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## Amir, Deputy Amir, PM congratulate Saudi king on success of Haj

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani sent a cable of congratulations to his brother the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on the success of the Haj season for this year 1445 AH. His Highness the Amir wished the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia further progress and prosperity. His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani also sent cables of congratulations to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on the success of the Haj season for this year 1445 AH.

## Putin flies into North Korea

Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in North Korea on Wednesday for his first visit in 24 years, vowing to deepen trade and security ties with the reclusive nuclear-armed state and to support it against the United States. Russian state media showed Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un shaking hands, embracing and talking beside Putin's plane. It touched down in Pyongyang around 2.45am following a stopover in Russia's far east. The leaders then rode in the same limousine and walked together into Putin's hotel. **Page 9**

## Dutch PM Rutte to be next Nato chief

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte (*pictured*), a staunch ally of Kyiv and a critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, will succeed Jens Stoltenberg as Nato chief, Dutch national broadcaster NOS reported yesterday, after Hungary and Slovakia backed him. Speaking at a news conference alongside US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington, Stoltenberg neither confirmed nor denied the media report. **Page 9**

# Qatar ranks 4th globally in economic performance

By Santhosh V Perumal  
Business Reporter

Qatar has ranked fourth among 67 countries in the world in terms of economic performance, according to The World Competitiveness Yearbook 2024, issued by the Switzerland-based International Institute for Management Development (IMD). Overall, the country improved its position by one notch to 11th spot in 2024 compared to 12th position the previous year, said the assessment, which was based on the developments witnessed by a comprehensive set of data and indicators provided at the local level, along with the results of an opinion poll of a sample of company managers and businessmen on the business environment and the competitiveness of the Qatari economy, as well as comparing such data and indicators with counterparts from other reviewed countries.

Qatar – with a per capita income of \$108,578 (in terms of purchasing power parity) in 2023 – was ranked high in the four main factors: economic performance (fourth), government efficiency (seventh), business efficiency (11th), and infrastructure (33rd), said the report.

“These outstanding results reflect the insight and wise vision of Qatar’s leadership. They also confirm that Qatar is on the right track towards achieving the ambitions of the Qatar National Vision 2030 by implementing the contents of the Third National Development Strategy 2024–30,” said Abdulaziz bin Nasser bin Mubarak al-Khalifa, secretary-general of the National Planning Council (NPC).

Under the economic performance factor, the most prominent indicators were the unemployment rate, youth unemployment rate, and terms of trade index in which the country ranked first globally.

Within the government efficiency factor, the Qatari economy ranked first in both the consumption tax rate and the personal income tax rate, while it ranked second in the public finance index.

As for the business efficiency factor, Qatar ranked first globally in both the effectiveness of corporate boards and the migrant stock, while it came in second place globally in the working hours index.

Under the infrastructure factor, Qatar ranked first in the sub-factors of energy infrastructure and the number of internet users per 1,000 people.

Regarding the challenges in 2024, the report said Qatar needs to sustain investments in human capital formation and also sustain economic growth and continue economic diversification efforts, allowing for the private sector to play a greater role in the economy.

Calling for efforts to manage a more balanced labour mix to boost productivity, it said there was a need to enhance governance structures and transparency to foster public trust and accountability and increase competitiveness and focus more on innovation.

## Troupes entertain Katara visitors

A troupe entertains the audience as part of the ongoing Eid al-Adha cultural programme being held at Katara – the Cultural Village, yesterday. **PICTURE:** Shemeer Rasheed **Page 12**

# GCC calls for comprehensive solution to Sudan crisis

QNA  
Geneva

The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) has reiterated its urgent call for a comprehensive solution to the ongoing crisis in Sudan, urging Sudanese parties to calm the situation and prioritise dialogue, unity, and the preservation of national state institutions to prevent their collapse and to avoid escalating conflicts and confrontations.

This statement was delivered by Deputy Permanent Representative of Qatar to the UN Office in Geneva, Jowhara bint Abdulaziz al-Suwaidi, on behalf of the GCC, as Qatar currently chairs the GCC session, during the Interactive Dialogue on Oral Update by Fact-Finding Mission on Sudan, part of the 56th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The GCC called on both sides

Qatar’s representative making the statement on behalf of the GCC in Geneva.

of the Sudanese conflict to commit to ending the conflict, as outlined in the Jeddah Declaration signed on May 11, 2023, regarding the commitment to protect civilians, and the May 20, 2023 declaration on a short-term ceasefire agreement and humanitarian arrangements under international humanitarian law and human rights law.

The GCC referenced UN Security Council Resolution 2,724, dated March 8, 2024, which urges all parties to ensure the removal

of any obstacles and enable full, rapid, safe, and unimpeded access to humanitarian aid.

The GCC also urged the Sudanese government and the Rapid Support Forces to engage seriously and effectively with crisis resolution initiatives, including the Jeddah platform and neighbouring countries, among others, reaffirming its commitment to stand by the Sudanese people, continue providing humanitarian aid, and contribute to alleviating their suffering.

# Fears grow for Israel-Lebanon all-out war

Reuters  
Beirut/Jerusalem

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz yesterday warned that a decision on an all-out war with Hezbollah was coming soon even as the US is trying to avert a greater war between Israel and Lebanon’s Hezbollah movement.

US envoy Amos Hochstein was sent to Lebanon to try and cool tensions following an increase in cross-border fire along Lebanon’s southern frontier that has escalated to Hezbollah hinting it could attack Haifa, Israel’s third-largest city.

Iran-backed Hezbollah has been trading fire with Israel for the last eight months in parallel with the Gaza war. Last week, the group fired the largest volleys of rockets and drones of the hostilities so far at Israeli military sites, after an Israeli strike killed the most senior commander yet.

An Israeli spokesperson said Israel yesterday targeted a Hezbollah air unit in the latest series of strikes.

Hezbollah says it will not halt

Lebanon’s caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati meeting with US special envoy Amos Hochstein (left) in Beirut yesterday.

its attacks unless there is a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

Hochstein, special envoy to US President Joe Biden, said he had been dispatched to Lebanon immediately following a brief trip to Israel because the situation was “serious”.

“We have seen an escalation over the last few weeks. And what President Biden wants to do is avoid a further escalation to a greater war,” Hochstein said.

He had met the head of Lebanon’s army earlier yesterday and spoke to reporters following a meeting with parliament Speak-

er Nabih Berri, who heads the armed Amal movement, which is allied to Hezbollah and has also fired rockets on Israel.

The US and France are engaged in diplomatic efforts to secure a negotiated end to the hostilities along Lebanon’s border.

Hezbollah published a nine-minute 31 second-long video of what it said was footage gathered from its surveillance aircraft of locations in Israel, including the city of Haifa’s sea and air ports. Haifa is 27km from the Lebanese border.

Katz said in an X post that in

## Offensive ‘approved’

The Israeli military said yesterday operational plans for an offensive in Lebanon were “approved and validated”. “The Commanding Officer of the Northern Command, MG Ori Gordin, and the Head of the Operations Directorate, MG Oded Basiuk... held a joint situational assessment in the Northern Command. As part of the situational assessment, operational plans for an offensive in Lebanon were approved and validated,” it said in a statement.

the wake of threats by Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the group’s head, to damage Haifa’s ports that are operated by Chinese and Indian companies, “we are getting very close to the moment of deciding on changing the rules of the game against Hezbollah and Lebanon.”

“In an all-out war, Hezbollah will be destroyed and Lebanon will be severely beaten,” he added.

## Gaza rescuers report deadly Israeli strikes

Israeli strikes yesterday killed at least 13 people in central Gaza, the civil defence agency in the Hamas-run territory said, although fighting has largely subsided as Muslims mark Eid al-Adha.

An Israeli announcement at the weekend of a daily “pause” of military activity to facilitate aid flows coincided with the Muslim holiday and has brought relative calm to parts of the besieged Gaza Strip after more than eight months of war.

In central Gaza, witnesses reported gunfire and artillery shelling near the Nuseirat refugee camp, where the civil defence agency said at least 13 people were killed in two separate strikes on a family home and a commercial building.

Al-Awda hospital said it received the bodies of “six martyrs and 15 wounded as a result of Israeli air strikes on various areas in the central and southern Gaza Strip”. Witnesses and the Hamas government media office said there were some strikes and fighting elsewhere in northern and central Gaza.



# Indian embassy to mark International Day of Yoga with mega event

By Joseph Varghese  
Staff Reporter

As many as 2024 participants - if not more - will take part in the yoga event at the Asian Town Cricket Stadium to mark the 10th UN International Day of Yoga on June 21, said the organisers of the event at a press briefing yesterday.

Arranged by the Indian embassy in collaboration with Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) and Indian Sports Centre (ISC), the event will be held from 6pm-8.30pm, disclosed the Indian ambassador, Vipul.

The press conference was attended by Sachin Dinkar Shankpal, first secretary, Indian embassy; Manikantan A P, president, ICC; and Abdulrahman E P, president ISC. Ambassador Vipul said that

International Day of Yoga is celebrated across the world and many yoga activities in preparation of the Yoga Day have been going on in Qatar for the past several days.

"We would be organising a big event on June 21 at Asian Town Cricket stadium. The event is open to the general public and everyone is invited join the occasion. The main element of the event will be the performance of Common Yoga Protocol by all participants for about 40 minutes," explained the ambassador.

The envoy noted that this year's theme for the International Yoga Day, "Yoga for Self and Society", emphasises the holistic benefits of yoga for individuals and its power to foster harmony between humanity and nature. The event will also feature yoga competitions for both children and adults and a yoga quiz with attractive prizes for win-



Indian ambassador Vipul addressing the press conference along with other officials.  
PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam

ners. The organisers highlighted that all the necessary arrangements have been done to make the event a smooth experience for all the participants. They also noted that anyone can join the event and all nationalities are encouraged to take part in the mega event. They recalled that previous editions of

the event in Qatar, since 2015, have been highly successful and have drawn the attention of the international community.

The UN proclaimed June 21 as the International Day of Yoga by a resolution which was proposed by India and co-sponsored by a record 177 member states in December 2014. Over the past few years, the day has been celebrated with great fanfare across the world including Doha. In 2022, for the celebration of 8th International Yoga Day, an event was organised in Doha where 114 nationalities were represented and a new Guinness World Record was created for the most nationalities in one yoga session.

Further details to join the event can be collected from 'Information & Culture Wing, at e-mail:cul.doha@mea.gov.in; press.doha@mea.gov.in; or phone:44255709; 44255745.



Children engaged in exciting games and contests.



Children at Msheireb Galleria at the Atlantis.

# Msheireb Downtown lights up for Eid with immersive experiences



Eid al-Adha celebrations at Msheireb Galleria hosts an array of activities.  
PICTURES: Joey Aguilar

By Joey Aguilar  
Staff Reporter

Msheireb Downtown Doha (MDD)'s festive atmosphere continues to draw crowds seeking a unique blend of family entertainment and cultural immersion during the Eid al-Adha holidays.

The festivities, which kicked off on June 16 and running until June 22, offer an array of fun-filled activities to create unforgettable memories for residents and visitors, especially families.

From 4pm-10pm daily, organisers noted that Msheireb Galleria transforms into a vibrant hub of entertainment - a treat for many holiday-goers.

The live stage performances enthrall people of all ages while the popular treasure hunt encourages children to flex their problem-solving skills, deciphering riddles and puzzles to uncover hidden clues throughout the Galleria before conquering digital challenges in the treasure hunt room.

Photo booths are proving to be a hit with visitors, providing a fun backdrop for capturing

**This immersive experience continues to enchant visitors with its appealing blend of cutting-edge technology, stunning visuals, and storytelling, transporting guests to the legendary lost city of Atlantis and offering a thrilling adventure running throughout Eid al-Adha holidays to July 9**

precious moments with friends and family. The excitement continues with the "Atlantis - The Immersive Odyssey", a crowd-pulling attraction that opened on May 1.

This immersive experience continues to enchant visitors with its appealing blend of cutting-edge technology, stunning visuals, and storytelling, transporting guests to the legendary lost city of Atlantis and offering a thrilling adventure running throughout Eid al-Adha holidays to July 9.

Young visitors are fascinated by various interactive games and engaging competitions. Traditional activities such as henna artistry, arts and crafts, balloon twisting, and face painting add a touch of cultural charm and delight to the celebrations.

Activities at Msheireb Galleria are receiving an overwhelming response from visitors as they create an environment where families could come together and experience the joy of Eid.

One of the staff said that they were delighted to see many happy faces filled with excitement and wonder at Msheireb Galleria this Eid holiday.

With the various offerings this Eid at Msheireb Galleria, MDD has become a favourite and vibrant destination for families and individuals seeking entertainment and cultural experiences. MDD has also witnessed a significant increase in footfall, attracting visitors not only from various places outside Doha but also from neighbouring GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia.

# Recovery from Afghan conflict faces increasing challenges: Qatar diplomat

Qatar has said that the recovery from long decades of conflict and deteriorating human rights conditions in Afghanistan now faces increasing challenges in the humanitarian, economic, as well as critical human rights conditions, especially the rights of women and girls, their fundamental freedoms, and their right to obtain education and work, stressing the necessity of continuing efforts to provide support, and continuing dialogue between all parties to reach effective and sustainable solutions.

