we have the resilience to carry on even when everything seems to be at a standstill. We have the ability to quickly adapt and innovate in whichever situation we find ourselves. So, it is important to remain together as a community and keep inspiring one another. This is what we do as community women leaders' forum in Qatar - holding the line and leading by inspiring one another," she said. Community women leaders Prathiba Ratheesh (India), Margaret Kabue (Kenya), Faith A A (Uganda), Nurett Mhmed Ahmed or Hanan (Ethiopia), Lulu Nyalali (Tanzania), Salina Rasul (Bangladesh) and Nisha Parajuli (Nepal) were present.

Qget hosts grand celebration



Qatar Chapter of Government Engineering College, Thrissur Alumni (Qget) hosted a grand celebration in honour of International Women's Day. With the theme "Inspire Inclusion," the event highlighted the achievements and talents of the women entrepreneurs within the Qget community. A key feature of the event was a talk by architect Nima Haris focusing on the importance of diversity and empowerment in society. Attendees were inspired by the personal stories and experiences shared by the Qget women entrepreneurs. There were over 20 stalls covering authentic Kerala snacks to cakes and pastries. Qget senior member and Engineers Forum vice-chairperson Thanuja Haseeb welcomed the gathering. Senior member Anjali Prasanan offered felicitations. The event was attended by around 200 people. Management committee members Shahna Zubair and Lakshmi thanked the participants.



Fun and festivities at Ideal Indian School event

Ideal Indian School celebrated International Women's Day with a lot of festivities, with special dedication to the women members of the IIS family. Principal Shaikh Shamim Sahib and all section heads were present. The programme began with a prayer service by Zohra. Rajula Sadath welcomed the gathering. All the women section heads were welcomed with a colourful blossom as a gesture of appreciation for their leadership, dedication and invaluable contributions to the school. The principal talked about the necessity of the equality of women in today's world. Girls' section headmistress Khatija T C was the overall co-ordinator. Teachers presented dances skits, songs and a fashion show. Teachers were selected and crowned in various titles, such as the 'Best Attire' awarded to Soubhagya, 'Best Jewellery' to Padmaja, 'Best Hijab' to Saba Harris, and the 'Queen of the Day' title bestowed upon Rasitha. Fun games were organised for the lady teachers. Sharon proposed a vote of thanks. The programme was compered by Soumya and Masarath.



MES organises special gathering

International Women's Day was celebrated at MES Indian School with a special gathering. Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar emphasised the significance of women in the modern world and the increased responsibilities that they assume for the growth and development of society. Colourful balloons were released, a lucky draw conducted and a cake baked by the department of home science was cut. The gent staff of the school felicitated the ladies with greeting cards.



China’s FM heads to Australia, New Zealand

AFP
Sydney

China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi will next week visit Australia and New Zealand, officials said yesterday, with the diplomatic blitz expected to focus on easing trade.

Wang’s visit to Australia, his first as foreign minister since 2017, comes as the two countries have begun to resolve simmering trade disputes, despite recent sparring over human rights and China’s growing clout in the Pacific region. “I think it is a good thing that Wang Yi is visiting,” Prime Minister Anthony Albanese told report-

ers yesterday, citing “significant progress” in removing trade impediments. New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters said Wang would also be visiting Wellington. “We look forward to re-engaging with Foreign Minister Wang Yi and discussing the full breadth of the bilateral relationship, which is one

of New Zealand’s most important and complex.” China’s top diplomat is scheduled to hold “strategic dialogue” talks with Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong in Canberra on March 20. “We seek to co-operate with China where we can, disagree where we must and engage in our

national interest,” Wong said in a statement. Australia’s trade relations with China have improved since Albanese’s centre-left Labor Party won power in 2022, adopting a less confrontational tone than the previous conservative government. China had imposed tariffs and trade barriers on key Australian

exports in 2020, retaliating after Canberra barred Huawei from 5G contracts and then called for a probe into the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic. Beijing’s foreign ministry said Wang’s visits would be “a prelude to high-level exchanges between China and the two countries this year”.

China blasts US TikTok vote as buyout plan emerges

AFP
Beijing

China blasted Washington’s “bandit” mentality yesterday after the US House passed a bill that would ban TikTok unless it splits from its Chinese owner, as former Trump treasury secretary Steve Mnuchin said he is preparing a buyout plan.

The short-video app has soared in popularity worldwide but its ownership by Chinese technology giant ByteDance – and alleged subservience to Beijing’s ruling Communist Party – has fuelled concern in Western capitals.

On Wednesday, the US House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved a bill that would force TikTok to divest from its parent company or face a nationwide ban.

The bill is yet to pass the senate, where it is expected to face a tougher test in order to become law.

“The US should truly respect the principles of a market economy and fair competition (and) stop unjustly suppressing foreign companies,” Beijing’s commerce ministry spokesperson He Yadong said at a press conference.

Washington should also “provide an open, fair, just, and non-discriminatory environment for foreign companies to invest and operate in the US”, He added. “China will take all necessary measures to resolutely safeguard its legitimate rights and interests,” he said.

At a separate press briefing, foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said the vote “runs contrary to the principles of fair competition and international economic and trade rules”.

“If so-called reasons of national security can be used to arbitrarily suppress excellent companies from other countries, then there is no fairness and justice at all,” Wang said.

“When someone sees a good thing another person has and tries to take it for themselves, this is entirely the logic of a bandit.”

Mnuchin yesterday said he is putting together a team of investors to buy TikTok from its Chinese owners, once the bill passed.

“I think the legislation should pass and I think (TikTok) should be sold,” Mnuchin told CNBC.

Mnuchin, who served for four years as former president Donald Trump’s treasury secretary, said that TikTok was “a great business and I’m going to put together a group to buy” the embattled app.

“This should be owned by US businesses. There’s no way that the Chinese would ever let a US company own something like this in China,” Mnuchin said.

China has blocked Western online platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) for years on its heavily-censored Internet.

US lawmakers voted 352 in favour of the proposed law and 65 against, striking a rare note of unity in politically divided Washington.

Hundreds rescued from Philippines scam centre



A Philippines police officer talks to foreign nationals after a raid on a 25-acre complex of buildings in Bamban town of Tarlac province, north of Manila. Hundreds of people forced to work in an online scam centre in the Philippines were rescued in the pre-dawn raid yesterday that also saw eight suspects arrested, according to police. Police found 432 Chinese nationals, 371 Filipinos, 57 Vietnamese, eight Malaysians, three Taiwanese, two Indonesians and two Rwandans at the site.

One dead, 29 rescued after Australia gold mine collapse

AFP
Sydney

Search teams pulled a body from the rubble of a collapsed Australian gold mine yesterday, after a major rescue operation earlier freed 29 workers trapped underground.

A crew of 30 miners was working deep inside the Ballarat Gold Mine in the state of Victoria when it caved in on Wednesday evening.

While 29 of the workers were rescued within hours, a 37-year-old man was help-

lessly pinned by the tumbling rocks. Emergency services toiled through the night to dig the man from the debris, some 3kms from the mine entrance. His body was eventually pulled from the mine yesterday morning.

Union officials have raised questions about the mine’s safety record – it collapsed in 2007 when owned by another company – and the site’s current owner now faces a major workplace safety probe.

“My inspectors and investigators have been on site since last night,” said Narelle Beer, executive director of the state’s workplace

safety regulator WorkSafe Victoria. “It will be a complex, detailed investigation. And we’re very keen to understand how we can ensure that a tragedy like this never occurs again.”

Australian Workers Union state secretary Ronnie Hayden said the collapse was “devastating”. “But it’s even more devastating because this should have been avoided.”

Hayden said the union would push state authorities to pursue a case under “industrial manslaughter” legislation.

“Our members are angry. Our organisers are angry,” he said.

Marcos, Blinken to meet as South China Sea tensions rise

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. will meet US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on March 19 to tackle co-operation and security matters, the office of the Manila leader said in a statement. Their meeting comes on the heels of heightened tensions between the Philippines and China over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Marcos also vowed to defend the Philippines’ maritime claims after Chinese President Xi Jinping called on the armed forces to co-ordinate preparations for military conflicts at sea. “So, I’m not surprised, but we will have to continue to do what we can to defend our maritime territory in the face of perhaps a more active attempt by the Chinese to annex some of our territory,” Marcos told a news conference. Japanese newspaper Asahi has also reported leaders from Japan, the US and the Philippines are in the final stages of planning a summit meeting in Washington, DC next month.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un sits inside a tank during a military demonstration involving tank units, in North Korea.

N Korea’s Kim ‘drives’ new tank during mock battle

Reuters
Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un guided a military demonstration involving a new battle tank, state media KCNA reported yesterday, in the latest show of force by the isolated state as South Korea and the US wrapped up joint drills.

Kim expressed “great satisfaction” that the new type of main battle tank successfully demonstrated its striking power in its first performance display on Wednesday, KCNA said.

The “training match” was designed to inspect the combat capabilities of tank crews and make them familiar with combat action on different tactical missions, it said. “Swiftly weaving their way through various worst combat

circumstances, heavy tanks hit targets at once with powerful strikes and broke through strong defence lines with high manoeuvrability,” the report said.

The 105th Tank Division, which was declared the winner of the mock battle, was the unit which occupied the South Korean capital Seoul during the Korean War, KCNA said.

Kim was joined by senior officials including Defence Minister Kang Sun-nam at the event.

In a photograph published by KCNA, the leader of the reclusive state could be seen with his head peaking out of a tank as the state media reported he drove the tank himself.

Meanwhile, other photographs showed Kim sporting a leather jacket and surrounded by troops, and also tanks with the North Korean flag blasting ammunition on a field.

Thai ex-PM Thaksin makes first public appearance since release

AFP
Chiang Mai, Thailand

Thailand’s former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra visited his hometown in the kingdom’s north yesterday as he made his first public appearances since being freed early from a jail sentence for graft and abuse of power.

The controversial billionaire, twice elected premier and ousted in a 2006 military coup arrived by private jet in Chiang Mai for a three-day trip.

After landing in Chiang Mai – his home city and traditional

political power base – at around 9.40am local time (0240GMT) he was greeted by his younger sister and her husband before heading to a park and greeting supporters.

