

**LOW SODIUM
FOR BETTER HEALTH**

Amwaj
ماء الشرب المعبأ
BOTTLED DRINKING WATER
150ml/650ml/350ml/200ml

 **QATAR** - قطر
مياه الشرب الوطنية

 **ISO 9001**

 **ISO 14001**

Doha Juice & Food Factory
Contact : 70960448/30454443

Engineer al-Meer was appointed Group CEO in November 2023, and he immediately focused on introducing innovative programmes to benefit both passengers and the airline's global 60,000 strong workforce. In his first message to employees, he stressed the importance of cultivating trust and empowerment in the work culture. Under his leadership, various workplace initiatives have been successfully introduced that continue to improve employee satisfaction, the statement added.



Qatar wraps up participation in UN session on status of women

QNA
New York

Qatar has wrapped up its participation in the 68th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW68). HE the Minister of Social Development and Family Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad headed Qatar's delegation to the session.

The (CSW68) discussed the policies and strategies applied to accelerate achieving the principle of social gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening financing institutions with a gender perspective, in addition to reviewing the obstacles and challenges facing women on their path towards achieving their development at all levels.

The participation of Qatar emerged through bilateral meetings and high-level events discussed important issues, most importantly the support for Palestinian women, and urging the international community to take real and decisive measures on the ground to activate mechanisms of protection, empowerment and rehabilitation, primarily stopping the heinous crimes committed against women and children in the Gaza Strip.

Addressing the opening session which was themed 'Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective', HE the Minister of Social Development and Family Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad delivered a speech calling for supporting women in the

field of work and protecting the family system. In her speech, HE the Minister showcased the efforts of Qatar in adopting policies and measures aimed at equal opportunities for women in various fields, including education, social support, decision-making, investment and entrepreneurship, as well as achieving fairness in wages in the government sector. She said that Qatar has come a long way in this regard.

She explained that the legislation and policies adopted by the state aim to achieve a balance between work and family responsibilities, and have greatly contributed to empowering Qatari women and enhancing their role and participation not only in the workforce, but also as an active partner in the state's development.

Emphasising Qatar's rejection of double standards in applying international law, she drew the attention of the participating delegations to the situation of Palestinian women, saying that the commission's meeting will have no meaning, if it keeps discussing some topics while Palestinian women have more pressing priorities.

The permanent delegation of Qatar to the United Nations, in partnership with the permanent delegations of Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Türkiye, and Indonesia had organised a high-level side event titled 'Advancing of Women in the Judiciary', on the margin of the 68th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

HE the Minister of Social Development and Family Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad, Minister of Family and Social

Service of Türkiye Mahinur Özdemir, and Executive Director of UN-Women Sima Bahous participated in the event.

HE the Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations Sheikhha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani, in a speech, referred to the United Nations General Assembly resolution entitled 'International Day of Women Judges', submitted by Qatar in 2021 and adopted by consensus, which calls on the international community to celebrate the International Day of Women Judges every year, and to support public education and awareness activities, to promote the full participation of women on an equal basis at all levels of the judiciary.

She praised the efforts of the Supreme Judicial Council in the State of Qatar, which encouraged the submission of the resolution, lauding its active role in developing strategic plans aimed at increasing women's participation in the judiciary.

For her part, HE al-Misnad affirmed Qatar's commitment to supporting women and enhancing their roles as one of the basic pillars of the 2030 Sustainable Development Plan.

She said that as a result of tireless efforts to increase women's participation in the judiciary, the ratio of Qatari female judges has reached 13%, adding that work is underway to increase the percentage of female judges to 30% by 2030. The event aimed to highlight the importance of women's representation in the judiciary, in addition to emphasising that women's representation in the judiciary ensures the establishment of strong, more neutral and less susceptible to corruption justice systems.

Pakistan PM meets Qatar envoy



Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met with Qatar's ambassador in Islamabad Ali bin Mubarak al-Khater. The meeting dealt with discussing bilateral co-operation between the two countries. **(QNA)**

Al-Muraikhi meets Ethiopian envoy



HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi met with ambassador of Ethiopia to Qatar Faisal Ali Ibrahim. During the meeting, they discussed bilateral co-operation relations between the two countries. **(QNA)**

Sierra Leone envoy presents credentials

HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi received a copy of the credentials of ambassador of Sierra Leone to Qatar Ahmed Tejan Fadlu-Deen. HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs wished the ambassador success in his duties, stressing his support to advance bilateral relations to closer co-operation in various fields. **(QNA)**



AlKhater meets Egyptian ambassador



HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhater met with ambassador of Egypt Amr Kamal El Din El Sherbini. The meeting dealt with discussing bilateral co-operation between the two countries, and the latest developments in the Gaza Strip and the occupied Palestinian territories, especially the continued attacks by the Israeli occupation forces on civilians, as well as the obstruction of the arrival of humanitarian aid. The two sides also discussed the latest developments in Sudan and the importance of intensifying diplomatic efforts to put the Sudanese issue back on the international community's agenda, particularly having donor countries enhance their aid and humanitarian support. **(QNA)**

GCC countries call for end to Gaza children's tragedy

QNA
Geneva

The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries called on the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the international community to shoulder their responsibility in ending the tragedy of the children in Gaza and securing their right to live, safety, and protection, considering to be a legal, ethical, and human obligation.

This came in the statement delivered by HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the UN Office in Geneva, Dr Hind Abdulrahman al-Muftah on behalf of the GCC countries as the head of the GCC Group, a panel discussion on the Rights of the Child, within the framework of the 55th session of the Human Rights Council.

The GCC countries pointed that the children in the besieged Gaza Strip are facing the worst, indescribable violations, noting



HE Dr Hind Abdulrahman al-Muftah

that over 13,000 Gazan children have been killed. The number is increasing on a daily basis as a result of the continued aggression, they pointed.

The children who are still alive face daily scenes of death, destruction, horror and hunger, which leave horrific psychological effects on them that will remain with them for life, the statement explained. The GCC countries stressed the importance and highest priority they give to promoting the children's rights and providing all means to protect them, pointing out that they have

translated this attention into enacting national laws and legislation that support children's rights, complementing their obligations under the international conventions they are members of.

The statement explained that achieving the well-being of children and ensuring their rights to protection, care and comprehensive development is considered one of the main areas on which the GCC countries have worked to strengthen partnerships and co-ordinate common strategic visions.

The GCC countries indicated that they are jointly organising conferences and adopting initiatives aimed at promoting children's rights, such as the Gulf Arab States Dialogue Conference on Child Welfare Policies, which was held with the participation of the General Secretariat of the Gulf Co-operation Council and Unicef, giving a platform to affirm the unwavering commitment of the GCC countries to reach advanced levels in the field of child

Qatar attends ministerial meeting on maritime aid corridor for Gaza

Qatar participated in the virtual ministerial meeting on the initiative of the Maritime Corridor to Deliver Humanitarian Assistance to Gaza. HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohamed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi represented Qatar at the meeting.

The meeting, hosted by Cyprus Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr Constantin Kombos, was attended by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, UK Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs David Cameron, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, European Union Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič, and UN Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Co-ordinator for Gaza Sigrid Kaag.

During the meeting, they discussed the urgent needs for delivering humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, along with the contributions of the countries involved in the initiative and strategies to address logistical challenges.



HE Dr Mohamed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi

A joint statement issued by the governments of the participating countries affirmed the ministers' agreement that there is no substitute to land routes via Egypt and Jordan and other crossings to Gaza for the widespread delivery of aid, describing that the opening of the Ashdod Port to humanitarian aid as a welcomed and important complement to the maritime corridor.

The ministers committed to continuing discussions on this matter, with senior officials scheduled to visit Cyprus next week to

receive detailed briefings on the continued activation of the corridor, including consultations on the possibility of establishing a joint fund to support the maritime corridor and coordinating material and financial contributions to ensure its sustainability.

The ministers reiterated that this maritime corridor should be part of ongoing efforts to increase the flow of humanitarian aid and commercial goods to Gaza through all possible means, including expanded land routes and continuous airlift operations, through close collaboration with Co-ordinator Sigrid Kaag, tasked with facilitating, coordinating, monitoring, and verifying the flow of aid to Gaza under UN Security Council Resolution 2720.

The ministers emphasised the necessity for Israel to open additional crossings to allow more aid into Gaza, including in the northern part of the Strip, and to ease comprehensive customs restrictions to facilitate the increasing flow of life-saving humanitarian aid. **(QNA)**

President of Slovenia receives credentials of Qatar's diplomat



Slovenian President Nataša Pirc Musar received the credentials of Jassim Yacoub al-Hammadi as ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary of Qatar (non-resident) to Slovenia. The ambassador conveyed greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to the president, wishing her good health and happiness, and government and people of Slovenia continued progress and prosperity. For her part, the president entrusted the ambassador to convey her greetings to the Amir, wishing His Highness good health and happiness and the State of Qatar further progress and development. **(QNA)**

Spiritual and physical well-being through fasting

Imam Al-Bukhari, may Allah have mercy upon him, has reported that the Messenger of Allah, sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam (may Allah exalt his mention), said: “Paradise has eight gates and one of them is Ar-Rayyan through which none will enter but those who observe fasting.” Imam As-Suyooti, may Allah have mercy upon him, has reported that Al-Harith Ibn Kadda, may Allah have mercy upon him, stated that: “Imposing abstinence from food” was the essence of medicine. Fasting, in medical terms, may mean a variety of things.

Some healthcare practitioners might recommend juice fasting. This type of fast eliminates all solid foods and the person consumes only fruit and vegetable juices. Others might recommend elimination of all foods except fruits and water for a specified time. Some might even recommend eliminating all foods and drinks for specific periods. The reported purpose for these forms of fasting is to cleanse toxins and poisons from the body and the digestive tract. In Islam, fasting both voluntary and obligatory is an act of worship. Although there may be health benefits, its primary purpose must always be to please Allah.

Alternative medicine considers fasting as a detoxification method. This simply means that it is used to purify the body by eliminating “toxins.” This process enhances the healing processes of the body. Fasting generally is perceived to spare any harm to vital organs but uses fatty tissues for energy production. Naturopathic healthcare practitioners generally proscribe short fasts. Because body temperature may drop during a fast, as does blood pressure, pulse, and respiration, it is considered important to stay warm. Fasting is seen as possible treatment for a variety of disorders and diseases such as obesity, chemical poisoning, arthritis, allergies, psoriasis, eczema, leg ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, bronchial asthma and even depression.

Fasting is a protection for the body and the mind. Imam At-Tirmithi, may Allah have mercy upon him, has reported that the Prophet, sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam, said: “Fasting and the Qur’an intercede for a man. Fasting says, ‘O my Lord I have kept him away from his food and his passions by day, so accept my intercession for him.’ The Qur’an says, ‘I have kept him away from sleep by night so accept my intercession for him.’ Then their



intercession is accepted.” Research has shown that fasting can improve the control of diabetes. Another study has shown that fasting improved the health of persons with irritable bowel syndrome and constipation. Another study suggests that fasting may improve cholesterol levels. Imam Al-Bukhari, may Allah have mercy upon him, has reported that the Messenger of Allah, sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam, said that Allah, the Almighty Said: “All the deeds of the children of Adam may Allah exalt his mention are for them, except fasting, which is for Me and I will give the reward for it.” Al-Bukhari has also reported that the Prophet, sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam, narrated that Allah the Almighty Said: “The fast is for Me and I will give the reward for it, as he (who observes the fast) leaves his (sexual) desire, food and drink for My Sake. Fasting is a shield (from Hell) and there are two pleasures for a fasting person, one at the time of breaking his fast and the other at the time when he will meet his Lord. The smell of the mouth of a fasting person is better in Allah’s Sight than the smell of musk.”