This came in statement delivered by Deputy Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations Office in Geneva Jowhara bint Abdulaziz al-Suwaidi, during the enhanced interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, within the framework of the 56th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Al-Suwaidi said that Qatar was keen to provide humanitarian and development aid to Afghanistan, noting that the total aid during the period from 2021-2024 reached 1,080 tonnes, in addition



to sending aid to those affected by the floods that recently struck the Baghlan province in northern Afghanistan. She indicated that work is underway to build an integrated specialised hospital for women and children, in addition to joint projects to support education in cooperation between the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD), the Education Above All Foundation (EAA), and Afghanistan's Ministry of Education.

Al-Suwaidi pointed out that

Qatar continues to host meetings related to the Afghan issue, and is preparing to host the third meeting of special envoys on Afghanistan, organized by the United Nations in Doha at the end of June to find more communication and coordination between the international community and the Afghan caretaker government to develop and implement humanitarian and development programs, promote and protect human rights, and ensure a decent life for the Afghan people.

# Doha Theater Group flags off new HQ

By Tawfik Lamari  
Staff Reporter

The Doha Theater Group held yesterday the opening ceremony of its new headquarters in the Gharrafat Al-Rayyan area (Education City), on the third day of Eid al-Adha in the presence of an elite group of artists, media professionals and theatre lovers. Artist Ibrahim Mohamed al-Emadi, chairman of the Board of Directors of the troupe, confirmed that the opening of the new headquarters comes within the framework of the group's continuous development efforts to provide its utmost in serving the theatrical movement in Doha.

He revealed in a statement that the band intends to establish its own theatre and launch a special hall for lectures and rehearsals.

Pointing out that the troupe has a group of texts that have been approved, as "Doha Theater Group" is vigorously preparing for the new season. He stressed: "The new headquarters is distinguished by its large spaces, which enable us to exploit these spaces in developing our theatrical activities. A special cultural library for the band was



established, and the building also has a large outdoor courtyard to be a suitable place for theatrical activities in moderate weather. The group's administrative offices have also been expanded."

Regarding the group's future plans and strategy, al-Emadi said: "In the coming period, we intend to establish a special stage for the troupe on which we will present our performances to the public. It will also be a suitable place for training and theatrical rehearsals, in addition to building a lecture hall, as part of the troupe's endeavours to provide a group of work-

shops and training, to qualify and discover theatrical talents."

On theatrical productions for the new season, al-Emadi added: "We currently have four texts that have been approved by the regulatory authorities, but we are awaiting the completion of renovation work of the Qatar National Theatre, as the arena suffers from the lack of a stage to present theatrical performances to the public. On the other hand, the troupe is working in full swing to prepare for the new theatrical season, to continue the success in the last edition of the Doha Theatre Festival."









# American in DR Congo ‘coup’ trial suffered ‘torture’: lawyer

AFP  
Kinshasa

An American on trial in the Democratic Republic of Congo over an alleged coup bid suffered “torture” during his arrest, his lawyer told the court yesterday. Taylor Christian Thomson, 21, is one of three Americans among 51 defendants being tried

at the military court in the capital Kinshasa.

On May 19, armed men attacked the home of Economy Minister Vital Kamerhe in the early hours before moving onto the nearby Palais de la Nation that houses President Felix Tshisekedi’s offices. They were seemingly filmed brandishing the flag of Zaire – the name of the Central African country during the rule of dictator Mobutu Sese Seko

– and chanting that Tshisekedi’s government was over. The army later announced a coup attempt had been stopped by the security forces. Defence lawyer Karl Kwatangholo said that Thomson had “suffered torture” during the intervention by Congolese security forces.

His client, he said, had been “badly molested and photos of his nudity (taken by Congolese soldiers) appeared on social media”

Kwatangholo and lawyers for the other defendants also called for evidence from earlier hearings involving their clients to be annulled, particularly those carried out by the military intelligence service.

According to the defence, the minutes were drawn up without the assistance of interpreters, even though Thomson speaks English and the hearings were conducted in French. Lawyers for the two

other Americans, Marcel Malanga, 21, and Benjamin Reuben Zalman-Polun, 36, have complained of the same. The lawyers also called on the military court to declare itself “incompetent” to try the defendants, who are all civilians. The alleged plot was led by Christian Malanga, a Congolese man who was a “naturalised American” and who was killed by security forces, army spokesman General Sylvain

Ekenge has said. His son is Marcel Malanga. Four women are among the accused, as well as a Canadian, a Briton and Belgian Jean-Jacques Wondo, who are all naturalised Congolese. The charges include “attack, terrorism, illegal possession of weapons and munitions of war, attempted assassination, criminal association, murder (and) financing of terrorism”, according to a court document.

## Putin greets South Africa’s Ramaphosa on re-election

Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin congratulated South Africa’s Cyril Ramaphosa on his re-election as president on Monday, reflecting continued good relations with Pretoria despite uncertainty over Moscow’s more than two-year-old invasion of Ukraine. “Hope was expressed for continued joint work on further strengthening of the partnership between Russia and South Africa in all its aspects,” a statement said on the Kremlin website, referring to Putin’s telephone call to Ramaphosa. Ramaphosa was re-elected by parliament on Friday. But the failure of his African National Congress party to win a majority in last month’s election, for the first time in 30 years, prompted the formation of a government made up - so far - of five parties. Russia and Ukraine have jostled for support from African nations since the 2022 invasion, with each country’s foreign minister embarking on several of regional tours. South Africa’s longstanding links with Moscow - as with a number of African states - date back to Soviet times, when Moscow was a prominent backer of liberation movements and the fight to end apartheid, spearheaded by the ANC. South Africa initially denounced Russia’s February 2022 invasion, but has since adopted a more nuanced position, including abstaining in several votes in the UN General Assembly condemning Russian actions. South Africa attended the Swiss-hosted “peace summit” on Ukraine over the weekend. But it declined to sign the final communique, along with India, Indonesia, Mexico and Saudi Arabia, even though some contentious issues were omitted in the hope of drawing wider support. South Africa found itself in a dilemma as host of a 2023 meeting of the Brics grouping of countries and it considered inviting Putin to attend despite a warrant from the International Criminal Court of Justice to arrest the Russian leader on allegations of deportation of Ukrainian children. In the end, Putin chose not to attend. — Reuters

# Kenya scraps most new tax hikes as hundreds protest



Police officers run after using teargas to disperse protesters.

AFP  
Nairobi

Kenya’s government yesterday walked back plans to impose multiple tax hikes, the presidency said, amending a controversial bill that sparked protests where more than a dozen demonstrators were arrested. The East African economic powerhouse has struggled with a cost-of-living crisis, which critics warned would only worsen under the levies laid out in a bill due to be debated this week and passed before June 30.

Hundreds of mostly young protesters assembled near parliament yesterday, with police firing tear gas and making arrests, according to AFP journalists. Hours later, the presidency announced that it would scrap many of the bill’s most contentious provisions, including taxes on bread purchases and car ownership. “The Finance Bill has been amended to remove the proposed 16% VAT on bread, transportation of sugar, financial services, foreign exchange transactions as well as the 2.5% Motor Vehicle Tax,” the presidency said in a statement.

“Additionally, there will be no increase in mobile money transfer fees, and Excise Duty on vegetable oil has also been removed,” it added. The cash-strapped government had earlier defended the hikes - which were projected to raise some 346.7bn shillings

(\$2.7bn), equivalent to 1.9% of GDP - as a necessary measure to cut reliance on external borrowing. Lawmakers were due to debate the bill yesterday afternoon, but postponed the discussion to Wednesday, just before the presidency announced the changes following recommendations made by a parliamentary committee.

“Because the people’s representatives have listened to the people...they have adjusted the proposals,” President William Ruto told lawmakers.

The bill sparked fury among many Kenyans, who staged protests on Tuesday dubbed “Occupy Parliament”. Black-clad protesters were forced into a cat-and-mouse situation with police, with officers lobbing tear gas and - in one instance - chasing people into a church before making arrests. “I am fighting for my future,” one protester, 23-year-old Wangari, told AFP. “With such taxes, with such exploitation, I don’t see how we can build a life,” she said.

“This is making it very hard for us, especially us, that are not a part of the one percent.”

Her thoughts were echoed by others like 29-year-old Rara Eisa who was protesting for the first time. “I am tired. The prices of everything have gone up, life is no longer affordable,” she said, adding that the taxes “are not lenient in any way”.

Many demonstrators waved signs emblazoned “do not force the taxes on us”, referring to Ruto



Protesters chant anti-government slogans during a demonstration against tax hikes in downtown Nairobi.



Protesters make signs with their arms in front of Kenya police officers.

as Zakayo, the Swahili name for the biblical tax collector Zacchaeus. Ruto came to power in 2022 on a promise to revive the economy and put money in the pockets of the downtrodden, but his policies have sparked widespread discontent.

He has raised income tax and health insurance contributions, and doubled VAT on petroleum

products to 16%. Last year’s tax hikes led to opposition protests, sometimes degenerating into deadly street clashes between police and demonstrators.

While Kenya is among the most dynamic economies in East Africa, roughly a third of the 51.5mn population lives in poverty. Overall inflation has remained stub-

bornly high at an annual rate of 5.1% in May, while food and fuel inflation stood at 6.2% and 7.8% respectively, according to central bank data. The World Bank said this month that while Kenya’s real GDP growth had accelerated last year to 5.6% from 4.9% in 2022, it was expected to slow to five percent this year.

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## Ivory Coast’s GDP growth pegged at around 7% between 2024-27: president

Reuters  
Abidjan

Ivory Coast expects a more than threefold increase to its oil output by 2027, boosted by recent oil and gas discoveries at the West African nation’s Baleine and Calao offshore fields, President Alassane Ouattara said yesterday.

The world’s top cocoa-producing nation is hoping to become a major regional oil and gas producer and regional energy hub. Ouattara told a joint session of parliament that more than \$15bn is

expected to be invested in the country’s oil sector, adding that output would grow to about 200,000 barrels per day (bpd) from 60,000 bpd by 2027.

“It will be a spectacular leap,” Ouattara said.

Italy’s Eni has said it would invest \$10bn in developing the Baleine field, which will take place in three phases from 2023-2027. Certified reserves of the Baleine field, discovered by the Italian energy group in 2021, are estimated at 2.5bn barrels of oil and 3.3tn cubic feet of natural gas.

The group announced its Calao dis-

covery in March, with preliminary assessments indicating potential resources ranging between 1bn and 1.5bn barrels of oil. Ivory Coast’s economic growth is forecast around 7% between 2024 and 2027, President Alassane Ouattara also said, adding that the country is expected to remain the economic powerhouse of the French-speaking West Africa region.

In March, the group said it had made a major discovery with preliminary assessments indicating potential resources ranging between 1bn and 1.5bn barrels of oil.

## Senegal leader to visit France in 1st official trip

AFP  
Dakar

Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Faye will travel to France this week in his first official visit outside of Africa, his office said yesterday. Faye, who was inaugurated on April 2, will take part in the Global Forum for Vaccine Sovereignty and Innovation, which aims to give Africa more sovereignty to address the many health crises it faces.

**Senegal and France have historically maintained strong political and economic relations**

He will travel to the former colonial power today, with the summit scheduled for Thursday. “At the end of this event, the Head of State will be invited to lunch by his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron,” Faye’s office said.

Senegal and France have historically maintained strong political and economic relations.

However, Faye, - a left-wing pan-Af-

ricanist - has insisted such partnerships should be mutually beneficial.

In May, Senegal’s Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko said the country’s wish to determine its path was “incompatible with the entrenched presence of foreign military bases” on Senegalese soil.

Sources told AFP on Monday that the French government would be reducing the number of soldiers stationed in West and Central African nations, including Senegal. Paris will reduce the number of soldiers posted to Senegal from 350 to around 100.



# Australia flags concern over China diplomats' actions

AFP  
Sydney

Australia yesterday voiced concern about the “ham-fisted” actions of two Chinese diplomats at a media event, tarnishing a highly touted visit in which Premier Li Qiang has sought to celebrate trade and friendship.

China’s second-most powerful man has posed in front of giant pandas and highlighted the need to

peacefully work through “differences” during his rare trip to Australia.

But the carefully choreographed tour briefly unravelled during a signing ceremony inside Australia’s parliament on Monday, when two Chinese diplomats appeared to shadow high-profile Australian journalist Cheng Lei.

Cheng returned to Australia in October last year after three years detained in China on opaque spying charges and has spoken unflinch-

ingly of her bleak prison conditions.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese criticised the “ham-fisted” behaviour, saying yesterday Australia had “followed up with the Chinese embassy to express our concern”.

“When you look at the footage, it was a pretty clumsy attempt, frankly, by a couple of people to stand in between where the cameras were and where Cheng Lei was sitting,” he told national broadcaster ABC.

“And Australian officials inter-

vened, as they should have, to ask the Chinese officials who were there at the press conference to move.”

Footage showed two Chinese diplomats hovering next to a seated Cheng, repeatedly ignoring requests to move from animated Australian officials.

Cheng said they “went to great lengths to block me from the cameras”. “And I’m guessing that’s to prevent me from saying something or doing something that they think would be a bad look,” she told Sky

News Australia. “But that itself is a bad look.”

Albanese had told Li in closed-door talks just hours earlier that “foreign interference wasn’t acceptable in Australia’s political system”. The highest-ranking Chinese official to visit Australia since 2017, Li’s visit shows the growing rapprochement between Beijing and Canberra after a years-long trade dispute.