“Seventeen years I’ve been waiting for him,” Samnang Kongpolpan, who travelled from northeastern Surin province, said at the park.

Alongside him was Bangkok taxi driver Paisal, who had journeyed to see the former politician he called “the PM of my heart”.

Thaksin planted a sapling at the park to mark his visit, and released fish into a lake as a Buddhist act of “merit-making”.

While in the north, Thaksin will

meet family and supporters and visit the graves of his relatives.

Thaksin, 74, returned to the kingdom in August last year after 15 years of self-exile, and was immediately jailed for eight years on charges dating back to his time in power.

But his sentence was cut to one year by King Maha Vajiralongkorn within days of his return, and last month the government said Thaksin was eligible for early release because of his age and poor health.

The former Manchester City owner’s return to Thailand came shortly after Pheu Thai took power at the head of a coalition govern-

ment that includes parties close to his old foes in the military.

The timing of his return led many to conclude a backroom deal had been struck to cut his jail time, a suggestion denied by the Pheu Thai-led government.

Ramet Rattanachaweng, spokesman for the royalist Democrat party, said the public would be watching closely to see if Thaksin is being given special treatment.

“He is on parole. If he gets something beyond regular regulations, the probation and corrections departments will have to explain themselves,” Ramet said.

Thaksin is widely seen as still

wielding great influence with Pheu Thai, and on his release last month, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin said that “everyone in the government is ready to listen” to the veteran leader.

Srettha is due to visit Chiang Mai from today on his return from official visits to Germany and France, and told reporters in Paris he would meet Thaksin “if opportunity and time allow”, according to public broadcaster ThaiPBS.

Pheu Thai spokesman Danuporn Punnakanta on Tuesday urged the party’s MPs not to go and see Thaksin.

Thaksin is one of the most in-

fluential but divisive figures in modern Thai history.

A former police officer turned telecoms tycoon, he is still loved by millions of rural Thais for his populist policies in the early 2000s, but has long been opposed by the country’s royalist and pro-military establishment.

“During Thaksin’s era, I notice our country had improved. He cleared out the debt for Thailand,” supporter Paisal said at the park in Chiang Mai.

The tussle for dominance between the establishment and Thaksin and his allies has largely defined Thai politics over the past two decades.

India fills poll board ahead of vote date announcement

Reuters
New Delhi

India appointed two officials as election commissioners yesterday, filling vacant spots in the three-person body ahead of an expected announcement of a date for a national election likely to be

won by incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
The appointments come days after the unexplained resignation of one commissioner, which drew expressions of concern from several opposition parties.
Another commissioner retired in February. Both departures come at a time when India's parliamen-

tary election, the world's largest poll with some 960mn voters, is due by May.
The ministry of law and justice said in the government gazette that President Droupadi Murmu had appointed Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu as commissioners, without giving more details about them.

Opinion polls predict an easy win for Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies in the vote for members of the lower house of parliament.
That would give him a third straight term in the world's fifth largest economy.
Earlier, a government-appointed panel recommended India hold

elections to state assemblies and the national parliament at the same time, saying the process would increase transparency and inclusivity and improve governance and growth.
The panel, appointed by the government in September, submitted its report to President Droupadi Murmu yesterday, days before an

election date is expected to be set.
The report will not affect the upcoming elections, which have to be held by May, as a "one nation, one election" law will have to be passed by parliament and ratified by states, many of which are ruled by Modi's rivals and have opposed the idea as they say it violates India's federal politics.

India's Paytm banking unit to cut about 20% of staff

Reuters
Mumbai

Indian digital payments firm Paytm plans to cut close to 20% of staff at its banking unit amid uncertainty over the unit's future due to a looming central bank deadline for it to halt most operations, two sources said.
Paytm Payments Bank has decided to lay-off staff in certain divisions, including operations, the sources with direct knowledge of the matter said.
The unit had 2,775 employees as of December 2023, data from information provider Tracxn shows.
Paytm, formally known as One 97 Communications, owns a 49% stake in the bank which was ordered by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) at the end of January to stop accepting credit transactions or deposits across products such as savings accounts, prepaid cards and digital wallets by March 15, following persistent compliance breaches.
Paytm shares have lost 54% of their value since the regulatory clampdown, in the worst crisis for one of India's largest digital payment firms.
"Since this regulatory order has coincided with appraisal season, employees with low ratings have been asked to leave," the first source, an employee at the banking unit, said.
"Employees are frustrated because the management has gone

back on their word that nobody will be laid off," this person said.
In an internal town-hall meeting in February, Paytm CEO Vijay Shekhar Sharma assured the bank's staff there would be no layoffs, the second source, also a banking unit employee, said.
Neither source wished to be identified as they are not authorised to speak to the media.
A spokesperson for Paytm Payments Bank declined to comment.
A Paytm spokesperson said: "There are no layoffs here."
The annual appraisal cycle is underway at the company which may lead to adjustments based on performance evaluations and role suitability, this spokesperson added.
"It's crucial to understand that this process is distinct from layoffs".
After today's deadline, customers who have deposits in the bank's accounts, wallets and toll tags for paying highways taxes, can still access them. But no fresh deposits can be made.
Paytm Payments Bank will also still hold a regulatory licence unless it is withdrawn by the RBI.
It is unclear what purpose Paytm Payments Bank will serve after the business halt, the second source said.
Both sources said there had been no update from Paytm on what banking staff would do after the move.
Paytm has absorbed about 100 employees from the banking unit, the second source said.

Water crisis in Bengaluru



People wait in a queue with cans to collect drinking water amid an ongoing water crisis in Bengaluru, India, yesterday.

Vedanta, Airtel, Essel 'among top funders of Indian political parties'

Reuters
New Delhi

Some of India's biggest companies, including Vedanta, Bharti Airtel, RPSG Group and Essel Mining were among the country's top political funders over the last five years under a now-scrapped opaque political funding system, official data showed yesterday.
The information was made public by the Election Commission of India following an order on Monday from the country's top court.
The poll body said in a statement, "The

Election Commission of India has uploaded the data on electoral bonds on its website as received from State Bank of India on 'as is where is basis'.
"It may be recalled that in the said matter, ECI has consistently and categorically weighed in favour of disclosure and transparency, a position reflected in the proceedings of the Supreme Court and noted in the order also," it said.
The political funding mechanism introduced in 2017 allowed companies and individuals to donate unlimited amounts anonymously to political parties.
The funding system, called Electoral Bonds, was challenged by opposition lawmakers and

a civil society group on the grounds that it hindered the public's right to know who had given money to political parties. The Supreme Court banned Electoral Bonds last month, calling them "unconstitutional".
Under the system, a person or company could buy bonds from government-owned State Bank of India and donate them to a political party.
Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party was the largest beneficiary of these bonds, which were donations, garnering 55% of the bonds worth Rs120bn rupees (\$1.45bn) donated between January 2018 and January 2024 by people and companies.

British charities urge makeover for misunderstood molluscs

Gardeners in the UK should learn to "live harmoniously" with slugs, snails and other molluscs rather than viewing them as their "greatest foe", two leading horticultural organisations urged yesterday.
The Wildlife Trusts and the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) said they were joining forces to challenge the negative perception surrounding the role of slugs and snails in British gardens.
The conservation charities have launched a "making friends with molluscs" campaign to highlight the importance to garden ecosystems of the often-maligned creatures. "While a small number of slugs and snails can cause damage to certain plants, overall they bring many benefits to the garden and contribute to a balanced ecosystem," RHS senior wildlife specialist Helen Bostock said. "We hope that by highlighting the crucial work that molluscs do in our gardens we can help give them a well-deserved reputation makeover."

Sunak opens Rolls-Royce facility



Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak attends the official opening of the new 'Future Works' area during a visit to the Rolls-Royce manufacturing facility in Bristol, Britain, yesterday.

Backlash over UK govt's new extremism definition

AFP
London

The UK government yesterday unveiled a new definition of extremism to determine which organisations get public funds and meetings with officials, prompting criticism from civic, political and religious groups.
The change, to what ministers call a "more precise and rigorous" definition, comes two weeks after Prime Minister Rishi Sunak warned of a "shocking increase in extremist disruption and criminality" that risked "mob rule".
Announcing the rewording of the government's 2011 extremism definition, senior minister Michael Gove told parliament it was necessary "to protect our democratic values and enhance

social cohesion". "It is important both to reinforce what we all have in common and to be clear and precise in identifying the dangers posed by extremism," he added.
Gove rejected criticism - including from normally sympathetic right-wing media - that it could stifle free speech.
"The government is taking every possible precaution to strike a balance... between protecting fundamental rights and safeguarding citizens," he said.
The government previously defined extremism as "the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values" such as "mutual respect and tolerance".
The new wording describes extremism as "the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance" that seeks to achieve one of several aims.

Farmers rally in Delhi to demand higher crop prices

Reuters
New Delhi

Thousands of farmers rode buses and trains from across India to gather yesterday at a rally in the capital, New Delhi, pressing a demand for higher guaranteed prices for their crops, as they faced down police barricades and tough security.
The rally, days before general elections are expected to be called in an exercise that will see Prime Minister Narendra Modi seek a rare third term, comes a month after police wielding tear gas and water cannons halted a farmers' march outside New Delhi.

"Through this meeting, we want to show government authorities that we are not too far from reaching our goals," Darshan Pal, of a farmers' group, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), told news agency ANI.
"We can surround Delhi whenever we want."
There was no immediate comment from the government or Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) but they have said in the past they are committed to the welfare and prosperity of farmers, who form an influential voting bloc.
Groups of farmers listened to

their leaders' speeches while intermittently chanting slogans against Modi and his government, which had stopped the February 13 march at a spot about 200km from New Delhi, at which the farmers camped.
Police earlier threw up barricades, tightened security, and warned of traffic congestion in preparation for yesterday's rally at the capital's Ramlila Maidan, a popular site for gatherings.
Farmers from states such as Maharashtra in the west and Odisha in the east were undeterred by the high turnout of police and paramilitary.
"This is a one-day event meant

to serve as a reminder to Modi government of their unfulfilled promises," said Narendra Singh, a farmer from the northern state of Haryana.
"This is a one-day event meant to serve as a reminder to Modi government of their unfulfilled promises"
Farmers say the Modi government had committed in 2021 to set up a panel to find ways of ensuring support prices for all produce but had been going slow on it.
They also want the government

to honour a promise to double their incomes and act against a federal minister whose son was arrested during similar protests in 2021 after being accused of running over and killing four protesters.
"Our main demand is a legally guaranteed minimum support price," said 39-year-old Utpal Biswas, from the eastern state of West Bengal. "Today's protest is supposed to last for a day but we will see how it progresses."
With the elections due by May, allowing the farmers to gather in the capital, even though under strict conditions meant to ensure public order, is seen as a concession from the government which

has blocked them outside the city in the past.
"This is an important day because the government has finally come under pressure from farmers and farmer groups," Jairam Ramesh, a spokesperson of the main opposition Congress party, told ANI.
"In the end, they have got permission for a gathering (in Delhi)."
Farmers say at least one protester has died in clashes with police over the last month and dozens more have been injured.
Modi suffered his biggest political defeat two years ago, when a similar year-long protest forced him to repeal some farm reforms.



