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Promoting GCC security is a priority for Qatar, says official

Qatar participated in the launch event of the GCC Regional Security Vision in Riyadh yesterday under the patronage of the GCC secretary-general.

The Qatari delegation was headed by HE the Director of the Policy and Planning Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr Khalid bin Fahad al-Khater. The event was organised by the GCC General Secretariat.

Speaking at the event, Dr al-Khater said that the launch of the vision coincides with increasing international and regional changes, which requires intensified co-ordination to avoid their serious consequences. He pointed out that the GCC countries are working to strengthen the bonds of collective security and safety and share a common approach to seeking to calm tensions, address instability in the region through diplomatic and economic means, and work to end conflicts that violate the sovereignty of states, through dialogue and resolving differences through negotiations and by diplomatic means, and not resorting to force to preserve the security and stability of the region.

HE Dr Khalid bin Fahad al-Khater speaking at the event in Riyadh.

He pointed out that the event is the culmination of joint Gulf efforts through the regional security team to reach a common vision for the GCC towards regional security in the region. He added that this vision represents the starting point for dealing with regional security issues in the coming period through the existing dialogues with several partners in this regard.

Dr al-Khater indicated that the vision is based on several security pillars for the GCC, the most important of which is the Charter of the Council, which emphasises the common destiny and unity of purpose between the Council states and the achievement of co-ordination and integration, as well

as the Joint Defence Agreement, which stipulates that any aggression against any of them is aggression against all of them, and any danger that threatens one of them threatens them all.

He also participated in a dialogue session organised by the GCC General Secretariat on ways to enhance it and move forward with it. He pointed out that promoting regional security is a priority for Qatar during its presidency of the current session of the GCC, which reflects Qatar's long-standing commitment to the principle of contributing to strengthening the security of the region by building bridges of dialogue and co-operation.

He explained that Qatar, during its presidency, focuses on deepening co-ordination towards the Palestinian issue, stopping the Israeli aggression on Gaza in co-operation with regional and international partners, and lifting the restrictions imposed by Israel on the entry of humanitarian aid, in addition to its work to strengthen the strategic partnerships of the GCC countries and focus on combating Islamophobia and racism against Arabs and Muslims. (QNA)

Sudan ministry accuses RSF of seizing aid trucks

The Sudanese Foreign Ministry accused the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) of seizing a number of humanitarian aid trucks provided by the UN Children's Fund (Unicef). The trucks were on their way to El Fasher (the capital of North Darfur state in the west of the country) to help contain the food and health crisis in the IDPs camps, the ministry said in a statement yesterday. The RSF escalated their attacks on villages in the states of Al Jazeera, North and South Kordofan, and also began implementing their threats to prevent humanitarian aid convoys from reaching the beneficiaries. (QNA)

US has 'signed off on more bombs, warplanes for Israel'

The US in recent days authorised the transfer of billions of dollars worth of bombs and fighter jets to Israel even as it publicly expresses concerns about an anticipated military offensive in Rafah, the *Washington Post* reported yesterday. The new arms packages include more than 1,800 MK84 2,000-lb bombs and 500 MK82 500-lb bombs, the newspaper said, citing Pentagon and State Department officials familiar with the matter. (Reuters)

RAMADAN THOUGHT



Seek the Night of Qadr in the odd nights of the last ten days of Ramadan. [Al-Bukhari]

Prayer times

Fajr...4:10; Zuh...11:38; Asr...3:07; Maghrib...5:52; Isha...7:22

Fasting times

Iftar today5:52pm
Imsak tomorrow.....3:59am

COMMUNITY

See Pages 4 & 5

Huge crane to clear Baltimore bridge debris

A crane works on clearing debris from the Francis Scott Key Bridge yesterday in Baltimore, Maryland.

The largest crane on the US Eastern Seaboard readied yesterday to begin salvage work to clear Baltimore harbour after a cargo ship crashed into a major bridge causing it to collapse. Vessel traffic through the busy Port of Baltimore has been suspended indefinitely since the accident brought down the Francis Scott Key Bridge in stunning speed, claiming the lives of six

men working on a pothole repair team. The work of clearing tonnes of steel debris from the deep waters of the Patapsco River is expected to be difficult and dangerous, made more delicate by the fact that the bodies of four workers have yet to be recovered. But the arrival of the huge floating crane — able to lift a 1,000-tonne load — will allow the work to begin. (AFP) **Page 6**

QU research focuses on dugong population dynamics using drones

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

A collaborative research between Qatar University (QU) and ExxonMobil is using drone technology to study the dugong population dynamics in the northwest coast of Qatar, home to the second largest population and the largest gathering of the marine mammal in one location.

The research team comprised Dr Mohsen al-Ansi al-Yafei and Dr Youssria Soliman, associate professors in the Department of Environmental and Biological Sciences at QU, ExxonMobil's researcher Ismail al-Sheikh and a number of assistant researchers.

The Gulf is home to a large population of dugongs also known as

Sea Cows. Previous studies conducted in the Gulf have estimated the numbers of dugongs at about 6,000. The studies that extended for a period over 13 years and covered the coastal waters of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE, spotted the largest single group of dugongs ever reported in the world, numbering about 674, between Bahrain and Qatar.

Although the number of dugongs in the Arabian Gulf is the second largest in the world after Australia, there are no accurate estimates of the numbers of dugongs in the region.

According to an article by Dr Soliman published on the latest edition of the QU research magazine, using an unmanned aerial vehicle, the current study aims to explain the conditions that support the single largest gathering of dug-

US official hints at famine spectre in northern Gaza

Reuters/AFP
Washington/Gaza

Famine is quite possibly present in parts of the northern Gaza Strip, a senior US State Department official said yesterday, adding that an obstacle to getting more aid to Palestinians was a scarcity of trucks in the enclave under Israeli siege.

The UN has warned of a looming famine and complained of obstacles to getting aid in and distributing it throughout Gaza. The US also says famine is imminent, but the official yesterday told Reuters it might already be present.

"While we can say with confidence that famine is a significant risk in the south and centre but not present, in the north it is both a risk and quite possibly is present in at least some areas," the official said on condition of anonymity.

The UN-backed global authority on food security warned earlier this month that famine was likely to occur by May in northern Gaza and could spread across the enclave of 2.3mn people by July.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric on Wednesday described "tremendous challenges" to distributing aid, including a "lack of security, lack of co-operation with the Israeli authorities, lack of insufficient number of trucks, not enough fuel." Israeli officials say they have increased aid access to Gaza, are not responsible for delays and that the aid delivery inside Gaza is the responsibility of the UN and humanitarian agencies. Israel has also accused Hamas of stealing aid.

The State Department official said one of the biggest issues limiting aid distribution was a scarcity of trucks inside Gaza and that Washington would work to help acquire or help the UN

Palestinians inspect the damage to a building after overnight Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

acquire additional trucks. "They're just about at the limit right now. There aren't additional trucks in Gaza to be loaded from Kerem Shalom or Rafah or Gate 96 with food," the official said, referring to various border crossings into the enclave.

The UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs says it has more than 200 trucks for aid delivery within Gaza, including some which are heavily damaged but still operable. But ultimately the UN says not enough aid is getting into Gaza.

The State Department official said that in the past week there was an average of 250 aid trucks a day entering Gaza, but more were needed. The official said the US was working to help get more aid regularly through Gate 96, a new entry point to reach north Gaza, citing a lack of vetted drivers.

He said that separately Israel had facilitated some 350-400 trucks of privately contracted humanitarian aid to northern Gaza over the past three or four weeks.

The US has warned Israel against expanding its military operation into the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where over a mil-

lion Palestinians are sheltering, without a plan to protect civilians.

The US has been briefed "on some aspects" of the humanitarian plan, the State Department official said, but it has yet to see a comprehensive one. Meanwhile, Israel sustained its aerial and ground bombardment of the Gaza Strip yesterday, killing dozens of Palestinians, as fighting raged around Gaza City's main Al-Shifa hospital, Palestinian officials and the Israeli military said.

Palestinian health officials said two Israeli strikes on the Al-Shejaia suburb in eastern Gaza City killed 17 people, while an Israeli air strike on a house in the Al-Maghazi refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip killed eight people.

Gaza's Hamas-run government media office said at least 10 policemen, tasked with securing aid to the displaced in northern Gaza, were among those killed in Al-Shejaia.

The armed wing of Hamas said their fighters targeted Israeli forces near to Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, one of the city's two hospitals blockaded by Israeli soldiers for several days. **Page 3**

Some 150,000 worshippers perform Taraweeh at Al-Aqsa

Some 150,000 worshippers performed the Taraweeh prayers at Al-Aqsa Mosque yesterday. The Islamic Endowments Department said that despite the occupation's restrictive measures, thousands of worshippers performed the Isha and Taraweeh prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The department pointed out that the occupation forces were deployed at the gates of Al-Aqsa and in the Old City, and they searched young men and checked their identities, as they were approaching the mosque. The occupation authority deliberately deprived tens of thousands of Palestinians from the West Bank governorates of access to Jerusalem to perform prayers in the Al-Aqsa Mosque. They also obstructed access of citizens from occupied Jerusalem to the mosque by placing procedures and barriers around the Old City and at the gates of Al-Aqsa. (QNA)

The Gulf is home to a large population of dugongs also known as Sea Cows.

ongs in northwestern Qatar. The study highlights that currently the dugong population in the location is estimated to exceed 1,000. The

study extended for more than three years and included repeated aerial surveys using drones. Another intensive seasonal ma-

rine survey monitored changes in the quality and density of sea grasses, which represent the main feeding grounds for dugongs. The observed changes in the population density over the study period was related to births, deaths, changes in habitats, fishing and boat accidents. The population age structure was also evaluated by measuring the ratio of calves to adults, as it is considered one of the indicators that help predict the extent of the increase or decrease in numbers of dugongs in the future.

An accurate count of dugongs is crucial to the goal of their management and to understanding the dynamics of the populations inhabiting the area. Obtaining an accurate count of the number of animals is difficult, especially in the marine environment. **To Page 2**



Italian ambassador Paolo Toschi receiving the award from HE the Minister of Municipality Abdullah bin Hamad bin Abdullah al-Attiyah in the presence of Expo 2023 Doha commissioner-general ambassador Bader Omar al-Dafa and Italian trade commissioner Paola Lisi.

Italy's 'Garden of the Future' wins accolade as Expo 2023 Doha ends

By Peter Alagos
Business Reporter

Italy's pavilion at the recently concluded Expo Doha 2023, 'Garden of the Future', was honoured with the 'Best Programming' award for its innovative and hi-tech structure and design. Italian ambassador Paolo Toschi and Italian trade commissioner Paola Lisi received the award from HE the Minister of Municipality Abdullah bin Hamad bin Abdullah al-Attiyah and Expo 2023 Doha commissioner-general ambassador Bader Omar al-Dafa in a recently held ceremony.

The pavilion was one of the flagships of the exhibition, thanks to its cutting-edge water-saving technologies which, if used together, allow water consumption for agricultural pur-

poses to be reduced by approximately 96%, the Italian embassy noted in a press statement.

The technological equipment was paired with a rich programme of activities in science, culture, and business fields; as many as 45 events were hosted in the pavilion, thanks to the involvement of public entities, business associations, universities and prestigious speakers, the embassy further stated.

During the expo, the Italian pavilion witnessed the presence of the following dignitaries from Italy: Minister of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forestry Francesco Lollobrigida, Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Maria Tripodi, and the President of the Permanent Commission of the Senate of the Italian Republic for Agriculture, Tourism, Industry, and Agricultural Food

Production Luca De Carlo.

"We are proud of the award received by the Italian Pavilion and of the results achieved by our presence at Expo Doha 2023," the ambassador stated. He added: "In the last six months, the Italian Pavilion has been not only a beacon for our institutions, companies, and research bodies in Doha, but also a bridge with stakeholders from Qatar and the entire Middle Eastern region, promoting the cooperation between institutions, businesses, and research bodies on the issues of sustainability and the relationship between man and nature."

"This is a fundamental step for the future development of bilateral relations and the joint search for solutions to the challenges of climate change, food security, and the fight against desertification."

89th Qatari plane with aid for Gaza in Egypt



A Qatar Armed Forces aircraft arrived in the Egyptian city of Al Arish yesterday. 24 tonnes of aid, including food supplies, provided by Qatar Charity, to be brought into the Gaza Strip, bringing the total number of aid planes to 89. The aid is part of Qatar's full support to the brotherly Palestinian people amid the current difficult humanitarian conditions. (QNA)

Awqaf to continue support for 'Flower Each Spring' initiative

While continuing its efforts to promote green and environmental protection initiatives, the General Administration of Endowments at the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs will continue to support the 'Flower Each Spring' programme.

The director-general of the administration Sheikh Dr Khalid bin Mohamed al-Thani also announced the continuation of the partnership with the 'A Flower Each Spring' programme of Qatar Foundation (QF)'s Qur'anic Botanic Garden to implement its activities and events throughout the year.

According to a statement from Awqaf, a total of 9,181 students were part of the initiative while engaging in various activities meant to expand greener spaces and environmental protection last year. Sheikh Dr al-Thani, who expressed his pleasure in the environmental partnership with the 'Flower Each Spring' programme this year called for intensifying efforts to preserve the integrity of green spaces, gardens and places that contain local plants. This partnership comes within the community partnerships held by the General Administration of Endowments with various sectors of society.

"The plants are national and glo-



Sheikh Dr Khalid bin Mohamed al-Thani (right) and Dr Saif Ali al-Bajri announce the continuation of the partnership.

bal wealth that requires providing everything necessary to preserve them. These all have a connection to the aesthetic dimension of human life," he said noting that increasing awareness of the importance of vegetation in preserving the environment and building positive behaviour towards it among generations is an obligation urged by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Dr Saif Ali al-Hajri, head of the programme expressed his gratitude to Awqaf for the support. He said that this pioneering regional programme was launched by Her

Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nass-er in 1999.

He noted that the programme is considered a qualitative initiative that aims to connect children with their natural heritage in a way that enhances hope for the future while fulfilling the objectives of Qatar National Vision 2030.

'A Flower Each Spring' programme celebrates each year one of the 350 plants and flowers that grow in Qatar, focusing on perennial plants of special importance to the coastal and desert nature of the country.

'You Matter' initiative distributes Iftar meals



In line with its dedication to strengthening community engagement, the 'You Matter' initiative distributed 300 Iftar meals to visitors at Aspire Park on Thursday, the Ministry of Interior posted on its X account. The volunteers also provided awareness guidelines on security and safety measures. Major Saeed Juma al-Hatmi, supervisor of the 'You Matter' initiative, stressed its commitment to organising such events and participating in activities aimed at promoting awareness of the connection between security and sports. The initiative aims to encourage effective and safe community involvement in various sports events nationwide, the MoI post added.