“Of course, we all know that in the past few years, our bilateral re-

lations also encountered some difficulties and twists and turns,” Li said before departing Australia yesterday afternoon.

“But thanks to the joint efforts of both sides, the bilateral relations have been put back on the right track.”

Asked about the Cheng Lei incident and Albanese’s remarks yesterday, Beijing’s foreign ministry spokesman said he was “not aware of the specific situation you mentioned”.

# Seoul troops fire warning shots as N Korea soldiers cross border again

AFP  
Seoul

Dozens of North Korean soldiers briefly crossed the heavily fortified border yesterday but retreated after warning shots were fired, Seoul said, the second such incident in two weeks as Pyongyang reinforces its frontiers with the South.

Landmine explosions near the border also injured multiple North Korean soldiers, the joint chiefs of staff said, adding that Pyongyang had recently deployed troops in the area to clear scrub and lay mines, as relations between the two Koreas plummet.

The countries technically remain at war as the 1950-1953 conflict ended in an armistice, and the demilitarised zone dividing the peninsula is already one of the most heavily mined places on earth.

But North Korea is moving to reinforce that, laying more landmines, reinforcing tactical roads and adding what appear to be anti-tank barriers, Seoul’s military said.

The JCS said it believed the crossing yesterday - like a previous

one on June 9 - was accidental, with some 20-30 North Korean soldiers carrying work tools involved in the incident.

“Dozens of North Korean troops crossed the military demarcation line and retreated northwards after warning shots” were fired, a JCS official said.

North Korean soldiers tasked with reinforcing the border had suffered “multiple casualties from repeated landmine explosion incidents” but they “appear to be recklessly pressing ahead with the operations,” the official said.

“North Korea’s activities seem to be a measure to strengthen internal control, such as blocking North Korean troops and North Koreans from defecting to the South,” the JCS official said.

“This has rather symbolic significance,” Koh Yu-hwan, North Korean studies emeritus professor at Dongguk University said adding new mines was making it clear Pyongyang did not want dialogue with the South.

“By laying mines, North Korea is demonstrating once again that, as per the instructions of the supreme leader (Kim Jong-un), there will be no reconciliation with the South,”

he added.

“North Korea is not laying mines across the entire frontline, but rather in areas that are easily observable by the South. They are also blocking roads and railways that were previously areas of inter-Korean co-operation.”

During a period of warmer ties in 2018, the two Koreas removed landmines along a section of the heavily fortified border in a bid to ease military tensions.

Earlier this month, around 20 North Korean soldiers crossed the military demarcation line between the two countries in a section of the border “overgrown with trees”, according to Seoul’s military, which assessed the incursion to be accidental.

That crossing came as North Korea was sending more than a thousand balloons laden with trash southward - a response, it said, to balloons carrying anti-Pyongyang propaganda sent north by activists.

The South Korean government in turn suspended a 2018 tension-reducing military deal and restarted loudspeaker propaganda broadcasts along the border, infuriating the North, which warned Seoul was creating “a new crisis”.

## Extreme weather hits China



A villager sits on an inflatable boat with rescuers at a flooded area after storms in Nanping, in China's Fujian province. At least four people were killed when record rains hit parts of southern China, state media reported yesterday, while more than a dozen were missing even as the north baked under some of its highest temperatures this year. Downpours “exceeding historical daily maximums” in some areas of Fujian province caused the four deaths, state news agency Xinhua said, citing the flood control headquarters of Shanghang County. More than 66,000 people in the county have been affected by the extreme weather, Xinhua said.

# Taipei keeps watch as China sub surfaces in Taiwan Strait

Reuters  
Taipei

Taiwan’s defence minister yesterday said they have a “grasp” of the situation after pictures appeared online of a Chinese nuclear submarine surfacing in the sensitive Taiwan Strait near Taiwanese fishermen.

The narrow strait that separates Taiwan from China is a frequent source of tension. Taiwan reports Chinese warplanes and warships operating there on a daily basis, as Beijing seeks

to assert its sovereignty claims against the island.

Taiwanese media published the pictures of the surfaced craft, which appears to be a nuclear-armed Jin class ballistic missile submarine, taken by a Taiwanese fishing boat in the strait as dawn broke yesterday, about 200km from Taiwan’s western coast.

Asked about the submarine, Taiwan Defence Minister Wellington Koo said they have a “grasp” of the intelligence situation, but declined to say how they were monitoring it or give details.

China’s defence ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Nuclear-powered submarines can operate underwater for months at a time, and ballistic-missile boats’ secretive mission means they rarely surface.

A security source familiar with the situation said the submarine was most likely returning to its home port in Qingdao from the South China Sea. The source said yesterday’s incident might have been because it experienced a malfunction and was forced to surface.

## S Korea orders striking doctors to return to work

The South Korean government issued a return-to-work order for private practitioners yesterday as more doctors including medical professors join the months-long strike to protest increasing medical school admissions.

The government will strictly enforce regulations against medical institutions that closed illegally, the health ministry said in a statement.

Around 4% of some 36,000 private clinics had notified the government of plans to be closed yesterday to take part in the protest, Health Minister Cho Kyoo-hong said.

But about 5,379 medical institutions were closed nationwide, or 14.9% of 36,059 institutions that were checked, as of 4pm yesterday, the health ministry confirmed.

President Yoon Suk-yeol said the doctors’ strike was “regretful and disappointing”. “(The government) has no choice but to sternly deal with the illegal acts neglecting patients,” Yoon said during a cabinet meeting, while offering to work together if the doctors return to work.

Under the law, doctors defying the return-to-work order can face suspension of their licences or other legal repercussions.



Members of The Korea Medical Association hold blue placards that read “Medical (policy) manipulation. Education (policy) manipulation”, as they attend a rally in Seoul yesterday.

## Navy personnel hurt in boat ‘ramming’ incident: Manila

AFP  
Manila

The Philippines yesterday said one of its navy personnel was severely injured after the China Coast Guard rammed a Philippine vessel near Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea.

“A Philippine Navy personnel sustained severe injury after the CCG’s (China Coast Guard’s) intentional high-speed ramming during the rotation and resupply mission to the BRP Sierra Madre (LS57) on June 17,” a military statement said.

The shoal, which hosts a tiny Philippine garrison stationed on a deliberately beached old warship, has been a focus of escalating confrontations between Chinese and Philippine ships in recent months as Beijing steps up efforts to push its claims to the disputed area.

Shortly after the incident, the Chinese coast guard reported

that a Philippine resupply ship in the area had “ignored many solemn warnings from the Chinese side”.

It “approached the...Chinese vessel in an unprofessional way, resulting in a collision”, Beijing said, accusing the ship of having “illegally broken into the sea near Ren’ai Reef”.

“The Chinese Coast Guard took control measures against the Philippine ship in accordance with the law,” it added.

But the Philippine armed forces called China’s version of events “misleading”, decrying “the illegal presence and actions of Chinese vessels within the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone”.

Manila’s national task force on the West Philippine Sea later said the Chinese vessels had “engaged in dangerous manoeuvres, including ramming and towing”.

“Their actions put at risk the lives of our personnel and damaged our boats,” it said.

# Four Philippine policemen found guilty in duo’s killing

AFP  
Manila

Four Philippine policemen were found guilty yesterday of killing a father and son, court officials said, in a rare case of law enforcement officers being prosecuted for taking part in former president Rodrigo Duterte’s deadly drug war.

The low-ranking officers were all sentenced to up to 10 years in prison for the shooting deaths of the two victims at a Manila slum during a police operation in 2016, Manila regional trial court judge Rowena Alejandria said in her written ver-

dict that was read in court yesterday.

“It must be worthy to note that the accused themselves did not deny their presence and participation in the police operation conducted, the same event where the victims Luis and Gabriel were killed,” Alejandria wrote.

Luis Bonifacio was 45 and his son Gabriel Bonifacio was 19 when they were killed.

Thousands of suspects were killed by police and unknown gunmen in a campaign that became the centrepiece of Duterte’s 2016-2022 rule, a crackdown that critics described as state-sponsored extrajudicial killings and is now a subject

of an investigation by the International Criminal Court.

Luis Bonifacio’s partner Mary Ann Domingo, cried on her son’s shoulder as they listened to the verdict on two counts of homicide each being read at the cramped northern Manila courtroom.

She later told reporters that she felt the ruling showed “justice still exists”.

“I hope these (convictions) will continue not just for me but for the other victims of extrajudicial killings,” she added.

Manila policemen Virgilio Cervantes, Arnel de Guzman, Johnston Alacre and Artemio Saguros, who attended the court session wear-

ing their blue police uniforms, were also ordered to pay 400,000 pesos (\$6,820) each in damages to the victims’ heirs.

The convicts were marched out of the courtroom without speaking to reporters.

The family has alleged more than a dozen police officers took part in the nighttime raid at the northern Manila slum community.

The family insisted the two were not involved in drugs and were unarmed when police opened fire.

The defendants pleaded self-defence, alleging the suspects were armed and had shot at them.

But state prosecutors went with the lesser charge of homicide

against only four officers, instead of murder, which involves deliberate intent to kill and which carries a heavier penalty.

“We are treating this as a partial victory because in all honesty, the case we filed against these policemen was murder and not homicide,” the Domingo family lawyer Julian Oliva said.

Police said the crackdown left more than 6,000 people dead, but rights groups estimate tens of thousands of mostly poor men have been killed by officers and vigilantes, even without proof they were linked to drugs.

Duterte had openly ordered police to shoot dead suspects during

the operations if officers believed their lives were in danger.

While the crackdown has been widely condemned and sparked an international investigation, only five other policemen have been convicted for killing suspects.

Three Manila police officers were convicted in 2018 of murdering a 17-year old boy in 2017. Two other narcotics police officers were found guilty last year for separate killings in 2016 and 2017, the latter victim a South Korean businessman.

Lawyers say most families are too scared to go after their relatives’ killers or do not have the money or time to pursue a case in the Philippines’ creaky judicial system.





# Tories stare defeat in the face even in stronghold

**AFP**  
Godalming, UK

Even in Surrey, a historic stronghold of UK Conservatives, voters are tempted to give opposition parties a chance at the July 4 general election, saying successive governments have “made a mess of it”.

With its pretty stone houses, window boxes and main street lined with small shops, Godalming is a typical country town in affluent southeast England, about an hour's train ride from London.

Many of the town's 20,000 residents are retirees and from wealthy backgrounds, and have always sent a Conservative MP to the UK parliament at Westminster.

Jeremy Hunt, the current finance minister, has served the constituency since 2005 but is now one of the most prominent Tories threatened with losing their

seat, with polls suggesting the centrist Liberal Democrat party could come out on top.

Defeat for Hunt would be a political earthquake for the Tories, who have had five prime ministers during a tumultuous period in UK history that has encompassed Brexit, the Covid pandemic and more recently the cost-of-living crisis caused by high inflation.

“I’m normally quite right-wing, but this time around I have no idea to be quite honest,” Claudette

Forrester, a 61-year-old former finance employee, said on the town's main street.

Forrester, who now cares for her disabled daughter, is disappointed by the Conservatives' 14 years in power.

“I feel like they don't know what the everyday person has to go through in life. When you go shopping, you've got to count the pennies because food is extortionate,” she said.

“We need to change and we

need improvements,” agreed Ian, a 70-year-old retiree and former National Health Service (NHS) worker.

He said he would vote for the centre-left Labour, which polls predict will win a huge majority nationwide.

“I want the current Conservative government to go away. They have done terrible things to this country,” he said outside a branch of the upmarket supermarket chain Waitrose.

He cited the struggles of the state-funded NHS, which now has record waiting lists, and the handling of the pandemic.

Other voters also said the state of the NHS was a major issue, along with the scandals of Boris Johnson's government, such as parties held in Downing Street during lockdown.

Most disgruntled voters say they will vote for Liberal Democrat Paul Follows, a local figure unknown at the national level.

# ‘Normal’ Farage resonates with seaside voters

**Reuters**  
Clacton-on-sea, England

Nigel Farage's brand of politics has found a home in the English seaside town of Clacton-on-Sea, where voters described the right-wing party leader as a straight talker who, unlike other candidates, understands their problems and wants to solve them.

Britain's July 4 election will be Farage's eighth attempt to win a seat in parliament after the anti-EU, anti-immigration campaigner entered the race proclaiming his aim to supplant the ruling Conservatives as the main party of the right.

Farage is an expensively educated former financial trader. But decades of railing against the establishment have earned him the trust of supporters who say they feel other politicians talk down to them.

“I feel like he's more normal. He understands us,” Venetia Maynard, 29, a cleaner, said while out shopping on Monday. Clacton has all the hallmarks of a British seaside resort: fish and chips, ice creams, and pockets of deprivation left by a shrunken tourism industry and decades of underinvestment. Interviewed on the day Farage launched his Reform UK's plan for government, Maynard said she was going to vote for him although she didn't know that much about his policies.

Under Britain's electoral system, Reform can't win this election, Farage himself said on Monday.

But he says Reform can emerge as the main opposition to a centre-left government of the Labour Party, which is forecast by polls to win a thumping majority.

