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Calm urged after reported Israeli strike on Iran

World leaders appealed for calm yesterday after reported Israeli retaliation against Iran added to months of tense spillover from the war in Gaza, with Iranian state media reporting explosions in a central province. Israeli officials made no public comment on the attack and Iranian officials played down its significance. But the spectre of direct hostilities between the Middle East arch-foes rattled world markets with prices of oil, gold and equities seesawing during the day. A senior US Congressional source said there had been retaliatory Israeli strikes but declined to provide any details, saying they were classified.

Man sets self on fire outside Trump trial

A man set himself on fire yesterday in a park outside the court where Donald Trump is standing trial in Manhattan, with a witness describing him throwing pamphlets before officers rushed to extinguish the flames. Burning clothes were strewn in the park, which was locked down by authorities, while ambulances lined up nearby on standby. Video seemingly taken by witnesses and posted on social media showed a person standing engulfed in flames, then falling to the ground as police and plainclothes officers rushed to beat out the blaze. **Page 9**



Palestinian children walk next to the ruins of Al-Farouq Mosque, destroyed during Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

14,000 children killed in Israeli aggression: Unicef

The number of children who have been killed in the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip has surpassed 14,000, the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) said yesterday. "Current reports indicate that more than 14,000 boys and girls have been killed in Gaza," Unicef spokesman James Elder said in a post on X. "Perhaps we should say it slowly: Fourteen thousand," adding, "Perhaps we should do something, and it is certainly not a military attack in Rafah," and called for an "immediate

ceasefire" in the Strip, Elder added. He called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, emphasising that the figures of casualties do not reveal the real magnitude of the catastrophe that was inflicted upon the Palestinians, particularly children and women, especially that the victims and missing are still underneath the rubble, something strongly suggests that death toll is far more than the figures being announced by the ministry of health in Gaza. **(QNA)**

Qatar regrets UNSC failure to approve draft resolution granting membership to Palestine

Decision hinders Palestinian people from obtaining legitimate rights: OIC, Muslim World League

QNA
Doha

Qatar yesterday expressed deep regret at the failure of the UN Security Council to adopt a draft resolution accepting full membership of the State of Palestine in the United Nations, and considered it a sad day for justice and a setback for efforts to bring peace to the region.

In a statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed the failure of the Security Council to adopt the draft resolution reveals, time and again, its inability to carry out its responsibilities and role within the framework of maintaining international peace and security, especially in light of the brutal war on the Gaza Strip, which led to the worst humanitarian disaster the world has ever witnessed in the 21st century.

The ministry reiterated Qatar's firm position in support of the legitimate rights of the brotherly Palestinian people, foremost of which is their right to establish their independent state on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC) too expressed deep regret at the failure of the Security Council, at a time when the Palestinian people are facing the

harshest forms of aggression, persecution, and genocide.

In a statement, the organisation said the use of the US' veto right contravenes the provisions of the United Nations Charter, which allows membership for all states accepting the obligations therein, and continues to hinder the Palestinian people from obtaining their legitimate rights, thus perpetuating the historical injustice suffered by the Palestinian people over the past 75 years.

The ministry reiterated Qatar's firm position in support of the legitimate rights of the brotherly Palestinian people

The organisation also affirmed Palestine's legitimate right to embody its political and legal status within the UN, akin to other countries around the world, considering this as an overdue entitlement for decades based on the political, legal, historical, and natural rights of the Palestinian people in their land, as confirmed by relevant United Nations resolutions.

It emphasised that recognising the State of Palestine contributes to achieving peace and stability and paves the way for the implementation of a two-state solution.

The organisation expressed

appreciation for the positions of countries that supported the resolution project, reflecting their stance in favour of rights, justice, freedom, and peace, and their rejection of Israeli colonial occupation policies. It called on countries that either rejected or abstained from voting on the resolution to review and rectify their positions in line with their obligations under international law, the United Nations Charter, and relevant resolutions.

The Muslim World League (MWL) too voiced its regret over the UN Security Council's failure.

In a statement by the general secretariat, the MWL stressed that obstructing Palestine's admission as a full member exacerbates the suffering of its oppressed people, encourages the occupation's intransigence to continue violating international law unchecked, and represents a significant obstacle to the pursuit of a just and comprehensive peace that all parties seek.

The MWL reiterated its demand for the international community to assume its responsibilities by stopping the Israeli occupation's attacks on civilians in the Gaza Strip, supporting the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, and establishing their state within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Qatar calls for global action to spare Mideast from fallout of conflicts

QNA
New York

Qatar has urged the international community to immediately act to defuse the tension and spare the Middle East region the peril of being dragged into a new vortex of conflicts.

It urged all parties to de-escalate the situation and exercise maximum restraint, stressing that the worrying developments that have been unfolding in the region underscore Qatar's repeated warnings of the peril of the spillover of the conflict unless bloodshed in the Gaza Strip ceases.

The comments came in a Qatar statement delivered by HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations, Sheikhha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani, before the meeting of the

quarterly open debate on "The situation in the Middle East", including the Palestinian question at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

The situation in the Gaza Strip amounts to an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe and Qatar reiterates its condemnation of all forms of targeting the civilians and civic facilities, including the collective punishment, deprivation of food and essential services, using starvation as a weapon and attempts of forced displacement of residents conducted by the de facto occupation power, Her Excellency pointed out.

She said Qatar has highlighted the humanitarian and security consequences of these practices and rejects any military operation launched by the occupation forces in Rafah city, adding the status quo precipitates the full respect of the

international law, the international humanitarian law, and the international human rights law, in addition to taking all essential steps to end the humanitarian catastrophe and stave off famine.

HE Sheikhha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani pointed out that such matter requires unhindered delivery of large-scale humanitarian aid immediately and safely.

Her Excellency reiterated Qatar's welcoming of the adoption of resolution No 2728 by the UN Security Council which called for an immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip culminating in a durable ceasefire.

She asserted the resolution remains binding under the charter, and it behooves the international community and the UN Security Council to ensure the enforcement of the international law without double standards.

Four Palestinians killed in Israeli raid in West Bank

Four Palestinians were killed yesterday after Israeli occupation forces fired live rounds at Nur Shams camp east of Tulkarm City in the West Bank. Three Palestinians were also wounded, among them two kids during confrontations with the Israeli occupation forces in Beita town in the Nablus Governorate in the northern occupied West Bank, Palestinian News Agency (Wafa) reported. Wafa added that special forces from the Israeli occupation raided one of the homes at Nur Shams camp and executed four young men who were sheltering there. **(QNA)**



Protesters rally in solidarity with Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, in Sanaa, Yemen, yesterday.

New tram lines expected to spur Qatar tourism growth

By Peter Alagos
Business Reporter

The recent opening of two more lines of the Lusail Tram is expected to spur "exponential growth" in local tourism, particularly within the vicinity of Lusail City, a Qatar Rail executive said.

Lusail City has been attracting thousands of local and international visitors in recent years as it is home to several touristic destinations, such as world-class malls and theme parks. It is also a hub for luxury residential homes, retail and food outlets, and offices for public and private sector entities.

Only recently, Qatar Rail announced the launch of the Pink



Each Lusail Tram station contains a customer information centre, Travel Card vending machines, live digital service updates, separate male and female prayer facilities and restrooms that cater for people with mobility impairments.

Line and the completion of all Orange Line stations. According to Qatar Rail, once the full tram

network opens, it will connect various government offices, residential towers, leisure and sports

facilities, avenues, marinas and other major attractions across Lusail City.

Engineer Ahmed al-Saleh, senior director of the Lusail Tram Project at Qatar Rail, spoke to the media earlier and pointed out that the transport agency's focus is on encouraging more people to utilise the tram, thus increasing ridership.

Not only will this drive tourism growth in the Lusail area, but the expanded operations of the Lusail Tram will also help entice more people to relocate and live in Lusail City's residential neighbourhood, al-Saleh emphasised.

Engineer Jassim al-Ansari, chief of Programme Delivery at Qatar Rail, also said plans are in the pipeline to add tram links, similar

to the metrolink, to augment the transportation needs of the riding public.

"A study, as well as preparations for a tram link, are being put in place. But this will always be subject to the number of ridership. In Lusail, particularly, we need to be more careful, and we need to know exactly where we can have more catchment of population and ridership to have effective operation of a tram link," al-Ansari told *Gulf Times*.

He added: "We are in favour of increasing ridership and encouraging more people from the surrounding neighbourhoods to use our network, considering that the Lusail Tram is also connected to the Doha Metro network.

Ajlan Eid al-Enazi, chief of

Strategy and Business Development at Qatar Rail, underscored the importance of both the Doha Metro and the Lusail Tram, saying both transport networks help the riding public save on travel time.

Both networks also provide accessibility to key destinations, such as government offices, corporate buildings, commercial shops and malls, restaurants, and other tourism-related establishments.

Citing Qatar Rail's successful experience during the 2022 FIFA World Cup, al-Enazi said the Doha Metro and Lusail Tram served as a vital mode of transportation for many sports fans. He said both networks will continue to ferry passengers quickly and safely during future sporting events to be hosted in Qatar.

US Air Forces Central Command celebrates new leadership handover



The Qatar Armed Forces and the US Air Forces Central Command celebrated the handover of the reins of the new US Air Forces Central Command, led by Major-General Derek France, succeeding Lieutenant General Alexis Grynkeiwich. The command is based in the State of Qatar. The handover ceremony, which was held at Al Udeid Air Base, was attended by HE Chief of Staff of Qatar Armed Forces Staff Lieutenant-General (Pilot) Salem bin Hamad bin Aqeel al-Nabit, ambassador of the United States of America to Qatar Timmy Davis, Commander of US Central Command Lieutenant-General Michael Kurilla, and several ambassadors and senior military commanders from the Qatari and American sides, and air force commanders, representatives of brotherly and friendly countries. (QNA)

Rwandan community pays homage to victims on 30th anniversary of genocide against Tutsi

The Rwandan embassy in Qatar honoured the memory of the victims of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, at an event at the Qatar National Convention Centre, a statement said yesterday.

Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department of Protocol director ambassador Ibrahim Fakhro, African Affairs Department assistant director Mubarak Mohamed al-Khalifa, Rwandan ambassador Igor Marara, other dignitaries and senior members from the Rwandan community in Qatar were present to remember more than 1m lives lost during this tragic chapter of history.

"On April 7, 1994, a genocide was unleashed against the Tutsi minority of Rwanda, leaving over a million dead in just 100 days, in full view of the world. A minimal United Nations peacekeeping force stood by and watched the genocide unfold, after a decision was made by the Security Council to withdraw most of the peacekeepers," the statement explained.

"Kwibuka," meaning 'to remember' in Kinyarwanda, encapsulates the essence of this commemoration. During the event, the attendees took a minute of silence, followed by the symbolic act of lighting the flame of hope, reminiscent of the spirit of renewal that emerged from the ashes of tragedy.

"This year's historic commemoration is an opportunity for Rwandans and the rest of the world to honour victims, comfort survivors, and reflect on Rwanda's journey of recovery, reconciliation, and resilience, with national unity at the core of the country's stability and progress," the statement said.

In his remarks, ambassador Marara emphasised the importance of collective action in combating genocide ideologies. "As we reflect on the lessons learned from our past, we believe that fighting genocide ideologies of any form



Rwandan ambassador Igor Marara addressing the gathering.

is a battle humanity should never stop fighting. We renew our commitment to actively cooperate with all stakeholders, promoting regional and international peace and security."

Malaika Uwamahoro, a Rwandan-born actress, poet and singer together with her team gave a performance, taking the audience through Rwanda's journey. Gloriosa Uwimpuhwe, a survivor of the 1994 Genocide Against Tutsi, shared her testimony during the event where she highlighted the pivotal role of unity in Rwanda's post-genocide development.

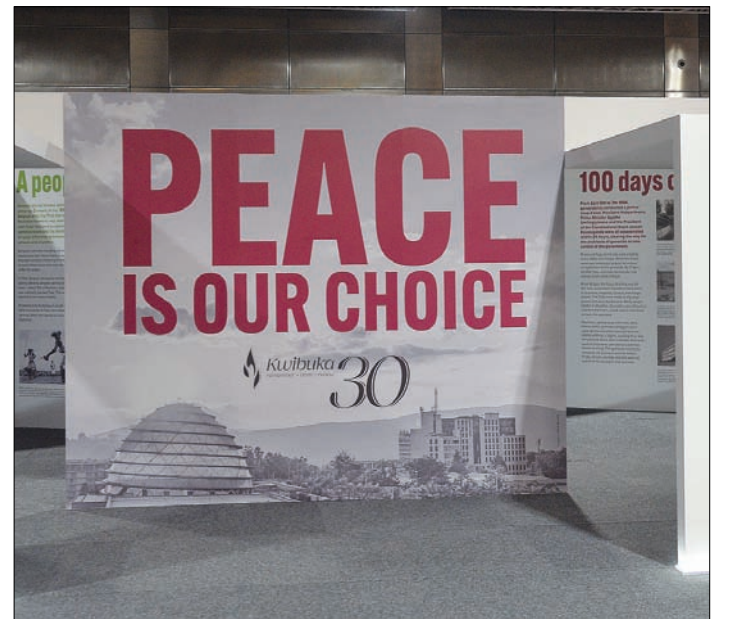
The event also featured an exhibition that served as a learning journey for participants. It provided insights into how the genocide against Tutsi was prepared and executed, its profound impact, and Rwanda's remarkable journey of perseverance, the embassy statement added.



Dignitaries honoured the memory of the victims of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



Malaika Uwamahoro (left) and her team performing at the event.



A view of the exhibition.

QU research succeeds in reducing environmental pollution

Research successes have been achieved at Qatar University (QU) in collaboration with various entities in the country to reduce pollution and protect the environment, Prof Dr Samir Jaoua, at the College of Arts and Sciences, has said.

The professor of Microbiology and Molecular and Microbial Biotechnology told local Arabic daily *Arrayah* that one of the current research projects is focusing on the use of microorganisms to reduce environmental pollution, and the production of natural bacterial pesticides. According to several research programmes being conducted,



Prof Dr Samir Jaoua

bacteria produce proteins which could be used instead of chemi-

cal pesticides, aiming to preserve the environment. He noted that there are a good number of Master and PhD theses in this field at QU. Prof Dr Jaoua said there is a scientific thesis of one of his graduate students, about isolating bacteria that resist harmful fungi producing mycotoxins. Professors at the department concerned from different specialities including marine sciences, biology, and botany among others, are highly interested in building an integrated research system.

Prof Dr Jaoua noted that the Qatari environment enjoys significant diversity in all natural resources including trees,

animals, fish, and microorganisms, represent a rich source for researchers in various related fields.

Among the prominent studies and research are those related to plants producing molecules found to have health benefits, in addition to bacteria producing molecules capable of combating germs and resist harmful insects or bacteria producing proteins.

"We collaborate with many entities in the country to enhance the utilisation of research efforts for the benefit of the Qatari environment and society. Our research projects are funded by QU and the Qatar National Research Fund," he added.