Biden has marginal 1-point lead over Trump: new poll shows

Reuters
Washington

US President Joe Biden had a marginal one-percentage point lead over Donald Trump ahead of the November presidential election as each candidate secured enough support from their parties to appear on the ballot, a new Reuters/Ipsos poll found.

Some 39% of registered voters in the one-week poll, which closed on Wednesday, said they would vote for Biden, a Democrat, if the election were held today, compared with 38% who picked Republican former President Trump.

Biden's lead was within the survey's 1.8 percentage point margin of error.

Many voters were undecided, with 11% saying they would vote for other candidates, 5% saying they won't vote, and 7% saying they don't know or had no comment.

Both candidates carry significant liabilities in the first US presidential election rematch in nearly 70 years, with voters concerned about Biden's age – 81 – and Trump's upcoming four criminal trials, including on charges of trying to overturn his 2020 election defeat.

The poll, which surveyed adults nationwide, included many ways to measure support for Biden and Trump, 77, and most pointed to a close race.

Trump had a marginal lead among all respondents, but Biden's lead among registered voters was significant because people who are already registered to vote are more likely to do so in November.

Only two-thirds of eligible voters turned out in the 2020 presidential election in which Biden defeated Trump.

In the seven states where the election was closest in 2020, a group that could again prove pivotal in November, Trump led Biden 40% to 37% among registered voters.

While nationwide surveys give important signals on who America will vote for, just handful of competitive states typically tilt the balance in the US electoral college, the ultimate decider in presidential elections.

With many voters unenthused by either Trump or Biden, the new poll showed independent candidate Robert F Kennedy Jr backed by 15% of registered voters should he appear as a third candidate on the ballot, down from 17% in a January survey.

It appeared that Kennedy could siphon similar shares of votes from Trump and Biden.

When poll respondents were asked to choose between Trump and Biden without any other options, Biden led 50% to 48% among registered voters, with 2% refusing to answer the question.

While Trump easily defeated former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley in the Republican Party's party nominating con-

test, clinching enough delegates on Tuesday to be the party's candidate, he has vulnerabilities among independents and even within his own party.

Only about 37% of Haley's supporters plan to vote for Trump now that she has dropped out of the Republican contest, the poll found.

Some 16% said they would vote for Biden and the rest said they would vote for someone else or not vote at all.

Following a controversial ruling by a conservative court in Alabama that the frozen embryos used in fertility treatments should be considered children, the new poll showed only a quarter of registered voters agreed with that view, while 57% disagreed and the rest were unsure.

The Reuters/Ipsos poll collected responses online nationwide from 4,094 US adults, including 3,356 registered voters. It had a margin of error of 1.8% for registered voters and 1.7% for all respondents.

Antarctica scientists warn of bird flu spread as penguin cases are confirmed

Reuters
Santiago

Scientists in Antarctica are warning of the spread of deadly H5N1 avian flu virus after the disease was first confirmed on the frozen continent's mainland last month and has since been detected in local penguin and cormorant populations.

The spread of the virus, which has decimated bird populations worldwide and hit South American wild bird and marine mammal populations hard, has raised alarm about the potential impact on Antarctica's massive penguin colonies.

"We are talking about a very worrying risk," said researcher Fabiola Leon from the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile who was part of an expedition in late 2023 and early this year to monitor for bird flu in Antarctica.

"There are species in danger of extinction, such as emperor penguins and other birds," the scientist added.

The Chilean Antarctic Institute (INACH), which organised the expedition, announced this week that it had detected the new positive bird flu cases in the region, which it said was a "landmark" find because it included cases found in penguins.

The positive cases included nine Adelia penguins and one Antarctic cormorant, Leon added.

The virus was first detected in skua seabirds on the Antarctic mainland last month.

"This detection of highly pathogenic influenza H5N1 is for the first time reported for Antarctic penguins and cormorants," Leon said, warning that the crowded nature of penguin colonies and migratory movements could exacerbate the virus' spread.

"This may promote, increase the rate of transmission of the disease among various bird colonies"

Skiing Afghans determined to keep sport alive

By Abdullah Hasrat
AFP

From the edge of a slope in the province of Bamiyan, rivals cheer as they take turns to race down the mountainside, united in keeping skiing alive in Afghanistan.

While it is home to spectacular mountain ranges, including the mighty Hindu Kush, the country does not have a widespread culture of skiing, with gear also costly and scarce.

That has not, however, stopped the growth of a thriving ski cohort, which is eager to keep developing the sport in Afghanistan, despite the loss of sponsors and prominent skiers who left the country after the Taliban takeover in 2021.

"Ski races have lost a bit of their colour" in Afghanistan since the Taliban authorities returned to power, said 23-year-old Esmatullah Haidari, who captains a local ski team.

However, he added, "there are still enthusiastic skiers who don't want skiing to fade away".

Shah Agha Rezayee, a trainer and long-time skier, said fans of the sport have "revived the spirit" of skiing.

"We should work for it because it is our motivation, interest and love," said Rezayee, who dreams of seeing Afghan skiing represented at the Olympics.

Today, there are teams in at least six provinces, with hundreds of members, a chunk of whom took to the Bamiyan slopes earlier in March for the federation's first formal race of the season.

Wearing a hodge-podge of warm clothes and neon pinnies, a long line of competitors shouldered their skis as they marched up the Bamiyan piste, which lacked a lift.

A handful of men gathered to watch, joining in spirited applause as each adult and child racer zipped through the finish line.

Women no longer participate since the Taliban authorities effectively banned women from all sports, despite previously making up a large number of skiers in Bamiyan, according to the federation.



Afghan skiers walk uphill to compete in a ski race on the outskirts of Bamiyan province last Friday.

"We feel their absence," said Haidari.

"Everyone should be free, and should be able to study and to ski, it's not important whether you're a girl or boy," he added. "We miss our sisters a lot"

Foreign women do not face the same restrictions and visitors have continued to join Afghans on the slopes, including at events organised by the charity-backed Bamiyan Alpine Ski Club.

One such event was the well-attended Afghan Peaks Ski Race, which was also sponsored this year by a local TV station.

Tourists with the adventure travel company Untamed Borders brought with them about 130kg (285 pounds) of gear into the country to donate.

Many skiers get by with donated equipment and handmade wooden skis.

"We have a very limited budget for the sport," said Mohamed Daud Kargar, president of the Afghanistan Ski Federation. "In the past, some organisations co-operated

with us but in the previous three years, we haven't received any help."

Nasratullah Nasrat, who learned to ski from YouTube videos, said he hopes to one day ski for Afghanistan, but voiced concern about the "very limited resources" available to skiers.

"Unfortunately, the government is not paying much attention, slopes have not been prepared and recently, there has been less snowfall," the 20-year-old from Wardak province told AFP, citing the late snow arrival this year in the drought-hit country.

Haidari echoed the challenges, but was determined to carry on the baton from two Olympic-hopeful Afghan skiers Sajjad Husaini and Sayed Alishah Farhang, who left the country after the UN-backed government collapsed in 2021.

Even "if we don't get resources, we will make wooden skis and we won't let skiing die in Afghanistan, especially in Bamiyan", he said.

SpaceX mega rocket lost in final phase of 'successful' test flight

SpaceX's Starship rocket, designed to eventually send astronauts to the moon and beyond, completed nearly an entire test flight to space on its third try yesterday but was destroyed during its return to Earth after making it farther than ever before.

During a live webcast of the flight, SpaceX commentators said mission control lost communications with the spacecraft during its atmospheric re-entry at hypersonic speed.

The vehicle was nearing a planned splashdown in the Indian Ocean about an hour after launch from south Texas.

A few minutes later, SpaceX confirmed that the spacecraft had been "lost", presumably either burning up or coming apart during re-entry or crashing into the sea.

For reasons that were left unclear, SpaceX opted to skip one of the test flight's core objectives – an attempt to re-ignite one of Starship's Raptor engines while it coasted in a shallow orbit.

That milestone is considered key to its future success.

Still, completion of many of Starship's intended flight objectives represented a milestone in the development of a spacecraft crucial to the growing satellite launch business of SpaceX, founded by Elon Musk in 2002, and NASA's moon programme.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) chief Bill Nelson congratulated SpaceX on what he called "a successful test flight" in a statement posted on social media platform X.

SpaceX president Gwynne Shotwell wrote in an X post the test



The SpaceX Starship spacecraft lifting off from Starbase in Boca Chica, Texas.

marked an "incredible day"

The two-stage spacecraft, consisting of the Starship cruise vessel mounted atop its towering Super Heavy rocket booster, blasted off from the company's Starbase launch site near Boca Chica Village on the Gulf Coast of Texas.

The upper-stage Starship reached peak altitudes of 145 miles (234km).

The spacecraft far exceeded its two past performances, both of which were cut short by explosions minutes after launch.

The company had acknowledged in advance a high probability that its latest flight might end with the spacecraft's demise before the mission profile was finished.

SpaceX's engineering culture, considered more risk-tolerant than many of the aerospace industry's more established players, is built on a flight-testing strategy that pushes spacecraft to the point of failure, then fine-tunes improvements through frequent repetition.

Yesterday's flight achieved many of the engineering goals set for the mission: a repeat of successful stage separation during initial ascent; the first test of Starship's ability to open and close its payload door in orbit; and the transfer of super-cooled rocket propellant from one tank to another during spaceflight.

