



# GULF TIMES



published in  
QATAR  
since 1978

0 668039 136499

SATURDAY Vol. XXXV No. 12993

April 27, 2024  
Shawwal 18, 1445 AH

www.gulf-times.com 2 Riyals

QUALITY ACCOMMODATION FOR YOUR WORKFORCE

HABARI REAL ESTATE

Rate from QAR 1900 For Ras Laffan Staff  
(Including Services & WIFI)

AL RUWAIS, AL SHAMAL

+974 3030 0880  
+974 3341 9475

www.habariestate.com

Now on talabat

ALIF

Sky Vision Real Estate Offer

Labour Room 1,250/- per room @ Industrial Area, Street-38,43,44,47

Warehouse 300sqm - Qr.12,500/-

Lounge & Club / Hotel Studio Room / Restaurant Space For Rent inside a 4 Star Hotel

Call: 33598672, 52038746, 50576993

Amwaj

Extra Mineral Added

Amwaj BOTTLED DRINKING WATER

LOW CALORIES & NO SUGAR

BETTER HEALTH

DOHA JUICE & FOOD FACTORY

منتج عالي الجودة للعصائر والمشروبات والمياه

DOHA JUICE & FOOD FACTORY

Tel: +974 31100277 / MOB: +974 30454443

www.gulf-times.com

gulftimes

GulfTimes\_QATAR

gulftimes

GulftimesVideos

## Amir congratulates Tanzania president

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani yesterday sent cables of congratulations to Tanzania President Samia Suluhu Hassan on the anniversary of her country's Union Day. HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent a similar cable to Tanzania Prime Minister Kassim Majaliwa on the occasion.

## Qatar pledges Ukraine assistance

Qatar has announced its commitment to provide \$3mn to the Office of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights to support its core work in Ukraine. This announcement was made by HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhater at the partnership meeting between Qatar and the Office of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights. HE AlKhater said that this funding will enable a range of key initiatives, including the appointment of monitoring experts and the establishment and support of regional offices throughout Ukraine. **Page 2**

## Unlicensed transport operators warned

The Ministry of Transport (MoT) has warned of legal action against unlicensed companies offering passenger transportation via electronic applications. In a post on X yesterday, the MoT explained that Uber, Karwa Technologies, Q Drive, Badr, Aber, Zoom Ride, and Ryde are the companies that are licensed and permitted in Qatar to do the business of passenger transportation via electronic applications.

## King Charles to resume public duties

Britain's King Charles (75) will return to public duties next week for the first time since being diagnosed with cancer as he makes good progress following treatment and a period of recuperation. In February, the palace revealed the king had been diagnosed with an unspecified form of cancer.

## COMMUNITY

See Pages 4 &amp; 5

## Qatar aid arrives in Port Sudan



A Qatar Armed Forces aircraft arrived at Port Sudan Airport in Sudan carrying 25 tonnes of aid, including food supplies and two ambulances, provided by the Qatar Fund for Development and Qatar Red Crescent. This brings the total number of planes to 18, with a total of 555 tonnes of aid. The assistance comes as part of Qatar's support for the Sudanese people and its full backing for their resilience in facing the difficult conditions resulting from ongoing conflict. **(QNA)**

## Gazans mourn baby who dies after rescue from dead mother's womb

Reuters  
Rafah, Gaza Strip



Relatives gathered by a tiny sandy grave in Gaza yesterday, where they had buried a baby girl, who lived just a few days after doctors delivered her from the womb of her dying mother following an Israeli air strike. The baby had been given the names Sabreen, after her dead mother, and Rouh, which means "soul". Her mother, Sabreen al-Sakani al-Sheikh, 30-weeks pregnant, was seriously injured when the Israeli strike hit the family home in Rafah, the southernmost city in the besieged Gaza Strip, on Saturday night. The baby's father Shukri and three-year-old sister Malak were killed. Doctors delivered the baby by Caesarean section, but the mother died of her wounds. Doctor Mohamed Salama, head of the emergency neonatal unit at Emirati Hospital, who had been caring for the baby, said the infant suffered respiratory problems and a weak immune system, and died on Thursday. "I and other doctors tried to save her, but she died. For me personally, it was a very difficult and painful day," he said. "She was born while her respiratory system wasn't

most of them women and children, have been confirmed killed in the six-month-old war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas, according to the Gaza health ministry. Much of Gaza has been laid to waste by Israeli bombardments and most of the enclave's hospitals have been badly damaged, while those still operating are short of electricity, medicine sterilisation equipment and other supplies. The baby's grandmother had pleaded for the doctors to save her. Her uncle, Rami al-Sheikh Jouda, sat by her grave yesterday lamenting the loss of the infant and the others in the family. He said he had visited the hospital every day to check on the baby's health. Doctors told him she had a respiratory problem but he did not think it was bad until he got a call from the hospital telling him the baby had died. "Rouh is gone, my brother, his wife and daughter are gone, his brother-in-law and the house that used to bring us together are gone," he said. "We are left with no memories of my brother, his daughter, or his wife. Everything was gone, even their pictures, their mobile phones, we couldn't find them," the uncle said.

## ILO Office Qatar starts programme for upskilling workers

By Joseph Varghese  
Staff Reporter

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) Project Office in Qatar has launched a four-year programme with the government of Qatar focusing on labour market priorities, a top official disclosed.

"Billed as 'ILO Qatar Technical Cooperation Programme,' we are continuing to focus on priorities around labour market governance and skills necessary for the rapidly changing market needs," Max Tunon, head of ILO Office in Qatar told *Gulf Times*.

"We have incorporated in the programme workforce policies such as the kind of workforce Qatar wants and needs to meet the ambitious goals of the Third National Development Strategy," he explained on the sidelines of a symposium on STEM education at the University of Doha For Science and Technology.

An agreement for this programme was signed last month and will continue until 2028 to meet the ambitious targets of Qatar National Development Strategy 2024-2030, Tunon said.

"The programme includes working on skills development, Qatari nationals in the private sector, increasing female workforce participation and attracting and retaining talent from abroad. It also aims to ensure that the rights of workers are respected. We want to make sure that the work aligns with the Third National Development Strategy.

"It focuses on the proportion of the workforce that is skilled, including people with special needs to be involved in the workforce.

"The programme aims to provide support to the government in shaping policies that can help them meet many of the objectives in the national development strategy," he continued.

Tunon pointed out that Qatar



Max Tunon

has adopted several initiatives on life-long learning and skills development. He, however, suggested a few steps in this regard: "We prefer to adopt more coherent and aligned approach under a skills policy strategy or skills vision and a comprehensive skills governance system that really articulate who is doing what and how the different institutions are working together.

"The second one is engaging the private sector and the workers in these courses. We had a discussion on the role of the private sector and the needs of the private sector, especially when those needs are rapidly changing and how to ensure that supply meets demand," he remarked.

Tunon said that a lot can be done to bring the private sector to the forefront for the development of the skills training programme.

"All these depend on the data and dialogue by skills analysis and forecasting to see how labour markets are evolving and how the needs of the specific sectors are evolving. It will also throw light on how technology is affecting each area and how will it affect more in the years to come. Many of the jobs may not be lost but augmented with technology," he added.

## Fourth edition of Katara Award for Nahma Art launched

Activities of the fourth edition of Katara Award for Nahma Art (Naham Al Khaleej), with the participation of 13 artists from Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, the UAE, Bahrain and Iraq, was launched yesterday.

Katara general manager Prof Dr Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Sulaiti inaugurated the competitions at an event at the Drama Theatre at Katara - Cultural Village in the presence of dignitaries from various walks of life.

The competitions, continuing until April 30, will witness the crowning of the winners of the "Naham Al Khaleej" Award, launched by Katara as part of its ongoing initiatives to revive the authentic heritage of Qatar and the GCC region, and to preserve the artistic heritage associated with the sea, especially of fishing and pearl diving.



Speaking at the inaugural ceremony, Prof Dr al-Sulaiti stressed that this edition of the festival features numerous activities that go deep into

the marine history and heritage of the region linked directly to Nahma art, considered one of the most prominent maritime heritage arts, flourishing during

fishing and pearl diving expeditions.

Nahma art contributed to the appearance of artists who mastered singing and chanting, to en-

ertain sailors on the deck, bringing joy and enthusiasm to their hearts, and helping them endure the toil and effort of work.

The fourth edition of the

award features a first prize of QR50,000, second prize of QR40,000, third prize of QR30,000, and the fourth prize of QR10,000.



## Culture minister visits Diriyah Art Biennale



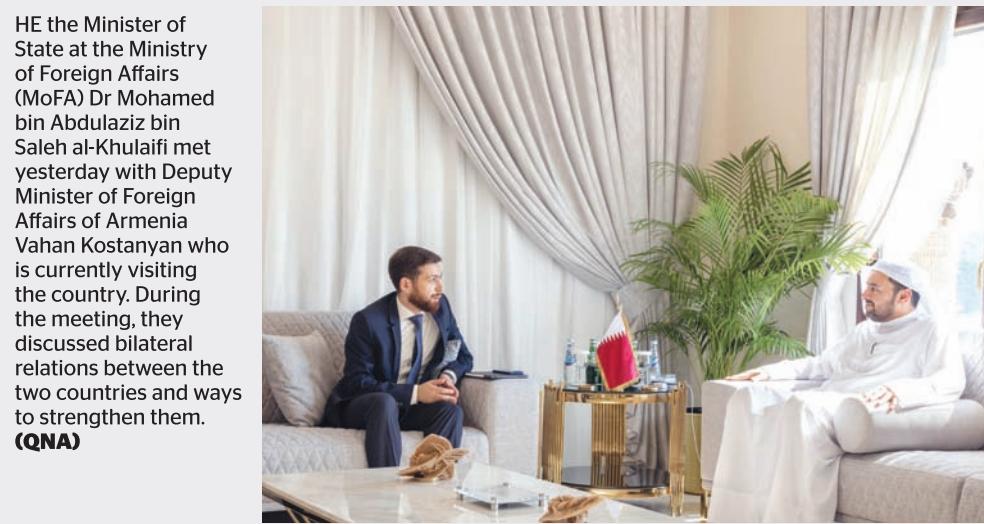
HE the Minister of Culture Sheikh Abdulrahman bin Hamad al-Thani visited the 2024 Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale, upon an invitation from the Saudi Ministry of Culture. Accompanied by Saudi Assistant Minister of Culture Rakan al-Tawq, the minister was briefed on the multiple works of art displayed across the second edition of the biennale. This edition, themed After Rain, showcases and celebrates Saudi Arabia's contemporary art scene in dialogue with global artists. The event that kicked off on Feb 20 and runs through May 24 features artworks ranging from music to movies and visual arts as well as workshops, cultural seminars, and interactive artworks. (QNA)

## Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to UN meets United Nations official



HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani met with UN Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Co-ordinator for Gaza Sigrid Kaag, at the headquarters of the Permanent Delegation in New York. The meeting dealt with discussing the latest developments in Gaza Strip, the chances for co-operation between Qatar and the UN to deliver the needed humanitarian aid to those affected in the strip. (QNA)

## Al-Khulaifi meets Armenia deputy minister



HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) Dr Mohamed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi met yesterday with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Vahan Kostanyan who is currently visiting the country. During the meeting, they discussed bilateral relations between the two countries and ways to strengthen them. (QNA)

## Qatar pledges \$3mn for Ukrainian human rights office

**QNA**  
Doha

Qatar has announced its commitment to provide \$3mn to the Office of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights to support its core work in Ukraine. This announcement was made by HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhater at the partnership meeting between Qatar and the Office of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights.

HE AlKhater said that this funding will enable a range of key initiatives, including the appointment of monitoring experts and the establishment and support of regional offices throughout Ukraine. She emphasized that these efforts aim to strengthen the necessary infrastructure to provide effective services aimed at supporting families and children affected by the ongoing conflict.

She stressed that Qatar has reinforced its role over decades as a key global mediator and advocate for peace, placing humanity at the forefront. She highlighted Qatar's launch of numerous regional and global initiatives in the fields of child education, health, food security, and economic empowerment, particularly for women and youth.

She mentioned that Qatar has previously succeeded, through mediation efforts, in reuniting Ukrainian children with their families through four operations, empha-



sizing its commitment to efforts aimed at reuniting dispersed families and ensuring their safety and well-being.

Furthermore, HE AlKhater noted that Qatar is currently hosting approximately 20 reunited families from both sides, providing comprehensive medical, psychological, and social support as part of the health and recovery program to meet the immediate and long-term needs of these families and facilitate their stable recovery and reintegration.

She highlighted that Qatar's partnership with the Office of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights embodies their shared values and mutual determination to promote and support these values.

"And as we continue our efforts to reunite more families between Ukraine and Russia, we cannot ignore the unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe that currently exists in Gaza. As more than 2mn people face death, displacement, drastic health conditions, and the

use of aid and starvation as a weapon of war," she added.

HE AlKhater also noted that the war did not spare innocent children with more than 16,000 killed and tens of thousands left with life-lasting injuries including thousands of amputees, stressing that the situation in Gaza requires immediate action from the global community to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people.