QU Health professionals launch series of webinars to mark World Autism Month

QNA
Doha

The Department of Continuous Professional Development for Health Professionals (CPD-HP) at Qatar University (QU) announced the start of a series of an online educational seminars, as a commitment to enhancing knowledge and raising the level of patient care.

QU said in a statement that these webinars aim to raise awareness and understanding of

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and support the goals of World Autism Month, adding that its weekly webinar series will begin on April 24 and will extend over five consecutive weeks, providing participants with a unique opportunity to interact with national experts, actively contribute to discussions and expand their understanding of ASD.

QU explained that the inaugural webinar will introduce diagnosis and genetic factors, and subsequent sessions will cover strategies for care delivery by multidisciplinary teams. It will

also challenge common misconceptions, and provide insights into the lived experiences of patients and their families coping with ASD, the statement added.

In this regard, head of CPD-HP at QU Dr Zachariah Nazar stressed the importance of working with national stakeholders to enhance awareness and exchange experiences, pointing out that these educational sessions represent a collaborative effort to support individuals with autism and their families.

By partnering with pioneering national stakeholders, we can

enhance awareness and understanding and ultimately improve the quality of care for people with ASD, Dr Nazar added. It is noteworthy that this initiative comes in co-operation with prominent national stakeholders committed to enhancing the care of autistic persons, including Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC), Sidra Medicine, Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU), Renad Academy and Child Development Center (CDC), and it aims to provide a platform for learning and discussing different aspects of ASD.

Do not drive at night without lights: MoI

Driving vehicles at night without turning on the lights is a traffic offence, the Ministry of Interior (MoI) has said. "Kindly turn your lights and ensure their proper functioning before driving at night to keep you and others safe," MoI's guidelines shared on its official X account said, explaining that it's a violation according to Article 70 of the Traffic Law. "Turning your lights on before driving at night is vital to ensuring traffic safety," the post added.

Driving a vehicle at night without turning on its lights

is a traffic violation according to Article 70 of the Traffic Law.

Turning your lights on before driving at night is vital to ensuring road safety.



VCUarts Qatar alumna's installation a tribute to two female visionaries

When designer Asma Derouiche was invited by Qatar Foundation (QF) to design and produce an artwork to celebrate the opening of Al-Mujadilah, QF's new Centre and Mosque for Women, she had no doubts as to where her source of inspiration would come from - from two women, who, though they lived centuries apart, were visionaries in the realm of education and development.

Derouiche chose to honour Fatima bint Mohamed al-Fihri, who is said to be the founder of the world's first university, in Fes, Morocco, and Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, the driving force behind establishing QF, and currently its chairperson.

The result was an irradant installation titled 'Ripples of Hope' that blends the past and the future, a confluence where ancient wisdom meets modern education, a statement said.

While the concept straddles two eras, it also represents the designer's connections to two countries and their respective cultures. Derouiche hails from the homeland of Fatima bint Mohamed al-Fihri - Tunisia - and is herself an alumna of Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser's Education City, having earned an MFA in Design from Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar (VCUarts Qatar), the very first partner university to be set up by QF at its Education City campus in 1998.

The Doha-based designer chose to work with a local company to bring her concept to life. Once again, she drew inspiration from QF, choosing green and white as the colour palette.



Ripples of Hope

Derouiche explains the concept behind, and the details of, the stunning installation, further: "The moment I read the brief - which said that the opening art exhibition must provide individuals with a richer and more textured understanding of the multifaceted nature of Muslim women's lives and social contributions throughout history - I immediately knew who and what my design should be about.

"I wanted to show the ripple effect that the work of two women, and other Muslim women who they represent, had and continue to have, over generations. Much like the concentric circles created when a solitary stone lands upon a still surface of water, the con-

centric circles and arcs in this artwork invite viewers to ponder the endless possibilities born from a singular moment in time - that single moment could be a smile, an act of kindness, the time shared with a loved one, or it could be the far-reaching influences that visionaries such as Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser and Fatima bint Mohamed al-Fihri, have on generations.

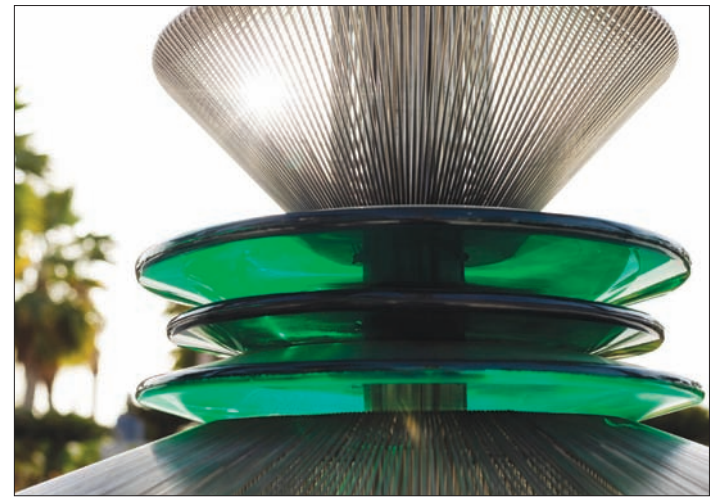
"I also incorporated a beam of light into each of the three sculptures, a metaphor for the radiating influence of learning and education from one generation to the next," she says.

According to Derouiche, the modular and interchangeable design of the installation refers to

the ever-evolving perspectives and adaptability exhibited by the human race, across centuries. The sculpture was made entirely in Doha using metal and glass.

"The combination of metal and glass embodies a balance between strength and fragility, creating a visual and conceptual dialogue between two seemingly opposing but holistic materials. That juxtaposition also prompts the question, 'How vital is the present moment in contrast to eternity?'" she explains.

The installation, after being exhibited at the opening of Al-Mujadilah, was part of a themed section titled 'Cultural Kinship' at the Design Doha Biennale.



Qatari teen's research on seawater published

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

A 12-year old Qatari boy, Zakarya Aldeeb, a student at Doha College (Year 8) published a scholarly article titled 'Physicochemical Analysis of Seawater on the East Coast of Doha' in the esteemed *International Journal of High School Research*.

He analysed Qatar's waters, testing for several physicochemical parameters that determine water quality, such as pH, Conductivity, Total Dissolved Solids (TDS), Turbidity, Alkalinity, Total Hardness, Silica, Sulphate, Iron, Nitrate, Phosphate and Temperature from different sampling sites along major coastal areas on the East Coast of Qatar - namely the Doha Corniche, Al Khor and Mesaieed.

The analysis was a success, and its results revealed that Qatari coastal waters contained typical values of each parameter analysed, being clean and unaffected by the many risks of polluted waters like large-scale algal blooming.

The article is peer reviewed by several professionals and experts in this field before, which led to its publication.

Zakarya earlier published a book, titled: *Deserts: The Wild World* and available on Amazon and Kindle. The book is about wildlife in desert environments



Zakarya Aldeeb

such as those in Qatar. The research publication can be read at: <https://doi.org/10.36838/v6i2.2>

MES student tops Hindi Olympiad

MES Indian School student Syed Dawar Abbas (Class 10-E) won the Rashtriya Hindi Pratibha Samman award bagging the gold medal along with a cash award of Rs7,500 in the International Hindi Olympiad

organised by Hindi Vikas Sansthan, New Delhi. A total of 80 students from the school appeared in this Olympiad with 12 winning gold and four bagging silver. Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar congratulated the winners.

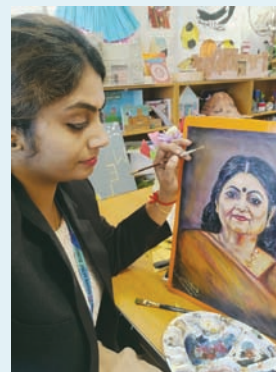


ICC hosts reception for Indian biker



Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) recently hosted a reception for Gabriel Sharath, who hails from Mangaluru, Karnataka, and is touring the Middle East on his bike. Indian embassy's deputy chief of mission Sandeep Kumar felicitated him. ICC president A P Manikantan, vice-president Subramanya Hebbagelu, other managing committee members and community leaders were present.

Versatile artist makes an impression



Doha-based Indian artist and art educator Roshni Krishnan, has a passion for mural paintings, cartoons, pencil drawings, fabric painting, bottle art and installations. Her mural paintings adorn public spaces, private residences and commercial establishments in Doha. Roshni has done live drawings for several dignitaries. "Identify your passion and prioritise" is her message to art enthusiasts.

Telangana Gulf Samithi's cricket league held



Telangana Gulf Samithi's annual cricket league TPL 9 for blue-collar workers was won by Telugu Friends XI with Bhagath Singh team being runners-up. Indian embassy's labour officer Jai Ganesh, was the chief guest, and Indian Community Benevolent Forum president Shanavas Bawa was the guest of honour. Deepak Shetty, K S Prasad Rao, Mohamed Kunhi, Shankar Goud, Gaddi Raju, Vamsi, Sagar, Manohar, Goli Srinivas and Yellaiah T were present.



US sanctions ally of Israeli minister, fundraisers for 'extremist' settlers

Reuters
Washington

The US yesterday imposed sanctions on an ally of Israel's far-right national security minister and two entities that raised money for Israeli men accused of settler violence, the latest actions aimed against those Washington blames for an escalation of violence in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The sanctions, in addition to those already imposed on five settlers and two unauthorised outposts already this year, are the latest sign of growing US frustration with the policies of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The moves yesterday, which freeze any US assets held by those targeted and generally bar Americans from dealing with them, hit two organisations that launched fundraising campaigns to support settlers accused of violence and targeted by previous sanctions, the Department of the Treasury said in a statement.

The Biden administration's moves against Israeli settlers have upset right-wing members of Netanyahu's governing coalition who support the expansion of settlements and ultimately the annexation of the West Bank, where Palestinians envisage a future

state. They come as the complex relationship between Washington and its ally Israel is tested by the war in Gaza and as the Biden administration urges Israel to show restraint in responding to retaliatory strikes by Iran.

Washington sanctioned Ben-Zion Gopstein, founder and leader of the right-wing group Lehava, which opposes Jewish assimilation with non-Jews.

State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said members of the group had engaged in "destabilising violence affecting the West Bank."

"Under Gopstein's leadership, Lehava and its members have been involved in acts or threats of violence against Palestinians, often targeting sensitive or volatile areas," Miller said in a statement, warning of additional steps if Israel does not take measures to prevent extremist attacks amid an escalation of violence in the West Bank in recent days.

The European Union also said yesterday it had agreed to take sanctions against Lehava and other groups linked to violent settlers. A spokesperson for Israel's embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Gopstein, the most prominent Israeli figure targeted by US sanctions, is a close associate of

National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, who himself lives in a West Bank settlement.

Since the 1967 Middle East war, Israel has occupied the West Bank of the Jordan River, which Palestinians want as the core of an independent state. It has built settlements there that most countries deem illegal.

The Biden administration in February said settlements were inconsistent with international law, signalling a return to long-standing US policy on the issue that had been reversed by the previous administration of Donald Trump.

One entity targeted yesterday, Mount Hebron Fund, launched an online fundraising campaign that raised \$140,000 for settler Yinon Levi, the Treasury said, after he was sanctioned on Feb 1 for leading a group of settlers that assaulted Palestinian and Bedouin civilians, burned their fields and destroyed their property. It said the second entity, Shlom Asiraich, raised \$31,000 on a crowdfunding website for David Chai Chasidai, who the US sanctioned for initiating and leading a riot that included setting vehicles and buildings on fire and causing damage to property in the Palestinian town of Huwara, resulting in the death of a Palestinian civilian.



File photo shows a girl sitting among patients in the kidney dialysis area at the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir el-Balah, central Gaza Strip, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Hamas group.

UN says medical equipment sabotaged in Gaza hospitals

AFP
Geneva

The UN decried yesterday the intentional destruction of complex and hard-to-obtain medical equipment in Gaza's beleaguered hospitals and maternity wards, further deepening risks to women already giving birth in "inhumane, unimaginable conditions".

Recent United Nations-led missions to 10 Gaza hospitals found many "in ruins" and just a couple capable of providing any level of maternal health services, said Dominic Allen, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) representative for the State of Palestine.

He said that what the teams found at the Nasser hospital complex, long besieged by Israeli forces during their operations in the southern city of Khan Yunis, "breaks my heart".

Speaking to journalists in Geneva via video-link from Jerusalem, he described seeing "medi-

cal equipment purposefully broken, ultrasounds - which you will know, is a very important tool for helping ensure safe births - with cables that have been cut". "Screens of complex medical equipment, like ultrasounds and others with the screens smashed," he added.

The World Health Organisation has described the difficulty of bringing such equipment into Gaza even before the current war erupted following Hamas' October first week storming of Israel. Meanwhile at Al-Khair, another specialised maternity hospital in Khan Yunis, "it didn't seem as if there was any piece of working medical equipment", he said, lamenting that the birthing rooms "stand silent".

"They should be a place of giving life and they just have an eerie sense of death." Only 10 of Gaza's 36 hospitals are currently even partially functioning.

And Allen said that only three of those were now capable of providing assistance to

the estimated 180 women giving birth across Gaza every single day - around 15% of whom suffer complications requiring significant care.

The hospitals that can provide such care are thus facing significant capacity constraints.

The Emirati Hospital in the south, which is the main maternity hospital in Gaza currently, is for instance supporting up to 60 births every single day, including as many as 12 Caesarian sections, he said.

Given the heavy pressure on the facility, women are discharged just hours after giving birth, "and after C-sections, it is less than a day", Allen said, stressing "that increases risks".

The current war started after Hamas launched its unprecedented storming in the first week of October. Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed at least 33,970 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry.

West Bank villagers vigilant but vulnerable after settler attacks

AFP
Al Mughhayyir

Sitting around a fire in the hills of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Ibrahim Abu Alyah and some friends stood watch over his herd in the aftermath of a settler attack on their village.

"We are here so that we can put away the sheep and tell people to protect their homes in case settlers come," Abu Alyah said.

After 14-year-old Israeli herder Benjamin Achmeir went missing on April 12 in the nearby illegal settler outpost of Malachi Hashalom, dozens of settlers raided his village of Al-Mughhayyir, north of Ramallah.

Armed with rifles and Molotov cocktails, they set houses ablaze, killed sheep, wounded 23 people and displaced 86, according to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA.

One Palestinian was also killed in the violence.

Abu Alyah, a shepherd, lost "20 or 30 sheep" and the cash he made from selling milk products when his house was set alight.

Al-Mughhayyir's mayor, Amin Abu Alyah, said the settlers, who were part of the search party for Achmeir, burnt "everything they found in front of them" including houses, a bulldozer and vehicles.

Several citizens tried to organise protection committees to defend themselves from raids, but were prevented from doing so, he said.