Qatar takes part in Qur'an reciting contest in Amman

Qatar, represented by the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs, will participate in the 31st International Hashemite Competition for Memorising and Reciting the Holy Qur'an. Mohammed Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah Kanoo of the Ministry of Awqaf's Department of Da'wah and Religious Guidance will contest in the competition's section of memorising the whole Qur'an with intonation, good reciting and interpretation. Run by Jordan's Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, the event is slated to be held from March 30-April 5 in the capital Amman. Qatar finished second in the 2016 and 2019 editions. (QNA)

MoI warning



Excessive speeding before Iftar is one of the main causes of road accidents during Ramadan, the Ministry of Interior cautioned on a X post yesterday. "Be cautious and do not put yourself and others at risk. Your safety is important to us," the post added.

Breakdown tips



"To ensure road safety, kindly adhere to necessary measures when your vehicle breaks down on the road," the Ministry of Interior said in a post on X.

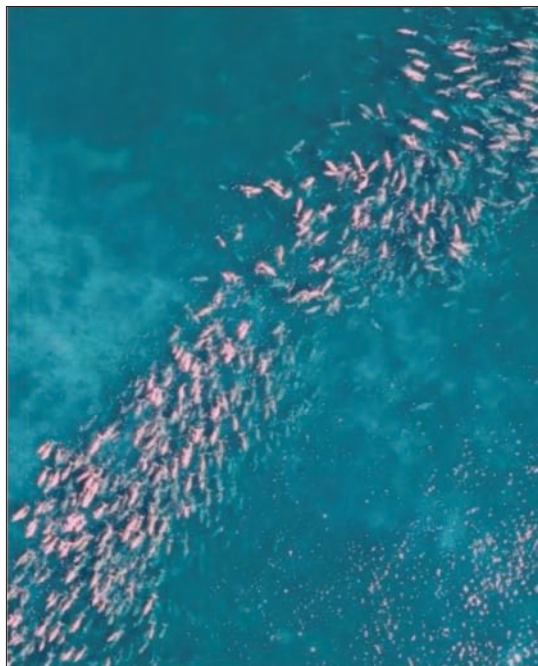
QU research focuses on dugong population dynamics using drones

From Page 1

This is due to the difficulty of counting, as observers do not see the animals because they are covered, either by water or plants, or they respond to the presence of observers and leave the place before they are seen. Since dugongs are spread over wide areas, trying to count their numbers is very difficult. Remote photography technology using drones provides a useful tool for measuring population density in an effective and more accurate way.

Since the survival of sea cow populations depends on the quality and density of sea grass habitats, the researchers also conducted quantitative and qualitative measurements for changes in sea grass habitats over several different seasons to determine the extent of change in these habitats, which are considered as home to sea cows.

Understanding the dynamics of dugong populations and how they respond to the changing marine meadow habitats is one of the keys to successfully managing and thus conserving marine life and dugong population.



Aerial survey using drones to monitor dugongs in Qatari coastal waters.

Iftar meal preparation for Palestinians in Gaza



Workers at Loyalty Support Services company prepare Iftar meals, part of humanitarian aid from Jordanian non-profit organisation, Waqf Thareed, to be delivered to Gaza, during the holy month of Ramadan, in Amman, Jordan.

Japan to resume funding to UNRWA

AFP
Tokyo

Japan is preparing to resume funding to the UN's crisis-hit Palestinian refugee agency (UNRWA), which co-ordinates nearly all aid to Gaza, the government said.

Once the sixth-largest contributor to the agency, Japan joined more than a dozen countries in pausing funding after Israel claimed that 12 of UNRWA's 13,000 Gaza employees were involved in the October first week Hamas storming.

Foreign Minister Yoko Kami-

kawa met UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini in Tokyo on Thursday to discuss measures taken by the agency to strengthen governance and transparency.

"Japan and the UNRWA confirmed that they will advance final co-ordination about necessary efforts to resume Japan's contribution," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Japanese media reports said the resumption of funding, which was suspended in January, was expected to come in the first half of April.

The abrupt suspension of funding has threatened UNRWA's efforts to deliver desperately needed aid in Gaza, where the UN has

warned of an impending famine.

This month, Australia, Canada, Sweden and others said they were resuming aid.

Lazzarini said on Tuesday that the agency has enough funds to keep operating until at least the end of May. Kamikawa on Thursday "pointed out the importance of ensuring transparency and traceability of fund flows and the neutrality of UNRWA staff", the ministry said.

The UN has launched both an internal and an independent investigation but has said Israel has not provided it with any evidence to support the claims against its workers.

Gaza fisherman braves Israeli navy fire to support his family

Reuters
Gaza

Before the Gaza war, Palestinian fisherman Jalal Qaraan navigated his small boat for long distances in search of a good catch.

These days he says merely casting his nets could be deadly if he draws the wrath of the Israeli navy.

Israeli airstrikes and shelling have reduced large swathes of the densely populated coastal Gaza Strip to rubble and killed more than 32,000 Palestinians as the war with the Palestinian group Hamas rages.

There are also plenty of dangers at sea for fishermen like Qaraan, who must nevertheless support his family.

"When we attempt to go out... we are besieged with gunfire, bombarded with shells, sound bombs. It's always a risk, entering the water is a risk," he said as he pulled his boat to shore after catching a few fish.

"There is not a day that goes by without them coming at us. It's all fear and terror, but despite this, I go in to be able to provide a secure living for my children."

The Israeli military was not immediately available for comment.

Qaraan is especially eager to work the seas during the holy month of Ramadan, when families usually enjoy large meals together after fasting. But fes-

tivities are hard to come by these days.

At least 32,623 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's air and ground offensive into Hamas-run Gaza, according to the health ministry there. Thousands more are believed to be lying dead under rubble, and more than 80% of the 2.3mn population have been displaced, many of them at risk of famine.

The war began when Hamas fighters stormed Israel in the first week of October.

Judges at the International Court of Justice on Thursday unanimously ordered Israel to take all the necessary and effective action to ensure basic food supplies without delay to the Palestinian population in Gaza.

The court said the Palestinians in Gaza face worsening conditions of life and famine and starvation are spreading.

"As for the fishing, there is no quantity. Today in Ramadan, I'm fasting, risking my life to get one or two kilos of fish to eat or to sell them to buy household necessities," said Qaraan, preparing his fishing net.

Other Gazans are feeling the effects of the fishing crisis. As she prepared for the breaking of the fast Umm al-Zein, one of the hundreds of thousands of displaced Gazans, said her children craved fish. "Palestine is known for its great fish and seafood but due to the war fish is not available. Unfortunately, we haven't eaten fish since October first week," she said.

POWER Iraq to import electricity from Jordan

Iraq said yesterday a power line would soon bring electricity from Jordan to the border area as authorities aim to diversify energy sources to ease the country's chronic outages, AFP reported from Baghdad. With its generating capacity ravaged by decades of conflict and underinvestment, Iraq has long relied on imports of both gas and electricity from neighbouring Iran. The 340-kilometre power line from Jordan will officially start operating today, the electricity ministry said in a statement. In a first phase, it will provide 40 megawatts (MW) of power to the Al-Rutbah area near the border. Its capacity will then be boosted to 150MW and finally 500MW to cover "several large parts" of Anbar province, west of the capital Baghdad. Despite its vast oil reserves, Iraq suffers rolling power cuts that can last up to 10 hours a day.

Zakat (the poor due): Meaning, ruling and benefits

The literal meaning of "Zakat" is purity. Its Islamic technical meaning designates the annual amount of wealth, food, property etc. which a Muslim with the adequate means must distribute among the rightful beneficiaries.

Zakat is a remarkable institution and a major pillar of Islam. Allah, Almighty, Says (what means): "And establish the Prayer, and pay Zakat (the poor due)..." [Qur'an, 2:43]

Moreover, Zakat is an obligatory act because it is one of the pillars of Islam: The Prophet sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam (may Allah exalt his mention), said: "Islam was built upon five (pillars): `The testimony that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; the establishment of the prayer; paying the obligatory charity (Zakat); pilgrimage to the House (Haj) to the Ka'bah in Makkah) and fasting (the month of) Ramadan.'" [Al-Bukhari and Muslim]

Zakat is a small portion of the Muslim's wealth that must be given to the poor or to other specified beneficiaries. Whoever claims that Zakat is not obligatory and refuses to pay it, is not a Muslim, but a Muslim who refuses to pay Zakat due to stinginess, while affirming its obligation, has committed a great sin for which one will be severely punished.

Allah, Almighty, Says (what means): "...and as for those who hoard treasures of gold and silver, and do not spend them for the sake of Allah, announce unto them a painful torment. On the Day when that [hoarded wealth] shall be heated in the Fire of Hell and with it will be branded their foreheads, their flanks, and their backs, (and it will be said unto them): `This is the treasure which you hoarded for yourselves. Now taste of what you used to hoard.'" [Qur'an 9: 34-35]

He, Almighty, also Says (what means): "And let not those who covetously withhold of that which Allah has bestowed on



them of His bounty (wealth) think that it is good for them (and so they do not pay Zakat). No, it will be worse for them; the things which they covetously withheld will be tied to their necks like a collar on the Day of Resurrection..." [Qur'an 3:180]

There is no equivalent in any other language to the word "Zakat" and the meaning it conveys. It is not just a form of charity, or alms-giving or tax or tithe. Nor, is it simply an expression of kindness; it is all of these combined and much more. It is a duty enjoined by Allah and a source of purification for the individual and society as a whole.

He, Almighty, Says (what means): "Take from their wealth 'Sadaqah' (Zakat) in order to purify them and sanctify them with it." [Qur'an 9: 103]

Zakat benefits the society in many ways. Here is an explanation of the far-reaching effects of it:

1. Zakat purifies the individual and his wealth. The status of his wealth is increased with Allah and in turn, he will be rewarded. When a person becomes liable for paying Zakat, a certain per-

centage of his wealth should be distributed immediately in the correct manner, because at that point, the wealth which is to be distributed does not belong to him. If this wealth is retained, it spoils the status of all of his wealth.

2. Zakat does not only purify the property of the one who gives it, it also purifies his heart from selfishness and greed. In return, it purifies the heart of the recipient from envy and jealousy, and it fosters in his heart good will and warm wishes toward the contributor. As a result, the rich and poor of society are bound together as a unit, working together and helping one another.

3. Zakat decreases the sufferings of the needy and poor members of society, however, those in need should not depend on it completely.

4. Zakat is an effective means of developing the spirit of social responsibility on the part of the well-to-do, and the feeling of security and belonging on the part of the underprivileged.

5. Zakat is a clear manifestation of the spiritual and humanitarian interactions between the individual and society. It is a sound illustration of the fact that though Islam does not hinder private enterprise or condemn private possessions, it does not tolerate selfish and greedy control of wealth and property. It is an expression of the general philosophy of Islam which adopts a moderate and effective course between the individual and society.

In conclusion, we mention a calling by Allah, Almighty (what means): "O You who believe! Shall I lead you to a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering [in this world and in the life to come]? You are to believe in Allah and His Messenger and strive hard in Allah's cause with your possessions and your lives: this is for your own good - if you had known it." [Qur'an, 61: 10-11]

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

Palestinian solidarity rally in Yemen



Demonstrators gather during a pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel rally outside Al-Saleh mosque in the Houthi-held capital Sanaa, yesterday, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Hamas group.

POLL

Support for Israeli war on Gaza declines in US

A recent poll conducted by the Gallup Foundation revealed growing opposition among Americans to the Israeli war in Gaza, which claimed the lives of over 32,000 individuals in Gaza, most of whom were women and children, according to figures from the Ministry of Health in the region, QNA reported from Washington.

Approximately 55% of surveyed Americans disagreed with Israeli actions, while 36% expressed support for Israeli operations. These figures mark a shift in American support for Israeli actions, with at least 50% endorsing them according to a survey conducted by the same foundation in November last year, while 45% expressed opposition to Israeli military actions in Gaza. Gallup conducted its latest survey in March, prior to the UN Security Council's resolution calling for a ceasefire during Ramadan, amidst ongoing Israeli warfare in Gaza, where the majority of the population is now on the brink of famine according to the UN. Support for Israel's actions in Gaza has declined even among partisan groups in the US, with Republicans still backing military efforts at a rate of 64%, showing a decrease from the November survey when it was at 71%. About 75% of Democrats expressed opposition to Israeli actions, while 48% of independents stated their rejection of Israeli measures.

Israel launches deadliest strikes in Syria

Reuters
Beirut

Israel carried out its deadliest strikes in months on northern Syria's Aleppo province early yesterday and said it killed a senior Hezbollah commander in Lebanon, stepping up its campaign against proxies in parallel with its war in Gaza.

Israel has ramped up airstrikes in Syria against both the Lebanese Hezbollah militia and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) since the Palestinian faction Hamas' storming of Israel in the first week of October. In recent days its pilots have resumed regular practice for "deep" raids into Lebanon.

The Israeli military said yesterday it had killed Ali Abed Akhsan Naim, deputy commander of Hezbollah's rocket and missiles unit, in an air strike in the area of Bazouriyeh in Lebanon.

It said he was one of the militia's leaders in heavy-warhead rocket fire and said he was responsible for conducting and planning attacks

against Israeli civilians. Israel and Hezbollah have also been trading fire across Lebanon's southern border in the biggest escalation since they fought a month-long war in 2006, as Hezbollah has tried to show its support for Hamas with volleys of rockets into Israel.

Syria's defence ministry said Israeli strikes hit several areas in the southeastern part of Aleppo province

About a dozen Israeli troops and half a dozen civilians have been killed in northern Israel, while nearly 270 Hezbollah fighters and 50 civilians including medics, civilians and journalists have been killed in Israeli strikes on southern Lebanon.

Israel has repeatedly struck international airports in both Damascus and Aleppo over the years to disrupt weapons flows to Iran's allies in the region, but strikes since October first week have been deadlier.

Syria's defence ministry said Israeli strikes hit several areas in the

southeastern part of Aleppo province around 1:45am (2245 GMT on Thursday), killing a number of civilians and military personnel.

It said the airstrikes coincided with drone attacks carried out from Idlib and western rural Aleppo that the ministry described as having been conducted by "organisations" against civilians in Aleppo and its surroundings.

The Israeli military declined comment. In a post on X, Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said Israel's attacks on Syria were a "blatant and desperate attempt" to expand the war, without saying if there were Iranian casualties.

Russia also condemned the Israeli strikes and considered them a flagrant violation of Syria's sovereignty, foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said yesterday. Three security sources told Reuters that 33 Syrians and six Hezbollah fighters had been killed in the strikes. One of the Hezbollah fighters was a local field commander whose brother had been killed in an Israeli strike on southern

Lebanon in November, one of the sources said.

LEBANON STRIKE

An Israeli strike on southern Lebanon yesterday killed a Hezbollah fighter, security sources in Lebanon said. The head of the IRGC's Quds Force, Esmail Qaani, met Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut in February to discuss the risk if Israel were to launch a full offensive against Hezbollah, and received an assurance that the group did not want to drag Iran into war with Israel, sources have said. Hezbollah has said it would stop firing into Israel if a ceasefire was reached in Gaza. Israeli and US officials, however, have said a ceasefire in Gaza would not automatically extend to Lebanon.