The Minister of State for International Cooperation highlighted that Sudan also remains in an ongoing humanitarian crisis amid dwindling international support. HE AlKhater affirmed that Qatar remains committed to addressing other global humanitarian crises, including the ongoing situation in Gaza and Sudan. For his part, Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights Dmytro Lubinets expressed profound gratitude and appreciation to Qatar, its leadership, and its people for their assistance to his country at this time. He highlighted the strong friendship ties the State

## Qatar in Arab Parliament conference



Qatar is taking part in the sixth conference of the Arab Parliament and Speakers of Arab Councils and Parliaments, which is being held in Cairo today. HE Speaker of the Shura Council Hassan bin Abdullah al-Ghanem, is heading the Qatari delegation to the conference. The conference will discuss, among other topics, the safe use of artificial intelligence. Participants will present their vision, as parliamentarians, for the optimal use of artificial intelligence technologies, and will discuss the challenges facing this field, in addition to the opportunities for optimal utilization of artificial intelligence technologies to advance development in Arab countries. The conference is scheduled to issue a document on "Arab Parliamentary Vision for Safe Employment of Artificial Intelligence." (QNA)

## First antiques exhibition opens at Katara

The first Katara - the Cultural Village Antiques Exhibition, also showcasing an open auction of historical artefacts and collectibles, in addition to a display of classical cars, will continue until April 30. A total of 22 companies and 10 countries are participating in the event inaugurated by Katara deputy general manager and Human Resources director Saif Saad al-Dosari and sponsored by the Seashore Group. The exhibition features various types of antiques, artefacts, and old collectibles, such as luxurious carpets, watches, clocks, luxurious household utensils, vintage electronics, antiquities, and Islamic arts, such as handwritten Holy Qur'an and historical manuscripts, brass, wooden, and glass artefacts, valuable paintings, as well as ancient daggers and swords. Amira Ahmed al-Muhannadi, director of Katara Publishing House, the organiser of the exhibition, pointed out that the hobby of collecting antiques and artefacts from different civilisations serves as a reason for cultural closeness among peoples. This exhibition is to be held annually to serve as a gathering for antique enthusiasts and traders. Several participants with booths at the exhibition expressed their joy at participating in the first antique exhibition held in Qatar.



of Qatar and Ukraine now have.

### For human dignity

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar and the Office of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights announced a partnership aimed at enhancing welfare and well-being within Ukraine.

Qatar announced that it will commit \$3mn to support the vital work carried out by the commissioner's office. The fund aims, according to a joint statement from the two sides, to support initiatives designed to improve the lives of children, citizens affected by armed conflicts, and the overall population through enhanced access to socio-economic support. Furthermore, the fund will contribute to increasing legal support and improving the necessary infrastructure required to provide the support needed for families affected by conflict in Ukraine.

The Office of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights expressed its deep gratitude to Qatar for this significant support, stressing its committed to utilising these resources to maximise their impact on welfare and well-being within Ukraine.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar and the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights reiterated their dedication to a world where human dignity is respected, and where each individual's rights are protected, stressing that this partnership marks a significant step towards achieving these pursuits.

## NHRC participates in seminar on enhancing co-operation in combating human trafficking

The National Human Rights Committee (NHRC), represented by HE Secretary-General of the Committee Sultan bin Hassan al-Jamali, participated in a seminar organised by the Saudi Human Rights Commission in Riyadh on enhancing co-operation in combating human trafficking crimes. The seminar reviewed legislative, institutional frameworks, and procedures aimed at combating human trafficking crimes, as well as how to benefit from best international practices and experiences, and the challenges facing countries in combating human trafficking crimes and addressing them. On the sidelines of the seminar, HE al-Jamali met with President of the Saudi Human Rights Commission Dr Hala bint Mazyad al-Twaijri, where the two parties discussed avenues for mutual co-operation through the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the committee and the commission, with the aim of holding national and regional events and activities to protect and promote human rights. (QNA)





## Landor, MAD Architects, Garcia Media and Pandora recognised for design excellence

By Joey Aguilar  
Staff Reporter

Landor, MAD Architects, Garcia Media and Pandora have emerged as the recipients of the Msheireb Award for Innovation by Design, recognising their exceptional creativity and excellence across four categories.

Landor was honoured with the Human-centred Design award, while MAD Architects received accolades for Sustainable Design. Garcia Media was recognised for Technology-powered Design, and Pandora claimed the Lifestyle and Luxury Design title.

The Msheireb Award is a culmination of the recently held Innovation by Design Summit, held at Msheireb Downtown Doha's Doha Design District. This event brought together a diverse lineup of speakers, including prominent Qatari innovators and entrepreneurs.

According to the organisers, Msheireb Properties and

Fast Company Middle East, the summit served as a platform for discussing the key role of design thinking in driving positive change on individual, community, and international levels.

The event featured a series of presentations and panel discussions exploring various topics, including biophilic design, integrating artificial intelligence (AI) in content creation, and urban planning's role in fostering people-centric cities. It also tackled the fusion of technology and creativity, designing for the experience economy, and understanding Gen Z preferences.

During the session on "How can museums use technology to become immersive," Fahad al-Turky, manager of Exhibitions and Programmes at Msheireb Museums, stressed the importance of prioritising human needs in technological interventions. Museum of Islamic Art director Shaikha al-Nassr highlighted a collaborative project with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York,



Innovation by Design Summit brought together a diverse lineup of speakers, including prominent Qatari innovators and entrepreneurs.

PICTURE: Joey Aguilar

demonstrating the innovative use of technology to enhance the museum experience. At a panel titled "Is technology empowering creativity or stifling it?" Mohamed al-Qassabi, head of Robotics and AI

at the Qatar Scientific Club, cited a collaborative approach between humans and AI, noting the need for education and training to effectively utilise AI tools.

Designer Abdulrahman al-



Charu Kokate, senior partner at Safdie Architects, discussed the innovative design integration at Singapore Changi Airport, challenging conventional airport experiences with the introduction of a central garden sans commercial activity.

Addressing regional sustainability challenges, Faysal Tabbarah, associate dean and Professor of Architecture at the American University of Sharjah, along with Matthew Utley, principal, Grimshaw; and Nasser Abuhasan, principal, AGI Architects; explored the adoption of sustainable new-age materials, highlighting the need to challenge traditional notions of industrial development and sustainability.

NFT artist Amrita Sethi encouraged creatives to design for the future, envisioning increased interaction with digital objects while Dr Mario R Garcia, CEO and founder of Garcia Media, cited the potential of AI as a tool for innovation while cautioning against the "AI Gap".

## Katara set to host Senyar Festival from April 30



The 10th edition of the Senyar Festival will be held from April 30 to May 3.

The launch of the dhows and the final ceremony will take place at Katara - the Cultural Village beach, with fishing taking place at waters off the Sealine area.

Jihad al-Jaidah, head of the judging committee at Senyar, told a meeting of the participants, that this year's edition has

the participation of 75 teams and 850 participants, including 82 from the GCC countries and 80 Qatar residents.

He emphasised the importance of teams adhering to the designated fishing times, from 4.30am-6pm.

Saeed Abdulrahman al-Kuwari, operations manager of Senyar Festival, said the first place winner will receive QR1mn,

the second-place winner QR500,000, and the third-place winner QR300,000. Besides, for the largest fish caught, the first-place winner receives QR50,000, the second-place winner QR30,000, and the third-place winner QR20,000.

The Senyar Festival aims to revive the customs and traditions associated with marine heritage in Qatar.

## Israeli strike kills Lebanese fighters

Reuters  
Jerusalem

An Israeli strike in Lebanon's Beqaa region has killed two members of a Lebanese fighter group that has fired rockets across the southern border at Israel, the group said yesterday.

Israel's military said in a statement yesterday that its air force "struck and eliminated Mosab Khalaf in the area of Meidoun in Lebanon," saying he was a member of the Jama'a Islamiya group and had carried out attacks against Israel. In a statement, the Jama'a Islamiya said two of its field commanders - Khalaf and relative of his - were killed in the strike.

A security source in Lebanon confirmed that Kha-

laf was a local official in the group's armed wing, the Fajr forces. The group has previously fired rockets at Israel. It was the first time Israel has confirmed having targeted a member of the Jama'a Islamiya in Lebanon, although more than a dozen members of the group have been killed in strikes in Lebanon, including targeting members of Palestinian faction Hamas in Lebanon.

Hamas stormed Israel in the first week of October. Israel responded with a military campaign on the Gaza Strip that has left more than 34,000 Palestinians dead.

In parallel, Hezbollah and Israel have been trading fire across Lebanon's southern border. An Israeli strike killed two Hezbollah fighters yesterday, security sources in Lebanon said.

## Gaza protest in Paris sees tense standoff

Reuters  
Paris

Tensions flared in front of Paris' prestigious Sciences Po university over the war in Gaza yesterday as pro-Israel protesters came to challenge pro-Palestinian students occupying the building.

Police moved in to keep the two groups apart. Chanting their support for the Palestinians, some students had been occupying a Sciences Po building since the night, displaying Palestinian flags at windows and over the entrance.

Several wore the black-and-white keffiyeh head scarf that has become an emblem of solidarity with Gaza. They demanded the

institution condemn Israel's actions, in a protest that echoed similar demonstrations on US campuses.

"When we see what is happening in the United States, and now in Australia, we're really hoping it will catch on here in France, the academic world has a role to play," said 22-year-old Hicham, a masters student in human rights and humanitarian studies at Sciences Po. "We hope that will spread to all universities and beyond ... we won't give in until the genocide in Gaza ends," said 20-year-old Zoe, a masters student in public administration at Sciences Po.

Later in the day, pro-Israel protesters, some wrapped in Israeli or French flags, walked to the building in protest.

## Drone strike on Iraq gas complex kills four Yemenis

AFP  
Arbil

Four Yemeni workers were killed in a drone attack on an Emirati-owned gas complex in Iraq's northern autonomous region of Kurdistan yesterday, an official said, AFP

reported from Arbil.

"Four Yemeni workers were killed and the field was severely damaged" which will cause "power shortages", Kurdistan regional government spokesperson Peshawa Hawramani said. He called on the federal government in Baghdad to "find the perpetrators of this terrorist act".

## South Sudanese comedians find laughs in painful past

Reuters  
Juba

When Isaac Anthony Lumori launched South Sudan's first weekly comedy show at the height of a civil war in 2014, his performers' quips about different ethnic groups were not always well received.

"They had...(a) few attacks because of some of the jokes they made," said Lumori, better known by his stage name MC Lumex, citing one comedian's remarks about the bowel habits of a particular tribe.

A decade on, with South Sudan officially at peace and audiences accustomed to the comedians' equal-opportunity digs, the reception has grown considerably warmer.

The 25 comedians from the troupe Kilkili Ana, which roughly translates as "Tickle Me" in Arabic, perform each Thursday at a culture centre in the capital Juba before more than 1,500 cheering fans from diverse ethnicities and walks of life.

They make wisecracks about everything from the 2013-2018 war that cost hundreds of thou-



South Sudanese comedian Wokil Jesh Komando entertains revellers during the Kilkili Ana weekly comedy show, which loosely translates to "Tickle Me" in Arabic, at the Nyakuron Cultural Centre in Juba, South Sudan. Right: People gather to get tickets for the Kilkili Ana weekly comedy show, in Juba, South Sudan.

sands of lives to South Sudan's economic woes and everyday quarrels between husbands and wives.

"Every day I get messages and calls from people saying I am so stressed, after going through your comedies I am now relieved," said Gista Wasuk, a 33-year-old comedian who grew up as a refugee in neighbouring Uganda during South Sudan's war of independence with Sudan.

In one recent sketch, Kuech Deng Atem, a 30-year-old former child soldier, poked fun at the tribalism of a family

member who reacted furiously to his daughter's plans to marry someone from a different ethnic group, only to change his tune after learning it was the son of a wealthy politician.

While security has improved since the war's main belligerents signed a peace deal in 2018, political and economic turmoil has continued to roil the world's youngest country, which became independent in 2011.

A general election is due in December to replace the current transitional administration. But the United States has raised

doubts about the credibility of the process and local conflicts between rival groups over land and natural resources have intensified this year, killing nearly 200 people.

Atem said he hoped comedy could help promote reconciliation and unity ahead of the election. Still, he acknowledged that certain topics remain off limits.

"You cannot talk about some government officials directly," he said. "You can't talk about some issues directly - issues to do with security."



# KMCC Qatar unveils 'Herimpact' initiative to empower women



**By Shafeeq Alingal**  
Staff Reporter

The Kerala Muslim Cultural Centre (KMCC) Qatar is spreading its wings to the women empowerment sector, taking a cue from the good response

for its social and welfare activities.

Under the aegis of KMCC Qatar Women's Wing, 'Herimpact' has been launched, aimed at empowering the organisation's women cadets along with other beneficiaries in educational, social, cultural and health realms.

In its maiden season, the cam-

paign, with its motto 'towards the fulfilment of her dreams,' will reach out to hundreds of women across Qatar. "Empowerment, career growth, continuing education and developing communication, social and soft skills are the focus of the initiative. The goal is to make the women enhanced and

empowered in social, economic and policy matters," KMCC Qatar Women's Wing secretary Saleena Koolath told *Gulf Times*.

"Driven by ambition, many dream of starting a career or getting involved in social activities. Our ultimate goal is to realise these dreams while helping them



go ahead with professional success and personal fulfilment," Saleena said.

The organisation, according to Saleena, is all set to launch a mass campaign that includes competitions, discussions and gatherings for women. This is to identify the beneficiaries and to assess their needs. "We are working on networking and need assessment. Some networking programmes and competitions were held. Further plans will be chalked out and modules designed by experts to address the needs of the women," she said.

As part of 'Herimpact', career guidance and motivational programmes will be organised for women. Also, in a bid to motivate the beneficiaries, women achievers and inspiring figures will be honoured. They will also share their success stories.

The launching ceremony was recently held at the KMCC Office at Al Thumama. KMCC Qatar state committee president Dr Abdul Samad inaugurated. KMCC Women's Wing state president Sameera Abdul Nasar presided. Functionaries of KMCC Qatar and Women's Wing were present.

## Academic excellence celebrated at RPS



Rajagiri Public School (RPS) honoured 207 meritorious students, who received medals and certificates for their academic achievements. Science India Forum - Qatar president Ravi Kumar Narayanan was the chief guest. The school's administrative director Jinsu Aju and principal Joshy Abraham felicitated the winners. Senior students gave a dance performance on the occasion.

