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UNSC asks Israel to do more on Gaza aid

The UN Security Council yesterday acknowledged Israel's pledge to open more entry points to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza but said "more should be done" to help civilians in the besieged Palestinian territory. In a statement, council members "took note of the announcement by Israel to open the Erez (border) crossing and allow the use of the Ashdod port for aid deliveries into Gaza, but stressed that more should be done to bring the required relief given the scale of needs in Gaza." Israel promised last week it would open the Erez crossing in the north after a tense telephone call between Joe Biden and Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu in which the US president demanded "immediate action" on aid. **Page 2**

OJ Simpson dies of cancer at 76



OJ Simpson, a Pro Football Hall of Fame running back who was accused of, and ultimately acquitted, in the 1994 killings of his former wife and her friend in "The Trial of the Century," has died after a battle with cancer. He was 76. Simpson leaves an off-field legacy that is marred by legal troubles. That includes his trial in the deaths of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald L Goldman, and his conviction of armed robbery and kidnapping. **Page 6**

'Ohtani's interpreter stole $16mn'

Federal prosecutors allege that Shohei Ohtani's former interpreter siphoned more than $16mn from the Los Angeles Dodgers star's bank account to pay off gambling debts to an illegal sportsbook. Ippei Mizuhara faces a charge of bank fraud that carries a maximum penalty of up to 30 years in prison and/or a $1mn fine. The funds were allegedly stolen over a two-year period from an account where Ohtani received his baseball salary, and without Ohtani's knowledge.

Attacks on N-plant mark new risks

The recent attacks on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant "mark the beginning of a new and gravely dangerous front of the war", the UN atomic agency's director general said yesterday. The attacks "marked a major escalation of the nuclear safety and security dangers in Ukraine," Rafael Grossi of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said in Vienna. He spoke at an emergency meeting of the 35 members of the Board of Governors, called by both Russia and Ukraine. The Zaporizhzhia plant (ZNPP), which Russia has occupied since March 2022, has been hit by a series of drone attacks since Sunday.

Top US general visits Israel amid 'threat'

The top US commander for the Middle East is in Israel for talks on security threats with the country's military officials, the Pentagon said yesterday. The visit comes amid fears that Iran will retaliate after an Israeli strike that killed seven members of Tehran's elite Revolutionary Guards, including two generals, in Syria earlier this month. General Erik Kurilla is in Israel "to meet with key IDF leadership... (and) discuss the current security threats in the region," an official said.

COMMUNITY
See Page: 4

Hamas 'still' seeking truce deal: Haniyeh

"My sons were not active Hamas fighters. They were going on Eid day visiting relatives"

Reuters
Doha/Jerusalem

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said yesterday his Palestinian resistance group was still seeking a deal for a ceasefire and hostage release after an Israeli strike killed three of his sons in an attack in Gaza.

Speaking while receiving condolences, Haniyeh said "the interests of the Palestinian people are placed above everything" when asked if the strike would affect the talks on a truce and hostage release.

"We are seeking to reach a deal but the occupation is still procrastinating and evading a response to the demands," he said.

Israeli forces carried out Wednesday's attack without authorisation from top commanders or senior leaders, Israeli media said yesterday raising fears among families of hostages it would derail efforts to secure their release from Gaza.

"The key to any agreement with the occupation starts with a permanent ceasefire and our top priority in the ongoing negotiation process is the unconditional return of the displaced and the complete withdrawal of forces from the Gaza Strip," Hamas spokesperson Abdel-Latif al-Qanoua said in a statement.

"Without that, an agreement will not happen," he added.



Ismail Haniyeh (File)

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government has faced mounting criticism from Israel's main ally, the US, over the conduct of its military campaign and the chain of command in pursuing its objectives.

Israel's Walla news agency reported that neither Netanyahu nor Defence Minister Yoav Gallant had been told in advance of Wednesday's strike on Haniyeh's sons, which was co-ordinated by the Israeli military and the Shin Bet intelligence service.

Quoting senior Israeli officials, it reported that the three adult sons, Amir, Mohamed and Hazem Haniyeh, had been targeted as fighters and not because they were the sons of Hamas's political leader.

Haniyeh, 61, told Reuters his sons were not active Hamas fighters. "These claims are lies to justify this crime and massacre," he said.

"They were going on Eid day visiting relatives," he added.

The conservative *Israel Hayom* daily quoted unnamed military officials saying the strike was carried out in accordance with procedure.

US, UK, Russia, Germany urge Iran to exercise restraint

The United States, the United Kingdom, Russia and Germany yesterday urged countries in the Middle East to show restraint and Israel said it was preparing to "meet all its security needs" in a region on edge over an Iranian threat to strike Israel.

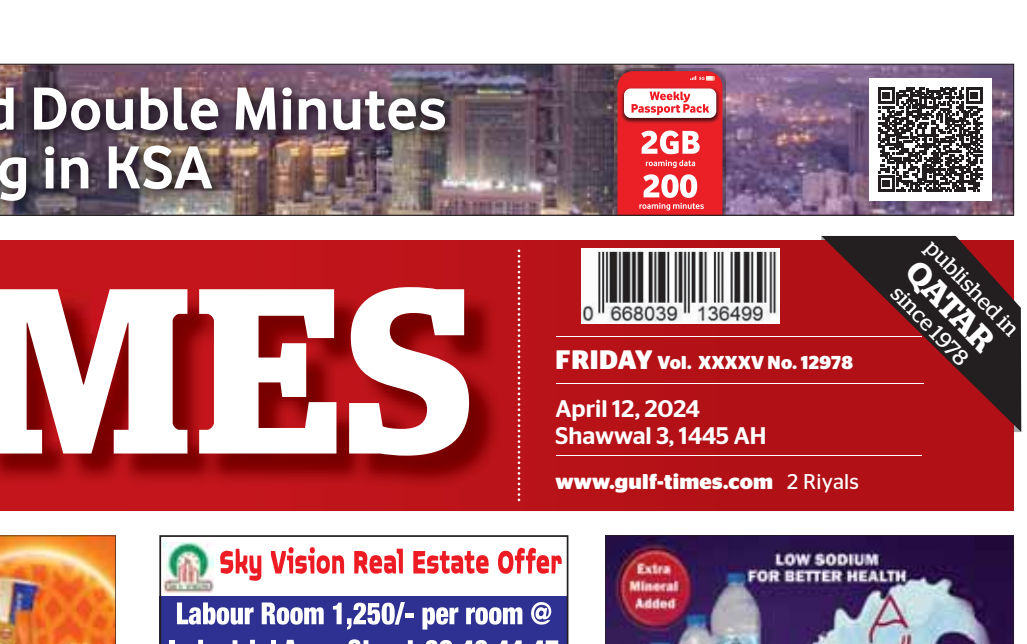
The German airline Lufthansa extended a suspension of its flights to the Iranian capital and Russia warned against travel to the Middle East.

Iran has vowed revenge for the April 1 airstrike on its embassy compound in Damascus that killed a top Iranian general and six other Iranian military officers, ratcheting up tension in a region already strained by the Gaza war.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke to the Turkish, Chinese and Saudi Arabian foreign ministers in the past 24 hours to make clear that escalation in the Middle East is not in anyone's interest, the State Department said yesterday.

British foreign minister David Cameron said he had made clear to his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, that Iran should not draw the Middle East into a wider conflict.

Dazzling fireworks show at Al Wakra



A dazzling fireworks display explodes across the night sky over Al Wakra, painting it with a kaleidoscope of colours. Eid festivities continued all over the country with several activities on the second day of the Eid yesterday. **PICTURE:** Ram Chand

Ashghal to raise sustainability and safety of road network

The Public Works Authority (Ashghal) is going ahead with its mission to adopt numerous initiatives to ensure the highest standards of environmental sustainability in development works.

Ashghal, according to its recent reports, is applying the latest mechanisms and technologies to raise the efficiency and safety of its road network.

In order to achieve sustainability, Ashghal is making use of recycling materials while implementing construction works. The volume of recycled materials and their use in projects reached more than 11mn tonnes, which is about 49% of the total material.

Ashghal, according to the report, has established three strategically located construction material recycling zones, in the North, West and South of Doha to optimise resource efficiency. These facilities became operational in 2020 for processing and recycling projects' construction waste materials (excavated material, reclaimed asphalt, concrete and demolition waste) instead of disposing them in landfills.

Ashghal's designated recycling zones have contributed to reducing the distance of transportation for landfill disposal by 60km on average, in addition to reducing the demand for imported construction materials, leading to the reduction of carbon emissions.

Sustainability initiatives implemented in Ashghal's projects





include the recycling and use of rubber tyres as an enhanced material for bitumen use modified with crumb rubber (CRMB) which is used in asphalt mixes, where more than one thousand tonnes of this material was produced in 2023, thereby increasing the stability and durability of asphalt for longer periods of time and reducing noise on the road. The initiative also contributed to recycling older tyres rather than disposing of them in landfills to preserve the environment and achieve sustainability.

Reclaimed asphalt from existing roads is also used before the commencement of development projects and is recycled in the asphalt layers that are paved on new roads and upgraded roads. Last year, 93,000 tonnes of reclaimed asphalt was reused in paved roads asphalt layers. Concrete and extracted materials of excavation and aggregate works are recycled within the construction works of the projects, as 2mn tonnes were used in base layers and 8mn tonnes were used in backfill work and 176,000 tonnes were used as a material for pipe and cable insulation.

Ashghal is using the latest sustainability techniques for road operation and maintenance to increase its longevity and reduce maintenance waste by scanning roads, bridges and drainage networks using the latest inspection techniques to identify any defects prior to it surfacing and conduct proactive maintenance work.

To optimise water usage, water resulting from dewatering is used instead of potable water in projects. This reduces carbon emissions resulting from water transportation and supply and the consumption of natural resources. About 2mn tonnes of groundwater was reclaimed and treated in Roads Projects Department projects in 2023.

Many of the projects have smart transportation systems which can be easily developed and improved in the future. This is with the aim of managing road and traffic networks, thereby increasing the efficiency of the road network, enhancing traffic safety and reducing congestion.

7th Coffee, Tea and Chocolates Festival kicks off

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

The 7th edition of 'Coffee, Tea and Chocolate Festival' kicked off at the Old Doha Port yesterday (April 11), hosting more than 50 companies that offer an array of popular and signature beverages and sweets.

Running for 10 days until April 20, the popular family-oriented event transforms the historic Old Doha Port into a hub of gastronomic delight and entertainment.

Visitors, mostly families and children, are treated with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, the subtle fragrance of tea, and the rich scent of chocolate wafting through the air.



Speaking to Gulf Times, festival project manager Jad Kansour highlighted the importance of an event that caters to families, saying: "It's a cozy event, everything is related to coffee, tea, and chocolate. What attracts the people mostly is the kids' areas since you know Qatar is all about families."

With large dedicated spaces for entertainment and play, he said the festival ensures a fun-filled experience for visitors of all ages.

Kansour highlighted the festival's commitment to supporting local businesses, with many of the participants being homegrown companies alongside international brands.

Another attraction is a food court that boasts delicacies from around the world, with approximately eight restaurants that offer diverse culinary experiences.

In a region where coffee and tea culture thrives, Kansour said the festival taps into the growing popularity of these beverages among Qataris, Saudis, and Emiratis, among other nationals in the region.

"It's very popular in Qatar and Qataris want coffee in the morning and at night," he said, adding that besides beverages and chocolates, the festival also showcases various types of honey from Spain and Azerbaijan, as well as street foods from different regions.

About the event's venue, Kansour underscored Old Doha Port's rising status and allure as a trendy tourist spot, saying: "Old Doha Port is becoming a favourite destination, for six months the weather is amazing and we're coming here to celebrate it after Ramadan and for the Eid". **To Page 2**

QATAR

China backs full UN membership for Palestine, two-state solution

QNA
Beijing



China has announced its support for granting full membership to Palestine in the United Nations.

The announcement was made by Mao Ning, spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, at a press conference yesterday in response to a question about China's position on Palestinian membership in the UN.

"The ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the severe humanitarian crisis it has caused are yet another reminder that the only way to end the vicious cycle of Palestinian-Israeli conflicts is to fully implement the two-state solution, establish an independent state of Palestine and redress the historical injustice long suffered by the Palestinians," Mao Ning said.

"China supports full UN membership for Palestine and supports speedy council action to that end."

Palestine had formally requested the UN Security Council to consider its application for full UN membership, which it submitted in 2011. The Council met on April 8 and referred the application to the Committee on the Admission of New Members for discussion.

UN Security Council calls for immediate lifting of restrictions on aid to Gaza Strip



The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has called for the immediate lifting of all restrictions on the delivery of aid to the Gaza Strip. In a statement issued yesterday, the council members expressed their deep concern about the catastrophic humanitarian situation and the impending famine in Gaza in light of the ongoing Israeli occupation aggression against the Gaza Strip since October 7. The Council members called for respect for the protection of humanitarian workers and condemned all forms of violence and hostile acts against civilians. **(QNA)**

Katara continues to entertain its visitors during Eid holidays

Katara the Culture Village Foundation has continued to amaze and entertain its visitors throughout the Eid holidays with its various featured activities, programmes and shows, in addition to the ongoing arts exhibitions and workshops. Parents and families in particular have appreciated the diversity of activities that give focus on children, which entertain and educate them simultaneously while keeping them engaged in activities that enhance their ability to interact positively with others. Salem Mabkhut al-Marri, Director of Public Relations and Communications Department at Katara, pointed out that Katara has maintained almost 40 different activities and entertainment programmes that will go on continuously throughout the four Eid holidays daily from 3pm until 10pm. Besides, the Eid gift distribution for children will go on and the fireworks as well. He stressed that all such activities have been designed to target various age categories and different people aiming to appeal to them and give them quality entertainment experience. He also pointed out that Katara offers its visitors all the necessary services and facilities for their comfort and convenience besides the wonderful scenery and natural surroundings.









7th Coffee, Tea and Chocolates Festival kicks off

From Page 1

Organisers plan to hold the event in different locations, ensuring each iteration offers a unique experience for attendees such as the previous edition at Al Bidda Park during the Expo 2023 Doha. It provided visitors the opportunity to engage in a range of activities, including barista competitions, tasting sessions, and seminars, among others.

Kansour said the festival is set to be held twice yearly, reflecting its growing significance within Qatar's cultural landscape.

He added that it has become a networking hub, fostering a sense of community among coffee, tea, and chocolate aficionados in the country.









Jad Kansour highlights Old Doha Port's rising status and allure as a trendy tourist spot. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

Nomas Center embarks on journey to explore cultural treasures of Uzbekistan

QNA
Doha

The Nomas Center of the Ministry of Culture is set to organise an expedition to Uzbekistan through which the participants will strive to learn about the country's Islamic and civilizational legacy.

The expedition will take place from April 12-19 with 59 participants from affiliates and staffers at Nomas Center in a mission to extend the humanitarian and cultural bridges to the nations. The initiative includes exploring the tourist, archaeological, cultural, and patrimonial attractions, as well as holding workshops and training sessions.