First, Farage himself must win a seat in Clacton. Polls show the seat is likely to be a close three horse race between Labour, the Conservatives and Reform. Although he has been heckled on the campaign trail elsewhere, pelted with a milkshake and chunks of debris, no one in Clacton seemed to have a harsh word for him. “I think he represents the working class a lot more than general politicians do. I mean, they're so out of touch with the working class. How can they represent a labourer or a cleaner or a bus driver?” said Michael Chaplin, 32, a roofer, as he strolled along the seafront. Clacton is a place where many people feel left behind, he said.

Kevin Ives, 63, a carer, said Farage was “brilliant” and he would vote for him. “Because he says what's totally obvious. If we keep bringing people into this country at the rate we are: eventually disaster.”

Cultivating an image of a British patriot, Farage spent over 20 years as an elected member of the European Parliament while arguing for its abolition. But although his party was able to win spots in European elections held under proportional representation, he never managed to win a seat of his own in parliament in the UK, under a first-past-the-post system that requires winning the most votes in a constituency.

## Sunak speaks to farmers in Barnstaple



British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak speaks to farmers as he campaigns on a farm near Barnstaple in North Devon, Britain, yesterday.

# Labour pledges to plug gaps left by bank branch closures

**Reuters**  
London

Britain's Labour Party said it would give regulators new powers to significantly increase the number of ‘banking hubs’ on high streets if voted into government next month.

Lawmakers in Britain have flagged concerns about the closure of branches leaving some people, particularly in rural areas, facing difficulties accessing cash as many customers bank online and use cards to pay in shops, cafes and petrol stations.

Banking hubs are located in communities across Britain and operated by the country's Post Office, in partnership with nine high

street banks. They allow for face-to-face personal and business banking as well as transactions and cash withdrawals.

Labour, which polls tip to win power from the Conservative Party in Britain's general election on July 4, said 6,000 branches have been shut since 2015, with only 50 banking hubs so far opened under a voluntary arrangement with banks including the big four of HSBC, Lloyds, NatWest and Barclays.

Rachel Reeves, who would become Britain's finance minister if Labour wins, said she would give the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) new powers to support LINK, Britain's largest cash machine network, to proactively source new locations for 350 hubs over the next five years.

It would also make it easier for communities to qualify for a hub, Labour said.

The Conservative government has already approved a law tasking the FCA to ensure reasonable provision of cash deposits as the volume of payments in Britain that do not involve cash rose from around 46% to 86% in the decade to 2022.

“The Conservatives have a clear plan to protect Access to Cash. We have taken the bold action to ensure we are on track to deliver 225 more banking hubs, ensuring peace of mind and financial security for people,” Bim Afolami, financial secretary to the Treasury, said in a statement.

More must be done to improve the timely delivery of services where cash access gaps have been identified,” the FCA said in an Access to Cash consultation paper in December on draft rules.

## Actor Ian McKellen recovering after falling off stage

British actor Ian McKellen, 85, fell off a London stage mid-performance and is now recovering after being taken to hospital, a theatre statement said yesterday. McKellen is starring as John Falstaff in *Player Kings*, a production of William Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Parts One and Two*, in the capital's West End theatre district.

In a fight scene during Monday evening's performance, McKellen lost his footing and fell off the front of the stage, crying out as staff rushed to help, media reported. The show was cancelled and the actor was taken to hospital.

“Following a scan, the brilliant NHS team have assured us that he will make a speedy and full recovery and Ian is in good spirits,” the theatre statement said.

The performance yesterday was cancelled to give McKellen a chance to rest and the play will resume today, it added. McKellen is best known for playing Gandalf in the film versions of *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* and was also Magneto in the *X-Men* movies.

## LibDem leader campaigns



Britain's Liberal Democrat party Leader Ed Davey greets a trainee at Nickel Support during a visit to a learning disability employment service in south London yesterday, during a party general election campaign event.

# Twice-stolen Titian painting up for auction

**Reuters**  
London

“Rest on the Flight into Egypt”, an early work by Titian that was looted by Napoleon and then stolen in the 1990s before being found at a London bus stop, will be offered for sale at auction next month, with an estimated price of up to \$32mn.

The painting, which auction house Christie's says is being offered to the market for the first time in around 145 years.

The artwork, part of the collection at British stately home Longleat House, will headline Christie's Old Masters Part I sale on July 2, with a price estimate of £15-25mn (\$19-32mn).

“It's painted when Titian's about 20 years old, around 1510 and it's that ignition moment when Titian is bringing about a real revolution in painting, introducing a naturalism to religious painting that had never

really been seen before,” Henry Pettifer, international deputy chairman of old master paintings at Christie's, said yesterday.

“It's incredibly rare for a picture of this importance to come to the auction market...there are very few important works by Titian in private hands.”

The painting was looted by Napoleon's troops in Vienna in 1809. It was auctioned by Christie's in 1878 when it was bought by the 4th Marquess of Bath, who took it to his home, Longleat House.

It was stolen from there in 1995, and following a reward of £100,000 (\$125,000) being offered, it was recovered by an art detective seven years later when it was found in a carrier bag at a bus stop in southwest London, without the frame. “A colourful history and an extraordinary story is always interesting in a work of art, because it is about storytelling,” Orlando Rock, chairman of Christie's UK, said.

# I was ‘political football’, says woman branded a spy

**Reuters**  
London

A woman publicly branded a Chinese spy and a threat to the nation's security by Britain's intelligence agency MI5 says the “politically-motivated” decision had destroyed her life and left her a prisoner in her own home.

In January 2022, the domestic spy agency MI5 sent out an alert notice (IA) about lawyer Christine

Lee, alleging she was “involved in political interference activities” in the UK on behalf of China's ruling Communist Party.

The unprecedented warning, circulated to lawmakers, said Lee had “facilitated financial donations to serving and aspiring parliamentarians on behalf of foreign nationals based in Hong Kong and China”.

Lee, along with her son, is now suing the spy agency, arguing it had acted unlawfully. Since the alert was issued she has not spoken

publicly, but in a witness statement submitted to the Investigatory Powers Tribunal in London, she said it had ruined her reputation and career.

“In short, I can summarise the issuance of the notice by the respondent has totally destroyed my life, my family's lives, my business and my business colleague's lives,” she said.

Amid a deterioration in relations in recent years, British security chiefs have regularly warned of the threat posed by China, while both

London and Beijing have traded spying accusations, with Lee's case one of the most high-profile.

Two Britons, including a former researcher for a prominent British lawmaker, face trial next year on charges of spying for China, while Beijing in June accused a married couple of being British spies.

In her statement, Lee, a British citizen who moved to Britain from Hong Kong in the early 1960s, says she was given no advance warning or details about the allegations against her. She said she had been

used as a “political football” to divert attention from the woes of then prime minister Boris Johnson.

“I maintain my claim that the IA was only issued against me as a political diversionary tool,” she said.

She said her work involved close dealings with both British parliamentarians and Chinese officials, and had included a private meeting with former British prime minister Theresa May in 2019.

MI5 said the alert about Lee been issued on the grounds of national security to protect parliamentary

democracy from foreign interference, and had been the most effective means of addressing the risk.

“We dispute and deny that there was any (political) interference,” the agency's lawyer Victoria Wakefield told the tribunal.

Lee left the public gallery in tears yesterday, the second day of the hearing which has mostly focused on whether MI5 had the authority to issue the alert notice and if it had breached her human rights. The tribunal said it would give its judgment at a later date.



# India ‘eyeing personal tax rate cuts to boost consumption’

Reuters  
New Delhi

The Indian government is considering lowering personal tax rates for certain categories of individuals, which could help boost consumption in the Asia's third-largest economy, two govern-

ment sources said. The plan could be announced in July, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government presents the first federal budget. A post-poll survey showed that voters were worried about inflation, unemployment and decreasing incomes. While the Indian economy grew at a world-beating 8.2% in

2023-24, consumption has grown at half that pace. Prime Minister Modi, while staking a claim to form the National Democratic Alliance ruled government, had said his administration would focus on raising middle-class savings and improving the quality of their lives. A cut in personal tax could boost consumption in the

economy and increase savings for the middle class, the sources said, declining to be identified as budget discussions are confidential. India's finance ministry did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment. The category of individuals that may see some tax relief are those earning over Rs1.5mn (\$17,960.42)

annually, up to a certain amount which is yet to be determined, the first source said. The changes could be made to a tax scheme introduced in 2020, where annual income up to Rs1.5mn is taxed at 5%-20% while earnings over Rs1.5mn is taxed at 30%. The personal tax rate jumps six-fold when an individual's in-

come increases by five times from Rs300,000 to Rs1.5mn, "which is quite steep," the second source said. The government may also explore lowering personal tax rates for annual incomes of Rs1mn, said the first source, adding that a new threshold was being discussed for income taxed at the highest rate of 30% under the old tax system.

# Probe opens into railway collision that killed nine, injured dozens

Reuters  
Kolkata

India yesterday launched an investigation into a train collision that killed nine people in the state of West Bengal and injured more than 50, a day after a top railway official blamed the incident on driver error. The death toll was revised down to nine from 15 after Monday's accident, in which a freight train rammed into a passenger train heading for the state capital of Kolkata from the northeastern state of Tripura.

"The inquiry will involve eyewitness accounts, scrutiny of official documents and statements from railway officials, regarding signalling and other mandatory safety issues," Chetan Kumar Shrivastava, general manager, Northeast Frontier railway, said. On Monday, India's top railway official said the driver of the freight train, who was among the dead, disregarded a signal, leading to the crash with the Kanchanjunga Express, which had halted near a railway station in the district of Darjeeling. There were 1,400 people aboard, a railway spokesperson said. But media said an automatic signalling system had not been working from Monday morning, prompting authorities to advise train drivers to proceed slower than usual, in a process known as "paper signals".

India's opposition leaders criticised the railway safety record of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, attributing it to negligence. The incident came a little over a year after about 288 people were killed in one of India's worst rail crashes in the neighbouring state of Odisha, caused by a signalling error. State-run Indian Railways, notorious for overcrowding, is the world's fourth largest train network, carrying 13mn people a day, along with nearly 1.5bn tonnes of freight in 2022.

In remarks to media on Monday, top railway official Jaya Varma Sinha, who chairs India's railway board, called for human error to be reduced, adding that an anti-collision system was being set up nationwide. Partial services resumed on the affected tracks yesterday, with some trains diverted and others running slower than usual, railway officials said. Many of the carriages have since been cleared from the lines, pushed onto the grassy verge. As trains passed them yesterday morning, passengers stared out at the wreckage. Meanwhile, survivors of the crash yesterday described their terror at the accident. "I did not feel like I was going to survive," said passenger Arti Roy who lost her belongings when the carriages crumpled, twisted and then flipped off the rails.



Former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi speaks at the Tibetan parliament-in-exile at Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, India.

# US lawmakers in India to meet Dalai Lama today

Reuters  
Dharamshala, India

A group of US lawmakers arrived in India yesterday to meet Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, with the head of the delegation saying President Joe Biden would soon sign a bill that aims to press China to resolve the Tibet dispute. The bill seeks to push Beijing to hold talks with Tibetan leaders, stalled since 2010, to secure a negotiated agreement on Tibet and spur China to address Tibetan people's aspirations on their historical, cultural, religious and linguistic identity. The visit, likely to rile Beijing at a time when the US and China have sought to stabilise rocky ties, comes days ahead of a US trip planned by the Dalai Lama for medical treatment, but it is unclear if he will have any engagements during it. The bipartisan delegation of seven lawmakers, headed by Republican Representative Michael McCaul and including Democratic former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, arrived in the Himalayan town of Dharamshala. It is home to the 88-year-old Tibetan monk in exile.

"We are very excited to see the Dalai Lama tomorrow to talk about many things, including the bill we just passed out of Congress that basically says the US stands with the people of Tibet," McCaul said. He was referring to a meeting set for today morning. Asked if Biden will sign the bill soon, McCaul responded, "Yes, he will, he will." McCaul, chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, was referring to the legislation, 'Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act', also known as the Resolve Tibet Act. US lawmakers have regularly visited Dharamshala and touted the work of the Dalai Lama to draw global support for linguistic and cultural autonomy in his remote, mountainous homeland. Beijing, which considers the Nobel peace laureate a dangerous "splittist" or separatist, said it was "seriously concerned" about the visit and the bill expected to be signed by Biden. "We...urge the US to fully recognise the anti-China and separatist nature of the Dalai clique, abide by its commitments on Tibet-related issues, refrain from any form of contact with it, and stop sending erroneous messages," foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said yesterday.

Lin said Tibet's affairs are purely the internal affairs of China, which brooks no interference from external forces. "We urge the US side to honour its commitment of recognising Tibet as part of China and not supporting Tibetan independence, and not to sign the above-mentioned bill," Lin told a regular briefing. Beijing would take "resolute and forceful measures" to safeguard its sovereignty, security and development interests, he added. The Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959 after a failed uprising against Chinese rule in Tibet. Chinese officials chafe at any interaction he has with officials of other countries. The Dalai Lama has met US officials, including presidents, during previous visits to the US, but Biden has not met him since taking office in 2021. Crowds of Tibetans, among them school children holding banners, gathered at the airport of the small hill town to greet the visiting lawmakers. "Over the last two years the Resolve Tibet Bill was passed...and it is now on the desk of President Biden, so that will be a game changer," said Tenzin Lekshay, spokesperson for the Central Tibetan Administration, or government in exile.