## ICC felicitates Telugu celebrities



Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) honoured four Telugu celebrities. Film actor Sampoornesh Babu, singers Sameera Bharadwaj and Renu Kumar and magician Ravi were felicitated for their contribution in their respective fields. Officials and community leaders were present.

## ICTM marks 475th milestone meeting



Indian Club Toastmasters (ICTM) hosted a dazzling celebration for their 475th milestone meeting recently in the presence of members, guests and representatives from Toastmasters District 116. Entertainment, including musical performances by members and a magic show, added to the evening's charm.

## Uniq holds health education programme



As a part of the 50th year jubilee of MES Indian School, a health education and awareness programme was conducted by Uniq (United Nurses of India - Qatar), bringing together about 300 educators. Heart health awareness and education was promoted through a series of sessions. Principal Dr Hameeda Kader gave introductory remarks. The Uniq resource persons were Saleena Koolath, Sulaiman Mohamed, Jiss Thomas, Bindu Linson, Joji Mathew, Irshad Ali Challapurath, Sneha Thomas, Ameer Kusru, Elizabeth Antony and Shermi Aziz. English teachers Magdalene Sylvia and Fiona Mary anchored the programme. Shiju Sebastian, Gincy Wilson and Praseela K A from the Welfare Department of the school co-ordinated.

## ICC Wednesday Fiesta hosts Telugu community groups



Four Telugu community organisations associated with the Indian Cultural Centre, participated in the 'ICC Wednesday Fiesta'. Among the highlights was a performance by singer Shreyas Patkar from India.



# Kefaq releases its inaugural souvenir

Kefaq, an association of residents of Kottarakkara in the southern Indian state of Kerala, released its first souvenir titled *Prayanam...the journey of life....* recently at its annual celebration, Kiranam 2024 in Doha.

Popular south Indian movie stars Vinu Mohan and Vidya Vinu Mohan released the publication by handing over the first copy to chief editor Cibi Mathew, associate editor Anil C Thomas and Kefaq president Biju K Philip.

Indian Cultural Centre secretary Abraham K Joseph, Indian Sports Centre secretary Pradeep Pillai, Jose Philip and Vishnu Gopal were among the dignitaries.

The souvenir features articles by noted writers Sheela Tommy, Saji Abraham, Anoop Annoor, Sujesh Hari, Prof Abraham Karkikam, Jayadeep Menon, P T Fer-



oze, Anil Kumar B, P G Varghese Malamel, Deepa Arakal, Kavya Satish, Prof John Kurakar, Molly John, Ramankari Radhakrishnan and contributions from Kefaq members.

The article '100 Kottarakkara' showcases personalities

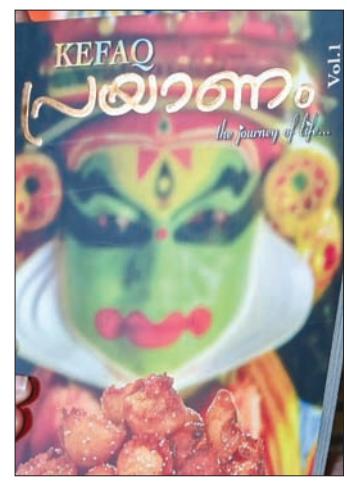
from social, political, arts and sports fields who make Kottarakkara famous.

The winners of a short story competition organised for expatriates in Qatar as part of the *Prayanam* souvenir were honoured at the event.

Archana Anup's *Prayanam*, Sherif Arimbra's *Asma* and Shibu Viswanathan's *Matakam* won the first, second and third positions, respectively. Essays *Kyethaa Swapnam* by Prahlad Kongath, *Iniyenkilum Padikkennda padangal* by Amal Fermis and

*Bandhangal* by Niaz T M won incentive prizes. All the six selected stories are included in the *Prayanam* souvenir.

The short story jury Brilly Binny, Shakti Surjit, Shine S, Shailaja teacher, Kavita Rajan and Shiju Dhamani were also



felicitated on the occasion.

Kefaq general secretary Binesh Babu, vice-president Biju P John, treasurer Anil Kumar R, ladies secretary Ancy Rajeev, managing committee members Jojin Jacob, Anish Thomas, Jobin Panicker, Shaji Karikam, Jalu Ambadi, souvenir committee members Mini Benny, Lijo Titus, Jacob Babu, Rinju Alex, Regi Lukose and Saji Baby were present.



## Earth Day commemoration

**MES**



To promote environmental awareness and sensitise students about the need for the protection of our planet, MES Indian School commemorated 'Earth Day' on April 22. The members of Campus Care Force (CCF) conducted special assemblies in all sections. Students spoke on the importance of preserving the earth. Colourful placards carried messages of sustainability and conservation. Teachers led by example by donning Earth Day-themed attire. Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar urged the students to adhere to eco-friendly practices to safeguard 'Mother Earth' which is bountiful for everyone's needs and life sustenance. Students and teachers participated in a rally on the school grounds reaffirming their commitment to sustainable practices and raising eco-conscious in the community. Poster Designing activity on the theme 'Save Earth' engaged students from Classes 5-8. Saplings were planted by the students. Teachers, including those in charge of CCF and Scouts & Guides co-ordinated the event.

**RPS**



Rajagiri Public School (RPS) observed World Earth Day with special assemblies across all sections. A collective pledge to protect the planet echoed through the PA system. The Nature Club spearheaded a "Campus Green-up" initiative. Kindergarten students, dressed in vibrant shades of blue for "Blue Planet Day", presented a tribute to Earth.

## MES U-19 team win Qatar Blasters Super Cup



The Under-19 football team of MES Indian School won the Qatar Blasters Super Cup 2024 organised by QBFC Qatar. The school governing board and the principal congratulated the team and the coach. Binoy K K from the Department of Physical Education was the coach of the team.

## MES marks World Book Day



With an objective to encourage reading habit among students, MES Indian School celebrated the World Book Day on April 23 in the central library. Addressing the gathering, principal Dr Hameeda Kadar said reading opens the vistas of future in a promising manner. She urged students to cultivate the habit of reading the works of great and renowned authors and get inspired. She also stressed that reading during the formative years is the ideal way to attain success in life. Shriya Harish Kumar, a student of Class IV spoke on the significance of reading. A vocabulary search competition was held and winners honoured. School librarians Nousheena and Sabu Antony co-ordinated the event.

## NIS appoints new student council leaders



Noble International School (NIS), Doha, set up its 11-member Student Council for the academic year 2024-25 at a ceremony. Head boy Raed Abdul Nasar, head girl Rida Zehra, sports captain Amaan Muneer and captains and vice-captains of the four houses took the oath and received badges and sashes from principal Shibu Abdul Rasheed and other officials. Vice-principal Jayamon Joy welcomed the gathering and vice-principal (CCA) Shihabudheen proposed a vote of thanks.



## MES forum briefs parents on CBSE exam format



With an objective to update the parents of Class 12 students about the recent changes effected by India's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in line with the National Education Policy 2020 concerning the format of exams, MES Indian School conducted a briefing session.

Providing insights into the curriculum assessment methods in the open forum, principal Dr Hameeda Kadar said there has been a substantial increase of 40% to 50% in the competency-based

questions, such as multiple choice and case-based, enabling the students to think out of the box and apply real-life situation in their responses.

The aim is to shift towards Competency Based Education by emphasising creativity, critical thinking and system-based learning, thus preparing students for 21st-century challenges by moving away from rote memorisation, she added.

Students of MES will be attempting skilled subjects this year for the first time. She assured the

parents that the students' well-being was the school's prime concern and the students could easily voice their concerns to the counsellors. The meeting also sought to establish a collaborative partnership between the parents and the school to ensure excellent performance by the students who will appear for the board exams. Study tips were shared by Dr Shaji Kumar and Zeenath Jalal, heads of the departments of Physics and Commerce, respectively. Magdeline Sylvia, a teacher from the Department of English anchored the event.

## DPS-MIS honours achievers

DPS-Modern Indian School (DPS-MIS) honoured around 150 students for being all-rounders (Grades V-IX and XI), and for securing 100% attendance (Grades V-XII) for the academic year 2023-24. Director Rocky Fernandes was the chief guest. Director Harish Kanjani, principal Asna Nafees, vice-principals, headmistress, academic and activity co-ordinators, parents and the awardees were present. The programme began with a recitation of verses from the Holy Qur'an. The choir rendered the school song. The programme was anchored by Maniksha Balodi, activity co-ordinator (Grades VI-VIII) under the guidance of principal and vice principal head of activities Soma Bhattacharjee. Priti Modi, activity co-ordinator (Grades IX-XII) proposed a vote of thanks.





# Burkina Faso suspends BBC and Voice of America over reporting

**AFP/Reuters**  
Ouagadougou

**B**urkina Faso has blocked local Internet access to the BBC and Voice of America (VOA) after they aired a rights report accusing the army of attacks on civilians in its battle against religious militants.

The British and US broadcasters are the latest international media organisations to be targeted since Captain Ibrahim Traore seized power in the West African country in a September 2022 coup.

Burkina's communications authority, the CSC, announced late on Thursday that it had "directed" Internet service providers to suspend access to the BBC, VOA and Human Rights Watch (HRW) from Burkina territory for two weeks.

It said the decision had been taken because the BBC and VOA had aired and also published reports on their digital platforms "accusing the Burkina army of abuses against the civilian population".

The CSC said the report contained "hasty

and biased declarations without tangible proof against the Burkina army".

In the report based on its own investigation, rights watchdog HRW said the West African country's military summarily executed about 223 villagers, including at least 56 children, in February as part of a campaign against civilians accused of collaborating with religious militants.

HRW said the Burkina army has repeatedly committed mass atrocities against civilians in the name of fighting terrorism, and it called on authorities to investigate the massacres.

The country's communication council said HRW's report contained "peremptory and tendentious" declarations against the army likely to create public disorder and it would suspend the programmes of the broadcasters over their coverage of the story.

Burkina authorities, contacted by AFP, have not commented on the accusations.

The country has been battling attacks from groups linked to Al Qaeda and Islamic State since a religious militant insurgency

swept in from neighbouring Mali in 2015.

Since then, around 20,000 people have been killed in Burkina Faso and around 2mn forced to flee their homes.

The VOA said yesterday that it had sought reactions to the HRW report "from several Burkina officials" but had received no response and intended "to continue to fully and fairly cover activities in the country".

A BBC spokesperson said "the suspension reduces the BBC's ability to reach audiences with independent and accurate news. We will continue to report on the region in the public interest and without fear or favour".

"VOA stands by its reporting about Burkina Faso and intends to continue to fully and fairly cover events in that country," Acting VOA director John Lippman said in a statement. "The Voice of America strictly adheres to the principles of accurate, balanced and comprehensive journalism, therefore, we ask the government of Burkina Faso to reconsider this troubling decision."

The UN Human Rights Office said it is "concerned" about the suspension.

"Restrictions on media freedom and civic space must stop immediately," spokesperson Marta Hurtado said in a statement.

The CSC warned other media they could face sanctions if they carried the articles.

Under Traore, the junta has distanced Burkina Faso from France, which ruled the country until 1960, and has already targeted a number of French media outlets.

In September, the junta-led government suspended the print and online operations of French media outlet Jeune Afrique in the country after it published two articles about tensions within the military.

In June, it suspended French TV channel LCI for three months.

In March 2023, it also suspended all broadcasts by the France 24 news channel a few months after also suspending Radio France Internationale (RFI).

It accused both public media outlets of having relayed jihadist leaders' messages.

The following month the correspondents of French newspapers *Liberation* and *Le Monde* were expelled.

## US troops to leave Chad in second African state withdrawal

**T**he United States will withdraw some troops from Chad, the Pentagon has said, days after Washington agreed to move forces out of neighbouring Niger.

The US has approximately 100 troops stationed in Chad as part of its strategy to combat extremism in West Africa.

"USAFRICOM is currently planning to reposition some US military forces from Chad, a portion of which were already scheduled to depart," Pentagon press secretary Major-General Pat Ryder told a news conference on Thursday, referring to the US Africa Command unit. "This is a temporary step as part of an ongoing review of our security co-operation, which will resume after Chad's May 6 presidential election."

Chad's air force chief had ordered the US military this month to halt activities at an air base near the capital N'Djamena, according to a letter sent to the transitional government and seen by AFP.

He said he had asked the US military to provide documents "justifying its presence at the Adjি Kossei Air Base" but had not received any.

US troops at the Adjি Kossei military base train anti-terrorism special forces and an elite unit of the Chadian army to combat the Nigerian religious militant group Boko Haram.

"The presence of American forces in Chad was initially motivated by a common commitment to the fight against terrorism, an objective shared between the two nations," a Chadian government spokesman told AFP yesterday.

"However, concerns have been expressed by the Chadian general staff about this presence" and "in recognition of the concerns expressed, the US government has decided to temporarily withdraw its forces from Chad," said Abderraman Koulamallah.

"It is important to stress that this withdrawal in no way signifies a break in co-operation between the two countries in the fight against terrorism," he said. "Further discussions will take place to explore the possibility of the return of US forces in the case of a specific bilateral agreement between the two nations."

Neighbouring Niger is also a lynchpin in the US and French strategy to combat religious militants in the region.

However, Niger's ruling military junta said in March that it was ending a military co-operation agreement with Washington, claiming it had been imposed and the US troop presence was illegal.

Washington this week began discussions with Niger on withdrawing the more than 1,000 US personnel in the country, which is also home to a \$100mn American drone base.

The United States will "continue to explore options on how we can ensure that we're able to continue to address potential terrorist threats" in the wake of the withdrawal, Ryder said this week following the announcement of the US pull-out from Niger.

General Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno seized the presidency of Chad in a 2021 coup after the death of his father, Idriss Deby Itno, who had ruled the Sahel country with an iron fist for more than three decades. - AFP

## Kenya flood death toll since March climbs to 70

**AFP**  
Nairobi

**T**he number of people killed in floods in Kenya due to heavier than usual rainfall since the monsoon began in March has risen to 70, with nearly half the deaths in Nairobi, the government said yesterday.