"We currently have more than 70 prisoners inside Israeli prisons on charges of joining protection



A Palestinian man gestures as he stands inside his kitchen in the aftermath of an attack by Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank village of Al-Mughhayyir near Ramallah recently.

committees or trying to form an organised body," he said.

In the nearby village of Duma, five kilometres north of Al-Mughhayyir, old fears came true when hundreds of settlers came down through the surrounding fields on Saturday.

That day, Achmeir's body was found bearing marks of a stabbing attack. People watched powerless as settlers rampaged through the village.

"Hundreds of settlers entered the village followed by more than 300 Israeli soldiers who stormed the village and declared it a closed military zone," said Suleiman Dawabsha, head of Duma's village council.

Mahmud Salawdeh, a 30-year-old iron worker whose house was torched in the attack, felt vulnerable when he realised the soldiers were not stopping the attack.

"We feel helpless because we are unable to protect ourselves,

and the settlers are protected by the army," he said. "I lost all my money and my future," he added from the ground floor of his charred house on the outskirts of Duma, near the fields the attackers came through.

At his feet, burnt furniture and shattered glass covered the floor, while walls black with soot served as a reminder of the firebombs thrown at the building.

His workshop in the adjacent room was torched, charred remnants of old tools lay around, while a large wooden box where he had been raising 70 chicks was now empty. The incident opened old wounds for Duma residents, who still remember the tragedy that struck the Dawabsha family.

In 2015, the family's home was set ablaze by a settler extremist, killing the couple and their toddler, and leaving only one surviving member, four-year-old Ahmed Dawabsha.

Turkiye's Freedom Flotilla ready to set sail for Gaza

AFP
Tuzla

An international humanitarian relief effort in the form of a Freedom Flotilla Coalition was getting ready yesterday to leave the western Turkish port of Tuzla and bring much-needed relief to residents of war-torn Gaza.

At least three vessels carrying some 5,000 tonnes of food, drinking water and medical aid were awaiting the green light from Turkish authorities to set sail from the port on the Sea of Marmara, south of Istanbul, organisers said.

Some 280 activists, rights campaigners, lawyers and doctors from more than 30 countries including the United States, Britain, Canada, Norway, Spain, Malaysia and Germany have joined the mission to Gaza. The territory has

been under Israeli blockade and bombardment since October first week, when Hamas fighters stormed Israel.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed at least 34,012 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, the territory's health ministry said yesterday.

Organisers have told reporters they are demanding a guarantee of free passage and an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Retired US army colonel and retired US State Department official Ann Wright - now a peace activist who resigned from the State Department in protest at the 2002 US-led invasion of Iraq - argued that any attempt to stop the flotilla would be unlawful.

"The siege of Gaza is illegal - it's a form of collective punishment which is a war crime," she said, saying Gazans were enduring "unimaginable" suffering.

Israel targets army position in Syria

Israeli strikes yesterday targeted a Syrian army position in the country's south, Syria's government and a monitor said, as US media reported Israel had hit Iran. In a statement, Syria's defence ministry said "the Israeli enemy carried out an attack using missiles... targeting our air defence sites in the southern region" and causing material damage. AFP reported from Beirut. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor said Israel targeted an army radar position in the southern province of Daraa that had detected the entry of Israeli planes into Syria's airspace. Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Britain-based Observatory, said the strikes took place "at a time when the Israeli air force was flying intensively over the Daraa region" without Syrian air defences taking any action. The Israeli military has carried out hundreds of strikes in Syria since the outbreak of a civil war in its northern neighbour in 2011, mainly targeting army positions and fighters. But the strikes have increased since Israel's war with Palestinian Hamas group in the Gaza Strip.

Four dead in UAE, Dubai airport still disrupted after storm



Cars are stranded on a flooded street in Dubai following heavy rains, yesterday.

Reuters
Dubai

Deaths from heavy rains earlier this week in the United Arab Emirates rose to four, authorities said yesterday, as well as flooding roads and jamming Dubai's international airport.

The storm first hit Oman at the weekend, killing at least 20 people, before pounding the UAE on Tuesday with its heaviest rains in 75 years of records.

Two Philippine women and one man died in their vehicles during flooding, the government in Manila

said. An Emirati man in his 70s had also died when his vehicle was swept away by floods in the northern Ras Al Khaimah emirate.

Scientists blame increasingly common extreme weather events, such as the rains in UAE and Oman, on human-led global warming.

Dubai International Airport, one of the world's busiest and a hub for travel around the Middle East, was still struggling to clear a backlog of flights three days after the storm. It was limiting arrivals for two days until Sunday.

Flagship carrier Emirates, one of the world's biggest international airlines, said check-in was suspend-

ed for people planning to transit via Dubai though those with the city as a final destination could travel as usual.

As of yesterday morning, 1,478 flights to and from Dubai had been cancelled since Tuesday, approximately 30% of all flights, according to aircraft flight tracking website FlightRadar24.

In the UAE capital Abu Dhabi, state carrier Etihad said flight operations were back to normal.

The main road connecting Dubai, the most populous emirate, with Abu Dhabi remained partially closed yesterday, while an alternative route saw vehicles driving through low

water on the hard shoulder past abandoned cars and buses.

In the UAE's north, including in the emirate of Sharjah, local media reported people were reportedly still trapped in homes. Residents said there was extensive damage to businesses.

Rains are uncommon in the UAE, which is known for its hot desert climate and temperatures that can soar above 50C in the summer.

The UAE's National Center of Meteorology said rain may return by late Monday, though predicted it would be light with a chance of heavy rain again on Tuesday in some areas.



Members of Kenya Defence Force carry the flag draped coffin of Brigadier Swaleh Said who died in a helicopter crash that killed Kenya's military chief, General Francis Ogolla, before his burial, in Kilifi, yesterday.

Kenya mourns defence chief killed in helicopter crash

AFP
Nairobi

Kenya began three days of mourning yesterday after its defence chief and nine other senior officers were killed in a helicopter crash, the latest military accident involving a high-profile figure.

A 19-gun salute will take place today in a military tribute to the former Chief of the Kenya Defence Forces, General Francis Omondi Ogolla, in the presence of President William Ruto, the defence ministry announced.

Ogolla was killed when his helicopter went down shortly after takeoff in a remote forested area of northwestern Kenya on Thursday.

"A distinguished four-star general has fallen in the course of duty and service of the country,"

Ruto said as he announced the deaths that evening.

He said the Air Force had dispatched an investigation team to establish the cause of the accident.

Ruto condoled with Ogolla's family at a ceremony in Nairobi yesterday as the nation began observing the mourning period, with the Kenyan flag flying at half-mast across the country and at missions abroad.

"Yesterday was truly a very, very tragic day," the president said. "This is a big loss to the country because General Ogolla made a whole difference in the security of the country." The family said in a statement that a funeral would be held tomorrow at Ogolla's home in Siaya in the west of the country, followed by a memorial service in a Nairobi suburb on April 26.

"Final salute" was the front-page headline in the leading *Dai-*

ly *Nation* newspaper. The bodies of the victims, draped in Kenyan flags, were returned to a military base in Nairobi on an air force plane late Thursday.

One of the officers, Brigadier Swale Saidi, was buried in the Indian Ocean town of Kilifi yesterday and other funerals are expected in the coming days.

Ogolla, a trained fighter pilot, had been promoted to the defence chief role by Ruto just a year ago and was about to mark 40 years of military service.

He had been visiting troops deployed in a security operation in the North Rift region, which is plagued by violence caused by armed bandits and cattle rustlers.

Ogolla's daughter Lorna Ogolla said in a poignant post on LinkedIn that her father died "doing what he did best for the better part of the last 40 years — trying to keep Kenya safe".

WHO likely to issue wider alert on contaminated J&J cough syrup

Reuters
London

The World Health Organisation (WHO) is likely to issue a wider warning about contaminated Johnson and Johnson-made children's cough syrup found in Nigeria last week, it said in an e-mail.

Nigeria's regulator recalled a batch of Benylin paediatric syrup last Wednesday, having found a high level of diethylene glycol in the product during routine testing.

The contaminant, alongside another closely related toxin, ethylene glycol, has been linked to the deaths of more than 300 children in Cameroon, Gambia, Indonesia and Uzbekistan since 2022, though there is no evidence that these incidents are linked with the latest recalls.

The UN health body said it puts out global medical product alerts to "encourage diligence" by national authorities and was likely to do so in this instance, "subject to confirmation of certain details from parties".

The recalled batch of Benylin syrup was made by J&J in South Africa in May 2021, although Kenvue now owns the brand after a

spin-off from J&J last year.

J&J has referred requests for comment to Kenvue. In an e-mailed statement yesterday, Kenvue said it had carried out tests on the batch recalled by Nigeria and had not detected either diethylene or ethylene glycol.

"We continue to work closely with health authorities and the WHO and are engaging with Nafdac to understand their test results, including verifying the authenticity of the sampled product, the testing methodology used, and results reported by the agency," the statement added.

Since Nigeria's recall, five other African countries have also pulled the product from shelves — Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and South Africa, where the drug was made.

South Africa's regulator has also recalled another batch of the syrup, which is used to treat coughs, hay fever and other allergic reactions in children.

Diethylene glycol is toxic to humans when consumed and can result in acute kidney failure, although there have been no reports of harm in the latest incident.

In the 2022 cases, the contamination in the syrups came from the raw materials used by manufacturers in India and Indonesia.

The WHO said it was collaborating with both the manufacturer and regulatory authority in South Africa to investigate the Benylin paediatric syrup, and had information on the source of the ingredients used. Kenvue has previously said it tested its ingredients before manufacture.

The agency said the possibility that the syrup was counterfeit was also "under consideration as part of investigations".

Earlier this week the WHO sent out a separate alert on five batches of contaminated cough syrup ingredients found in Pakistan that appeared to have been falsely labelled as Dow Chemical products.

It was the first alert the WHO has sent on excipients — elements of a medicine other than the active pharmaceutical ingredient — rather than finished products, the agency confirmed yesterday.

The batches of propylene glycol were contaminated with ethylene glycol.

"It was critical for WHO to also alert manufacturers that may have been procuring this material to exercise more caution," a WHO spokesperson said by e-mail.

Propylene glycol is not an ingredient in Benylin paediatric syrup, a Kenvue spokesperson said yesterday.

TRAGEDY

Nigerian air strike killed 33 villagers during Eid: witnesses

An air strike on a village in Nigeria's northwestern Zamfara state killed at least 33 people last week, four residents and a traditional leader said, after a military operation targeting armed kidnapping gangs and their hideouts, Reuters reported from Maiduguri/Abuja. The incident, on April 10, is the latest in a pattern of deadly aerial assaults by the military that have killed civilians and were the subject of a special Reuters report last year. The military said on Thursday the air strikes had eliminated armed gangs, known locally as bandits, in several locations in Zamfara, including Maradun local government area. But Lawali Ango, the traditional head of Dogon Daji village in Maradun, told Reuters there were no bandits in his area of Zamfara. Ango said he was away from his village on April 10, preparing for Eid prayers marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadan at around 0700 GMT when he saw aircraft passing. This was followed by loud explosions.

Boating in Burundi's flooded areas



People ride on boats in a residential area covered with water following flash floods in the Gatumba district of Bujumbura, Burundi yesterday. The government of Burundi and the United Nations have launched an appeal for financial aid to cope with the "devastating effects" of months of relentless rainfall that has displaced nearly 100,000 people. East Africa has been experiencing torrential rains in recent weeks that have cost the lives of at least 58 people in Tanzania in the first half of April, and 13 people in Kenya.

Thousands affected by floods in eastern DRC

AFP
Bukavu

Thousands of households and dozens of schools have been affected by flooding in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, with local authorities yesterday calling for help from the central government.

"At least 4,500 houses have collapsed, more than 2,000 plots of land have disappeared, and more than 7,000 households have been affected by overflowing rivers and the rising waters of Lake Tanganyika," said Dominique Kalonzo, head of communications at Uvira town hall. Kalonzo added that 53 schools had been flooded in the eastern city of Uvira, according to a town hall report drawn up earlier this week. "Those affected have been taken in by families, while others are spending the night under the stars," added Kalonzo.

"The Uvira town council has

launched an urgent appeal to the Congolese government and humanitarian organisations, because Uvira is at risk of being hit by epidemics."

For weeks, torrential rains have been hitting the north shore of Lake Tanganyika in the South Kivu region, which borders Burundi's flood-hit economic capital, Bujumbura. Lake Tanganyika is Africa's second largest lake.

"It is a really worrying situation, even national road five on the Uvira-Fizi section is flooded," said Santos Kitandala, a civil society activist from Fizi.

"A large market, the Mwemezi market, has been swallowed up, as have several administrative offices."

The floods are also affecting the town of Kalemie, further south.

Beyond the DRC, East Africa is experiencing torrential rains that killed at least 58 people in Tanzania during the first fortnight of April and 13 others in Kenya.

Zuma's comeback an election bonanza for South African cartoonists

AFP
Cape Town

South Africa's most famous cartoonist, Zapiro, says the upcoming elections brought an unexpected gift: the surprise comeback of his favourite subject, former president Jacob Zuma.

The caricaturist has depicted the 82-year-old politician with a shower head poking out of his skull for almost two decades and has no intention of stopping.

"The shower man is giving us trouble," he quipped. "I have huge fun drawing Zuma".

Zapiro came up with the shower gibe in 2006 after Zuma infamously told a physical abuse trial he took a shower after having unprotected sex with an HIV-positive woman to avoid contracting the virus.

The depiction is known to irritate the graft-accused former leader who has sued Zapiro several times with little success.

Thirty years after democracy ended decades of apartheid regime censorship, political satire is alive and kicking — and scandal-tipped Zuma remains a source of inspiration to many.

"Zuma is giving us amazing material, this is a very exciting time,"



South African cartoonist Jonathan Shapiro, known as Zapiro, poses for a photo in his studio in Cape Town. Right: Figurines created by South African cartoonist Shapiro, of (from left) former South African president Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former South African president Jacob Zuma and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader Julius Malema, are displayed at his studio in Cape Town.

said 34-year-old cartoonist Nathi Ngubane, who was born a month after Nelson Mandela was released from prison.

Forced out of office under a cloud of corruption in 2018, Zuma has returned with a bang as head of a new opposition party, uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK).

The move has shaken up South African politics, with polls showing MK could pull off an upset on May 29, winning more than 10% of the vote.

That could see his former po-

litical home — the ruling African National Congress (ANC) — return its worst result in three decades and lose its parliamentary majority.

Ngubane said his parents, who are Zulus like Zuma, were initially shocked at his irreverent depictions.

"In black South African culture, you are expected to respect your elders," he said.

Yet, he was unmoved. "Because I can, I pressed on," he said. "We have to use our freedom." In one of



his recent drawings, Zuma is seen wearing traditional Zulu garb as he spikes his ANC rival, President Cyril Ramaphosa.

The latter was a tough nut to crack, said Zapiro, whose real name is Jonathan Shapiro.

"Cyril took me ages," he said in an interview in his sunny Cape Town studio, his dog Captain Haddock lying under the desk.