Hezbollah said that it had fired across the border at Israel eight times yesterday. Israeli Air Force (IAF) pilots have stepped up practising long-range strikes across the northern border as normal training activities have resumed in recent weeks after being suspended at the start of the Gaza war, the military said this week.



DCICAI celebrates women leaders at annual Iftar event

Indian embassy second secretary Bindu N Nair, the chief guest, addressed the evolving societal attitudes towards gender equality, emphasising this year's theme, 'Investing in Women: Accelerate Progress'

The Doha Chapter of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (DCICAI) celebrated International Women's Day (IWD), themed 'Women in Leadership', with an Iftar that brought together over 150 attendees, including members and their spouses, to honour women in various leadership roles.

Indian embassy second secretary Bindu N Nair, the chief guest, addressed the evolving societal

attitudes towards gender equality, emphasising this year's theme, 'Investing in Women: Accelerate Progress'.

Laxmi Agarwal, an acid attack survivor and recipient of the International Women of Courage Award by Michelle Obama, delivered a powerful keynote speech.

She shared her harrowing experience of surviving an acid attack at the tender age of 15. As Laxmi recounted her story, the entire

audience could empathise with the pain and trauma she endured. However, what stood out the most was Laxmi's unwavering determination to overcome adversity and pursue her dreams despite the challenges she faced.

MES Indian School principal Dr Hameeda Kader stressed the importance of unity among women, emphasising a collective journey of progress. She stressed that women must no longer sole-

ly focus on empowerment but rather on the collective journey of progress, walking hand in hand with men.

HSBC's Mena region NRI head Neha Ghai shared her personal journey and highlighted the crucial role of working women in society, encouraging women to seek guidance and support when needed.

Earlier in his inaugural address, chapter chairperson Kamlesh

Tibrewal acknowledged the significant contributions of women leaders within DCICAI and reiterated the chapter's commitment to fostering diversity and inclusivity.

Vice chairperson Kishore Alex proposed a vote of thanks. Members of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India residing in Qatar and aspiring to join the Doha Chapter of ICAI can contact Tibrewal (55928942) or Alex (55046010).

ICC holds Iftar



Indian Cultural Centre, under the aegis of embassy of India, conducted an Iftar meet. Indian ambassador Vipul spoke about the importance of the holy month. Officials from various ministries in Qatar, including the Ministry of Interior, were present, along with officials from the embassy of India, presidents of other apex bodies, associated organisations and community leaders. ICC president A P Manikantan welcomed the gathering. Vice-president Subramanya Hebbagelu, general secretary Mohan Kumar and the other members of the managing committee co-ordinated.



Over 200 attend KBF's Suhoor



Over 200 members and guests attended a Suhoor hosted by Kerala Business Forum (KBF).

Indian ambassador Vipul was the chief guest. KBF president Aji Kuriakose presided. A Ramadan message was given by KBF executive committee member Abdul Gafoor Makkatteray.

Indian embassy deputy chief of mission Sandeep Kumar, KBF advisory board chairman Ramakrishnan, members V S Narayanan, Abdullah Theruvath, Sabith Saheer, Indian Cultural Centre president A P Manikantan, Indian Sports Centre president E P Abdul Rahman, general secretary Ni-

had Ali, Indian Business and Professionals Council vice-presidents Ashraf K P and Latheesh Appukuttan, and many community leaders were present.

KBF vice-president Kimi Alexander briefed on the upcoming Indo-Qatar Summit, 'KBF Business Connect 2024', which will be exploring investment opportunities in both Qatar and India on April 30 and May 1 at Grand Hyatt Doha.

The Suhoor was co-ordinated by an organising team led by KBF management committee member Hamza Saphar along with Kimi Alexander, Manzoor Moideen, Jayprasad J P, K M S Hameed, Sony Abraham and Mohamed Shabeer.

ICBF hosts Iftar for female domestic workers



Nearly 60 female domestic workers participated in an Iftar hosted by the Indian Community Benevolent Forum (ICBF).

Indian embassy first secretary and ICBF co-ordinating officer Dr Vaibhav Tandale, was the chief guest. One of the invitees, Basariya, expressed her gratitude and joy in being included in a community event and thanked ICBF's support in renewing her QID. An-

other attendee, Naseema, shared her struggles of being away from her family back home and lauded ICBF's insurance scheme as a remarkable initiative.

ICBF president Shanavas Bava, general secretary Varkey Boban, advisory council members Shashidar Hebbal and Johnson Antony, Indian Cultural Centre vice-president Subramanya Hebbagelu, general secretary Mohankumar and managing committee member

Satyanarayana Malireddy spoke. ICBF vice-president Deepak Shetty elaborated on the services provided.

ICBF treasurer Kuldeep Kour Bahl welcomed the gathering and event co-ordinator and managing committee member Zareena Ahad proposed a vote of thanks. The event was co-ordinated by secretary Mohamed Kunhi and managing committee member Shankar Goud.

KMCC holds cultural parade at Expo 2023 Doha



While adding grandeur and colours to Expo 2023 Doha, which concluded on Thursday, the Kerala Muslim Cultural Centre (KMCC) Qatar state committee recently held a cultural parade at Al Bidda Park. Named 'Visit to Expo', the parade featured art forms and cultural performances, with a focus on the message of environmental protection. The programme was organised to mark the conclusion of Expo 2023 Doha. Led by KMCC Qatar state president Dr Abdul Samad and general secretary Saleem Nalakath, the parade witnessed participation of sub committees' officials. Mohamed Easa, Adam Kunji, P K Abdul Raheem, T T K Basheer and V T M Sadhik were present.






Sri Lankan Independence Day competition organised



The Sri Lankan Majlis Qatar (SLMQ) organised the 76th Sri Lankan Independence Day competition at the Stafford Sri Lankan School. This annual event conducted by the SLMQ since 2002 is supported by the Sri Lankan embassy. The competition, which brought together over 500 Sri Lankan students from various schools across Qatar, featured an array of contests for different age groups. Prizes were presented to the best young writer, speaker, poet, artist, colourist and mastermind. Sri Lankan ambassador Mafaz Mohideen was the chief guest. Embassy officials, school principal Nimal Fernando and other guests were present.

COMMUNITY |

MES students excel in maths challenge

Bibhastu Das **Khruthika Priya** **Huda Zahir**

As many as 1,253 students of MES Indian School, comprising 621 boys and 632 girls, participated in the Aryabhata Ganit Challenge 2023 winning the Best School Merit certificate, 'Mathematics Promotion School' from The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), India.

The preliminary round of Aryabhata Ganit Challenge 2023 - a test fostering essential competencies like problem-solving skills, logical reasoning and analytical thinking among students to apply mathematics in their daily life, saw Bibhastu Das (10-C), Khruthika Priya of (10-O) and Huda Zahir (9-P) in the top three slots and selected for level-2.

The Department of Mathematics head Nitha Gopi and teachers co-ordinated the participation of students. Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar congratulated the students for their outstanding performance in the competition and the teachers for their dedication in training the students.

MES holds badminton tourney to mark golden jubilee



In celebration of its golden jubilee year, MES Indian School conducted a badminton tournament for the members of the governing board and staff, fostering a sense of solidarity and fellowship. The team led by vice-president Kashif Jaleel won the championship. Anver K and his team emerged as the first runners-up. General secretary Hazmal Ismail honoured the winners with medals and trophies. School officials and teachers of MES and Mesis were among those who witnessed the tournament. The members of the Physical Education Department organised the event.

Children showcase talent at Sohni Dharti's grand event



Keeping up with its tradition of engaging children in religious and literary activities to showcase their extracurricular abilities, Sohni Dharti Qatar organised a grand Faizan e Ramzan and National Day event recently.

More than 400 people attended, mostly Pakistanis living in Al Khor Community.

This year event was entirely a children's show. More than 80 children participated in different competitions in the programme, also conducted by children. Sohni Dharti chairman Anwar Ali Rana gave the opening remarks. The event was hosted by Abdullah Aaban, Musaddiq Atif, Azaan Danish, Sadia Danish, Musfira Binte Mujtaba, Yahya Wajahat and Mohamed Ayan.

The winners of the Holy Qur'an recitation competition, in the order of first, second and third places, respectively, were: Age group 5-7 (Surah Al Kausar) - Mohamed Wali Khayyam, Mohamed Qasim Waqar, Mohamed Mohtashim Shafqat. Age group 8-11 (Surah Al Qadr) - Syed Amna Wajahat, Usman Salman, Hamnah Khalid. Age group 12-16 (Surah Al Baqarah-185) - Syed Hamza Wajahat, Yahya Wajahat, Saifuallah.

The judges Arshad Hussain Hashmi, Khalid Sajjad Bhatti, Malik Waqas, Shahida Khan and Atiq Ur Rasheed adjudged the participants on their ability to recite the Qur'an accurately, paying attention to proper pronunciation and vocal articulation.

Mohamed Affan Rizwan delivered a speech with the subject of Seerat Un Nabi in Urdu (Pakistan's national language). The lead of Sohni Dharti Future leader programme Umar Khayyam prepared all the children and provided them the contents in Urdu.

Sohni Dharti volunteers Benish Anwar, Romana Mujtaba, Kiran Mumtaz prepared tableaux on the themes of Ramadan and Pakistan National Day. Children received a big round of applause from the audience. The tableau showcasing how various social media apps and online gaming distract and influence the worshippers in the holy month of Ramadan and Tu Kujha Man Kujha, the all-time famous qawwali earned a big acknowledgment from the audience.

Before concluding the event, a cake cutting ceremony was held to celebrate Pakistan National Day. Community welfare attache and chief guest Wahidullah Khan Wazir and senior community member Mohamed Ajmal congratulated the Sohni Dharti executive committee for organising the event and appreciated the efforts of the children.

Rana stated by utilising the Sohni Dharti platform, he and his team will continue providing opportunities to children to learn more about Ramadan Kareem, Seerat-un-Nabi and National Day events to polish their extracurricular skills. He added that Sohni Dharti would continue to hold such programmes and try to get more children involved. He thanked the children, their parents, volunteer ladies and Sohni Dharti executive committee for their efforts to put up the programme. Rao Inam ul Haq, Mujtaba Balloch, Zafar Chandio, Mohsin Ali, Mohamed Abid and Ghulam Fareed played key roles in managing the show.

The event concluded with a special Iftar dinner following by a prize distribution ceremony.





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BPS kindergarten section holds orientation programme






Birla Public School (BPS) Kindergarten section conducted its orientation programme for the new foundation batch 2024-25.

Principal Dr Anand R Nair, in his inaugural speech, elaborated on entrusting the children to the competent teachers and being rest assured of quality education.

The parent orientation gave an insight into the scholastic and co-scholastic activities. Vice-principal Edna Fernandez and KG headmistress Josephine Fernandes also interacted with the parents. The day further progressed with the introduction of teachers and their classes. The teachers met the parents for the 'Meet and Greet Session'. A Parent's Survival Kit, meant to ease anxieties and uncertainties about their ward's new school experience, was distributed.

DPS-Modern Indian School tops in CMU-Q Pi Day competition



The top 4 teams from the Pi Day Mathematics Competition return back to campus to compete for the top place.

The team from DPS-Modern Indian School in Doha won the top prize for 2024 Pi Day Mathematics Competition at Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar (CMU-Q).

The second place team was from DPS Monarch International School, with Mesaieed International School and Doha British School rounding out the top four.

The CMU-Q Pi Day Mathematics Competition is an annual event that challenges the mathematical skills of high school students in Qatar.

This year, 340 students from 85 schools in Qatar participated. Prizes were sponsored by Abu Issa Holding, a strategic partner of CMU-Q. Michael Trick, dean of CMU-Q, emphasised the importance of a strong mathematical foundation.

"Developing a strong understanding of mathematics in high school is fundamental to so many fields in higher education. Congratulations to each student for taking up this challenge, and I hope all of them continue to explore math."

The preliminary round of the competition took place in February, with students competing in teams of four. Zelealem Yilma, associate teaching professor of mathematics, and the chief organiser of the event said the competition challenges students to apply knowledge, creativity and teamwork in a way that's a little different from their regular mathematical studies.

The final round took place on March 14 (3/14), known as Pi Day in math circles. Pi represents the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter, an irrational number rounded to 3.14. Pi Day is embraced by mathematicians and educators worldwide as an opportunity to celebrate and encourage learning in mathematics.

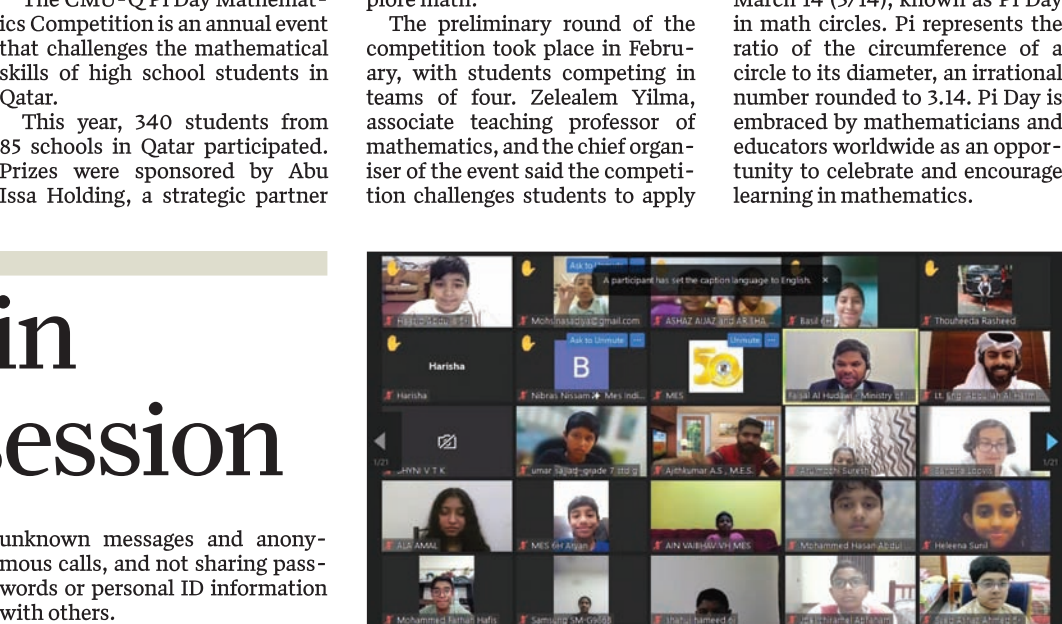
MES family participates in MoI's online awareness session

To raise awareness about cybercrimes including hacking, fraudulent practices of all kinds, threats and blackmailing and its prevention, the Cyber Crimes Prevention Department of the Ministry of Interior (MoI) conducted an online session for parents, students and staff of MES Indian School.

First Lt Abdullah al-Harmi shared details of common types of cybercrimes, methods of combating them, punishments for different types of cyber offences such as blackmailing, phishing, fraudulent messages, thefts and piracy and explained the services offered by the department for the public.