What SpaceX failed to demonstrate on top of Starship's re-entry failure and the skipped engine re-ignition test was an attempt to fly the Super Heavy rocket back to Earth, part of SpaceX's routine strategy of recovering its launch boosters for re-use.

SpaceX officials have said they plan to conduct at least six more test flights of Starship this year, subject to regulatory approval.

The company is required to investigate each test mission failure and deliver its findings and corrective actions to the Federal Aviation Administration for the agency's approval before the vehicle can fly again. – **Reuters**

Haiti works at government transition as gang leader threatens politicians

AFP/Reuters
Port-au-Prince

A powerful Haitian gang leader has pledged to continue the fighting that has plunged the country into chaos, as stakeholders work toward establishing a transitional governing body to replace the outgoing prime minister.

Gangs that control most of the capital Port-au-Prince launched an armed campaign almost two weeks ago, saying that they intended to topple Prime Minister Ariel Henry, sending the nation into violent conflict with warnings of possible famine and civil war.

Henry agreed to step aside after an emergency meeting on Monday that brought together US, UN and Caribbean representatives, among others, and yielded a blueprint for Haitians to form a governing Transitional Presidential Council until elections can be held.

However, Jimmy Cherizier, a powerful Haitian gang leader known as "Barbecue", said on Wednesday that his coalition of armed groups "do not care about Ariel Henry's resignation".

"We are going to continue the fight for Haiti's liberation," the former police officer under UN sanctions told Spanish-language network W Radio.

Earlier, Cherizier issued a threatening message aimed at political leaders who would take part in the transitional council.

His threat was recorded on Wednesday and distributed via a rambling seven-minute audio message shared on messaging platform WhatsApp.

"Don't you have any shame?" said Cherizier, directing his remarks at politicians looking to join the council. "You have taken the country where it is today. You have no idea what will happen."

"I'll know if your kids are in Haiti, if your wives are in Haiti ... if your husbands are in Haiti," he said in an apparent threat to their families. "If you're gonna run the country all your family ought to be there."

In his remarks, Cherizier said the resignation of Henry was only "a first step in the battle"

Haiti has not had a national election since 2016, and there is currently no president or parliament.

President Jovenel Moise, who was assassinated in 2021, was not replaced, with Henry leading the country after his death.

Henry has been stranded in Puerto Rico after a visit to Kenya, where he hoped to nail down details of a plan for Nairobi to lead a UN-approved police force to restore order in Haiti.

He announced late on Monday that he would resign when the transitional council is stood up.

Kenya said it had put its plans on hold, but President William Ruto confirmed on Wednesday that his country still intended to follow through with the support mission once the transitional council is installed.

Guyanese President Irfaan Ali, who heads the regional bloc CARICOM, said the crisis in Haiti is likely beyond the capacity that Caribbean militaries could handle.

"The situation in Haiti tells you how ill-prepared we were as a region," he said at a University of Guyana event in Georgetown. "We are now scrambling to put together joint command, joint operation."

The transitional body is to have seven voting members drawn from political parties, the private sector and the Montana Group, a civil society coalition that had proposed an interim government in 2021 after Moise's assassination.

There will also be two non-voting seats on the council: one for civil society and another for the church.

In Port-au-Prince, shops were open on Wednesday and life was slowly returning to normal, an AFP reporter observed.

Buses were running and some government offices were open after a two-week closure. However, schools stayed shut, as did the city's airport.

Several countries and the European Union have evacuated their diplomatic personnel due to the instability.

The UN mission in Haiti said on Wednesday that it would be launching an "airbridge" from neighbouring Dominican Republic to facilitate the movement of aid into the country.

Survivors say at least 60 migrants die attempting to cross Med: aid group

At least 60 people died on a migrant boat that lost power as it tried to reach Europe from Libya, an aid group said yesterday, citing accounts from those rescued.

“Survivors report that at least 60 people died en route, including women and at least one child,” said Marseille-based SOS Mediterranee.

The group’s Ocean Viking rescue ship is currently heading for port, carrying 224 people rescued from different boats.

Among them are 25 from a boat that survivors said had set off from Zawiya, Libya on March 8 – only for its motor to give out three days later.

UN body the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said it was “deeply troubled by news of a shipwreck in the Central Mediterranean”.

Passengers reported drifting without food or water for several days, said SOS Mediterranee.

It was not immediately clear how those who died were said to have lost their lives. AFP was not in an immediate position to confirm the toll.

Ocean Viking also has aboard 113 people recovered on Wednesday night and a further 88 rescued yesterday from “an overloaded inflatable craft”.

It has been directed to Ancona on Italy’s eastern coast, which SOS Mediterranee said was

1,450km (900 miles) from its current position.

The aid group said it had asked Italian authorities for “somewhere closer to put ashore”.

SOS Mediterranee has rescued more than 39,000 people in the Mediterranean since 2016 – most of them on the Central Mediterranean route, the world’s most dangerous migrant passage.

Last year, 3,105 migrants died or were reported missing attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe, according to IOM figures.

The count has reached 278 so far this year.

Charity groups like SOS Mediterranee and others complain that Italy’s right-wing government is obstructing their rescue activities, forcing them to travel to distant ports to disembark migrants and often temporarily impounding their ships.

Italy and other European Union governments are trying to curb the number of sea migrants making the crossing from North Africa, and have offered money or equipment to Libya and Tunisia to stop departures from their shores.

Data from the Italian interior ministry record that 5,968 migrants have arrived by sea so far this year, down from 19,937 at the same stage in 2023. – **AFP/Reuters**

Spain MPs approve amnesty law for Catalan separatists

AFP/Reuters
Madrid

Spanish lawmakers have approved an amnesty law for Catalan separatists, with their figurehead Carles Puigdemont already mulling his return after years of self-imposed exile to avoid prosecution over the 2017 independence bid.

Lower house lawmakers voted 178 in favour to 172 against, with the bill seeking to draw a line under years of efforts to prosecute those involved in the botched secession bid that triggered Spain’s worst political crisis in decades.

Passing the amnesty is a key moment for Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez as it was a demand made by separatist parties in exchange for their parliamentary support to allow him to serve a new term in office.

It comes six weeks after an earlier version of the bill was voted down by lawmakers.

In a message on X, formerly Twitter, Sanchez hailed approval of the amnesty as a “courageous and necessary step” that opens “a new era of coexistence and prosperity in Catalonia”.

The text will now be put to the Senate, which is controlled by the right-wing opposition Popular Party (PP) that is resolutely opposed to the measure.

However, any upper house veto could later be overridden by the lower house in a final vote around May or June.

Drafted by ruling Socialists and two Catalan separatist parties, the text is the most controversial piece of legislation parliament has voted

on since Sanchez came to power in 2018, even dividing his own electorate.

Justice Minister Felix Bolanos said the amnesty law would affect “around 400 people”.

Speaking with reporters in the European Parliament, where he is a lawmaker, a cheerful-looking Puigdemont expressed hope that the law would be in force “by the end of May”, saying late on Wednesday that he hoped to return to Spain in the weeks that followed the final passage of the bill into law.

As Catalan leader at the time, he led the 2017 independence bid, fleeing to Brussels to avoid prosecution.

Nine of his fellow secessionists who stayed in Spain were tried and jailed.

Three years ago, the government pardoned them.

In the run-up to July’s general election, Sanchez had said that he was against any offer of amnesty, but electoral calculations forced a change in his approach after the vote resulted in a hung parliament.

In order to secure a new term in office, Sanchez was forced to seek the support of the two separatist parties, Puigdemont’s hardline JxCat and its more moderate rival ERC.

In exchange, JxCat demanded the amnesty law.

ERC leader Oriol Junqueras, who was one of those jailed and then subsequently pardoned, expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the vote.

“We have always wanted justice to prevail as soon as possible and for me it will be a pleasure to meet again with all our comrades in exile,” he

told Spain’s TVE public television.

On January 30, parliament held a first vote on the amnesty bill, but lawmakers rejected it in a humiliating defeat for Sanchez, as JxCat’s seven MPs voted against it on the grounds that it did not go far enough.

For Puigdemont, the wording did not offer sufficient protection against prosecution on charges of terrorism or treason.

A month after the failed vote, Spain’s top court said it was opening a probe into Puigdemont on “terrorism” charges over street protests linked to the 2017 crisis.

The Socialists then moved to reopen talks on the wording of the amnesty bill despite the risk that the new text could be ruled unconstitutional.

The new version removed all references to the Spanish penal code, using instead a broader European definition of terrorism with the intention of ensuring those involved can still be covered by the amnesty even if found guilty in Spain.

The bill’s latest version defines terrorism by a 2017 EU directive, meaning it would have to have caused serious human rights violations, something that does not appear to have happened in the case facing Puigdemont.

The Spanish right, which has been implacably opposed to the bill, has remained defiant.

For the PP, the amnesty bill has always been nothing more than Sanchez “buying” the separatists’ votes to stay in power.

“You have bought seven votes for ... an amnesty. And that is corruption,” PP lawmaker Agustin Conde told parliament on Wednesday.

Belgian army disbands platoon over hazing

Belgium’s defence ministry said yesterday that it is disbanding a platoon of 30 soldiers over the squad’s violent and humiliating hazing rituals.

“This is a serious decision and a unique problem in the recent history of the Belgian military,” army chief Admiral Michel Hofman said at a press conference in Brussels.

Alongside Hofman, Minister of Defence Ludivine Dedonder described the behaviour as “unacceptable” and “in no way compatible with the values of the military”.

An investigation was launched in November when a relative of a victim e-mailed Dedonder.

She said there was “humiliating and degrading treatment” including “battery and assault” and “harassment” with “threats, pressure and blackmail”.

The officials said the hazing took place in a platoon within the 4th Engineer Battalion based in eastern Belgium and dated to 2021 according to preliminary evidence.

Hofman said the harassment took place during training.

The officials gave no details of the acts but there was so far no indication of sexual or racist violence.

“It takes time to put this puzzle together,” Hofman said. – **AFP**

Journalists in Portugal strike for the first time in more than four decades

A union called yesterday on all journalists in Portugal to join a one-day strike over low wages and job insecurity, the first stoppage of its kind in 42 years.

The action came after Portugal’s leading media group, Global Media, announced a redundancy plan this week targeting 20 employees, including 10 journalists, due to a “complicated financial situation”.