To mark this occasion, Director of the Nomas Center Ghanem Abdulrahman al-Kuwari said through these events, the Ministry of Culture seeks to extend the humanitarian and cultural bridges, in addition to promoting young people's expertise from a variety of age groups through cultural expeditions to cities and civilizational landmarks in various territories around the globe. The centre primarily works to upgrade young people's talents to help them invest in their leisure time, as well as learn and practice numerous activities relevant to the heritage, in addition to customs and traditions within the mission and vision of the Ministry of Culture to promote the national identity and unlock the young people's talents through expeditions, workshops and training sessions.

The initiative includes exploring the tourist, archaeological, cultural, and patrimonial attractions, as well as holding workshops and training sessions

KMCC Qatar holds Eid meet



The Kerala Muslim Cultural Centre (KMCC) Qatar state committee organised a gathering to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, a statement said. Named 'Eid Al Hubb', the gathering featured cultural programmes and prize distribution for Ramadan quiz competition winners. Indian ambassador Vipul, the chief guest, hailed KMCC Qatar for its services to the Indian community, noting that the organisation has left an impressive mark while implementing a slew of welfare and charity activities. KMCC Qatar's voluntary services during the Covid-19 pandemic drew praise from the envoy, who observed that the organisation won accolades from non-Indian communities as well. KMCC Qatar state president Dr Abdul Samad presided. Advisory board vice-chairman S A M Basheer and members Abdul Nasar Nachi, P V Mohamed Moulavi, C V Khalid and K V Mohamed were present. State committee members P K Abdul Raheem, T T K Basheer, Sidheeq Vazhakkad, Thahir Thahakkutty and V T M Sadikh led the activities. General secretary Saleem Nalakath welcomed the gathering and vice-president K Mohamed Essa proposed a vote of thanks.

Gaza war rages on



Palestinian medics transport casualties into an ambulance following Israeli bombardment on the Firas market area in Gaza City yesterday amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Hamas group.



Palestinians react at Al Maamadani Hospital where casualties of Israeli bombardment on the Firas market area in Gaza City were evacuated yesterday amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Hamas group.

Israel on alert after Iranian threat

AFP
Palestinian Territories

Israel was on alert yesterday after its arch foe Iran threatened reprisals over a strike in Syria this month that killed two Iranian generals, and as the war against Hamas ground on in Gaza. Days after Israel strengthened its air defences and paused leave for combat units, the United States also warned of the risk of an attack by Iran or its allied groups at a time when Middle East tensions have soared.

Iran is "threatening to launch a significant attack on Israel," US President Joe Biden said Wednesday, pledging "ironclad" support for its top regional ally despite diplomatic tensions over Israel's military conduct in Gaza. Israel was widely blamed for an April 1 attack that destroyed Iran's consulate building in Damascus and killed seven members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including two generals.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on Wednesday warned that Israel "must be punished and will be punished", days after one of his advisers had said that Israeli embassies are "no longer safe".

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz swiftly replied to Khamenei on social media site X that "if Iran attacks from its territory, Israel will respond and attack Iran". Biden said later Wednesday that he had told Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu that "our commitment to Israel's security against these threats from Iran and its proxies is ironclad".

"Let me say it again – ironclad. We're going to do all we can to protect Israel's security."

The Axios news site reported that US Central Command chief Michael Kurilla was set to visit Israel to discuss the situation with Defence Minister Yoav Gallant. German airline Lufthansa said it had suspended flights to and from Tehran, probably until Thursday, "due to the current situation in the Middle East". And Russia warned its citizens to refrain from travelling to Israel, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.

Israel and the United States have long faced off against Iran and the so-called "Axis of Resistance" coalition of groups based in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. The Syria strike killed Iranian IRGC Brigadier General Mohamed Reza Zahedi, who led the foreign operations wing the Quds Force in Syria and Lebanon.

Regional tensions have been stoked by the Gaza war. Israel's offensive has killed at least 33,482 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry.

Much of the long blockaded territory has been reduced to a bomb-cratered wasteland of destroyed buildings with yet more bodies feared under the mountains of rubble.

An Israeli siege has deprived Gaza's 2.4mn people of most food, water, fuel, medicines and other basic supplies, the dire shortages only alleviate by sporadic aid deliveries. Israeli war cabinet member Benny Gantz said on Wednesday that "Hamas is defeated" militarily but pledged to keep fighting "what remains of it" in the years to come.

An Israeli air strike on Wednesday killed three sons of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh. Haniyeh's brother Nahed told AFP inside Gaza that their family are "in the same situation" as other Gazans. "There is no difference between the sons of leaders and the sons of the people," he said.

Haniyeh insisted that his sons' deaths would not influence the group's position in ongoing talks in Cairo on a possible temporary ceasefire and hostage release deal. Those talks, which started Sunday, have brought no signs of a breakthrough on a plan presented by US, Qatari and Egyptian mediators, which Hamas said it was studying.

Washington has also ramped up pressure on Netanyahu to agree to a truce, increase aid flows and abandon plans to invade the territory's far-southern city of Rafah. About 1.5mn civilians are sheltering in Rafah, the last Gazan city yet to face a ground incursion. Biden labelled Netanyahu's handling of the war a "mistake" in an interview broadcast on Tuesday.

Washington's tougher line has brought some results, the US Agency for International Development said. Recent days had seen a "sea change" in aid deliveries, said USAID administrator Samantha Power, although she insisted Israel needs to do more.

Gallant promised Israel would "flood Gaza with aid", using a crossing point on its border with Gaza, streamlined checks and two new routes organised with Jordan. He said they expected to hit 500 aid trucks entering Gaza a day, the average pre-war level. Israel has faced a chorus of international criticism over its handling of the war.

Spain is among several Western nations, including Ireland and Australia, to have suggested they would recognise a Palestinian state in the near future as a starting point for wider peace talks.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez warned that Israel's "disproportionate response" in Gaza risked "destabilising the Middle East and, as a consequence, the entire world".

Israel's foreign ministry slammed Ireland's new prime minister Simon Harris for not mentioning the hostages held in Gaza during a speech to parliament.

Moroccan accused of UK murder provoked by Zionist attacks

A Moroccan asylum seeker accused of stabbing a stranger to death told British police he carried out the attack because Israel had "killed children" in Gaza, his trial heard yesterday.

Ahmed Alid, 45, also allegedly attacked his housemate, a Christian convert, and assaulted two police officers, during the incidents in Hartlepool, northeast England, last October.

Prosecutors said he murdered 70-year-old Terence Carney after a chance meeting in the street when he was carrying two knives. He stabbed housemate, Javed Nouri, as he slept in bed. Alid repeatedly wounded the sleeping Nouri in the chest, Teesside Crown Court heard at the start of the trial.

The 31-year-old survived the assault but Carney died after being stabbed six times in the chest, abdomen and back.

Police arrested Alid nearby with a bloody knife in his waistband, and he later told officers that he had acted because of the Gaza war, the court heard. "He said he had wanted to kill them because of the conflict in Gaza and to further his desire that Palestine would be free from the Zionists, by which he meant Israel," prosecutor Jonathan Sandiford said.

"The defendant said he would have killed more people if he had been able to do so."

Sandiford added Alid had described Carney as an "innocent victim" during his interrogation, but that he had been killed "because Britain had created the Zionist entity — Israel — and should make it leave". "They killed children and I killed an old man," he told officers, the prosecutor said.

Alid has pleaded not guilty to charges of murder, attempted murder and two counts of assault.

Prosecutors are treating the case as having a terror connection or aim, meaning he would face a stiffer sentence if convicted.

The trial is expected to last 10 days. Britain's most senior counter-terrorism officer warned this year that police have seen an "unprecedented" rise in terror threats following the conflict in Gaza that started on October 7.

Metropolitan Police assistant commissioner Matt Jukes said the war has become a "radicalisation moment". —**AFP**

War-ravaged Sudanese people have had enough: UN mission

AFP
Geneva

The Sudanese people have had enough of the devastating conflict raging inside the country, UN investigators said yesterday as the fighting rolls on into a second year. Sudan's warring parties must commit to an immediate ceasefire, end attacks on civilians and ensure unimpeded access to humanitarian aid, the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan insisted.

"It's beyond time for this devastating war to stop," said Mohamed Chande Othman, the mission's chair. "The Sudanese people have endured enough. The warring parties must find a path for peace and respect for human rights." Fighting in Sudan erupted on April 15 last year between the regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces.

The conflict has killed thousands and sparked a humanitarian disaster. In October, the UN Human Rights Council established a fact-finding mission to probe all alleged human rights and international humanitarian law violations in the conflict. Othman, a former chief justice of Tanzania, said the Sudanese army and the paramilitaries had shown little regard for protecting civilians, and the mission was investigating reports of repeated attacks on non-combatants, schools and hospitals.



Children carry packs of humanitarian aid at the school housing displaced Sudanese who fled violence in war-torn Sudan, near the eastern city of Gedaref, in a file picture.

Attacks on aid convoys have also been reported, the mission said in a statement. "Aid agencies are persevering even though there have been attacks and looting of humanitarian convoys, personnel and warehouses," said Mona Rishmawi, one of the mission's three investigators.

"We are also investigating the deliberate blocking of humanitarian assistance destined for civilians living in areas controlled by the opposite side," she said. The mission also raised concerns about poor harvests, soaring grain prices and the risk of a food catastrophe. They called on the two sides to commit to a comprehensive peace process.

The mission will submit a comprehensive report to the Human Rights Council at its September-October session. More than 8.5mn people have fled their homes since the fighting broke out, with nearly 1.8 million having escaped across the country's borders.

The UN refugee agency said Tuesday that thousands of people were still fleeing the country daily.

Lufthansa extends suspension of Tehran flights, FMs hold call

Reuters
Frankfurt



Germany's Lufthansa extended a suspension of its flights to Tehran yesterday with the Middle East on alert for Iranian retaliation for a suspected Israeli air strike on Iran's embassy in Syria. Lufthansa and its subsidiary Austrian Airlines are the only two Western carriers flying into Tehran, which is mostly served by Turkish and Middle Eastern airlines.

The region and the United States have been on alert for an attack by Iran since April 1, when Israeli warplanes are suspected to have bombed the Iranian embassy compound in Syria. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock called her Iranian counterpart Hossein Amirabdollahian to call for "maximum restraint" on all sides and avoiding further escalation.

Lufthansa said it had suspended flights to and from Tehran until probably April 13, extending its suspension by two days, to avoid its crew having to disembark to spend the night in the Iranian capital. "Last weekend it was decided not to operate a flight to Tehran with a layover for the crew due to the security situation," a spokesperson said. "On the route, the crew has to spend the night in Tehran before the return flight to Frankfurt. We want to avoid disembarking for safety reasons."

Austrian Airlines, which is owned by Lufthansa and flies from Vienna to Tehran six times a week, said it was still planning to fly on Thursday but was adjusting timings to avoid an overnight layover.

"The Austrian Airlines flight to Tehran scheduled for today will take place, but will depart from Vienna several hours late in order to minimise the time between landing and departure in Tehran," a spokesperson said. Iranian air space is also a key overflight route for Emirates' and Qatar Airways' flights to Europe and North America.

Emirates, Qatar Airways, Turkish Airlines, Aeroflot and Air Arabia, among the airlines which fly to Tehran, did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Flydubai said its flights to Iran are still currently scheduled to operate. Businesses in Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Turkiye were closed for the Eid al-Fitr holiday.

"Avoiding further regional escalation must be in everyone's interest. We urge all actors in the region to act responsibly and exercise maximum restraint," the German foreign ministry said in a post on X.

US says downed 11 Yemen rebel drones

AFP
Dubai

The US Central Command said on X, that its forces had shot down three drones launched from Houthi-controlled areas on Wednesday morning, and eight drones later the same day

The United States military said yesterday it had shot down 11 drones belonging to Yemen's Houthi rebels, after the group claimed it had targeted Israeli and American ships off the Gulf of Aden.

The US Central Command said on X, formerly Twitter, that its forces had shot down three drones launched from Houthi-controlled areas on Wednesday morning, and eight drones later the same day.

"It was determined the UAVs presented an imminent threat to US, coalition, and merchant vessels in the region," the statement said using the acronym for unmanned aerial vehicles. The latest Houthi attacks targeted two Israeli ships as well as an American commercial vessel and a US warship, the Houthis said in a statement.

"The ships were targeted with a number of suitable naval missiles and drones," the statement said. Houthi rebels have launched dozens of missile and drone attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden since November, leading to retaliatory strikes by the United States against Houthi targets in Yemen.

The rebels say their actions are in solidarity with Palestinians during Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Israel's main ally the United States formed a multinational coalition in December to protect maritime traffic, but has so far failed to prevent the attacks.

COMMUNITY

Eid Bazaar, Mehendi Night at ICC





The Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) hosted a grand Eid Bazaar & Mehendi Night over two days. Indian ambassador Vipul inaugurated the celebration. There were stalls of handicrafts, leather products, imitation jewellery, readymade Indian traditional clothes, Indian food and live henna stations. ICC president A P Manikantan welcomed the gathering and vice-president Subramanya Hebbagelu proposed a vote of thanks. Advisory council chairman Sathish Pillai, Indian Community Benevolent Forum president Shanavas Bava, ICC general secretary Mohan Kumar, past president P N Babu Rajan, management committee members and community leaders were present.

Garangao at Ideal Indian School



The Junior Section of Ideal Indian School celebrated Garangao recently. Children dressed in colourful traditional attire, carried decorated baskets and bags. The programme started with a prayer by Abdul Rahman (4C). A special speech was delivered by Hamda Musthafa (4G). Tanu Madhvi was the host. The choir performed a group song. Headmaster Sajid Shamim and section co-ordinator Jessena Abdulla joined the celebrations. A highlight was the students parading around the entire school with Garangao music playing. Principal Shaik Shamim Saheb, headmaster Sajid Shamim, and other heads of sections distributed nuts and candies to the children.



Eid dresses gifted to workers



Telangana Welfare Association – Qatar (TWA-Q) along with the Centre for Indian Community (CIC) Qatar – Rayyan Zone & ITPN distributed Eid dresses to about 85 blue collar workers and poor fishermen at Old Doha Port.

TWA-Q president Mohamed Abdul Rauf thanked the community for supporting the Eid gift initiative.

Chairman Khaja Nizamuddin recalled that TWA-Q launched the gesture since three years and would continue it with support from the community.

CIC executive members Subul Abdul Aziz, Siddiq Vengara, Thaher T K, ITPN executive members Faisal, Sajeer, and Sakeer and community leaders Sayeed and Abdul Raheem attended the event. TWA-Q officials Naveed Dastagir, Mohamed Shoieb, Mohamed Taha, and Syed Bakar co-ordinated.

ICC Youth Wing holds blood donation camp



Indian Cultural Centre's (ICC) Youth Wing, in collaboration with Hamad Medical Corporation's Blood Donation Centre, organised a blood donation camp at Grand Mall in Asian Town Industrial Area. Indian embassy first secretary Harshvardan Patel, the chief guest, lauded the initiative. ICC president Manikantan A P thanked the participants and volunteers. Indian Community Benevolent Forum president Shanavas Bawa, ICC general secretary Mohan Kumar and other leaders were present. ICC Youth Wing chairman Edwin Sebastian led the event. Joint convener Pallavi Jayaraj welcomed the gathering and welfare convener Brammakumar proposed a vote of thanks.