"He is the most reluctant president we have ever had."

Ramaphosa came to power on largely unfulfilled promises of

stamping out corruption. Zapiro now draws him as "spineless" or as a "faux superhero".

Getting a cartoon right takes a lot of pondering, he said.

"I never start out with a joke or a drawing. I use my left brain. I look at what are the issues, what is in the news and how I react to it," he said.

Recently he drew himself reflecting about whether Artificial Intelligence threatened his work in a series of vignettes for the Daily Maverick newspaper where

he works. After an analysis of the current state of political play, including Ramaphosa interrupted by a blackout during a speech outlining progress in tackling outages and a Zulu nationalist party using its late leader as the face of the election campaign, his character concludes it does not.

"Cartoonists will be the last to go," said Zapiro, who sports a neat goatee, explaining AI does not "see irony in stuff".

"I'll never run out of material in a place like South Africa," he said. "We have wild politicians."

For tragic events like a wave of xenophobic violence that killed dozens of people in 2008, he uses Mandela and late archbishop Desmond Tutu, shown side by side, to represent the nation's moral conscience.

"Critical thinking is what cartooning is about," he said. "I point out the anomalies to help things get better." Yet, as South Africa struggles with high unemployment, rampant crime, failing infrastructure and widespread graft, he sometimes feels a "dissonance" between his role as a satirist and as a citizen.

"We are absolutely at a tipping point," he warned. "The next five years are going to be unbelievably scary."



Prayer time in Sydney



Worshippers attend Friday prayers at Lakemba Mosque, in Lakemba, Sydney, Australia.



Nearly half of China's major cities are sinking: study

Reuters
Singapore

Nearly half of China's major cities are suffering "moderate to severe" levels of subsidence, putting millions of people at risk of flooding especially as sea levels rise, according to a study of nationwide satellite data released yesterday.

The authors of the paper, published by the journal 'Science', found 45% of China's urban land was sinking faster than 3mm per year, with 16% at more than 10mm per year, driven not only by declining water tables but also the sheer weight of the built environment.

With China's urban population already in excess of 900mn people, "even a small portion of subsiding land in China could therefore translate into a substantial threat to urban life," said the team of researchers led by Ao Zuru of the South China Normal University.

Subsidence already costs China

more than 7.5bn yuan (\$1.04bn) in annual losses, and within the next century, nearly a quarter of coastal land could actually be lower than sea levels, putting hundreds of millions of people at an even greater risk of inundation.

"It really brings home that this is for China a national problem and not a problem in just one or two places," said Robert Nicholls at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of East Anglia. "And it is a microcosm of what is happening around the rest of the world."

The northern city of Tianjin, home to more than 15mn people, was identified as one of the worst-hit. Last year, 3,000 residents were evacuated after a "sudden geological disaster" that investigators blamed on water depletion as well as the construction of geothermal wells.

Many of China's old coal districts have also suffered as a result of overmining, with authorities often forced to inject concrete into

the crumbling shafts to reinforce land.

The problem is not limited to China. A separate study published in February said around 6.3mn sq km of land across the globe was at risk. Among the worst-hit countries is Indonesia, with large parts of the capital Jakarta now below sea level.

Nicholls said vulnerable cities could learn lessons from Tokyo, which sank by about 5m (16ft) until it banned groundwater extraction in the 1970s. "Subsidence mitigation should be looked at very seriously, but you can't stop all of it so you are talking about adaptation and building dykes," he added.

Of the 44 major coastal cities suffering from the problem, 30 were in Asia, according to a 2022 Singapore study. "It is a problem of urbanisation and population growth - larger population density, more water extracted, (and) more subsidence," said Matt Wei, a geophysics expert at the University of Rhode Island.

Thai divers seek to take on 'ghost gear' threatening marine life

Reuters
Phuket

Beneath the surface of the turquoise waters off a beach on Thailand's holiday island of Phuket, divers laboriously collect abandoned fishing gear, much of it made from plastic, that is tangled on coral and trapping sea life.

This discarded or lost fishing equipment is known locally as "ghost gear" and is a growing problem in waters off Thailand and beyond, ensnaring marine life and adding to microplastics pollution as nets and ropes break down over time.

According to Thailand's Department of Marine and Coastal Resources, estimates of the percentage of endangered marine life affected by plastic pollution in the upper Andaman Sea off Thailand have grown from 20% in 2021 to at least 30% as of 2023.

Scuba diving groups and marine organisations in Thailand have been working to remove the abandoned fishing gear from reefs through cleanup missions, but have a problem tracking its scale.

Experts say the lack of a coordinated strategy is hindering the pursuit of more comprehensive and effective solutions to track, manage or outlaw dumping of fishing equipment.

"We constantly collect discarded fishing gear. We have a strong scuba diving community. We have many government sectors working on this cleanup drive," said Salisa Traipipitsirawat, senior campaigner and Southeast Asian plastic manager



A scuba diver shows to the camera abandoned fishing nets removed from a coral reef in Phuket, Thailand.



Plastic garbage floats in the sea in Phuket.

from the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), which is partnering with other organisations to compile data.

The aim is to help marine scientists assess the impact of abandoned fishing gear in Thai waters. "Even though there is collection of waste, there is no uniform data collection," Salisa added. Off the Phuket shore, about 20 volunteer divers equipped with submersible gear, scissors, nets, and notebooks

dive down to collect discarded fishing nets, recording data during cleanup missions. They are also encouraging other recreational divers to join their initiative.

The group also engages about 500 fishermen to collect abandoned nets. The trash is sorted and weighed and, where possible, sent for recycling. About 130 tonnes of used fishing equipment has been collected by EJF from local fishing communities along Thai coastal areas and recycled into new products.

In one case, a dead turtle is found on the shore and taken for a necropsy performed by marine veterinarians. Inside its stomach are pieces of rope and plastic. "As of today, plastic waste is one of the main causes of endangered marine animals washing ashore," said Patcharaporn Kaewmong, head of the marine rescue centre in Phuket.

"Waste management is a very big problem."

N Korea mocks US envoy's Asia trip

AFP
Seoul

North Korea yesterday ridiculed this week's Asia tour by the top US envoy to the United Nations, calling it the "aid-begging trip of a loser". Linda Thomas-Greenfield on Tuesday urged Pyongyang to return to dialogue during a visit to South Korea, adding later she still believed sanctions were an "effective tool" to deter the nuclear-armed North.

Her comments followed Russia last month using its UN Security Council veto to effectively end UN monitoring of violations of the raft of sanctions on Kim Jong-un's regime.

In a statement, Pyongyang's foreign ministry said Thomas-Greenfield's trip - which began Sunday, a day after Iran's drone and missile strike on Israel - would have been better spent addressing the spiralling situation in the Middle East.

"The US has taken no account of peace and security guarantee in the Middle East including Palestine, but it is at a loss for the miserable fate of the tattered sanctions mechanism against the DPRK," said the statement signed by vice-minister Kim Son Gyong, using the North's official name.

The US envoy's tour of the region was "no more than an aid-begging trip of a loser to enliven the weakened illegal sanctions and pressure on the DPRK with the help of inferior allies," it added. Last year, North Korea conducted a record number of missile tests in defiance of UN sanctions in place since 2006 and despite warnings from Washington and Seoul, having declared itself as an "irreversible" nuclear weapons state in 2022.

During her stay in Seoul, Thomas-Greenfield blamed countries including "Russia and Iran" for having "not implemented these sanctions" against the North "in a way that will allow them to work as effectively as

they can". She also said Washington was collaborating with Seoul, Tokyo, and others to explore "some creative ways" and "out-of-the-box thinking" to ensure the continuation of the UN's monitoring activities. But North Korea said the US envoy appeared to have "forgotten her duty".

"At present, the Middle East situation, including Palestine's admission to a UN membership is brought up for discussion at the UNSC as the most pressing issue," Pyongyang's statement said.

North Korea has recently bolstered military ties with Moscow, and this month it thanked Russia for its veto blocking the renewal of a panel of UN experts that monitored international sanctions against it.

Seoul and Washington say Kim has been shipping weapons to Russia for its war in Ukraine, possibly in exchange for Moscow's technical assistance for Pyongyang's budding spy satellite programme.



Sriyani Sirimanna, wife of Sri Lankan government employee Saman Sirimanna is pictured at her house on the outskirts of Colombo, as she looks at photographs of their children Imash Thivanka (centre) and Medha Sathsarani (left), who lost their lives when a lone attacker hit St. Anthony's church during the April 2019 massacre in Colombo.

Deep wounds in Sri Lanka five years since Easter massacre

AFP
Colombo

Sri Lanka marks on Sunday five years since bombers slaughtered 279 people in the island's deadliest suicide attack, but grieving families say they are still waiting for justice. Government employee Saman Sirimanna, 59, and his wife Sriyani, 57, lost their two children when a suicide bomber stormed into St Anthony's church in the capital Colombo on Easter Day 2019.

It was part of a wave of attacks that included three luxury hotels and two other churches in the majority Buddhist nation. Sirimanna said his 19-year-old son and 22-year-old daughter had gone to "seek blessings" for good exam results. "My loss is irreplaceable," Sirimanna told AFP, with tears in his eyes. "My children will never return." Among the dead were 45 foreigners, including tourists visiting the island a decade after the end of a brutal civil war.

Sirimanna is bitter over delays in court proceedings and a dragging investigation into the bombings. A court last year ruled that Sri Lanka's ex-president and top officials had failed to heed urgent warnings that the attacks were imminent.

An inquiry into the bombings

found the attacks were the work of a homegrown terror group that declared an affiliation with the Islamic State group. But survivors and bereaved families are demanding a proper investigation into claims of links between the bombers and Sri Lankan intelligence officials. "I am the first person who filed legal action," Sirimanna said. "I went to court because the authorities did not carry out their responsibilities."

Evidence tendered during a civil case brought by Sirimanna and other relatives of the dead showed that Indian intelligence officials warned Colombo of the attack more than two weeks earlier. The Supreme Court ruled last year that top officials, including then-president Maithripala Sirisena, had been negligent in failing to prevent the bombings. Sirisena was in Singapore on the day of the attacks.

It ordered the defendants to pay 310mn rupees (\$1mn) in compensation to victims and relatives. But the ruling has yet to be fully implemented as Sirisena has appealed the order. "The court gave them six months to pay - they didn't," Sirimanna said, noting the next hearing in the case is scheduled for July. "We hope at least then there will be some justice," he added. Successive governments have failed to probe

media claims that Suresh Sallay, a top military intelligence official linked to former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, had connections with the bombers. Rajapaksa, a retired army officer, won a landslide presidential election seven months after the attacks, campaigning on a pledge to keep Sri Lanka safe.

He appointed Sallay as head of Sri Lanka's main intelligence agency. Rajapaksa was ousted around two years ago when protesters stormed his compound during an unprecedented economic crisis. His successor, President Ranil Wickremesinghe, announced a probe into Sallay's relationship with the attackers last September.

But there has been no public announcement of its progress - and the intelligence chief remains in his role. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has urged an independent investigation with international help to establish the "full circumstances" of the bombings. Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, the leader of the Catholic church in Sri Lanka, said the lack of a credible investigation had shaken people's trust in the government. "We have been critical of government people and various authorities over and over again, but no positive response has come," he told AFP.

DEFENCE

China unveils new cyber force to 'fight and win' wars

China yesterday announced the creation of a new military cyber corps, saying it would bolster Beijing's capacity to "fight and win" wars. The Information Support Force will act as a "key support for coordinated development and application of network information systems", defence ministry spokesman Wu Qian said. China has ploughed billions of dollars into modernising its armed forces in recent years as tensions with the US and other regional powers have escalated. The new cyber force represents "a strategic step to establish a new system of services and arms and improve (China's) modern military force structure", Wu said.

AVIATION

Taiwan voices flight safety fears over China air routes

Taiwan yesterday said China's decision to open new air routes that run close to two Taiwanese-controlled islands was a flight safety risk taken without consultation, and said it would demand any aircraft using them be asked to turn around. Taiwan's government expressed anger in January after China "unilaterally" changed a flight path called M503 close to the sensitive median line in the Taiwan Strait. China claims Taiwan as its own territory. The new Chinese routes to China's Xiamen and Fuzhou cities connect to the M503 flight route, and run alongside existing routes to the islands of Kinmen and Matsu, which have regular flights to and from Taiwan.

TRAGEDY

Ram put down after death of elderly couple

A ram in New Zealand has been shot and killed by police after it was blamed for the deaths of an elderly couple in a farm paddock. A man and woman were found "deceased" at the property in West Auckland. "The postmortem results indicate injuries consistent with an animal attack," police said. The ram was in the same paddock where the bodies were discovered. Another person suffered a minor injury after being attacked by the ram in the enclosure. "Our staff at the scene too was confronted and approached by the ram," police said. "On undertaking a risk assessment, the ram was shot and died at the scene."

TECHNOLOGY

AI tool predicts when recruits will quit jobs

Bosses wondering how long a new hire will stick around can now turn to AI for a heads-up. The artificial intelligence (AI) tool was developed by Japanese researchers to try and help managers provide targeted support to staff to stop them quitting. It crunches data on employees and was created by Tokyo City University professor Naruhiko Shiratori with a start-up based in the Japanese capital. The tool also analyses data on employees who left the company, or took a leave of absence, to create a turnover model for each firm. Then when fed data on new recruits, it predicts who is at risk of quitting.

Pro-China PM retains seat in Solomon Islands election

AFP
Honiara

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare was set to retain his seat in elections, local media reported, paving the way for the pro-China leader to try to form a government.

Sogavare is one of China's most loyal friends in the South Pacific and has vowed to deepen ties with Beijing further if he returns to power.

He will soon travel to the capital Honiara, where his team will begin bartering with other MPs behind closed doors in the race to form a ruling coalition.

The election, billed as Solomon Islands' most important in a generation, was seen in part as a referendum on China's place in the "Hapi Isles". Sogavare fended off four challengers to retain a parliamentary seat he has held for more than 20 years, according to provisional results reported by the nation's public broadcaster. The 69-year-old has championed deeper links with Beijing since coming to power in 2019, when he severed longstanding diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

That decision partly fuelled a wave of anti-government riots that tore through the Chinatown district in Honiara.

Violence returned in 2021, when angry mobs tried to storm parliament, torched Chinatown and attempted to raze Sogavare's home.

The centrepiece of Sogavare's embrace was a 2022 security pact that has seen rotating teams of Chinese police deployed in the archipelago.

Regional governor Martin Fini, who oversaw the swift expansion of Chinese interests on the island of Malaita, earlier lost his re-election bid, according to the election commission.

The province of Malaita refused for years to accept aid or investment from China, bucking the trend as Beijing's influence expanded across the rest of the sprawling archipelago to Australia's northeast.

That changed when Fini was installed as the province's premier in 2023, replacing the popular Daniel Suidani. Fini recently signed a memorandum of understanding with China's Jiangsu province but his failure to retain his seat puts that agreement in doubt. Beijing's embassy in Solomon Islands has praised Fini's "firm support" of China, promising to pave his province with better roads and provide it with better Internet.