The strikers called for a wage increase to cope with inflation and for compliance with labour laws on overtime pay.

“Job insecurity and low salaries” create “an obstacle to citizens’ right to information,” the Journalists Union, which called the strike, said in a statement.

The last general strike by Portuguese journalists was in 1982. – **AFP**

Turks up in arms over killing of stray cat

The killing of a stray cat in Istanbul has triggered petitions, protests and death threats, pushing the president to intervene and the courts to retry the culprit.

On January 1, Ibrahim K was caught on a security camera in the lobby of the building where he lived kicking to death a stray cat named Eros that his neighbours regularly fed.

He was sentenced in early February to 18 months in jail but was then released for good behaviour, sparking indignation among animal welfare groups and a section of the public in Turkiye, whose large stray cat population is often fed and sheltered.

Some 320,000 people signed an online petition demanding a stiffer sentence and in late February the justice ministry said Ibrahim K would be retried after it received a night-time call from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan saying he was taking a “personal” interest in the case.

Ibrahim K was retried on Wednesday in a court building where hundreds of people thronged the corridors and the atmosphere was tense.

The judges increased his sentence by one year but did not order him to be detained, ignoring the demands of animal welfare groups and Internet trolls who have sent him death threats.

One animal rights group is to appeal, saying that Ibrahim K should be jailed for the maximum four years allowed by law.

Yesterday the hashtag #JusticeforEros (#ErosicinAdalet) was trending on X, formerly Twitter, in Turkiye and several major newspapers, including *Hurriyet*, splashed pictures of the dead cat on their front pages.

Hurriyet carried several articles about Eros and “Ibrahim the killer” – **AFP**

Ukraine steps up border attacks as Putin urges Russians to vote

AFP
Moscow

President Vladimir Putin urged Russians yesterday to vote for him at a “difficult” time for the country, hours before polls open and as Kyiv launched a barrage of deadly attacks on border regions.

Officials in Moscow warned against any protests during the vote, after calls from the opposition for anti-Putin demonstrations at midday on Sunday.

Putin is set to extend his rule by another six years this weekend in a presidential election the Kremlin says will show that the country is fully behind his assault on Ukraine.

Ahead of the vote, Kyiv has ramped up its aerial bombardment of Russian regions just across their shared border.

And the Russian national guard said it was fighting off attacks from pro-Ukrainian militias in Kursk, the latest in a string of border clashes.

“I am convinced: you realise what a difficult period our country is going through, what complex challenges we are facing in almost all areas,” Putin said in an address to Russians on the eve of the vote. “And in order to continue to respond to them with dignity and successfully overcome difficulties, we need to continue to be

united and self-confident.”

All of Putin’s major critics are dead, in prison or in exile, and authorities blocked the few genuine competitors who tried to stand in the March 15-17 contest.

Alexei Navalny, Putin’s most high-profile opponent over the last decade, died in February in an Arctic prison colony.

He was serving 19 years for “extremism”, a sentence widely seen as retribution for his campaigning against the Kremlin leader.

Moscow prosecutors warned yesterday against protests during the election.

“The organisation of and participation in these mass events are punishable by virtue of the legislation in place,” they said in a statement posted on Telegram.

Navalny’s widow, Yulia Navalnaya, has called for rallies outside polling stations on Sunday, the final day of voting.

Kyiv has this week launched some of its most significant aerial attacks since the start of the two-year conflict.

The governor of Russia’s Belgorod region, Vyacheslav Gladkov, said yesterday that at least three separate waves of aerial attacks had killed two people, wounding several others.

He accused Ukraine of trying to “sow panic, distrust, anger and resentment, in order to break the unit of our society”.

Shopping centres in the region



A woman poses after casting her ballot at a mobile polling station during early voting in Russia's presidential election in Donetsk, Russian-controlled Ukraine.

were closed yesterday, and Gladkov urged residents to delay taking trips outside “to save your health and your life”.

Pro-Ukrainian paramilitaries also claimed to be escalating attacks and incursions in Russian border regions.

In a joint statement yesterday, three pro-Kyiv volunteer groups – claiming to consist of anti-Kremlin Russians who have taken up arms – called on authorities to evacuate civilians from the regions of Belgorod and Kursk.

“Civilians should not suffer from the war and any casualties in the process of fighting will be on the conscience of Starovoit and Gladkov,” they added, referring to

the regions’ governors.

Russia has denied militias’ claims to have gained ground.

The national guard said yesterday that its units had beaten back one such attack near the village of Tyotkino in the Kursk region.

The defence ministry said it had fended off another by Ukrainian forces trying to enter the Belgorod region via the village of Spodariushino, without saying when the clash had happened.

It published video images showing air strikes on what it said was a Ukrainian sabotage group.

The fighting came just hours ahead of polls opening in Russia’s Far East for the presidential election.

Ex-education minister’s dissertation pulled for plagiarism

Norway’s former higher education minister, who resigned in January over plagiarism allegations, has had her masters dissertation annulled by her alma mater due to “cheating”, her political party said yesterday.

Sandra Borch, who had been minister since 2023, announced her resignation in January after a student revealed similarities between her 2014 dissertation and other works, notably those of two other students.

The University of Tromso decided, after investigating the matter, to annul the dissertation, which focused on safety regulations in the

oil industry, the parliamentary group of Borch’s Centre Party said.

“Borch cheated and the results of her dissertation have to be annulled,” the university commission ruled, cited by the party in its statement.

“I made a mistake and was negligent, and I will of course bear the consequences,” Borch said in a statement, adding that she would not contest the decision.

Business student Kristoffer Rytterager, who revealed the plagiarism, claimed that the former minister had left in typing mistakes when, among other things, lifting word for

word a passage from another dissertation.

The 27-year-old student, whose revelations were widely covered in Norwegian media, said he had scrutinised her work because of his irritation over her hard line on plagiarism as minister.

Her ministry had taken to the Supreme Court the case of a student who had been cleared on appeal of self-plagiarism for using passages of her own past work without citing them.

The ministry denied harassing the student but argued it wanted the country’s high court to rule on what exactly constitutes academic plagiarism. – **AFP**

Danish chef plans to launch gourmet dining to stratosphere

Danish chef Rasmus Munk wants to take high-end cuisine to the edge of space, with plans to serve up a stratospheric dining experience in 2025, his restaurant said yesterday.

“The expedition will take place aboard Space Perspective Spaceship Neptune, the world’s first carbon-neutral spaceship,” Al-

chemist, the Copenhagen restaurant that has earned Munk two Michelin stars, said in a statement.

“They will dine as they watch the sunrise over the Earth’s curvature” at an altitude of 100,000’ (30,000m) above sea level, the statement said.

For \$495,000 per ticket, six tourists will embark on a six-hour journey in a pressurised space

capsule that will rise into the stratosphere in a hydrogen-filled “SpaceBalloon”.

The 32-year-old chef and self-confessed space enthusiast will be joining the trip.

Munk promises “dishes inspired by the role of space exploration during the last 60 years of human history, and the impact it has had on our society – both sci-

entifically and philosophically”.

His menu will be restricted only by his inability to cook food over an open flame.

Many of the ingredients will be prepared on the ship from which the capsule is launched, according to Alchemist, which is ranked fifth among the world’s restaurants in 2023 according to the *World’s Best 50 Restaurants* guide. – **AFP**

CHAIRMAN

Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Attiyah

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka

Deputy Managing Editor

K T Chacko

- P.O.Box 2888, Doha, Qatar
- editor@gulf-times.com
- 44350478 (News),
- 44466404 (Sport),
- 44466636 (Home delivery)
- 44350474
- facebook.com/gulftimes
- twitter.com/gulftimes_Qatar
- instagram.com/gulftimes
- youtube.com/GulftimesVideos

GULF TIMES

The case for a European public-goods fund

Following weeks of intense negotiations, the European Union has agreed to revise its fiscal rules. The new rulebook will replace the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) – which has been suspended since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic – and modernise the bloc’s 25-year-old fiscal framework. While the SGP featured a one-size-fits-all model that ultimately undermined its credibility, the updated fiscal rules allow for a differentiated approach. The goal is to maintain the existing deficit and public debt limits while still encouraging member states to invest in green and digital technologies. Member states will be granted extended adjustment periods of up to seven years to reduce their debts to sustainable levels, provided they commit to reforms and investments that support this double (green/digital) transition.

But while the EU’s efforts to strike a balance between fiscal discipline and growth incentives are commendable, national budgets alone will not be enough to finance the EU’s ambitious double transition. The European Commission estimates that an annual investment of roughly €650bn (\$700bn) is needed to meet the 2030 targets of producing at least 42.5% of the bloc’s energy from renewable sources and reducing greenhouse-gas emissions by 55%.

Under the new fiscal rules, funding for digital and green investments can be sourced from the €800 billion NextGenerationEU fund, which was established in 2020 to help European economies recover from the Covid-19 shock. But since the NGEU is scheduled to end in 2026, there is an urgent need for more durable financial mechanisms to support the EU’s long-term objectives.

Once the fund is established, countries would be encouraged to submit comprehensive investment proposals for transnational projects

As matters stand, the NGEU’s focus on national investments has left transnational projects such as high-speed railways and hydrogen infrastructure severely underfunded. Moreover, the US Inflation Reduction Act has widened the investment gap between Europe and the United States. To restore its strategic autonomy, European leaders should build on the success of the NGEU.

In a forthcoming paper, we propose the establishment of a \$750bn EU public-goods fund aimed at bridging funding gaps in crucial areas like renewable energy and digital infrastructure. The primary focus of this fund would be to catalyse cross-border investments and support projects that struggle to secure funding without EU-level

financial support. By making access to this fund contingent on compliance with the new fiscal rules, the EU could maintain fiscal discipline among member states.

The public-goods fund, which would cover the 2026-30 period, is intended to align seamlessly with the EU’s climate goals. Building on the successful precedents established by previous EU borrowing initiatives, it would be financed by issuing EU bonds, backed by pooled national guarantees, the EU’s budget (bolstered by sufficient revenue streams), or both. Its proposed size represents roughly one-fifth of the bloc’s total investment needs through 2030, and the remaining investments would be financed through contributions from member states and the private sector.