There are specific requirements for the Muslim to consider when fasting. First is the intention to worship Allah and obey His Commandments. Second, is that the fasting must take place between dawn to dusk. Muslims are prohibited from fasting for more than two continuous days without breaking the fast. This is based on the narration reported in Al-Muwatta, which states that the Prophet, sallallaahu

‘alaihi wa sallam, forbade fasting for two days or more without breaking the fast in between. Likewise, fasting is prohibited on the following days:

- i) Eid Al-Fitr: The day of festival after the Ramadan fasting
- ii) Eid Al-Adha: The ‘Festival of Sacrifice’ celebrating on the 10th of Dhul-Hijjah, the last month of Islamic Calendar
- iii) Days of Jumu’ah (Fridays): If a person needs to fast on the day of Jumu’ah, either he should fast on the prior day of Jumu’ah and continue on the day of Jumu’ah, or he can fast on the day of Jumu’ah but has to continue the fast on the next day too.

Married women are admonished not to fast without the permission of their husbands (especially optional fasts), as the husband have a right over their wives. Breaking the fast with dates or sips of water is better. Again, this is based on the Prophet’s Sunnah and the narration reported by Imam Abu Dawood, may Allah have mercy upon him: “When one of you is fasting, he should break his fast with dates, but if he cannot get any, then (he should break his fast) with water, for water is purifying.”

Imam Muslim, may Allah have mercy upon him, has reported that the Prophet, sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam, said: “The Ajwah date is an excellent remedy.”

The best days for fasting are Mondays and Thursdays. Imam At-Tirmithi, may Allah have mercy upon him, also reported that the Prophet, sallallaahu ‘alaihi wa sallam, said: “The deeds of men are presented to Allah on Mondays and Thursdays, and I like mine to be presented when I am fasting.”

The Ayyam Al-Beedh (the 13th, 14th, and 15th of each lunar month) are also recommended for fasting. While both the obligatory fasting during Ramadan and the voluntary fasting during the remainder of the year are acts of worship, they may provide healing to the body. Whatever healing may occur because of fasting is a blessing from Allah; however, this should not be the intention or the goal of fasting. Fasting gives us a greater ability to control our desires and emotions. It should not be considered a “cure-all” or a diet programme. Those who fast will receive their reward from Allah as long as their intentions are pure and their fasting is not harmed or nullified by lying, backbiting, or evil deeds. (Source: Al-Jumu’ah magazine)

Scattered rain reported



Scattered rain was reported yesterday (Friday) inshore across Qatar and moderate to heavy rain at northern areas, mostly offshore, when the minimum and maximum temperatures stayed in the 19-22C and 25C-31C range, respectively. The Met office forecast for today (Saturday) features only offshore warning for thundery rain with strong wind and high sea. The expected minimum and maximum temperatures are in the 20C-21C and 27C-32C range, respectively.

PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam

Benefits of exercise during Ramadan

With the arrival of the holy month of Ramadan, opinions vary regarding the impact of fasting on athletes’ performance, and questions arise about exercising, whether it has a positive or negative effect, when to engage in it, what types of sports are preferable, and their impact on athletes during fasting.

Ramadan is considered a physical challenge, but that doesn’t mean withdrawing from activity or staying at home. By adjusting one’s individual activity schedule, it’s possible to maintain movement and perhaps even improve one’s health. Engaging in sports during Ramadan is highly beneficial for health, recommended by many doctors who emphasise its importance in preventing weight gain. Fasting and exercise provide an opportunity to burn fat.

During Ramadan, there is a significant change in athletes’ dietary habits due to adjustments in meal routines. Many studies recommend exercising while fasting through following a comprehensive diet plan. Balanced nutrition allows athletes to achieve optimal benefits from fasting.

Furthermore, exercising during Ramadan increases muscle efficiency, helps rid the body of fats, maintains body weight after

Many studies recommend exercising while fasting through following a comprehensive diet plan. Balanced nutrition allows athletes to achieve optimal benefits from fasting

consuming rich Ramadan meals high in fats and sugars. Exercise also enhances the efficiency of the circulatory system and strengthens the immune system, increasing the body’s ability to resist many diseases.

Athletes who exercise during Ramadan must adhere to some guidelines to ensure safe exercise while fasting and avoid any health problems. Among the most important is maintaining a healthy and balanced diet during Ramadan, consuming foods rich in vitamins, minerals, and proteins at both Suhoor (pre-dawn meal) and Iftar (meal after sunset) to avoid fatigue and nutritional deficiencies while exercising. It is preferable to exercise after Iftar or shortly before it to allow the body to replenish calories.

Additionally, it’s crucial to drink plenty of water, especially since the body may lose water during exercise while fasting, leading to dehydration. Therefore, consuming a significant amount of water between Iftar

and Suhoor is essential. Avoid exercising if symptoms of dehydration or thirst appear.

Another essential advice for exercising during fasting is to stop exercising immediately when feeling tired or fatigued, lie down, and avoid any effort until the Iftar meal. Also, it’s recommended to avoid exercising in hot weather, as increased sun exposure during fasting raises the risk of dehydration.

It’s preferable to engage in high-resistance exercise after Iftar, approximately three hours later, during which any type of exercise can be practiced, accompanied by increased water consumption, fruits, and vegetables, and using any available weights. During fasting hours, it’s best to engage in light exercise such as walking, light jogging, or swimming, preferably about 40 minutes before Iftar. The exercise duration should be between 30 to 40 minutes, followed immediately by Iftar to avoid dehydration. (QNA)

Luxury segment flourishes amid booming tourism

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Qatar’s retail sector, particularly in the luxury segment, has experienced a significant upswing fuelled by the country’s thriving tourism industry, it is learnt. From the final quarter of 2023 to February of this year, demand for luxury items and experiences has surged, drawing visitors from neighbouring GCC countries, as well as from other regions.

Employees of luxury retail establishments at major malls and shopping centres across Doha reported a huge increase in their sales, attributing the trend to the influx of tourists seeking high-end products and curated experiences.

A supervisor of a jewellery and watch shop at a prominent mall disclosed that many customers, many from neighbouring GCC nations such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain, are particularly interested in Arab-inspired pieces and designs.

She noted a substantial rise in their sales during the hosting of the Doha Jewellery and Watches Exhibition (DJWE), held at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre in February. “We exceeded our targets this year during the same period last year. There was a big footfall at our shop, and as expected, we received a lot of new and returning clients here and from different countries, including Europeans and Asians,” she added.

Echoing this statement, another supervisor from a luxury retail outlet highlighted how various events hosted by Qatar, such as the DJWE, the AFC Asian Cup 2024, and the Expo 2023 Doha, spurred spending on jewellery and high-end watches. He noted that the influx of football players and enthusiasts, including visitors from Korea and Japan, among other participating countries, contributed remarkably to the surge in sales, with a preference for gold bracelets, necklaces,



The demand for luxury items in Qatar, especially jewellery, surged during the hosting of several major events.

and precious stones. Expressing optimism about the future of tourism in Qatar, he underlined the potential for continued growth, attracting visitors from diverse regions.

This upward trend, he added, is expected to have a ripple effect, benefiting multiple sectors, especially retail and hospitality. Further proving the surge in luxury retail sales, an employee from a luxury apparel boutique cited the exceptional performance during the AFC Asian Cup, followed by sustained gains from events like the DJWE, Web Summit, Qatar International Food Festival, World Aquatics Championship Doha, and WTA/ATP tours, among others.

The employee highlighted Qatar’s rising popularity as both a tourism and shopping destination, noting the positive impact of various sporting and cultural events hosted throughout January and February.



WMC Qatar marks Int'l Women's Day



Mallika Sukumaran with WMC Qatar members.

The International Women's Day was celebrated by World Malayalee Council (WMC) Qatar with veteran Malayalam actress Mallika Sukumaran as the chief guest. She inaugurated the event with a cake-cutting ceremony along with the members of WMC Qatar Women's Forum. The popular actress was honoured during

the event for her 50-year journey in the Malayalam film industry. She addressed the gathering with anecdotes of her life interspersed with humour and humility, and enlightened the audience on the importance of education, self-reliance and honesty in all endeavours. She remarked that empowerment comes from within and

emphasised the role of women as mothers in creating strong and capable individuals regardless of gender. She held the audience captive with her simplicity and honest discourse. WMC Qatar general secretary Kajal Moosa welcomed the gathering. Chairman V S Narayanan and president Suresh Kariyad spoke.

PISQ hosts grand food festival



Pakistan International School Qatar (PISQ) hosted a spectacular Food Festival Day, bringing together students from the Cambridge Branch, Primary Wing, Girls Wing, Boys Wing and the Evening Wing. The heart of the celebration was the variety of stalls featuring an array of Arabic, Pakistani and continental cuisine. From biryanis to falafels and desserts, the students showcased their culinary skills and expressed their creativity and cultural diversity through the art of cooking. Dressed in chef costumes including antibacterial gloves and hats, the young chefs not only showed how good they were at cooking but also how committed they were to keeping the kitchen as clean as possible. Teachers and faculty members mentored the students.



QPWA hosts get-together



Indian expatriate forum Qatar Parakkadavu Welfare Association (QPWA) recently hosted an Iftar and get-together. President M P Mohamed presided. General secretary Ismail V P welcomed the



gathering. Former longtime Doha resident Ismail Chamali was honoured by QPWA patron K K Usman. A presentation about EduSpark (an education initiative under QPWA and run by Crescent Charitable Trust) was given by EduSpark chairman Abdul Raoof. QPWA treasurer Abbas Parakkadavu proposed a vote of thanks.

MES students excel in art competition



Ayaan Mohamed



Rinsha Fathima



Minha Manaf

Three students of MES Indian School won prizes in an inter-school art competition conducted by the Skills Development Centre. In the junior category,

Ayaan Mohamed (Class V) was first. In the senior category, Rinsha Fathima (Class VIII) and Minha Manaf (Class X) were second and third, respectively.

MES Scouts take part in 'Gulf Traffic Week' initiative



A team of Scouts from MES Indian School along with a Scout leader participated in the 'Gulf Traffic Week' organised by the General Directorate of Traffic. The event aimed to emphasise the importance of adhering to traffic safety rules and promoting knowledge about traffic rules and regulations among students. Fawez Ben Ehiek, an official at the General Directorate of Traffic, gave a presentation. Rajesh K S, in-charge teacher of Scouts, co-ordinated the participation of the students and Ashraf, a teacher, accompanied them.

Area 16 Toastmasters holds speech contest



Area 16 Toastmasters' annual speech contest was participated by Doha Tamil Toastmasters, Laughter Advanced Toastmasters, Parsons Doha Toastmasters and Professional Toastmasters. The chief judges were Sabari Prasad and R S K Naidu. Pradip Sadiye was the contest manager, and Shafana Khathija, Shakshi Sukhnani, Sagarika Pati and Bindu Pillai were the contest chairs. Area 16 director Smitha Bindu opened the contest. Remi Reji called the meeting to order. The role players were Rajesh Sekar, Rishad Mohamed, Munavar Bashah and Kumaran. District director Ravishankar spoke.

Iftar meet organised



Kerala Muslim Cultural Centre Qatar Kannur District Committee organised an Iftar meet.





Golden rays of the setting sun are seen scattered through layers of clouds in Doha recently. **PICTURE:** Gulf Times news editor Bonnie James

Doha College hosts ‘Qatar School Choir of the Year’ contest



Overall winners Park House English School with lead adjudicator Alison McNeill and Doha College senior vice-principals.



Young children enjoying their QSCoY performance.