Suidani was one of the rare provincial leaders who refused to cash China's cheques, fearing Beijing's goodwill would one day come with strings attached.

Indicating he would now seek to reclaim the premiership of Malaita, the most populous of Solomon Islands' nine provinces, Suidani said the pursuit of closer ties with China had contributed to Fini's downfall.



Mount Ruang volcano erupts in Sitaro, North Sulawesi, yesterday.

Indonesia volcano erupts again after thousands evacuated

AFP
Tagulandang

A remote Indonesian volcano sent a tower of ash spewing into the sky yesterday, after nearly half a dozen eruptions earlier this week forced thousands to evacuate when molten rocks rained down on their villages.

Mount Ruang in Indonesia's outermost region of North Sulawesi started erupting late Tuesday, stirring a spectacular mix of fiery orange lava, a towering ash column and volcanic lightning.

Officials yesterday morning said Ruang had calmed, but it started to belch ash again hours later after authorities maintained the highest alert level and told residents to stay out of a 6km exclusion zone.

"I was very surprised, the mountain erupted again. We are scared," said Riko, a 30-year-old

resident of neighbouring Tagulandang island.

The country's volcanology agency said the eruption sent a plume of smoke 1,312 feet above the peak.

"There was an eruption of Mt Ruang, North Sulawesi" at 1706 local time, 0906GMT, it said in a statement.

"The ash column was observed to be grey in colour...leaning towards the south."

Hundreds of locals on neighbouring Tagulandang island were earlier seen cleaning up volcanic material from the harbour and their yards yesterday morning with the help of soldiers and police officers.

Some described their panic and rush to safety when the eruptions began days ago.

"I evacuated. There was a house. I stayed there. And then it rained and rocks fell," Ninice Hoata, a 59-year-old teacher in Tagulandang said. Other residents pleaded for more

assistance and expressed fears of another eruption before it struck.

"We really need tarpaulin assistance as soon as possible, to temporarily cover the leaking roof," said 64-year-old Herman Saha.

"We are worried there will be a follow-up (eruption) because there is information about that." The volcanology agency had earlier warned in a statement that the volcanic activity at Ruang was "still high" with potential dangers including flying rocks, hot clouds and lava flows. It advised all residents to wear masks to prevent respiratory issues.

Houses elsewhere could be seen lying empty and electricity was out in parts of the island before yesterday's eruption.

Officials said Thursday that communications had been knocked out on parts of both Ruang and Tagulandang, which is home to around 20,000 people.

Japan doctors sue Google Maps over 'punching bag' reviews

Around 60 doctors in Japan have accused Google Maps of ignoring vitriolic reviews of their clinics in a class-action lawsuit touted as the first-of-its-kind.

The medics are seeking 1.4m yen (\$9,000) in total damages from Google in a bid to hold the US tech titan accountable for inaction over the reviews. They sued the company on Thursday, saying they are powerless to reply to, or refute, reputation-damaging reviews because of their obligation to patient confidentiality. "People who post online can say anything anonymously, even if it's nothing but slander or verbal abuse", one of the participating doctors told reporters.

"It's like I'm a punching bag", he said under anonymity. The case at Tokyo District Court is believed to be the first class-action lawsuit in Japan to target a platform over negative online reviews, a lawyer for the plaintiffs said.

Manila sizzles

People use their hands to shield their faces from the sun during a hot day, in Manila, Philippines, yesterday. The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration earlier said the heat index in 12 areas of the country was expected to touch the "danger" level of up to 44C yesterday.

UN sounds alarm on violence in Myanmar

AFP
Geneva

Intense fighting in Myanmar's Rakhine State poses a grave threat to civilians, the United Nations warned yesterday, as it urged international pressure to prevent more "horrendous persecution" of ethnic Rohingya.

UN human rights chief Volker Turk said clashes between the military and the Arakan Army, alongside tensions being fuelled between the Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine communities, meant there was a serious risk of a repeat of previous atrocities.

"The alarm bells are ringing, and we must not allow there to be a repeat of the past," Turk said in a statement.

More than 1m Rohingya fled Myanmar's Rakhine state to refugee camps in Bangladesh in 2017 after a military clampdown on the Muslim group in which

many were killed. Thousands still risk their lives each year trying to get away from Myanmar on flimsy boats trying to get to Malaysia or Indonesia.

"Countries with influence on the Myanmar military and armed groups involved must act now to protect all civilians in Rakhine state and prevent another episode of horrendous persecution of the Rohingya," Turk said.

Clashes have rocked Rakhine state again since the Arakan Army attacked security forces in November, ending a ceasefire that had largely held since the military's 2021 coup.

The AA is one of several armed ethnic minority groups in Myanmar's border regions.

Turk's office said that since the informal ceasefire broke down, 15 of Rakhine's 17 townships had been affected by fighting, resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries, and taking the number of displaced to well over 300,000.

S Korea govt to compromise on medical reforms

Reuters
Seoul

South Korea's government announced a compromise in its medical reform plans yesterday in a bid to end a two-month walkout by doctors, and also said President Yoon Suk-yeol would meet the opposition leader for the first time after two years in office.

The conciliatory moves followed a crushing election defeat for Yoon's ruling party last week. The government has been locked in a stalemate with doctors over its

plans to boost medical school admissions.

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo said yesterday the government accepted a proposal by major state medical school deans to let them set new admissions for 2025. This was the first shift from the government's plan to increase new medical student admissions by 2,000 a year from next year, eventually adding 10,000 more physicians by 2035.

The association representing the country's trainee doctors who walked off the job on February 20 said it had no information to share, following the government

announcement. Following the announcement on medical school admissions, Yoon's office and the opposition Democratic Party (DP) said Yoon and DP leader Lee Jae-myung held a brief phone call and Yoon invited him to a meeting next week.

Yoon's refusal to communicate with parliamentary leaders and the standoff with doctors were key issues in last week's legislative elections, in which Yoon's ruling party failed to win back control of parliament.

A Gallup Korea opinion survey published yesterday showed

Yoon's support ratings had plunged by 11 percentage points to 23%, the lowest since he took office in May 2022.

Han said he accepted the proposal to scale back the increase in the medical school admissions quota and to give universities flexibility in setting their quotas, as a potential way to reach a compromise.

Thirty-two medical schools will now be allowed to lower their previously designated quotas by up to 50% for next year, while the increases for 2026 and beyond will proceed as planned. Han said the

government had made a "bold decision" amid a lack of consensus in the medical community, mounting concerns over the walkout and a need for universities to finalise their academic calendar for next year.

Yoon has been pushing to add more doctors as part of his medical reforms, pointing to a shortage of physicians outside the greater Seoul area and in essential medical disciplines including emergency care and paediatrics.

The protesting physicians have said the healthcare sector is not short of doctors, and the government's plans fall short of address-

ing pay and working conditions properly. Yoon was initially emboldened by opinion polls showing South Koreans overwhelmingly supported the idea of adding more doctors, but some voters had started to blame him for refusing to show flexibility.

Yoon's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the change in the medical reform plans. But asked about his support ratings falling to a record low, an official said the government was making its utmost effort to reflect the people's wishes in state affairs.



Extreme heat threat hangs over voters head

Thomson Reuters Foundation
New Delhi

Campaign rallies under a blazing sun, long treks to rural polling stations - as Indians vote, forecasts for extreme heat could add to the challenges of holding the world's biggest election.

With voting starting yesterday,

parties and authorities are being urged to do more to keep voters, candidates and polling station staff safe following heat warnings by the nation's meteorological service for the six-week election period.

During India's April-June hot weather season, various parts of the country could record 10 to 20 heat-wave days compared to the normal

four to eight, head of the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) Mrutyunjay Mohapatra said earlier this month. "Most parts of south peninsula, central India, east India and plains of northwest India will experience above normal heatwave days with temperatures hitting or crossing 40 degrees Celsius," Mohapatra said.

While hot weather is part of eve-

ryday life in much of the country of 1.4bn people, the intensity and frequency of heatwaves in India is rising due to climate change, increasing the risk of working or other outdoor activities.

Eleven people died and several more were hospitalised with heat-stroke after they attended a political event held under the afternoon sun in Maharashtra last April.

Anxious to avoid similar tragedies, the Election Commission of India has instructed electoral officers in each state to raise awareness about the dangers of extreme weather conditions and take steps to help voters cope with the scorching heat. The measures for polling stations include ensuring the availability of drinking water, rigging up

canopies for shade and providing childcare facilities.

They will also need to have medical kits, healthcare volunteers and ambulances on hand on voting days.

"A billion people will come out to vote...It's going to be very challenging for us," Kiren Rijju, India's earth science minister, said this month. "All the states have made elaborate preparations."

First-time voters rejoice in Maoist rebel heartland

AFP
Dugeli, India

In remote Indian forests home to a decades-old Maoist insurgency battling government rule, few in farmer Ajay Kumaroya's village had ever dared anger the guerrillas by voting.

But when the 23-year-old rose at dawn, Kumaroya found dozens of his neighbours already queuing at the polling station as general elections began yesterday, defying the insurgents to exercise their democratic right.

Known as Naxalites, the rebels have been fighting since 1967 for what they claim is for the rural poor - and Chhattisgarh state's Bastar district, an area bigger than Belgium, was once their key heartland.

But India has deployed tens of thousands of security personnel to crush them, and the crowd at Kumaroya's village reflects government efforts to boost infrastructure and connect villages like his to the rest of the country.

"I am here for Prime Minister Narendra Modi," Kumaroya said. "If he wins, our roads will get better."

Poll workers rolled out a red carpet outside the booth for the people of Dugeli village, showering flower petals on the first few voters to enter.

Fellow farmer Pradeep Kumar Karma, 27 said he was voting for Modi to "solve our Naxal problem", he said.

"If that happens, we will prosper with tourism and investments", he added.

Government security operations have badly dented the Naxalites.

One assault on Tuesday killed 29 rebels, following another clash this month that killed at least 13 insurgents.

But holding elections in Bastar is an immense logistical and security challenge, with dense forests providing ample cover for gunmen to lay landmines and carry out ambushes.

"Setting up polling stations and conducting voting in a peaceful manner has always been a challenge because of left-wing extremism," Chhattisgarh state chief electoral officer Reena Kangale said.

"Much of the area is also mined, so access is a problem without loss of life and limb."

In recent days, hundreds of security personnel searching for improvised explosives have swept the new roads that have been driven deep into dense forests.

Indian paramilitary forces have deployed to hundreds of remote communities, to protect polling officials fearful of attacks.

Ajay Dikshit, 57, a government school principal seconded to election duty, said his family had pressed him to turn down the assignment.

"I am government employee and I can't refuse an order," he said before voting day, while awaiting a helicopter ride to his post. "I just hope that everything works out well."

In Bastar, veteran polling officers such as Gajendra Punem, 37, said the situation had changed radically as the insurgency has waned.

"When I was first sent to a sensitive area for polls in 2014, not a single villager came out to vote," Punem said. "Everyone there was afraid of punishment by Naxals."



Voters line up outside a polling station to vote during the first phase of the general election in Kairana, Uttar Pradesh, yesterday.

World's biggest poll kicks off as India begins voting

AFP
Haridwar, India

India began voting yesterday in a six-week election. A total of 968mn people are eligible to take part in the world's biggest vote - a staggering logistical exercise that critics say follows a concerted effort to delegitimise rivals.

A long and winding queue was patiently assembled outside a polling station in the Haridwar, on the banks of the Ganges river, even before the booths opened.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi had ensured our country as well as our faith is secure," 59-year-old Hindu ascetic Uday Bharti said outside a polling station. "We have come here to

make sure Modi keeps doing his good work."

Modi, 73, remains resoundingly popular after a decade in office that has seen India rise in diplomatic clout and economic power.

"I urge all those voting...to exercise their franchise in record numbers," he wrote in a post on X as the election began. "Every vote counts and every voice matters!" Modi has already led the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) through two landslide victories in 2014 and 2019.

Analysts have long expected Modi to triumph against a fractious alliance of more than two dozen parties that have yet to name a candidate for prime minister. His prospects have been further bolstered by several criminal probes into his opponents and a tax investigation this year that froze the bank accounts of Congress, India's larg-

est opposition party. "We have no money to campaign, we cannot support our candidates," Rahul Gandhi, the most prominent Congress leader, told reporters in March. "Our ability to fight elections has been damaged."

Opposition figures and human rights organisations have accused Modi's government of orchestrating the probes to weaken rivals.

Modi's tenure has seen India overtake former colonial ruler Britain as the world's fifth-biggest economy, and Western nations lining up to court a prospective ally against regional rival China's growing assertiveness. In doing so, they have sidestepped concerns over the taming of India's once-vibrant press and restrictions on civil society that have seen rights groups such as Amnesty severely curtail their local operations.

'Quarter of UK 5 to 7-year-olds have smart phone'

Around a quarter of British children aged between five and seven-years-old now have a smart phone, a study by the UK communications regulator said yesterday. The findings come as parents have started to push back against the trend for giving younger children access to the devices. Research by the Ofcom authority found that 38% of children in the age group were using social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Whatsapp despite rules requiring users to be at least 13. The study also found that the number of the same age watching live-streamed content rose from 39% to around half. Ofcom said parental concerns appeared to have increased considerably but "enforcement of rules appears to be diminishing". Science Minister Michelle Donelan described the findings as "stark". Online safety legislation passed by parliament aims to crack down on harmful content. "Children as young as five should not be accessing social media," Donelan said.

Woodland turned into wasteland



Illegally dumped commercial waste covers Hoard's Wood, a 199-acre site of protected ancient woodland in Ashford, Britain. The historic woodland has seen industrial-scale illegal dumping since 2020 reaching heights of 12 feet and leading to its recent closure. Campaigners are fighting to have the site cleared.

Harry case against tabloids to proceed as planned

Reuters
London

Prince Harry's privacy case has avoided a major delay after London's High Court rejected an application by the publisher of Rupert Murdoch-owned British mass-market newspapers that could have caused stalled proceedings for two years.

In total, 42 figures are suing News Group Newspapers (NGN), the publisher of the Sun and the defunct News of the World, over allegations that its journalists, or private detectives they contracted, had been involved in unlawful activities and invasion of their privacy.

A trial focusing on some of those claims, possibly including Harry's, is due to begin at the high court in London in January next year, but on Wednesday the publisher, NGN, applied to have

a ruling first on whether some of the lawsuits had been brought outside a six-year time limit for legal action. Judge Timothy Fancourt yesterday rejected that application for a preliminary trial, meaning the cases will proceed as planned. Fancourt said it could lead to an "unsatisfactory" two-year delay and risk increasing costs, saying it was unlikely that NGN would win a time limitation argument in every case.

Last July, Fancourt rejected an application by NGN to strike out Harry's lawsuit, ruling the prince could proceed with some of his allegations about confidential details about him being obtained by deception, although his accusations of phone-hacking were ruled to be time-barred.