The webinar provided general instructions on preventing cybercrimes such as securing online and social media accounts and bank cards, carefully dealing with unknown messages and anonymous calls, and not sharing passwords or personal ID information with others.

Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar thanked the officer for enlightening the audience about cybercrimes and preventive measures. In the question-answer session, students and parents clarified their doubts. Faisal al-Hudawi, Public Relations Department, MoI, co-ordinated the online session.



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Togo's contested new constitution fuels street debate

AFP
Lome

Constitutional reform in Togo, criticised by the opposition as a power grab, has sparked heated debate on the streets of the capital as voters gear up to elect MPs next month. Lawmakers in the West African country on Monday voted for a switch from a presidential to a parliamentary system, giving parliament the power to elect the president. "I am against this constitu-

tional reform...they should have held a national consultation to get the people's opinion," photographer Claude Vivor told AFP on the streets of Lome. "It is a constitutional coup," he said.

The president will be chosen "without debate" by lawmakers for a single six-year term, and not by the public, according to the new text which was adopted by the National Assembly almost unanimously. "It means that we are no longer going to elect the president as we currently do," motorbike taxi driver Yaovi Baka told AFP on a

roadside leading to the working-class district of Adidogome.

The reform also creates the role of president of the council of ministers, which will have the "full authority" to manage government for a six-year term. It is unknown whether the term can be renewed, leading to fears that long-serving President Faure Gnassingbe will be able to remain in power indefinitely. "It is a technique to keep President Faure Gnassingbe in power," Baka added.

Political tensions mounted in Togo this week as police broke up

an opposition news conference amid a backlash over the reform. The editor of a Togolese newspaper was also arrested on Thursday, as media watchdogs warn of a press clampdown, less than a month before the legislative and regional elections on April 20.

But Afi Xolali Pascaline Dangbuie, who runs a food shop and heads Adidogome's network of market associations, sees things differently. Dangbuie is clear about what she wants: "peace". "We voters will give the deputies the power to elect the president...at every

presidential election, there is a great deal of tension in the country.

"What's more, the expenses involved are enormous. "These funds could be used to do something else to benefit the population," Dangbuie said, in front of her stall. Since 1990, when democracy was established in Togo, the result of every presidential election has been contested by the opposition.

"Most of the crises recorded in the country are linked to the election of the president," agreed lawyer Samir Ouro Sama. "We have had the experience of

a presidential system over the past 60 years and we know what that has led to. "We needed to find a mechanism that would allow us to experiment with something new.

"But I note that there was a lack of education in the run-up to this reform." In 2019, members of parliament revised the constitution to limit presidential terms to two, but it did not apply retrospectively, leaving Gnassingbe free to stand for the next two elections. Gnassingbe succeeded his father, who had ruled with an iron fist for almost 38 years.

Nigerian village celebrates return of kidnapped students

Reuters
Kuriga

The whole village of Kuriga ran towards the convoy of buses shouting "Our children are back!" and "Alhamdulillah," meaning "Thank you, God", to welcome home more than 100 students and staff who were abducted this month in Nigeria's northwest. The army announced on Sunday it had rescued 137 hostages - 76 female and 61 male - in the neighbouring state of Zamfara, days before a deadline to pay a 1bn naira (\$767,000) ransom for their release.

The students described being marched through the forest for more than two weeks in an attempt to hide from authorities, having to sleep under trees, being fed half cooked rice and given only filthy water to drink. "Even the bandits were hungry," said Amina Alhassan, one of the kidnapped students, talking through the window of a bus as it pulled into Kuriga.

"We used our dirty headscarves as sanitary pads...we were crying and praying every day."

Tanko Musa, one of the freed students, said the kidnappers told them the government had paid the ransom and they could be released as a result. "We don't know how much was paid, but they said the government has paid them," he said. Earlier this week, Information Minister Mohamed Idris said no ransom had been paid. One security source said he saw 14 black



Nigerian students and staff who were kidnapped this month arrive after they were freed, in Kaduna.

bags, which he assumed contained the ransom money, being delivered to an area in Zamfara state where the students were held after their March 7 abduction.

Relieved parents crowded around the buses to catch a glimpse of the children they thought they had lost. "We had no hope of seeing our children again," said Yunusa Musa, whose two children, Hafatsu, 19, and Zaituna, 16, were among those kidnapped.

Yunusa called on the Nigerian government to deploy soldiers in the town and its surroundings to allow villagers to farm the land they had to abandon because of rampant insecurity. Abductions at Nigerian schools were first carried

out by Boko Haram, which seized 276 students from a girls' school in Chibok in northeastern Borno State a decade ago. Some of them never came back.

But since then, criminal gangs without ideological affiliation have adopted the tactic to obtain ransom money. The kidnappings have become an almost daily occurrence, especially in northern Nigeria, tearing apart families and communities that must pool savings to pay ransoms.

Neither Nigerian presidency spokesperson Ajuri Ngelale nor Information Minister Mohamed Idris responded to requests for comment on whether a ransom had been paid in this instance.

Condolences pour in after Easter bus crash kills 45 in South Africa

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa expressed his condolences yesterday over an Easter bus crash that only an eight-year-old girl survived out of 46 people on board.

She had been admitted to hospital after Thursday's crash but did not suffer serious injury. Police have said they are investigating a case of culpable homicide, with the driver among the dead after allegedly losing control.

The accident occurred when the bus plunged off a bridge into a ravine and caught fire in the north of the country.

It was travelling from neighbouring Botswana to Morija, where an Easter pilgrimage and service have attracted more than a million worshippers in recent years. Ramaphosa "conveyed his condolences to the Republic of Botswana and to the family and friends of the 45 bus

crash victims", the president's office said.

Transport ministry media officer Vongani Chauke, told AFP family members were "coming to the country to visit the surviving girl". "She's fine, receiving medical attention and does not have serious injuries", he said.

According to police, 34 bodies have been found but only nine were identifiable with many burnt beyond recognition. The authorities continue to search for the remaining 11. South African police confirmed that 15 males and 31 females on board were Botswana citizens travelling from Molepolole village, 60km northwest of the capital Gaborone. It plunged off a major bridge linking two hillsides near Mmamatlakala in Limpopo province, around 300km north of Johannesburg.

The transport minister has promised a full inquiry.

The president of Estonia, Alar Karis, took to X to extend "heartfelt condolences" to Masisi adding that he was "deeply saddened by the news". The Turkish embassy in Gaborone said on X its "thoughts are with the families affected by this tragedy".

While South Africa has one of the African continent's most developed road networks, it also suffers from one of the worst safety records. Major road accidents are common during Easter weekend and the festive season in December.

Reuters TV footage from the scene showed a wreck of mangled metal from the bus amid scattered clothes and other belongings. "Authorities are still combing the scene for more bodies," the police said in a statement. Authorities had begun a "process to identify and repatriate the remains of the deceased", the police statement said.

Texas appeals court acquits woman convicted of illegally voting in 2016

Reuters
Houston

A Texas appeals court reversed its prior ruling and acquitted a woman who had been sentenced to five years in prison for attempting to vote in the 2016 election against state law, after a higher court ordered it to reconsider.

Crystal Mason was convicted of illegally voting two years after that election by a trial court, which ruled that she tried to cast a provisional ballot despite being on supervised release from prison for a felony and therefore ineligible to vote.

The Texas Second Court of Criminal Appeals upheld that conviction in 2020, but two years later, the state's highest criminal court ruled that the appeals court had failed to require proof that Mason

knew it was a crime for her to vote under those circumstances.

The appeals court's reversal of Mason's conviction on Thursday, after finding that prosecutors had indeed not sufficiently proven she knew her act was illegal, was hailed by voting rights advocates as a major victory in one of the US states with the most restrictive voting laws.

Texas is among several Republican-controlled states that have enacted new limits on voting since the 2020 election in which President Joe Biden, a Democrat, defeated Republican incumbent Donald Trump, who falsely claimed voter fraud had cost him the race.

"This ruling gives us hope not just for Ms Mason, but for the broader fight for voting rights in Texas," said Christina Beeler, voting rights attorney at the Texas Civil Rights Project, in a statement

on Thursday. Advocates have criticized Texas' restrictions as disproportionately impeding Black voters, like Mason, as well as Hispanic and other non-white voters who tend to vote for Democrats.

In 2021, Texas' Republican governor signed a law adding new mail voting identification requirements, banning drive-through and 24-hour voting sites, curbing early voting, empowering partisan poll-watchers and limiting who can help voters requiring help because of disabilities or language barriers.

A federal district court judge in Texas in November granted a motion from the US Justice Department and civil rights groups to block parts of the law requiring officials to reject mail-in ballots and ballot applications based on minor errors or omissions, finding that they violated the US Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Immigrants killed in Baltimore bridge collapse died doing job 'others do not want to do'

Reuters
Baltimore

They came to the United States for a chance at a better life. They found work filling pot holes on a bridge in the middle of the night, and they ended up dead in the Baltimore harbour. The six victims of the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapse were all immigrants from Mexico and Central America, doing the kind of gruelling work that many immigrants take on, when a container ship crashed into a support pillar at 1:30am on Tuesday and sent them plunging into the icy Patapsco River.

Divers pulled the bodies of Alejandro Hernandez Fuentes and Dorian Castillo from a red pickup truck 25ft underwater the following day. Four are missing and presumed dead: Maynor Suazo from Honduras; Jose Lopez from Guatemala; Miguel Luna from El Salvador; and another whose name has not been released. Another two workers were rescued.

The news rippled quickly through Baltimore's Hispanic community, which has nearly doubled in size in recent years, transforming the modest row-house neighbourhoods near the sprawling port complex. Churches held vigils for the missing workers, and advocacy groups quickly raised \$98,000 for the victims' families.

Some said they were not surprised that all of the victims were immigrants, even though they account for less than 10% of the



Wreckage from the Francis Scott Key Bridge rests on the Dali cargo ship in Baltimore.

population in Maryland's largest city. "One of the reasons Latinos were involved in this accident is because Latinos do the work that others do not want to do. We have to do it, because we come here for a better life. We do not come to invade the country," said Lucia Is-las, president of Comité Latino de Baltimore, a nonprofit group.

Hispanic workers are more likely than other racial and ethnic groups to die on the job, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, with construction being a particularly deadly industry. Government and industry figures show that Hispanics are over-represented in high-risk jobs: 51% of construction workers, 34% of slaughterhouse workers and

61% of landscaping workers. The workers on the Key Bridge were employed by Brawner Builders Inc, a local construction company that has done extensive work for the state and has been cited seven times since 2018 for safety violations. Company officials have said they are devastated by the loss, and declined comment when contacted by Reuters. Community leaders said many Hispanics in the city take low-paying work that provides scant benefits. "The only choice is to work, when you don't have the same salary that a citizen might earn," said Carlos Crespo, 53, a mechanic from Mexico.

"Many don't value our Hispanic community. They see us as animals or think that we live off the

government. But that is not true, we pay our taxes too," he said. Crespo and others involved in the fundraising effort said it was built on years of similar attempts to help provide a safety net for people who struggle to find affordable health care and adequate housing or navigate services that are only provided in English.

"We go from one crisis to another," said Susana Barrios, vice president of the Latino Racial Justice Circle.

The disaster comes in the middle of a US presidential election in which immigration is once again a top concern for voters, as Democratic President Joe Biden's administration has struggled to manage a recent record number of border



A search team uses a remotely operated underwater vehicle to look at the wreckage of the Francis Scott Key Bridge, which was destroyed when a cargo ship collided with it earlier this week, in Baltimore, Maryland.

crossings. Republican candidate Donald Trump has employed racist rhetoric against immigrants, referring to them as "animals" and "not people" on the campaign trail and has said he would dramatically ramp up deportation if re-elected on Nov 5.

Baltimore, which has struggled with high crime and a poverty rate nearly double the national average, historically hasn't been home to a large Hispanic population, but the community has grown in recent years. Hispanics made up 7.8% of the city's population in 2020, up from 4.2% in 2010, according to US Census figures.

Nelson Amaya, a pastor of a Pentecostal church in the nearby suburb of Severn, said many Central American immigrants have moved from nearby Washington, DC, suburbs in search of jobs and more affordable housing. Many

Hispanic markets, restaurants and other businesses have opened in recent years, he said. "In more or less the last five years, the Hispanic population here has grown a lot," he said. "That has a big, big impact on the economy."

The White House said on Thursday that existing immigration rules could allow for relatives of the victims who are abroad to visit the United States. In the meantime, some struggled to come to grips with their loss.

"We continue to wait with faith, with hope, that our brother's body can be found so that we can begin the repatriation process, which is what interests us most," said Martin Suazo, brother of one of the missing, in Azacualpa, Honduras. "We believe they should not forget the suffering of the families of the four victims whose bodies have not been found."

Heading to Camp David



US President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden disembark from an Air Force One Boeing 747 airplane before boarding an Air Force One Boeing 757 airplane. Biden is heading to Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland, for the Easter weekend.



Hunter Biden, son of US President Joe Biden, and his wife Melissa Cohen Biden walk to board Air Force One at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland.

Biden, Obama, Clinton rake in \$25mn at NYC campaign stop

AFP
New York

US President Joe Biden was joined in New York by his predecessors Barack Obama and Bill Clinton at a blockbuster fundraising event where he collected \$25mn to go towards his re-election bid. The Democrat's bumper evening took place at Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan, around an hour's drive from where his Republican rival Donald Trump had earlier attended a wake for a New York police officer killed on duty.

As Biden raked in financial support ahead of November's election, pro-Palestinian demonstrators protested outside the venue – and several inside the hall whistled and shouted before being ushered away. Biden's campaign team announced ahead of the event a “record” collection of more than \$25mn, noting it was more than Trump had raised for the whole of February. The event had a celebrity tinge.

Singers Queen Latifah and Lizzo, among others, warmed up the room before the 42nd, 44th and 46th presidents of the United States sat down for a question-and-answer session moderated by comedian Stephen Colbert.

Vogue editor-in-chief Anna Wintour was also in attendance. The discussion mixed serious topics with jokes, and ended when Obama and Clinton joined Biden in donning aviator sunglasses, Biden's favorite accessory.

Trump's campaign spokesperson, Steven Cheung, had blasted on social network X the “glitzy fundraiser...with their elitist, out-of-touch celebrity benefactors.”

Earlier in the day, Trump made a short statement after attending the wake of police officer Jonathan Diller, who was shot and killed on Monday during a traffic stop.

“We have to stop it. We have to get back to law and order,” said the 77-year-old billionaire, who refrained from criticizing his 81-year-old rival directly.

Trump devotes much of his campaigning to attacks on illegal immigration and criticizing Biden for being lax on policing. The White House said Biden had called New York Mayor Eric Adams on Thursday to offer his condolences over Diller's killing.

The Democrat has not been in contact with the officer's family but “grieves” with them, his spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre said, adding that the president “has stood with law enforcement his entire career and continues to stand with them.” Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday that Biden was “deeply grateful for the sacrifices police officers make to keep our communities safe.”