Orientation programme for senior students at DPS-MIS

DPS-Modern Indian School organised an orientation programme for students of Grades XI and XII.

There was a Facebook live for parents.

Principal Asna Nafees gave valuable pointers to the students, stressing on the school policies, and advised them to stay focused on their goals.

She also emphasised the school's mission to educate students beyond academic success, guiding them towards becoming conscientious citizens of the world.

The academic co-ordinator, Dr Rakhi Mishra, apprised the students of the rules and regulations, and behaviour, discipline and cyber policies of the school.

Grade XI class representative Kakoli Biswas explained the assessment process, promotion policy and academic award criteria for both Grades XI and XII.



Jose Thomas, CBSE co-ordinator for Grades XI and XII briefed the students on the CBSE guidelines and AISSCE examination framework.

Jolly Sabu, university admission counsellor provided insight into college application process, timelines, and deadlines of the universities.

Priti Modi, activity co-ordinator, gave the students a sneak peek into the plethora of activities specially designed to sharpen the latent talents of the students and develop life-skills.

Speech workshop held for children



District 116 Qatar Toastmasters Speakers' Bureau joined hands with the recently concluded Expo 2023 Doha to organise a speech workshop attended by around 50 children. The initiative was led by Expo organising committee secretary-general Dr Fayqa Ashkanani and Bureau chair Shoba Raj with support from District 116 programme quality director Sabeena M K and other officials from both sides.

World Autism Day observed at MES



MES Indian School observed World Autism Day recently. As a part of the activity, blue ribbons, the primary colour designated for autism and associated with calmness and acceptance, were distributed by the Psychology students of Grade XII. This gesture was aimed to raise awareness about autism and show support for individuals on the autism spectrum within the school community. The students organised an awareness session. A talk show by senior students to support and understand autism in children was relayed through the school's public address. Harleen Kaur, Irene Thomas and Fashna Abdul Samad from the Department of Guidance and Counselling co-ordinated the event.



MES KG marks first day of new school year

The Golden Jubilee year batch of Kindergarten students at MES Indian School marked its first day recently. The tiny tots were welcomed by the iconic mascots Mickey and Minnie Mouse.

As part of the Golden Jubilee celebration, parents were invited to participate in a special event where a 'Golden Gateway Ticket' was hidden under five chairs. The parents who found their tickets were rewarded with gifts adding an element of fun and anticipation to the day.

'Embrace and Release Sentiments Graffiti Board was set up, where parents could jot down their feelings and reflections, allowing them to connect with others experiencing similar emotions. Principal, teachers and other staff members welcomed the children.



Corporate climate pledge weakened by carbon offsets move

By Nick Perry
AFP

The world's main benchmark for vetting corporate climate action has been accused by its own staff of "greenwashing" after allowing businesses to use carbon credits to offset pollution from their value chains.

The ruling by the Science Based Targets Initiative (SBTi) was slammed as a "coup" yesterday and has sparked a revolt by staff who want the decision reversed and the non-profit's chief executive and board to resign.

Experts say it could irreversibly damage the credibility of the SBTi, which is partnered with the UN Global Compact and WWF, and is the gold standard for assessing the net zero plans of big business.

An internal letter sent to SBTi leadership, and seen by AFP, said that the board's decision was taken without adequate consultation, defied science, and "resulted in significant harm to our organisation's reputation and viability".

"We stand ready to support any efforts aimed at ensuring that the SBTi does not become a greenwashing platform where decisions are unduly influenced by lobbyists, driven by potential conflicts of interest and poor adherence to existing governance procedures," read the letter to SBTi's chief executive and board of trustees.

"In the event that our concerns are not addressed, SBTi staff will have no choice but to take further action," it added, without elaborating on what that would mean.

It was signed by staff from "the Target Validation Team, Target Operations Team, the Technical Department, Communications, Impact and IT, and multiple department heads".

Comment has been sought from SBTi, which receives funding from the Bezos Earth Fund and IKEA Foundation, among others.

On April 9, SBTi issued a statement rolling back its previous opposition to the use of carbon credits to offset Scope 3 emissions.

These occur in the value chain, and represents the lion's share of the carbon footprints – in some cases more than 90% – of most companies.

Carbon credits are generated by projects that reduce or avoid emissions – like renewable energy, tree planting and forest protection – and sold to companies that want to offset pollution from their activities.

"The voice of business on this issue is clear ... this change empowers companies to bring more innovation and investment into cutting emissions from their value chains," María Mendiluce, chief executive of the We Mean Business Coalition, and a board trustee to SBTi, said in a statement.

However, critics say that offsets give corporations a free pass to keep polluting without cleaning up their act, and their usage to make claims of "carbon neutrality" has become increasingly contentious.

Gilles Dufrasne from Carbon Market Watch, who sits on the technical advisory group to SBTi, said allowing their usage by companies represented a "fundamental U-turn on SBTi policy so far".

"It is pretty much a coup from the board," he told AFP, adding at least one member of the advisory group had resigned in protest. "It's extremely serious, I've never seen anything like it."

Verification by SBTi allows companies to say their climate plans align with science and the goals of the Paris agreement to limit global warming.

More than 4,000 companies and financial institutions have sought to have their net zero claims verified by SBTi, the nonprofit said.

Dufrasne said that the decision was "extremely damaging" to corporate climate responsibility because it sent a signal that companies could just pay someone else if they can't meet their own targets.

"I'm not sure if SBTi's credibility can survive this," he said.

Carsten Warnecke from the NewClimate Institute, a nonprofit policy organisation, said in a statement: "Anyone who still believed that the voice of science still had weight in this initiative has been proven wrong."

Russia, Kazakhstan battle record floods as river levels rise further

Reuters
Moscow

The Russian city of Orenburg battled rising water levels yesterday after major rivers across Russia and Kazakhstan burst their banks in the worst flooding seen in the areas in nearly a century.

The deluge of melt water has forced over 120,000 people from their homes in Russia's Ural Mountains, Siberia and Kazakhstan as major rivers such as the Ural, which flows through Kazakhstan into the Caspian, overwhelmed embankments.

Residents in the city of Orenburg said the waters of the Ural rose swiftly and to far beyond breaking point, forcing them to flee with just their children, pets and a few belongings.

"It came very quickly at night," Taisiya, 71, told Reuters in Orenburg, a city of 550,000 about 1,200km (750 miles) east of Moscow.

"By the time I got ready, I couldn't get out," she said.

Whole areas of the city were underwater, and the Ural rose swiftly to 10.87m (more than 35'), far above the level considered by local authorities as safe.

Orenburg Governor Denis Pasler told President Vladimir Putin that the situation had peaked, adding however that water levels would still rise.

He said that 11,972 homes had been flooded and if waters rose further 19,412 more people would be in danger.

The flooding has struck Russia's Urals and northern Kazakhstan worst, though waters are also rising in southern parts of Western Siberia, the largest hydrocarbon basin in the world, and in some places near the Volga, Europe's biggest river.

Water levels were also rising in Siberia's Tyumen, where 7,291 people were evacuated, and in Kurgan, where 6,151 people were evacuated.

The flooding of the Ishim river in Russia's Tyumen region is due to peak by April 23-25.

After the Ural burst through dam embankments in Orsk, upstream from Orenburg, last Friday, some residents expressed anger over how local officials had handled the situation, demanding greater compensation and begging for help from Putin.

Putin held a video meeting with Emergencies Minister Alexander Kurenkov and the governors of Orenburg, Kurgan and Tyumen, the worst affected regions.

In Orenburg, some residents expressed disappointment that the local officials had not done enough to prepare for the annual snow melt.



A general view shows a flooded area during sunset in Orenburg, Russia.



Right: A road sign is seen at the entrance to the flooded residential area in Orenburg, Russia.



A resident is evacuated by members of Kirov's Regional Fire and Rescue service in Orenburg.



In this pool photograph distributed by the Russian state agency Sputnik, Russia's President Vladimir Putin chairs a meeting on flood response efforts in various regions of Russia.

In his first public comments on the floods, Putin told officials to focus on helping people.

"In some places the water has not arrived yet and in other places it has not flowed away yet, but we need to think right now on how to rebuilding housing," the president said.

Spring flooding is a usual part of life across Russia – which has an area equal to the United States and Australia combined – as the heavy winter snows melt, swelling powerful rivers in Russia and Central Asia.

This year, though, a combination of factors triggered unusually severe flooding, according to emergency workers.

They said soils were waterlogged before winter and then were frozen under deep snow falls which melted very fast in rising spring temperatures and heavy rains.

Climate researchers have long warned that rising temperatures could increase the incidence of extreme weather events, and that heavily forested Russia is of major importance in the global climate equation.

In Kurgan, a region which straddles the Tobol river, water levels are rising.

About 14,000 workers were working around the clock to raise the 30km long Kurgan embankment, Governor Vadim Shumkov said.

In the city of Kurgan water levels are at just under 4m, Shumkov said.

Kazakhstan has also been badly hit.

The emergencies ministry said yesterday that the number of evacuees stood at over 98,000, and a state of emergency remained in effect in eight regions of the country.

Emergency workers have removed 8.8mn cu m (310mn cubic feet) of water from flooded areas, the ministry said.

The Kazakh government said movement was restricted on hundreds of kilometres of roads in the Aktobe, Akmola, Atyrau, Kostanai, Mangistau and North Kazakhstan regions.

Three Dutch skiers die, one injured in Austria avalanche

AFP/Reuters
Vienna

Three Dutch skiers were killed, while another was injured in an avalanche in the Austrian province of Tyrol yesterday, police said in a statement.

"Shortly before 11am (0900 GMT), during an ascent towards the Martin Buesch Shelter east of the Talleit Peak, an avalanche roughly 180m (590') long and 80m wide occurred," the statement said.

The four were part of a 17-member group from the Netherlands on a ski touring excursion near the renowned resort of Soelden, together with four local Austrian guides.

"There are three fatalities," a police spokesman said.

The avalanche swept away four members of the group, two of whom were dead when rescuers found them.

The two others were rescued injured; one was flown to hospital by helicopter and the other remained on the mountain, the statement said.

The skier who remained on the mountain died, a police spokesman said later.

The police did not immediately have further details as to the victims' identities.

Avalanches are a recurring threat in Europe's mountain ranges and have claimed hundreds of lives in recent decades.

About 20 people a year have died on average over the past decade from avalanches in Austria, a top Alpine winter sports destination.

Greece offers payment to tourists evacuated from wildfires last year

AFP
Athens

The Greek government has offered compensation to tourists evacuated from wildfires on the holiday island of Rhodes last year so they can stay there again.

Tourists of any nationality "who stayed in hotels that were evacuated during the forest fires in Rhodes in July 2023, have the possibility to obtain financial assistance", the tourism ministry said in a statement.

Visitors must register on a Rodos Week website set up by the ministry to obtain money towards six nights in an equivalent hotel to where they were in 2023.

Beneficiaries would get up to €300 ($321) to stay in a double room in a three-star hotel, €50 ($54) per night.

For a six-night stay in a family room in a five-star hotel, the government compensation increases to €500 ($535).

Tourists who stayed in rented apartments and houses are not entitled to the offer. And the trips are to be made before May 31 or between October 1 and November 15.

In July, at the height of a heatwave, about 20,000 people were evacuated from the island because of wildfires that the authorities said ravaged almost 17,770 hectares (44,000 acres) in the south of Rhodes.

The German TUI Group and the British airline Jet2 flew empty planes to the island to evacuate affected tourists.

On Sunday, Greek authorities raised its wildfire alert level to "high risk" after dozens of new blazes broke out.

Like many other parts of the Mediterranean, Greece experienced a prolonged heat wave last summer in which 20 people died and close to 175,000 hectares (430,000 acres) of land were scorched.

Sweden sees earliest 'summer' on record

Sweden has posted its earliest ever start to what it considers to be "summer", with three southern towns posting average temperatures above 10° Celsius (50° Fahrenheit) for five straight days, the country's meteorological service said yesterday.

"A Swedish weather record was broken on Saturday, April 6, 2024. Each day from April 6th to 10th, the average daily temperature was at least 10C at SMHI's stations in Malmo, Kristianstad and Karlshamn," the SMHI said in a report on its website.

"The condition was thereby met for meteorological summer at these three stations," it said. "This is the earliest arrival date for summer ever observed in Sweden, with statistics that date back to the end of the 1800s."

The previous record was set in 1906 when summer was officially recorded as arriving on April 10th.

"Inevitably, as global warming progresses, the likelihood of summer arriving ever earlier increases," the SMHI said. – ***AFP***

Tandem heatwaves, storm surges 'increasingly batter coasts'

By Linda Givetash
AFP

Coastal communities need to prepare for simultaneous extreme weather events as heatwaves increasingly overlap with surges in sea levels due to climate change, a study published yesterday warned.

Extreme heat and sea levels are typically monitored and studied individually but researchers from Hong Kong Polytechnic University found they were occurring simultaneously – a phenomenon that could multiply fivefold by mid-century.

The study's lead author, Mo Zhao, told AFP these events pose "very dangerous" risks, from deadly heat to floods, that may "exceed the coping capacity" of communities to respond.

"We don't have sufficient resources or sufficient human resources to handle these two extremes," she said.

Previous studies have shown that heat contributes to storm systems like tropical cyclones that bring surging sea levels, said Shuo Wang, co-author and assistant professor of hydroclimatic extremes.

However, the study published in the journal *Communications Earth and Environment* found that high temperatures not only precede storms but persist through them, leaving communities battered by two extremes at once.

Already, global coastal areas have seen these combined events occur an average of 3.7 days more per year between 1998 and 2017 compared to the previous two decades.

The study projected that these events would increase by an average of 31 more days per year by 2049 under a worst-case scenario if planet-heating greenhouse gas emissions continue to be unabated.

Tropical regions such as southeast Asia, West Africa and eastern parts of South America would see the greatest increases.

With 40% of the world's population living in the tropics, the study said billions of people were facing the potentially deadly consequences.

And the solution is not as simple as air conditioning.

Cooling systems are not common in households in poorer countries, the study noted.

Meanwhile, richer countries that do have them have shown that power cuts become a risk, particularly during storms.

"People cannot use air conditioners. But at the same time they suffer from heat ... so we have adverse impacts on human health, especially for the elderly and children," Wang said.

The researchers said the world could avoid reaching this worst-case scenario by making rapid and deep cuts to emissions.

"If we take urgent action to mitigate the climate change ... the situation would be better," Wang said.

However, with the effects of climate change already being felt, extreme events cannot be avoided totally.

Instead, governments need to invest in adapting coastal infrastructure to better protect communities from the changing conditions, Wang said.

Early warning systems that measure the multiple variables contributing to complex crises are also needed so people can better prepare, he added.

WORLD

TRAGEDY

Eight killed, many injured in Brazil bus crash

A bus ran off a highway in northeastern Brazil and overturned yesterday, killing at least eight people and injuring 23, authorities said. The bus was travelling from Rio de Janeiro in the southeast to the tourist town of Porto Seguro in Bahia state when it ran off the road around 4am, said the Federal Highway Police (PRF). There were 34 people on board. Authorities did not release details on the condition of those injured or the victims' nationalities. They said the two bus drivers were unharmed. Brazilian media broadcast images of the blue and white bus lying on its side along the BR-101 highway.