By focusing on cross-border investments, the fund would underscore the EU’s unified approach to tackling European challenges. At the same time, the requirement to comply with the new fiscal rules would broaden the conditional framework established by the NGEU programme, which linked fund access to the rule of law in recipient countries.

Similarly, the proposed conditionality regime would tie access to the new fund to domestic fiscal discipline, thus aligning with the EU’s revised fiscal guidelines. Rather than facing penalties for non-compliance, as was the case under the previous SGP, countries would be incentivised to demonstrate fiscal responsibility.

Thus, the conditionality regime would simultaneously boost the EU’s growth potential, uphold the integrity of the new fiscal rulebook, and encourage fiscal sustainability among member states. Moreover, increased debt issuance at the European level could be offset by reduced debt issuance at the national level.

Once the fund is established, countries would be encouraged to submit comprehensive investment proposals for transnational projects. The European Investment Bank would determine whether they are eligible to access the fund’s resources based on their alignment with the EU’s double-transition targets and the potential for positive cross-border spillovers. Meanwhile, the European Commission would ascertain that the countries proposing these projects comply with fiscal rules.

The fund’s proposed design aligns with the trend of using EU funds to achieve broader policy objectives. By relying on the successful model of the pandemic recovery fund and the bloc’s current conditionality regime, it would empower the EU to meet crucial climate targets while upholding its shared values. — Project Syndicate

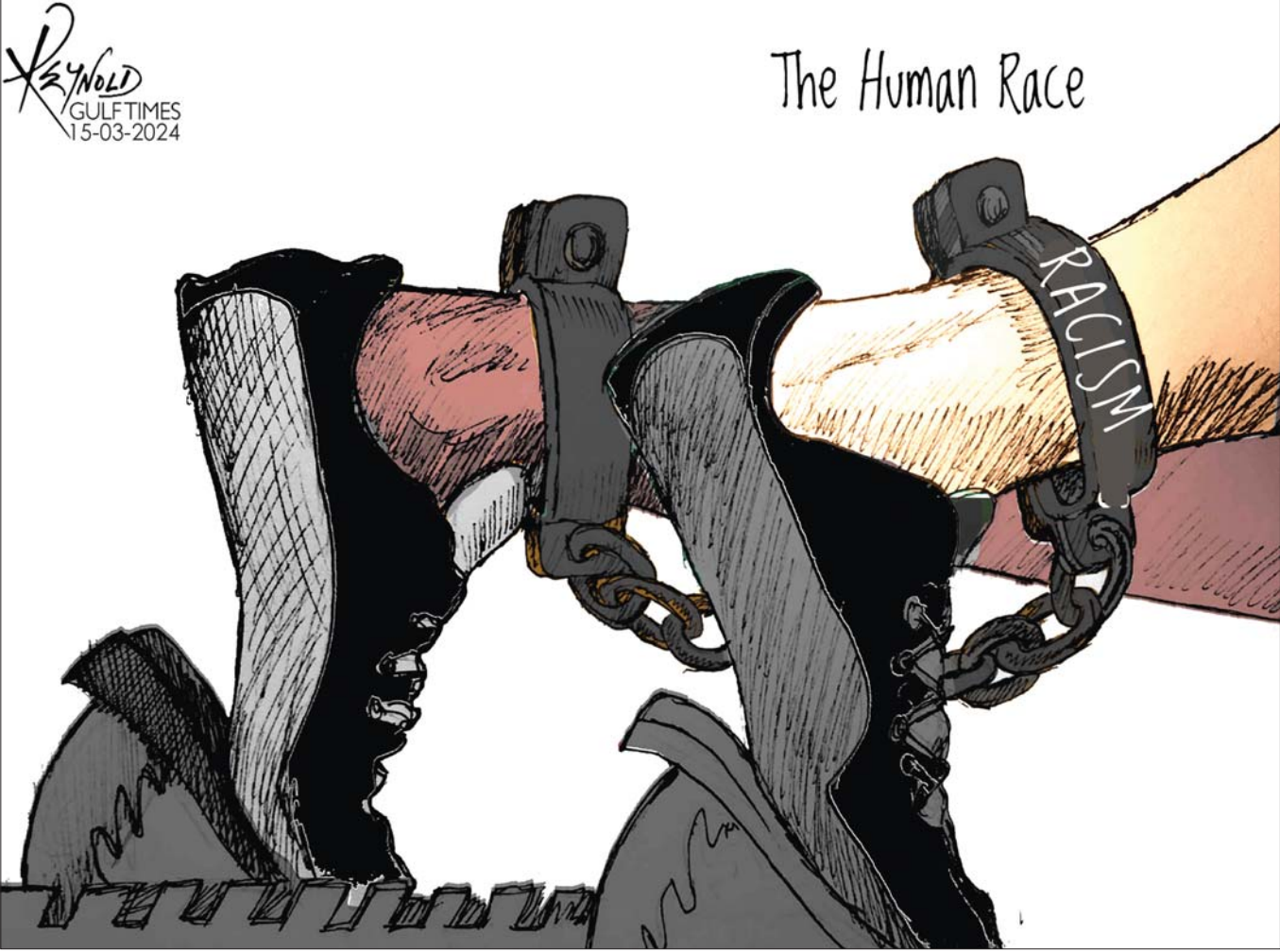
To Advertise
gtadv@gulf-times.com

Display
44466621
44418811

Classified
44466609 44418811
gtcad@gulf-times.com

Subscription
circulation@gulf-times.com

© 2024 Gulf Times. All rights reserved



A pragmatic way to think about AI policy

The recent boom of general-purpose AI (GPAI) models like ChatGPT has made it only more relevant

By Margrethe Vestager
Brussels

In Poznan, 325 kilometres (200 miles) east of Warsaw, a team of tech researchers, engineers, and child caregivers are working on a small revolution. Their joint project, “Insension,” uses facial recognition powered by artificial intelligence to help children with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities interact with others and with their surroundings, becoming more connected with the world. It is a testament to the power of this quickly advancing technology.

Thousands of kilometres away, in the streets of Beijing, AI-powered facial recognition is used by government officials to track citizens’ daily movements and keep the entire population under close surveillance. It is the same technology, but the result is fundamentally different. These two examples encapsulate the broader AI challenge: the underlying technology is neither good nor bad in itself; everything depends on how it is used.

AI’s essentially dual nature informed how we chose to design the European Artificial Intelligence Act, a regulation focused on the uses of AI, rather than on the technology itself. Our approach boils down to a simple principle: the riskier the AI, the stronger the obligations for those who develop it.

AI already enables numerous harmless functions that we perform every day – from unlocking our phones to recommending songs based on our preferences. We simply do not need to regulate all these uses. But AI also increasingly plays a role at decisive moments in one’s life. When a bank screens someone to determine if she qualifies for a mortgage, it isn’t just about a loan; it is about putting a roof over her head and allowing her to build wealth and pursue financial security. The same is true when employers use emotion-recognition software as an add-on to their recruitment process, or when AI is used to detect illnesses in brain images. The latter is not just a routine medical check; it is literally a matter of life or death.

In these kinds of cases, the new regulation imposes significant obligations on AI developers. They must comply with a range of requirements – from running risk assessments to ensuring technical robustness, human oversight, and cybersecurity – before releasing their systems on the market. Moreover, the AI Act bans all uses that clearly go against our most fundamental values. For example, AI may not be used for “social scoring” or subliminal techniques to manipulate vulnerable populations, such as children.

Though some will argue that this high-level control deters innovation, in Europe we see it differently. For starters, time-blind rules provide the certainty and confidence that tech innovators need to develop new products. But more to the point, AI will not reach its immense positive potential unless end-users trust it. Here, even more than in many other fields, trust serves as an engine of innovation. As regulators, we can create the conditions for the technology to flourish by upholding our duty to ensure safety and public trust.

Far from challenging Europe’s risk-based approach, the recent boom of general-purpose AI (GPAI) models like ChatGPT has made it only more relevant. While these tools help scammers around the world produce alarmingly credible phishing e-mails, the same models also could be used to detect AI-generated content. In the space of just a few months, GPAI models have taken the technology to a new level in terms of the opportunities it offers, and the risks it has introduced.

Of course, one of the most daunting risks is that we may not always be able to distinguish what is fake from what is real. GPAI-generated “deepfakes” are already causing scandals and hitting the headlines. In late January, fake pornographic images of the global pop icon Taylor Swift reached 47mn views on X (formerly Twitter) before the platform finally suspended the user who had shared them.

It is not hard to imagine the damage that such content can do to an individual’s mental health. But if applied on an

even broader scale, such as in the context of an election, it could threaten entire populations. The AI Act offers a straightforward response to this problem. AI-generated content will have to be labelled as such, so that everyone knows immediately that it is not real. That means providers will have to design systems in a way that synthetic audio, video, text, and images are marked in a machine-readable format, and detectable as artificially generated or manipulated.

Companies will be given a chance to bring their systems into compliance with the regulation. If they fail to comply, they will be fined. Fines would range from €35mn (\$37mn) or 7% of global annual turnover (whichever is higher) for violations of banned AI applications; €15mn or 3% for violations of other obligations; and €7.5mn or 1.5% for supplying incorrect information. But fines are not all. Noncompliant AI systems will also be prohibited from being placed on the EU market.

Europe is the first mover on AI regulation, but our efforts are already helping to mobilise responses elsewhere. As many other countries start to embrace similar frameworks – including the United States, which is collaborating with Europe on “a risk-based approach to AI to advance trustworthy and responsible AI technologies” – we feel confident that our overall approach is the right one. Just a few months ago, it inspired G7 leaders to agree on a first-of-its-kind Code of Conduct on Artificial Intelligence. These kinds of international guardrails will help keep users safe until legal obligations start kicking in.

AI is neither good nor bad, but it will usher in a global era of complexity and ambiguity. In Europe, we have designed a regulation that reflects this. Probably more than any other piece of EU legislation, this one required a careful balancing act – between power and responsibility, between innovation and trust, and between freedom and safety. — Project Syndicate

• Margrethe Vestager is Executive Vice-President of the European Commission.



AI is neither good nor bad, but it will usher in a global era of complexity and ambiguity, writes the author.