Biden and Trump, who faced off at the ballot box in 2020, are guaranteed to win their respective parties' nominations for the November presidential election this summer.

The star-studded fundraiser for Biden, however, underscored his party's ability to drum up cash.

According to NBC News, guests at the event could pay \$100,000 for a photo with the trio.

“The numbers don't lie: today's event is a massive show of force and a true reflection of the momentum to reelect the Biden-Harris ticket,” Jeffrey Katzenberg, the campaign's chief fundraiser, said in a statement, referring to Vice-President Kamala Harris.

Family of US reporter jailed in Russia vows to keep fighting

AFP
Washington

One year after American journalist Evan Gershkovich was arrested in Russia on espionage charges, his family vowed to continue fighting for his release, a pledge echoed by President Joe Biden.

“We never anticipated this situation happening to our son and brother, let alone a full year with no certainty or clear path forward,” his family said in a letter to the readers of the *Wall Street Journal*, Gershkovich's employer. “But despite this long battle, we are still standing strong.”

The 32-year-old reporter was detained by Russian security service agents on March 29, 2023, and accused of spying – the first such charge against a Western journal-

ist since the Soviet-era. Gershkovich, his employers and the White House all vehemently reject the spying accusations, saying he was an honest journalist doing his job. “Journalism is not a crime, and Evan went to Russia to do his job as a reporter – risking his safety to shine the light of truth on Russia's brutal aggression against Ukraine,” Biden said in a statement.

He vowed to “continue working every day to secure his release” as well as to “denounce and impose costs for Russia's appalling attempts to use Americans as bargaining chips.” Russian President Vladimir Putin has expressed willingness to exchange Gershkovich, and the Kremlin on Thursday said conversations were still ongoing behind the scenes.

In their letter, Gershkovich's parents, Mikhail and Ella, and

sister Danielle described the past year as “unimaginable.”

“It has felt like holding our breath,” the family wrote. “We have been living with a constant ache in our hearts thinking about Evan every moment of every day.”

The family, who has met with Biden, thanked the US government, the *Journal*, Gershkovich's friends and well-wishers for working towards his release and for their support.

“Throughout all the challenges in this tumultuous time we've watched as Evan has faced this uncertainty, stuck in a small cell, with limited news of the world, without his freedom.”

The US government has declared that Gershkovich is wrongfully detained, meaning it effectively regards him as a political hostage.

“To Evan, to Paul Whelan, and

to all Americans held hostage or wrongfully detained abroad: We are with you. And we will never stop working to bring you home,” Biden said, referencing the case of a former US marine also jailed in Russia since 2018. Democratic and Republican leaders of the bitterly divided US Congress united yesterday in calling for Gershkovich's release, as well as that of Whelan and others “wrongfully detained” by Russia.

“Journalism is not a crime, and reporters are not bargaining chips,” their statement said.

UK Foreign Minister David Cameron called Russia's detention of Gershkovich “a damning indictment of its disregard for media freedom, and the values of truth and objectivity.” Over the past year, Gershkovich's family has watched footage and photographs from a Moscow court where he

appeared every few weeks to have his pre-trial detention extended continually. “We have watched him face this with his head held high because he is innocent,” the family wrote in their letter.

This week the court in Moscow ruled that Gershkovich would remain in detention until at least late June. Yesterday, the *Wall Street Journal* published a large blank space on its front page under the headline: “His story should be here.”

At Moscow's Lefortovo prison, the reporter shares a small cell with another inmate. He gets an hour-long walk in a small prison yard every day, tries to stay fit through exercise and relies on fruit and vegetables sent by friends to supplement the meagre prison diet. “We will continue fighting for Evan's freedom, whatever it takes,” the family's letter said.

Trailblazing Black Oscar winner Louis Gossett Jr dead at 87

AFP
Los Angeles

Louis Gossett Jr, the first Black man to win a best supporting actor Oscar for his performance as a hard-man drill instructor in *An Officer and a Gentleman*, has died. He was 87.

Gossett's family said he died Thursday night in Los Angeles without stating the cause, multiple US media outlets including CBS News reported. Gossett appeared in more than 60 movies, and in 1983 became the third Black actor – after Hattie McDaniel and Sidney Poitier – to win an Academy Award, for his supporting role as a stern gunnery sergeant in Taylor Hackford's *An Officer and a Gentleman*.

The movie also netted the actor a Golden Globe, and he later picked up another supporting actor Globe for *The Josephine Baker Story*, as well as an Emmy for the eight-part smash-hit ABC miniseries *Roots*. The New York na-

tive, who announced in 2010 that he had prostate cancer, cultivated a tough guy image that paid dividends in a slew of action movies, including *Iron Eagle* (1986) and *The Punisher* (1989).

Gossett chronicled his painful experiences as a trailblazing Black actor in his memoir, *An Actor and a Gentleman*, including his first trip to Los Angeles in the 1960s when he was pulled over by police four times during a single car journey.

“The only time I was really free was when the director said ‘action’ in front of a camera or on the stage and that's when I flew,” he told *The LA Times* in 2008.

Divorced from his third wife in 1992, Gossett lived in Malibu, California and raised two sons. He was born in Brooklyn, New York on May 27, 1936, and cut his teeth on stage, appearing in *Take a Giant Step*, which was selected as one of the 10 best Broadway shows of 1953 by *The New York Times*.

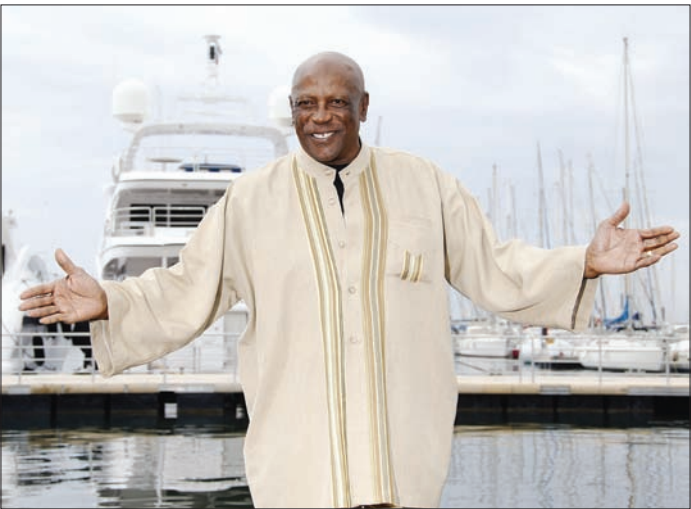
He won a part in the 1959 Broadway production of Lorraine

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* before making his Hollywood debut alongside Poitier in the film version two years later. His other credits include *The Deep*, *Blue Chips*, *Daddy's Little Girls*, *Firewalker* and *Jaws-3D*.

Gossett Jr came to wide attention on the small screen, winning an Emmy for his turn as the slave Fiddler in *Roots*, a cultural phenomenon that drew more than 100mn viewers for its finale in January 1977. He was nominated for television's top prize six more times, including for his portrayal of Anwar Sadat in the 1983 miniseries ‘Sadat’.

He told entertainment industry bible ‘Variety’ in 2015 that his role in the TV movie as the Egyptian leader who made peace with Israel was his favourite. “It was a challenge to play someone with history like that. His spirit was very much like Mandela's. He transitioned from a hawk to a dove,” he said.

He continued to work well into his 70s, appearing briefly on



Actor Louis Gossett Jr poses during a photocall in a file picture.

HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* and CBS shows *Extant* and *Madam Secretary*, as well as NBC's *ER* and HBO superhero series *Watchmen*.

“In our eyes, you were a LEADING man despite your many inspiring roles as supporting

characters. Thank you for your undeniable talent,” civil rights attorney Ben Crump said on X, formerly Twitter. Gossett Jr's representatives did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Niagara region declares state of emergency out of caution ahead of eclipse

Canada's Niagara region has proactively declared a state of emergency ahead of a rare total solar eclipse on April 8 that is expected to gather massive crowds to areas in and around the region's popular waterfalls. The Niagara region said in a statement on Thursday that Regional Chair Jim Bradley had declared a state of emergency “out of an abundance of caution.”

“Declaring a state of emergency...strengthens the tools the region has at its disposal to safeguard the health and safety of residents and visitors and protect our critical infrastructure in any scenario that might arise,” a Niagara region press release said. The dramatic waterfall, situated

along the Canadian-US border, is in the path of the eclipse, and many people are splurging on hotels and rentals in advance to experience the phenomenon at one of North America's natural wonders.

The mayor of Ontario city of Niagara Falls Jim Diodati predicted “by far the biggest crowd that we've ever had” on the Canadian side for the eclipse. Diodati estimated that up to a million people will be there, compared with the 14mn who typically visit during the course of an entire year.

The region will also be modifying some of its programs and services and closing some facilities to keep traffic off the roads on April 8. — Reuters

In Quebec, residents miffed over mining boom

AFP
Saint-Élie-de-Caxton

Canada's Quebec province is rich with minerals needed for everything from electric cars to cell phones, but residents living atop the potential windfall are worried their backyards will be dug up – and they won't get a dime.

In recent months, tens of thousands of mining exploration permits have been issued in the province amid a global rush for critical and strategic minerals such as graphite, lithium, zinc, nickel and cobalt.

But under provincial mining exploration rules, subsoil in Quebec does not belong to landowners.

In Saint-Elie-de-Caxton, a town of 2,000 people about halfway between Montreal and Quebec City, residents are fed up. Signs around town proclaim “Saint-Elie, incompatible with mining activity” or “Don't Dig in my Caxton.”

“We are at war, says Gilbert Guerin, spokesman for the “Don't Dig in my Caxton” committee, pointing to a map delineating exploration claims that have effectively parcelled off the town for future mines.

In Quebec, it only takes a few clicks on a website and about Can\$75 (US\$55) to stake a mining claim covering up to 100 hectares (250 acres) – an opportunity open to locals and foreigners alike.

“I bought here. I thought I would be sovereign in my own home, but I came to understand that what's underground did not belong to me,” says Yvan Lafontaine, surveying his property in the neighbouring village of Saint-Mathieu-du-Parc from atop an observation tower he had built.

When Lafontaine learned that a company had acquired the mining rights to the subsoil beneath his land, what the nature lover calls his little “paradise,” he fought back by staking 12 claims surrounding

the property. Currently, more than 350,000 claims have been registered, covering 10% of Quebec. The southern areas of the province – where most of the population lives – is the most sought after.

According to an AFP analysis of government data, the number of claims issued significantly increased from September 2022 to the end of February 2024, with about 160,000 granted – a 140% increase over the previous 18-month period.

For Saint-Elie resident Julie Hamelin, the mining exploration regulations in Quebec are “outdated.”

“It's something out of the Wild West, this way of staking claims,” she said, urging provincial authorities to protect inhabited lands from mining. Guerin, a former civil servant, says he is worried about the “irreversible consequences” that a mining project would have, particularly on the region's groundwater.

To try to discourage mining companies from moving in, residents of Saint-Elie-de-Caxton spent thousands of dollars to buy up more than 220 exploration claims around the village. Faced with growing public discontent, the Quebec government has announced it intends to modernize its mining law, and insisted in an e-mail to AFP “that no exploration can be carried out without the consent of the owner of private land.”

But mining companies definitely are eyeballing Quebec's potential for resources extraction. “There is a lot of graphite in Quebec. It could be the most important reserve in the world,” says Hugues Jacquemin, chief executive of Northern Graphite. “We absolutely must develop this sector because it is essential for the manufacture of batteries and electric vehicles,” he told AFP during a visit to a mine at Lac-des-Iles, 260km north of Montreal.



Oscar-winning *Oppenheimer* finally premieres in Japan

Reuters
Hiroshima

Best picture winner *Oppenheimer* finally premiered in Japan yesterday, eight months after a controversial grassroots marketing push and concerns about how its nuclear theme would be re-

ceived in the only country to suffer atomic bombing.

The biggest winner at this month's Academy Awards, the film directed by Christopher Nolan about US physicist J Robert Oppenheimer, who led the race to develop the atomic bomb, has grossed nearly \$1bn globally.

But Japan had been left out of

worldwide screenings until now, despite being a major market for Hollywood.

Nuclear blasts devastated its western city of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the south at the close of World War II, killing more than 200,000.

"Of course this is an amazing film which deserves to win the Academy

Awards," said Hiroshima resident Kawai, 37, who gave only his family name.

"But the film also depicts the atomic bomb in a way that seems to praise it, and, as a person with roots in Hiroshima, I found it difficult to watch."

A big fan of Nolan's films, Kawai, a public servant, went to see *Op-*

penheimer on opening day at a theatre that is just a kilometre from the city's Atomic Bomb Dome.

"I'm not sure this is a movie that Japanese people should make a special effort to watch," he added.

Images on social media showed signs posted at the entrances to some Tokyo theatres, warning that the movie featured images of nucle-

ar tests that could evoke the damage caused by the bombs.

Another Hiroshima resident, Agemi Kanegae, had mixed feelings upon finally watching the movie.

"The film was very worth watching," said the retired 65-year-old. "But I felt very uncomfortable with a few scenes, such as the trial of Oppenheimer in the US at the end."

Taiwan's navy chief 'to visit US next week'

Reuters
Washington/Taipei

Taiwan's navy chief, Tang Hua, will visit the US from next week to attend a military ceremony and discuss how to boost bilateral naval co-operation as China raises threats toward the island, six people briefed on the trip said.

While Taiwan and the US have a close relationship, it is unofficial, as Washington formally recognises China, not the democratically governed island that Beijing claims as its own territory. Taiwan rejects China's territorial claims.

The six security sources said Tang would visit Hawaii, home of the US Indo-Pacific Command, for a Pacific Fleet change-of-command ceremony. Three of them said Tang was then expected to attend the April 8-10 Sea-Air-Space conference near Washington and that talks were under way to arrange a meeting with the US chief of naval operations, Admiral Lisa Franchetti.

The sources spoke on condition of anonymity given the trip's sensitivity.

Taiwan's navy and the Pentagon declined to comment.

China's defence ministry did not respond to a request for comment. China's foreign ministry said it firmly opposed "military collusion" between the US and Taiwan and that Washington should "refrain from sending out any erroneous signal to the forces of secession for the independence of Taiwan".

Unlike visits to the US by senior officials from allies like Japan and Britain, conducted openly, those of Taiwanese officials, especially military, are kept low key and often not officially confirmed.

Washington and Taipei have had no official diplomatic or military relationship since 1979, when the US switched recognition to Beijing, though the US is bound by law to provide the island with the means to defend itself.

China has not renounced the use of force to take Taiwan, where the defeated Republic of China government fled in 1949 after it lost China's civil war to Mao Zedong's Communists, who established the People's Republic of China.

Taiwan's navy is dwarfed by that of China, which is adding nuclear-powered submarines and aircraft carriers. Under a modernisation effort President Tsai Ing-wen has overseen, Taiwan is developing its own submarines, the first unveiled last year.