Doha College, one of the oldest international schools in Qatar, recently hosted the sixth edition of the nationwide choral competition for children, ‘Qatar School Choir of the Year’ (QSCoY). Launched in 2017 with the motto ‘Uniting Children through Singing,’ QSCoY experienced a surge in popularity and participation. The event hosted at Doha College’s Al Wajba campus, featured 16 choirs from across the country competing in three age categories: 5-8, 7-11 and 11-18.

Taking the helm this year was Doha College’s new director of music, William Morrow, who led the various music departments through the two-day event. This year’s lead adjudicator, Alison McNeill, a UK-based opera singer, conductor, and musician, led workshops and supported pupils and staff in delivering outstanding performances. She was joined in the grand final by long-time panel member Olga Protopopova, principal of the International Centre for Mu-

sic, and Zlatan Fazlic, director of the Qatar Music Academy, who also delighted the audience with a performance conducting the “Qatar Junior National Choir.” This edition saw new laureates GEMS Wellington in first place in the 5-8 category. Last year’s champions, American School of Doha, repeated their win for the 7-11 category, while Park House English School clocked their first victory in the 11-18 category and the overall QSCoY award. Morrow, shared his elation at the completion of his first QSCoY edition. “I was extremely impressed by the performances of all choirs from across Qatar, and as host of my first QSCoY competition, it highlighted to me how strong the support for music and arts is across the country. All students dazzled audiences and the adjudication panel. I want to extend a huge congratulations and thanks to parents, the students for all their hard work, the teachers, conductors and accompanists for their hours of dedication and commitment.” Principal David Tongue, said: “I was absolutely delighted with the quality of the singing on display, and the judges had a challenging job choosing between the excellent finalists.”

MES triumphs in MESF Super League



MES Indian School won the MESF Super League 2024 finals against QRI Phoenix FC. The winning team captained by Binoy K K had as members Kwadwo Attah, Mohamed Rashid, Ali, Afzal, Humayun, Hariz, Bernard, Nuhu, Ashiq, Sahil, Ephraim, Samuel, Adam and Hisham. Attah won the golden boot, valuable player of the tournament and the final man of the match awards.

MES students take part in flower planting at Expo 2023 Doha

A group of students from MES Indian School took part in an educational programme organised by Expo 2023 Doha, by joining the flower planting event which saw flower beds shaped to resemble the outline of Qatar in the International Zone of Al Bidda Park. About 3,200 students from

80 schools were present to plant 80,000 flowers. The event aimed to promote environmental awareness and foster a sense of pride in the country’s natural beauty among the younger generation. Under the guidance of the organising committee’s volunteers, students planted flowers in designated areas following

the contours of Qatar’s map. The Expo hosted environmental workshops that inspired young minds and encouraged the new generation to adopt sustainable practices. The teachers in charge of the event from MES were Jency George, Shailaja Nishad, Rajesh K S, Mary Jainsha and Kavitha Rajan.





Palestinian solidarity gatherings



People take part in a protest on the first Friday of the fasting month of Ramadan, to show their support to the Palestinians in Gaza Strip, in Istanbul, Türkiye, yesterday.



People pray as they attend a protest in support of Palestinians in Gaza, amid the ongoing conflict, in Amman, Jordan, yesterday.



Yemenis lift placards and flags of Palestine as they march in the Houthi-run capital Sanaa, yesterday, in support of Palestinians amid ongoing battles between Israel and the Hamas group in the Gaza Strip.

Palestinians hold Ramadan prayers by ruins of mosque



Palestinians perform the first Friday noon prayer of the holy fasting month of Ramadan over the ruins of Al-Farouq Mosque, yesterday, destroyed in Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip.

Reuters
Rafah

Palestinians in Gaza held the first Friday prayers of Ramadan outside the ruins of a mosque levelled in Israel's offensive, one of hundreds the Hamas-run authorities say have been damaged or destroyed in Israeli attacks since October.

Scores of worshippers knelt in rows in the street by the wreckage of the Al-Farouq mosque in Rafah, laying out their prayer mats in the shadow of a white minaret marking all that remains of the otherwise flattened building.

The words "Al-Farouq mosque" were painted on the side of a marquee in the street serving as a temporary place of worship, amid surrounding ur-

ban desolation. Well over 1mn Palestinians are crammed into Rafah, seeking sanctuary from the Israeli military campaign that has laid waste to much of the Gaza Strip since it began in October in response to the October first week Hamas storming of Israel.

Abu Jihad, a lawyer who fled to Rafah at the southern end of the narrow, densely populated enclave from his home in Gaza City in the north, said he had attended prayers in a field yesterday.

"The whole land is the land of God, so we can pray anywhere. The occupation can't deprive us of that," said the father of six, referring to Israel.

People were praying in tents, damaged mosques and the streets, said Abu Jihad, who was reached by phone.

Friday prayers are particularly well attended during Ramadan. Mediators tried but failed to secure a ceasefire in time for the start of Ramadan which began at the outset of this week.

The Hamas-run Gaza government media office says Israeli attacks have completely destroyed 223 mosques and partially destroyed another 289, while Israeli attacks had also demolished three churches.

The Israeli military did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Ramadan's first Friday prayers in Gaza.

The war in Gaza was triggered when Hamas fighters stormed into Israel in the first week of October.

Israel's ground and air offensive since then has killed more than 30,000 people, according to health authorities in Gaza.

Egypt striving to secure ceasefire in Gaza: Sisi

Reuters
Dubai

Egypt is hoping to reach a deal within a few days for a ceasefire in Gaza that would boost aid deliveries and allow displaced people in the enclave's south to move back north, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said yesterday.

Sisi also warned against the danger of an Israeli incursion into the city of Rafah, where an estimated 1.5mn people have sought shelter next to Gaza's border with Egypt.

Aid officials have warned of looming famine in the coastal enclave, home to 2.3mn people, with the war between Israel and the Gaza Strip's ruling Palestinian group Hamas now in its sixth month.

"We wish within a few days at most to reach a ceasefire and not to have a negative development that could affect the situation," Sisi said in comments recorded during

a visit to a police academy.

"We are talking about reaching a ceasefire in Gaza, meaning a truce, providing the biggest quantity of aid," he said. This would include "curbing the impact of this famine on people, and also allowing for the people in the centre and the south to move towards the north, with a very strong warning against incursion into Rafah."

Sisi added: "We warned of what is happening, that aid not entering would lead to famine." Egypt has joined international calls on Israel to open land crossings with Gaza to let in more aid.

Fearing a spillover of displaced Palestinians crowded near its border, Egypt has been trying, along with Qatar and the US, to mediate between Israel and Hamas in pursuit of a truce and the release of Israeli hostages in return for Palestinian prisoners held in Israel.

A push to secure a ceasefire before the start of the holy month of Ramadan this week fell short. Hamas said on Thursday that it had presented a proposal for a truce

deal to mediators. Israel said it was based on unrealistic demands.

Sisi also voiced alarm at regional ripples from the Gaza war, including attacks on Red Sea commercial vessels that have led shippers to divert away from the Suez Canal, slashing Egypt's vital canal revenues by about 50% early this year.

The attacks have been carried out by Yemen's Houthis, who describe them as acts of solidarity with Palestinians against Israel in the Gaza war. There have also been months of border clashes between Lebanon's Hezbollah, a Hamas ally, and Israeli forces northeast of Gaza.

"We also warned of the war expanding and, as you have seen, (affecting) the safety of maritime navigation in the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, and the significant impact of that on international trade," said Sisi.

"We warned of all of that. And also that the conflict could expand to the north. These are all risks we warn against."

EU set to impose sanctions on 'violent' Israeli settlers

EU countries have reached a preliminary agreement to impose sanctions on "violent" Israeli settlers in the West Bank, officials said yesterday, AFP reported from Brussels. A high-ranking EU official said that he expected foreign ministers from the bloc's 27 member states to give political backing to the moves at a meeting in Brussels on Monday. Britain and the United States have already imposed sanctions on a small number of Israeli settlers accused of committing human rights abuses against Palestinians in the West Bank. Hungary – a staunch supporter of Israel – has for weeks been holding up a deal for the EU to take a similar step, diplomats say. Under the agreement, the official said that the EU would first impose

sanctions on Hamas fighters for the October first week storming of Israel. The 27-nation EU has struggled for a unified position in the face of the Hamas storming and Israel's subsequent devastating military operation in Gaza. The EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell on Monday will sound out ministers on whether to suspend a co-operation agreement with Israel over its assault. But there is unlikely to be unanimity for the move given strong backing for Israel from several member countries. Israel's retaliatory military campaign to destroy Hamas has killed at least 31,490 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory.

Houthis fire at ship off Yemen as they threaten wider campaign

AFP
Dubai

A missile launched yesterday by Yemen's Houthi fighters at a ship in the Red Sea caused no damage, after they threatened to expand their harassment campaign which has disrupted global trade.

The fighters have launched dozens of missile and drone strikes on shipping in the commercially vital seaway over the past four months.

They say they are targeting Israel-linked shipping as part of an "axis of resistance", in protest at Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Yesterday, the Royal Navy's United Kingdom Marine Trade Operations and security firm Ambrey had reported that the ship was damaged after being hit west of the rebel-held Yemeni port of Hodeidah

in the early hours of yesterday. But a daylight inspection showed that the vessel had not been impacted by the missile and had not sustained damage, UKMTO and Ambrey said in a later update.

Ambrey said the "vessel was listed as Israel-affiliated but had changed ownership in February 2024", adding that it was headed from Singapore to the Suez Canal with armed guards onboard.

The same tanker was nearly hit by a missile southeast of Yemen's port of Aden the previous day, Ambrey said.

The Houthis claimed the attack in a statement, alleging that the ship is Israeli-owned. They identified the vessel as Pacific 01.

They also claimed a separate drone attack on a US destroyer in the Red Sea, adding that the strike "achieved its goals". There was no immediate confirmation from Washington and AFP could not independently verify the Houthi claims.

Three killed in militants' siege at Mogadishu hotel: police

AFP
Mogadishu

Three people were killed in an hours-long siege by Al Shebaab militants at a popular hotel near the presidential palace in the Somali capital Mogadishu, police said yesterday.

Armed fighters stormed the SYL hotel in a hail of bullets late on Thursday before security forces announced they had brought the situation under control after more than 13 hours.

It broke a relative lull in violence by the Al Qaeda-linked group, demonstrating its continued ability to strike despite a major military offensive against the militants.

"Three people died in the attack and 27 others including

18 civilians and nine soldiers were wounded," Somali police spokesman Colonel Qasim Ahmed Roble told a press conference, adding that the injury toll included three lawmakers.

Security forces also killed five assailants in a gunbattle, he added.

"The situation at the hotel is back to normal now," Roble said. The attack on the SYL hotel – which has been targeted several times in the past – occurred at the start of the holy month of Ramadan and was claimed by Al Shebaab.

"Several gunmen forced their way into the building after destroying the perimeter wall with a heavy explosion," security officer Ahmed Dahir said.

Witnesses described hearing the assailants shoot indiscrimi-

nately. "I don't know about the casualties but there were many people inside when the attack started," said Hassan Nur, who escaped by scaling a wall.

Other witnesses said police arrived at the hotel within minutes of the attack, triggering a fierce gun battle.

The US said it condemned the attack "in the strongest terms".

"The US has a shared interest with Somalia to advance peace and prosperity, and we remain committed to supporting Somali efforts to defeat Al Shebaab," the US embassy in Mogadishu said in a statement.

The government has not commented publicly but images on state television showed President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud visiting the injured in hospital.

Released Senegal opponent makes first public appearance in months

AFP
Dakar

Ousmane Sonko, one of Senegal's leading opposition figures, yesterday made his first public appearance in months, just a day after his release from jail, greeting hundreds of supporters in the capital Dakar.