DECISION

Colombia's ELN rebels freeze peace talks

Colombia's National Liberation Army (ELN) rebels yesterday said they are suspending participation in the coming cycle of peace talks with the government, planned for this month, but will attend an extraordinary meeting scheduled for today. The announcement is the latest development in recent troubles at the talks, restarted by President Gustavo Petro at the end of 2022 as part of his efforts to end Colombia's six-decade conflict. The guerrilla group, founded in 1964, said the suspension was due to "government insistence in carrying out a demobilisation operation in Narino against the ELN," referring to regional talks with one of its factions.

WARNING

Haiti food stocks could be drained within weeks: UN

Stocks of food that the UN has sent to Haiti risk being exhausted by the end of April, particularly with the international airport now closed for a month, a UN spokesman warned yesterday. The Caribbean nation has been in a state of extreme insecurity since late February when gang leaders who control much of Port-au-Prince teamed up to attack police stations, prisons, the airport and the sea port in a drive to topple Prime Minister Ariel Henry. The UN World Food Program (WFP) only has enough food inside Haiti to feed 175,000 people for a month, the UN secretary-general's spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

CONTROVERSY

Chile president recalls ambassador to Venezuela

Chilean President Gabriel Boric recalled his country's ambassador in Caracas for consultations citing remarks by Venezuela's foreign minister about criminal organisation Tren de Aragua. On Monday, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Yvan Gil described the criminal group as a "fiction created by the international media." "The irresponsible statements of Venezuela's foreign minister, ignoring the existence of the Tren de Aragua, are worrying and constitute a serious insult to those who have been victims of this organisation," said Boric adding he would seek information from ambassador Jaime Gazmuri and "instruct him to take necessary actions."

Ex-football star O J Simpson dies of cancer

AFP
New York

OJ Simpson, a Pro Football Hall of Fame running back who was accused of, and ultimately acquitted, in the 1994 killings of his former wife and her friend in "The Trial of the Century," has died after a battle with cancer. He was 76.

Simpson died on Wednesday, his family announced on social media.

"On April 10, our father, Orenthal James Simpson, succumbed to his battle with cancer," the family wrote on Simpson's official X (formerly Twitter) account. "He was surrounded by his children and grandchildren. During this time of transition, his family asks that you please respect their wishes for privacy and grace." Simpson, a San Francisco native, was an All-American at Southern California.

He played for the Buffalo Bills, who drafted him with the No. 1 overall pick in 1969, and was a five-time All-Pro in his nine seasons there. He was named NFL MVP in 1973 after becoming the first player to rush for 2,000 yards in a season, doing so during a 14-game season.

Simpson concluded his career with two seasons as a member of the 49ers, then transitioned to a career as an actor, commercial pitchman and broadcaster before his arrest. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1985.

But Simpson leaves an off-field legacy that is marred by legal troubles. That legacy includes his trial in the deaths of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald L Goldman, a multi-million-dollar verdict against him in a civil suit, and his conviction of armed robbery and kidnapping that ultimately saw him serve nine years at Lovelock (Nev.) Correctional Centre.

On June 12, 1994, after the bodies of Brown Simpson and Goldman were found outside her condo in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles, Simpson quickly became a person of interest. He became a fugitive of the law and led police on a low-speed chase in a white Ford Bronco driven by friend and former NFL player Al Cowlings on June 17 before his arrest. Simpson's criminal trial began in January 1995 and featured his "legal dream team," headlined by the late Johnnie Cochran against lead prosecutor Marcia Clark. The trial spanned months and touched across racial lines throughout America before the jury came back with a verdict on October 3: not guilty.

However, in a civil lawsuit, Simpson was found liable for $33.5mn in a wrongful death case filed by Goldman's family. While the Goldmans never received close to that amount, the sale of Simpson's 1968 Heisman Trophy for $230,000 was put toward the debt.

Simpson stayed largely out of the public eye, initially living in Florida, until he was put on trial again in 2008, this time after he and another man were accused of robbing two sports memorabilia dealers at gunpoint in their hotel room. Simpson contended that the items previously had been stolen from him, however he was convicted of 12 counts of armed robbery and kidnapping and sentenced to up to 33 years in prison. He was granted parole in July 2017 and released on October 1, 2017.

He lived the rest of his life in Las Vegas, where TMZ reported yesterday that Simpson died.



Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida addresses a joint meeting of Congress, as US Vice-President Kamala Harris and House Speaker Mike Johnson listen, at the US Capitol in Washington, US, yesterday.

Japan prime minister asks US to overcome 'self-doubt'

AFP
Washington

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida yesterday called on Americans to overcome their "self-doubt" as he offered a paean to US global leadership before a bitterly divided Congress.

Warning of risks from the rise of China, Kishida said that Japan - stripped of its right to a military after World War II - was determined to do more to share responsibility with its ally the US.

"As we meet here today, I detect an undercurrent of self-doubt among some Americans about what your role in the world should be," Kishida told a joint session of the House of Representatives and Senate during a state visit to Washington. "The international order that the US worked for generations to build is facing new challenges, challenges from those with values and principles very different from ours," Kishida said.

Kishida said he understood "the exhaustion of being the country that has upheld the international order almost single-handedly" but added: "The leadership of the US is indispensable."

"Without US support, how long before the hopes of Ukraine would collapse under the onslaught from Moscow?" he asked.

"Without the presence of the US, how long before the Indo-Pacific would face even harsher realities?" While he was careful not to touch on US domestic politics, Kishida's address comes amid a deadlock in Congress on approving billions of dollars in additional military aid to Ukraine, due to pressure from hard-right Republicans aligned with presidential contender Donald Trump.

Kishida met with President Joe Biden where they pledged to step up co-operation, including with new three-way air defences involving the US, Japan and Australia.

Kishida said that China's military actions "present an unprecedented, and the greatest, security challenge."

Kishida's speech, from the dais where Biden delivered a raucous State of the Union address a month ago, marked a rare moment of bipartisan unity in Congress.

Lawmakers across party lines offered repeated standing ovations as Kishida reaffirmed support for Ukraine, warned of Chinese influence and highlighted Japanese investment in the US.

Suspend Ecuador from UN, Mexico tells international court

Mexico yesterday said it had filed a lawsuit against Ecuador at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague over the storming of its embassy in Quito. Foreign Minister Alicia Barcena told a press conference that in its lawsuit, Mexico is requesting that Ecuador be suspended from the United Nations unless it issues a public apology "recognising the violations of the fundamental principles and norms of international law." She said the goal was to "guarantee the reparation of the moral damage inflicted on the Mexican state and its nationals." Security forces stormed the embassy on Friday night to arrest former Ecuadoran vice-president Jorge Glas, who is wanted on corruption charges and had been granted asylum by Mexico. The rare incursion on inviolable diplomatic territory sparked an international outcry, and led Mexico to break ties with Ecuador, pulling its diplomats out of the country.

Trudeau meets France PM



Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and France's Prime Minister Gabriel Attal shake hands at the end of a joint news conference, in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, yesterday.

Foreign meddling didn't sway polls, says Trudeau

AFP
Ottawa

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau insisted that Canada's last two elections were indeed "decided by Canadians," as he pushed back against criticism that his government had not done enough to thwart foreign interference.

Trudeau testified for hours before an independent commission probing allegations China and others sought to meddle in Canada's democratic process - as well as Ottawa's response.

"Those elections held in their integrity, (they) were decided by Canadians," Trudeau testified about the 2019 and 2021 votes, both won by his Liberal Party.

Ministers, intelligence officials and senior Trudeau aides also testified at the hearings, which were organised to try to shed light on a political scandal that has shaken Canada for more than a year.

The opposition Conservatives have accused Ottawa of turning a blind eye to supposed interference, particularly by China. Beijing has rejected allegations of meddling. An intelligence report submitted to the commission described China's activities as "sophisticated, pervasive, persistent and directed against all levels of government and civil society across the country."

Trudeau and several of his ministers who appeared at the inquiry however downplayed the intelligence, saying it was often not conclusive.

The prime minister pointed to an example of a foreign diplomat caught boasting to superiors that they had successfully swayed a Canadian election outcome, saying: "Bragging is not doing."

Doubts voiced over US climate-friendly farming practices

Reuters
Washington

President Joe Biden's administration is offering farmers money for adopting practices that store carbon in the soil to fight climate change, but soil science experts and a review of US department of agriculture research indicate doubt that the approach will be effective.

Farm practices like planting cover crops and reducing farmland tilling are key to the USDA's plan for slashing agriculture's 10% contribution to US greenhouse gas emissions as the US pursues net-zero by 2050. Ethanol producers also hope those practices will help them secure lucrative tax credits for sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) passed in the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA).

But the farming techniques, which will receive an extra funding boost from Biden's signature climate law, may not permanently sequester much atmospheric carbon in the soil, according to five soil scientists and researchers.

Four other soil scientists, and the USDA, said the practices can store various amounts of soil carbon, but circumstances will dictate how much and for how long.

The White House referred Reuters to the USDA for comment.

A USDA spokesperson said "the adoption and persistent use of no-till and cover crops are key for the sequestration of carbon on working croplands."

All the experts interviewed agreed that no-till and cover crops can have significant environmental benefits such as preventing soil erosion and increasing biodiversity. Yet five of them expressed scepticism about tying climate policy and public money to the practices.

"Will it help with climate adaptation? Absolutely. Should it serve as an offset for more permanent and long-lived pollutants? Absolutely not," said Daniel Rath, an agricultural soil carbon scientist at the Natural Resources Defence Council.

The USDA has spent $1.3bn in financial assistance to farmers for planting and managing cover crops and $224mn for implementing no-or reduced-till since 2014, according to agency data. That figure is miniscule compared to total USDA spending, but does amount to about 8% of its farm conservation spending in that period.

"If we really want to offset or mitigate climate change, we need to think about different systems," said Humberto Blanco, an agronomy professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "We need to think about more aggressive strategies."

Adoption of cover crops and no-till has risen in the past decade; now, 11% of farms plant cover crops and about 40% use minimal or no tilling, according to the most recent USDA agricultural census.

Under the right conditions, planting cover crops and reducing tilling can be positive for the climate, scientists said.

"If a farmer is using cover crops and getting good growth in the fall and spring, and they're doing minimal tillage, on most soils, they're going to add soil carbon over time," said Robert Myers, a professor at the University of Missouri and regional director of extension programmes at a USDA research site.

A USDA spokesperson said the benefits largely depend on factors like growing climate, soil type, crop rotation, and other factors.

Five other experts said that no-till farming commonly results in a higher concentration of carbon in the soil surface but a decrease deeper in the soil profile, resulting in a net zero gain.

Seven experts said the climate benefits of no-till and cover crop techniques can be lessened or reversed if farmers plough their fields again.

Heatwaves put millions of children in Asia at risk: UN

AFP
Bangkok

Massive heatwaves across East Asia and the Pacific could place millions of children at risk, the UN warned yesterday, calling for action to protect vulnerable people from the soaring temperatures. Global monitors have warned that 2024 is shaping up to be the hottest year on record, marked by climate extremes and rising greenhouse gas emissions.

The Unicef data showed over 243mn children across the Pacific and East Asia were estimated to be affected by heatwaves, putting them at risk of heat-related illnesses and death. Several countries in the region are currently smouldering in the summer heat, with temperatures nearing record levels as they regularly hit over 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit).

Local forecasters are predicting steeper rises in the coming weeks.

Some Philippine schools suspended in-person classes in April, with the state weather forecaster saying temperatures could reach a "danger" level of 42 or 43 degrees Celsius in parts of the country.

In Thailand, a temperature of 43.5 degrees Celsius was recorded in the northern province of Mae Hong Son earlier this week – just a few degrees shy of the record 44.6 degrees Celsius.

Around 40 people die from heat-related illnesses annually, according to the Thai ministry of health. And in February, neighbouring Vietnam endured a monster heatwave in its southern "rice bowl" when temperatures reached up to 38 degrees Celsius – an "abnormal" high for the period.

According to the Unicef report, children are more at risk than adults as they are less able to regulate their body temperature.

"Children are more vulnerable than adults to the effects of climate change, and excess heat is a potentially lethal threat to them," said Debora Comini, director of Unicef Regional Office for East Asia and the Pacific.

Vietnam tycoon sentenced to death in $12.5bn fraud case

Reuters
Hanoi

A court in Vietnam yesterday handed the death sentence to real estate tycoon Truong My Lan for her role in a 304tn-dong ($12.5bn) financial fraud, the country's biggest on record, state media said.

Her trial, begun on March 5 and ending earlier than planned, was one dramatic result of a campaign against corruption that the leader of the ruling Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, has pledged for years to stamp out.

Lan, the chairwoman of real estate developer Van Thinh Phat Holdings Group, was found guilty of embezzlement, bribery and violations of banking rules at the end of a trial in the business hub of Ho Chi Minh City, state media said.

"We will keep fighting to see what we can do," a family member said, speaking on condition of anonymity. Before the verdict he had said Lan would appeal against the sentence.

Lan had pleaded not-guilty to the embezzlement and bribery charges, Nguyen Huy Thiep, one of Lan's lawyers said.

"Of course she will appeal the verdict," he added noting she was sentenced to death for the embezzlement charge and to 20 years each for the other two charges of bribery and violations of banking regulations. Vietnam imposes the death penalty mostly over violent offences but also for economic crimes. Human rights groups say it has executed hundreds of convicts in recent years, mainly by lethal injection.

The *Thanh Nien* newspaper said 84 defendants in the case received sentences ranging from probation for three years to life imprisonment. Among them are Lan's husband, Eric Chu, a businessman from Hong Kong, who was sentenced to nine years in jail, and her niece who got 17 years. Lan started as a cosmetics trader at the central market in Ho Chi Minh City, helping out her mother, she told judges during the trial, according to state media.

She later founded her real estate company Van Thinh Phat in 1992, the same year when she got married, according to state media.

She was found guilty, with her accomplices of siphoning off more than 304tn dong from Saigon Joint Stock Commercial Bank (SCB), which she effectively controlled through dozens of proxies despite rules strictly limiting large shareholding in lenders, according to investigators.

From early 2018 through October 2022, when the state bailed out SCB after a run on its deposits triggered by Lan's arrest, she appropriated large sums by arranging unlawful loans to shell companies, investigators said. "The defendant's actions not only violate the property management rights of individuals and organisations but also put SCB under scrutiny, eroding people's trust in the leadership of the party and state," state newspaper VnExpress cited the jury as saying.

Anger at US, Philippines, Japan summit



Filipino activists tear images portraying US President Joe Biden, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, during a protest amid the trilateral summit between the US, Philippines and Japan, in Manila, Philippines, yesterday.

Taiwan, China can resolve differences: ex-president

Reuters
Taipei

Taiwan and China can peacefully resolve their differences, former Taiwan president Ma Ying-jeou said yesterday after meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping, adding that people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait share the same culture and history.

Ma, president from 2008 to 2016, last year became the first former or sitting Taiwanese leader to visit China.

On Wednesday, he held his second meeting with Xi, following a landmark summit in Singapore in 2015 when Ma was still Taiwan's leader, which was the first time Chinese and Taiwanese leaders had met following the end of the civil war in 1949.

Speaking on his return from Beijing, Ma said he hoped young Taiwanese can put aside ideology and realise the historical and cultural links between Taiwan and China.