# India sees record peak demand for power in north

Peak demand for power in India's hot, arid northern plains hit a record on Monday, the government said as it continues to implement measures to meet high energy consumption, although the weeks' long heatwave is forecast to abate soon. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted above-normal temperatures for June in the northwest and central parts of the country, making it one of the longest heatwave spells. Government data shows that there were nearly 25,000 cases of suspected heat stroke and 56 people lost their lives in the sweltering heat across the country from March-May. India's power ministry said demand for power at the peak time on Monday reached 89 gigawatt (GW), the highest ever for the northern region, adding that the strong demand, which has prevailed since May 17, was "challenging". The temperature in the national capital Delhi was about 44C late Monday afternoon but the IMD said it felt like 49.2C. In Delhi, which is facing a water shortage, the highest daily temperatures have stayed above 40C since May 12 and are forecast to fall below that mark only on June 26.



A man wears a scarf as he walks past the India Gate on a hot summer day in New Delhi yesterday.

# Monsoon rains a fifth below normal so far

Reuters  
Mumbai

India's monsoon has delivered a fifth less rain than normal so far this season, the weather department said yesterday, in a worrying sign for the vital agricultural sector. Summer rains, critical to economic growth in Asia's third-largest economy, usually begin in the south around June 1 before spreading nationwide by July 8, allowing farmers to plant crops such as rice, cotton, soybeans, and sugarcane. India has received 20% less rainfall than normal since June 1, according to data compiled by the state-run India Meteorological Department (IMD), with almost all regions except for a few southern states seeing shortfalls and some northwestern states experiencing heat waves. The rain shortfall in soybean, cotton, sugarcane, and pulses-

growing central India has risen to 29%, while the paddy-growing southern region received 17% more rainfall than normal due to the early onset of the monsoon, according to the data. The northeast has received 20% less rainfall than normal so far, and the northwest some 68% less. The lifeblood of the nearly \$3.5tn economy, the monsoon brings nearly 70% of the rain India needs to water farms and refill reservoirs and aquifers. In the absence of irrigation, nearly half the farmland in the world's second-biggest producer of rice, wheat and sugar depends on the annual rains that usually run until September. "The monsoon's progress is stalled. It has weakened. But when it revives and becomes active, it can erase the rain deficit in a short burst," an IMD official said. The official sought anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media.

# Opposition seeks Nehru-Gandhi dynasty boost in parliament

Reuters  
New Delhi

Ascension of India's Nehru-Gandhi dynasty is due to make her electoral debut, potentially strengthening the opposition's challenge to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in parliament after he was humbled in a recent election, politicians and analysts said. The family has long been the glue holding factions of the main opposition Congress Party together, through Modi's massive mandates in 2014 and 2019 and

his unexpected loss of a parliamentary majority in elections that ended this month. Congress has credited Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, 52, its general secretary, and her older brother Rahul, for nearly doubling its tally in the latest election, and galvanising the wider 'INDIA' opposition alliance of parties led by Congress, that forced Modi to rely on allies to run a government for the first time. Rahul and his mother Sonia have both been Congress party presidents and are lawmakers, but Priyanka, known for her ora-

tory and crowd-pulling power, will be standing for office for the first time from one of two seats that Rahul won recently but needs to vacate, in accordance with law. Congress workers have long urged that she contests elections. "They are getting on the offensive because Priyanka is a good speaker," said political analyst Rasheed Kidwai. "So in the house, it's Modi who will be on the defensive because of the presence of the two Gandhis," Rahul and Priyanka, he said. "The Gandhis are on a high

now." Opposition leader Aaditya Thackeray welcomed Priyanka's candidature: "A very strong and dedicated voice that will only make the voice of INDIA stronger in parliament". Priyanka will stand for a by-election in the southern state of Kerala after Rahul, 53, decided to keep his other seat in the family bastion of Raebareli in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state that sends most lawmakers to parliament. Indian laws allow a candidate to contest from up to two seats,

but to retain only one. Analysts expect Priyanka to win from Wayanad, given her brother has won from there twice. Votes are expected to be cast in the coming weeks. If she wins, she and Rahul will be in the lower house of India's parliament, with their mother Sonia in the upper house. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party said Congress's reliance on the family that has given India three prime ministers was not ideal for democracy. BJP leaders, who have long ridiculed Rahul as a "prince" undeserving of his political po-

sition, have said Congress has been behaving as if it had won the election. While Congress has won 99 of 543 seats in the lower chamber of parliament, against 240 for the BJP, the result for Congress is far better than the 52 in 2019 and its all-time low of 44 in 2014. Priyanka vowed not to "let the people of Wayanad feel the absence of Rahul Gandhi". "I will work very hard and try my best to please everyone and be a good representative," she told reporters.





## Starliner's return pushed to June 26

Boeing Starliner's return to Earth from the International Space Station (ISS) with its first crew of astronauts has been pushed back to June 26, a Nasa official said yesterday.

Nasa astronauts Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams were launched aboard Starliner June 5 and arrived at the ISS following a 24-hour flight in which the spacecraft encountered four helium leaks and five failures of its 28 manoeuvring thrusters.

Starliner's first flight with astronauts is a crucial last test in a much-delayed and over-budget programme before the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) can certify the spacecraft for routine astronaut missions and add a second US crew vehicle to its fleet, alongside SpaceX's Crew Dragon.

The new delay of the return of Starliner is intended "to give our team a little bit more time to look at the data, do some analysis and make sure we're really ready to come home", Steve Stich, Nasa's commercial crew programme manager, said during a news conference.

Nasa is targeting a departure no earlier than June 26, leaving open an opportunity for further extensions of time at the ISS.

Starliner, while designed for future six-month missions, can stay docked to the ISS for a maximum of 45 days during its current mission. – **Reuters**

## Searing heat scorches US from Chicago to east coast

AFP/Reuters

Chicago/New York City

Extreme heat and high humidity smothered the central and northeastern United States yesterday, with temperature records expected to melt away in the coming days, authorities warned, as wildfires sizzled in the west.

"A heatwave will settle and persist across the Great Lakes, Ohio Valley and the Northeast through the next few days," the National Weather Service (NWS) said, explaining that the early arrival of summer heatwave made it more dangerous.

Forecasters predicted that the mercury could hit 100° Fahrenheit (about 38° Celsius) in certain parts of New England by tomorrow.

"Widespread, numerous record-tying/breaking high temperatures are possible," it said, adding that the heat would not abate significantly overnight and warning that those without air conditioning could suffer in particular.

With roughly 80mn people from Indiana

to New England under a heat advisory or excessive heat warning, New York Governor Kathy Hochul has activated the state's Emergency Operations Centre in response to high temperatures expected to last until the weekend.

"This is a deadly event," she said, one day after the city of Syracuse hit 94F (34.4C), topping a record from 1994. "We have seen blizzards, we have seen flooding, we had hurricanes, we had tornadoes. But this heat event is most likely to cause more deaths."

The state's beaches and public pools will open early, in time for people to enjoy them over the Juneteenth holiday on Wednesday, she said.

In Chicago, such an early and prolonged heatwave has not been seen since 1933, the Illinois state climatologist's office said on X, formerly Twitter.

City officials have opened community cooling centres for those in need.

Chicago registered 97F at Chicago O'Hare International Airport on Monday, which broke a previous record of 96F set in 1957.

Cleveland also set a record.

Detroit and Philadelphia, as well as cities in New Hampshire, Connecticut and Maine are also due for record temperatures in the coming days, NWS meteorologist Marc Chenard said.

While it is too soon to say if the heat is driven by climate change, this wave has come sooner than others.

Central Maine is running 30F above average, he added.

"It's kind of early in the season to be getting this long of a duration of heatwave for the Ohio Valley and New England," Chenard said. "That's really the main danger or risks from this event."

The sweltering – and record – heat, started just days before the official start of summer tomorrow, and is expected to last the rest of the week.

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer took to social media to ask that residents watch out for their neighbours, especially the elderly who are more vulnerable to the heat.

"Be sure to check on your friends, family, and neighbours to make sure they're doing all right," she wrote.

Human-caused climate change is heating up the planet at an alarming rate, the global scientific community agrees.

Dramatic climate shifts have begun taking a heavy toll worldwide, fuelling extreme weather events, flooding and drought, while glaciers are rapidly melting away and sea levels are rising.

The year 2023 was the hottest on record, according to the European Union's climate monitor, Copernicus.

A coalition of environmental, labour and health advocacy groups have called on the administration of US President Joe Biden to unblock federal disaster aid funds to tackle both extreme heat and wildfires, particularly the smoke they generate.

Neither situation is currently covered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as a disaster eligible for relief funding.

As the East Coast prepared for searing heat, firefighters in California were battling a major wildfire, and 7,000 residents of the small resort town of Ruidoso in New Mexico were forced to evacuate in the face of a spreading, uncontained wildfire.

## Pro-Trump groups outspending pro-Biden groups so far

Outside groups supporting Donald Trump's presidential bid have spent significantly more money in recent months than groups that are working to re-elect Democratic President Joe Biden, according to a Reuters analysis of campaign finance records.

Pro-Trump spending groups have spent over \$25mn since Trump clinched the Republican nomination on March 6, Federal Election Commission records show, compared to over \$15mn spent by Biden's allies.

MAGA Inc, the largest pro-Trump super PAC, will report tomorrow that it had \$93.7mn in the bank at the end of May, up from \$33mn at the end of April, according to a senior official with MAGA Inc who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Both sides have put most of their recent spending into television attack ads, as they try to sway the small slice of US voters who will determine the outcome of the November 5 election.

Trump allies say the spending blitz aims to counter Biden's early fundraising advantage.

Biden's campaign reported \$84mn in the bank at the end of April, compared to \$49mn reported by Trump.

"There's an effort to strategically weaken Biden's cash advantage," said a source familiar with MAGA Inc, who also spoke on condition of anonymity. "Right now, Trump's campaign is able to bank every dollar they raise because his allies at MAGA Inc are carrying the weight of the ad war against Team Biden."

Trump's fundraising deficit has been compounded by courtroom battles that have driven up his legal bills and made him the first US president to be convicted of felony crimes.

Biden, 81, and Trump, 78, are neck-and-neck in national public opinion polls, though Trump has a slight advantage in the battleground states that could determine the winner of the election.

Both campaigns are due to report updated campaign finance figures tomorrow.

"We're seeing spending essentially at parity and know the campaign will have the resources going into this fall to highlight the stark choice voters have this fall," a source close to the Biden campaign.

The Trump campaign said in a statement that its own fundraising was strong, propelled by Trump's conviction.

The campaign highlighted that Trump raised \$53mn in the 24 hours after the guilty verdict.

Unlike political campaigns, super PACs face no limits on fundraising, but they are not allowed to co-ordinate their ad purchases with the candidates they support. They must report spending shortly after it happens.

MAGA Inc spent roughly \$18mn to help Trump's campaign, largely on a barrage of television and digital ads that have attacked Biden's immigration policies and have argued that he is too old.

By contrast, Future Forward, the biggest super PAC backing Biden, has reported new expenditures to the FEC since March 6 that total less than \$1mn, even though it held \$57mn in the bank at the end of April.

A senior Democrat with ties to the group, speaking on condition of anonymity, said it would spend heavily in the final months of the election, as it did in the 2020 contest when Biden defeated Trump. – **Reuters**

# Biden announces new citizenship path for spouses of Americans

Reuters/AFP

Washington

President Joe Biden announced one of the biggest legalisation efforts in recent history yesterday, offering a path to citizenship to hundreds of thousands of immigrants in the US illegally who are married to US citizens.

The election year move contrasts sharply with his Republican rival Donald Trump's plan for mass deportations.

The programme will be open to an estimated 500,000 spouses who have lived in the US for at least 10 years as of June 17, the White House and US Department of Homeland Security said in statements yesterday.

Some 50,000 children under age 21 with a US-citizen parent also will be eligible.

"These actions will promote family unity and strengthen our economy," the White House said in a statement.

Biden, a Democrat seeking a second term in November's presidential election, took office vowing to reverse many restrictive immigration policies of his predecessor Trump, who is also looking to return to the White House.

However, faced with record levels of migrant arrests at the US-Mexico border, Biden has toughened his approach in recent months.

Earlier this month, Biden barred most migrants crossing the US-Mexico border from requesting asylum, a policy that mirrored a similar Trump-era asylum ban and drew criticism from immigration advocates and some Democrats.



Biden speaks at an event marking the 12th anniversary of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals at the White House in Washington, DC. – **AFP**

tion advocates and some Democrats.

Biden's planned legalisation programme for spouses of US citizens could reinforce his campaign message that he supports a more humane immigration system and show how he differs from Trump, who has long had a hard-line stance on both legal and illegal immigration.

The programme will allow the spouses and children to apply for permanent residence without leaving the US, removing a potentially lengthy process and family separation.

If they are granted green cards, they could eventually apply for US citizenship.

People who are considered public security threats or who have disqualifying criminal history would not be eligible.

The implementation will roll out in coming months and the

majority of likely beneficiaries would be Mexicans, senior Biden administration officials said on a call with reporters.

Biden spoke about the announcement at an event at the White House yesterday tied to the anniversary of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme, where he was accompanied by Democratic lawmakers, immigration advocates, DACA recipients and spouses of undocumented people.

Former president Barack Obama and then-vice-president Biden launched the DACA programme in 2012, another major legalisation effort that currently grants deportation relief and work permits to 528,000 people brought to the US as children.