Sonko arrived at a hotel to hold a press conference with his deputy, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who

was also released from prison on Thursday and who Sonko has endorsed as a candidate for the March 24 presidential vote.

He predicted a large first-round victory for Faye if the presidential vote went ahead without fraud.

"If the election goes well, I don't think we'll get less than 60%," he said.

He called on "the Senegalese people to remain vigilant, especially as there are rumours of corruption circulating".

Just hours earlier, Senegal's Supreme Court confirmed the date of the delayed presidential election, rejecting an attempt by disqualified candidates to cancel the date.

The petitioners had wanted presidential decrees setting the date for the election and the duration of the campaign to be suspended.

But the court said the issue did not fall within its purview, adding that the Constitutional Council had "full jurisdiction

in electoral matters". President Macky Sall had postponed the February election, trying to push it back to December at the last minute, sparking a crisis and deadly protests. The Constitutional Council stepped in, forcing him to reset the date to March 24. In the early hours of yesterday, thousands thronged the streets of Dakar, singing and dancing as Sonko and Faye were driven away from the city's Cap Manuel prison.



Senegalese opposition leader Ousmane Sonko (right) listens to the presidential candidate he is backing in the March 24 election, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, as they hold a joint press conference, in Dakar, yesterday.

Biden praises US senate leader speech calling for Israel elections

AFP
Washington

President Joe Biden praised yesterday a speech by the US Senate leader urging new elections in Israel, saying many Americans shared concerns about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's handling of the Gaza war.

The call by Democratic Senate majority chief Chuck Schumer, the highest-ranking elected Jewish American in history, was the most strident rebuke of Israel yet by a senior US official since October 7 last year.

"He made a good speech, and I think he expressed serious concern shared not only by him, but by many Americans," Biden said when asked about the speech after a meeting with Irish Prime Minister

Leo Varadkar at the White House.

Biden told reporters in the Oval Office that Schumer had contacted his staff to say he was going to make the comments, and added that he was "not going to elaborate on the speech." The Schumer speech came amid mounting pressure from Biden on Netanyahu to let more aid in as famine looms in the enclave.

"As a democracy, Israel has the

right to choose its own leaders, and we should let the chips fall where they may. But the important thing is that Israelis are given a choice," said Schumer. "There needs to be a fresh debate about the future of Israel after October 7"

Schumer accused Netanyahu of surrounding himself with extremists. During his meeting with Varadkar, who has himself made strong criticisms of Israel over

the Gaza war, Biden agreed that a ceasefire was necessary. "You know my view is that we need a ceasefire as soon as possible to get food and medicine in, to get the hostages out," Varadkar said, as Biden nodded his head and said "I agree."

"We need to talk about how we can make that happen and move towards a two-state solution."

Biden – wearing an emerald

green tie to mark Ireland's Saint Patrick's Day holiday on Sunday – said that "we both know a lot more has to be done" on aid for Gaza.

The US president also crossed his fingers for luck, but did not comment, when asked by reporters what he thought of Hamas's new proposal of a six-week truce in Gaza and an exchange of several dozen Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners.

Tornadoes kill 3, injure dozens in Ohio, Indiana

By Brendan O'Brien
Reuters

First responders and clean-up crews fanned out across rural Indiana and Ohio on Friday after one or more tornadoes ripped through the area, killing three people and injuring dozens more as it levelled homes and businesses.

Three deaths were reported in Logan County, Ohio, after at least one tornado touched down and moved east at about 7:45pm on Thursday, Sheriff Randall Dodds said in a statement. Earlier reports of three deaths in Indiana later proved to be false. The twister was one of seven tornadoes in Indiana and Ohio reported to the National Weather Service on Thursday night and early Friday. An additional tornado was reported in northern Texas, and a twister may have also caused damage in a northern Kentucky town.

On Friday, first responders were checking for victims in the Logan County communities of Lakeview, Midway and Orchard Island, Dodds said during a news conference on Friday morning. The search was initially hampered by downed powerlines, gas leaks and a mass of destruction. "We are going to recheck those areas again. There are many places back there that are collapsed," Dodds said, adding that teams were out working on a grid system.

As daylight broke, aerial footage posted on social media revealed widespread destruction in



People observe the damage after an overnight tornado tore through Lakeview, Ohio.

Lakeview, a community of 1,100 residents about 113km northwest of Columbus, Ohio. It showed mobile homes ripped from their foundations, debris covering roadways and large trees on their side.

In Winchester, a town of about 5,000 people in eastern Indiana, 38 people were injured, three critically, when an apparent tornado rolled through on Thursday evening, the mayor said.

"Nobody has passed away, so far as much destruction ... very lucky. There are houses that are levelled,"

Mayor Bob McCoy said during a news briefing, noting that 22 houses were destroyed and more than 100 badly damaged. "I praise the Lord for this one because this could have been really bad."

The National Weather Service earlier said it could not confirm that a tornado had touched down in Winchester, but that it was likely judging by the damage and images taken by people on the ground.

McCoy said firefighters and volunteer crews were cleaning up and assessing the damage on Friday

morning as most of the town was without power.

NBC News earlier reported three deaths in a trailer home park in Winchester, citing state police as a source, but authorities later said that there were no reported deaths in the town. Several small towns near Winchester also suffered heavy damage from apparent tornadoes. A twister may have also touched down in Milton, an Ohio River town in northern Kentucky, where local news reported that several homes were damaged.



A view shows a tornado moving in Hancock County, Ohio.



Damage from tornadoes is revealed in the morning light after tornadoes ripped through the Indian Lake area of Logan County, Ohio.

Argentina weapons haul



Argentine federal police officers stand next to weapons seized, before a press conference held by Argentina's Security Minister Patricia Bullrich, in Buenos Aires.

Apple reaches \$490mn settlement over CEO's China sales comments

Apple agreed to pay \$490mn to settle a class-action lawsuit that alleged Chief Executive Tim Cook defrauded shareholders by concealing falling demand for iPhones in China. A preliminary settlement was filed on Friday with the US District Court in Oakland, California, and requires approval by US District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers.

It stemmed from Apple's unexpected announcement on Jan 2, 2019 that the iPhone maker would slash its quarterly revenue forecast by up to \$9bn, blaming US-China trade tensions. Cook had told investors on an Nov 1, 2018, analyst call that although Apple faced sales pressure in markets such as Brazil, India, Russia and Turkiye, where currencies had weakened, "I would not put China in that category."

Apple told suppliers a few days later to curb production. The lowered revenue forecast was Apple's first since the iPhone's launch in 2007. Shares of Apple fell 10% the next day, wiping out \$74bn of market value. Apple and its lawyers did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the ruling. The Cupertino, California-based company denied liability, but settled to avoid the cost and distraction of litigation, court papers show.

Shawn Williams, a partner at Robbins Geller Rudman & Dowd representing the shareholders, called the settlement an "outstanding result" for the class. The settlement covers investors who bought Apple shares in the two months between Cook's comments and the revenue forecast. Apple posted \$97bn of net income in its latest fiscal year, and its payout equals a little under two days of profit. Last June, Rogers refused to dismiss the lawsuit. She found it plausible to believe Cook had been discussing Apple's sales outlook and not currency changes, and said Apple knew China's economy was slowing and demand could fall. The lead plaintiff is the Norfolk County Council as Administering Authority of the Norfolk Pension Fund, located in Norwich, England. —Reuters

Canada reviewing TikTok's expansion plan

Canada in September ordered a national security review of a proposal by TikTok to expand the short-video app's business in the country, the industry ministry said this week. The potential outcome of the review, which could range from Canada asking TikTok to take mitigation measures to even blocking the expansion, could add to the company's growing woes.

On Wednesday, the US House passed a bill to force TikTok's Chinese owner ByteDance to divest the US assets of the app or face a ban. The measure is the latest in a series of moves in Washington to respond to US national security concerns about China, from connected vehicles to advanced artificial intelligence chips to cranes at US ports.

The Canadian review is focused only on TikTok's investment plan, according to a statement from industry ministry, meaning it is unlikely to result in an outright ban like the one proposed in the US.

"Our government is closely following developments related to the bill being proposed by US lawmakers," a government spokesperson said. The spokesperson declined to comment on the specifics of Canada's reviews but added it was not related to the US bill.

Under Canadian law, the government can assess potential risks to national security from foreign investments such as the TikTok proposal. Canada last year banned TikTok from government-issued devices, saying it presents an "unacceptable" level of risk to privacy and security. — Reuters

US judge rules top prosecutor can stay in Trump Georgia poll case

AFP
Washington

Georgia judge on Friday rejected a bid to disqualify the top prosecutor who brought charges against Donald Trump, clearing an obstacle to a trial of the former president on charges of trying to overturn the 2020 election.

Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee said District Attorney Fani Willis can remain on the high-profile case, but the attorney she hired to be her lead prosecutor, Nathan Wade, must step aside. Trump and his co-defendants in the Georgia racketeering case had been seeking to have Willis disqualified and the entire case dismissed following revelations that she had what they claimed was an "improper intimate personal relationship" with Wade.

They alleged that some of the \$650,000 Wade has been paid to work on the case was used to take Willis on "lavish vacations," including a Caribbean cruise and Napa Valley tour. McAfee, in a 23-page ruling, said Willis had shown a "tremendous lapse" in judgment and there was a "significant appearance of impropriety," but the district attorney can stay if Wade drops out.

"The Defendants failed to meet their burden of proving that the District Attorney acquired an actual conflict of interest in this case through her personal relationship and recurring travels with her lead prosecutor," McAfee said. "The Court finds the allegations and evidence legally insufficient to support a finding of an actual conflict of interest," the judge said. "However, an odour of mendacity remains."

The allegations of misconduct against Willis threatened to tor-

pedo the case against Trump.

The 77-year-old has pleaded not guilty to charges of involvement in a criminal conspiracy to overturn the 2020 election result in Georgia, where Democrat Joe Biden won by some 12,000 votes.

Trump is also facing federal charges of conspiring to overturn the election results.

Willis has asked for the trial of the former president and his 14 co-defendants to begin on August 5 – three months before the November presidential election expected to pit Trump against Biden once again – but McAfee has not yet agreed to an August start date.

Trump's lawyers have sought repeatedly to delay his various court cases until after the November election, when he could potentially have the federal charges against him dropped if he wins. Steve Sadow, Trump's lead counsel in the Georgia case, expressed disappointment with McAfee's ruling

saying "the Court did not afford appropriate significance to the prosecutorial misconduct of Willis and Wade."

"We will use all legal options available as we continue to fight to end this case, which should never have been brought in the first place," Sadow said in a statement. Four of Trump's original 18 co-defendants, including three former campaign lawyers, have pleaded guilty already to lesser charges in deals that spared them any prison time. Others indicted in Georgia include former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, Trump's former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows, John Eastman, a constitutional lawyer, and Jeffrey Clark, a mid-level Justice Department official. Trump's federal case on charges of conspiring to overturn the 2020 election results had been scheduled to start in Washington on March 4, but has been frozen as the Supreme Court considers



DEFENCE

China steps up patrols around outlying Taiwan islands

The Chinese coastguard yesterday said it would step up patrols around Taiwan's Kinmen islands after a series of deadly fishing accidents, one of which led to bitter blame-trading between the two sides. The Kinmen islands are administered by Taipei but located just 5kms from the Chinese mainland. Last month, two men died when a Chinese fishing boat capsized nearby while being pursued by Taiwan's coastguard. Another Chinese boat capsized in the area on Thursday, also resulting in the death of two crew members. There was no indication the boat was being pursued, and the sinking prompted a joint rescue operation by China and Taiwan.