Wisdom of Allah (The Sustainer) in enjoining fasting

The religion of Islam contains all benefits, and *Shari'ah* enjoins everything that is beneficial. Islam is based on wisdom and benefiting people. Imam Al-Baidawi stated in his book *Al-Minhaj*: “Evidence indicates that Allah, the Almighty, prescribed all His rulings to benefit His servants.” (p. 233) Real jurisprudence means knowing this wisdom and realising these objectives. Ibn Taymiyyah, may Allah have mercy upon him, said: “The person who understands the Law-Giver's wisdom is the real jurist.” He also said: “The core of jurisprudence is to know the wisdom, objectives, and merits of *Shari'ah*.” (*Al-Fatawa*: 11/354)

When the worshipper realises the objectives and wisdom of the acts of worship, the acts of worship become easier for him, and he can feel their spiritual-ity and significance. This enables the worshipper to offer the acts of worship not as inherited habits and traditions whose sweetness is not felt and whose objectives are not understood. Sheikh Mustafa Al-Siba'i said in this regard: “This is in order for the act of worship to be more effective and influencing, so that the believer can be more tranquil and reassured when performing the act of worship and putting *Shari'ah* into effect.”

Fasting is one of the rituals prescribed by the blessed *Shari'ah*. Without the scholars' explanation of the wisdom behind enjoining fasting and clarification of some of the objectives they realised, minds would not have been able to understand the wisdom of The All-Wise and the kindness of The Most-Kind and the All-Aware (of everything). The following includes the sayings of different scholars in relation to the wisdom of enjoining fasting.

First: Feeling Pity for the Deprived and Disseminating a Sense of Consolidation among the Believers

Imam Ibn Rajab mentioned in his book *Lata'if Al-Ma'arif* (p. 314) that one of the predecessors was asked: “Why was fasting enjoined?” He said: “In order for the rich to feel hungry so that they do not forget the poor and the hungry.”

When Prophet Yusuf, ‘*alaihi assalam*, was asked: “Why do you not satisfy your hunger although you are in charge of the storehouses of the land?” He said: “I fear that satiety may cause me to forget the hungry.” Only the one who experienced tiredness can realise its meaning and only the one who experienced pain can understand its severity.

Only the one who suffered from longing can understand its meaning,

And only the one who experienced ardent love can realise how it feels.

Therefore, one of the great objectives of fasting is to experience the suffering of deprivation and hunger, to practically implant mercy in the hearts of rich Muslims towards the poor, so that they may remember the continuous deprivation of the poor and realise their suffering and pains. As a result, the hearts of the rich may soften, and they become willing to help the poor with money, food, charity, and different types of generosity and benevolence. This is the greatest social consolidation which creates harmony among the Muslims and strengthens relations among the members of the society.

Second: Consoling the Hearts of the Poor

When the rich are also deprived of food, drink, and pleasures, the hearts of the poor get consoled because they become on equal footing with the rich, even for one hour of daytime.



Third: Controlling the Sexual Desire to Avoid Sinning

A person may have a desire for women without being able to fulfil it, and may fear of committing a sin. So, he may resort to fasting in order to weaken his desire. Therefore, the Prophet, *sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam* (may Allah exalt his mention), advised the youth, saying: “O young men, those among you who can support a wife should marry, for it restrains eyes from casting (evil glances), and preserves one from immorality; but those who cannot, should devote themselves to fasting for it is a means of controlling sexual desire.”

Fourth: Feeling the Weakness and Need of Servitude

When a person feels the pain of hunger, they feel how weak, humble, and needy they are, so they submit to their Lord and realise the extent of their weakness and inability. They see how they have lost power due to their need of even a morsel of food or a mouthful of water. If the servant does not see how humble and submissive he is, he will not know the greatness of his Lord. It was said: “The one who has known himself will be able to know his Lord.” This means that the one who has realised his weakness, destitution, and need will understand the power, richness, and might of his Lord, the Almighty.

Fifth: Lessening Satan's Effect on the Fasting Person

Satan circulates in the body like the blood; when the Muslim fasts, Satan finds a limited opportunity to affect him, so he loses the ability to influence the fasting Muslims or insinuate whispers to them in the manner he does when they are not fasting. This helps Allah's servant to have self-control, which leads to all happiness; however, falling under the control of one's desires and self leads to all misery and distress. Ibn Al-Qayyim said: “Fasting keeps the heart and organs

healthy and restores to them that which desires have stolen from them.” (*Zad Al-Ma'ad* 2/29)

Imam Al-Kamal ibn Al-Humam stated in *Fat'h Al-Qadeer*: “Fasting controls the self, which is inclined to evil, and restrains its curiosity in relation to the eyes, the tongue, the ears, and private parts. Therefore, it was said that if a person becomes hungry, all the organs become satisfied and tranquil, and if a person becomes sated, all the organs become out of control.”

Sixth: Getting Accustomed to Patience During Calamities and Steadfastness During Hardships

The fasting person obliges himself to abstain from that which it craves for due to fasting, although these desired matters are lawful when they are not fasting. Therefore, fasting boosts the Muslim's strong determination and patience, especially at the end of the daytime, when they become very hungry and thirsty, although water and food are available, but the Muslim cannot eat or drink, regardless of how much they crave for them. This is out of patience, endurance, and aspiration for rewards from Allah, the Lord of the Worlds. Therefore, fasting is half of patience.

Seventh: Reminding Allah's Servant with the Difference between the Submission of Servitude and the Might of the Lord

As fasting reminds the person of his need of food and drink and his inability to dispense with them, it rids him of arrogance, pride, and self-conceit and causes him to be submissive to his Creator and Sustainer. Accordingly, no one can claim that he is a god, such as Pharaoh, Nimrod, and the like. Therefore, Allah denounced those who considered Prophet 'Isa and his mother as gods, saying: “The Messiah, son of Mary, was not but a messenger; [other] messengers have passed on before him. And his mother was a supporter of truth. They both

used to eat food.” (Qur'an 5: 75) Both of them need Him and are submissive to Him; God cannot be in need of anything or submissive, but should be one, self-sufficient, free of any need, and all creatures need him. This is in accordance of Allah's saying: “O mankind, you are those in need of Allah, while Allah is the Free of need, the Praiseworthy. If He wills, He can do away with you and bring forth a new creation.” (Qur'an 35: 15-17)

Eighth: Attaining Piety

The most sublime and greatest objective of enjoining fasting is to enable the fasting people to attain the status of the pious. Fasting is one of the greatest acts of worship by which a person trains to attain this great status. Everything related to fasting enables the person to attain piety if they fast according to the prescribed manner.

According to Ali ibn Abi Talib, may Allah be pleased with him, piety means: “Fearing the Majestic, acting according to *Shari'ah*, and getting ready for death.” The fasting person combines all the attributes of piety; they fast out of fear of Allah; otherwise, he will not fast. In addition, fasting implies adherence to the Book of Allah, obedience to His commands, and submissiveness to *Shari'ah*. The fasting person does all these acts in order to be prepared for the Day of Resurrection. The Prophet said: “Indeed, anyone who fasts for one day for Allah's Pleasure, Allah will keep his face away from the (Hell) fire for (a distance covered by a journey of) seventy years.” Nothing can be equal in reward to fasting, according to the following *Hadith*: “The fast is for Me. So I will reward (the fasting person) for it.”

According to Talq ibn Habib, may Allah have mercy upon him, piety means acting in obedience to Allah with His guidance, seeking Allah's reward, abstaining from acts of disobedience with His guidance, and fearing Allah's punishment.” These qualities also apply to the fasting person, as fasting is an act of obedience in which the fasting person adheres to a time set by the Law-Giver, seeking Allah's reward. Fasting also involves abstaining from everything that incurs Allah's wrath or spoils this act of worship, out of fear of losing the reward of fasting and deserving Allah's punishment.

Among the greatest evidence that piety is attained by fasting is that Allah's servant does not break his fast without a reasonable excuse, even if he is punished or beaten. This is in order to honour Allah's command. Ibn Rajab and other scholars mentioned that the greatest evidence that fasting involves piety is that the believer dislikes food, drink, and sexual desire because he knows that Allah dislikes them at a certain time (while fasting), then likes these things at the time when Allah makes them lawful (after breaking the fast). The greatest evidence is that the fasting person abstains from the unlawful things he desires even when he is not seen by people because he knows that Allah, the Almighty, sees him. This is the rank of perfection in religion, which is attained by worshipping Allah as if you see Him, and if you cannot achieve this state of devotion, then you must consider that He is looking at you.

The subject of the wisdom and objectives of fasting is vast and is open to discussions and additions. O Allah, the Most Merciful of those who show mercy, enable us to learn and understand, and accept our good deeds.

Article source: <http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/>

Ramadan and repentance

One of the greatest blessings which Allah bestows upon His servants is that He gives them an opportunity to turn to Him in repentance. He also made repentance a safe resort and secure refuge which is sought by sinners, who confess their sins, hope for Allah's mercy, and regret for the evil deeds. They will find in their closeness to their Lord something which removes the gloominess of sins and lightens the darkness of heart, so that their life will change from miserable and evil disobedience to luminous and blessed obedience.

Allah calls and commands His servants to repent to Him no matter how great their sins and evil deeds are and promises them to accept their repentance and to change their evil deeds into good deeds. This is out of Allah's mercy and kindness towards His servants.

Repentance has a very high and importance status which accompanies Allah's servants until their death, as it acts like their beginning and end. Therefore, Allah commands the believers and upright people to repent to Him after believing in Him, showing patience, and striving is His cause, and makes success depend on repentance. Allah, the Almighty, says: {And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed.} [Qur'an 24: 31] Allah divides His servants into penitents and wrongdoers, as He says: {And whoever does not repent - then it is those who are the wrongdoers.} [Qur'an 49: 11]

It was authentically reported that the Prophet, *sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam* (may Allah exalt his mention), said: “Allah, the Almighty, will continue to stretch out His Hand in the night so that the sinners of the day may repent, and continue to stretch His Hand in the daytime so that the sinners of the night may repent, until the sun rises from the west.” [Muslim]

The Prophet, *sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam*, whom Allah forgave his former and later sins, said: “O people, turn in repentance to Allah and beg pardon of Him. I turn to Him in repentance a hundred times a day.” [Muslim] Therefore, what about sinners and wrongdoers?