Actor Hugh Grant had also won similar permission, but he said on Wednesday he had reluctantly settled his case with NGN for an "enormous sum of money".

Sunak eyes tougher rules to combat 'sick note culture'

Labour force participation among working-age Britons is its lowest since 2015, mainly due to a rise in long-term illness

Reuters
London

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak yesterday said the government would look to tighten rules for long-term sick leave in a bid to reverse a rise in the number of Britons who have permanently dropped out of the workforce.

Labour force participation among working-age Britons is its lowest since 2015, mainly due to a rise in long-term illness and a greater number of students, in contrast to other large, rich nations which have seen increased participation since 2020.

With his eyes firmly on a national election later this year, which polls show he is expected to lose, Sunak sought to appeal to core Conservative voters by warning the current welfare bill was fiscally unsustainable, and arguing that a 'sicknote culture' around mental health needed to be reined in.

"We need to be more ambitious about helping people back to work and more honest about the risk of over-medicalising the everyday challenges and worries of life," he said in a speech in London.

Sunak said that, if re-elected, he would go further on welfare reform, including by empowering authorities to treat benefit fraud like tax fraud.

Some 9.4mn Britons aged 16-64 - 22% of that age group - are neither working nor unemployed, up from 8.55mn just before the pandemic, according to official

data. Of those, 2.8mn are long-term sick and 206,000 are temporarily ill.

The opposition Labour Party, which has a double-digit lead in

"We need to be more ambitious about helping people back to work and more honest about the risk of over-medicalising the everyday challenges and worries of life"

polls, said the Conservatives had failed to deliver either a healthy nation or a healthy economy and

its own policies would tackle the root causes by driving down healthcare waiting lists.

Last year Britain's budget watchdog said a quarter of people who were off work due to long-term sickness were waiting for medical treatment, although it added that cutting waiting lists to their 2015 length might only get 25,000 back into work.

Over half of the long-term sick reported suffering from 'depression, bad nerves or anxiety', although many said it was a secondary condition alongside their main health problem.

Sunak said medics were too willing to issue repeat notes approving extended sick leave, rather than advising how a person could get back to work.

Sunak said he wanted healthcare workers rather than family doctors to provide "an objective assessment of someone's ability to work and the tailored support they need to do so".

"We don't just need to change the sick note culture, so the default becomes what work you can do - not what you can't," the prime minister said.

H5N1 strain of bird flu found in milk: WHO

AFP
Geneva

The H5N1 bird flu virus strain has been detected in very high concentrations in raw milk from infected animals, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said yesterday, though how long the virus can survive in milk is unknown. Avian influenza A(H5N1) first emerged in 1996 but since 2020, the number of outbreaks in birds has grown exponentially, alongside an increase in the number of infected mammals. The strain has led to the deaths of tens of millions of poultry, with wild birds and land and marine mammals also infected.

Cows and goats joined the list last month – a surprising development for experts because they were not thought to be susceptible to this type of influenza. US authorities earlier this month said a person working on a dairy farm in Texas was recovering from bird flu after being exposed to cattle. “The case in Texas is the first case of a human infected by avian influenza by a cow,” said Wenging Zhang, head of the global influenza programme at the WHO. “Bird-to-cow, cow-to-cow and cow-to-bird transmission have also been registered during these current outbreaks, which suggest that the virus may have found other routes of transition than we previously understood,” the expert told a

media briefing in Geneva. It was only the second case of a human testing positive for bird flu in the United States, and came after the virus sickened herds that were apparently exposed to wild birds. “Now we see multiple herds of cows affected in an increasing number of US states, which shows a further step of the virus spillover to mammals,” Zhang said. “The virus has also been detected in milk from infected animals.” She said there was a “very high virus concentration in raw milk”, but experts were still investigating exactly how long the virus is able to survive in milk. The Texas health department has said the cattle infections do not present a con-

cern for the commercial milk supply, as dairies are required to destroy milk from sick cows. Pasteurisation also kills the virus. “It is important for people to ensure safe food practices, including consuming only pasteurised milk and milk products,” said Zhang. From 2003 to April 1 this year, the WHO said it had recorded 463 deaths from 889 human cases across 23 countries, putting the case fatality rate at 52%. Zhang noted that the human cases recorded in Europe and the United States in the past few years – since the virus surged – have been mild cases. So far, there is no evidence that A(H5N1) is spreading between humans.

And Zhang stressed that the A(H5N1) viruses identified in cows and in the human case in Texas showed no increased adaptation to mammals. As for potential vaccines, if required, Zhang said there were some in the pipeline. “Having candidate vaccine viruses ready allows us to be prepared to quickly produce vaccines for humans, if this becomes necessary,” she said. “For this particular H5N1 virus detected in dairy cows, there are a couple of candidate vaccine viruses available.” In the case of a pandemic, there are close to 20 influenza vaccines licensed for pandemic use and they could be tailored with the specific virus strain in circulation, she said.

UN rights chief urges states to act on slavery reparations

Reuters
Geneva

The United Nations human rights chief has called for countries to take concrete steps on reparations for people of African descent at a UN meeting yesterday, adding his voice to calls for justice for slavery atrocities. Support is building among Africa and Caribbean nations for the creation of a tribunal to address reparations, which might include financial payments and other amends, for crimes dating back to the transatlantic trade of enslaved people.

“I join your demands for action now,” United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk said in an address at the closing of the four-day UN Permanent Forum on People of African Descent (PPPAD). “On reparations, we must finally enter a new era. Governments must step up to show true leadership with genuine commitments to move swiftly from words to action that will adequately address the wrongs of the past,” he said. Turk, who supports the forum but is not one of its 10 members, did not specifically say how reparations should be addressed. While the idea of paying reparations has

gained traction, it remains divisive and has not been accepted by most former colonial powers. The Netherlands has apologised for its role in the transatlantic slave trade and plans a €200m fund to address that past. A British Foreign Office spokesperson acknowledged the country's role in transatlantic slavery but said there was no plan to pay reparations, saying that the focus should be on learning the lessons from history and on “today's challenges”. The PPPAD, which has no powers of enforcement but makes recommendations to other UN bodies, announced its conclusions yesterday.

It reiterated a 2023 call to set up a slavery tribunal, adding this time that it should be sought via the UN's policy-making organ, the General Assembly. And it specifically called on the proposed tribunal to analyse the situation in Haiti “and provide reparations and restitution and compensation appropriately” after Haitian groups at the forum urged France to repay billions of dollars that formerly enslaved people were forced to pay in return for recognition of the island's independence two centuries ago. The forum also voiced support for a reparations fund that was announced in Ghana last year.

Second town mayor killed ahead of Ecuador's anti-crime referendum

AFP
Quito

The mayor of a mining town in violence-riddled Ecuador was shot dead yesterday, the second such killings in days ahead of a weekend referendum on tougher measures against organised crime, police said. Jorge Maldonado, the mayor of Portovelo, “fell victim to gunshots that resulted in his death”, police said on X, formerly Twitter. He was gunned down while off-duty by two attackers on a motorcycle.

Maldonado was the fifth Ecuadorian major assassinated in a year, and the third in less than a month. Two days before his killing, the mayor of Camilo Ponce Enriquez in the southern province of Azuay, Jose Sanchez, was shot dead. And last month, Brigitte Garcia, the 27-year-old mayor of coastal San Vicente, was found dead in a car along with the municipality's communications director, Jairo Loo.

Both had suffered gunshot wounds. Millions of Ecuadorians will cast ballots in a referendum tomorrow to decide whether or not to green-light stricter measures against organised crime in a country gripped by bloody gang wars. Once a bastion of peace situated between major cocaine producers, the South American country has been plunged into crisis after years of expansion by the transnational cartels that use its ports to ship the drug to the United States and Europe.

Prosecutors, journalists and police have been among the victims of organised criminals with links to Mexican and Colombian cartels. In January, President Daniel Noboa declared a state of “internal armed conflict” against about 20 criminal groups. That came after a spasm of violence sparked by the prison escape of a major drug lord, who has yet to be recaptured.

Since then, the military has been deployed in the streets and taken control of the country's prisons, where a string of gang riots in recent years has left some 460 people dead.

Since January last year, at least a dozen politicians have been killed in Ecuador, including presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, who was gunned down last August after leaving a campaign event.

After Garcia's assassination in March, the government said it would reinforce security controls. Some 13.6m of Ecuador's 17.7m people are eligible to vote in tomorrow's referendum.

They will be asked to give the go-ahead for measures such as allowing the deployment of soldiers to back up police outside of a state of emergency, boosting arms control and increasing sentences for terrorism and drug trafficking.

Man sets self on fire outside Trump trial

AFP/Reuters
New York

A man set himself on fire yesterday in a park outside the court where Donald Trump is standing trial in Manhattan, with a witness describing him throwing pamphlets before officers rushed to extinguish the flames.

Burning clothes were strewn in the park, which was locked down by authorities, while ambulances lined up nearby on standby, an AFP correspondent at the scene saw, describing a strong smell of burning chemicals.

Video seemingly taken by witnesses and posted on social media showed a person standing engulfed in flames, then falling to the ground as officers rushed to beat out the blaze.

One patrolman used a small fire extinguisher in an attempt to control the blaze.

A witness who gave his name as Dave, 73, told AFP that he saw a man throwing pamphlets before dousing himself with an unspecified liquid and lighting himself on fire.

“It's hard to even process in your brain,” another witness, who declined to give his name, told Reuters.

TV reporters described the incident unfolding moments after the full panel of 12 jurors and six alternates was selected for the trial of the former president in a hush money cover-up case.

It appeared hearings in the case would resume after lunch despite the incident, but later than usual at 3pm (1900 GMT).

“A male did light himself on fire outside of the Supreme Courthouse. We're still gathering details from the field,” said a New York Police Department spokes-



An Investigator take pictures of pamphlets thrown by a man after he reportedly set himself on fire, at the park across from Manhattan Criminal Court in New York City.

Left: Trump speaks to the press before his trial at Manhattan Criminal Court in New York.



A view of a pamphlet dropped by the man who set himself on fire outside the courthouse.

Trump campaign, RNC launches effort to fight voter fraud

Donald Trump's campaign and the Republican National Committee (RNC) launched a programme yesterday to combat voter fraud in the lead-up to the November election, even as voting irregularities have proven extremely rare in the United States. The RNC and the Trump campaign said they were preparing to deploy more than 100,000 attorneys and volunteers across the states that are expected to be competitive in the presidential race.

The Republican Party and the Trump campaign said in a statement that they plan to recruit an army of poll watchers, who will monitor individual polling sites for irregularities.

Attorneys, meanwhile, will be stationed at “Republican Party War Rooms” in competitive states, where they will staff an “Election Integrity Hotline” to answer calls from poll watchers and voters who have observed possible irregularities.

“Having the right people to count the ballots is just as important as turning out voters on Election Day,” Trump said in a statement. “Republicans are now working together to protect the vote and ensure a big win on November 5th!”

Asked about the latest Republican initiative, the Biden campaign referred questions to the Democratic National Committee (DNC).

The DNC accused Trump and the RNC of trying to undermine the vote in November. “Donald Trump knows he's running a losing campaign, so he's working with his handpicked team of election deniers at the RNC to once again lay the groundwork to undermine our democracy and spread baseless lies about a rigged election,” said DNC spokesperson Alex Floyd. — Reuters

man who gave no motive for the man's action.

A fire department spokesman did not respond to a request for comment about yesterday's incident, but media reported the man had been taken away for medical treatment.

The self-immolation happened in a park opposite the 100 Centre Street courthouse, which has been used by authorities to corral protesters, both pro-Trump and

anti-Trump, as well as well as by some members of the media.

The park, which is close to several courthouses and other buildings, was cordoned off following the incident.

Nearby, a pamphlet was visible that referred to “evil billionaires” and called on people to “expose this corruption!”

The portion that was visible to a Reuters witness did not mention Trump.

The incident came shortly after jury selection for the trial was completed, clearing the way for prosecutors and defence attorneys to make opening statements next week in a case stemming from hush money paid to an adult entertainment actress.

The 12 jurors, along with six alternates, will consider evidence in a first-ever trial to determine whether a former US president is guilty of breaking the law.

The jury consists of seven men and five women, mostly employed in white-collar professions: two corporate lawyers, a software engineer, a speech therapist and an English teacher.

Trump is accused of covering up a \$130,000 payment that his former lawyer Michael Cohen made to the actress before the 2016 election to keep quiet about an encounter she says they had a decade earlier.

Three officers charged in 2021 death of man in custody

Reuters
Washington

California prosecutors have announced involuntary manslaughter charges against three police officers for the 2021 death of a man in their custody, reversing the outcome of a previous investigation that had cleared the officers.

The officers in Alameda, California, pinned Mario Gonzalez, 26, to the ground for about five minutes before he became unresponsive during an arrest on April 19, 2021, according to body camera footage the city released after his death. An attorney who represented the three of-

ficers during the original investigation said in a statement that there was no new evidence in the case and the charges announced on Thursday were a “blatantly political prosecution”.

Gonzalez's death in Alameda, a city of nearly 80,000 people adjacent to Oakland, occurred the day before a Minneapolis jury convicted former policeman Derek Chauvin of murdering George Floyd, amid nationwide protests against police violence and racial inequality.

An initial probe by the Alameda County District Attorney's Office into the case found in 2022 that the officers bore no liability for Gonzalez's death.

The Office's Public Accountability Unit, a new department opened by District Attorney

Pamela Price in 2023 after she was elected, reopened and re-examined the case, leading to the charges.

The three officers charged were dispatched to a park to check on Gonzalez in 2021 after residents reported a man was loitering and talking to himself, according to recordings of 911 emergency calls released by the city.

The officers' body camera footage showed that they struggled for a little over five minutes to keep Gonzalez pinned and handcuff him while trying to take him into custody.

After Gonzalez became unresponsive, the officers used chest compressions until paramedics arrived. Gonzalez died in a hospital later that day.

Lula recognises two more Indigenous lands, gives more time on four others

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva officially recognised two more Indigenous territories on Thursday, but said he decided not to sign off on four others because they still need to be cleared by people currently occupying them.

The recognition grants the territories legal protection as reservations to be defended against invasions by illegal loggers, gold miners and cattle ranchers.

Lula, who pledged to legalise as many reservations as possible, signed in Brasilia the recognition of the Aldeia Velha and Cacique Fontoura lands, which are located in the states of Bahia and Mato Grosso, respectively.

The leftist leader has so far recognised 10 Indigenous territories since he took office in January 2023 for his third non-consecutive term.

“We decided to sign off on only two,” Lula said, adding that the other four other territories are currently occupied by farmers or socially vulnerable people, and the government wants them to leave peacefully. — Reuters



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GULF TIMES

The key to transforming African health

Despite the relentless stream of bad news from around the world, there are still reasons for optimism. One notable example is the renewed push to localise pharmaceutical production in Africa, demonstrating how even catastrophic events like a pandemic can lead to positive, unforeseen outcomes.