POLICY

Japan's ruling coalition agrees to fighter jet exports

Japan's ruling coalition has agreed to allow the export of next-generation fighter jets being developed with Britain and Italy, relaxing Tokyo's strict transfer rules for military equipment. Japan and the two countries signed a treaty in December formalising plans to pool resources to co-develop the fighter jet. Japan's arms export rules currently forbid the export of equipment to a third country, although there have been exceptions in recent years. Yosuke Takagi, policy chief of coalition partner Komeito, said at a meeting with the Liberal Democratic Party that they "have agreed" to ease the rules for exports of the fighter jet.

DECISION

Japan suspends Fukushima water release after quake

The release of wastewater from Japan's stricken Fukushima nuclear plant was temporarily suspended yesterday following an earthquake. A 5.8-magnitude jolt struck off the coast of Fukushima region, home to the plant wrecked by a tsunami in 2011, at 00.14am yesterday, the Japan Meteorological Agency said. "We have confirmed remotely that there were no abnormalities on ALPS treated water dilution/discharge facility, etc.," Tokyo Electric Power Company said referring to the water release process. But "to be on the safe side, we have suspended operations of the facilities in accordance with the pre-defined operational procedures", it said.

DATA

Sri Lanka's economy shrank 2.3% in 2023

Sri Lanka's economy shrank 2.3% in 2023, official data showed yesterday, as the island nation struggled to break out of its worst financial crisis in decades. But the economy grew 4.5% in the fourth quarter setting the stage for a recovery this year, Sri Lanka's Census and Statistics Department said in a statement. Sri Lanka's agriculture sector grew 2.6% from a year earlier, but industrial output shrank by 9.2%, while services decreased by 0.2%. "Growth benefited from a stronger currency, higher remittances and better tourism revenue in the second half of 2023, which fuelled positive economic sentiment," the statement added.

Japan's union group announces biggest wage hikes in 33 years

Reuters
Tokyo

Japan's biggest companies agreed to raise wages by 5.28% for 2024, the heftiest pay hikes in 33 years, the country's largest union group said yesterday, reinforcing views that the country's central bank will soon shift away from a decade-long stimulus programme.

The much-stronger-than-expected increase comes as the Bank of Japan looks close to ending eight years of negative interest rate policy.

BoJ officials have stressed the timing of a pivot would depend on the outcome of this year's annual wage negotiations.

Policymakers hope that big pay rises will boost household spending and produce more durable growth in the broader economy, which narrowly avoided slipping into recession late last year.

Workers at major firms had asked for annual increases of 5.85%, topping the 5% mark for the first time in 30 years, according to trade union group Rengo.

"We estimate that this year's wage hikes could reach 5.3%. If that is realised, real wages would turn positive in April-June 2024," said Moe Nakahama, an economist at Itochu Economic Research Institute.

Rengo, which represents about 7mn workers, many at large companies, had set its eyes on hikes of more than 3% in base pay - a key

barometer of wage strength as it provides the basis for bonuses, severance and pensions.

Analysts had expected a rise of more than 4%, after last year's 3.6%, itself a three-decade high.

Rengo chief Tomoko Yoshino told a press conference that rising income inequality, inflation and a labour crunch were among the factors behind the big increase, adding part-time workers would see pay hikes of 6% this fiscal year.

Yoshino said the country was at a critical stage in a shift towards economic revival.

The government is counting on such wage hikes to trickle down to smaller and medium-sized firms, which account for a whopping 99.7% of all enterprises and about 70% of the country's workforce, but many lack the pricing power to pass higher costs on to their customers.

Wage talks for most smaller companies are expected to conclude by the end of March, and any increments are likely to come in lower than those agreed by major firms.

Among smaller delivery companies, for example, only 57% are planning any wage hikes in the fiscal year from April, according to a Japan Chamber of Commerce survey published last month.

Even though Japanese companies have been raising pay, the increases have largely failed to keep up with inflation. Real wages, which are adjusted for inflation, have now fallen for 22 straight months.

Heavy rains in Indonesia



People move on an inflatable boat in flooded water after the heavy rains in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, yesterday.

China stance on TikTok ban 'supremely ironic': US envoy

AFP
Beijing

The US ambassador to China yesterday said Beijing's position on a potential TikTok ban in the US was "supremely ironic" given the ruling Communist Party's censorship of online platforms within its borders.

The US House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved a bill on Wednesday that would force the wildly popular short-video app to break with its Chinese parent company or face a nationwide ban.

China has sharply criticised the approval, slamming what it called Washington's "bandit" mentality and accusing lawmakers

of "unjustly suppressing foreign companies".

US ambassador Nicholas Burns offered a rebuke yesterday, saying Beijing's stance was unjustified given it blocks many Western web platforms from operating in the country.

"I find it supremely ironic that government officials here in China... have been criticising the US for the debate we're currently having on TikTok," Burns said during an online seminar held by the East-West Center, a US-based research organisation.

"They won't even let TikTok be available to 1.4bn Chinese," he said in response to a question about the avenues for American public diplomacy in China.

China's government tightly controls the spread of information online and scrubs out

social media content it deems politically sensitive. Many Western platforms, including Google, Facebook and Instagram, are blocked from operating in the country.

TikTok's Chinese parent company ByteDance also runs a separate version of the app inside China called Douyin.

China hit back at Burns's comments yesterday, saying the US stance on the app was "the real irony".

Asked about the ambassador's seminar, foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said the US "is making every effort to use national power to suppress TikTok".

"A country that prides itself on free speech and claims to be a free-market economy is willing to use the power of the state to crack down on specific companies," Wang said.

McDonald's suffers global tech outage

Some McDonald's stores were back online after a global technology outage yesterday disrupted operations for a few hours at many of the restaurant chain's outlets in markets including Japan, Australia and the UK. "Many markets are back online, and the rest are in the process of coming back online. We are closely working with those markets that are still experiencing issues," McDonald's Global Chief Information Officer Brian Rice said. The fast food giant ruled out the possibility of a cybersecurity incident and said the outage was caused by a third-party provider during a "configuration change". McDonald's did not comment on the number of stores impacted. Many of its stores in Japan had stopped taking in-person and mobile customer orders because of the system disruption. A spokesperson at McDonald's Holdings Company Japan said recovery work was in progress and operations were resuming at some stores.

Philippine army trains



Soldiers of the Philippine army artillery division participate in a live fire exercise as part of a combined arms training exercise of the army at Crow Valley in Capas town, Tarlac province, north of Manila, yesterday.

Scientists find bleaching in Great Barrier Reef's far north

Reuters
Sydney

Australian researchers have found coral bleaching around six islands in the far northern parts of the Great Barrier Reef, after a government agency said last week a major bleaching event was unfolding across the world's most extensive reef ecosystem.

Scientists at the James Cook University said yesterday they found only a few relatively healthy areas, mostly in deeper waters, after surveying sites at the Turtle Group National Park, about 10km offshore from the state of Queensland.

"It was quite devastating to see just how much bleaching there was, particularly in the shallows ... (but) they were all still at the stage of bleaching where they could still recover as

long as the water temperatures decline in time," lead researcher Maya Srinivasan told Reuters.

Bleaching is triggered by warmer ocean waters, which cause corals to expel the colourful algae living in their tissues and turn white. A bleached coral can recover if waters cool but if ocean temperatures remain high for longer periods, it will die.

Stretching about 2,300km along Australia's northeastern coast, the Great Barrier Reef has seen five mass bleaching events in eight years, which experts have tied to climate change.

The six islands in the Turtle Group were new additions to the university's monitoring programme in the barrier reef and the data collected from here would help further analyse how corals are affected by bleaching, cyclones and floods, Srinivasan said.

Cancer patients in Philippines falling for alternative 'cures'

AFP
Manila

Filipino mother Mary Ann Eduarte delayed chemotherapy for her cancer for several years and instead took food supplements falsely promoted on social media as cures for the deadly disease.

They didn't work and the cancer spread to her lungs and bones.

Eduarte is one of many Filipinos duped by medical misinformation flooding the social media platforms where they rank among the world's heaviest users.

A shortage of doctors, the difficulty of reaching a hospital in the

archipelago, poor health literacy, and fear of incurring huge medical bills have led many people suffering from chronic conditions to seek alternative treatments online.

In recent years, AFP digital investigation journalists have seen an explosion in the volume of posts and paid advertisements promoting unproven treatments for diseases such as cancer.

The trend was fuelled by the Covid-19 pandemic, when healthcare systems were overwhelmed and many were too scared to visit a hospital.

Eduarte, 47, who makes a living selling beauty products online, found a lump in her body during a self-check in 2014.

She was advised to have a biopsy to find out if it was cancer, but she was scared and delayed having the procedure for two years.

Instead, she spent about 50,000 pesos (\$900) a month on food supplements, including drinks made from tropical fruit and barley grass that she had seen advertised as cancer cures on Facebook and YouTube.

Eduarte finally agreed to have the biopsy in 2016, which confirmed the tumour was malignant.

But she refused chemotherapy, fearing it would make her sick and lose her hair, and continued taking the supplements for another three years.

"I really believed they would

destroy my cancer cells because that's what I was being told by their marketing," Eduarte said at her home near Manila.

"They were posting testimonials that said people were being cured."

After her cancer metastasised, Eduarte agreed to chemotherapy. "I made the wrong decision," she admitted.

"Those food supplements actually cost me more than if I had immediately sought standard medical treatment."

Madonna Realuyo, an oncologist at the Bicol Regional Hospital and Medical Center in the central Philippines, said online misinformation about cancer

treatment was a "serious problem".

"Five out of 10 patients I see ask me about something they have seen or read on the Internet - 90% of the time the information is incorrect," Realuyo said.

"Telling them the correct information does not guarantee that they will listen to us or believe us."

The cost of cancer treatment, which can reach millions of pesos, made patients vulnerable to deceptive marketing of unproven products that are supposedly cheaper.

"Once you're diagnosed with cancer, the reality is that there's a lot of out-of-pocket expenses," said Aileen Antolin of the Philip-

pine Foundation for Breast Cancer.

The Philippines' Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said it was not able to go after companies or individuals falsely promoting products online because it still doesn't have guidelines for implementing this section of the 2009 law that established the agency.

The barrage of medical misinformation during the pandemic prompted Melbourne-based doctor Adam Smith, who speaks Tagalog, to make YouTube videos identifying misleading ads or posts.

But he quit after being hit with several lawsuits by the companies whose products he was exposing.

Top political donor subject of fraud, tax evasion probes

AFP
Mumbai

India's largest known political donor is a company which has been the subject of fraud and tax evasion probes, according to data published weeks before national elections.

The election commission published a list detailing buyers of electoral bonds, a controversial funding scheme that has helped Prime Minister Narendra Modi's

party build an immense campaign war chest dwarfing its rivals.

Electoral bonds account for the lion's share of political donations in India but the country's Supreme Court ruled them illegal last month, saying the scheme violated the right of voters to know who was financing their representatives.

Nearly \$165mn of the bonds issued between April 2019 and January of this year, or around 11% of the total, were bought by a company helmed by Santiago Martin.

The data shows that his Future Gaming and Hotel Services was the single biggest buyer of electoral bonds for the period.

Since 2011 Martin and his company have been subject to several investigations on suspicion of unpaid income tax, money laundering and fraud, according to media reports. Before the electoral bonds scheme was struck down, critics said it reduced transparency by leaving the public unable to scrutinise whether donors had received political favours in return for their

cash. Lawmaker Jairam Ramesh of the opposition Congress party said the data showed Martin's company had donated to political parties after being raided by investigators on at least two occasions.