The Biden administration has also announced guidance to make it easier for DACA recipients to obtain skilled-work visas.

US Representative Adriano Esparilla, a Democrat attending yesterday's event, said the relief for spouses is a way for the administration to balance recent border enforcement measures.

Trump campaign spokesperson Karoline Leavitt called Biden's new programme "amnesty" and in a statement reiterated Trump's deportation pledge, saying he would "restore the rule of law" if re-elected.

A little more than half of US voters back deporting all or most immigrants in the US illegally, Reuters/Ipsos polling shows.

At the same time, separate polling by the advocacy group Immigration Hub found 71% of voters in seven election battleground states backed allowing spouses in the US for more than five years to remain.

Rebecca Shi, executive director of the American Business Im-

migration Coalition, said focus groups conducted by her organisation with independent and Republican voters found they supported legal status for spouses.

"It boosts turnout in terms of Latino and base voters, but it also has support with the middle and the right," she said on a call with reporters on Monday, adding that most people thought the spouses could already legalise.

Republicans slammed the new rules.

Far-right House member Marjorie Taylor Greene said Biden "wrote a vote-buying free citizenship executive order".

Congressman Josh Brecheen of Oklahoma said: "With the stroke of a pen, President Biden is now shielding 550,000 illegal aliens from deportation. This is all in an effort to appease their family members hoping to garnish their votes for the upcoming election."

## White House slams 'cheapfake' clips of Biden

The White House has criticised Republicans for spreading videos purported to show President Joe Biden's mental and physical decline, saying that the images had been deceptively cut and manipulated.

"It tells you everything that we need to know about how desperate Republicans are here," Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters, branding the clips as "cheapfake" videos.

Outlets including the *New York Post* and an official Republican social media account have shared several seemingly damning short videos in recent days of the 81-year-old president.

In one video, an apparently disoriented Biden appears to wander away from fellow world leaders while watching a skydiving display during a G7 summit in Italy last week.

However, Jean-Pierre said the footage was misleadingly edited, and Biden instead was moving to give a thumbs up to the parachutists.

"This was widely fact checked ... including by conservative media," she said at a media briefing, adding: "If you run that tape a little bit longer than you'd see...what was happening?"

Earlier in the week NBC also debunked the claim, posting footage caught by its own cameras from another angle online which showed Biden interacting with the parachutists just a few feet away. Another widely-shared clip was a close-up shot

of Biden standing still as world leaders danced close to him during a concert at the White House – which opponents said showed a state of confusion.

"The president stood there listening to the music, and he didn't dance. Excuse me. I did not know not dancing was (...) a health issue," Jean-Pierre said of the video.

And on the weekend, the *New York Post* again shared a video appearing to show Biden getting lost on stage during a fundraising event in California, before being pointed to an exit by former president Barack Obama.

Andrew Bates, another White House spokesman, said on X that Biden was instead waiting on the stage to appreciate the applause from his supporters.

And Eric Schultz, a senior Obama adviser, posted a link to the *Post* article on X, writing: "This did not happen".

Biden's main rival in the November election, Republican Donald Trump, has made Biden's advancing age one of his main campaign rallying points, trying to position himself as an energetic alternative – despite being, at 78, just three years younger.

Whoever wins the vote will set a new age record. Biden is already the oldest man to hold the office and would continue to be so, while if Trump wins, he would become the oldest ever at an inauguration. – **AFP**



# Nuclear arms spending soars as global tensions swell, studies show

By **Nina Larson** and **Johannes Ledel**  
AFP

Nuclear-armed countries hiked spending on atomic weapons arsenals by a third in the past five years as they modernised their stockpiles amid growing geopolitical tensions, two reports showed on Monday.

The world's nine nuclear-armed states jointly spent \$91bn on their arsenals last year, according to a new report from the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN).

That report, and a separate one from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), indicated that nuclear weapons states are dramatically scaling up spending as they modernise and even deploy new nuclear-armed weapons.

"I think it is fair to say there is a nuclear

arms race under way," ICAN chief Melissa Parke told AFP.

Wilfred Wan, head of SIPRI's weapons of mass destruction programme, meanwhile warned in a statement that "we have not seen nuclear weapons playing such a prominent role in international relations since the Cold War".

SIPRI's report showed the total estimated number of nuclear warheads actually declined somewhat to 12,121 at the start of this year, from 12,512 a year earlier.

However, while some of that included older warheads scheduled to be dismantled, it said 9,585 were in stockpiles for potential use – nine more than a year earlier.

And 2,100 were kept in a state of "high operational alert" on ballistic missiles.

Nearly all of those were held by the US and Russia, but China was for the first time believed to also have some warheads on high operational alert, SIPRI said.

"While the global total of nuclear warheads continues to fall as Cold War-era weapons are gradually dismantled, regrettably we continue to see year-on-year increases in the number of operational nuclear warheads," SIPRI director Dan Smith said.

The spending surge reported by ICAN appeared to back that up.

The report showed that in 2023 alone, nuclear weapons spending worldwide jumped by \$10.8bn from a year earlier, with the United States accounting for 80% of that increase.

The US share of total spending, \$51.5bn, "is more than all the other nuclear-armed countries put together," said ICAN.

The next biggest spender was China, at \$11.8bn, followed by Russia, spending \$8.3bn.

Britain's spending meanwhile rose significantly for the second year in a row,

swelling 17% to \$8.1bn.

Spending for 2023 by the nuclear-armed states – which also include France, India, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea – jumped more than 33% from the \$68.2bn spent in 2018, when ICAN first began collecting this data, it said.

Since then, the nuclear armed states have spent an estimated total of \$387bn on the deadly weapons, the report showed.

Parke slammed "the billions of dollars being squandered on nuclear weapons" as "a profound and unacceptable misallocation of public funds".

She highlighted that that money was more than what the World Food Programme estimates is needed to end world hunger.

"And you could plant a million trees for every minute of nuclear weapons spending," she said.

"These numbers are obscene, and it is

money that the state says is going towards weapons that... will never be used," she said, pointing to the nuclear deterrence doctrine.

The investments are not only wasteful but also extremely dangerous, she warned. "What happens when deterrence fails?"

Geneva-based ICAN won the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for its key role in drafting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which took effect in 2021.

Seventy countries have ratified it to date and more have signed it, although none of the nuclear weapons states have come on board.

"Instead of investing in Armageddon, the nine nuclear-armed states should follow the example of almost half the world's countries and join the treaty ... and make a real contribution to global security," said Alicia Sanders-Zakre, a co-author of Monday's ICAN report.



Mark Rutte speaking to the media on the day of a European Union leaders informal summit in Brussels, on Monday. - **Reuters**

## Dutch PM Rutte to succeed Stoltenberg as Nato chief: media

**Reuters**  
Washington/Amsterdam/Budapest

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, a staunch ally of Kyiv and a critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, will succeed Jens Stoltenberg as Nato chief, Dutch national broadcaster NOS reported yesterday, after Hungary and Slovakia backed him.

Speaking at a news conference alongside US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington, Stoltenberg neither confirmed nor denied the media report.

"With the announcement of (Hungarian) Prime Minister (Viktor) Orban, I think it's obvious that we are very close to a conclusion ... to select the next secretary-general, and I think that's good news," he told reporters, while praising Rutte.

"I think Mark is a very strong candidate. He has a lot of experience as prime minister. He's a close friend and colleague, and I therefore strongly believe that very soon, the alliance will have decided on my successor," he said. "And that will be good for all of us, for Nato and also for me."

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato)'s next secretary-general will face the challenge of sustaining allies' support for Ukraine's fight against Russia's invasion, while guarding against any escalation that could draw the military alliance directly into a war with Moscow.

In the two years since Russia launched its full-scale invasion, Rutte has been one of the driving forces behind Europe's military support to Ukraine, stressing time and again what he said was the absolute need for a Russian battlefield defeat to secure peace in Europe.

Under his recent leadership, the Netherlands has ramped up defence spending above the 2% threshold of GDP required of Nato members, providing F-16 fighter jets, artillery, drones and ammunition to Kyiv as well as investing heavily in its own military.

Rutte's support for Ukraine is underscored by his criticism of Russia and its President Vladimir Putin, as the Netherlands holds Russia accountable

for the downing of passenger flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine in July 2014 – which killed all 298 passengers and crew, 196 of them from the Netherlands.

Hours before the NOS report, Hungary and Slovakia had given their support to the candidacy of Rutte, clearing a crucial hurdle on his way to Nato's top job.

Nato takes decisions by consensus, so any candidate needs the support of all 32 allies.

Only Romania, whose President Klaus Iohannis is also vying for the job, is still officially opposed to Rutte's candidacy.

Hungary's backing followed a meeting Orban had with Stoltenberg last week, where the two sides agreed that Hungary would not block Nato decisions on providing support for Ukraine but has agreed that it would not be involved.

"PM Mark Rutte confirmed that he fully supports this deal and will continue to do so, should he become the next secretary-general of Nato," Orban wrote on the X social media platform. "In light of his pledge, Hungary is ready to support PM Rutte's bid for Nato secretary-general."

Orban had earlier opposed Rutte's candidacy because he had expressed "problematic" opinions that included the idea that Hungary should leave the European Union.

Hungary has been at odds with other Nato countries over Orban's continued cultivation of close ties with Russia and refusal to send arms to Ukraine, with Budapest's foreign minister last month labelling plans to help the nation a "crazy mission".

Turkiye and Slovakia have also changed course on Rutte's bid, with Turkiye saying it would support him in late April and Slovakia announcing its support earlier yesterday.

Slovakia, which borders Ukraine, had stressed the need for the next Nato chief to help deal with the protection of Slovak airspace, its President Peter Pellegrini said, after the previous Slovak government donated an S-300 system to Ukraine, and allies pulled out Patriot batteries that had been temporarily placed there.

Stoltenberg's term will end on October 1.

**Reuters/AFP**  
Seoul/Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived early today in North Korea, vowing to deepen trade and security ties with the reclusive nuclear-armed state and to support it against the United States.

The trip is Putin's first to the isolated nation in 24 years, with a recent confrontation between North and South Korean troops on the countries' shared border highlighting regional security tensions.

The two Koreas have remained technically at war since their 1950-53 conflict and the border dividing them is one of the most heavily fortified in the world.

Russian state media showed Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un shaking hands, embracing and talking beside Putin's plane.

It touched down in Pyongyang around 2.45am following a stopover in Russia's far east. The leaders then rode in the same limousine and walked together into Putin's hotel.

The US and its Asian allies are trying to work out just how far Russia will go in support of the North Korean leader, whose country is the only one to have conducted nuclear weapon tests in the 21st century.

In a signal that Russia, a veto-wielding member of the UN Security Council, is reassessing its entire approach to North Korea, Putin praised Pyongyang ahead of his arrival for resisting what he said was US economic pressure, blackmail and threats.

In an article published by North Korean state media, Putin praised "Comrade" Kim, and promised to "jointly resist illegitimate unilateral restrictions", to develop trade and strengthen security across Eurasia.

"Washington, refusing to implement previously reached agreements, continuously puts forward new, increasingly stringent and obviously unacceptable demands," Putin said in the article, printed on the front page of North Korea's *Rodong Sinmun*, the ruling Workers' Party mouthpiece.

"Russia has always supported and will continue to support the DPRK and the heroic Korean people in their opposition to the insidious, dangerous and aggressive enemy"

Putin issued a presidential order on the eve of the visit, saying that Moscow was looking to sign a "comprehensive strategic partnership



Putin with Kim Jong-un during a meeting in Pyongyang. - **Reuters**

treaty" with North Korea.

His foreign policy adviser, Yuri Ushakov, said it would include security issues.

Ushakov said the deal would not be directed against any other country, but would "outline prospects for further co-operation".

Putin noted the Soviet Union was the first to recognise the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) founded by Kim's grandfather, Kim Il-sung, less than two years before the 1950 Korean War.

North Korean state media also published articles praising Russia and supporting its military operations in Ukraine, calling them a "sacred war of all Russian citizens".

Putin's state visit comes amid US accusations that North Korea has supplied "dozens of ballistic missiles and over 11,000 containers of munitions to Russia" for use in its invasion of Ukraine. South Korea, a staunch US ally, has raised similar concerns.

The White House said on Monday that it was troubled by the deepening relationship between Russia and North Korea.

The US State Department said it was "quite certain" Putin would be seeking arms to support his war in Ukraine.

Moscow and Pyongyang have denied arms transfers but have vowed to boost military ties, possibly including joint drills.

Russia is due to exceed the whole North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) military al-

liance on ammunition production this year, so Putin's trip is likely aimed at underscoring to Washington just how disruptive Moscow can be on a host of global crises.

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

The visit will include one-on-one discussions between the two leaders, as well as a gala concert, state reception, honour guards, document signings and a statement to the media, Russia's Interfax news agency quoted Putin's aide Ushakov as saying.

Russian Defence Minister Andrei Belousov, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the ministers for natural resources, health, and transport, the heads of the Russian space agency and its railways, and Putin's point man for energy, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak, will be part of the delegation.

North Korea has been under UN sanctions for its ballistic missile and nuclear programmes since 2006, and those measures have been strengthened over the years.

The Security Council has been divided over how to deal with Pyongyang.

Russia and China say more sanctions will not help while Washington and its Asian allies accuse Beijing and Moscow of emboldening North Korea by shielding it from more sanctions.