Without fanfare Taiwan and the US have expanded their military co-operation since Tsai took office in 2016, especially since China began ramping up military pressure over the past four years. Beijing now regularly sends fighter jets over the median line of the Taiwan Strait that once served as an unofficial barrier.

Previous US trips by senior Taiwan officers to the US have included then-navy chief Lee Hsi-ming in 2015 and deputy defence minister Hsu Yen-pu, who last year attended a Taiwan-US defence industry conference in Virginia.

Protest against monkey labour



Monkey-masked activists from the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), wearing prison uniforms, gather outside the Royal Thai embassy in Tokyo, Japan, to protest against what they described as the Thai government's forced labour of endangered macaques in the coconut industry.

Philippines says will not be cowed into silence by China

Reuters
Manila

The Philippines is not seeking a fight or trouble in the South China Sea but will not be cowed into silence, submission, or subservience, its defence ministry said yesterday, in its latest show of defiance in a heated row with China.

Recent Chinese statements show their isolation from the rest of the world on their "illegal and uncivilised activities" in the South China Sea, the Philippine defence ministry said in a statement.

"It also shows the inability of the Chinese government to conduct open, transparent, and

legal negotiations. Their repertoire consists only of patronising and, failing that, intimidating smaller countries," the ministry said.

The statement was in response to its Chinese counterpart accusing the Philippines on Thursday of provocations, misinformation and treachery after Manila accused Beijing of aggressive conduct in Manila's exclusive economic zone.

Chinese defence ministry spokesperson Wu Qian on Thursday said the Philippines was to blame for the breakdown of relations, demanding its neighbour to cease what it calls were acts of infringement and provocation.

He added China was committed to properly managing maritime differences with relevant parties through dialogue and consultation,

while firmly safeguarding its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests

The South China Sea issue will be settled through the concerted efforts of regional countries, the official said.

"On the South China Sea issue between China and the Philippines, we have stated our serious position multiple times. We oppose foreign interference, infringement and provocation, and advocate proper management of differences," stated Wu Qian.

China will not allow the Philippines to act willfully on the South China Sea issue, he added.

The spokesperson stressed that the military co-operation between the US and the Philippines must not undermine China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.

South Korea envoy steps down amid pre-poll controversy

South Korea's ambassador to Australia has resigned, Seoul's foreign ministry said yesterday, after his appointment while under investigation by corruption authorities triggered public outcry just weeks before a general election. Before being named to the post, Lee Jong-sup had been banned from travelling while South Korea's Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) probed allegations he interfered with an enquiry into the death of a marine last year, while he was the country's defence minister. Seoul's foreign ministry said yesterday it had "decided to accept his resignation", without giving further details. The 20-year-old marine died after being swept away while doing relief work during major flooding, with some reports saying he was never given a life jacket by authorities. The CIO is looking into whether Lee, as defence chief, interfered with the probe into the marine's death.

Sandstorm in Jilin



Motorists drive through a street during a sandstorm in Jilin, in northeastern China's Jilin province.

Pyongyang rules out meetings with Japan

Reuters
Seoul

North Korea has no interest in dialogue with Japan, state media KCNA reported yesterday, citing Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has said he wants to hold talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un "without any preconditions" and is personally overseeing efforts to realise the first such leaders' summit in 20 years in an attempt to defuse decades of tensions.

But North Korea has said it had no interest in a summit with Japan and would reject any talks, signalling no thaw in relations between the two countries.

Choe also said Pyongyang has no intention to help with the issue of Japanese abductees, accord-

ing to KCNA, adding North Korea will "respond sharply" to Japan's interference with its sovereignty.

"I cannot understand why he persistently adheres to the issue that cannot be settled," Choe was quoted as saying by KCNA, referring to Kishida. North Korea admitted in 2002 to kidnapping 13 Japanese citizens decades earlier. Five abductees and their families later returned to Japan, saying the others had died. However, Tokyo believes 17 Japanese were abducted, and continues to investigate the fate of those who did not return. North Korea's ambassador to China, Ri Ryong-nam, also said there would be no meeting at any level with Japan, a KCNA report said. Ri made the remark in a statement, adding that an official at the Japanese embassy in Beijing proposed a contact via e-mail to a councillor of the North Korean embassy.

Big powers need to stop 'strangling' N Korea: Russia

Reuters
Moscow

Russia yesterday said major powers needed a new approach to North Korea, accusing the US and its allies of ratcheting up military tensions in Asia and seeking to "strangle" the reclusive state.

Russia vetoed the annual renewal of a panel of experts monitoring enforcement of longstanding United Nations sanctions against North Korea over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes.

Moscow's move, which strikes

a blow at the enforcement of a myriad of UN sanctions imposed after Pyongyang carried out its first nuclear test in 2006, underscores the dividend that Kim Jong-un has earned by moving closer to President Vladimir Putin amid the war in Ukraine. "It is obvious to us that the UN Security Council can no longer use old templates in relation to the problems of the Korean peninsula," said Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova.

Zakharova said the US was stoking military tensions, that international restrictions had not improved the security situation and that there were severe humanitarian consequences for the popu-

lation of North Korea, formally known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

"The US and its allies have clearly demonstrated that their interest does not extend beyond the task of 'strangling' the DPRK by all available means, and a peaceful settlement is not on the agenda at all," she said. The US state department said on Thursday that Russia's veto had "cynically undermined international peace and security" and accused Moscow of seeking to bury reporting by the panel of experts on its own "collusion" with North Korea to get weapons.

"Russia alone will own the outcome of this veto: a DPRK more

emboldened to reckless behaviour and destabilising provocations, as well as reduced prospects for an enduring peace on the Korean peninsula," state department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

The Russian veto is seen as a major turning point in the international sanctions regime against North Korea, which was formed in 1948 with the backing of the then-Soviet Union while the Republic of Korea was backed by the US.

North Korea is the only country to have conducted nuclear tests in the 21st century - in 2006, 2009, 2013, twice in 2016, and 2017, according to the United Nations.

Russia said the experts' work

was neither objective nor impartial, and that they had turned into a tool of the west.

"The Group of Experts of the UN Security Council Committee 1718 has lost all standards of objectivity and impartiality, which should be integral characteristics of its mandate," Zakharova said.

She said the experts had "turned into an obedient tool of the DPRK's geopolitical opponents. There is no point in saving it in this form".

Since Putin ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow has gone out of its way to parade a renaissance of its relations - including military ties - with Pyongyang. Washing-

ton says North Korea has supplied Russia with missiles that it is using against Ukraine, assertions which have been dismissed by the Kremlin and Pygonyang.

For Putin, who says Russia is locked in an existential battle with the west over Ukraine, courting Kim allows him to needle Washington and its Asian allies while securing a deep supply of artillery for the Ukraine war.

For Kim, who has pledged to accelerate production of nuclear weapons to deter what he casts as US provocations, Russia is a big power ally with deep stores of advanced missile, military, space and nuclear technology.

DUP party leader steps down after police charges

Reuters
Belfast

The leader of Northern Ireland's largest unionist party Jeffrey Donaldson stepped down yesterday after confirming he had been charged with "allegations of an historical nature", the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) said.

Donaldson is one of the British region's best-known politicians

and is Northern Ireland's longest-serving lawmaker in the British parliament, to which he was first elected in 1997. He is also a former member of the Northern Irish Assembly.

"The party chairman has received a letter from Jeffrey Donaldson MP confirming that he has been charged with allegations of an historical nature and indicating that he is stepping down as leader of the Democratic Unionist Party with immediate

effect," the DUP said in a statement.

"In accordance with the party rules, the party officers have suspended Donaldson from membership, pending the outcome of a judicial process."

The DUP gave no details of what the charges were.

It appointed Gavin Robinson, a fellow member of the British parliament, as interim party leader.

As a member of the London parliament, Donaldson, 61, does

not hold a position in the Northern Irish power-sharing government, a key part of the region's 1998 peace settlement that only resumed last month following a two-year suspension.

His resignation comes amid a tumultuous period for the DUP and with elections to the British parliament expected later this year.

Sinn Fein overtook the DUP for the first time at elections to the Northern Irish assembly in

2022, paving the way for Michelle O'Neill to become the British region's first

Irish nationalist First Minister

Donaldson was the third person to lead the DUP in a matter of weeks when he took over in 2021 after the party in effect dumped both his predecessors.

He also had to face down some opposition from within the party last month when the DUP decided to end its boycott of the power-sharing government over post-

Brexit trade rules.

Donaldson brokered a deal with the British government that eased some of the trade barriers with the rest of the United Kingdom that the DUP and many unionist voters said undermined Northern Ireland's place in the union.

All the lawmaker's social media accounts appeared to have been deleted, with Donaldson's handle on the social network X showing the message "This account doesn't exist".

India eyes Oman, UK trade deals in early days of Modi's probable third term

Reuters
New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to prioritise completion of free trade deals with Britain and Oman in the first 100 days of the next government if he wins upcoming elections as opinion polls predict, two government sources said.

Modi has asked Indian ministries to set annual goals for the next five years that will fit into a 100-day action plan as he chalks out a strategy to fuel further growth in Asia's third-largest economy.

Among its goals for the 100-day plan, the trade ministry aims to feature the pacts with Britain and Oman, as talks on both deals are in their final stages, said the sources, who have direct knowledge of the discussions.

They sought anonymity as details of the plan are private.

This month Modi identified integrating India into world trade as a key priority area in talks with senior government officials, according to a document seen by Reuters.

Some of the objectives will be discussed on May 1, when India will be in the middle of its seven-phase election, set to start on April 19 with vote-counting due on June 4, at which Modi will be seeking a rare third term.

The trade ministry and Modi's

office, which will make a final decision on the priorities, did not respond to a request for comment.

Modi has asked ministries to set annual goals for the next five years that will fit into a 100-day action plan as he chalks out a strategy to fuel further growth in Asia's third-largest economy

A spokesperson for Britain's department for business and trade said the two countries were "continuing to work towards an ambitious trade deal".

The spokesperson added: "Whilst we don't comment on the details of live negotiations, we are clear that we will only sign a deal that is fair, balanced and ultimately in the best interests of the British people and the economy."

Ahead of India's elections, both nations this month put on hold their two-year long negotiations without a deal, while reaffirming their commitment to a new pact aimed at doubling their trade by 2030. Britain also holds elections this year.

Reuters could not immediately contact an Oman official. The trade ministers of India and Oman met in December and said they had asked their negotiators to wrap up talks on a comprehensive pact so as to hasten signing of a deal.

Knights prepare for jousting tournament



Knights make preparations ahead of the International Jousting Tournament event at The Leeds Armouries, in northern England, as teams from the UK, France and Italy compete in a spectacular live sporting event from medieval times.

Congress bemoans 'tax terrorism' after new notice

Reuters
Mumbai

India's main opposition party yesterday said it had been asked to pay an additional Rs18.2bn (\$218mn) in taxes, which it called an attempt by the tax department to financially cripple it weeks before a national parliamentary election.

Calling the latest notice from the income tax department "tax terrorism", Congress treasurer Ajay Maken told reporters the party would fight the demand in court.

India will vote in seven phases between April 19 and June 1 in an election Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to win and

secure a record-equalling third straight term.

"The law is on our side, we have no doubt about it, but by the time we get relief, elections will be over," Maken said.

The Supreme Court is expected to hear the case on Monday, he added.

A tax department spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment yesterday, which was a public holiday. The tax department has said it cannot comment on individual tax notices as they are confidential.

A source familiar with the tax dispute said income tax assessments of Congress were reopened for seven years following searches in April 2019 and those proceedings were due to get time-barred on March 31 this year under tax laws.

The Congress had violated tax exemption laws, had been given several opportunities to reply to notices and the tax department's action against the party had been backed by court rulings, the source said.

Congress, which has been ruled by the Gandhi-Nehru family, was once India's most dominant political party and has accused Modi of trying to "cripple it financially" before the elections through the tax department.

Last month, the party said the authorities froze some of its bank accounts pending a tax case that dates back to 2018-19 involving Rs1.35bn, and its bid to contest this in court was dismissed.

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has said that the tax case was not politically motivated.

Indian navy intercepts hijacked vessel near Somalia

The India's navy yesterday said it has intercepted a fishing vessel in the Arabian Sea after a suspected hijacking, its latest anti-piracy operation after a spate of regional attacks on shipping. Two Indian vessels had approached the Iranian-flagged FV Al Kamar 786 around 165km southwest of the Yemeni island of Socotra, not far from the eastern tip of Somalia. An operation was "currently underway by the Indian Navy towards rescue of hijacked FV & its crew," the navy said in a statement. The statement added that nine armed pirates were believed to have taken over the vessel. India's navy has been deployed continuously off Somalia since 2008. It stepped up anti-piracy efforts last year following a surge in maritime assaults. This month, the Indian navy rescued 19 crew members off the Maltese-flagged cargo ship MV Ruen, which had been hijacked by Somali pirates in December.

Everything Electric exhibition



People look at the Microlino EV car, on display at the Everything Electric exhibition at the ExCeL London international exhibition and convention centre in London, Britain, yesterday.

India, Ukraine to restore ties to pre-war levels

Reuters
New Delhi

The foreign ministers of India and Ukraine yesterday said they had agreed to restore trade and co-operation to levels before Russia's invasion, as Kyiv seeks to build support for its peace plan with an old friend of Moscow.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba was in India on the first visit by a top official from Kyiv since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, ahead of a possible international summit in the coming months to advance its blueprint for peace.

New Delhi has traditionally had close economic and defence ties with Moscow and refrained from criticising Russia over its war in Ukraine. It has urged the neighbours to resolve their con-

flict through dialogue and diplomacy while increasing purchases of cheap Russian oil to record levels.

"We paid specific attention to the peace formula and next steps on the path of its implementation," Kuleba posted on X after talks with his counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar.

"We...agreed to restore the level of co-operation between our countries that existed prior to the full-scale war launched by Russia, as well as identify new promising projects to take our relations to the next level," Kuleba said.

Jaishankar said that "our immediate goal is to get trade back to earlier levels".

Ukraine hopes to hold a summit, without Russian participation, to advance a peace formula that calls among other things for the withdrawal of Russian troops from its territory.

Calls for 'smartphone free' childhood grow in UK

AFP
London

It is the question many adults dread being asked by their children: when can I have a smartphone?

But as fears grow about the impact of the gadgets on young minds, some UK parents are fighting back.

The challenge is being led by mother-of-three Daisy Greenwell after a casual school gate conversation spurred her into action.

Greenwell, who had been privately mulling the issue with a close friend for some time, was

told by another mother that her own 11-year-old son already had a smartphone, as did a third of the boy's class.

"This conversation has filled me with terror. I don't want to give my child something that I know will damage her mental health and make her addicted," she wrote on Instagram.

"But I also know that the pressure to do so, if the rest of her class have one, will be massive," added the journalist from Woodbridge, eastern England.

The post in February triggered a tidal wave of reaction from parents similarly gripped by anxiety about providing their children with a de-

vice they fear will open them up to predators, online bullying, social pressure and harmful content.