"There are many cases of companies that have donated electoral bonds, and immediately afterwards gotten huge benefits from the government," he wrote in a post on social media platform X yesterday.

Martin's company is one of 14 among the top 30 donors under

the electoral bond scheme that have reportedly been targets of criminal investigations, according to data.

The electoral bonds data confirmed that Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party was far and away the biggest beneficiary of the scheme, receiving \$730mn or around 47% of total bonds cashed.

Its main competitor Congress meanwhile received around \$171mn in the same timeframe, or 11% of the total.

But the data does not map elec-

toral bond buyers to recipients, leaving it unclear which individual and corporate donors were funding which parties.

Nirmala Sitharaman, Modi's finance minister, said yesterday any suggestion of a link between criminal investigations and political donations was based on "huge assumptions".

"What if the companies gave the money, and after that, we still went and knocked at their doors?" she asked a panel hosted by newspaper *India Today*.

Top buyer of India electoral bonds 'linked to Reliance'

Reuters
Mumbai/New Delhi

A little-known Indian company, Qwik Supply Chain, which purchased \$50mn worth of bonds for political donations via an opaque scheme is affiliated to billionaire Mukesh Ambani's Reliance group, regulatory filings show.

India's Election Commission on Thursday made public details of companies and individuals who bought electoral bonds, which permitted unlimited, anonymous political donations since 2018.

The Supreme Court of India banned these instruments on February 15, calling them "unconstitutional" and saying contributions "by companies are purely business transactions made with the intent of securing benefits in return."

Qwik Supply Chain was the third largest donor using these bonds, following Indian firm Future Gaming, which paid \$165mn, and infrastructure company Megha Engineering which bought bonds worth \$117mn, the Election Commission data showed.

While the data released revealed donor identities, it does not show which party they donated to.

Corporate funding is a sensitive subject in India and Thursday's disclosure has become a hot topic as critics often say such bonds helped companies hide their donations to avoid any potential allegations of winning favours from a ruling party.

Qwik Supply Chain, headquartered near Mumbai, bought bonds worth Rs4.1bn (\$50mn) in 2022 and 2023, the data shows.

The company's latest financial statement for the year to March 2023 filed with the Indian government shows that at least three companies - Reliance Group Support, Reliance Fire Brigade and Reliance Hospital Management - together own 50.04% of its stake.

The three companies have the same office addresses as other Reliance businesses in Mumbai, corporate filings show.

Reliance said Qwik "is not a subsidiary of any Reliance entity", without elaborating. It did not respond after Reuters shared the regulatory papers and shareholding details linking it to Reliance.

Party funding system needs transparency, says minister

Reuters
New Delhi

Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman yesterday said a political funding mechanism scrapped by the Supreme Court as "unconstitutional" was an improvement on the past but a more transparent system should be put in place.

Her comments came a day after the Election Commission made public names of companies and individuals who had donated billions of rupees to political parties under the system that had kept their identities secret.

Sitharaman rejected criticism that the system, introduced by her government in 2017, had led to graft, patronage of businesses and crony capitalism across political parties, but said lessons had to be learnt. The Electoral Bonds system 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 which political party.

The Supreme Court banned the bonds last month.

"It is not a perfect system. But you moved from almost a wild law unto oneself kind of situation, where everybody did what they wanted," Sitharaman told the *India Today* media conclave. "This is certainly not perfect. But one bit better.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves to supporters from atop a vehicle during a roadshow as part of Bharatiya Janata Party's election campaign ahead of national elections in Hyderabad yesterday.

"We have to introduce elements of lessons that we have taken from this, to make sure there is transparency." Elections cost Indian parties millions of dollars and funding parties has been a gray area for decades, with individuals and companies accused of secretly routing illegal funds to parties in exchange for favours.

The bonds system was intro-

duced to route funds through the banks while the identities of the donors were kept secret to protect them from being targeted by rival political parties, the government said in 2017.

The names made public on Thursday showed that some of India's biggest companies had donated billions of rupees in batches over the last five years

by buying bonds from the government-run State Bank of India.

Another list showed how Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) received nearly half the Rs127.7bn donated during the period. The two lists, however, did not connect who donated how much to which party.

Underwater metro train



A family looks on through the metro glass as they travel inside the underwater metro train running through the tunnel under the river Ganges after commencement of its commercial services in Kolkata, India, yesterday.

US concerns on India's citizenship law 'misplaced'

Reuters
New Delhi

Comments by the US expressing concern about India's implementation of a contentious citizenship law based on religion are "misplaced, misinformed, and unwarranted", the Indian foreign ministry said yesterday.

India's move this week sparked sporadic protests, with critics, including Muslims groups and opposition parties, saying the law was discriminatory and undermined the country's secular constitution.

In a statement, the US state department said it was "concerned" about the notification of the law, citing "respect for religious freedom and equal treatment" as a fundamental democratic principle.

"We are of the view that it is misplaced, misinformed, and unwarranted," Randhir Jaiswal, a spokesperson for India's for-

eign ministry, said yesterday, in response to the US statement.

"Lectures by those who have a limited understanding of India's pluralistic traditions and the region's post-partition history are best not attempted," he added.

The reference was to the colonial-era division of the subcontinent at the time of independence from Britain in 1947.

There were no grounds for concern about the treatment of minorities, Jaiswal said, adding, "Votebank politics should not determine views about a laudable initiative to help those in distress." The Indian law provides a fast-track for citizenship to persecuted Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists, Jains and Christians who have fled to India from neighbouring countries.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has earlier defended the law, known as the Citizenship Amendment Act, saying it will benefit the victims of years of such persecution in India's neighbours.

Two senior Tory MPs announce plans to resign

Two senior UK lawmakers yesterday became the latest from the Conservatives to announce they will stand down at the next election, as Rishi Sunak's party appears headed for defeat.

Armed Forces minister James Heappey said he had taken the "painful decision" not to fight his seat at the nationwide vote, which is expected to occur in the second half of this year. His announcement came after Brandon Lewis, a former chairman of the Tories who was also Northern Ireland and justice secretary, said he would not be a candidate. At least 66 Conservatives and former Conservatives have now announced they are leaving parliament at the election - the most since Labour's landslide win under Tony Blair in 1997. The most high-profile of them is ex-PM Theresa May, who said last week she would step down after 27 years as an MP. The retirements add to a feeling in Westminster that the election will see the Tories kicked out of government after 14 years in power.

India to lower EV import tax if \$500mn invested

Reuters
New Delhi

India yesterday lowered import taxes on certain electric vehicles produced by carmakers that commit to invest at least \$500mn and start domestic manufacturing within three years, bolstering Tesla's plans for the market.

The policy is a big win for Tesla, as it's in line with what the company had been lobbying for in New Delhi, despite pushback from domestic carmakers.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk has been trying to enter the Indian market

for years but New Delhi wanted a commitment to local manufacturing.

Tesla officials visited India several times over the last year, with Musk meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June.

Sources said in July that the US carmaker had offered to produce a \$24,000 car at a yet-to-be-built factory but wanted a cut in import taxes that Musk said were among the highest in the world.

Under the new policy, effective immediately, companies that meet the requirements will be allowed to import up to 8,000EVs costing \$35,000 or more a year at

a lower tax rate of 15%. India currently levies a tax of 70% or 100% on imported EVs depending on their value.

Tesla's cheapest vehicle, the Model 3, starts at \$38,990 in New York, according to the company's website. Tesla did not respond to an e-mail seeking comment.

"We invite global companies to come to India. I'm confident India will become a global hub for EV manufacturing and this will create jobs and improve trade," Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal told reporters at a press briefing.

India's EV market is small but growing, with domestic carmak-

er Tata Motors dominating sales. Electric models made up about 2% of total car sales in India in 2023, with the government targeting 30% by 2030.

EV imports at the lower tax rate will be allowed for a maximum of five years. The duty foregone would be limited to the investment made by the company or around \$800mn, whichever is lower.

The policy comes at a time when global EV sales growth is otherwise slowing.

This will open up the world's third-largest auto market to new carmakers, suppliers, technologies and the overall EV ecosystem,

said Gaurav Vangaal, associate director at S&P Global Mobility.

"Multiple carmakers, who are sitting on the fence, would now like to enter India," he added.

Tesla, weighed down by a lack of entry-level vehicles and the age of its line-up, is battling a decline in demand and stronger competition from rivals like China's BYD.

BYD wants to invest in building EVs in India but has been stalled by New Delhi's strict investment rules for countries sharing the land border.

Vietnam's VinFast, which also wanted lower EV import

taxes, plans to invest \$2bn and last month began constructing a factory in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

India has been working on the EV policy for several months despite lobbying from Tata Motors and rival Mahindra & Mahindra.

The Nifty Auto index ended a volatile session 1.6% lower. Mahindra saw the biggest fall, losing 4.8% while Tata Motors was down 2.3%.

The objective of the new policy is to "strengthen the EV ecosystem by promoting healthy competition among EV players," the commerce ministry said.

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Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka

Deputy Managing Editor

K T Chacko

Production Editor

Amjad Khan

✉ P.O.Box 2888, Doha, Qatar
✉ editor@gulf-times.com
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☎ 44466404 (Sport),
☎ 44466636 (Home delivery)
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GULF TIMES

Can EU’s gig worker rules tame management by algorithm?

Low pay, few labour rights and dangerous working conditions – for millions of European gig workers, it can be a rough job. But a deal thrashed out by EU ministers this week addresses one of their biggest headaches – management by algorithm.

Drivers and delivery riders for online platforms such as Uber and Deliveroo say the opaque nature of algorithmic management tools can result in random job assignments and performance ratings, and even account deactivation – hitting their earnings and morale.

While Monday’s watered-down deal to boost gig workers’ employment rights fell short of unions’ demands, they hailed the Platform Work Directive’s provisions for greater transparency over algorithmic management systems as a crucial step to protect European workers from machine-made decisions.

The draft rules should act as a “wake-up call” over the risks of artificial intelligence (AI) turning Europe into a “wild west” for workers’ rights, said Jonathan L’Utile Chevallier, who co-ordinates a delivery riders’ co-operative in the French city of Bordeaux.

The draft rules should act as a “wake-up call” over the risks of AI turning Europe into a “wild west” for workers’ rights

advocates will be able to establish whether structural injustices such as racial or gender bias are baked into the code used to allocate jobs or evaluate performance.

That information could be used in potential lawsuits challenging discrimination or other labour rights infringements, said Oguz Alyanak, a researcher at Fairwork, a gig research project at Britain’s Oxford Internet Institute.

“This is a big step,” Alyanak said.

Algorithmic management is not limited to gig work, as artificial intelligence (AI) begins to revolutionise the workplace – increasingly used as a tool to monitor workers performance and taking over tasks previously carried out by humans.

The boom in the technology that started in 2022 could replace 300mn full-time jobs – about 18% of work globally, according to Goldman Sachs.

Some companies are also embracing automation in the hiring process, including resume screeners that scan applicants’ submissions, assessment tools that grade an online test, and facial or emotion recognition tools that can analyse a video interview.

The draft EU rules are the first attempt at regulating the impact of algorithmic management for Europe’s roughly 28mn gig workers, and set the standard for future legislation, union leaders said.

“This directive is the antidote to uberisation,” said Brahim Ben Ali, a former Uber driver and secretary-general of the INV union in France who has been pushing for the EU rules since 2019.

“It’s important to recognise the work of working-class communities in achieving something so monumental,” he added.

Move EU, a Europe-based group representing ride-hailing companies, declined to comment on the draft EU rules. Delivery Platforms Europe, which represent food delivery firms, did not immediately reply to requests for comment.