Kenya and other countries in East Africa - a region highly vulnerable to climate change - have been pounded by severe downpours in recent weeks, compounded by the El Nino weather pattern.

El Nino is a naturally occurring climate pattern typically associated with increased heat worldwide, leading to drought in some parts of the world and heavy rains elsewhere.

"The official tally of fellow Kenyans who regrettably have lost their lives due to the flooding situation now stands at 70 lives," government spokesman Isaac Mwaura said on X, after torrential rains killed 32 people in the capital Nairobi this week.

Fifteen people were killed in the Rift Valley region, the government said in a report yesterday, following a meeting of the country's disaster response committee.

More than 120,000 people have been displaced by the floods, the report said, with 22 others injured and eight reported missing.

The government has proposed 3.3bn Kenyan shillings (\$24.5mn) for an "initial emergency response", which includes repairing infrastructure, emergency housing and food assistance.

Sixty-four public schools in Nairobi - nearly a third of the total number in the capital - have been "substantially affected" by the flooding, Belio Kipsang, the principal secretary for education, said yesterday.

However, Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua said: "The schools will reopen as scheduled", following mid-term holidays this month.

In Makueni County, south of Nairobi, "a lorry ferrying people was swept away by raging waters", the Kenya Red Cross said on X, adding that 11 individuals had been rescued.

Kenyans have been warned to stay on alert, with more heavy rains forecast across the country in coming days as the monsoon batters East Africa.

At least 155 people have died in neighbouring Tanzania due to flooding and landslides.

Tanzanian Prime Minister Kassim Majaliwa said on Thursday that more than 200,000 people had been affected by the disaster.

He said homes, property, crops and infrastructure including roads, bridges, railways and schools had been damaged or destroyed.

In Burundi, one of the poorest countries on the planet, around 96,000 people have been displaced by months of relentless rains, the United Nations and the government said this month.

Meanwhile, the UN humanitarian response agency, OCHA, said in an update this week that in Somalia, the seasonal Gu rains from April to June are intensifying, with flash



A man is seen near an area where houses were destroyed by floods following torrential rains at the Mathare informal settlement in Nairobi.

adding that 11 individuals had been rescued.

Kenyans have been warned to stay on alert, with more heavy rains forecast across the country in coming days as the monsoon batters East Africa.

At least 155 people have died in neighbouring Tanzania due to flooding and landslides.

Tanzanian Prime Minister Kassim Majaliwa said on Thursday that more than 200,000 people had been affected by the disaster.

He said homes, property, crops and infrastructure including roads, bridges, railways and schools had been damaged or destroyed.

In Burundi, one of the poorest countries on the planet, around 96,000 people have been displaced by months of relentless rains, the United Nations and the government said this month.

Meanwhile, the UN humanitarian response agency, OCHA, said in an update this week that in Somalia, the seasonal Gu rains from April to June are intensifying, with flash

floods reported since April 19.

It said four people had been reportedly killed and more than 800 people affected or displaced nationwide.

Uganda has also suffered heavy storms that have caused riverbanks to burst, with two fatalities confirmed and several hundred villagers displaced.

Late last year, more than 300 people died in torrential rains and floods in Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia, just as the region was trying to recover from its worst drought in four decades that left millions of people hungry.

From October 1997 to January 1998, massive flooding caused more than 6,000 deaths in five countries in the region.

The UN's World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said in March that the latest El Nino is one of the five strongest ever recorded, adding its impact would continue by fuelling heat trapped in the atmosphere by greenhouse gases.

## Herds of hippos trapped in mud in drought-hit Botswana



This aerial view shows hippos stuck in a dried-up channel near the Nxaraga village in the Okavango Delta, on the outskirts of Maun.

**AFP**  
Maun, Botswana

**H**erds of endangered hippos stuck in the mud of dried-up ponds are in danger of dying in drought-struck Botswana, conservation authorities told AFP yesterday.

Southern Africa has been affected by severe drought, caused by the El Nino weather phenomenon, which has threatened harvests and plunged millions into hunger.

Several countries in the region have recently declared a state of national disaster.

Near the vast wetlands of the Okavango Delta in northern Botswana, the dried-up Thamalakane River has forced herds of hippos to head for natural water reserves close to the tourist town of Maun.

"The river system dries up and animals are in a compromised situation," said Lesego Moseki, spokesperson for Department of Wildlife and National Parks

(DWNP) in Botswana's capital Gaborone.

Botswana is home to one of the world's largest populations of hippos living in the wild, estimated at between 2,000-4,000 by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

"The riverine vegetation is poor and the hippo in Ngamiland (northwestern district) depends on the water flowing through the Okavango Delta systems," Moseki added.

They were still looking into the how many hippos had died in the pools, he said.

Hippos have thick but sensitive skin, meaning they need to bathe regularly to avoid sunburn.

Without water, they can become aggressive and approach villages.

Local authorities are calling for hippos to be relocated to reserves to avoid conflict with humans.

El Nino is a naturally occurring climate pattern typically associated with increased heat worldwide, leading to drought in some parts of the world and heavy rains elsewhere.

## Let us press on with UK migrant plan, Rwanda tells critics

**Reuters**  
Kigali

**R**wandan President Paul Kagame's government said yesterday that it would take as many migrants as Britain sends its way and urged "shouting" critics of the deportation plan to now let both nations proceed.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak expects first flights to leave in 10-12 weeks after parliament passed legislation this week to sidestep legal objections that the migrants could be sent back to nations where they may face mistreatment.

"No matter what number is announced to arrive here tomorrow or after tomorrow... we are capable of receiving them," deputy

government spokesperson Alain Mukarulinda told Reuters, adding that Rwanda did not yet know dates or numbers.

With a long history of receiving refugees from Africa's Great Lakes region and elsewhere, Rwanda had temporary housing ready for migrants from Britain, Mukarulinda added, with longer-term facilities under construction as they go through the asylum process and potentially establish residency.

Kagame won plaudits for rebuilding Rwanda after the 1994 genocide that killed more than 1mn people, turning it into one of Africa's fastest-growing economies.

However, his government has been accused by Western nations and rights activists of muzzling the media, repressing critics, and backing rebel groups in neigh-

bouring Democratic Republic of the Congo. Rwanda denies those allegations.

"For two years, critics have just shouted without proposing another solution," Mukarulinda said of the UK migrant plan. "Today, I would say, now the shouting is over... we don't claim this solution is a miracle solution but at least let these two countries implement it."

Britain says the plan will deter dangerous crossings of the English Channel in small boats via people smugglers.

This week's legislation states that some existing UK rights statutes will not apply to the scheme and Rwanda must be treated by British judges as a safe destination.

Sunak has also said that he is prepared to ignore orders from European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) enjoining the gov-

ernment from deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda.

Asked how Rwanda would respond if the ECHR imposed an injunction on deportations but Britain ignored it, Mukarulinda said problems around the plan were for London to resolve.

"We don't have anything to say or criticise... on the internal affairs of the British government," he said.

Britain has already paid Rwanda more than £200mn (\$250mn) under the scheme, and to resettle some 300 refugees could cost more than £600mn, the UK parliament's spending watchdog has said.

Britain said in 2022 that the first migrants to arrive would be temporarily lodged at a 100-bed hostel in Kigali that was previously a home for genocide survivors.

# Trump allies drafting plans to erode Fed's independence, WSJ reports

**Reuters**  
Washington

The allies of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump are drafting proposals that would attempt to erode the Federal Reserve's independence if he wins, the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on Thursday, citing people familiar with the matter.

A small group of the former president's allies has produced a nearly 10-page document outlining a policy vision for the central bank, according to the report.

The group argues that Trump should be consulted on rate decisions and would

have the authority to remove Jerome Powell as Fed Chair before his term ends in 2026, the report added.

Trump had picked Powell in 2017 to lead the US central bank but turned against him soon after.

He said in February that he would not reappoint Powell and believed the Fed chief would lower interest rates to help President Joe Biden's prospects for re-election.

The WSJ said it could not determine if the former president was aware of or signed off on the effort, but some people close to the discussions believe the work has received his blessing.

The former president has had informal

discussions with advisers about possible candidates to lead the Fed and has asked associates whether they would be interested in the job, the report said.

The Trump campaign played down the report yesterday, sharing an earlier statement with Reuters in response.

"Let us be very specific here: unless a message is coming directly from President Trump or an authorised member of his campaign team, no aspect of future presidential staffing or policy announcements should be deemed official," the statement from campaign co-chairs Chris LaCivita and Susie Wiles said.

However remote the likelihood of such a plan becoming reality in its entirety or

in part, the prospect of Trump having extensive sway over Fed policy decisions that wield tremendous influence over the direction of the world's largest economy and global asset markets was already resonating.

Among the pegs supporting the US dollar's stature as the world's reserve currency, for instance, is the Fed's ability to set monetary policy on its own without political oversight.

That status in turn is key to granting the US government a nearly unchecked ability to borrow on global bond markets at relatively low interest rates despite having a \$26tn debt load, dubbed the "exorbitant privilege."

"If Fed independence is eroded it would be absolutely disastrous," said Citigroup Global Chief Economist Nathan Sheets, who served as under-secretary for international affairs for the US Treasury under Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama.

"When I think about the risk for markets and the dollar, any policy change that eroded Fed independence in an appreciable way would be greeted by the market very vigorously and adversely and be a source of great pressure and volatility," he said. "Any gains a political actor might think they glean would be so small compared to the potential cost that they might have...it leaves me optimistic it is not a game worth playing."

## Biden 'happy to debate' Trump, but 'don't know when'

**AFP/Reuters**  
Washington

Joe Biden said yesterday that he is ready to face off against his White House challenger Donald Trump in a debate ahead of their likely presidential rematch in November.

Candidate debates have been important milestones in US presidential elections for decades, helping make or break voters' opinions of the contestants, personal style and demeanour as much as their policy chops.

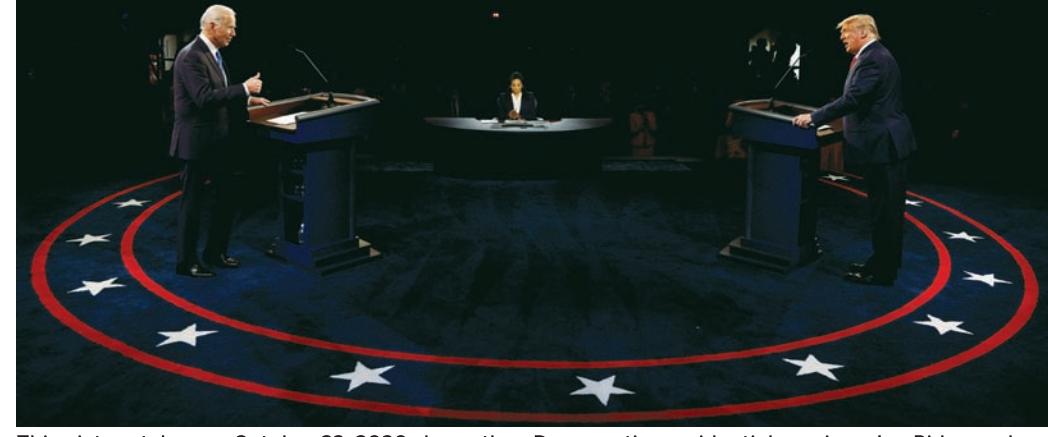
However, Biden's team has for months been non-committal about his willingness to participate in the tradition, which is usually held in front of an audience and moderated by a well-known journalist.

"I am happy to debate him," Biden told radio host Howard Stern yesterday. "I am, somewhere. I don't know when."

"Ok, let's set it up!" Trump campaign adviser Chris LaCivita said on X in response to Biden's comments.

Presumptive Republican nominee Trump declined to face off against his primary opponents in any debates during the 2024 cycle.

However, he has indicated his eagerness with the man who beat him in 2020, saying on social media



This picture taken on October 22, 2020 shows then Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden and then-president Donald Trump at their second 2020 presidential campaign debate at Belmont University in Nashville.

earlier this year that he was ready to hold a presidential debate with Biden "ANYTIME, ANYWHERE, ANYPLACE!"

Biden, who has branded Trump as a threat to democracy, told reporters last month that any agreement to debate the real estate mogul "depends on his behaviour".

The nonpartisan Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) has already arranged three dates and locations for Trump and Biden to go head-to-head for the 2024 fight, at US universities throughout the country in September and October.

However, Trump bashed the CPD as being biased toward Democrat Biden when in 2020 it planned to move a third and final debate to a virtual format amid the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.

Then-president Trump had himself shown up to the second 2020 debate against Biden only three days before testing positive for Covid-19.

Biden at the time had said he would not participate in another in-person debate with Trump while the Republican was still ill.

A verbal spar could be a useful opportunity for both the 77-year-

old former president and 81-year-old current president to display stamina, as Biden is still dogged by Trump's old "Sleepy Joe" nickname – and Trump faced online teasing when he appeared to nod off during his criminal trial in New York last week.

Biden has a lead among registered voters of 41% to 37% over Trump, a Reuters/Ipsos poll found earlier this month.

Asked during a trip to Las Vegas in early February about Trump calling for Biden to debate him, Biden said: "If I were him, I would want to debate me too. He's got nothing to do."

## Scientists find speedy herbivore dinosaur

**Reuters**  
Buenos Aires

Paleontologists from Argentina announced the discovery of a new medium-sized herbivorous dinosaur, which was a fast runner and lived about 90m years ago in the Late Cretaceous period in present day Patagonia.

The animal, named *Chakisaurus nebulosus*, was found in the Pueblo Blanco Natural Reserve, in the southern province of Río Negro, an area rich in fossils where many mammals, turtles, and fish have been found along with other species of dinosaur.