## 'We are like slaves', Afghan girl tells UN rights council

**AFP**  
Geneva

A young girl living in Taliban-run Afghanistan provided the top UN rights body with rare, anonymous testimony from within the country yesterday, describing a life of "slavery".

Filmed from behind in front of a white screen, with only the black outline of her head covering visible, the girl identified as Laila recalled what it was like before the movement swept back to power nearly three years ago.

Before that, women and girls "were free", she said in the recording as the body met in Geneva to address the rights situation in the country.

"But now we are not free. We are like slaves".

Afghan girls are like "birds with broken wings", she said. "They are still trying to fly, and they still want to find an opportunity and fly

as ... high as they can."

Since returning to power in 2021, the Taliban government has used its interpretation of Islam to erode women's rights, banning them from secondary schools, universities and some public spaces such as parks, and refusing to let them carry out certain types of work.

The UN has described the situation in the country as "gender-based apartheid".

The Taliban authorities have responded to international criticism by saying that Afghanistan's laws follow Islam and guarantee all citizens' rights under sharia.

However, Richard Bennett, the special rapporteur on the rights situation in Afghanistan, told the council yesterday that the violations against women and girls were "so severe and extensive" that "they may amount to crimes against humanity".

"The Taliban's institutionalisation of its system of gender oppression should shock the con-

science of humanity," he said.

Last year, the executive director of UN Women Sima Bahous warned that the situation was so dire that suicidal thoughts were "everywhere" for women.

In her testimony, Laila said she knew several women who had taken their own lives after they were captured and badly beaten by men using the "excuse" that they were not wearing a "proper hijab".

"I'm sure that it's an excuse, because girls are really afraid. They always try to wear black, a scarf, black coat, everything," she said.

Laila said she herself constantly worried what would happen if security forces captured her.

"Do they kill me?" she asked.

In particular, she said she was "really worried about my future".

After girls were banned from going to secondary schools, she has been stuck at home, helping her mother, learning to cook various dishes.

"This is not my future," she in-

sisted. "I lost many opportunities in my life ... I face depression and I feel helpless."

However, she stressed, "I didn't give up, and I will never give up".

"I want to have a bright future. I want to become a leader. I want to become the voice of all Afghan girls."

Laila stressed the urgent need for international support.

"I appeal to the international community, actually I beg them, to keep supporting the girls and women of Afghanistan, especially in education and work," she said.

Shafiqah Khpalwak, an Afghan poet, writer, and rights activist living in exile, also pleaded for international action.

"In the eyes of the Taliban, we are nobody," she told the council from the podium.

"We are not nobody," she insisted. "We continue to resist for our rights, and we ask you to stand with us and be on the right side of history."

## Timberlake arrested for drunk driving

Pop singer Justin Timberlake was arrested and charged with driving while intoxicated in a neighbourhood in the Hamptons on New York's Long Island, authorities said yesterday.

Timberlake was arrested in the town of Sag Harbour yesterday morning, according to a statement from the local district attorney's office.

The 43-year-old was arraigned in Sag Harbour Village Justice Court and released, the statement said.

His next court date will be a virtual appearance on July 26, the statement said.

Representatives for Timberlake did not immediately reply to an e-mail seeking comment.

Timberlake was taken into custody after he left a dinner at the American Hotel, *People* magazine reported. - **Reuters**

## Sweden sees rise in diabetes among young children: report

Diabetes diagnoses among children under five have risen in recent years, a charity supporting diabetes research said yesterday, adding that the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic could be an explanation.

A new report by Barndiabetesfonden (The Child Diabetes Fund) said that 460 children in Sweden were treated for type 1 diabetes in 2022, up from 283 in 2018, a 62% increase.

Almost a third of the children needed intensive care when they fell ill, Barndiabetesfonden said in a statement.

Type 1 diabetes, previously referred to as juvenile diabetes, is a chronic autoimmune condition where the body does not produce any insulin, whereas the more common type 2 diabetes is a condition where the body does not produce enough insulin.

"It is frightening that type 1 diabetes is creeping down in age. It's something we need to think about how to deal with, both in research and in healthcare," researcher Ake Lernmark said in a report published by the charity.

The organisation said it was a well-known

fact that viral illnesses often preceded type 1 diabetes, and noted that the current Swedish increase coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic.

It also said studies had shown young children who contracted Covid-19 were more likely to develop type 1 diabetes if the mother had never had Covid-19 prior to the child's birth.

If the mother had the infection or was vaccinated the risks were lower.

"In some of the children, Covid-19 likely triggered the development of a first antibody," Lernmark said in the report. - **AFP**



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GULF TIMES

Higher for longer rates weigh on US and world

The US Federal Reserve sets monetary policy by adjusting the interest rate big banks pay each other for overnight loans: the Fed funds rate.

Changes in that rate ripple through the economy, affecting employment, output and the price of goods and services.

The Fed and its vast global audience thought 2024 would be a rate-cut bonanza. But with inflation proving stickier than almost anyone predicted, those expectations are fading fast.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell confirmed as much on June 12, when he and his fellow policymakers signalled there would be just one cut in 2024 and forecast more for 2025, reinforcing policymakers' calls to keep borrowing costs higher for longer to suppress inflation.

Traders now see just one or two rate cuts happening this year. That's a big letdown from the roughly six they expected at the start of the year and the three that Fed officials pencilled in as recently as March.

Some investors and economists say there's a chance of no cuts at all this year.

When inflation peaked above 7% in 2022, it reflected a broad-based increase in the price of goods and services. But now, with a key inflation measure back below 3%, price increases are being driven mainly by a persistent shortage of housing. Commodity prices and car insurance premiums are also contributing to the stickiness, keeping inflation above the Fed's 2% target.

Some also point to Powell himself for prematurely telegraphing interest-rate cuts, which ignited optimism in financial markets and fuelled economic activity.

With every tick higher in the dollar, things gets tougher for developing economies – especially for those that have dollar-denominated debt that becomes more expensive to pay back as their home currency weakens

Last week, the Bank of Canada led the Group of Seven in lowering borrowing costs, and the European Central Bank (ECB) followed suit. If those institutions, along with the Bank of England (BoE) and Reserve Bank of Australia move ahead with their own easing cycles, that risks driving down their currencies – raising import prices and undermining progress in getting inflation down.

The ECB, for its part, all but ruled out a second interest-rate cut in July, and some also question if such a move would be wise at the following meeting in September.

The BoE pivot to rate cuts is likely to take longer, with traders pricing the first reduction in the fall.

Higher for longer keeps the dollar strong against other currencies, because the prospect of persistently lofty US rates makes investment in US securities more appealing on a relative-value basis, causing the greenback to appreciate.

So with every tick higher in the dollar, things gets tougher for developing economies – especially for those that have dollar-denominated debt that becomes more expensive to pay back as their home currency weakens.

The Fed's move to signal fewer interest-rate cuts this year deepens its divergence from peers who have already begun to ease.

For the world economy, divergence from the Fed matters. Higher US interest rates stoke dollar strength and will continue to lure foreign capital away from rival economies, especially emerging ones.

The Fed's policy direction impacts the whole financial world, especially emerging markets and economies where local currencies are pegged to the dollar.

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How techno-libertarians fell in love with big government

By Quinn Slobodian  
Cambridge

The multimillionaire tech investor Balaji Srinivasan made his name as an anti-government crusader in 2013, when he gave a talk about Silicon Valley's "ultimate exit" from the United States – what he called the "Microsoft of nations". Perhaps most memorably, Srinivasan described America's "Paper Belt" – Washington with laws and regulation, Boston with higher education, Los Angeles with entertainment, and New York City with ads and publishing – as the modern-day Rust Belt.

In his view, Silicon Valley was usurping all four cities, previously the centres of power in postwar America, by outpacing regulation, scorning academic prestige, introducing streaming services, and reinventing direct-to-consumer marketing. In the years that followed, Srinivasan doubled down on his techno-libertarian message. He gave prolix speeches about his contempt for government and was combative with his foes, often waxing lyrical about a "network state" or a new kind of polity where all decisions were made through ownership, consent, and contract.

Then, in early 2017, Srinivasan deleted his Twitter history. Where had he gone? It turns out that the federal government had come knocking at his door, seeking his expertise. The newly elected president, Donald Trump, had tapped Srinivasan's friend and fellow libertarian, tech investor Peter Thiel, to help assemble his cabinet, and Srinivasan was under consideration to lead the Food and Drug Administration. Years' worth of strident anti-government pronouncements vanished the moment Srinivasan had a shot at old-fashioned political power.

This was far from an isolated incident. In fact, such hypocrisy is the new norm. In recent years, techno-libertarians have been queuing to attach themselves, remora-like, to the US government. What's happening? Is it simply disingenuousness, or does it reflect some deeper rationale?

The answer has become increasingly clear: leading Silicon Valley techno-libertarians are against the state only insofar as it is not enriching them personally. When faced with the prospect of the government becoming a major client, once-principled opposition to state power dissipates.

One can see this transformation in Thiel himself. In 2009, he declared that "the great task for libertarians is to find an escape from politics in all its forms." But by 2016, Thiel was fully engaged in partisan politics, speaking at the Republican National Convention. In the intervening years, Palantir, the data-analytics firm that he co-founded, has grown into a behemoth, benefiting from huge government contracts. It now draws nearly half its revenue from the public purse.

Another example is Marc Andreessen, a founder of the leading Silicon Valley venture-capital firm Andreessen Horowitz (known as a16z), where Srinivasan was briefly a partner. In October 2023, Andreessen wrote *The Techno-Optimist Manifesto*, a much-discussed screed praising the Promethean power of free markets and entrepreneurial technologists. "Government" did not appear once in the 5,000-word text, while the only two mentions of the "state" positioned it as the enemy.

But the state is Andreessen's bread and butter. It paid for the land-grant university where he helped develop the first internet browser. And, as Bloomberg reports, a16z is a familiar face

in Washington these days and spends significantly more on lobbying than other venture funds to push its "American Dynamism" initiative, which consists of backing firms that chase government defence, energy, and logistics contracts.

The internal logic of this shift can be explained by one of Thiel's pieces of public writing, which are now few and far between. In 2020, he wrote a new preface to James Dale Davidson and William Rees-Mogg's 1999 book, *The Sovereign Individual: Mastering the Transition to the Information Age*, which envisions the possibility of escape from the state, complete with cyber-currencies and the abandonment of conventional citizenship. Thiel identified two developments that the authors failed to account for: the rise of China and advances in artificial intelligence.

In the Silicon Valley of the 1990s, it was possible to suppress the fact that government funding was behind the biggest breakthroughs, and instead to cultivate the myth of the self-made genius. But the meteoric rise of China in the new millennium suggested that another ingredient was necessary for tech supremacy: a state that was willing to deliver reams of personal information about its citizens. Tesla CEO Elon Musk, like Thiel, was supposedly once opposed to forms of mass surveillance – a position he has since reversed, given his recent trip to China to secure precisely that sort of data.

While Tesla's stock valuation has been sliding, Musk can still rely on the more robust elements of his portfolio: SpaceX, now the primary launcher of US satellites, and Starlink, its satellite internet service that is currently underpinning Ukraine's war effort. These ventures, though, are more a reflection of the traditional military-industrial complex than a radical rethink of the relationship between a gifted cognitive elite and the state, as imagined in *The Sovereign Individual*.

Talk of Silicon Valley's exit from the US was always free-riding by another name, and now it is beginning to reach its ultimate, unvarnished form. Maybe techno-libertarians need a more accurate, if less glamorous, label. After all, they're not forging a mysterious world beyond politics on the far edge of the continent or in the world's oceans, let alone on distant planets, nor are they necessarily accelerating a descent into techno-feudalism. In fact, they're nothing more than techno-contractors, submitting the next invoice to the Paper Belt.

– Project Syndicate

Leading Silicon Valley techno-libertarians are against the state only insofar as it is not enriching them personally. When faced with the prospect of the government becoming a major client, once-principled opposition to state power dissipates

• Quinn Slobodian, Professor of International History at the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University, is the author, most recently, of Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy.



# Spectre of neo-fascism haunts Europe

By Slavoj Žižek  
Ljubljana

The surprise in this month's European Parliament elections was that the outcome everyone expected really did come to pass. To paraphrase a classic scene from the Marx Brothers: Europe may be talking and acting like it is moving to the radical right, but don't let that fool you; Europe really is moving to the radical right.

Why should we insist on this interpretation? Because most of the mainstream media has sought to downplay it. The message we keep hearing is: "Sure, Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) occasionally flirt with fascist motifs, but there is no reason to panic, because they still respect democratic rules and institutions once in power."

Yet this domestication of the radical right should trouble us all, because it signals a readiness by traditional conservative parties to go along with the new movement. The axiom of post-World War II European democracy, "No collaboration with fascists," has been quietly abandoned.

The message of this election is clear. The political divide in most EU countries is no longer between the moderate right and the moderate left, but between the conventional right, embodied by the big winner, the European People's Party (comprising Christian democrats, liberal-conservatives, and traditional conservatives) and the neo-fascist right represented by Le Pen, Meloni, AfD, and others.

The question now is whether the EPP will collaborate with neo-fascists. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is spinning the outcome as a triumph of the EPP against both "extremes," yet the new



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen delivers the State of the European Union address to the European Parliament, in Strasbourg, France, last September. (Reuters file photo)

parliament will include no left-wing parties whose extremism is even distantly comparable to that of the far right. Such a "balanced" view from the EU's top official sends an ominous signal.