"More importantly, the Chinese on both sides of the Strait can handle disputes peacefully," he added.

China considers Taiwan its own territory, and has ramped up military and political pressure to assert those claims. Neither government recognises the other.

Ma, who was accompanied by a group of students to Beijing, said his visit had shown the youth that people on either side of the strait are "descendants of the Yan and Yellow Emperors", an expression referring to a common ancestor.

In an apparent slip up, Ma added that people on either side of the strait both belong to "the Republic of China", before correcting himself to say "the Chinese people", using wording referring to those ethnically or culturally Chinese.

Ma made the same verbal slip up during his meeting with Xi, in footage carried on Taiwanese television stations.

$65,000 gold teacup stolen from Japan department store

A Japanese department store discovered a golden teacup worth over 10mn yen ($65,000) had been stolen yesterday, after it was showcased in an unlocked box.

The teacup, made of pure 24-carat gold, went missing from a Tokyo outlet of the major department store chain Takashimaya, where an event displaying an array of gold items for sale is being held.

The stolen teacup was one of the most expensive among over 1,000 pieces of shining teaware, tableware and artefacts on display, a Takashimaya spokesman said.

"It was kept in an unlocked transparent box at the time, so it could be taken out easily for customers to take a close look," the spokesman said.

Security footage showed a man stowing the cup in his bag and fleeing the scene, local media reported, with police seeking the apparent culprit.

North Korea leader Kim vows to deal 'death-blow' to enemy if provoked



North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un (centre) visiting a bedroom at Kim Jong-il University of Military and Politics in west Pyongyang. The North Korean leader vowed to deal a "death blow" to his country's enemies, as South Korea's hawkish ruling party suffered a defeat in parliamentary elections. If provoked, North Korea will "deal a death-blow to the enemy without hesitation by mobilising all means in its possession", Kim said. "Now is the time to be more thoroughly prepared for a war than ever before," Kim said.

First foreign-born sumo grand champion dies at 54

AFP
Tokyo

Akebono, a Hawaiian who was the first foreign-born sumo wrestler to become a grand champion, has died aged 54, US officials and Japanese media said yesterday.

Born Chad Rowan in 1969, Akebono was among the most successful sumo wrestlers of the 1990s.

He reached the sport's highest rank of yokozuna, or grand champion, in 1993 and became a Japanese citizen in 1996.

Akebono won 11 tournaments before retiring as a wrestler in 2001 to train younger fighters.

He died in early April after heart failure, Kyodo News agency said.

US ambassador Rahm Emanuel called Akebono "a proud Hawaiian and a bridge between the US and Japan".

"When Akebono became the first-ever foreign-born grand champion, sumo's highest rank, in 1993, he opened the door for other foreign wrestlers to find success in the sport," Emanuel said in a statement.

"Throughout his 35 years in Japan, Akebono strengthened the cultural ties between the US and his adopted homeland by uniting us all through sport."

Standing more than 6ft 5ins and weighing over 230kgs, Akebono was initially considered too tall for sumo but was allowed to join a stable run by Takamiyama, a former wrestler also from Hawaii.

Akebono made his debut in 1988 and rose through the ranks, winning his first top-level tournament four years later.

Myanmar troops 'have withdrawn from border hub'

AFP
Mae Sot, Thailand

Myanmar junta troops have withdrawn from their positions in a major trade hub near the Thai border following days of clashes, an ethnic armed group said yesterday, in a further blow to the embattled military.

On the border near the bustling trading town of Myawaddy, reporters in Thailand heard shelling early yesterday after witnessing hundreds of people queueing the night before to seek safety in the kingdom.

By yesterday afternoon, while the flow into Thailand's Mae Sot town had lessened, people like 26-year-old Sadi were anxiously waiting for relatives.

"I'm just about holding it together," he said, checking his phone as he explained that his fiancee was still in Myanmar.

The country has been roiled with conflict since the army overthrew a democratically elected government in 2021, but the junta is facing its gravest threat yet after heavy losses in recent months.

Karen National Union (KNU) fighters and other anti-junta groups launched an assault on Myawaddy town this week.

Myawaddy is important to the cash-strapped junta, with more than $1.1bn worth of trade passing through it in the 12 months to April, according to the junta's commerce ministry.

The remaining 200 or so junta troops in the town had withdrawn late Wednesday, Padoh Saw Taw Nee, a KNU spokesman, said.

The troops were now sheltering on a bridge that connects Myawaddy to the Thai border town of Mae Sot, he said, claiming the KNU now controlled the whole town.

A Thai border official said the town had "fallen" late Wednesday.

The KNU and allied anti-junta groups would "surely intercept and block" any attempt by the military to send troops to Myawaddy, Padoh Saw Taw Nee said.

Thai soldiers stood on alert alongside armoured cars at the border in heat of 37 degrees Celsius yesterday.

Reporters there heard a plane flying in the direction of Myawaddy, followed by a thudding sound around 10.30am local time (0330GMT).

Myawaddy residents said the military was carrying out air strikes on the town but they had not seen KNU fighters in the streets.

The complete capture of the town would be a humiliating defeat for the junta, which has suffered a string of battlefield losses in recent months that have prompted rare criticism of its top brass by its supporters. Independent Myanmar analyst David Mathieson said it was "still too early to assess who actually controls Myawaddy and actually what constitutes control, as opposed to presence".

At the "Friendship Bridge No.2" on the Thai side, the trucks that normally carry medicine, consumer goods and construction materials into Myanmar were standing idle.

A Thai border official said checkpoints were open on both sides but that no goods traffic was moving.

From a hill overlooking Myawaddy yesterday evening the town appeared calm, with residents riding motorcycles out into farmland and the sounds of a construction site mingling with bells at a monastery.

The Thai government needs to prepare for a potential influx of people fleeing conflict in Myanmar, member of parliament Kannavee Suebsang said during a visit to Mae Sot.

"We need to prepare. We need to plan. We cannot just ignore the situation inside Myanmar," he said.

The Myanmar junta was sending reinforcements towards Myawaddy, military sources said yesterday, although it was unclear when or how they would arrive because some routes to the town are in the hands of its opponents.

WORLD

DECISION

UK government hikes family visa requirements

The UK yesterday increased the income required to sponsor someone coming to the country on a family visa as part of the government's plan to cut immigration. From yesterday, the minimum income requirement needed to bring a family member to the UK rose to £29,000 ($36,800) from £18,600, and will climb to £38,700 early next year. The move forms part of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's plan to "cut unsustainable and unfair levels of migration, and ensure those arriving here do not burden the taxpayer". The government intends to ultimately synchronise the threshold for family visas with that of skilled work visas.

POLICY

Britain suspends import duties on over 100 items

Britain yesterday suspended import duties on more than 100 items, including car parts and fruit juice, until June 2026, responding to industry demand. The government said it would implement 126 new tariff suspensions on goods which aren't produced in sufficient quantities in Britain. It also said 11 other existing suspensions would be extended. Minister for Trade Policy Greg Hands said the move was in response to the needs of business after the government had considered 245 applications for duty suspensions. "From automotives to food and drink, we're helping businesses to reduce import costs and remain competitive," Hands said in a statement.

ANNOUNCEMENT

UK 'can meet power, gas demand this summer'

There is sufficient supply to meet British energy demand during the summer season from April to September this year, the UK's national transmission companies for gas and electricity said. Total UK gas demand was forecast at 29bn cubic metres (bcm) this summer versus 33.3 bcm in the same period of 2023, National Gas said. The reduction is largely due to the expectation of lower exports to continental Europe, in combination with less demand for gas for power generation. Britain exports some gas to the rest of Europe via interconnectors, with average UK exports to the rest of Europe expected to be 3.6 bcm, down from 7.1 bcm last summer.

CORPORATE

Oil India contains leak at well in Assam state

Oil India said it had contained an overnight leak at a crude oil well in the eastern state of Assam. Gas and crude oil spread out to nearby areas located within about 100 metres of the site in the Tinsukia district of Assam, the company said in an exchange filing. An on-site team was formed to immediately assess the affected areas, the company said. Oil India did not provide any details on the extent of oil and gas that spilled due to the leakage or if any personnel were affected. Oil India, which operates exploration and production assets mostly in the northeastern part of the country, said that it was taking measures to clean the site.

Modi woos south in bid for pan-India ride to power

AFP
Madurai, India

Few doubt Narendra Modi will win re-election in India's marathon polls starting this month – the question is how far the prime minister will succeed in wooing the wealthier and better-educated south.

After a decade in power, Modi hopes to significantly increase his Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) 55% parliamentary majority – and to do that requires winning in southern states.

Modi's Hindu-nationalist BJP won 303 of 543 seats in the lower house of parliament in 2019, but mainly from the populous, poorer, Hindi-speaking north.

Holding repeated rallies across the south, Modi has sought to win new voters, offering his "topmost respect" to the south's Tamil culture and language, including wearing the region's traditional white wrap, waving from open-topped convoys in flower-strewn parades.

Modi has also launched a social media handle in Tamil, to win over those who see the BJP dominated by northern Hindi speakers.

But the BJP's push faces serious headwinds in the south, where voters typically back regional parties strongly rooted in appeals to social justice, and Modi's muscular Hindu nationalism holds little appeal.

"We give respect to people not depending on religion or caste," 38-year-old Abu Backer, a steel business owner in Tamil Nadu state, said proudly.

Palanivel Thiaga Rajan, Tamil Nadu's information technology minister – commonly known by his initials PTR – said he hated seeing "polarisation" in politics.

Rajan, from Tamil Nadu's ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party – which won 23 parliament seats in 2019 – said he was proud of the south's long history of "harmonised" mixed-faith communities. Many in India's southern states have backed populist parties rooted in their cultural and linguistic identity, boasting of social reform efforts aimed at tackling India's millennia-old caste hierarchy.

"Those places that have been able to maintain their cultural identity, language identity, their customs, their history... where people have the opportunity to grow... the BJP fares very poorly in those states," the 58-year-old Rajan said.

He was deeply critical of those he believes use Hinduism as "a political tool".

In the last polls, the BJP won just over a fifth of seats – 29 out of 129 – across the five southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana.

In wooing the south, the BJP hopes to wrest the credentials of being a truly pan-India party from its already humbled rival, the opposition Congress Party.

But Tamil Nadu social activist Ramu Manivannan said Modi had his work cut out in the south, where literacy rates are higher than the national average.

"One of the most important reasons why it is a huge challenge for the BJP to come into the south... is because of social radicalisation," Manivannan said.

"When he (Modi) is in the north, he speaks the language of what you call religion... people do not verify what his performances are.

"If he comes and speaks about underdevelopment in Tamil Nadu, here people give him back figures."

About a fifth of India's 1.4bn live in the five southern states, and some fear if Modi wins, he could back a revision of electoral boundaries based on population.

That has worried some as it would likely mean a significant expansion of seats from northern states, reducing the south's overall parliamentary punch even further.

Each time Modi visits Tamil Nadu – and he has made at least seven trips this year – social media erupts with a hashtag battle between 'Welcome Modi' versus 'Go Back Modi'. The tax burden on the south, which some see as unfair, adds to the wariness.

Modi's image, bolstered by India's presidency of the G20 last year, has rested widely on his claims of steering the country into becoming one of the world's fastest-growing economies.

But with a 31% contribution to the country's GDP, India's economic success has been driven by southern states.

Global supply chains shifting from China such as Apple have moved to Tamil Nadu, which boasts the highest number of factories in the country by state.

But Rajan argues that economic disparities have added to tensions, saying people feel "squeezed" by heavy tax duties they see little return for.

"The more they constrain the engines of growth and revenue, the more the overall pie shakes," PTR said.

But some believe Modi could win big in the south, noting the party has reined in the religious rhetoric it utilises in northern heartlands.

"Now they (BJP) fight for common issues, just like the other parties," said 58-year-old Sivakumar, a book sales manager in Madurai, adding he believes people were warming to that shift.

"That change might be beneficial for the BJP," he said.

Star greets fans on Eid



Bollywood actor Shahrukh Khan greets fans gathered outside his residence on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr in Mumbai, India, yesterday.

India, China should urgently address border situation: PM

Reuters
Mumbai

India and China should urgently address the "prolonged situation" on their border, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, in an apparent softening of tone on bilateral issues between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

"It is my belief that we need to urgently address the prolonged situation on our borders so that the abnormality in our bilateral interactions can be put behind us," Modi said in an interview with US publication *Newsweek*.

Ties between India and China, who share a long mountainous border, have been strained since troops of both countries clashed on their disputed Himalayan frontier, killing 24 soldiers, in 2020.

In May last year, Modi said peace on the border was essential for normal relations with China, adding that India was committed to protecting its sovereignty and dignity. Internal security and strong foreign policy are two planks Modi has used as he campaigns for a record third term, in a general election that gets under way next week and will span nearly two months.

"For India, the relationship with China is important and significant," Modi said, adding that peaceful relations between the two neighbours were important for the entire region and world.

Meanwhile, Congress party veteran Jairam Ramesh yesterday said the prime minister's reaction to the China issue is an "insult to the martyrs". Taking to X, Ramesh wrote, "The prime minister's reaction on the China issue is not only shameful but also an insult to our martyrs who made the supreme sacrifice while protecting our borders."

Apple's India iPhone output touches $14bn

Apple has assembled $14bn worth of iPhones in India in fiscal 2024, Bloomberg News reported. Apple now makes as much as 14% or about one in seven of its marquee devices from India, the report said, citing people familiar with the matter. Foxconn assembled nearly 67% while Pegatron Corporation made about 17% of the India-made iPhones, the Bloomberg report added. Wistron Corporation's plant in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, which the Tata Group took over last year, made the remaining. Apple declined to comment on the Bloomberg report. Apple is increasingly looking to diversify its supply chain beyond China amid geopolitical tensions between Beijing and Washington, even as China remains the largest iPhone-making hub in the world. Pegatron is in advanced talks to hand over control of its only iPhone manufacturing facility, located in Tamil Nadu, to the Tata Group.

Assange's wife hails 'good sign', five years after detention



Supporters of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange display banners at a demonstration outside the Ecuadorian embassy in London yesterday, on the fifth anniversary of the arrest of Julian Assange by British police at the embassy.

AFP
London

Julian Assange's wife yesterday said it was a "good sign" that US President Joe Biden was "considering" dropping the WikiLeaks founder's prosecution, five years on from his arrest and detention.

"It looks like things could be moving in the right direction," Stella Assange told the BBC.

Australia's parliament passed a motion in February with the prime minister's support calling for an end to the legal saga surrounding Assange, an Australian who has been held in Britain since 2019 while fighting extradition to the US. "We're considering it," Biden replied at the White House when asked by a reporter if he had a response to Australia's request.

"It's a good sign. The prime minister of Australia (Anthony Albanese) overnight said that he is optimistic," Stella Assange told the BBC. Her husband has now spent five years at the high-security Belmarsh Prison in southeast London.

The 52-year-old Assange is currently waiting to learn if he can make a last-ditch appeal against extradition to the US, after a UK court last month delayed a decision on his case. It is now expected on May 20.