It is estimated that the largest *Chakisaurus* reached 2.5m or 3m long and was 70cm high (8-10' long and 27" high).

Studies of *Chakisaurus* yielded new findings indicating that it was a fast runner and had its tail curved unusually downward.

"This new species, *Chakisaurus nebulosus*, was a bipedal herbivore that among its most important characteristics had a tail that, unlike other dinosaurs, which was horizontal, had a downward curvature," said Rodrigo Álvarez, author of the study. "It is something super new for these animals. In addition, it is known that it was a good runner, which was something it needed because it lived with a large number of predators and its only defence was to be faster than them."

The dinosaur's name derives from Chaki, which is a word from the Aonikenk language, of the indigenous Tehuelche people, which means "old guanaco", a reference to a medium-sized herbivore mammal found in the region.

Nekul means "fast" or "agile" in the Mapudungún language, of the local Mapuche people.

"He had very strong hind limbs and a tail with an anatomy that allowed him to maneuver it to the sides and so be able to balance during races," said Sebastian Rodriguez, co-author of the study.

A team of Argentine paleontologists with the support of the National Geographic Society, made the discovery initially in 2018, but recently unveiled their finding in the journal *Cretaceous Research*.

## Bird flu traces found in one in five US commercial milk samples, says FDA

**Reuters**  
Washington

One in five commercial milk samples tested in a nationwide survey contained particles of the H5N1 virus, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said late on Thursday, suggesting the outbreak of bird flu is more widespread than previously thought.

The agency said there is no reason to believe the virus found in milk poses a risk to human health.

"This says this virus has largely saturated dairy cattle throughout the country," said Dr Michael Osterholm, an infectious disease expert at the University of Minnesota.

Many infectious disease experts and government officials have said they believe the pasteurisation process will inactivate the virus, also known as avian influenza.

However, additional testing is needed to confirm that there is no infectious virus in the milk, the agency said.

"To date, the retail milk studies have shown no results that would change our assessment that the commercial milk supply is safe," the FDA said in its latest update.

"I'm not worried about the milk itself. It does indicate that the virus is more widespread among dairies than we had previously thought," said Samuel Alcaine, associate professor, of food science at Cornell University.

"We had a little over 30 herds or farms that had been reported as having positive for avian influenza," he said. "We have just under 30,000 farms across the US. Thirty-three is a really small number. It makes it seem like there is definitely more spread out there."

Eight US states have confirmed cases of bird flu in 33 dairy herds, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

Only one person – a Texas farm worker – has been confirmed to have bird flu in the current outbreak.

The patient suffered conjunctivitis, an eye irritation that can cause redness and discomfort.



Police forensics personnel search for clues on the rooftop at the site of the deadly fire at a guesthouse in Porto Alegre.

State Governor Eduardo Leite said he was "deeply shocked".

"We will continue working on the aftermath of this tragedy and the investigation of the causes. My condolences to the victims' families," Leite wrote on X.

State lawmaker Matheus Gomes accused the city government of giving funds to the homeless shelter even though it had faced reports of non-compliance with regulations "for years".

"There needs to be an investigation not only into the fire, but the entire chronicle of this tragedy foretold," he wrote on X.

The building belongs to a network of budget youth hostel-style hotels in Porto Alegre.

The deadly fire comes 11 years after another in Rio Grande do Sul state.

In 2013, 242 people were killed at the Kiss nightclub in the town of Santa Maria when sparks from a flare lit by a band during a concert ignited the ceiling, trapping hundreds inside as the building burned.

Investigators found the club lacked working fire extinguishers and had insufficient exits.

Four people were found responsible and sentenced to prison terms of 18-22 years.

## 'I can't breathe': man in Ohio tells cops before he died

Ohio police released video of a black man who died at a local hospital after repeatedly telling officers "I can't breathe" as they pinned him to the floor of a bar and handcuffed him, evoking memories of the killing of George Floyd in 2020.

In body camera video released on Thursday by the Canton Police Department, officers are seen apprehending the man, identified as Frank Tyson, 53, who was suspected of leaving the scene of a single-car accident on April 18.

The Canton Police Department was not immediately available for comment on the video, which was posted online by several local media outlets.

The 36-minute clip begins with a patrol officer coming upon a car that had struck an electrical pole. Officers are then seen entering an establishment, where they find Tyson.

An altercation ensued and officers wrestled Tyson to the ground and handcuffed him.

Tyson can be heard repeatedly saying, "I can't breathe. I can't... get off my neck".

The video next shows Tyson lying motionless, face down on the floor. The officers then check on Tyson, who appears to be unresponsive. Paramedics then arrive.

Tyson died at a local hospital, according to WKYC, an NBC affiliate in Cleveland. -Reuters



## POLICY

**Japan to levy huge fines with new app rules**

Japan's cabinet yesterday approved legislation that would slap major fines on tech giants like Google or Apple if they block access to third-party smartphone apps and payment systems. Similar to the European Union's new Digital Markets Act, behaviour deemed anti-competitive could see operators fined up to 20% of their revenues in Japan. Under the legislation, they would also have to act fairly and make operating systems, browsers and search engines available for all. "The legislation is urgently needed in order for Japan, the US, and Europe to keep pace with each other and ensure fair competition in the digital field," said a government spokesman.

## PEOPLE

**Vietnam tycoon appeals fraud death sentence**

A top Vietnamese property tycoon sentenced to death in a \$27bn fraud case has launched an appeal against her conviction, state media said yesterday. Truong My Lan, chair of major developer Van Thinh Phat, was found guilty this month of swindling cash from Saigon Commercial Bank (SCB) over a decade. The 68-year-old was found to have embezzled \$12.5bn, but prosecutors said the total damages caused by the scam now amounted to \$27bn - one of the biggest frauds in history, equivalent to 6% of Vietnam's 2023 GDP. Thanh Nien news site said Lan has filed an appeal against the verdict.

**Bangladesh premier in Thailand**

Thailand's Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin (centre left) walks with Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (centre right) during a welcome ceremony at Government House in Bangkok yesterday.

**Town to block Mount Fuji view from troublesome tourists**AFP  
Tokyo

A huge black barrier to block Mount Fuji from view will be installed in a popular photo spot by Japanese authorities exasperated by crowds of badly behaved foreign tourists.

Construction of the mesh net - 2.5 metres high and the length of a cricket pitch at 20 metres - will begin as early as next week, an official from Fujikawaguchiko town said yesterday.

"It's regrettable we have to do this, because of some tourists who can't respect rules," leaving litter behind and ignoring traffic regulations, he said.

It is the latest direct action in Japan against overtourism after residents of Kyoto's geisha district banned visitors from small private

alleys this year. Record numbers of overseas tourists are travelling to the country, where monthly visitors exceeded 3mn in March for the first time ever. Mount Fuji, Japan's highest mountain, can be photographed from many spots in the resort town of Fujikawaguchiko.

But this viewpoint is particularly popular because the majestic volcano appears behind a Lawson convenience store, which are ubiquitous in Japan.

Due to this visual juxtaposition, a reputation has spread on social media that this spot is very Japanese, making it a popular photo location," said the town official who declined to be named.

The mostly non-Japanese tourists are overcrowding a stretch of pavement next to the Lawson shop, he said. After traffic signs and repeated warnings from security guards fell on deaf ears, the town in

Yamanashi region decided on the huge screen as a last resort.

The measure is also meant to protect a nearby dental clinic against the onslaught of tourists.

They sometimes park there without permission and have even been seen climbing on the roof of the clinic to get the perfect shot, the official said.

The town wishes it hadn't come down to this, he said, adding that the current plan is for the screen to be maintained until the situation improves.

Tourism to Japan has been booming since pandemic-era border restrictions were lifted, and the government has been working hard to boost visitor numbers.

But this has not been universally welcomed - including in Kyoto where locals have complained of snap-happy tourists harassing the city's immaculately dressed geisha.

**Australia mourns refugee guard killed in Bondi attack**

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese hailed as a hero Pakistani security guard Faraz Tahir, killed in Sydney while trying to stop a mass stabbing attack, in remarks delivered yesterday at a funeral attended by hundreds. Tahir, who would have turned 31 on Wednesday, was on the first day of his job when he became one of six killed this month during the stabbing spree at a busy mall in beachside Bondi. "Running toward danger, to protect people he had never even met, without doubt, he helped save lives that day," Albanese said. "Without question, Faraz Tahir died a hero."

The ceremony was held before a crowd gathered outside the city's Baitul Huda mosque, under a banner that read "Love for all - hatred for none". Fellow security guard Mohamed Taha, injured while trying to stop the attacker, attended in a wheelchair after being released from hospital for the ceremony.

**Hot day in Manila**

A woman holds a portable fan near her face while queuing to enter Quiapo church during a hot day in Manila, Philippines, yesterday.

**Smaller towns in S Korea bear brunt of doctors' shortage**Reuters  
Incheon, South Korea

Hospitals in South Korea's smaller cities are struggling with a lack of physicians, as a nationwide strike of trainee doctors enters its third month in protest against plans to tackle the shortage by boosting medical school admissions.

Seoul, the capital, boasts top-level hospitals, but smaller cities are starved of doctors in a trend experts say will only get worse as the population ages at one of the world's fastest rates, while birth-rates are the lowest in the world.

"Our artificial kidney room was closed for almost two years because we didn't have a doctor and we couldn't find one ... but this is a national phenomenon," said Cho Seung-yeon, director of the Incheon Medical Center in the port city.

The shortage is at the heart of government plans to add thousands of medical school students from next year that face stiff opposition from trainee doctors and some medical groups who doubt it will improve poor working conditions.

South Korea has 2.6 doctors for every 1,000 people, one of the lowest rates among developed

countries, according to the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

In contrast, top-ranked Austria has 5.5 for every 1,000 people.

"I hope the number of doctors will increase in the future, due to our rapidly ageing society which means more and more people will visit hospitals," said Yoo Byung-seon, 66, one of those being treated in the Incheon hospital.

Because it cannot find staff, the hospital's cardiology department has resorted to using roving doctors from a nearby university hospital, Cho added.

In a complaint this week the

Korea Medical Association, a leading critic of the government's reforms, accused Cho and another staffer of breaking the law by using unlicensed personnel for some medical procedures.

Cho denies those claims, a hospital spokesperson said.

Medical interns and resident doctors who began their strike late in February say they are underpaid and overworked, conditions the government must tackle before adding more physicians.

Cho acknowledged that policies must also change to ensure the new doctors work in underserved areas and don't just gravitate

tate back to Seoul, but adding practitioners was a necessary first step.

The prolonged strike will only hurt physician assistants who often perform some of a doctor's duties though without the same protection, said Choi Hee-sun, president of the Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union.

"It's only doctors who say there is no shortage of doctors," she said, faulting both the government and the striking doctors for early failures to strike up dialogue, where stalemate persists.

Medical outcomes can vary widely outside the capital, where government figures show

there were 4.82 active doctors for every 1,000 people in 2022, compared to Incheon's equivalent of 2.65.

The city racked up South Korea's highest rate of avoidable deaths, an indicator of healthcare quality, at 51.49 per 100,000 people in 2021, while the corresponding rate for Seoul was 38.56, health ministry figures show.

One 82-year-old woman who spent a month in hospital in Incheon, Yoon Geum-ja, said she was satisfied with the healthcare system now, but added, "I'm worried there won't be many doctors around in future."

## DECISION

**Lanka leases out airport built with Chinese loans**

Sri Lanka yesterday said it had leased a white elephant international airport built with Chinese loans to a foreign joint venture, as the island nation's bankrupt government seeks to offload loss-making assets. The small airport near a wildlife sanctuary on the southern coast opened in 2013 but was immediately plagued by problems, and has been a running sore on state coffers since. Government spokesman Bandula Gunawardana told reporters that cabinet had awarded a 30-year lease to a joint venture between India's Shaurya Aeronautics and Russia's Airports of Regions Management Company.

## DEFENCE

**N Korea's Kim oversees test of multiple rocket launcher**

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un oversaw the test-firing of a multiple rocket launcher, state media said yesterday. The country has recently bolstered military ties with Russia, and Pyongyang thanked Moscow this month for its UN Security Council veto blocking the renewal of a panel of UN experts that monitored international weapons sanctions on Kim's government. The "flight features, (and) hit and concentration indices" of the "240 mm shell of a multiple rocket launcher", made at Pyongyang's new defence industry unit, were "evaluated very satisfactorily" during the test, according to the official Korean Central News Agency.

**Blinken raises concerns with Beijing over 'powering' Russia war**Reuters  
Beijing

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday raised concerns about China's support for Russia's military, one of the many issues threatening to sour the recent improvement in relations between the world's biggest economies.

Blinken raised the matter during five-and-a-half hours of talks with China's top diplomat Wang Yi in Beijing, the latest high-level contact between the countries that have eased last year's acrimony.

"I reiterated our serious concern about the PRC providing components that are powering Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine," Blinken said at a press conference at the end of his visit yesterday, using China's official name, the People's Republic of China.

"China is the top supplier of machine tools, microelectronics, nitrocellulose, which is critical to making munitions and rocket propellants, and other dual-use items that Moscow is using to ramp up its defence industrial base."

Underscoring the closeness of the Beijing-Moscow relationship, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu met his Chinese counterpart Dong Jun yesterday and said the two countries were working to strengthen their "strategic partnership in the defence sector".

They met on the sidelines of a regional security meeting in Kazakhstan where Shoigu said Russia and its allies in Asia should expand joint military exercises and

counter what he called US efforts to destabilise their neighbourhood.

Despite its "no limits" partnership with Moscow, China has steered clear of providing arms for Russia's war in Ukraine, but Blinken said its supply of so-called dual-use goods was "having a material effect in Ukraine" and raising the threat Russia poses to other countries in Europe.

Blinken did not respond to a question on whether Washington would impose sanctions over China's support for Russia.