The Covid-19 shock underscored the critical need to fund public-health systems and expand access to essential technologies and preventive and therapeutic drugs, and should have served as a wake-up call for policymakers and public worldwide. But once the virus was brought under control, wealthy countries reverted to the policies and practices that had made the initial pandemic response so unequal.

No part of the world has suffered more from these extreme global inequalities than Africa. African countries were the last to receive Covid-19 vaccines, having been crowded out by vaccine-hoarding wealthier countries and denied access to the technologies necessary for domestic production. Although Africa accounts for 18% of the world's population, the continent received only 3.3% of all administered vaccines by the end of 2021. By the end of 2022, its share had barely increased to 5.5%.

No part of the world has suffered more from extreme global inequalities than Africa

Even before Covid-19, Africa was already grappling with the global neglect of major epidemics such as Ebola, Zika, and monkeypox, as well as endemic diseases. One of the biggest obstacles to tackling these health crises is the continent's dependence on imported drugs. Despite bearing one-quarter of the global disease burden, only 2% of medical research is conducted in Africa, and more than 90% of the continent's vaccines and 70% of its medicines are imported. Moreover, of the roughly 375 pharmaceutical manufacturers operating in Africa, just 15% are locally owned, and most of these companies focus on formulations rather than the active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) crucial for drug production.

Fortunately, the bitter experience of Covid-19 appears to have catalysed a much-needed policy shift. During the pandemic, the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention laid the groundwork for inter-governmental cooperation by bolstering collective regional responses under extremely difficult conditions. More recently, several African governments and international organisations have launched initiatives to boost local pharmaceutical production and promote innovation across the continent.

These initiatives face significant challenges, especially their reliance on voluntary technology transfers, which have proven to be very limited in scope. To access essential knowledge and force multinational companies (MNCs) to share their technologies, African countries must expand their use of compulsory licensing, in line with their own patent laws and the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement.

That said, access to knowledge alone is not enough. Given that production processes require specialised expertise, comprehensive education programmes and skills training are crucial to establishing a sustainable foundation for innovation and production in Africa. This requires a broader regional effort, which African governments appear to be considering.

Another major obstacle is competition from large pharmaceutical companies. Novartis, which has previously initiated patent disputes in countries like India, has already announced its intention to achieve a fivefold increase in patient outreach in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2025. For localisation efforts to succeed, it is crucial to emphasise local ownership and ensure that the benefits are not monopolised by Big Pharma.

Given that Africa's rich genetic diversity makes it a veritable treasure trove of genomic data, the risk of knowledge and data theft is a pressing concern. While the African CDC's Pathogen Genomics Initiative was celebrated as a major achievement when it was launched in 2019, there are now valid concerns that the pandemic treaty could make these data globally accessible, potentially benefiting large pharmaceutical companies in rich countries without ensuring fair compensation for Africa. Tellingly, foreign powers are already squabbling over who should control access to this invaluable database.

The challenges confronting African countries' efforts to take control of their health-care destiny are immense. Their determination to localise drug and vaccine production is a promising start. - Project Syndicate

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What a climate-aligned IMF would look like

By **Mohamed Nasheed** and **Rakesh Mohan**
Male

Last week, the board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved current managing director Kristalina Georgieva for another five-year term. It is a welcome development that comes at a critical moment. Her second term will finish just before the end of this "make-or-break" decade for reining in climate change and delivering on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Georgieva has made significant progress in aligning the IMF with these goals. She was instrumental in the IMF's decision to acknowledge climate change as a critical macro issue under its institutional mandate. Under her leadership, the IMF launched its first-ever climate-change strategy; created the Resilience and Sustainability Trust (RST), its primary climate-finance instrument; and fostered global dialogue on the issue through its flagship publications and research.

But now even bolder leadership is needed. As the only multilateral institution charged with maintaining global financial and fiscal stability, the IMF's role is critical for addressing climate change. Georgieva can build on the progress made in her first term by doing four things: committing the IMF to align with the Paris agreement; ensuring that it has ample financial firepower; elevating the voices of climate-vulnerable emerging-market and developing economies (EMDEs); and mobilising international support for climate mitigation and adaptation efforts.

The first task is the most important. All the IMF's programmes – not just those that are explicitly climate focused, like the RST – need to start promoting low-carbon development. Critically, that means avoiding scenarios that lock in fossil-fuel-intensive growth paths that will leave countries stranded in a net-zero future.

All the IMF's work must be consistent with models of inclusive growth and development, including those where value is generated from natural capital and biodiversity. Equally, the IMF's surveillance efforts (which involve all countries, not just borrowers) should help governments identify how best to achieve their development and climate goals.



Kristalina Georgieva: bolder leadership needed.

But aligning IMF financing and operations with the Paris goals will not be enough. With governments negotiating a new climate-finance goal this year, the IMF should help policymakers identify potential sources of financing and better understand the macroeconomic dimensions of the issue. This will require fresh thinking, because the evidence shows that carbon pricing will not be enough to generate the resources needed to support the net-zero transition. Robust analytics from the IMF can help to foster a global consensus on how best to generate international and domestic public finance – whether through taxation, revenue from carbon border adjustment mechanisms, or other channels.

Second, Georgieva must ensure that the IMF itself has ample financing firepower. As she has previously warned, the world is increasingly prone to a wide range of shocks, many of which would have profound macroeconomic consequences. In this fraught new setting, the IMF's operations and balance sheet must be calibrated against what member states need to remain resilient. While the IMF Board approved a 50% increase in member states quotas (contributions) last December, that is far below the 267% increase required to meet the gross external financing needs of the most vulnerable members.

Similarly, the transition to net-zero will radically alter the economic terrain for many countries, especially those that have long relied on exporting or

taxing fossil fuels. The IMF should track these trends and prepare to support countries that need help pursuing an orderly, low-carbon transition.

Third, Georgieva has a special responsibility to ensure that climate-vulnerable economies are involved in the IMF's decision-making. These economies are more likely to seek IMF help, so it is all the more important that they have a say in how the IMF works. Yet, as of October 2022, the Vulnerable Group of 20 (V20) commands only around 5% of the voting power at the IMF, despite being home to 17% of the world's population.

One major V20 demand is to "make debt work for the climate." That means revising the IMF's debt-sustainability model to incorporate urgent investment and spending needs, and to determine what it will take for each country to meet them. Implicit in this approach is a move away from conventional austerity-based measures, and toward strategies focused more on resource mobilisation.

To be sure, the recent addition of a third African chair on the IMF Executive Board was a welcome development. But at the end of the day, last year's 16th General Review of Quotas was a missed opportunity to rebalance voting power.

Given that the IMF has never had a non-European managing director, it will take fundamental governance reforms to convince climate-vulnerable economies that it truly represents their interests. To that end, Georgieva should offer

her support for ongoing efforts to recognize the V20 as an official inter-governmental group at the IMF.

Finally, since Georgieva cannot undertake these efforts alone, the IMF Board must support her in hiring and funding additional staff from diverse disciplines and backgrounds. Additional resources would allow the IMF to scale up its direct country engagement and ensure that national policies are tailored to local contexts. Coordination with other international institutions is also essential. The World Bank, for example, can help leverage the RST's limited resources to mobilise more money, especially toward resiliency programmes like Climate Prosperity Plans.

In her first term, Georgieva won the argument that climate change is central to the IMF's mandate. Now, she will have to show that the institution can rise to the challenge posed by the climate crisis at this "now or never" juncture. - Project Syndicate

• **Mohamed Nasheed**, a former president of the Maldives, is founder and secretary-general of the Climate Vulnerable Forum.

• **Rakesh Mohan**, a former deputy governor of the Reserve Bank of India, is a member of the Economic Advisory Panel to the World Bank President Ajay Banga, president emeritus of the Centre for Social and Economic Progress, and a member of the Task Force on Climate, Development, and the International Monetary Fund.

Quality journalism is more important than ever

By **Anya Schiffrin**, **Dylan W Groves** and **Joseph E Stiglitz**
New York

Although news consumption soared during the Covid-19 pandemic, subscriptions have since fallen, and news outlets around the world have been laying off reporters or even shutting down altogether. That is bad news for all of us.

Our new Unesco brief highlights recent research that demonstrates just how important high-quality information is to a well-functioning economy, society, and democracy.

New studies in economics and political science use rigorous methods to confirm what journalists already knew: that their work has a positive influence on democratic norms, civic engagement, and governmental and corporate accountability. By building social trust and promoting human rights, serious, credible reporting also supports economic performance and sustainable development.

The 2021 Unesco Windhoek+30 Declaration – which reaffirmed the importance of information as a public good (one from which everyone benefits, and none are excluded) – was based on numerous studies from Africa, India, Latin America, and the US.

This literature shows that high-quality news and journalism promotes accountability and responsiveness even amid rising tides of misinformation and disinformation. Fact-checking can indeed counter the lies and distortions now flooding societies around the world.

Moreover, high-quality journalism remains more effective than social media in disseminating accurate, trustworthy news.

While technology can enhance the spread of good information, it is currently doing the opposite. Large digital platforms regularly downrank news, claiming that users are more interested in other categories of content.

But Pew Research Center data suggest that news consumption across platforms has remained stable (at least in the US) since 2020. And with more people voting in elections this year than ever before, there has never been a greater need for quality reporting.

Everyone – even those who do not invest in journalism themselves – benefits from the investigation, curation, and dissemination of trustworthy and useful information. But this



public good is unlikely to be adequately provided in a free market, even with the help of public-spirited philanthropists, aid organisations, media companies, and governments. In many markets, their support is not enough.

Governments, especially, have a responsibility to ensure the provision of public goods. Enabling high-quality journalism requires legal regimes that protect free expression and the "right to tell." But that is not enough. For journalists to do their jobs, there also must be laws and enforcement mechanisms in place to ensure the right to access information: the "right to know."

While many countries have passed such laws, they are rarely enforced. When public authorities even bother to respond to information requests, they often do so only after long delays, and with extensive redactions.

Legacy media outlets are a key part of the media ecosystem and require continued support; but so do smaller outlets and those targeting underserved areas. Some promising ideas for supporting journalism include providing special funds or tax breaks (such as payroll tax credits or targeted value-added-tax (VAT) reductions) and issuing news-subscription vouchers. During the pandemic, governments around the world launched variations of these policies, thus producing a wide range of models that can now be emulated.

Another crucial step is to ensure that journalists are appropriately compensated for their work.

Big Tech (the proprietors of search engines,

social media, and most artificial-intelligence platforms) relies on news media to engage users and improve its products. Since tech firms do not produce news themselves, they have no way to fulfil users' demand for high-quality news and search results without the content provided by journalists. However, they have long used content produced by journalists without providing much (if any) compensation, thus depriving media outlets of a major revenue source: advertising. This cycle is destroying the information ecosystem on which they, and our society, depend.

Many countries have helped sustain high-quality journalism through investments in independent public broadcasting. Healthy public broadcasting institutions build social trust and generate an important spillover benefit: competition that forces private media companies to hold themselves to a higher standard. The institutional structures that facilitate the development of public broadcasting are well-known; what is required is the political will to establish the necessary frameworks.

A general principle in economics is that without public support, there will be an undersupply of public goods. Unfortunately, quality journalism is fast becoming Exhibit A for this principle, despite rigorous scholarship demonstrating its importance.

Journalism's business model is threatened by the rise of AI and the power of tech monopolies that distribute news without paying a fair price for it, and this is happening just as misinformation, disinformation, and political polarisation are magnifying the dangers of journalism's decline.

Around the world, there is a growing sense that democracy is in decline. An important step toward reversing this is to enhance support for quality journalism, starting immediately. The costs of inaction may be enormous. - Project Syndicate

• **Anya Schiffrin** is director of the technology, media, and communications specialisation at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

• **Dylan W Groves** is assistant professor of political science at Lafayette College.

• **Joseph E Stiglitz**, a former chief economist of the World Bank and former chair of the US President's Council of Economic Advisers, is university professor at Columbia University and a Nobel laureate in economics.

Japanese nationals targeted in suicide attack in Karachi

AFP/Reuters
Karachi

Five Japanese nationals escaped a suicide attack on their vehicle in Pakistan's financial capital Karachi yesterday as police shot down a gunman accompanying the bomber, officials said.

Pakistan is battling a surge in militant violence on its territory, including frequent attacks on Chinese migrant workers.

"It was a targeted attack, five Japanese officials were on their way to the export processing zone as per their routine," Abrar Husain, a Karachi police spokesperson, told AFP. "The suicide bomber died detonating the bomb, while the second one was killed in crossfire."

Japan's top government spokesman Yoshimasa Hayashi said "one Japanese national was confirmed injured".

Japan has "issued an alert to Japanese nationals living in Pakistan in response to the incident", he added.

No militant group has claimed responsibility for the rare attack on Japanese nationals, with Pakistani authorities identifying them as engineers working for the management of an export-processing zone in the port city.

One of the two attackers, who followed the Japanese in their vehicle by motorbike, jumped off when the vehicle slowed down and set off explosives tied to his body but failed to strike his target, Pakistani counter-terrorism official Raja Umar Khatab told reporters.

His accomplice then began



Police officers are seen at the site of an attack in Karachi yesterday.

shooting at the vehicle.

"I think he fired some 15-16 shots," Khatab said, adding that private security guards with the foreigners and a nearby police patrol returned fire and killed the second attacker.

The attackers had followed the Japanese group's vehicle for some time, Khatab said, with authorities suspecting they carried out reconnaissance to identify their target and the location for the attack.

Islamist militants and separatist insurgent groups have been involved in other bloody attacks in the South Asian nation, with some of them targeting foreigners, mainly Chinese nationals.

The Japanese involved in yesterday's incident have been moved to a safe place in police custody, police spokesperson Hussain said.

Pakistan's foreign office said later that the two locals had suc-

cumbed to their injuries.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif condemned the attack, praising the timely police action for saving lives.

Pakistan ramped up security for Chinese engineers working on Beijing-linked projects in March after five workers were killed in a suicide attack.

That attack came days after security forces killed at least seven militants as they attempted to storm the offices of Gwadar Port in southwest Pakistan, considered a cornerstone of Chinese investment.

In recent years, Beijing has poured billions of dollars into projects in Pakistan.

However, these have sparked resentment in Balochistan province - where Gwadar is located - and Chinese citizens have frequently come under attack.

Swedish cops shoot, arrest man who attacked three women

Swedish police said yesterday that they had shot and arrested a man who allegedly injured three elderly women with a sharp object in the central town of Vasteras.

The women, aged between 65-80, were found injured outdoors and taken to hospital, police said on their website.

"Police arrested a man in the vicinity of the crime scene. In connection with his arrest, a situation arose and a police officer fired their weapon," the statement said. "The man was injured and has been taken to hospital, his condition is unknown."

Daily *Aftonbladet* said the man was armed with a knife at the time of his arrest.

It said the man was in his 30s and known to police, with a criminal record for drug offences.