The US indicted Assange multiple times between 2018 and 2020 but Biden has faced persistent domestic and international pressure to drop the case filed under his predecessor, Donald Trump. Washington alleges that Assange and others at WikiLeaks recruited and agreed with hackers to conduct "one of the largest compromises of classified information" in US history.

Before going to prison, Assange spent seven years holed up in Ecuador's London embassy to avoid extradition to Sweden, where he faced accusations of assault which were later dropped.

New Amy Winehouse movie to open in UK today

AFP
London

A biopic of troubled British singer-songwriter Amy Winehouse tracking her meteoric rise and very public downfall opens in UK cinemas today amid a swirl of controversy.

Even before its release, *Back to Black* has attracted backlash with criticism ranging from the casting to concerns it could exploit Winehouse's story.

"Given the vulture-like efficiency with which her life was picked over, it's near-impossible to think of a sincere reason to make a movie about Winehouse – at least not one that isn't motivated by greed," wrote music editor Roisin O'Connor in The Independent.

Winehouse, who died aged just 27 in 2011, was a distinctive figure with her beehive hairdo, heavy black eye makeup, multiple tattoos and smoky voice.

She shot to international fame with her Grammy Award-winning 2006 album *Back to Black* which included the track *Rehab*, charting her battle with addiction.

Director Sam Taylor-Johnson's biopic is the second big-screen telling of Winehouse's story, coming nearly a decade after Asif Kapadia's 2015 documentary *Amy*.

That film won an Oscar but was publicly condemned by her family, in particular Winehouse's father who claimed it tried to portray him as "money-grabbing" and "attention-seeking".

After the film became the second-highest grossing documentary at the British box office, Mitch Winehouse said it dwelled too much on the negative and not enough on his daughter's fun-loving side.

He hinted the family could collaborate with another filmmaker in future to correct the record.

Mitch Winehouse and his former wife Janis attended this week's premiere in London but Taylor-Johnson said the family had not contributed to her film.

"It was important to meet with them out of respect," she told Empire.

"But they didn't have any involvement in terms of... like they couldn't change things. They couldn't dictate how I was to shoot," she said.

The filmmaker, whose 2009 feature *Nowhere Boy* dramatised John Lennon's early years, said she had been after "the truth" of Winehouse's life.

"What I wanted as much as possible was the truth of Amy, and Amy's relationship was that she loved her dad, whether we think he did right or wrong," she said.

Eddie Marsan, who plays Mitch Winehouse, said he tried to avoid a "comfortable narrative" that there was "someone to blame" in some way for Winehouse's death, such as her father or her ex-husband Blake Fielder-Civil.

To research the role, he said, he approached a friend who worked with both Amy and her father in the music industry who told him Mitch had been a "loving father but he was in an impossible situation".

"He had a daughter who was an addict, she was the most famous woman in the world, she was hounded by the paparazzi, she had unlimited resources and money," the friend told him.

Back to Black also depicts Winehouse's turbulent relationship with Fielder-Civil.

He said in 2018 he would "always carry a burden of guilt" over his role in her decline.

Marisa Abela who portrays the tragic singer said it would have been a mistake to "judge a character and a character's decisions".

"If other people who watch the film decide she shouldn't have loved a certain person, or shouldn't have trusted someone, that's fine.

"The only villains in our story are addiction and the relentless paparazzi. I'm not telling people how to feel about it," she said.

Navalny penned secret memoir before his death, says widow

Reuters/AFP
London/New York

Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny wrote an autobiography before he died which will be published later this year, his widow Yulia Navalnaya said yesterday, revealing the existence of a text his inner circle had kept secret for years.

Navalny, who died aged 47 in an Arctic prison in February, had wanted to become president of Russia and was Vladimir Putin's fiercest domestic critic.

His allies, branded extremists by the authorities, accused Putin of having him murdered and have said they will provide proof to back that allegation.

The Kremlin has denied any state involvement in his death and, when he was alive, dismissed Navalny, a former lawyer who oversaw corruption investigations into Russia's political elite, as a marginal US-backed troublemaker out to destabilise Russia.

Navalnaya, his widow, said in a post on X from outside Russia that her late husband had started to write the memoir – titled *Patriot* – in 2020 after he had been poisoned by what Western doctors said was a nerve agent and had been flown to Germany for medical treatment.

She said the book would be released simultaneously in at least 11 different languages on October 22 and appear in Navalny's native Russian.

"This is not at all how I imagined Alexei would write his biography. I thought that we would be in our 80s, and that he would be sitting at his computer by the open window and be typing away," Navalnaya said.

"But things turned out the way they did. Horribly and very, very unfairly," she said. "Nevertheless, Alexei started writing a book at that time (in 2020) and was unexpectedly quickly drawn into the process."

"He liked to recall the events of his life in connection with events in the country. For example, he enjoyed describing his childhood," Navalnaya said.

Kira Yarmysh, Navalny's spokesperson, described how Navalny had begun to dictate parts of the book to her while he was convalescing in Germany two months after his poisoning and that he had finished the book when in prison after returning to Russia in 2021.

"Alexei had a rare talent of being instantly able to pronounce written text. My job was to keep up with him and occasionally interject: "You just used that same word!" Yarmysh wrote on the Telegram messenger service.

"I heard people talking about his (social media) posts from prison: 'Alexei writes so well, I wish he'd write a book!' And I wanted to clap my hands and shout, 'He is writing one! He is writing one!' But we agreed to keep everything a secret. Now the secrets are over," she said.





Yulia Navalnaya, wife of late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Left: Navalny is seen addressing supporters during an unauthorised anti-Putin rally on May 5, 2018 in Moscow.

Penguin Books UK in a statement on X described the book as the "full story of Navalny's life and a rousing call to continue the work for which he sacrificed his life".

In the United States the autobiography is being published by Alfred A Knopf, which published a separate statement from his widow.

"It is the full story of his life: his youth, his call to activism, his marriage and family, and his commitment to the cause of Russian democracy and freedom in the face of a world super-power determined to silence him," Knopf said. "It expresses Navalny's total conviction that change cannot be resisted and will come."

"Sharing his story will not only honour his memory but also inspire other to stand up for what is right and to never lose sight of the values that truly matter," Knopf cited Navalnaya as saying.

The book is unlikely to be readily available in Navalny's native Russia, where the authorities outlawed his movement as extremist and cast his supporters as US-backed troublemakers.

Navalny's death has robbed Russians opposed to Putin of their most charismatic figurehead at a time when authorities have crushed the last remnants of dissent.

The crackdown has intensified since the Kremlin launched its full-scale hostilities against Ukraine in 2022.

Putin, a former KGB officer, secured a new six-year term in power in the face of no genuine challenger at elections in March.

Putin for years refused to utter Navalny's name in public, but last month broke that pattern when he alleged he had approved an initiative to swap "Mr Navalny" for unnamed Russians in Western jails days before his death.

Navalny's team says Putin ordered his killing on the eve of a prisoner swap.

Navalnaya called the 71-year-old leader a "coward" for only uttering her husband's name after his death.

EU countries agreed to impose sanctions on 30 Russian officials over the death of Navalny.

However, Navalny's allies said the limited targeting of a small number of prison officials was purely symbolic and would have no impact on the Kremlin.



People stand at a makeshift memorial near the centre of Skaerholmen, south of Stockholm, where a father was shot dead in an underpass earlier this week.

Outcry in Sweden after man is gunned down by youths

Swedes reacted with shock and anger yesterday after a father was gunned down in broad daylight in front of his son in a Stockholm suburb, amid media reports he confronted a gang of youths.

The Scandinavian country has seen a surge in violence in recent years as criminal gangs feud for control of drug markets, with bombings and shootings recorded weekly.

The gangs often recruit young teens to carry out the violence because they are not criminally liable, with some perpetrators as young as 12.

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson and opposition leader Magdalena Andersson were both due to visit the Skarholmen suburb south of the capital in the evening.

The area has seen several shootings in recent months.

"The system-threatening crime that our country is now experiencing has brutal consequences for our entire free and open society," Kristersson wrote in a post on Instagram yesterday. "People with violent intent should not be allowed to intimidate honest citizens into silence."

"The gangs, with their utter ruthlessness, will not stop until we have stopped them," he said.

The 39-year-old father, identified in media reports only as Mikael, was shot in the head in front of his son early on Wednesday evening as they cycled to a swimming pool.

He died early yesterday, according to police.

Several media outlets, including television chain TV4 and tabloids *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*, said he was shot because he confronted the gang.

"He didn't like injustice. It cost him his life," his sister, who didn't give her name, told *Expressen*. "He was sensitive, he didn't like to read about all the shootings."

No arrests have been made in connection with the killing.

According to police statistics, 363 shootings were reported last year with 53 fatalities, while a total of 149 bombings were recorded.

Wednesday's shooting came as Sweden's parliament adopted a new law giving police powers to establish zones where they can search people or their vehicles even if they are not suspected of specific crimes.

The new law will go into force on April 25.

The proposal has been controversial, with critics saying it runs counter to the rule of law and could lead to discrimination. – ***AFP***

Major Russian air strikes destroy Kyiv power plant

Reuters/AFP
Kyiv/Moscow

Russian missiles and drones destroyed a large electricity plant near Kyiv and hit power facilities in several regions of Ukraine yesterday, officials said, ramping up pressure on the embattled energy system as Kyiv runs low on air defences.

The major attack more than two years since Russia's full-scale invasion completely destroyed the Trypilska coal-powered thermal power plant near the capital, a senior official at the company that runs the facility told Reuters.

Footage shared on social media showed a fire raging at the large Soviet-era facility and black smoke belching from it.

Reuters was able to confirm the location of the video as the Trypilska station.

"We need air defence and other defence support, not eye-closing and long discussions," President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Telegram, condemning the attacks as "terror".

The Russian defence ministry said it hit fuel and energy facilities in Ukraine in what it described as a massive retaliatory strike using drones and high-precision, long-range weapons from air and sea.

The strikes were a response to Ukrainian drone attacks on Russia's oil, gas and energy facilities, it said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that recent airstrikes on Ukraine's energy grid, which have caused huge blackouts, are part of the Kremlin's "demilitarisation" of its neighbour.

"We assume that in this way we have an influence on the Ukrainian military-industrial complex," said Putin, adding that the strikes were also in response to Kyiv targeting Russia's energy infrastructure.

Kyiv's appeals for urgent air defence supplies from the West have grown increasingly desperate since Russia renewed its long-range aerial assaults on the Ukrainian energy system last month.

The attacks, which hammered thermal and hydroelectric power plants, have caused fears about the resilience of an energy system that was hobbled by a Russian air campaign in the war's first winter.

Ukraine's air force commander said air defences took down 18 of the incoming missiles and 39 drones. The attack used 82 missiles and drones in total, the military said.

The destroyed power plant outside Kyiv, a major power supplier for the capital and Cherkasy and Zhytomyr regions, is the third and last facility owned by state-owned energy company Centrenergo.

"Everything is destroyed," Andriy Gota, head of the supervisory board of the company, said when asked about the situation at Centrenergo.

The Trypilska plant was the biggest energy facility near Kyiv and was built to have a capacity of 1,800MW hours, more than the pre-war needs of Ukraine's biggest city.

The Ukrenergo grid operator said its substations and power generating facilities had been damaged in attacks on the regions of Odesa, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Lviv and Kyiv.

Ukraine's largest private electricity company DTEK, which lost 80% of its generating capacity in attacks on March 22 and March 29, said Russia's attacks hit two of its power stations, inflicting serious damage.

Yesterday afternoon Russian forces attacked a thermal power station in the Sumy region in northern Ukraine with guided bombs.

The scale of damage was not immediately clear, though the regional administration said there were no casualties.

The strikes also attacked two underground storage facilities where Ukraine stores natural gas, including some owned by foreign companies, energy company Naftogaz said.

The facilities continued to operate, it added.

"The situation in Ukraine is dire; there is not a moment to lose," said US ambassador Bridget Brink, adding that 10 missiles struck critical infrastructure in the Kharkiv area alone.

The grid operator issued a statement urging Ukrainians to minimise their use of electricity in the peak evening hours so as not to overload the system.

The region of Kharkiv, which borders Russia and already has long, rolling blackouts in place, was forced to cut electricity for 200,000 people, presidential aide Oleksiy Kuleba said.

Ukraine has warned it could run out of air defence munitions if Russia keeps up the intensity of its strikes and that it is already having to make difficult decisions about what to defend.

There has been a slowdown in vital Western assistance and a major US aid package has been blocked by Republicans in Congress for many months, Ukraine has said.



This picture taken from social media shows smoke and fire at the site of a missile strike at the Trypilska power station in Kyiv region.

Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Russia's overnight attack used six ballistic missiles, which can hit targets within minutes and are much harder to shoot down. Kyiv says that is why it needs US-made Patriot air defences.

"Ukraine remains the only country in the world facing ballistic strikes. There is currently no other place for 'Patriots' to be," Kuleba wrote on X.



A pedestrian walks as a cyclist rides across the Pont de Grenelle with the Eiffel Tower in background, over the river Seine in Paris.

Bikes overtake cars in Paris

Bicycles have passed cars as a means of transport in Paris according to a recent study, a city official said yesterday.

"Ten years ago who could have predicted that bicycles would overtake cars. Yet, it's happened," deputy mayor in charge of transport David Belliard posted on X.

The study by the Institut Paris Region, an urban planning agency, found that Parisians opted for bicycles for 11.2% of their trips within the city itself, compared to only 4.3% for cars.

Walking was the option for most trips at 53.5%, followed by public transport at 30%.

The study conducted between October 2022 and April 2023 followed 3,337 Paris region residents aged 16-80 whose movements were tracked and who filled out travel journals.

Paris has been investing heavily in bike lanes and has reduced the number of car parking spaces as part of measures to meet climate change goals.

Cars are still the top means of transportation in the Paris suburbs, but it is hoped that a major expansion of suburban metro lines that is underway will help reduce the use of personal vehicles that are a major source of air pollution and carbon emissions. – ***AFP***

Ukraine parliament overhauls army draft rules

Reuters
Kyiv

Ukraine's parliament passed a bill yesterday to overhaul how the armed forces draft civilians into the ranks after a general told the chamber that Russian forces outnumbered Kyiv's troops up to ten times on the battlefield in the east.

Two years into a war against Russia, a country with three times its population, Ukraine has been suffering setbacks on the battlefield.

Tens of thousands of soldiers have been killed, many times more have been wounded and hundreds of thousands have now fought for two years with no respite.

Martial law lets draft officers call up men over 27 to fight, and a separate measure signed into law last week by President Volodymyr Zelensky made thousands more men susceptible by lowering that minimum age to 25.

However, during the war there have been thousands of cases of draft dodging and in practice commanders have said they are not receiving enough troops.

The new measures should increase troop numbers by requiring men to update their draft data with the authorities, boosting payments to those who volunteer, and letting some convicts serve.

It adds some new punishments for draft dodging, but stops short of severe measures that had prompted public opposition.

"Pass this law and the Ukrainian Armed Forces will not let down you or the Ukrainian people," General Yuriy Sodol, commander of the joint forces, told lawmakers.

"We are maintaining our defences with our last strength," he said as lawmakers stood up and applauded more than a dozen commanders who attended the session.

Maksym Zhorin, a deputy commander of Ukraine's third assault brigade, said the law would not lead to "miracles" on the battlefield.