Sincere repentance erases evil deeds and sins no matter how great they are, even disbelief and polytheism, as no sin is too great for Allah to forgive. Allah, the Almighty, says: {Say to those who have disbelieved [that] if they cease, what has previously occurred will be forgiven for them. But if they return [to hostility] - then the precedent of the former [rebellious] peoples has already taken place.}

[Qur'an 8: 38] Allah also called those who killed prophets and committed great sins to repent to Him, as He says: {Allah is the third of three} [Qur'an 5: 73] And: {Who say that Allah is Christ, the son of Mary} [Qur'an 5: 17] Allah, the Almighty, gave those people an opportunity to forgive their sins, as He says: {So will they not repent to Allah and seek His forgiveness? And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.} [Qur'an 5: 74]

According to the Sacred *Hadith*, Allah says: “My servants, you commit sins night and day, and I am there to pardon your sins, so beg pardon from Me so that I should grant you pardon.” [Muslim] According to another Sacred *Hadith*, Allah says: “O Son of Adam, I do not care even if your sins should pile up to the sky and you should beg pardon of Me, I would forgive you. O Son of Adam, if you come to me with earth-wide sins and meet Me, not associating anything with Me, I would come to you with an earth-wide forgiveness.” [At-Tirmidhi]

Ramadan is the greatest season for repentance, forgiveness, and expiation of sins. According to a *Hadith* reported by Muslim from Abu Hurairah, may Allah be pleased with him the Messenger of Allah, *sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam*, said: “Five prayers, from one Friday prayer to (the next) Friday prayer, and from Ramadan to (the next) Ramadan are expiation (of the sins committed in between their intervals) if major sins are not committed.” In addition, fasting and offering prayer at night during Ramadan and at Lailat Al-Qadr (Night of Decree) in specific, out of faith and seeking reward from Allah, expiate all the former sins. Allah's servant can find help during Ramadan which he cannot find in any other month, due to the availability of numerous opportunities to obey Allah, people's hearts draw closer to Allah, the gates of Paradise are opened, the gates of Hell are closed, reasons for evil are limited, and devils are chained. All these matters can help a person repent and turn back to Allah.

Therefore, the deprived and helpless person is the one who misses this opportunity and does not have his sins forgiven during this month. Accordingly, he deserves to be humiliated and distanced from Allah's mercy, according to Jibril's supplication and the Prophet's *Ta'min* (saying “Amen”). Jibril said: “O Muhammad may Allah distance [from His Mercy] the one who lives through Ramadan, yet does not attain the forgiveness of Allah, say: ‘Amen.’” So the Prophet, *sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam*, said: “Amen.” [At-Tabarani]

The Prophet, *sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam*, said: “May he be abased who passes through the whole of Ramadan before his sins are forgiven.” [At-Tirmidhi]

If Allah, the Almighty, calls His servants at every time to repent to Him sincerely, then repenting to Allah during Ramadan takes precedence over the other months, because it is the month during which tears are shed, sins are erased, and people are set free from Hell. If a person does not repent during Ramadan, when will he repent?

Repentance has six conditions to be accepted:

First: It should be sincere to Allah, the Almighty.

Second: It should take place before the sun rises from the west; if it does, repentance will not be accepted. Allah, the Almighty, says: {The Day that some of the signs of your Lord will come no soul will benefit from its faith as long as it had not believed before or had earned through its faith some good. Say, “Wait. Indeed, we [also] are waiting.} [Qur'an 6: 158] Allah also accepts His servant's repentance as long as he has not given his spirit in death, according to what the Prophet, *sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam*, said.

Third: The penitent should avoid committing the sin from which he repents; if he still commits the sin, repentance will not be valid.

Fourth: The penitent should regret for his evil deeds; regret is the greatest pillar of repentance. It was authentically reported from the Prophet, *sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam*, said: “Regret is repentance.” [Ibn Majah]

Fifth: The penitent should determine not to return to sins in the future.

Sixth: The penitent should restore people's rights and absolve himself, if the sin is related to people's rights.

O fasting brother, during this blessed month, we should decrease our sins, stop committing acts of disobedience and evil deeds, and repent sincerely to Allah. Ramadan should be a season for us to rectify our deeds, reform our path, and call ourselves to account. If we find that we do good deeds, we should praise Allah and increase these deeds; otherwise, we should repent to Allah, seek His forgiveness, and do more good deeds.

Article source: <http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/>

A time for jubilation

Ramadan is back. And yes, all the jubilation germinating in our households for months now has fully sprung. Spreading through the world, crossing every kind of barrier—literal and figurative, manmade and natural Ramadan seeks every square foot on the face of earth wherein is a fasting Muslim, to cheer his heart, inspire his soul, and enrich his sense of *taqwa*.

What an amazing mode of worship is the fasting of Ramadan!

Sure, fasting Ramadan is the Third Pillar upholding the edifice of Islam. Yes, it is a time for profound reflection and nurturing that special God-consciousness of *taqwa*. True, it is a way of boosting self-control, an extended training period of intensive worship.

But that's not all. Ramadan is a season of harvest, a time of year in the time of man to reap joy in sowing the fruitful seeds of happiness for our Hereafter. In fact, so much is the delight of Muslims of all backgrounds and places in the fertile fields of Ramadan that some scholars openly worry that our Ramadan euphoria grows so overwhelming that it may distract us from the essence of fasting.

In a well-known *Hadith* of Prophet Muhammad, *sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam*, we are told that a fasting person is promised with certainty two joyous moments every time we fast: “One at the time one breaks his fast. And another when one meets his Lord” [Muslim]. The *Hadith* does not limit the joy of fasting to only these two moments. But you better believe it does, indeed, restrict them to just those who fast. These twin joys are exclusive to fasting and fasters. They come only to the latter because of the former.

It's not that the fasters may again eat and drink when they break their fast. That's not the source of their joy. It's the fact that they succeeded to establish their reward with Allah, who enabled them to keep their fast pure, however hard it was physically or mentally and in spite of their being able to break it when no other human was looking. That's the sheer joy of a faster. He was able to overcome himself, his nafs, and keep it honest and whole-some, inside and out. That's the cause of celebration.

The *Hadith* I just mentioned is a divine pronouncement, a *Hadith* qudsi. It actually begins with the Prophet, *sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam*, telling us that Allah Says: “All the deeds of a Son of Adam are his [since he claims sincer-

ity in doing them for Me, but cannot prove it in this world] except for fasting. It is [always genuinely done] for Me, and I [consequently give unspecified abundant] reward for it.”

So whoever fasts cannot but fast honestly and purely for Allah's Sake. Every Muslim knows this. This is what fills every Muslim with glee in and about Ramadan, plain and simple.

Ah! Now that's real and absolute happiness, the kind of gladness that only comes from having certain knowledge that one has achieved sincerity in worship and gained *taqwa*. Meet rare contentment! It's a feeling that only issues from a secure place of sheer confidence within us, one that guarantees us an unimaginable reward from a Loving and Merciful Lord—the true and only God who has Himself shown us a recurring way of worship that solidifies our relationship with Him through trust and conviction.

It is surely awe-inspiring to realise that worship is joyful, and that the more sincere and authentic our worship, the more joy we will find in it and because of it. The significance of Ramadan in the spiritual storehouse of man cannot be overstated or overestimated. And it is all ours! And it comes with a divine warranty of human success, along with a Heavenly security that it will perfect the way we worship our Lord and serve Him exclusively!

The Muslim asks for nothing more. That is why Muslims used to do more in Ramadan, though they were doing it on a lot less. Some of the most important achievements of our ‘Ummah materialised in this least materialistic of months.

Is this do-more-with-less ethic of our righteous predecessors true for you? What did you attain last Ramadan? The one before?

Many of us do more for ourselves in Ramadan than any time of year. But compared to what? And what have you done for your family, your local community, your *Ummah* in past Ramadans?

Do you know what you want to achieve this Ramadan? Happiness is perhaps the most powerful of human motivators. Jubilation is its most ecstatic expression. It is unreserved rejoicing in celebration of victory and success.

Are you ready to celebrate?

Article source: <http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/>

Ramadan cannon at Lusail Boulevard



The Ramadan cannon being fired at Lusail Boulevard yesterday (Thursday), marking the end of fasting on the fourth day of the holy month. **PICTURE:**Shaji Kayamkulam

Old Doha Port turns into a hub of gastronomy and culture this Ramadan



By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

The Old Doha Port has transformed into a hub of cultural exploration and gastronomic delight this Ramadan with the ongoing Throwback Food Festival, drawing in crowds eager to experience authentic Qatari hospitality and indulge in a diverse array of culinary offerings.

Launched on March 10 and set to run until April 10, the month-long festival has been attracting many families seeking to break their fast in the colourful Mina District, currently hosting the event.

The Old Doha Port has transformed into a hub of cultural exploration and gastronomic delight this Ramadan. **PICTURES:** Joey Aguilar

Featuring a nostalgic journey through tastes and memories, the festival boasts over 15 restaurants, showcasing a variety of local and international cuisines, echoing the flavours of the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

From Iftar to Suhoor, festival-goers are treated to a feast not only for the palate but also for the senses, with traditional music bands, theatrical performances, roaming dancers, balloon shows, science demonstrations, and art workshops, providing wholesome entertainment for families and children alike.

A collection of murals, created by 13 local, regional, and international artists, adorn the Mina District, which forms part of Qatar Museums' World Wide Walls (WWW) international mural programme.

These vibrant artworks turn the area into an open-air gallery, giving visitors a visual treat and insight into Qatar's rich heritage.

Retail outlets within the port area also contribute to the festival's appeal, with an antique store showcasing items reflecting Qatar's history and attracting people keen on exploring the country's cultural treasures.

For Indian expatriate Sachin and his family, the Old Doha Port has become a favoured destination during Ramadan, providing not only extraordinary ambience but also a range of features catering to families.

"We want to take advantage of the pleasant weather as well," he said.

"Our daughter likes to play here at the park, it's suitable for families who like picnics."



It is learnt that the Old Doha Port has become a gathering place not only for families but also for teens seeking recreational

activities, with dedicated walk and bike lanes providing space for leisure pursuits like badminton.



Lusail Boulevard lights up for Ramadan

Lusail Boulevard has transformed into a colourful destination with a wide array of light decorations for the holy month of Ramadan. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