The US officials say such assistance risks hurting the broader bilateral relationship, even as ties stabilise after being hit by then-House speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022 and the US downing of a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon in February 2023. China has said it has not provided weaponry to any party, adding that it is "not a producer of or party involved in the Ukraine crisis".

However, it says that normal trade between China and Russia should not be interrupted or restricted.

Blinken's visit produced little progress on other contentious issues, including US complaints about cheap Chinese exports and tensions over Taiwan and the South China Sea. Instead, both sides were focusing on pragmatic issues such as people-to-people exchanges.

In addition to his talks with Wang, Blinken met Chinese President Xi Jinping, who reiterated Beijing's concerns that the US was suppressing its economic development.

"This is a fundamental issue

that must be addressed, just like the first button of a shirt that must be put right, in order for the China-US relationship to truly stabilise, improve and move forward," Xi said.

Earlier, Wang told Blinken that the "giant ship" of the China-US ties had stabilised, "but negative factors in the relationship are still increasing and building".

Wang also said the US had taken "endless" measures to suppress China's economy, trade, science and technology, equating such steps to containment.

"And the relationship is facing all kinds of disruptions. China's legitimate development rights have been unreasonably suppressed and our core interests are facing challenges," Wang told Blinken.

The agenda for the talks was set during the November summit between Biden and Xi in San Francisco and a follow-up call in April.

Hours before Blinken landed in China on Wednesday, President Joe Biden signed a bill that included \$8bn to counter China's military might, as well as billions in defence aid for Taiwan and \$61bn for Ukraine. Wang said the US must not step on "red lines" covering sovereignty, security and development interests - an apparent reference to Taiwan.

Other issues being discussed include artificial intelligence and the US push for progress on the curbing of China's supply of the chemicals used to make fentanyl.

Blinken, along with senior US officials focused on anti-narcotics collaboration with China, met China's minister of public security, Wang Xiaohong, to discuss the fentanyl issue.

**Vietnam parliament chief steps down**Reuters  
Hanoi

The chairman of Vietnam's parliament Vuong Dinh Hue resigned over unspecified "violations and shortcomings", the ruling Communist Party said yesterday, a new sign of political turbulence weeks after the dismissal of the country's president.

The latest change among Vietnam's top leadership amid a widespread campaign against corruption could raise new concerns about political stability in the southeast Asian manufacturing hub, which is highly reliant on foreign investment and trade.

Hue, 67, had been touted as a possible candidate for the Communist Party secretary position, Vietnam's most powerful job. His position as head of the assembly

was one of four posts described as "pillars" of the state leadership.

"Comrade Vuong Dinh Hue's violations and shortcomings have caused negative public opinion, affecting the reputation of the party, state and him personally," the Communist Party's Central Committee said in a statement.

Hue's resignation came just days after the announcement that his assistant had been arrested over alleged bribery involving an infrastructure company.

It also came less than three weeks after Hue met Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, timing viewed as notable by diplomats given the sensitivity in Vietnam of relations with its huge neighbour.

The party statement yesterday said Hue's resignation had been accepted and he would be removed from the Central Committee and the powerful Politburo.

**Smaller towns in S Korea bear brunt of doctors' shortage**Reuters  
Incheon, South Korea

Hospitals in South Korea's smaller cities are struggling with a lack of physicians, as a nationwide strike of trainee doctors enters its third month in protest against plans to tackle the shortage by boosting medical school admissions.

Seoul, the capital, boasts top-level hospitals, but smaller cities are starved of doctors in a trend experts say will only get worse as the population ages at one of the world's fastest rates, while birth-rates are the lowest in the world.

"Our artificial kidney room was closed for almost two years because we didn't have a doctor and we couldn't find one ... but this is a national phenomenon," said Cho Seung-yeon, director of the Incheon Medical Center in the port city.

In contrast, top-ranked Austria has 5.5 for every 1,000 people.

"I hope the number of doctors will increase in the future, due to our rapidly ageing society which means more and more people will visit hospitals," said Yoo Byung-seon, 66, one of those being treated in the Incheon hospital.

Because it cannot find staff, the hospital's cardiology department has resorted to using roving doctors from a nearby university hospital, Cho added.

Cho denies those claims, a hospital spokesperson said.

Medical interns and resident doctors who began their strike late in February say they are underpaid and overworked, conditions the government must tackle before adding more physicians.

Cho acknowledges that policies must also change to ensure the new doctors work in underserved areas and don't just gravitate

tate back to Seoul, but adding practitioners was a necessary first step.

The prolonged strike will only hurt physician assistants who often perform some of a doctor's duties though without the same protection, said Choi Hee-sun, president of the Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union.

"It's only doctors who say there is no shortage of doctors," she said, faulting both the government and the striking doctors for early failures to strike up dialogue, where stalemate persists.

Medical outcomes can vary widely outside the capital, where government figures show

# Water shortages, traffic aggravate Bengaluru as it votes

Reuters  
Bengaluru

Dire water shortages, flooding, gridlocked roads and poor civic facilities have become major issues in Bengaluru city, residents in India's tech hub said as they voted yesterday in a general election that is otherwise focused

on jobs, inflation and Hindu nationalism.

The southern city of about 14mn people, capital of Karnataka state and often called "India's Silicon Valley", voted in the summer heat in the second phase of the world's largest election, set to go on until June 1.

Bengaluru is home to thousands of startups and global firms from

Walmart to Alphabet's Google and is showcased as a symbol of an ambitious, rising India. But unplanned growth and creaking infrastructure is blotting the booming city.

"The water shortage is not a surprise for us, locals. We knew it's coming. Nothing on rain water harvesting has been done by either the central or the state government," Prasanna Raghavan, an IT profes-

sional said after casting his vote.

"My hope is, whoever comes to power prioritises climate issues."

The city's problems have featured prominently in the campaign, in which Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party and the main opposition Congress - which governs Karnataka state - are pitted against each other.

"The Congress government in

Karnataka has turned the tech city into a tanker city, and left it to the tanker mafia," Modi said in Bengaluru last week, referring to the water tankers being used after taps dried up.

Congress blamed BJP, which ruled the state before Congress, for the water scarcity.

"The water crisis in Bangalore is not just a problem; it's a wake-up

call. As your MP (member of parliament), I see it as a challenge we must confront head-on," Rajeev Gowda, Congress candidate from the Bengaluru North seat, posted on X this week.

"We should steer our infrastructure towards sustainable solutions. Water conservation isn't just a short-term fix, it's a long-term commitment," he said.

# India votes in second phase of national polls

Reuters  
Bengaluru/Noida India

India yesterday voted in the second phase of the world's biggest election, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his rivals raise the pitch of the campaign by focusing on hot-button issues such as religious discrimination, affirmative action and taxes.

Almost 1bn people are eligible to vote in the seven-phase general elections that began on April 19 and concludes on June 1, with votes set to be counted on June 4.

Modi is seeking a record-equaling third straight term on the back of his economic record, welfare measures, national pride, Hindu nationalism and personal popularity. Surveys suggest he will easily win a comfortable majority.

His challengers have formed an alliance of more than two dozen parties and are promising greater affirmative action, more handouts and an end to what they call Modi's autocratic rule.

A total of 88 seats out of the 543 in the lower house of parliament went to the polls yesterday, with 160mn people eligible to vote across 13 states and federal territories.

Voter turnout around the half-way mark was 39%, an Election Commission (EC) spokesperson said. The EC and political parties were concerned that unseasonably hot weather, and weddings in some parts of the country, would affect turnout.

More than half of the seats in yesterday's contests were in the southern states of Kerala and Karnataka and the northwestern state of Ra-

asthan. The campaign has become more heated since the first phase of voting on April 19 as Modi and the main opposition Congress party have faced off on communal issues.

The Congress said Modi was using divisive language to distract voters from real issues such as unemployment, the price rise and rural distress. Rahul Gandhi, a former Congress president and the face of the party, was among the 1,200 candidates in the fray yesterday.

"This election is not a regular election...because for the first time in the history of India, one party and one person is trying to finish the constitution and democracy of India," Gandhi said at an election rally in a region of Karnataka which votes next week. Gandhi is seeking re-election from Wayanad in Kerala and faces Annie Raja of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and BJP's K Surendran, among others, in the Left Front-ruled state.

In 2019, Gandhi defeated the CPI candidate by more than 400,000 votes, the highest margin in Kerala, although he lost his second seat to BJP in the family bastion of Amethi in north India. India allows a candidate to contest from more than one seat but they can retain only one if they win from more.

The Congress slumped to a historic low when it was swept out of power by BJP in 2014 and won its second-lowest number of 52 seats in 2019, with Kerala contributing the highest tally of 15.

The party is expected to do better in Karnataka this year where it won just one of 28 seats in 2019 but gained strength and defeated BJP in state elections last year.



Women stand in a queue to cast their vote at a polling station during the second phase of the general elections, in Barmer, Rajasthan, yesterday.

# Top court declines to order any change to vote-counting process

Reuters  
New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday declined to order any change to the vote-counting process, rejecting petitions seeking a return to the ballot system or to tally all paper slips generated as proof of voting for votes recorded by electronic machines.

The order comes days after India began voting in the elections on April 19, with votes due to be counted on June 4 and Prime Minister Narendra Modi widely tipped to win a rare third-straight term in the face of a struggling

opposition challenge. "Blindly discussing any aspect of the system can lead to unwarranted scepticism and impede progress," Justice Dipankar Datta said, after the two judge-bench delivered a unanimous verdict.

"Instead, a critical yet constructive approach guided by evidence and reason should be followed to make room for meaningful improvements and to ensure the system's credibility and effectiveness."

India has been using Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) since 2000 to record votes. The ballot unit is connected to a VVPAT or 'voter verifiable paper audit trail' unit which produces a paper slip that is visible to the voter via a

transparent screen for about seven seconds before it gets stored in a sealed drop box.

Under the present system, the poll body counts and matches the VVPAT paper slips at five randomly selected polling stations in each state legislative assembly constituency, several of which are combined to form one parliamentary seat.

Critics and watchdogs, including some political parties, want verification to be done at more booths to increase transparency.

The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), a non-government civil society group, petitioned the top court seeking verification of all EVM votes with VVPAT slips.

## World War II veterans share memories



D-Day veteran John Dennett (centre) tells a story during an event to launch the 80th anniversary commemorations of Allied amphibious landing (D-Day Landings) in France in 1944, in central London yesterday. Heads of state and veterans are due to mark the anniversary of D-Day on June 6, a date that was key to Allied Europe's eventual victory against the Nazis in World War II.

## Scottish First Minister vows to win trust vote

Reuters  
London

Scotland's First Minister Humza Yousaf yesterday said he intended to fight a vote of no confidence called by political opponents following his decision to withdraw from a coalition agreement and try to run a minority government.

"I'm quite confident, very confident in fact, that I'll be able to win that vote of no confidence," he told Sky News.

Scottish National Party leader Yousaf ended an alliance with the Scottish Greens after a dispute over a decision to scrap a climate change emissions reduction target last week.

The Scottish arm of the Conservative Party that governs Britain then said it would seek to topple Yousaf with a no-confidence motion, calling him a "lame duck".

His position now hangs on a knife-edge vote after almost

all other parties, including his former coalition partners, said they would vote against him.

With the Conservatives, Labour, Greens and Liberal Democrats all indicating they have no confidence in Yousaf, he would need the support of Ash Regan - a one-time leadership rival to Yousaf who acrimoniously left the SNP last year - to cling on as first minister.

If Yousaf lost, parliament would have 28 days to choose a new first minister before an election was forced.

The Scottish Labour Party said they would bring a separate motion of no confidence in the government, which could lead to Scottish elections more immediately.

"It would be untenable for the SNP to assume it can impose another unelected first minister on Scotland," leader Anas Sarwar said in a statement, saying an election was needed to give Scotland a "fresh start."

# UK court releases 'China spying' suspects on bail

AFP  
London

A UK court yesterday granted conditional bail to two men accused of spying for China, in a case which has heightened Western concern over claims of aggressive Chinese espionage.

British police charged the pair on Monday, on the same day investigators in Germany arrested three German nationals suspected of

sharing information on maritime technology with Beijing.

Appearing in a central London court, Christopher Cash, 29, of east London, and Christopher Berry, 32, of Oxfordshire, central England, were not required to enter any pleas.

Cash previously worked at the UK parliament as a researcher.

He and Berry are both accused of an offence under Britain's counter-espionage Official Secrets Act.

At a brief hearing, magistrate Paul Goldspring ruled both men

could be released on conditional bail, with Cash ordered not to contact UK lawmakers or to enter the parliamentary estate.

The pair, who were told not to leave the UK or contact each other, spoke only to confirm their names and addresses.

They must register at a police station and notify officers of any internet-enabled devices they intend to use.

Both defendants will next appear at the Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey in London on May

10 for a preliminary hearing.

They are accused of having given "articles, notes, documents or information" to a foreign state.

The alleged offences are said to have taken place between 2021 and last year.

Responding to their arrests and the detentions in Germany, Beijing said on Tuesday that the events were designed to "smear and suppress" China.

London's Metropolitan Police said in September they had arrested a man in his twenties on spying

allegations. The Sunday Times reported that he was a parliamentary researcher.

The newspaper named him as Cash and said he had had contacts with MPs from the ruling Conservative party.

They included Security Minister Tom Tugendhat and Alicia Kearns, the chairwoman of the influential House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee.

Tugendhat was reported to have only had limited contact with the suspect, and none when he was se-

curity minister. In a statement issued by Cash's lawyers in September, the ex-researcher protested his innocence.

"It is vital that it is known that I am completely innocent," he was quoted as saying.

"I have spent my career to date trying to educate others about the challenge and threats presented by the Chinese Communist Party."

"To do what has been claimed against me in extravagant news reporting would be against everything I stand for."