Still, Monday’s provisional deal on the directive – which focused primarily on recognising gig workers as employees with rights including sick pay, pensions and unemployment benefits, was “a bittersweet victory,” said L’Utile Chevallier.

It fell short of unions’ hopes and scrapped a set of criteria proposed by the European Commission to determine if an online company is an employer.

Instead national law, collective agreements and case law will dictate whether a worker is an employee, in effect maintaining the status quo. The burden of proof will be on companies to show that their gig workers are not employees. – Thomson Reuters Foundation

Under the new rules, automated decisions affecting working conditions must have some human oversight, and workers would have access to the information driving AI-powered decisions. Such provisions complement parts of the landmark EU AI Act endorsed by European lawmakers on Wednesday.

By guaranteeing greater transparency over algorithmic decisions, workers’ and labour

By Nkechi S. Owoo
Accra

It is well known that women in developing economies have fewer educational and employment opportunities than their male counterparts, leading to higher rates of poverty. In Ghana, for example, men have higher employment rates and incomes than women, and are less likely to be engaged in vulnerable jobs. Less widely recognised is that, by some metrics, the gap is not narrowing quickly enough: women in developing economies continue to account for a significant share of the economically disadvantaged. Add disability to the mix, and the challenges facing women are even greater.

There are over 1bn people living with disabilities worldwide, some 80% of whom reside in developing countries. While there are many models for measuring disability, some conclusions are indisputable: disability is more prevalent among women (19%) than men (12%); people with disabilities face high barriers to education and employment, leading to higher rates of lifelong poverty; and outcomes for women with disabilities are even worse than those for their male counterparts.

Ghana’s experience is a case in point. Women are disproportionately represented among the 8% of the population who face functional limitations related to sight, hearing, mobility, cognition, self-care, and/or communication. And, as the chart shows, 68% of men with disabilities are in vulnerable employment, compared to 80% of women with disabilities, while 40% of men with disabilities have attained secondary and post-secondary education, compared to just 31% of women with disabilities.

These poor outcomes partly reflect social biases. Expectations of the capabilities of people with disabilities tend to be low, so households are often unwilling to spend limited resources on educating and training family members with disabilities, and employers tend to be reluctant to hire them. Since women and girls are more often underestimated than men and boys – nearly 90% of people worldwide hold fundamental biases against women – they are more likely to be left behind.



Though legal protections for people with disabilities are in place – Ghana ratified its Persons with Disability Act (Act 715) in 2012, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been in force since 2008 – they have been insufficient to counteract entrenched biases. A key reason may well be the lack of comprehensive data on disability-related issues, particularly in Africa. Such data is essential to design and implement more effective policies. The first step toward addressing discrimination against persons (especially women) with disabilities is thus to ensure adequate collection of relevant information, especially labour-market data, not least by emphasising more inclusive sampling. This would facilitate disability-disaggregated research and enable robust evidence-based policymaking.

Strengthening disability laws requires the use of sufficiently precise language – and implementation of supportive policies – to ensure that people can take advantage of the opportunities to which their right is guaranteed. For example, Ghana’s Persons with Disability Act 715 guarantees persons with disabilities a free education, but fails to clarify until which level, let alone establish relevant supportive structures. The consequences of these failings are far-reaching: a comprehensive, high-quality education is vital to lift people with disabilities

out of poverty, vulnerability, and exclusion. So is access to quality employment. But here, too, laws in many countries – including Ghana – are lacking. Since the public sector can provide only so many jobs, governments must encourage private employers to ensure that (suitably qualified) persons with disabilities account for a certain share of their workers. Both “carrots” (like tax rebates) and “sticks” (repercussions for non-compliance) can be used. In Ghana, the Disability Common Fund – a social-protection programme aimed at alleviating poverty among people with disabilities – should also be scaled up.

But economic empowerment is just the beginning. Women with disabilities in Ghana and elsewhere grapple with reduced access to healthcare and higher risks of sexual exploitation. Policymakers must therefore devise laws ensuring that all people have equal access to healthcare and other social services, including domestic-violence shelters.

All such efforts must recognise and account for the diverse challenges faced by people with different kinds of disabilities, as well as the reality that women face even greater discrimination than men. For example, while healthcare access must be improved for all people with disabilities, special attention must be paid to the provision of sexual- and reproductive-health services –

including breast-cancer screenings and family-planning services – for women with disabilities.

Furthermore, organisations working to protect persons with disabilities must design programmes tailored for different groups. And relevant NGOs should promote participatory approaches to the development of interventions aimed at supporting vulnerable groups, including those with disabilities.

But all the policies and programmes in the world cannot ensure full social and economic inclusion for people with disabilities. Campaigns are also needed to reduce the social stigma that contributes significantly to the marginalisation faced by people with disabilities.

The fact is that disability is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. If the world is to have any hope of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals – especially eliminating poverty, achieving gender equality, and enhancing social and economic inclusion – the needs of people with disabilities must be fully considered. – Project Syndicate

• Nkechi S. Owoo, a health and demographic economist at the University of Ghana, is a non-resident research fellow at the Center for Global Development in Washington, DC, and at the Partnership for Economic Policy in Nairobi, Kenya.

Climate leadership from the Global South

By Omar Andrés Camacho and Soipan Tuva
Bogota/Nairobi

Last month, the International Energy Agency’s ministerial gathering took place in Paris, while the African Union, which recently joined the G20, held its annual summit in Addis Ababa. Both fora recognised the urgent need to fulfil the commitments made at last December’s UN Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai, not least to triple installed renewable-energy capacity by 2030. But the challenges ahead are substantial.

COP28 identified many actions that are crucial to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. Beyond the sharp increase in renewable-energy capacity, these include doubling the rate of energy-efficiency improvements by 2030, phasing down the “unabated” use of fossil fuels, and providing financial support to developing countries as they work to expand energy access and advance economic development.

Africa and Latin America have a central role to play in fulfilling the world’s net-zero ambitions. Both regions boast abundant renewable-energy potential, thanks to vast solar, wind, hydro, and geothermal resources. By leveraging these, Africa and Latin America can make rapid progress in reducing their carbon emissions, enhancing energy access, and stimulating sustainable economic growth.

Our countries, Colombia and Kenya, are already making significant strides toward a cleaner energy mix. Though Colombia has massive oil and gas reserves, hydropower generation accounts for nearly 70% of its electricity production. And the government is committed to increasing



the share of renewables in the energy mix further by 2030. By harnessing wind, solar, biomass, and geothermal, Colombia can diversify its renewable-energy portfolio and further reduce its reliance on fossil fuels.

Colombia is also taking direct action to accelerate the phaseout of fossil fuels. The government recently announced a ban on the issuance of new licenses for oil and gas exploration, and has signalled its intention to address the negative effects of fossil-fuel extraction. These measures will not only curb carbon emissions, but also help protect the country’s vulnerable ecosystems and rich biodiversity.

As for Kenya, it is emerging as a renewable-energy success story in Africa. Using its vast geothermal, wind, solar, and hydroelectric resources, Kenya has raised the share of renewables in its electricity generation to a whopping 94%. Its geothermal sector has achieved remarkable growth, making it Africa’s leading producer of geothermal power. And now, Kenya is helping its neighbours, Ethiopia and Djibouti,

to harness their own geothermal resources as well.

Underpinning Kenya’s progress are government efforts to implement supportive policies and create an enabling environment for private investment. The Kenyan government’s forward-thinking approach has not only resulted in expanded energy access for its people; it has also created jobs and local industries, thereby advancing economic development and opening up opportunities to collaborate with others. Kenya is a founding member of Accelerated Partnerships for Renewables in Africa, an initiative that aims to bolster the energy transition in African countries, with support from Denmark, Germany, and the United Arab Emirates.

Colombia and Kenya’s achievements should be highlighted and celebrated to motivate and guide other countries in their own clean-energy transitions. Those with fossil-fuel resources, for example, must follow Colombia’s example in limiting oil and gas exploration.

But Colombia and Kenya are not only passive models for others to

follow; they are also active global leaders. If their clean-energy transitions didn’t already make their commitments apparent, their recent decision to join the Beyond Oil & Gas Alliance – an international coalition of governments and partners working to facilitate the fossil-fuel phaseout – should make them so.

Still, financing is key if the world is to realise its clean-energy ambitions. Low investment in Africa is a major challenge. A recent BloombergNEF report shows that in 2021, just 0.6% (\$2.6bn) of the \$434bn invested in renewable-energy projects went to African countries. A sharp increase in funding flows from rich countries to clean-energy sectors in both Africa and Latin America is urgently needed.

Beyond direct financial support from rich countries, the global financial system – including the International Monetary Fund and multilateral development banks – must urgently be reformed, so that it is fairer and more efficient. Only then can this system deliver enough financing to meet the growing needs of developing economies. Co-ordinated action to ease the debt burdens on developing economies is also vital.

At COP28, the Global South demonstrated solidarity and a commitment to co-operation. By sharing knowledge and best practices, developing economies can drastically accelerate the clean-energy transition. But, if the world is to succeed at combating climate change and safeguarding our collective future, bold action to ensure adequate financing is essential. – Project Syndicate

• Omar Andrés Camacho is Minister of Mines and Energy of Colombia. Soipan Tuva is Cabinet Secretary of the Kenyan Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, and Forestry.

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Russia missile attack on Ukraine’s Odesa kills 20

Reuters
Odesa

A Russian ballistic missile attack hit civilian infrastructure in Ukraine's Black Sea port city of Odesa yesterday, killing 20 people and wounding more than 70 in Moscow's deadliest at-

tack in weeks, Ukrainian officials said.
Russia has stepped up its strikes on the southern city in recent weeks, launching drones or missiles almost every day this month.
Two Russian Iskander-M missiles fired from the Moscow-occupied peninsula of Crimea struck a residential area in Odesa, Oleh

Kiper, the region's governor said on national television.
"Russia continues to terrorise Odesa ... local residents, medical and emergency workers are among the victims and injured," Andriy Kostin, Ukraine's prosecutor general, said. The medic and rescuer were killed by a second missile after rushing to the scene to treat

people hurt in the initial strike, Kiper added. Ten people had suffered serious injuries, he said. Residents were rushing to donate blood, causing queues at medical centres. Today has been declared a day of mourning.
A three-storey recreational facility was destroyed and at least 10 private houses, a low pressure gas

pipeline and rescue vehicles were damaged in the attack, the southern military command said.
Rescuers battled to put out fires on the pipeline and in a private house over a total area of about 120 square metres and continued clearing the rubble.
"Ukraine needs urgent help to defend itself and to defend peace

in Europe," Maia Sandu, the president of neighbouring Moldova, said on X.
Odesa, one of Ukraine's biggest ports, has long been a target of Russian attacks, especially after Moscow quit a UN-brokered deal that had allowed safe passage for Ukrainian grain shipments via the Black Sea.

Dye, cyber attacks mar first day of Russia presidential elections

Reuters
Moscow, Russia

Russia's election was yesterday marred by a series of disruptions including dye being poured into ballot boxes, a Molotov cocktail thrown at a polling station in President Vladimir Putin's home town, and reported cyber attacks.
Millions of Russians cast their ballots across the country's 11 time zones at the start of a three-day election that is almost certain to hand Putin six more years at the helm of the world's largest country by territory.

Amid the Ukraine war, the deadliest conflict in Europe since World War II, Putin, 71, dominates Russia's political landscape and none of the other three candidates on the ballot paper presents any credible challenge.

Dye was poured into ballot boxes in Moscow, Russian-annexed Crimea, and the Caucasus region of Karachayevo-Cherkessia, according to Russian media, in apparent anti-Kremlin protests.

CCTV footage of one dye-pouring incident showed a young woman depositing her voting slip before calmly pouring a green liquid into the ballot box. A policeman was seen detaining her immediately afterwards.