When we talk about fascism today, we should not confine ourselves to the developed West. A similar kind of politics has been ascendant in much of the Global South as well. In his study of China's development, the Italian Marxist historian Domenico Losurdo (also known for his rehabilitation of Stalin) stresses the distinction between economic and political power.

In pursuing his "reforms," Deng Xiaoping knew that elements of capitalism are necessary to unleash a society's productive forces; but he insisted that political power should remain

firmly in the hands of the Communist Party of China (as the self-proclaimed representative of the workers and farmers).

This approach has deep historical roots. For over a century, China has embraced the "pan-Asianism" that emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century as a reaction against Western imperialist domination and exploitation.

As historian Viren Murthy explains, this project has always been driven by a rejection not of Western capitalism, but of Western liberal individualism and imperialism. By drawing on pre-modern traditions and institutions, pan-Asianists argued, Asian societies could organize their own modernisation to achieve even greater dynamism than the West.

While Hegel himself saw Asia as a domain of rigid order that does not allow for individualism (free subjectivity), pan-Asianists proposed a new Hegelian conceptual framework. Since the freedom offered by Western individualism ultimately negates order and leads to social disintegration, they argued, the only way to preserve freedom is to channel it into a new collective agency. One early example of this model can be found in Japan's militarisation and colonialist expansion before WWII. But historical lessons are soon forgotten. In the search for solutions to big problems, many in the West could be newly attracted to the Asian model of subsuming individualistic drives and the longing for meaning in a collective project.

Pan-Asianism tended to oscillate between its socialist and fascist versions (with the line between the two not always clear), reminding us that "anti-imperialism" is not as innocent as it may appear. In the first half of the twentieth century, Japanese and German fascists regularly presented themselves as defenders against American, British, and French imperialism, and one now finds far-right nationalist politicians taking similar positions vis-à-vis the European Union.

The same tendency is discernible in post-Deng China, which political scientist A. James Gregor classifies as "a variant of contemporary fascism": a capitalist economy controlled and regulated by an authoritarian state whose legitimacy is framed in the terms of ethnic tradition and national heritage. That is why Chinese President Xi Jinping makes a point of referring to China's long, continuous history stretching back to antiquity. Harnessing economic impulses for the sake of nationalistic projects is the very definition of fascism, and similar political dynamics can also be found in India, Russia, Türkiye, and other countries.

It is not hard to see why this model has gained traction. While the Soviet Union suffered a chaotic disintegration, the CPC pursued economic liberalisation but still maintained tight control. Thus, leftists who are sympathetic toward China praise it for keeping capital subordinated, in contrast to the US and European systems, where capital reigns supreme.

But the new fascism is also supported by more recent trends. Beyond Le Pen, another big winner of the European elections is Fidiás Panayiotou, a Cypriot YouTube personality who previously gained attention

for his efforts to hug Elon Musk. While waiting outside Twitter's headquarters for his target, he encouraged his followers to "spam" Musk's mother with his request. Eventually, Musk did meet and hug Panayiotou, who went on to announce his candidacy to the European Parliament. Running on an anti-partisan platform, he won 19.4% of the popular vote and secured himself a seat.

Similar figures have also cropped up in France, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, and elsewhere, all justifying their candidacies with the "leftist" argument that since democratic politics has become a joke, clowns might as well run for office. This is a dangerous game. If enough people despair of emancipatory politics and accept the withdrawal into buffoonery, the political space for neo-fascism widens.

Reclaiming that space requires serious, authentic action. For all my disagreements with French President Emmanuel Macron, I think he was correct to respond to the French far-right's victory by dissolving the National Assembly and calling for new legislative elections. His announcement caught almost everyone off guard, and it is certainly risky. But it is a risk worth taking. Even if Le Pen wins and decides who will be the next prime minister, Macron, as president, will retain the ability to mobilize a new majority against the government. We must take the fight to the new fascism as forcefully and as fast as possible.

— Project Syndicate

● Slavoj Žižek, Professor of Philosophy at the European Graduate School, is International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at the University of London and the author, most recently, of Christian Atheism: How to Be a Real Materialist.

## From Swahili to Zulu, techies develop AI language tools

Lack of African language AI tools deepens digital divide | Nigerian government, African startups build local LLMs | Data scarcity, copyright, privacy are challenges

By Bukola Adebayo, Nita Bhalla and Kim Harrisberg  
Lagos/Nairobi/Johannesburg

When the Nigerian government announced plans in April to develop a multilingual AI tool to boost digital inclusion across the West African nation, 28-year-old computer science student Lwasinam Lenham Dilli was thrilled.

Dilli had struggled to scrape datasets from the Internet to build a large language model (LLM), used to power AI chatbots, in his native Hausa language as part of his final-year project at university.

"I needed texts in English and their corresponding translation in Hausa but I couldn't get anything online, (there was) no clean data," Dilli told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"(Creating local language LLMs) is a way to ensure that our local dialects and languages will not be forgotten or left out of the AI ecosystem," he added. The world has been swept up in a whirlwind of AI mania, with tools such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, Meta's Llama 2, and Mistral AI captivating millions globally with their ability to generate human-like text. But for many tech-savvy Africans, the excitement has been tempered by a frustrating reality: when languages like Hausa, Amharic, or Kinyarwanda are entered into the chat, many of these advanced systems falter, often producing nonsensical responses.

Technology experts warn the lack of LLMs in African languages will lead to the exclusion of millions of people on the continent, increasing both the digital and economic divide.

The Nigerian government-led initiative to develop a multilingual LLM aims to level the playing field.

"The LLM will be trained on five low-resource languages and accented English to ensure stronger language representation...for development of artificial intelligence solutions," said Nigeria's Digital Economy Minister Bosun Tijani in April. The government will partner with Nigerian AI startups, and local data will be collected by volunteers who are fluent in any of five Nigerian languages: Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Ibibio, and West African lingua franca-Pidgin.

To build the model, the project will also draw on the expertise of more than 7,000 fellows from Nigeria's tech talent programme — a government scheme to train three million people in skills such as coding and programming.

Silas Adekunle, co-founder of Awarri, an AI startup that is part of the initiative, said building a nuanced AI tool that understood Nigeria's unique language and cultural landscape presented many challenges.

"We have so many different accents and languages, and this (LLM) will enable many people and developers to build products that leverage AI but are for the Nigerian market," said Adekunle.

"The scale of the project, especially with limited resources, has required us to be creative in how we train the model, gather the data, compute and label what we have."



### Closing the AI language gap

Africa is home to more than 2,000 languages spoken across 54 countries, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco).

However, the majority of African languages remain underrepresented on the Internet. English dominates the digital space, accounting for around 50% of all websites, followed by Spanish, German, Japanese, and French.

Along with the Nigerian government initiative, there are also a small but growing number of African startups rising to the challenge of developing AI tools in languages like Swahili, Amharic, Zulu and Sesotho. In Kenya, for instance, health tech firm Jacaranda Health has pioneered the first LLM operating in Swahili to improve maternal healthcare in East Africa.

Built on Meta's Llama 3 system, UlizaLlama (AskLlama) aims to refine Jacaranda Health's SMS service for low-income Swahili-speaking expectant mothers who have queries ranging from dietary concerns and fetal movement to exercise during pregnancy.

The platform currently provides pre-written automated responses, but once UlizaLlama is integrated by the end of June, it will tailor responses to individual needs, offering more detailed pregnancy guidance and emergency support.

"A lot of these expectant moms can't just do a Google search. UlizaLlama's goal is to make sure that we get them the accurate answers in the fastest possible time," Jay Patel, Jacaranda Health's director of technology, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"We're shooting for about 85% accuracy to start with and a faster response time. At the moment, it takes a few minutes to respond, but we are hoping to get that down to less than a minute in the future."

In South Africa, the Masakhane initiative is using open-source machine learning to translate African languages. Lelapa AI, a South African AI research lab, has pioneered VulaVula — a for-profit language processing tool that translates, transcribes and analyses languages in English, Afrikaans, Zulu and Sesotho.

### Data scarcity, ethical concerns

But AI experts say building LLMs in African languages poses significant challenges, ranging from availability of data to ethical concerns over consent, compensation and copyright.

Many African languages are low-resource languages, meaning there is a scarcity of data to train these models effectively — unlike high-resource languages such as English or French.

Michael Michie, co-founder of Everse Technology Africa, an AI startup building intelligence into data protection and privacy, said collecting the data needed to train LLMs also raised ethical questions.

In many African communities, oral tradition predominates, and certain communities may not be interested in sharing their language to train LLMs and this should be respected.

"There are currently no regulations or laws in African countries that address issues related to consent, privacy and compensation to communities when collecting data to train AI tools — this needs to be addressed," said Michie.

"There are questions of who owns the language and who benefits. There needs to be guidelines to prevent exploitation and ensure the development of these LLMs benefits the people they are meant to serve," he added. Open-source initiatives like Creative Commons, which allow creators to legally share their work with specified conditions like ensuring attribution and non-commercial use, are also not a perfect solution, said some AI experts.

"At the moment there's this push of saying everything should just be under Creative Commons," said Vukosi Marivate, associate professor of computer science at the University of Pretoria and co-founder of Lelapa AI. But if everything is open source, it may be harder to properly reimburse and acknowledge the original contributors to these language models, he said.

"A lot of people are working on LLMs now because of the prestige, that's where the money is, but we need to make sure that our languages are actually being taken care of." — Thomson Reuters Foundation



Beijing: During a visit to Australia this week, Chinese Premier Li Qiang made a classic goodwill gesture that boded well for relations between the two countries: he offered to send pandas.

The offer comes as ties between Australia and its largest trading partner improve after a diplomatic dispute that led to China imposing a raft of restrictions on Australian agricultural and mineral exports in 2020.

Native to China, pandas have through the years become "envoys of friendship", earning China's outreach to countries it gifts the animals to the name of panda diplomacy. They have also been used to show Chinese anger.

So what is panda diplomacy and how does it work?

**When did panda diplomacy start?**

Since its founding in 1949, the People's Republic of China has used panda diplomacy to boost its international image, either by gifting or lending panda to foreign zoos as goodwill animal ambassadors.

Former Chinese leader Mao Zedong in 1957 gifted a panda, Ping Ping, to the former Soviet Union to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution that ushered in the Soviet regime.

To further cement ties with its socialist allies, China dispatched another panda to the Soviet Union in 1959 and five more to North Korea between 1965 and 1980. In 1972, Beijing gifted two pandas, Ling Ling and Hsing Hsing, to the United States after then President Richard Nixon's historic visit, in a sign of normalised China-US relations and marking a pivotal moment for China's foreign policy. Since then, other countries including Japan, France, Britain and Spain have also been given panda.

### What's the panda diplomacy policy?

Since 1984, China stopped gifting pandas due to their dwindling numbers and began loaning them to overseas zoos instead, often in pairs for 10 years, with an annual fee of up to about \$1mn.

While keeping pandas can be costly for zoos, they are seen as drawcards for visitors and help generate income.

The pandas typically return home to southwest China after the loan agreement ends. Panda cubs born overseas are no exception, and would be sent home between the age of two and four to join a Chinese breeding programme.

### How does it work?

China has a history of using pandas to reward its trading partners. A 2013 Oxford University study said the timing of China's lease of pandas to Canada, France and Australia "coincided with" uranium deals and contracts with these countries.

The panda agreements with other countries, including Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, also coincided with the signing of free-trade agreements.

Sometimes, pandas are also used to express China's displeasure with a nation. In 2010, China recalled two US-born pandas, Tai Shan and Mei Lan, after Beijing warned Washington against a scheduled meeting between then-President Barack Obama and the Dalai Lama, which Beijing views as a dangerous separatist. In a recent downturn in bilateral ties, Ya Ya, on loan to the US for 20 years, was returned in April 2023.

Concerns over her health had also fanned nationalist sentiment on China's social media, with animal advocates accusing the Memphis Zoo in Tennessee of providing inadequate care to the animal. In November last year, three other pandas left, leaving only four giant pandas on US soil.

That month, Chinese President Xi Jinping then hinted that he was open to sending more pandas to the US after meeting with President Joe Biden in California, a gesture seen as Chinese willingness to improve ties.

### Are pandas still endangered?

China's domestic conservation programmes have seen the status of pandas improve from endangered to vulnerable.

The population of giant pandas in the wild has grown from around 1,100 in the 1980s to 1,900 in 2023.

There are currently 728 pandas in zoos and breeding centres around the world. (Reuters)





# Katara's Eid fireworks show ends with a bang

Katara – the Cultural Village Foundation's Eid al-Adha activities are continuing to witness remarkable turnout, including a large number of families visiting from various Gulf countries. A number of visitors expressed their admiration for Katara, deeming it a distinctive cultural and tourist destination in Qatar, hailing the events and activities being offered to the public. Katara's Eid al-Adha activities, which are directed at various age groups, include theatrical performances, such as the play *Garden of Dreams*, and public art on the Katara Corniche. There are also theatrical performances inspired by the cultural heritage of countries from Asia and Africa, including China, Syria, Morocco, and Jordan. Various workshops directed at children are being held, including a drawing event before a live audience. Last night saw the conclusion of Katara's dazzling fireworks displays that have attracted a large number of visitors. – QNA