Daily *Expressen* reported that one of the women and the assailant are being treated at hospital for serious injuries.

Vasteras is located 120km west of Stockholm. - **AFP/Reuters**

Zelensky: Nato must choose 'whether we are indeed allies'

AFP
Kyiv

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) must decide if it is Ukraine's ally and urged the defence alliance's members to accelerate weapons deliveries to help his struggling forces.

His appeal to Western partners to provide at least seven more air defence systems came hours after Russia launched a wave of fatal drone and missile attacks across the country.

A barrage in Ukraine's eastern Dnipropetrovsk region left at least seven dead, including children.

However - in a first - Ukraine said that it had downed one of the long-range Russian bombers that launched the missiles.

"Our sky must become safe again," the Ukrainian leader told a gathering of Nato defence ministers via video link.

"It depends fully on your choice," he said, telling the meeting in Brussels that their alliance faced a choice over "whether we indeed are allies".

Zelensky has pointed to Western efforts to defend Israel from Iranian aerial attacks and suggested Ukraine's allies could do more to fend off Russian bombardments.

Casting a bleak picture of his forces' ability to hold off Russian attacks on the ground, Zelensky said Ukraine could not defend itself without Western support.

"It is obvious that now, while Russia has air advantage and can rely on its drone and rocket terror, our capabilities on the ground, unfortunately, are limited," he told the Nato ministers.

Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg said the bloc had agreed to give Ukraine more weapons including air defences.

"Nato has mapped out existing capabilities across the alliance and there are systems that can be made available to Ukraine," he said. "So I expect new announcements on air defence capabilities for Ukraine soon."

Ukraine has seen an uptick in devastating Russian attacks on its cities.

Earlier this week, a strike on the city of Chernigiv killed 18 people.

Zelensky called a weekend vote in the US House of Representatives on a long-delayed \$61bn military aid package a "vitaly important decision".

The aid has been delayed since last year amid

political infighting in the Republican Party, and yesterday Zelensky urged Ukraine's allies to make speedier decisions on support.

"This year, we can't wait for decisions to be made," he said. "We need seven more Patriots or similar air defence systems - and it's a minimum number."

"They can save many lives and really change the situation," Zelensky said.

He addressed the Nato ministers after visiting Ukrainian troops on the front line and inspecting new defensive lines dug in the war-battered Donetsk region.

The Russian missile attacks on Dnipropetrovsk hit housing blocks, strewn debris and sparked a fire in a multi-storey building.

In the regional capital Dnipro, rescuers trawled the damage searching for survivors and bodies throughout the day, as residents hauled their belongings out of destroyed apartments in rucksacks and carrier bags.

"Two children are among those killed. A 14-year-old girl and an eight-year-old boy," Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on social media. "Children must not be killed in air strikes in modern Europe. We must protect them with a reliable air shield."

Ukraine's railway operator said train facilities were hit in the attack and that seven employees were among those wounded.

A female member of staff was killed, they added. Russian shelling on the southern Mykolaiv region and the eastern Sumy region left two people dead, local officials announced.

The Russian Tu-22M3 bomber that Kyiv said it had shot down crashed as it was returning to its base after firing missiles at Ukraine earlier in the night, the main intelligence directorate of Ukraine's defence ministry said.

"We took revenge for our cities and civilians," a Ukrainian air force spokesman, Ilya Yevlash, said.

Russian officials said the plane crashed over the southern Stavropol region.

They said the pilots ejected but that at least one member of the crew had died.

The Russian defence ministry blamed a technical error, according to comments distributed by state-run news agencies.

Stavropol governor Vladimir Vladimirov said two crew members had been taken to a local medical centre.

"The search for the fourth pilot is continuing," he added.

Croatia's top court bars president from becoming next PM

Reuters/AFP
Belgrade/Zagreb

Croatia's Constitutional Court has ruled that President Zoran Milanovic cannot take up the more powerful position of prime minister after this week's elections, saying the firebrand leader could not head any potential coalition.

Hours later, Milanovic dismissed the court's ruling, saying that parliament is the only institution that could decide who will be prime minister - though he did not spell out how he planned to challenge the decision of the country's top tribunal.

The president has accused the court of being biased in favour of his rivals in the ruling conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party.

He has also often criticised the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) and opposed helping Ukraine in its war with Russia.

The HDZ, led by current Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic won Wednesday's election with 61 seats but without securing a parliamentary majority, triggering negotiations among various parties to form a governing coalition.

A coalition led by Milanovic's opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP) came second with 42 seats.

The result made it unlikely that Milanovic would become head of the government, but the court said yesterday that he could not do so even if he managed to find enough support among smaller parties.

The far-right Homeland Movement took third place with 14 seats, potentially giving it a decisive role in getting the HDZ over the line.

The court, which has the last word on constitutional matters, said that Milanovic had failed to adhere to a March court warning that he should resign from the presidency before campaigning for the prime ministerial post again.

Milanovic dissolved parliament on March 18, triggering this week's snap election, and said he would run for prime minister and resign only after winning the polls.

The Constitutional Court said at the time he must resign first.

Croatia has a parliamentary democracy in which the prime minister and his cabinet set all major policies.

The president is empowered to nominate the prime minister based on election results, can dissolve parliament and acts as armed forces chief with some say in foreign policy.

Final results in the election are not expected until next week because a re-run is needed in two polling stations after irregularities were recorded.

The elections were held as the European Union nation of 3.8mn people struggles with corruption, a labour shortage, the highest inflation rate in the eurozone and undocumented migration.

Azerbaijan, Armenia agree 'historic' return of villages

Armenia has agreed to return several villages to Azerbaijan in what both sides said yesterday was an important milestone as they edge towards a peace deal after fighting two wars since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Azerbaijani foreign ministry spokesperson Aykhan Hajizada posted on X that Armenia would return four villages near the countries' shared border that had been "under occupation" since the early 1990s, and called it a "long-awaited historic event".

In Armenia, the state news agency quoted the prime minister's office as saying: "In this process, the Republic of Armenia receives a reduction in risks associated with border delimitation and security."

It said the handover in practice involved only "two and a half villages" because Azerbaijan already partly controlled the settlements involved, but added that the demarcation of the border was a "significant event". The settlements are deserted but are strategically important as they are close to Armenia's main highway north towards the border with Georgia, through which much of its trade is done, and to the pipeline through which it receives gas from Russia. - **Reuters**



Croatian President Zoran Milanovic

French teen dies from heart failure following knife attack near school

AFP
Souffelweyersheim, France

A 14-year-old girl has died of a heart attack in eastern France after her school locked down to protect itself from a knife attacker who lightly wounded two other girls, an official said yesterday.

The teenager "was rescued by teachers who were very fast to call the fire department. She died at the end of the afternoon", education official Olivier Faron said. The girl's middle school in

the village of Souffelweyersheim closed its doors on Thursday afternoon after a man stabbed two other girls aged seven and 11 outside a nearby primary facility.

"Sadly this pupil underwent an episode of very high stress that led to a heart attack," Faron said.

The two girls hurt in the attack were discharged from hospital on Thursday evening with only light wounds.

Police have arrested the 30-year-old assailant, and a probe has been opened into "attempted murder of minors", the prosecutor's office said.

It was not immediately clear what had motivated him, but it did not appear to be "a terrorist act", it said.

He was "psychiatrically fragile" and appeared to have stopped his medication.

The incident follows a series of attacks on schoolchildren by their peers, in particularly the fatal beating earlier this month of Shemseddine, 15, outside Paris.

On Thursday French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal announced measures to crack down on teenage violence in and around schools.

Italian judge throws out case against migrant NGOs

Reuters
Rome

An Italian judge has cleared three migrant sea rescue charities that had been accused of abetting irregular immigration in complicity with human traffickers, throwing out a case opened more than seven years ago.

A pre-trial judge in Trapani, Sicily, said there were no grounds to proceed against international charities Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Save the Children, and Germany's Jugend Rettet.

The decision is a vindication for the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that had always denied any collusion with traffickers and rejected accusations from Italian politicians of acting as "sea taxis" for migrants.

"These unfounded accusations have attempted to tarnish the work of humanitarian search and rescue teams for years," said MSF's International President Christos Christou. "They were intended to remove vessels from the sea and to counter their efforts of saving lives and bearing witness. Now these accusations have collapsed."

Italy is the first port of call for thousands of people who try to cross the Mediterranean from north Africa, and rescue charities have often been targeted by political parties pledging to stem the arrivals.

Right-wing Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has accused the rescue NGOs of acting as "ferry boats" for migrants, and her government has passed legislation to curb their activities, including through the impounding of their vessels.

Elly Schlein, leader of the opposition Democratic Party, said yesterday's ruling was "a historic sentence" that showed "solidarity is not a crime".

In 2017, Trapani prosecutors seized Jugend



This picture taken last year shows an Italian Coast Guard vessel carrying migrants rescued at sea passes near a tourist boat, on the Sicilian island of Lampedusa.

Rettet's rescue boat, the "Juventa", saying they had found "serious evidence" of encounters at sea between its crew members and Libyan traffickers.

They launched similar charges against Save the Children and MSF, without impounding their vessels.

Following the accusations, Jugend Rettet and Save the Children stopped Mediterranean sea rescues, while MSF continued them.

Italy faces a steady inflow of sea migrants

from north Africa, but their numbers have fallen from a 2016 peak following border control deals with Libyan and Tunisian authorities.

In the year to date, around 16,000 migrants have arrived on Italian shores, compared to 35,000 in the same period of 2023.

NGO vessels are responsible for a small fraction of sea rescues in the central Mediterranean - about 4.2% of the total, according to Italian interior ministry statistics for the January-July 2023 period.

QPO 15th anniversary final celebration today



Nasser Sahim al-Jassim

The Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra (QPO)'s final celebration of its 15th anniversary will be held today (Saturday) with the QPO on Tour concert, accompanied by the Qatar Concert Choir, at Qatar National Convention Centre (QNCC).

Renowned conductor Elias Grandy will lead the concert, which showcases remarkable musical compositions from various countries visited by the QPO in the past, including Syria, England, the US, France, Italy, Austria, Russia, and China.

Reflecting on the anniversary, Kurt Meister, QPO executive director, said: "Over the past decade, QPO has garnered its reputation as a world-class orchestra that offers a unique blend of compositions from East and West. It started with auditions held in various European and Arab countries, and today it has matured into an ensemble that has had world premieres from

Damascus to London, and St Petersburg to New York.

"The Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra is unique not only for its combination of Arab and Western music, but also its diversity with musicians ranging from 28 different nationalities; QPO is one of the most diverse orchestras in the world. This diversity not only manifests itself in QPO's melodies, but also represents the character and culture of Qatar."

Nasser Sahim al-Jassim, deputy executive director, said: "The Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra aims to bring together communities through the power of music and showcase the rich Qatari culture and heritage to the global stage. By seamlessly blending Eastern and Western classical music and traditional harmonies, the orchestra creates a unique musical experience. With a focus on diverse musical genres, including folklore and Maqam music, the Qatar Philharmonic

Orchestra celebrates the richness and diversity of musical traditions."

The QPO was founded in 2007 as a centre in the Qatar Foundation, chaired by Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser. The Qatar Philharmonic gives on average 40 different performances per year in venues such as QNCC, Abdul Aziz Nasser Theatre, and the Katara Opera House, which it opened in December 2010 with the world premiere of Marcel Khalife's Rababa Concerto.

Touring performances have included the Royal Albert Hall in London, the Kennedy Center in Washington, Teatro a La Scala in Milan, Theatre des Champs-Elysées in Paris, the Konzerthaus in Vienna for the 50th anniversary of Opec, the Syrian Opera House in Damascus, the United Nations General Assembly, the BBC Proms in London, Linz Brucknerhaus and Santa Cecilia Hall in Rome.



Kurt Meister

Qatar Foundation, NBA inspire athletes at 'Her Time to Play' panel discussion

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Qatar Foundation and the NBA held a panel discussion yesterday, titled 'Her Time to Play', at Education City aimed at fostering female empowerment through sports. The event featured Sylvia Fowles, a two-time WNBA champion, 2017 WNBA MVP, and an eight-time WNBA All-Star; Edniesha Curry, former WNBA player and current head coach of the Virgin Islands Men's National Basketball Team; and Amal al-Keldi, Technical Affairs Coordinator at the Qatar Basketball Federation.

Dozens of budding female basketball players, coaches, and trainers gathered for the talk, which explored topics about self-confidence, teamwork, and inspiration in sports. According to the organisers, the 'Her Time to Play' initiative, spearheaded by the NBA and WNBA, underlines a commitment to providing girls and women with opportunities to engage in basketball and pursue careers in coaching and athletic leadership.

Sharing her insights and personal journey, Fowles credited her mother as her greatest inspiration, saying: "I really wasn't into basketball, it took me to get into high school to appreciate the game and really have good coaches, but if I had to choose one person who really inspired me, that will have to be my mom, she is my biggest fan." Al-Keldi, expressing her enthusiasm for the initiative, stressed its potential to instil invaluable life lessons in young athletes, both on and off the court. "This initiative can help the girls learn values not only on the court but also off the court," she told *Gulf Times* on the sidelines of the event, highlighting the importance of confidence and teamwork in shaping future leaders.

Curry, meanwhile, echoed sentiments of empowerment, drawing parallels between her own experiences and the aspirations of the

young athletes in attendance. "We operate in hundreds of countries around the world and get to work with young and inspiring women like you," she said, citing the global impact of initiatives promoting female participation in sports.

About the significance of teamwork in basketball and its impact on broader life experiences, Fowles underscored the transformative power of collaboration, saying: "The more we understand each other and help each other out, the outcome is always better."

"When you can do things in a group, you learn these certain skills that do translate over and realised it. For me it was travelling overseas, fly to different countries, meeting new people, try new food, and basketball did that, without basketball I don't think I have those opportunities," she said, noting the profound life lessons learned through the sport.

About navigating the challenges of balancing athletic pursuits with academic responsibilities, Fowles offered encouragement to aspiring athletes, highlighting the importance of time management and prioritisation.

"If this is something that you are passionate about, something that you want to see flourish, of course, this is something that you have to put time into," she pointed out.

About developing self-confidence, Curry cited the value of confronting diverse challenges, embracing occasional setbacks, and the importance of resilience. She urged them to navigate discomfort by exposing themselves to new experiences, whether in unfamiliar countries, with different people or through trying new sports.

"You might have a big challenge and you might fail, but the next morning you get up and you work hard and you do something to make a change, and the more time you do that the more confidence you have to lead yourself through these challenges, and I think that is important. The more time you try that, the easier it gets," she said.



WNBA icon Sylvia Fowles with aspiring female basketball players at the event yesterday at Education City. PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



Amal al-Keldi



Sylvia Fowles with young basketball enthusiasts.



Edniesha Curry with young female basketball enthusiasts.



Dozens of aspiring female basketball players attended the panel discussion yesterday at Education City. PICTURE: Joey Aguilar