Greenwell and her friend Clare Reynolds have now launched the Parents United for a Smartphone Free Childhood campaign.

Academic research combined with parents' own experiences have created a sense of dread about a child's request for a phone.

At the same time parents say they feel powerless to refuse, with phones for school-age children "normalised", supposedly on safety grounds.

UK Schools Minister Damian Hinds told a parliamentary committee recently almost all pupils

now got a mobile phone around the age of 11 or 12.

"There seems to be something of a rite of passage about that," he told MPs, adding that some children got one "quite a lot earlier".

After Greenwell finally broached the subject on Instagram, a WhatsApp group she set up to discuss the issue with Reynolds quickly filled with like-minded parents relieved that others felt the same way.

Then the reaction just "snowballed", she added.

Greenwell said there is now a group in every area of the country as well as a few working groups for people with professional expertise

on the issue.

"We've got an education one which has got lots of headteachers from across the country," she added.

"They are talking about how we can roll this out, how we can help parents and schools to collaborate and stop people from getting a smartphone at such a young age."

Other working groups are full of people who "are really knowledgeable and experienced in their fields", including an advocacy group to talk about policy change.

Those signed up include a tech company policy director and a staffer at Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's 10 Downing Street office.

"They're people who really, really know the lie of the land," she said.

Many of the parents' concerns are echoed in US social psychologist Jonathan Haidt's just-published book *The Anxious Generation*.

In it, Haidt argues that the "complete transformation of childhood that took place between 2010 and 2015" as smartphones really took off has led to a "great re-wiring of childhood".

He links the rise of the "phone-based childhood", continual supervision by adults and the loss of "free play" to spikes in mental illness in young people.



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GULF TIMES

Pasta makers cheer Turkiye as its durum wheat flows abroad

Turkiye's spectacular breakthrough as an exporter of durum wheat has spared pasta fans another year of price pain and the country is poised to remain a crucial source of the ingredient prized in Mediterranean cuisine.

On track to be the world's second-largest durum exporter in 2023/24, Turkiye has helped fill a supply gap caused by a second drought in three years in top supplier Canada and stifled a price surge seen at the season's start.

Global stocks of durum are still forecast to hit a three-decade low this season, according to the International Grains Council, an intergovernmental body. But Turkish shipments have averted an immediate shortfall and kept durum in line with easing world prices of staple grains.

Previously a net importer of the hard wheat whose milled flour is used to make pasta, couscous and certain types of bread in the Mediterranean region, Turkiye has taken the market by surprise by exporting around 1.5mn metric tonnes of durum so far in the 2023/24 season ending in June.

"Turkiye, by entering global markets as an exporter, changed the game," Aykut Goymen, chairman of Turkiye's pasta industry association, said.

"I can say that it was not a one-off thing and it is sustainable for Turkiye to be a durum exporter in the coming years." Turkiye's better-than-anticipated crop last year left stocks brimming following hefty imports made in response to high inflation and earlier drought.

"Pasta producers bought durum from Turkiye because it was offered to us at competitive prices"

Attractive prices for farmers, including a near 30% rise in the state's purchase price last year, as well as investment in irrigation, have boosted sowing and yields. Weakness in the lira during an economic crisis also made Turkish

durum more competitive overseas.

With growers planting more and weather staying clement so far, Turkish production is widely expected to set a second straight record this year above 4mn tonnes.

That comfortably surpasses the country's annual domestic consumption of up to 3mn tonnes. Demand from its large export-focused pasta industry has been curbed by a shift to using cheaper soft wheat for cost-conscious markets in Africa and Latin America.

Analysts anticipate another year of substantial exports, even if Canadian output recovers, with the 2024/25 volume seen potentially exceeding 1mn tonnes again.

Turkish shipments, along with sizeable flows from Russia and Kazakhstan, have been a boon for importers in Italy.

"Pasta producers bought durum from Turkiye because it was offered to us at competitive prices," said Vincenzo Divella, co-CEO of the eponymous Italian pasta company.

"We had a big problem in Canada...In our country, the season was disastrous because of the weather and rains." The Turkish crop is seen in Italy as a good-quality option, though Canadian durum remains the benchmark for many processors.

With Europe now planning to use tariffs to shut out grain from Russia, in further fallout from Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, Turkish trade could become even more crucial.

"For durum, this could have major consequences, particularly for Italian imports," Severine Omnes-Maisons, analyst at Strategie Grains, said of the proposed tariffs on Russia, which has supplied a fifth of EU durum imports so far in 2023/24.

Dwindling cultivation in the durum consumption heartlands of Europe and North Africa may also make the market more reliant on imported supply from Turkiye.

Drought has gripped parts of the Maghreb and southern Europe in what analysts see as a sign that the zone is becoming too arid even for a crop that likes dry, warm conditions. Morocco's cereal harvest is set to shrink by half this year. In France, a regular supplier to EU neighbours, torrential rain could reduce this year's durum area to a new 21st century low.

Importers have responded by scooping up crop from Turkey, Russia and Kazakhstan, a trio that Argus Media analyst Alexandre Marie sees as a potential "Canada on Europe's doorstep" – Reuters

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Giorgia Meloni's surprising success

By Lucrezia Reichlin
London

After almost two years in power, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni is more popular and influential than ever, not only in Italy but also across the European Union. For the leader of Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) – a political party with roots in Italian fascism that, until recently, had relatively few members, no culture of governance, and a firmly anti-EU, anti-euro stance – this is a remarkable achievement.

Meloni leads a three-party coalition with the far-right Lega and the centre-right Forza Italia. But the Brothers of Italy enjoy a solid majority. And that is not the only thing that distinguishes it from its coalition partners. Unlike the pro-Russia Matteo Salvini, who leads Lega, Meloni is vocally pro-Nato. This is a major reason why EU leaders – as well as markets – view her in an increasingly positive light.

Meloni is now poised to have lasting influence in European politics, where the Brothers are part of the centre-right European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Group – of which Meloni is president. Forza Italia, for its part, belongs to the European People's Party (EPP), while Lega belongs to the Identity and Democracy Group, along with far-right parties like Germany's Alternative für Deutschland and France's National Rally.

Already, Meloni is taking advantage of expectations that this June's European Parliament elections will strengthen the right and weaken the centre to boost the ECR's relevance. While the EPP is leading in the polls, it will have to form a coalition to govern – and it will need ECR votes. Meloni may well seize this opportunity to secure a senior position for the Brothers in exchange for supporting the EPP's Ursula von der Leyen in her bid for a second term as European Commission president.

To be sure, a formal alliance between the ECR and the EPP, together with the liberals, is unlikely. The ECR's membership – which includes radical right-wing parties, such as Spain's Vox, Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), and new arrivals like France's Reconquête! – makes the group



Giorgia Meloni: more popular and influential than ever.

difficult for mainstream parties to accept.

But pragmatic negotiations and support on specific issues will not be impossible. And here, Meloni might emerge as a key power broker. Amid all the political wheeling and dealing, however, some of the exiting Commission's commitments, such as its green policy, are likely to be diluted.

Meloni's impact on European politics is likely to extend beyond the European Parliament. The marriage between a party with roots in fascism, a pro-Russian party, and an EPP member might seem to be an Italian idiosyncrasy, which is unlikely to be repeated. But, so far, it has worked. And if it works in Italy, it could provide a way forward for other political parties in Europe.

In the last two decades or so, voters in many advanced democracies have steadily become less faithful to political parties. There have been large swings in support, and new parties have risen – and sometimes fallen – rapidly. Whereas traditional parties used to offer comprehensive political programs, new movements often focus on narrow issues. As voting becomes increasingly transactional, space for "unnatural" alliances is growing.

But the picture for Meloni is not all rosy. In fact, continued stable support in Italy is far from guaranteed. The Brothers' rise has been meteoric, with its share of the popular vote soaring from 4% in 2018 to about 27% today. But the party's strength has been mostly a result of others' weaknesses. This is true elsewhere in Europe as well: the governments of most EU countries – France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain – are unlikely to survive the next election. It is also true in Italy, where a divided opposition cannot mount much of a challenge.

But Italy's electorate can be fickle, not least in the face of economic hardship. And while the Italian economy has performed relatively well since the Covid-19 pandemic – better than Germany – the outlook seems to be darkening, as the crisis-response measures, especially generous subsidies to the construction sector, are rolled back.

Italy's fiscal deficit is projected to reach 4.3% of GDP this year – 0.6 percentage points above the government's original target – and its net primary expenditure is forecast to violate the EU's new fiscal rules. Add to that concerns from independent

forecasters that growth estimates for 2024 are overly optimistic, and a sharper-than-expected fiscal adjustment seems likely. As four years of government largesse come to an end, growth will decline.

Fortunately, the risk premium on Italian government bonds has not yet been affected. Gone are the days of financial-market instability driven by bets against the euro. But the market is watching Italy's performance closely, and sentiment may turn.

Though Meloni has proved to be a creative politician – and not the populist many feared she would be – leadership based on others' weakness is not sustainable. And so far, Meloni has failed to formulate any strategy for addressing Italy's structural problems, its regional disparities, and the need for reform of the health and pension systems. Sooner or later, voters may well leave the Brothers behind. – Project Syndicate

● *Lucrezia Reichlin, a former director of research at the European Central Bank, is Professor of Economics at the London Business School and a trustee of the International Financial Reporting Standards Foundation.*

Are global capital rules possible?

By Howard Davies
London

What's in a name? The final proposals for bank-capital rules were dubbed Basel 3.1, as if to suggest a minor tidying-up exercise – just a few grace notes added to a melody composed long ago. But banks, concerned that the implications would be more severe, spoke of Basel 4, implying not grace notes, but a reworking of the entire composition, now in a major key.

That name didn't stick. Regulators insisted that it was not a new tune, and that anyone who could sing Basel 3 would have no trouble picking up Basel 3.1. But then, some anonymous practitioner in the American political dark arts came up with the term Basel Endgame, which seems to suggest that someone is about to die. On the eastern side of the Atlantic, the term recalls Samuel Beckett's play, Endgame, about existential angst and the futility and meaninglessness of human life. Non-bankers might find that to be a good description of the debate over the proper size of big banks' reserves, which has now been ongoing for many years.

Some countries, like Singapore and Australia, have stopped arguing and just gotten on with it. In the European Union and the United Kingdom, the details are almost finalised. But in the US, the endgame is nowhere near the end – which may even be further away than ever, following US Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell's recent intervention.

Allow me to recount the short version of this tangled tale. It started last summer, when Fed Vice-Chair for Supervision Michael Barr put forward some moderately tough proposals calling for sizeable increases in capital. US banks mounted a robust counteroffensive, and now Powell has said that there must be "broad material changes" to proposals that were supported by a majority of Federal Reserve Board members just last year.



The tower of the headquarters of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) is seen in Basel, Switzerland. Banks in EU largely comply with 'Basel Endgame'.

The merits of the underlying argument have almost been submerged by the politics. Are some banks right to argue that the Fed's proposals will put them at a competitive disadvantage internationally? Comparing proposals across countries is very difficult. Barr's plans, no doubt influenced by the spate of embarrassing US bank failures last year, did envisage a bigger increase in capital than was planned in the EU, but starting from a lower base. The UK, as ever, is somewhere in between.

Do all these different proposals comply with the original Basel agreement? The Basel Committee will answer that question itself in due time, but it currently looks as though the UK will comply more or less, while the EU will not. Under Barr's proposals, the US regime would probably have been compliant, and on the tougher side. Now, no one really knows where it will land.

What we do know is that the constitutional arrangements that govern the setting of capital standards for banks are remarkably divergent in the three main Western

jurisdictions. In the EU, the European Commission, a political body, holds the pen, because the stability of the single market requires that there not be significant divergences from place to place. If there were, all banks would be headquartered in the country with the weakest regime and would conduct all their European business there.

Thus, the EU Basel agreements are implemented through directives or regulations that carry the force of law throughout the bloc. Given the circumstances, it is not surprising that the outcome is a deal that may slightly undercut the original Basel agreement. Politicians, as usual, responded to special pleading. The so-called Danish compromise, for example, includes a concession for banks that own insurance companies. It is an open secret that if the European Central Bank was fully in charge, the EU would be compliant with Basel, as the UK plans to be.

Since Brexit, the UK regulator has been alone in the driver's seat. The government delegated the power to set capital rules to the Bank of England (BoE), and though

it sometimes sounds as though ministers regret having done that, I doubt the regime will change at this point.

At first glance, the US regime might resemble the UK's, since the Fed is in the driver's seat. But the Fed's board, unlike the BoE's board, is politically balanced, with a majority reflecting the party in power. That is why Barr was able to propose his robust package of rules in the first place. But now, argues Peter Conti-Brown of the Brookings Institution, Powell is trying to protect the Fed, rather than the financial system, in the face of strong public criticism. He "appears to prize Fed independence for monetary policy so dearly that he wants to avoid political fights about regulatory policy."

That argument recalls the longstanding view of Germany's Bundesbank that an independent central bank should not get into the dirty business of banking supervision. Gordon Brown, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, was acting on the same concern when he moved banking supervision to the Financial Services Authority (which I chaired) in 1997. But then George Osborne chose to reverse the move in 2013.

There are strongly held views on both sides of the debate about whether central banks should be responsible for banking supervision. But the way the Basel Endgame is playing out indicates that it will be very difficult to deliver common global standards across different constitutional arrangements.

In Beckett's Endgame, the character Clov is pathetically desperate to create order out of chaos. "I love order. It's my dream," he says. "I'm doing my best to create a little order." That could be the Basel Committee's motto as it tries to sell its wares. But like Clov, it may be facing insuperable odds. – Project Syndicate

● *Howard Davies, a former deputy governor of the Bank of England, is Chairman of NatWest Group.*

CRIME

Russia detains another suspect over concert hall attack

A Russian court yesterday ordered another suspect charged with “terrorism” over the deadly attack on a Moscow concert hall to be held in pre-trial detention. Russia has detained 12 people in connection with the massacre. They include the four men accused of having shot dozens of concert-goers and then set the Crocus City Hall venue on fire last week in the deadliest attack in Russia for two decades. The Basmany district court in Moscow yesterday said it had ordered Nazrimad Lutfulloi, a Tajik citizen, to be held in pre-trial detention until May 22. Nine of the 12 people arrested by the Russian authorities have been sent to pre-trial detention.

PEOPLE

Russia looks to label pop queen a ‘foreign agent’

Russian prosecutors have asked the justice ministry to label Alla Pugacheva, the queen of Soviet pop music, as a “foreign agent”, the state RIA news agency reported. Pugacheva, 74, a Soviet and then post-Soviet icon, has criticised the war in Ukraine. She is one of Russia’s most famous people - known across generations for hits such as the 1982 song “Million Scarlet Roses” and the 1978 film “The Woman who Sings”. Pugacheva has in the past been feted by both President Vladimir Putin and his predecessor Boris Yeltsin. When Mikhail Gorbachev died in 2022, she praised the last Soviet leader for allowing freedom and rejecting violence.