"Undoubtedly, it will bring a little more order and systematise (things) in general on the issue of mobilisation," he said. "Personally, I would make it much tougher and also continue to reduce the conscription age."

Ukrainian troops achieved startling success in the war's first year, pushing Russian invaders from the capital and recapturing swathes of territory in the east and south.

However, since a major Ukrainian counter-offensive stalled last year, Russia has been pressing its advantage in manpower and equipment to wrest new ground in the east.

Military analysts say Ukraine's armed forces need to address acute manpower shortages, as well as a shortage of ammunition, worsened by US Republicans who have blocked military aid from Washington, and potentially flagging support from some European allies.

"The enemy outnumbers us by 7-10 times, we lack manpower," said Sodol, who is commanding Kyiv's troops in the Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine.

Lawmaker Oleksandr Fedienko said the passage of the bill would send a "message to our partners that we are ready to retake our territory and we need weapons".

The bill passed with a majority of 283 votes, Yaroslav Zhelezniak, a lawmaker for the Holos party, wrote on the Telegram messaging app. It still requires Zelensky's signature to become law.

Volodymyr Fesenko, a Kyiv-based political analyst, said the law could partially solve the mobilisation issue, but that it would depend on how it was implemented.

"Our experience shows that there are laws and there is practice, i.e. how the law will work. This law will solve part of the problems, but it will start working somewhere in the mid-May," he said.

The law gives Ukrainian men 60 days to update their personal data with the military authorities.

Until now, draft offices had to rely on incomplete and old data.

An earlier proposal to set a time limit for mobilisation was abandoned, meaning wartime military service remains open-ended, a sensitive issue for those who have been fighting since the start of the war.

It took parliament months to put the bill to a final vote this week, as politicians accused each other of drafting poorly-worded amendments and lacking the political will to approve unpopular changes.

Over 4,000 amendments were submitted after the first reading in February.

COMMENT

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Will Boeing crash shareholder value?

For half a century, maximising shareholder value has been the overriding objective of corporate governance, especially in the US and the UK. But Boeing's disastrous performance on product and customer safety may mean that change is in the air.

The crashes in 2018 and 2019 of Boeing's 737 MAX model, in which 350 people were killed, should have served as a wakeup call. But it was not until the blowout of a side door on a recent US flight that it became obvious to everyone that there is a fundamental problem with how Boeing is being run. Since then, AerCap – the world's largest aircraft leasing company and a major customer of Boeing – has demanded that financial targets "take a back seat," so that the company can focus 100% "on quality and safety metrics." Another customer, Emirates, has demanded that the company's next CEO be an engineer. And Boeing's largest union, the International Association of Machinists District 751, has demanded a board seat to "save this company from itself."

How did it come to this? For years, courts and academics have embraced shareholder value as the path to efficient management, as if focusing on this single goal and subjecting a company to the discipline of the market would reliably ensure top performance. Yet corporate management is far too complicated a task to be guided by the stock ticker. Every day, executives must make difficult decisions about how best to balance financial goals with product quality and safety, labour conditions, environmental impact, and so forth.

What shareholder value has done is turn corporations into ATM machines. Corporate bosses embraced the concept because they could partake in lucrative shareholder bonanzas through stock-option plans and extra bonuses. Perhaps not surprisingly, these cash channels are often misaligned with actual company performance. How else could Boeing's CEO walk away with a 45% pay raise after causing even more damage to the company when he failed to fix its problems after the MAX crashes?

Pleasing shareholders with hefty dividends and share buybacks can all too easily undermine large business operations. But it wasn't always this way. In the early seventeenth century, a legal innovation, the "capital lock-in," created a basis for corporations to mobilise capital for large-scale investments by depriving investors of the opportunity to withdraw their money. With a more stable capital base, companies could borrow on a larger scale, and the market for shares became more liquid, because new investors did not have to fear that old ones would pull out.

What shareholder value has done is turn corporations into ATM machines. Corporate bosses embraced the concept because they could partake in lucrative shareholder bonanzas through stock-option plans and extra bonuses

The primacy of shareholder value turned shareholders into the pilots who steer companies. But portfolio investors have little interest in concerning themselves with the details of management. Their only concern is the bottom line. They lack a "firm commitment," as economist Colin Mayer of the University of Oxford puts it. And when these pilots' planes start to fall apart in midair, many will simply bail out and try their luck elsewhere.

But firms are more than just ATM machines. They pool resources, they innovate, and – perhaps most importantly – they solve problems. Contrary to the leading theory of the firm, which views the institution as a second best to markets (as merely a "nexus of contracts"), firms can do things that markets cannot do. As economists Albert Hirschman and Kenneth Arrow demonstrated, firms have the capacity to repair – to mend flaws when things go wrong, to improve their operations, and to find solutions to new complications.

Prices may signal the need for repair, but actually doing the repair work requires much more. One must find the root cause of the problem and devise an effective and lasting fix. Stakeholders that can parachute away when things go wrong will not invest in repairs. They will choose "exit" over "loyalty" (in Hirschman's terms); and when they use "voice," they usually do so only to vote for directors who will advance their own interests.

For portfolio investors, the exit door is always kept open – if only by the company stepping in and buying back their shares. That means they are the most disloyal stakeholders of any business corporations. From their perspective, it does not even matter what goods the firm produces, except as a factor to be considered in building a well-diversified portfolio. Once they have pocketed their gains, they will get out, leaving behind an organisation that has sought to please investors by cutting costs, even when that has meant losing customers and valuable employees. As with planes, it is easy to crash a firm, but it takes much more time, and many more resources, to rebuild it.

Boeing's self-inflicted woes hold broader lessons. Once again, we see how the misguided idea of shareholder value can serve powerful financial interests while destroying what business organisations are best at. Firms excel not at blindly pursuing a single goal, but at pooling resources to solve complex problems, produce things of value, and reduce costs for society. This can be profitable, but making profit an end in itself is ultimately counterproductive. The "Boeing Effect" ought to remind us of that. – Project Syndicate

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The boring truth about AI

By Amar Bhide
Cambridge

Experts who warn that artificial intelligence poses catastrophic risks on par with nuclear annihilation ignore the gradual, diffused nature of technological development.

As I argued in my 2008 book, *The Venturesome Economy*, transformative technologies – from steam engines, airplanes, computers, mobile telephony, and the internet to antibiotics and mRNA vaccines – evolve through a protracted, massively multiplayer game that defies top-down command and control.

Joseph Schumpeter's "gales of creative destruction" and more recent theories trumpeting disruptive breakthroughs are misleading. As economic historian Nathan Rosenberg and many others have shown, transformative technologies do not suddenly appear out of the blue. Instead, meaningful advances require discovering and gradually overcoming many unanticipated problems.

New technologies introduce new risks. Invariably, military applications develop alongside commercial and civilian uses. Airplanes and motorised ground vehicles have been deployed in conflicts since World War I, and personal computers and mobile communication are indispensable for modern warfare. Yet life goes on. Technologically advanced societies have developed legal, political, and law-enforcement mechanisms to contain the conflicts and criminality that technological advances enable.

Case-by-case court judgments are crucial in the US and other common-law countries. These mechanisms – like the technologies themselves – are evolutionary and adaptive. They produce pragmatic solutions, not visionary constructs.

The Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb and helped end World War II, was an exception. It had a high-priority military mandate. With the Nazis seeking to develop a bomb of their own, speed and effective leadership were essential. And as all-out thermonuclear war became a real threat, statecraft and strategic deterrence helped avert doomsday.

But nuclear weapons are a misleading analogy for AI, which has followed the typically diffused, halting pattern of most other technological transformations. AI spans disparate techniques – such as machine learning, pattern recognition, and natural language processing – and has wide-ranging applications. Their common feature is mainly aspirational – to go beyond mere calculation to more speculative yet useful inferences and interpretations.

Unlike the Manhattan Project, which proceeded at breakneck speed, AI developers have been at work for more than seven decades, quietly inserting AI into everything from digital cameras and scanners to smartphones, automatic-braking and fuel-injection systems in cars, special effects in movies, Google searches, digital communications, and social-media platforms. And, as with other technological advances, AI has long been put to military and criminal uses.

Yet AI advances have been gradual and uncertain. IBM's Deep Blue famously beat world chess champion Garry Kasparov in 1997 – 40 years after an IBM researcher first wrote a chess-playing program. And though Deep Blue's successor, Watson, won $1mn by beating the reigning Jeopardy! champions in 2011, it was a commercial failure.

In 2022, IBM sold off Watson Health for a fraction of the billions it had invested. Microsoft's intelligent assistant, Clippy, became an object of ridicule. And after years of development, autocompleted texts continue to produce embarrassing results.

Machine learning – essentially a souped-up statistical procedure that many AI programs depend on – requires reliable feedback. But good feedback demands unambiguous outcomes produced by a stable process. Ambiguous human intentions, impulsiveness, and creativity undermine statistical learning and thus limit the useful scope of AI. While AI software flawlessly recognises my face at airports, it cannot accurately comprehend the nuances of my carefully and slowly spoken words.

The inaccuracy of 16 generations of professional dictation software (I bought the first in 1997) has repeatedly frustrated me.

Large language models (LLMs), which have become the public face of AI, are not technological discontinuities that magically transcend the limitations of machine learning. Claims that AI is advancing at warp speed confuse a mania with useful progress. I became an enthusiastic user of AI-enabled search back in the 1990s. I thus had high hopes when I signed up for ChatGPT's public beta in December 2022. But my hopes that it, or some other LLM, would help with a book I was writing were dashed. While the LLMs responded in comprehensible sentences to questions posed in natural language, their convincing-sounding answers were often make-believe.

Thus, whereas I found my 1990s Google searches to be invaluable timesavers, checking the accuracy of LLM responses made them productivity killers. Relying on them to help edit and illustrate my manuscript was also a waste of time.

These experiences make me shudder to think about the buggy LLM-generated software being unleashed on the world.

That said, LLM fantasies may be valuable adjuncts for storytelling and other entertainment products. Perhaps LLM chatbots can increase profits by providing cheap, if maddening, customer service.

Someday, a breakthrough may dramatically increase the technology's useful scope. For now, though, these oft-mendacious talking horses warrant neither euphoria nor panic about "existential risks to humanity."

Best keep calm and let the traditional decentralised evolution of technology, laws, and regulations carry on. – Project Syndicate

• *Amar Bhide, professor of Health Policy at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, is author of the forthcoming* Uncertainty and Enterprise: Venturing Beyond the Known *(Oxford University Press).*



(Picture: pixabay.com)

Remaining steadfast on obedience



There are lessons for us all in the passage of the days and nights - and the days are moving away from us as quickly as the clouds. The people shall continue advancing until they finally end up in Paradise or Hell. Also, the rapid rate at which the days and nights are running away from us during these present times confirm the foretelling of 'time compression'. This is one of the signs of the Last Hour that the Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, informed us of. This is therefore, a great opportunity for the wise amongst us to awaken, perform good deeds and repent sincerely. Allah Says what means: "And it is He who has made the night and the day in succession for whoever desires to remember or desires gratitude."[Qur'an 25: 62]

Muslims have recently spent a whole month enjoying the blessings of their Lord between supplication, prayer, remembrance of Allah, almsgiving and recitation of the Qur'an. But, alas, the days and their memories of them have passed away so quickly, as if they were autumn leaves blown away by a strong wind.

When one compares the people's spiritual condition during Ramadan to that after it, they will certainly see signs of laziness and negligence in terms of performing righteous deeds. It is as if acts of worship and repentance were only meant for Ramadan! Such people are ignorant of the fact that Allah is the Lord of all months and that Ramadan is only meant to be an occasion when one renews their resolve to worship Allah and persevere in that. That is why Allah Says, after prescribing fasting for His slaves, what means: "...That you may become righteous."[Qur'an 2: 183]

In view of this, it becomes incumbent upon us to consider the reality of worship and its internal impact on us - and not its outward forms. For there are some of us who have nothing to show for their fasting except hunger and thirst and will have no reward for their worship except tiredness and sleeplessness. This is further confirmed when one hears people asking one another merely about the number of times they have recited the Qur'an and listened to sermons and admonitions during Ramadan. Are these people ignorant of how Allah dealt with the people of 'Aad, who were very tall like lofty pillars, the like of which were not created in the land before? Do they not read about what happened to 'Aad, Thamood and the people of Prophet Lut? Do they not consider the Qur'an carefully? Had it been from other than Allah, they would surely have found therein many contradictions.

Where are the hearts that are submissive to Allah? Many hearts have become fertile ground for heedlessness. The youth are stuck in their exuberance for this life and the elders are doing no righteous deeds. We have neglected the Book of our Lord publicly and privately and therefore we are as far from sincere deeds as Mount Safaa is from Mount Marwah. Allah Says what means: "Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an, or are there locks (upon) their hearts? Indeed those who reverted back (to disbelief) after guidance had become clear to them – Satan enticed them and prolonged hope for them." [Qur'an 47: 24-25]

Do not be deluded by your determination to shun the dictates of your whims in Ramadan only to yield to temptation after it, for lustful desires are wickedly intriguing. Remember that many a brave man has been dealt a deadly blow by those whom he overlooked. The one who becomes negligent of his duties to Allah after he has been doing them perfectly, or who falls back into committing sins after he has abstained from them is actually the farthest one from prosperity and salvation - even if he does deceive himself with seasonal acts of worship. He is also likely to be punished by being deprived of the joy and sweetness of worship. As for the believing men and women, who are inwardly as pure as they are outwardly and who worship Allah at all times, they will taste the sweetness of worship and Allah will provide for them for all of their needs. They are the ones who sincerely follow the path of the Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, constantly in their worship of Allah.

Ramadan is distinguished among other months as far as acts of worship are concerned, but this does not mean that acts of worship should only be performed during Ramadan. The Messenger of Allah, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, was always generous and his generosity increased during Ramadan. He used to seek refuge with Allah from abandoning committing good deeds after performing them constantly. He, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, would say: "I seek refuge with You from recession after advancement." Allah also warns against this when He Says what means: "And do not be like she who untwisted her spun thread after it was strong...."[Qur'an 16: 92]

A supplication of the Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, also confirms this. He would say: "O Allah! Make this life for me an increase in good deeds." Therefore, we can see that he did not restrict the performance of good deeds to Ramadan alone, but followed the commandment of his Lord which means: "And worship your Lord until there comes to you the certainty (i.e. death)." [Qur'an 15: 99]

Human beings are no doubt imperfect. Islamic law, therefore, does not burden us with that which would exceed our capabilities. We are however required to hold fast, at all times, to the trustworthy handhold (the religion of Islam). This will make us attain the pleasure or our Lord in this world and the next and will save us from destruction as well as protecting us from all evils. This is despite however little our acts of worship may amount to. The Messenger of Allah, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, said: "O people! Do whatever you can of righteous deeds, for Allah will not cease to accept your deeds and bless you as long as you do not become apathetic. The most beloved of all good deeds to Allah is the one done continuously even if it is little."[Al-Bukhari & Muslim]

In view of this, we must understand that there are established acts of worship that must be performed at all times and never fluctuate, even after Ramadan like *Salaah* (prayer), *Zakaah* (obligatory charity), invocation of Allah and repentance, which Allah enjoins on His slaves when He Says what means: "...And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed." [Qur'an 24: 31]

The Messenger of Allah, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, used to say: "I seek the forgiveness of my Lord and repent to Him one-hundred times a day."