**CHAIRMAN**

Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Attiyah

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudhaka

**Deputy Managing Editor**

K T Chacko

**Production Editor**

Amjad Khan

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

**GULF TIMES****50 years of immunisation success call for 50 more**

Routine immunisation programmes, once the purview of the wealthy world, now exist in every country, owing to the landmark commitment that the World Health Organisation (WHO)'s member states made in 1974 to establish what is now known as the Essential Programme on Immunisation (EPI). Initially, the EPI focused on ensuring universal access to vaccines against tuberculosis, diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, polio, and measles – all preventable child killers. Today, 84% of children globally are immunised against these six diseases, compared to only 5% in 1974.

But progress has been hard won. After rapid gains in immunisation coverage throughout the 1980s, momentum was lost in the 1990s. The main issue was that lower-income countries lacked the resources and infrastructure needed to sustain immunisation programmes. Moreover, vaccine markets were fragmented and dysfunctional: countries depended on a few manufacturers, and uncertain demand deterred new entrants.

That is where Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, came in. The organisation was established in 2000 to harness the strengths of the public and private sectors. By forging new partnerships, the thinking went, Gavi could improve access to vaccines against a wider range of infectious diseases in lower-income countries and marginalised communities.

**The EPI anniversary should serve as a reminder that we can achieve world-changing results when working together**

In the decades since, Gavi has helped protect more than 1bn children and halved childhood mortality in 78 countries, while delivering significant economic benefits. Meanwhile, most of the countries that Gavi supports have

continued to increase funding for vaccination efforts, putting such programmes on a more sustainable footing and creating an entry point for other health services.

The 50th anniversary of EPI is a fitting moment to celebrate the millions of lives saved through routine immunisation, and the health workers who have devoted considerable effort, often in the most demanding environments, to realise the EPI's goals. But it is also an opportunity to reflect on what still needs to be done. According to estimates, around one in 10 children in lower-income countries have not received any routine vaccines. These "zero-dose" children are often in poor communities affected by conflict and displacement, in countries with extremely fragile health systems that provide no access to primary care.

Continued progress will depend on the ability to reach these marginalised communities.

At a time when violent conflict, geopolitical tensions, and climate change are dominating the headlines, the EPI's anniversary should also serve as a reminder that we can still achieve world-changing results when we work together. Every vaccination offers hope for a better, healthier future. And as we stand on the cusp of a new era for immunisation, there is reason for optimism.

Since 2022, for example, a record number of people are protected by the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, which protects against the main cause of cervical cancer. Moreover, EPI has an ambitious goal of immunising 86mn girls against HPV in Gavi-supported countries by the end of 2025.

This week, three more African countries will join Burkina Faso and Cameroon in rolling out the world's first-ever malaria vaccine – a development that would have seemed impossible just a few decades ago.

The future of vaccines appears to be even brighter. It is possible that, before the end of the decade, there will be a new vaccine against tuberculosis – one of humanity's oldest scourges. Looking further ahead, it is likely vaccines will be delivered through dissolvable microarray patches instead of syringes.

In the half-century since the WHO instituted the EPI, the world has shown a remarkable capacity to come together on the crucial issue of vaccination. At this moment of deepening political polarisation and global fragmentation, nations must commit to another 50 years of changing the world for the better. - Project Syndicate

**To Advertise**

gtadv@gulf-times.com

**Display**

44466621 44466609 44418811

44418811 gtcad@gulf-times.com

**Subscription**

circulation@gulf-times.com

© 2024 Gulf Times. All rights reserved

# Central banks in a cashless world

By Mariana Mazzucato and David Eaves  
London

Economics has always had a strange and much-debated relationship with money. For a long time, economists – including Nobel laureates like Merton Miller and Franco Modigliani – regarded money merely as a medium of exchange. But by building on the work of John Maynard Keynes and Hyman Minsky, economists have since moved beyond a narrow focus on the quantity of money to consider its structural influence on the real economy and the financial system.

A structural understanding of money and finance becomes even more important in an increasingly digitalised and cashless world, because there is a growing need for policymakers to operate not just as market fixers but as proactive market shapers.

A cashless world not only changes people's relationship with money and creates new opportunities for how it is managed or even conceived; it also puts new pressure on central banks to reimagine their role and become more innovative.

While plenty of attention has been devoted to experiments with central bank digital currencies, an even more important intervention is to create and shape a new digital infrastructure around interoperable payment systems. Given the structural component of capital, this can increase bank competition, inclusion, and accessibility, and possibly offer new tools for managing economies in the face of crises.

Cashless transactions are growing faster than ever as reliance on physical cash declines. Consumers, businesses, and governments clearly prefer cashless technology's cost-effectiveness and ease of use. Tap-based payment systems, once confined to the realm of tech-savvy urbanites, now pervade even the most rudimentary economies. Interoperable payment systems are quickly emerging as the core economic infrastructure of the digital-era economy, marking a departure from the past 2,000 years of government-issued physical cash.

As with all technological change, this one is not neutral. It has a momentum of its own, and if policymakers do not direct it in the public interest, it could lead to deeper forms of exclusion and other structural problems across the economy. For example, digital payments systems in many countries are not interoperable, which means that the owners can determine who gets access and thereby extract undue rents. Those already on the margins are then pushed further outside the cashless world or, worse, outside the formal economy altogether.

Here, a central bank can serve as more than just a regulator, by influencing or even creating shared infrastructure. It can not only reduce the costs of digital transactions but also create new opportunities to improve efficiency and financial inclusion for those on the fringes of the formal economy.

That is what India has done with UPI, an interoperable digital payments infrastructure that



Signs of QR code based mobile-payment of different companies display at a stall in India. (AFP)

has been strongly shaped by the central bank.

It is also what Brazil has done with its Pix system, an interoperable instant-payment service that allows individuals and businesses to send and receive money at any time of day, usually for free or at very low cost.

According to the Brazilian Central Bank (BCB), Pix is now the country's most popular payment method, surpassing credit and debit cards and other transfer methods rivalling cash. Over 66% of the population uses it.

This may sound like a typical fintech success story. Yet it was the BCB that stepped in proactively to build Pix, after it realised that private players would not make their systems interoperable on their own. Before Pix, each financial institution used its own transaction system and set its own fees. But now the competition has shifted away from fees to focus on the quality and quantity of services that financial institutions offer. Pix, as infrastructure, is delivering real, direct savings for consumers, and supporting inclusion and accessibility.

By driving this change, the BCB is helping to shape a much larger trend toward serving the common good. When a common-good framework becomes the foundation for most economic activities, there will be many more opportunities for collaboration, coordination, and co-investment between governments, private companies, civil society, and international organisations.

Of course, this role for central banks challenges the traditional view that they are regulation-

orientated market fixers that should focus only on guaranteeing financial stability, thus leaving questions of equity, access, and inclusion to the private sector. The public sector has long been assigned the task of merely de-risking the value creators, not taking risks or creating value itself. It is seen as a lender of last resort, not an investor of first resort.

This narrow view of the state's role in wealth creation has limited policymakers' understanding of the range of tools and instruments they have for catalysing sustainable economic growth. Although ensuring the financial system's stability will remain essential, Brazil and India's market-shaping efforts around interoperable payment infrastructure demonstrate that central banks have the tools to do more for the common good.

In the UK, the Bank of England's newly declared secondary objective is to facilitate innovation in providing financial-market infrastructure services when it exercises its powers as a regulator. It seems the appetite for more ambitious market-shaping may be spreading. We certainly hope so, because bringing about an equitable future will require more ambitious central banks. - Project Syndicate

**Mariana Mazzucato**, founding director of the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, is chair of the World Health Organisation's Council on the Economics of Health for All. **David Eaves** is Co-Deputy Director and Associate Professor of Digital Government at the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose.

## Why the EU's new migration pact matters

By Ana Palacio  
Madrid

Against the backdrop of escalating geopolitical tensions, and with European Parliament elections looming, the narrow passage earlier this month of the European Union's Migrant and Asylum Pact has attracted relatively little attention.

To be sure, the agreement is more remarkable for the mere fact of its enactment than for any of the provisions it contains. Nonetheless, it marks the culmination of a decade-long effort to reform the EU's "Dublin system" for governing migration-related matters.

The need for change was undoubtedly urgent. In the last year alone, some 380,000 people crossed the EU's borders without authorisation – the highest number since 2016 – and a record 1.14mn sought asylum.

The major "arrival countries" – such as Greece, Italy, and Spain – have long advocated for a fairer distribution of asylum-seekers across the EU.

But consensus on the topic has been elusive, owing to divergent interests and priorities among EU member states.

That has not changed. The Migrant and Asylum Pact rests on a delicate trade-off: frontline states agreed to establish detention centres to process asylum-seekers' claims and repatriate individuals deemed ineligible, and their EU counterparts would either accept a share of the rest or participate in cost-sharing initiatives. For a large share of Europe's political leaders, however, this is not good enough.

In fact, the pact barely passed. While it won the support of the three principal parliamentary factions – the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists



Migrants wander around a makeshift camp near Calais, France. (AFP)

and Democrats, and the liberal Renew Europe – a significant number of MEPs abstained, effectively expressing their dissent.

The effort to push through the Migrant and Asylum Pact highlighted the complex political dynamics shaping the EU's approach to migration. Both Italy's Socialists and their ideological foils from the Five Star Movement voted against parts of the bill, motivated largely by their interest in opposing Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni – a key proponent of the deal. Similar dynamics played out in France.

The process also exposed new political divisions. Representatives of Germany's Greens, for example, broke ranks with their counterparts at home to vote against the package.

The pact is now set to be endorsed by the Council of the European Union on April 29. But it still faces opposition from both ends of the political spectrum. Far-right parties say it is insufficient to deter migrants, whereas left-leaning groups and NGOs worry that it does too little to protect migrants' rights and ensure adequate living conditions.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has announced that Poland will not accept the relocation mechanism, while Slovakia's

populist prime minister, Robert Fico, has declared that he will not implement the new rules at all.

Even so, the Migrant and Asylum Pact may hold positive lessons about EU politics and the Union's future. Most notably, the effort to pass it demonstrated the impact a leader like Meloni can have when they bring to bear their coalition-building capabilities.

Contrary to her combative campaigning style, Meloni has adopted a pragmatic and constructive approach to European leadership, particularly when it comes to migration. For example, she was a principal architect of the memorandum of understanding that the European Commission and Tunisia signed last July.

Though the MoU has been the target of much-deserved criticism – it is no blueprint for engagement with third countries – it established Meloni as a major voice in Europe's migration debate.

Meloni has also been a driving force behind other bilateral deals, such as a recent aid deal with Egypt aimed at curbing irregular migration to the EU. In marshalling support for the Migrant and Asylum Pact, Meloni collaborated with the European Commission, and carried out more

than 20 high-profile missions in the Mediterranean over an eight-month period.

Ultimately, the Migrant and Asylum Pact hints at an emerging approach to EU-level policymaking: imperfect consensus.

Although no one is entirely satisfied, the EU does not remain deadlocked. Some progress, however limited, is preferable to inaction. In this sense, the fate of the migration agreement will serve as a kind of barometer for the next European Parliament's mandate.

When it comes to migration policy, the EU is at a crossroads. It has largely abandoned the "Wir schaffen das" ("We'll manage this") spirit embodied by former German chancellor Angela Merkel in 2015, when she decided to allow over a million asylum-seekers to enter Germany. The idea of forcing asylum-seekers to settle outside the EU's borders is gaining traction, as reflected in the EPP manifesto for the June elections.

Despite the broad appeal of limiting migration, however, the EU also needs migrants to fill crucial low-skill jobs – such as in construction – for which there is an acute shortage of workers. Finding consensus on the right balance between these two imperatives would be difficult in the best of times; at a moment of deep polarisation, it is practically impossible.

But the EU must find a way forward. To that end, the next European Parliament – which is certain to feature more fragmentation – must embrace the Meloni model of creative coalition-building, underpinned by pragmatism and a commitment to shared values. - Project Syndicate

**Ana Palacio**, a former foreign minister of Spain and former senior vice president and general counsel of the World Bank Group, is a visiting lecturer at Georgetown University.

## Spain seizes 25 tonnes of hashish in truck bound for France

Spanish police seized 25 tonnes of hashish worth €50m hidden in a truck from Morocco, the biggest such haul in nearly a decade, officials said yesterday. The drugs were hidden in 22 wooden cabins inside the truck that arrived at the southern port of Algeciras, bound for Perpignan in southern France, police and customs authorities said in a joint statement. The truck's documentation claimed it was transporting melons but the vehicle was earmarked for inspection

by a police officer who was patrolling the port with the aid of a sniffer dog. It is the biggest seizure of hashish found in a vehicle in Spain since 2015 when police found nearly 48 tonnes in two trucks, also in the port of Algeciras, the statement said. In the latest case, police arrested the driver of the truck, who has been brought before a judge for questioning. -AFP

## Poland records lowest EU membership support in more than a decade: poll

Support for Poland's membership in the European Union has dropped to its lowest level in more than a decade, according to a poll published yesterday, as the bloc gears up for European Parliament elections.

A pro-EU coalition came to power in Poland in October elections after eight years of rule by the Law and Justice party (PiS), pledging to undo laws introduced by the right-wing populists.

The PiS clashed frequently with Poland's Western allies and the EU institutions in Brussels over rule-of-law concerns.

According to the latest poll by the CBOS Institute, despite the pro-EU camp's victory, support for the country's membership in the 27-nation bloc dropped to 77%, its lowest level since 2013.

Support had stood at 85% last year, and is far from the highest level of 92% seen in 2022.

It "still remains very high, but the poll confirms a decreasing trend", Anna Materska-Sosnowska, a political scientist at the Stefan Batory Foundation, told AFP.

Seventeen per cent of respondents said they were opposed to Poland's membership in the European Union, a rise of seven percentage points from 2023 and 12 points more than two years ago.