A Molotov cocktail was thrown at a polling station in St Petersburg, and a 21-year-old woman arrested, the Fontanka news site reported. Arson attempts were recorded at polling stations in Moscow and Siberia.

Russia's electoral commission

chief, Ella Pamfilova, said perpetrators of such acts faced up to five years in prison, and suggested they had been paid for by those seeking to disrupt the vote.

"Listen carefully everyone," Pamfilova said, before setting out the article in the Criminal Code which dealt with disrupting the work of electoral commissions.

"Especially for all the scumbags who are prepared to destroy the votes of the people because of these pieces of silver," Pamfilova was quoted as saying by the TASS state news agency.

As of 17.20 Moscow time (1420GMT), country-wide turnout was high, at around 24.6%. Demand for electronic voting was so high the system was overloaded.

The Kremlin says Putin, in power as president or prime minister since the last day of 1999, will win as he commands broad support for rescuing Russia from post-Soviet chaos and standing up to what it says is an arrogant, hostile West.

The shadow of the Ukraine conflict hangs over the election: Russia has several hundred thousand troops fighting a grinding artillery and drone war along the 1,000km front line in Ukraine.

Russia's defence ministry said Ukrainian proxies had repeatedly tried to pierce Russia's border over the past three days, but had been repelled.

At least three children were killed by Ukrainian shelling of the Russian-controlled city of Donetsk, the mayor said. There was repeated shelling of the Russian region of Belgorod where two people died and 23 were injured.

Putin accused Ukraine of aiming to disrupt voting by trying to frighten people and said its actions would not go unpunished.

The Kremlin has repeatedly warned that any attempt to interfere in the election would be considered an act of aggression. Russia's foreign intelligence service said the US was planning to meddle.

The electoral commission said there had been over 10,000 attacks on electronic voting systems but that they had endured.

One woman scrawled "Return me my husband" on her ballot paper before burning it, according to videos on social media.

A spokesperson for disqualified presidential candidate Boris Nadezhdin said two staffers and one volunteer associated with his campaign were detained yesterday and another activist attacked at a polling station.

More than 114mn Russians are eligible to vote, including in what Moscow calls its "new territories" - four regions of Ukraine that its forces only partly control, but which it has claimed as part of Russia. Ukraine says the staging of elections there is illegal and void.

Putin ordered a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 after eight years of conflict in eastern Ukraine between Kyiv's forces on one side and pro-Russian Ukrainians and Russian proxies on the other.

If Putin completes a new six-year term, he will overtake Soviet dictator Josef Stalin to become Russia's longest-serving ruler since Empress Catherine the Great in the 18th century.

Dutch king takes part in NLdoet



King Willem-Alexander volunteers in a kitchen during the 20th edition of NLdoet, the largest volunteer campaign in the Netherlands, in Badhoevedorp yesterday.

22 migrants dead in Aegean Sea: Turkiye

AFP
Istanbul

Twenty-two migrants including seven children have drowned after a boat capsized off the Turkish coast, local officials said yesterday.

Two people were rescued by the Turkish coastguard and another two managed to make it out of the water on their own, officials said. The victims' nationalities were not yet known.

The boat capsized off Turkiye's largest island, called Gokceada

or Imbros, which is located in the Aegean Sea off the coast of the northwestern province of Canakkale, near Greece's Lemnos island. "The Turkish coastguard found the bodies of 22 people including seven children," the local governor's office said in a statement. The search and rescue operation was backed by one airplane, two helicopters, a drone, 18 boats and 502 personnel, it added.

Turkiye is hosting nearly 4mn refugees, mostly Syrians.

Many migrants try to reach the Greek islands from Turkiye's western coasts hoping to eventu-

ally reach prosperous European Union countries, with many dying in the perilous sea crossing.

Officials said the boat began sinking overnight and yesterday many ambulances were standing by at the port of Kabatepe near Gokceada. There has been an increase in migrant crossing attempts in the waters between Turkiye and Greece in recent weeks. The Turkish coastguard indicated that it had rescued or intercepted several hundred migrants, including children, attempting to cross to Greece since the start of the week.

Brussels shop sells sealed unwanted Amazon parcels

A shop has opened in Brussels selling still-sealed unwanted Amazon parcels by the kilo. The shop called 'Pile ou Face', French for 'Heads or Tails', is located near the central square Place Flagey and offers the parcels at 16 euros (\$17.40) per kilo. Customers pick a box among the dozens stored in the shop and some open them on the spot. "I paid 40 euros and I got three or four headphones. I did a good job," said Paul, who declined to give his last name. Gisele Peeters is a bit disappointed, though. Her 14.40 euro parcel contained an old-style telephone with a dial. "It's not something I would have bought. I'll try to resell it," she said. Arnaud Userstam, who founded the shop, said connected watches and smartphones are the items people are happiest to get, but others return home with clothes, or sometimes especially weird items. "A lady got 100 toothbrushes for dogs," he said.

Spanish farmers protest



Spanish farmers stage a protest demanding fair conditions for the agricultural sector, in Valladolid, northern Spain, yesterday.

Dutch govt picks France’s Naval Group for sub order

Reuters
Amsterdam/Paris

The Dutch government yesterday said it had picked French defence company Naval Group to build four new submarines in coming decades in a deal seen by politicians as a potential lifeline for the shipbuilding industry and a boon for France three years after Naval Group lost a key contract to build 12 submarines for Australia.

The first two submarines would be operational within the next 10 years, junior defence minister Christophe van der Maat said. He did not specify the exact value of the multi-billion euro contract.

The submarines will be of a size to both operate in shallow waters and take part in missions far from base.

"The Barracuda family sub-

marine will provide the Royal Netherlands Navy with extended leading edge capabilities satisfying the requirements set by the Netherlands ministry of defence," Pierre Éric Pommellet, chairman and CEO of Naval Group said in a statement, welcoming news his group had been selected and saying the submarine programme would help the Netherlands' "strategic autonomy".

The agreement still has to be approved by the Dutch parliament, where several parties voiced discontent over the choice for Naval following media reports about the decision.

A group of lawmakers this week urged the government to rethink and opt for a consortium of Swedish defence company Saab and Dutch shipbuilder Damen instead, saying that would benefit domestic industry more.

New parents left angry as babies need Paris Olympics tickets

AFP
Paris

New parents heading to the Paris Olympics are calling for a ticketing rule change after discovering that their infants will be refused entry to venues unless they have their own seats.

Margaux Giddings, a nurse from southwest France, bought her place for the gymnastics last year when they first went on sale and then fell pregnant, giving birth recently.

"I'm breastfeeding my daughter and she'll be five months' old at the time of the Games," the 33-year-

old from Bayonne said. "It bothers me to leave her. I would have liked to take her with me in a sling or a baby carrier."

The policy for the Games, which run from July 26-August 11, states that "all spectators will need a valid ticket to access an Olympic venue, including children of all ages".

"I couldn't believe it when I found out that as soon as a baby is born it needs its own seat," said Tom Baker, a 37-year-old ticket holder from London who is expecting his first child with his wife Kate in May.

He contacted Paris 2024 and was informed over the chat service that he should think about buying tickets for the Paralympics instead,

where reduced prices for children are available - unlike for the Olympics.

"I said 'wait a second! We've bought tickets a year-and-a-half before the event, we didn't even know that we were definitely going to be trying to get pregnant,'" he said. "You couldn't have known about this and you can't solve it because the tickets are sold out."

He and Kate, plus her brother and mother, have spent around 3,000 euros (\$3,300) on seats for kayaking and beach volleyball among others.

The Paris organising committee, which has already faced criticism over ticket prices, stood by its de-

cision to require everyone including babes-in-arms to have their own place.

"In general, Paris 2024 does not recommend parents bring children under four years of age to competition sites," it said in a statement.

"Paris 2024 urges them to consider the environment of sports venues that may be unsuited to the welfare of young children."

In other sports, policies on infants vary.

For the Euros and World Cup football, children of all ages require seats and many big clubs advise against bringing infants, but they are often welcome for free at sports such as rugby, cricket or athletics.

The London Olympics in 2012 began with same policy as Paris, but organisers changed it under public and media pressure.

Adrien Pol, a social worker from Liege in Belgium who is expecting his first child in June, is hoping for a similar U-turn.

"It's discriminatory against women," he said of the policy. "We want to breastfeed so it will end up being my partner Marine who has to stay with our child."

"She might have to make the sacrifice even though it's something we wanted to do together," he added.

A petition has been posted in French on change.org denouncing

rules that are "unfair, against nature, and contrary to the spirit of Olympism", attracting around 170 signatures so far.

A discussion of the issue on the Reddit online chat platform led to many unsympathetic comments urging new parents to stay away.

"Do your infant a favour and get them a babysitter because no infant is going to enjoy being in a large venue with thousands of people, a lot of free-flowing germs, and extreme noise," wrote one.

Pol said parents should be free to make their own choices, adding that his sessions for basketball and for beach volleyball were for only three hours.



Katara art exhibitions explore Ramadan values

Katara – Cultural Village inaugurated three diverse art exhibitions that bring together various creative experiences, enriching the artistic and cultural scene in the country as part of the ongoing Ramadan activities.

The exhibitions explore the meanings of the Holy Qur'an verses and the true values of the holy month. The opening was attended by Katara's deputy general manager and Human Resources Department director Saif Saad al-Dosari, Turkish ambassador Dr Mustafa Goksu, a number of artists and art and culture enthusiasts.

The first exhibition, titled "Spirit of Arabic Calligraphy," by Iraqi artist Bashar Ali, is being held at Building 18, Hall 2. The exhibition celebrates calligraphy, and creatively depicts the fruits and plants mentioned in the Qur'anic verses by Arabic letters, which were used to write the Holy Qur'an, through paintings that employ various techniques and materials.

The artist integrates the beauty of Arabic calligraphy with visual art, creating compositions of images, verses, and supplications using different techniques and materials such as acrylic, gold leaf, and oil colours. The artworks pay high attention to detail, using colours derived from soil and plants, offering visitors a unique experience. There are on display 27 related works by the artist, who expressed his happiness at seeing his work on display at Katara.

The other exhibition titled "Remembered in the Qur'an" is being held at Katara Building 18 in collaboration with Qatar Photography

Centre, featuring a selection of different photos, representing various topics mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. It aims to highlight the greatness of the Creator, promote religious understanding, and encourage contemplation of Allah's creations in the universe. It also includes Qur'anic texts to reinforce the religious connection between the Qur'anic verse and the images, providing visitors with an experience that encourages reflection on Allah's creations in the universe. The exhibition is considered a distinctive educational and cultural opportunity during Ramadan.

The third exhibition "World Mosques in Postcards" was inaugurated at Katara Building 22. It features a diverse collection of distinctive postcards and stamps showcasing famous mosques in Qatar, such as Al Shyoughh Mosque, Al Qubaib Mosque, Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Mosque, Abu-Bakr Mosque, Educational City Mosque, and Katara Mosque. It also includes postcards of famous mosques and religious institutions in Asian, European, and African countries, such as Turkiye, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Singapore, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Cyprus, and Bosnia.

In the meantime, Katara International Ramadan Chess Championship started Thursday at Katara Hall 15 and set to go on until March 23, from 9pm to 2.30am daily. The championship has 88 players representing 14 countries, and on the first day, the first round of matches was played in the classic chess style with nine rounds according to the Swiss system, 60 minutes + 30 additional seconds for each move.



Iftar goodies to go!



A variety of Iftar snacks, catering to all palates and pockets, are among the salient features of the holy month of Ramadan in Doha. The goodies come under steamed, baked or fried categories and ranging from spicy to sweet. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