Now that you know this, it becomes incumbent on you to put it into practice, for you have tasted the sweetness of worship and closeness to Allah in Ramadan, do not therefore, ruin that with your sins. Moreover, the continued observation of acts of worship or negligence in them is an indication of the inner-workings of the heart, for it is the most changeable organ in the human body. That is why the Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, said: "The heart was given that name because of its inconstancy. The similitude of the heart is like that of a feather at the bottom of a tree which the wind blows hither and thither." [Ahmad] The Messenger of Allah, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, used to say in his supplication: "O turner of the hearts! Establish my heart firmly on your religion."

It is your right to celebrate Eid for it is Allah who made joy and happiness among the rewards for certainty of faith and made sorrow and distress among the recompense for displeasure and doubt. Eid should be an occasion for wholesome recreation and amusement. It is when people exceed the limits of Allah in their celebration and harm others that it becomes unlawful. This is because in these instances, people do not give Allah His due rights, nor do they thank Him for His blessings. 'Ali bin Abi Taalib, may Allah be pleased with him, saw some people playing around in a manner that is displeasing to Allah on the day of Eid and remarked: "If Allah has accepted these people's fasting then these are not the actions of the grateful and if Allah did not accept their fasting then such is not the behaviour of the fearful."

Ibn al-Qayyim, may Allah have mercy upon him, said about happiness: "Surely, Allah shall bring this ware (happiness and joy) to its merchants (i.e. those who know how best to rejoice) and those who know its value, though it may, on the way, fall into the hands of those who do not appreciate its value, for many are carriers of knowledge who are not themselves knowledgeable and many are carriers of knowledge unto those who are better than them in understanding." Allah Says what means: "The example of those who were entrusted with the Torah and then did not take it on (by neglecting their duty towards it) is like that of a donkey who carries volumes (of books)..."[Qur'an 62: 5]

The Muslim should therefore, not exceed the limits when rejoicing for Allah does not love such people. This is because excessive joy generates arrogance and disdain for the truth. While commenting on the saying of Allah which means: "From the evil of the retreating whisperer (a devil who makes evil suggestions to man but disappears when one remembers Allah)." [Qur'an 114: 4] One of the Qur'anic commentators said: "The devil occupies the heart of man whenever he is happy or sad, but when he remembers Allah he withdraws." So fear Allah during joyful moments for the sincere Muslim does not transgress the limits, nor does he deviate from the truth due to his happiness. Ali Ibn Abi Taalib said: "Every day in which one does not disobey his Lord is a cause for celebration."

The Wise Law-Giver has prescribed for you the fasting of six days in the month of Shawwaal. The Messenger of Allah, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, said: "Whoever fasts (the whole of) Ramadan and then follows it up with six days fasting in the month of Shawwaal, is like the one who fasts for the whole year (in terms of reward)." It is better to observe this fast immediately after Eid and do them in succession, but there is no harm if one separates between them or fasts them anytime during that month. However, these six fasts are not obligatory.

Whoever fasts them will be rewarded for that and whoever does not, will not be punished. If one is however consistent in fasting it for years and then becomes unable to do so in a particular year due to illness or travel, they will get the same reward as if they fasted them. This is because the Messenger of Allah, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, said: "If a man is sick or travels, what he used to do while he was resident and healthy will be written down for him."

However, it is not permissible for someone to fast these six days before they make up for the days that they missed during Ramadan. One will only get the reward for the six days fasting in Shawwaal if they have completely fasted the whole of Ramadan. Finally, let whoever wants an additional reward endeavour to fast on the 13th, 14th and 15th day of every month for the Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, has explained that whoever fasts them is like the one who fasts perpetually.

Fear Allah as He should be feared and be conscious of Him in private and in public. Worship Him as if you see Him, for even though you do not see Him, He sees you.

Allah Says what means: "And rely upon the Exalted in Might, the Merciful. Who sees you when you arise. And your movement among those who prostrate. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Knowing."[Qur'an 26: 217-220]

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Islam – a comprehensive way of life

To understand the essence of Islam is to understand the very essence of humanity. More than a religion, Islam is a complete and comprehensive way of life leading to a balanced way of living. Islam brings civilisation and happiness to man. Islamic principles and teachings can provide realistic, fair and objective solutions to the prevention of individual, familial, social and international problems which are threatening the existence of human communities throughout the world.

A spiritual belief that does not deal with social behaviour, economic relations and international organisations is as erroneous as the social doctrine that does not consider spiritual belief, morality and behaviour. Such social doctrines are abortive attempts, incapable of total human guidance or of achieving any coherence or accord among human beings.

Both the individual and the society are in dire need of a belief that accommodates and directs all their vital activities towards construction and growth. When the individual and society adopt such a belief and apply it to life, humanity can accomplish seemingly miraculous achievements which can only occur when man unites himself with the Eternal Power that channels his personality -potential in the right direction.

History has shown that Islam is unique in its ability to provide guidance for the entire range of human activity. It does not separate spiritual and secular life as unrelated entities.

Islam integrates all domains of human life, just like the different systems in the human body integrate to provide a complete human being. If one system does not work properly, it has got to affect the whole body. Likewise, Islam proposes systems of laws that integrate all parts of human society to bring happiness and peace to all its members.

There is no other way or system that urges the active worship of Allah in its general and most comprehensive sense other than Islam. Fox example, Islam teaches that Muslims should fast for a month every year (i.e. Ramadan) in order to acquire piety and self-discipline and to develop awareness of the needs and problems of others who are starving or are in desperate need of food. Such an awareness of the needs of others is not enough on its own. Therefore, *Zakaah* (obligatory charity) is prescribed to be distributed among the segments of society that are in need of individual and communal assistance.

A very important universal concept in Islam is *Ummah* (Nation). *Ummah* transcends all limitations implied by the term 'nation' by encompassing all people regardless of race, colour, or sex. Allah emphasised this great Islamic principle in the verse (which means);

"Mankind was [of] one religion [before their deviation]; then Allah sent the prophets as bringers of good tidings and warners and sent down with them the Scripture in truth to judge between the people concerning that in which they differed. And none differed over it [i.e. Scripture] except those who were given it-after the clear proofs came to them-out of jealous animosity among themselves. And Allah guided those who believed to the truth concerning that over which they had differed, by His permission. And Allah guides whom He wills to a straight path." [Qur'an 2:2 13]

Moreover, Islam has a unique understanding for the concept of Ummah. *Ummah* is the field for knowledge, ethics, government and positivism. *Ummah* in Islam is a system in which people integrate, even if they belong to different belief systems. It is a system of universal justice and peace that accommodates everyone who believes in freedom of thinking and in calling people to the truth-whether they are individuals or communities.

Indeed, Ummah in Islam is an apparatus which is more advanced than that developed by the West or the UN.

The Prophet Muhammad, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, proposed a constitution for the city of Madinah during the first days of his emigration from Makkah. He, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, included the rights of both Jews and Christians, thereby safeguarding their freedom and beliefs. History has never known a constitution that represented minorities as this constitution of the Islamic state did. Ummah as an Islamic concept will, Allah willing, bring the advent of universal peace as well as an internal social system. Ummah is the field-ground for civilisation to take place. Such an Ummah can be integrated and united, if it derives its doctrines, constitutions, morals, values and the whole perspective of life from the same united source: belief in the only true Allah. This is known as the concept of *Tawheed* (Monotheism).

The educated in the West are beginning to see that the "full" life is found only in Islam, the universal religion.

And what about the present day Muslim world? Unfortunately, some "educated" Muslims now pay only "lip-service" to Islam. They think that Islam is a slogan to be raised or a word to be uttered. Islam is the way of life that should be implemented in all spheres of life. These hypocrites have forgotten that Allah dislikes those who brag about things that they do not practise. When man's deeds are not commensurate with their words, their conduct is odious in the sight of Allah.

"O you who have believed, why do you say what you do not do? Great is hatred in the sight of Allah that you say what you do not do." [Qur'an 61:2-3]

May Allah let the Muslim World never forget that Islam provides a complete and comprehensive way of life. Islam creates harmony in the mind, the soul and the body in a marvellous way. The need for Islam emerges from the humanity's search for a constitution that provides guidance and satisfaction in all spheres of life. It is a code of life that is not limited to partial needs, but rather a way of life that penetrates all barriers to interact with people's needs in this life and beyond. It is a way of life where there is no discrimination between what is sacred and what is secular.

Islam is unique among the religions and civilisations the world has known. In contrast to the other religions of the world, Islam defines religion itself as the very business of life, the very matter of space-time, the very process of history, and the gift of Allah. Therefore, all these work together to constitute them.

Islam is a divine guidance wherein humans of all nations, colours and tongues feel linked to a Supreme Power and Justice. Its teachings are kept intact and authentic. It is the only way to happiness, dignity, and universal peace. Islam is so unique in its method for solving the problems of humanity. I can say with confidence that the 21st century will be the century of Islam. The everlasting miracle of Islam, THE QUR'AN, is a standing challenge to the intellect of all peoples at all times. In Islam's four abiding principles - equality, tolerance, promotion of science, and solution to the world's problems - its universality asserts itself. It calls to all mankind, if only mankind will listen.

"Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an? If it had been from [any] other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction." [Qur'an 4:2]

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

The light of the truth

What is Life?

Man's existence in this world and the creation of this entire universe are not mere accidents or products of a fortuitous nature. This universe, every single atom of it, manifests and leads us to the realisation of a Loving, Merciful and All-powerful Creator. Without a Creator, nothing can exist. Every single human being is aware that their existence is dependent upon a Creator. He knows for sure that he cannot create himself. Therefore, it is his duty to know his Master, the Creator.

Humankind

Man is a unique creature. Allah, the Most Exalted, established man as His representative or deputy, to govern over all other creatures in this world. He is endowed with the faculty of reason, which sets him apart from all other animals. Together with this faculty to discriminate and discern, man has been given the freedom to choose for himself a way of life worthy of his position as Allah's representative, or to fall lower than the lowest of all animals or creations. Almighty Allah Says in the Noble Qur'an (what means):

"And [by] the soul and He who proportioned it. And inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness. He has succeeded who purifies it. And he has failed who instills it [with corruption]." [Qur'an 91: 7-10]

Man is born pure and sinless and has been given the choice to do righteous deeds or indulge in sins. Prophet Muhammad, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam* (may Allah exalt his mention), said in an authentic *Hadith* (narration): "No babe is born but upon Fitrah (innate nature, which is Islam). It is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian." [Muslim]

Divine Guidance

The Creator, out of His abundant Love and Mercy for mankind has not left us in darkness to discover the right path by trial and error alone. Coupled with our intellectual capability to reason, our Creator bestowed upon us Divine Guidance that outlines the Criterion for Truth, knowledge, as well as the reality of our existence in this world and the Hereafter.

Revelations

From the beginning of mankind, our Creator sent Prophets, may Allah exalt their mention, to convey His Revelation and to invite human beings to the Path of true peace and obedience to the one true God. This is Islam. This message has been conveyed to man in successive generations through the different prophets, may Allah exalt their mention, who invited mankind to the same Path. However, all the earlier messages or revelations from Allah Almighty were distorted by people of later generations.

As a result, the pure Revelation from our Creator was corrupted with myths, superstitions, idol worship and irrational philosophical ideologies. The religion of Allah, the Exalted, in a sense was lost in a plethora of religions. Human history is a testament of man's drift between light and darkness, but Allah, out of His Abundant Love for mankind, has not forsaken us.

Final Revelation

When mankind was in the depths of the Dark Ages, our Creator sent His final Messenger, Prophet Mohammed, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, to redeem humanity with the final Revelation, which represents the ultimate and permanent source of guidance for the whole world.

Criteria for Truth

The following criteria can best serve as a gauge to find out the authenticity of the last Revelation (the Qur'an), the Word of Allah:

1. Rational teachings

Since our Creator bestowed reason and intellect upon us, it is our duty to use it to distinguish the truth from falsehood. True, undistorted Revelation from Almighty Allah must be rational and can be reasoned out by all unbiased minds.

2. Perfection

Since our Creator is All-Perfect, His Revelation must also be perfect and accurate, free from mistakes, omissions, interpolations and multiplicity of versions. It should be free from contradictions in its narration.

3. No myths or superstitions

True Revelation is free from myths or superstitions that degrade the dignity of our Creator or man himself.

4. Scientific

Since our Creator is the Creator of all knowledge, True Revelation is scientific and can withstand the challenge of Science at all times.

5. Factual Prophecy

Our Creator is the Knower of the past, present and future. Thus, His prophecies in His Revelation will be fulfilled as prophesied.

6. Inimitable by man

True Revelation is infallible and cannot be imitated by man. Allah's true Revelation is a Living Miracle, an open book challenging all mankind to see and prove for themselves its authenticity or veracity. Almighty Allah Says in the Noble Qur'an (what means):

"Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an? If it had been from [any] other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction." [Qur'an 4:82]

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QATAR





The beach and sea fronts are especially popular during the Eid holidays.







Beaches and parks are hot destinations during the Eid holidays



By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter





Large numbers of residents of different nationalities flocked to the numerous public gardens and parks across the country to enjoy the Eid holidays.

The Public Gardens Department at the Ministry of Municipality has made all the arrangements at the parks and beaches to make them ready to receive the expected influx of visitors during the holidays, in particular because of good weather conditions for outdoor activities.

Accordingly, inspection tours were carried out ahead of Eid, with the necessary cleaning and maintenance works done to keep these places in their best shape.

Most of the parks are free of charge.

However, Al Khor Park is a paid facility, with pre-booking necessary, and there is another separate fee for to the Panda House there.

Al Khor Park is unique in that it is not just a park with ample green areas, but it hosts a zoo.

Expatriate Saeed Abdalla said that public parks have become easily accessible at almost all areas of the country, making it the best option for families to spend time in the open air, allowing children to enjoy play in the open spaces.

He said that this encourages healthy lifestyle and helps steer children away from electronic devices and the virtual world.

Others meanwhile prefer to go to the seafront areas, such as Doha Corniche, Katara Seafront and other areas at Wakra and Al Khor.

Public and private beaches across the country, especially those outside Doha at the Sealine Al Wakra, Simaisma, Al Shamal, Al Khor and others have seen great turnout, with many groups of people – families and friends – opting to spend the Eid holidays there from early morning hours till late evening.

While some preferred to stick to a quiet spot for fishing and contemplation, others enjoyed swimming, bike and camel rides over the sand dunes and other group activities and games.

Expatriate Khalid Ahmed said that the residents of Qatar are very lucky to have such amazing beaches, many of which equipped with various services and facilities that ensure comfort and safety for everybody, including children, the elderly and those with special needs.

He added that it is very clear that the authorities have exerted great efforts to prepare these places and make them easily accessible for the public free of charge.

Accordingly, the Ministry of Municipality has invited residents and visitors of the country to enjoy the various beaches and parks.

However, it has also urged the public to maintain cleanliness of these places, avoiding littering or setting fire for barbecues directly on the sands.

Through its official X account, the ministry further urged the public to dispose of their garbage, barbecue remains and other refuse materials at the designated areas, to keep these places clean to be enjoyed by all.