The downward trend in support corresponds to the results of a Eurobarometer poll.

According to that study, carried out using different methodology, around 62% of Poles were satisfied with EU membership, a decrease of 10 points compared to 2002.

Polish support for the EU remained slightly above the European average of 61%, according to the Eurobarometer poll.

Materska-Sosnowska said the drop in EU support could be attributed to "a negative campaign carried out for years" by the PiS party.

"People also lack knowledge about what the EU really represents," she added. -AFP



Amilhastre cuts the hair of a client at his hair salon, 'Achille coiffure masculin', in the town of Saint-Girons, southwestern France.

## I love this job: Barber still trimming at 90

By Coline Daclin

AFP

French barber Roger Amilhastre, 90, could have hung up his clippers decades ago but he said his passion for hair gives him a reason to get up in the morning.

"I love this job, it's in my bones," he said, leaning on one of his cast-iron barber's chairs from the 1940s. "And despite my age, my hands still don't shake."

Even with arthritis, he is on his feet from Tuesday to Saturday, tending to his customers' hair and beards in his shop in the small southern town of Saint-Girons in the foothills of the Pyrenees.

"I would have liked to retire at 60, but my wife was sick and I needed to pay for the care home," he said, which cost more than €2,000 (\$2,150) a month.

Even after his wife died in January, he kept going to work to stave off the sad thoughts.

"I'm not grumpy getting up" to go to work, he said.

France's national hairdressers' union believes Amilhastre may be France's oldest active barber.

"We have few who continue late in life, but 90 years old is exceptional," union president Christophe Dore told AFP. "I'm not sure if he is France's oldest barber, but if he, he can't be far off."

According to the national statistics institute INSEE, a little more than half a million people over 65 still work in France.

In the southern region of Occitanie, where Amilhastre lives, only 1.65% of people older than 70 years old still work, including 190 79-year-olds.

However, statistics do not go beyond that age.

Many of Amilhastre's customers call him Achille, after his father who founded the barber's shop in 1932, giving it his name and then teaching his son the profession.

The shop witnessed the German occupation of France during World War II.

"During the war, German police came to find my father to groom a captain who had broken

his leg," Amilhastre said.

German troops had taken over a large stately home in town called Beauregard.

"We were scared because they used to say that anyone who went up to Beauregard never came back," he said. "Luckily he did."

The 90-year-old said he remembered a "tough period" for businesses when he first picked up the scissors in 1947 a few years after the war ended.

However, then the town rebounded, he said, with its men following a flurry of new hair trends from greased back quiffs in the 1950s to 1970s bowl cuts.

The barber's shop survived an economic downturn as local paper mills closed in the 1980s sparking mass layoffs, and supermarkets pushed small shops out of business.

"People started looking for work further afield, so we had to adapt and stay open later in the evening," Amilhastre said.

That same decade, the Aids epidemic sent customers into a worrisome frenzy.

"People were scared. They no longer asked to be shaved and when we did, we were petrified there'd be a cut, that someone would bleed and the virus would be passed on to the next customer," he said.

Jean-Louis Surre, 67, runs the nearby cafe where Amilhastre once taught him to play billiards as a young boy.

Behind his bar, Surre said he still remembered his mother taking him across the road to see Amilhastre for a haircut every month as a child.

"He'd pump up the chair to reach the mirror, use his clippers and then at the end perfume you with some cologne – you know, squeezing those little pumps," he said.

He is one of several old-timers to regularly drop by Achille's – even just to read the newspaper or have a chat.

Inside the barber's, Jean Lafitte, a balding 84-year-old, said he no longer really needed a haircut.

"With what little is left up there, these days I come out of friendship," he said.

The court opened the investigation into Sanchez's wife in response to a complaint from anti-corruption pressure group Manos Limpias (Clean Hands), whose leader is linked to the far-right. The group, which has presented a litany of unsuccessful lawsuits against politicians in the past, said in a statement on Wednesday that it had based its complaint on media reports and could not vouch for their veracity.

## WHO says overall public health risk from bird flu is currently low

The current overall public health risk posed by the H5N1 bird flu virus is low, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said yesterday, but urged countries to stay alert for cases of animal-to-human transmission. The UN-agency said countries should implement infection control measures and procedures to reduce human exposure to birds and mammals potentially infected with bird flu or other animal influenza viruses. The WHO said it strongly advises that people consume

only pasteurised milk, in which bacteria and viruses have been killed, and avoid consuming raw milk. "The virus has been detected in milk and its potential role in transmission is being investigated," the agency added. One in five commercial milk samples tested in a nationwide survey contained particles of the H5N1 virus, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said late on Thursday (see report on Page 7). -Reuters

## Zelensky calls for more air defence systems from allies

Reuters/AFP  
Washington

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called for additional air defence systems to be sent to Kyiv to help protect against Russian strikes, adding that a pause in US funding had helped Moscow seize the initiative.

His comments come just days after Congress emerged from a half-year of deadlock to approve a \$61bn aid package for Ukraine.

Yesterday the Pentagon announced that it will buy \$6bn worth of new weapons for Ukraine including interceptors for the Patriot air defence system, the single largest assistance package President Joe Biden's administration has provided (see report on Page 7).

"This year, Russian jets (have) already used more than 9,000 guided aerial bombs against Ukraine and we need the ability to shoot down the air combat aircraft so that they do not approach our positions and borders," Zelensky said at the start of a virtual meeting led by the United States on helping arm Ukraine.

The first such meeting, known as the Ukraine Contact Group, was held two years ago.

"While we were waiting for a decision on the American support, the Russian army managed to seize the initiative on the battlefield," Zelensky said. "We can still now, not only stabilise the front, but also move forward achieving our Ukrainian goals in the war."

He also highlighted the stakes in the conflict, saying that Russian success could breed further aggression.

"Predatory regimes like Russia's are rapidly increasing their appetite for aggression. When they succeed in one part of the world, it creates problems in many other places. Aggression spreads when not stopped," he said.

After the meeting, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin said he would ask allies to accept more risk.

"We're going to ask (allies) to accept a little bit more risk so that we can do what's necessary in Ukraine," he told reporters.

Austin said the Patriot missile defence system itself would not be a "silver bullet" for Kyiv, but rather integrating it with other missile defence systems.

Spain's defence minister said yesterday that Madrid would deliver Patriot anti-aircraft missiles to Ukraine, following pressure from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) and European Union allies to send more military aid to Kyiv.

The new \$6bn US weapons package announced will be purchased from defence contractors and not drawn from US stocks and delivery to Ukraine will take time, perhaps even years for some systems.

The United States hopes its new deliveries of weaponry will help Ukraine rebuild defences and refit its forces as it recovers from a gap in US assistance, but it does not expect Kyiv to launch large-scale offensive operations against Russian forces in the near term.

The influx of weapons could improve Kyiv's chances of averting a major Russian break-



A child is evacuated from a hospital in Kyiv after local authorities declared that there was possible danger of a Russian military strike.

## Kyiv clears hospitals over air strike fears

Officials in Ukraine's capital Kyiv announced yesterday the evacuation of two hospitals which they feared could be targeted by Russian strikes.

"The city is urgently beginning to evacuate two hospitals because a video is being widely circulated online, de facto announcing an enemy attack on these medical facilities," Kyiv's city administration said.

It referred to comments made by the head of the KGB in Moscow-allied Belarus, who said on national television that the buildings hosted military personnel "hiding behind sick children" – suggesting Russia could regard the facilities a legitimate military target.

"This is an absolute lie and a provocation by the enemy, which it is trying to use to attack the social infrastructure of the capital," the administration wrote on Telegram.

Ivan Tertel, the head of the Belarusian KGB, provided the addresses of the two Kyiv hospitals where he said fighters were "hiding behind the backs of children".

"Without a doubt, all of them will suffer well-deserved punishment, even though they have chosen Kyiv hospitals as their lair," he said in a speech broadcast by the state news agency Belta.

Belarusian troops are not fighting in the war in Ukraine, but Minsk is a close ally of Moscow and Russian forces used Belarusian territory as a staging ground for their full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Kyiv's city authorities said they were moving patients and staff from both hospitals to other medical facilities.

AFP journalists on the scene saw around 10 ambulances waiting for patients to be evacuated.

A child on a stretcher connected to medical equipment was placed in one of the vehicles, which left the scene.

Some patients were leaving the hospital on their own.

The head of Kyiv's military administration, Sergiy Popko, said the evacuations were taken out of precaution.

"So far, there is no evidence to suggest that Russia is actually going to launch such strikes. However, for us, the lives and health of our people and our children are the highest value," he said.

"We are doing our best to protect children, their parents, adult patients and staff from a possible attack on these medical institutions," Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recorded at least 1,682 attacks against Ukraine's healthcare system since the beginning of the war.

These caused 128 deaths and 288 injuries, according to WHO statistics released in early April. - AFP/Reuters

through in the east, just over two years since the start of Moscow's full-scale invasion, military analysts say.

However, it remains unclear how much pressure Kyiv can apply on Russia after months of

rationing artillery as its stocks ran low.

Kyiv also faces manpower shortages on the battlefield and questions linger over the strength of its fortifications along a sprawling, 1,000km (621-mile) front line.

## Spanish PM keeps country guessing on his future

AFP/Reuters  
Madrid

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has suspended all duties and gone silent while he considers whether to step down on Monday over a graft investigation against his wife.

The 52-year-old Socialist leader, who has been in office since 2018, stunned Spain on Wednesday when he put his resignation on the line after a Madrid court opened a preliminary investigation into suspected influence peddling and corruption against his spouse Begona Gomez.

"I need to stop and think whether I should continue to head the government or whether I should give up this honour," he wrote in a four-page letter posted on X.

Sanchez said he would suspend all public duties until he announces his decision on Monday and the normally hyperactive premier has since remained out of sight and silent.

His absence was especially noticeable in Catalonia, where he had been scheduled to attend an event in Barcelona on Thursday to launch his Socialist party's campaign for regional elections there on May 12.

"We are with you Pedro!" said the head of the Socialist party in Catalonia, Salvador Illa, one of the many demonstrators of support. Sanchez has received from the left to try to convince him not to resign.

The court opened the investigation into Sanchez's wife in response to a complaint from anti-corruption pressure group Manos Limpias (Clean Hands), whose leader is linked to the far-right.

The group, which has presented a litany of unsuccessful lawsuits against politicians in the past, said in a statement on Wednesday that it had based its complaint on media reports and could not vouch for their veracity.



Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said on X that he had spoken with Sanchez to urge him to keep carrying the torch for more "fair, prosperous and humane" governance, adding his leadership was important for the country, Europe and the world.

Colombia's President Gustavo Petro, who denounced a far-right "mud machine" seeking to halt progressive policies, also expressed support, as did Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and Nicolas Schmit, the lead candidate for the Party of European Socialists (PES) in European Parliamentary elections in June.

On the streets of Madrid, Mercedes Cano, a 69-year-old retired French teacher, said people were tired of political bickering.

"There's a general feeling of disillusionment, whether you're on the left or the right," she said.

The right-wing opposition has accused the prime minister of being irresponsible for putting the country on hold while he mulls over his decision.

If Sanchez decides to remain in office, he could choose to file a confidence motion in parliament to show that he and his minority government are still supported by a majority of lawmakers in the assembly.

If he resigns, an early election could be called from July – a year after the last one – with or without Sanchez at the helm of the Socialist party.



## Palestinian Festival at Katara showcases heritage, culture

The Palestinian Heritage, Cultural and Products Exhibition is currently on at the southern facade of Katara - the Cultural Village until May 4, with a view to enhance and support the creativity of the people in Palestine in general and Gaza in particular.

This special edition of the festival adopts the theme: 'Our Heritage, Our Land, the Tale of Our Resilience'. The opening ceremony on Thursday was attended by Katara's deputy general manager and Human Resources director Saif Saad al-Dosari, Palestinian ambassador Monir Ghanim and diplomats from a number of other countries.

The annual exhibition is organised in collaboration between Katara and the embassy of Palestine in Qatar, with the event management and solutions provided by Final Vision Company. The special edition's diverse activities reinforce the Palestinian cultural identity and provide an important opportunity for the younger generations to familiarise themselves with Palestinian heritage, embrace their identity, and understand their rich and deeply rooted civilisation on this land for thousands of years.

The exhibition is open to the public daily from 4pm-11pm, fea-



turing various activities, live performances, and markets. These markets showcase Palestinian products ranging from food items and sweets made by artisans specially brought from Palestine, to traditional and ancient handicrafts, including valuable symbolic heritage items like Palestinian Keffiyeh, embroidered Palestinian clothing, bags, and other diverse creations crafted by the artisans.

Further, this year's exhibition is distinguished by special performances presented by the Palestinian artistic youth group "Sawl" from Gaza, one of the prominent Palestinian artistic groups representing the heritage and folk culture of Palestine in Gaza, having previously performed in many international shows.

The Palestinian Heritage, Cultural, and Products Exhibition pro-

vides an opportunity for networking, idea exchange, and offering support to dozens of Palestinian craftsmen, cultural and social figures who have specially attended from all Palestinian cities, notably Jerusalem, to participate. Besides, the exhibition serves as a significant platform to raise awareness about Palestinian heritage and introduce the authentic creativity of the Palestinian people.



**POWER MEETS EFFICIENCY.**

**GRIP AND GLIDE WITH AWD DUAL MOTORS.**

**DESIGN. ELECTRIC EFFICIENCY.**

**EFFORTLESS ELEGANCE, ELECTRIFYING SPEED.**

**ARTISTRY IN MOTION, INNOVATION IN ACTION.**

**BYD**



**MANNAI TRADING CO. WLL**  
Member of Mannai Corporation QPSC

**WE DON'T CRUISE WE CONQUER**

**CALL NOW 800 1808**

Our preferred partner:

**البنك التجاري**  
**COMMERCIAL BANK**