OFFICIAL

Erdogan to meet Biden at White House on May 9

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meet with US counterpart Joe Biden at the White House on May 9, a Turkish official said. It would be the first White House meeting between the two leaders. The Biden administration in January approved \$23bn in F-16 warplanes for Turkiye after it ratified Sweden’s stalled Nato membership bid. Some analysts linked Turkiye’s continued delays to Erdogan’s anger at Washington for its support of how Israel is pursuing its war against Hamas. The Turkish leader has compared Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Adolf Hitler and accused the US of sponsoring the “genocide” of Palestinians.

DECISION

France to repatriate colonial soldiers’ remains from Vietnam

France is to repatriate from Vietnam the bodies of six soldiers who died in Dien Bien Phu, the country’s last stand in colonial Indochina, the defence ministry said. The operation will happen “in the coming days”, the statement added. Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam was the site of an epic battle against Vietnamese communist forces in 1954 that spelt the end of France’s colonial empire in Indochina. The existence of the six bodies, “conserved in three different locations”, had been reported to the French embassy in Vietnam in 2012, 2021 and 2022. The Vietnamese authorities approved the repatriation on March 25.

Russian drone, missile attacks damage Ukraine power facilities

Reuters
Kyiv

Massive Russian missile and drone attacks hit thermal and hydro power plants in central and western Ukraine overnight, officials said yesterday, in the latest barrage targeting the country’s already damaged power infrastructure. Kaniv hydropower plant and Dnister plant, which is located on the Dnister River, flowing through neighbouring Moldova, were among the targets, President Volodymyr Zelensky said. “The terrorist state of Russia wishes to repeat the ecological disaster in the Kherson region following Russia’s destruction of the Kakhovka HPP (blown up by Russian forces last year). This time, not only Ukraine but also Moldova are at risk,” he said on X. Last week, Russia also hit Ukraine’s largest dam, the Dnipro-HES in the southern Zaporizhzhia region, eight times during a massive overnight attack. “We urge our partners to respond quickly and decisively to Russia’s intensified bombing campaign against Ukraine’s critical infrastructure,” Zelensky said in a call for more air defences. Regional officials said Russian forces had also attacked infrastructure overnight into yesterday in the Kamianske district near the city of Dnipro. At least one person was wounded, they added.

Ukrainian Energy Minister German Galushchenko said power facilities in the regions of Dnipropetrovsk, Poltava and Cherkasy had similarly come under attack. “Electricity generation facilities were targeted by drones and missiles,” Gelushchenko said on Facebook. Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said that energy facilities in total of six regions had been damaged. “Again, the attack was directed both against electricity generation facilities and against its distribution system,” he added. Power grid operator Ukrenergo said on Telegram it had to apply power cuts schedules up till the evening in three regions - Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kirovohrad. The largest private power firm, DTEK, said its three thermal power plants had come under attack yesterday, and equipment was severely damaged. “Attacks destroyed half of DTEK’s available generating capacity. Five of the six DTEK power stations that had been operating prior to this week have now sustained serious damage,” it said in a statement. It added that Russian strikes on energy facilities were becoming more “accurate and concentrated”. The Ukrainian military said its air force had destroyed 58 Russia-launched attack drones overnight from a total of 60, along with 26 of 39 missiles of various types.

Erdogan supporters rally ahead of polls



Supporters of Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan attend a rally ahead of the local elections in Istanbul, Turkiye, yesterday.

China halts work on two projects in Pakistan after deadly attack

AFP
Peshawar, Pakistan

Chinese contractors have halted construction on two major dam projects in Pakistan after a suicide bomber killed five Chinese engineers and a Pakistani driver this week, a provincial official said yesterday. The companies have demanded that Pakistan authorities come up with new security plans before reopening the sites where around 1,250 Chinese nationals are working, the official said. The security of Chinese workers is a major concern to both countries, with nationals frequently targeted by militants hostile to outside influence. The workers were targeted on Tuesday by a

suicide bomber who rammed into their vehicle on a mountainous road near one of the dam sites. He detonated his explosives on impact, plunging their vehicle into a deep ravine. A senior official from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa interior department said on condition of anonymity that since Wednesday, China Gezhouba Group Company has halted work on the Dasu dam in the province and Power China has stopped work on Diamer Bhasha dam, which straddles two provinces. “They have demanded new security plans from the government,” he said. “Around 750 Chinese engineers are engaged in the Dasu Dam project, while 500 are working on the Diamer Bhasha Dam,” he added. He said the movement of Chinese engineers has been restricted to the compounds where they live, close to the sites.

China has not commented, but this week repeatedly urged Pakistan to ensure the safety of its nationals. Tuesday’s attack sparked a flurry of diplomatic activity at the Chinese embassy in Islamabad, with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and the foreign and interior ministers offering condolences in quick succession. China’s foreign ministry declared the countries “iron-clad friends” but asked Pakistan to “take effective measures to ensure the safety and security of Chinese nationals, projects, and institutions”. Meanwhile, Chinese investigators have arrived in Pakistan to join a probe into the killing, Pakistan’s interior ministry said. Pakistan’s Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi met the Chinese team of investigators at Beijing’s embassy and briefed them on the investigation so far, the statement said.

Births fall in Italy for 15th year running to record low

Births in Italy dropped to a record low in 2023, the 15th consecutive annual decline, national statistics bureau ISTAT said yesterday, as the population continued to shrink. Italy’s ever-falling birth rate is considered a national emergency, but despite successive governments pledging to make it a priority, none have so far been able to halt the drop. Last year Italy recorded 379,000 births, a 3.6% decline on 2022 and a 34.2% drop on 2008 - the last year Italy saw an increase in the number of babies born. It was also the lowest number since the country’s unification in 1861. The fertility rate fell to 1.20 children per woman from 1.24 in 2022 - far below the rate of 2.1 needed for a steady population. By contrast, some 661,000 deaths were registered last year, a fall on the previous three years when Covid boosted the mortality rate in Italy. ISTAT said life expectancy also jumped last year to 83.1 years, up six months on 2022.

French farmers’ protest



A protester carries a bale of straw to be put in front of the offices of Les Republicains (LR) party’s MP during a demonstration called by the Bourgogne Franche-Comte rural coordination group to express their difficulties and to demand a remunerative agriculture with a promising future in Dijon, central eastern France, yesterday.

France eyes spent uranium plant to bypass Russia

AFP
Paris

The French government has said it is “seriously” studying the option of building a plant to convert and enrich reprocessed uranium to cut its reliance on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine. The only plant in the world that currently converts reprocessed uranium for use in nuclear power plants is located in Russia. “The option of carrying out an industrial project to convert reprocessed uranium in France is being seriously examined,” the French industry and energy ministry said. “The associated conditions are still being studied,” said the ministry. The announcement came after French daily *Le Monde* said that state-owned power utility EDF had no immediate plans

to halt uranium trade with Russia, while Moscow’s war against Ukraine stretches into its third year. According to the newspaper, Jean-Michel Quilichini, head of the nuclear fuel division at EDF, said the company planned to continue to “honour” its 2018 contract with Tenex, a subsidiary of Russia’s state nuclear power company Rosatom. The contract stipulates that reprocessed uranium from French nuclear power plants is to be sent to a facility in the town of Seversk (formerly Tomsk-7) in western Siberia to be converted and then re-enriched before being reused in nuclear plants. Since Russian President Vladimir Putin sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022, the west has slapped multiple rounds of sanctions on Moscow but Russia’s nuclear power has remained largely unscathed.

Greek govt defeats censure motion over train tragedy

AFP
Athens

Greece’s conservative government survived a censure motion in parliament that was lodged over claims it had tried to manipulate an investigation into the deadly train collision that rocked the country last year. The no-confidence motion was defeated, with 159 deputies of the 300 in parliament voting against, and 141 in favour. The conservative government of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has a parliamentary majority and was widely expected to defeat the

motion lodged by the socialist PASOK party on Tuesday. The motion came after a newspaper report claimed that a key sound recording from the night of the accident, which claimed 57 lives in February 2023, had been misleadingly edited. Opposition parties accused the government of having been behind the alleged subterfuge as part of efforts to reinforce its chosen narrative that human error was to blame for the head-on collision. “Public opinion has reached an irrevocable conclusion - that you are geared towards a cover-up” of the train tragedy, Nikos Pappas, parliament speaker for the main opposi-

tion Syriza party, told the chamber on Wednesday. “You are summoned to give answers,” he said. Opposition parties say the government handed out the spliced recording to friendly media. But Mitsotakis told the chamber: “Never was there an order to conceal. I am looking you in the eyes and telling you this.” In what he has previously called a “national trauma”, Mitsotakis said “chronic failures by the state met human error”, insisting that he wanted to speak “the truth” to a “distrustful and angry society”. The disaster struck when a freight train and a passenger train with 350 staff and passengers, mostly stu-

dents, collided near a tunnel outside the central city of Larissa shortly before midnight. A year after the accident, relatives of the victims say that despite government promises of a full investigation, state authorities wasted time and overlooked vital evidence. Experts appointed by relatives’ families say the accident site was cleaned of wreckage and topsoil before investigators could fully examine it. The body of a young woman travelling on the passenger train still remains unaccounted for. Experts for the families have also claimed that the freight train was carrying undeclared chemicals that caused a huge explosion after the

crash, killing people who might otherwise have survived. On Sunday, the *To Vima* weekly reported that leaked recordings of train staff on the night of the accident had been edited to suggest human error was exclusively to blame. One clip in particular, which was extensively used at the time, had the station master giving the go-ahead to an unnamed train driver. *To Vima* reported that the discussion was with a driver on an earlier train not involved in the accident. It said his name had been removed to create the impression that the discussion was with the driver on one of the trains that collided. Who carried out the alleged ma-

nipulation remains unclear. Critics point to an address to the nation by Mitsotakis just hours after the accident in which he said that “everything” showed human error was to blame. Government spokesman Pavlos Marinakis called the *To Vima* report “baseless”. The main opposition party Syriza had called on Mitsotakis, who was comfortably re-elected in June, to resign. Opposition parties were already furious this past week after a four-month parliamentary investigation into the accident concluded without assigning blame to senior politicians.



Visitors explore MDD via the tram this Ramadan.



Msheireb hosts a Garangao event on March 14, attracting many children. **PICTURE:** Thajudheen



MDD has remained a bustling hub throughout Ramadan.

MDD: A vibrant hub for Ramadan celebrations

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Msheireb Downtown Doha (MDD) has become a premier destination for families seeking to immerse themselves in the spirit of Ramadan, featuring an array of traditional, cultural, and religious activities, it is learnt.

MDD has been attracting crowds eager not only to engage in these offerings but also to see a glimpse into Qatar's history and rich heritage.

From the symbolic first Iftar cannon on March 11 to Garangao tradition, live performances, and an array of community engagements, MDD has remained a bustling hub throughout Ramadan.

Msheireb Properties continues to promote the different attractions within the area through its



MDD's Doha Design District hosts a unique fashion exhibition by VCUArts Qatar.



MDD transforms into a preferred destination for families looking to engage in the essence of Ramadan. **PICTURES:** Joey Aguilar

social media channels, showcasing a wide range of Ramadan dishes, including those featured at the Ramadan Nights Iftar hosted at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Doha.

In addition, live cooking sessions and numerous local and international culinary delights further enhance the dining experience for visitors.

As the sun sets, MDD starts to draw crowds with activities lasting from 8.30pm to 1.30am daily. Workshops, exhibitions, entertainment shows, a bazaar, and a Garangao mini-fashion show have entertained and engaged attendees.

Visitors can also visit MDD's Doha Design District to see a number of unique fashion pieces being showcased by Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar as part of a unique exhibition.

A highlight for children was

the unique Garangao night held at Sahat Al Nakheel, where participants showcased their traditional attire for a chance to win exciting prizes, including a staycation at the Mandarin Oriental Doha.

To promote an active lifestyle during Ramadan, Msheireb Properties is organising a padel tournament at the Company House, fostering friendly competition among enthusiasts. The tournament, which began on March 14, is set to conclude on April 13.

MDD's mosques host scholars and imams leading the Isha and Taraweeh prayers. In collaboration with the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs, these spiritual gatherings aim to provide worshippers and visitors with a suitable environment for prayer and reflection.

In addition to these religious and recreational activities, MDD offers a range of community-cen-



Msheireb hosts various traditional, cultural, and religious activities throughout Ramadan.

tric events. From Ramadan arts and crafts for families to lantern-making workshops, henna art sessions, and calligraphy classes, there has been something for everyone to enjoy.

A curated photography exhibition capturing the essence of Ramadan, featuring works by local photographers, has been on display at Barahat Msheireb.

For those seeking refreshment and relaxation, a dedicated Ramadan corner at Sikka Wadi offers henna art, dates, teas, and coffees, providing a serene refuge amid the celebration.



Delectable sweets and pastries are up for grabs at night at MDD this Ramadan.

Tailoring shops have busy shifts ahead of Eid al-Fitr



The tailoring shops across Qatar, in particular at Souq Al Ali, have started to get loads of orders for making new thobes (Qatari men's traditional dress) ahead of the upcoming Eid al-Fitr. Speaking to local Arabic daily *Arrayah*, a number of customers and tailors stressed that demand for stitching new thobes considerably increases before Eid from Qataris and expatriates, especially for children and young people. Some shops have almost reached the maximum number of orders that they could deliver before Eid holidays. Some others will continue to receive orders until the last five days of Ramadan, so they would extend their working hours and increase the number of tailors in all shifts. Ibrahim Mansour, a customer, stressed that the prices at Souq Al Ali, which has many tailors, are much cheaper than any other place. He noted this creates good

competition, which makes tailors keen to attract customers by offering them better services at more affordable prices. When a person becomes a regular customer for the same shop for many years, he will be offered quality service at excellent rates. Accordingly, Mansour opted to deal with the same shop for more than ten years. He noted that the charges for making thobes for children could be set at QR30, and QR30-50 for adults, depending on the special requirements of the customer. Abulraheem Mohamed is a regular customer of the same shop at Souq Al Ali as he always enjoys a good experience regarding prices and timely delivery. He said that dealing with the same tailor has fostered mutual trust, which saves him a lot of money and effort to compare prices. Some tailors exploit the urgency of the occasion and increase their fees and the prices of fabric to unreasonable

rates, which discourage customers from going to them, Mohamed said. Salem al-Marri, another customer, estimated that the prices for making thobes at Souq Al Ali to be almost 50% than elsewhere in the country. For instance, the overall price for a good thobe for children could range around QR80 at Souq Al Ali while it goes up to QR140 in some other commercial streets. Besides, tailors in Souq Al Ali often deliver the thobe after five days of receiving the order, while others could take up to 10 days, he added. Zakaria, a tailor, said that most shops at the Souq started to receive orders for Eid more than a week ago and the number of orders are steadily increasing as this is considered as a good season for business. He stressed that all varieties of fabric preferred by customers are available at the market and they suit all budgets.



Tailoring shops at Souq Al Ali are experiencing increasing rush ahead of Eid al-Fitr. **PICTURES:** Ram Chand

