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Scorching heat: Haj death toll passes 900

Friends and family searched for missing Haj pilgrims yesterday as the death toll at the annual rituals, which were carried out in scorching heat, surged past 900. Relatives scoured hospitals and pleaded online for news, fearing the worst after temperatures hit 51.8 degrees Celsius (125 Fahrenheit) in Makkah on Monday. About 1.8 million people from all over the world took part in the days-long, mostly outdoor pilgrimage, which this year fell during the Saudi summer. An Arab diplomat told AFP that deaths among Egyptians alone had jumped to "at least 600", from more than 300 a day earlier, mostly from the unforgiving heat. That figure brought the total reported dead so far to 922, according to an AFP tally of figures released by various countries. **Page5**

US army kills key ISIS official in Syria

The US Central Command said yesterday it had conducted an airstrike in Syria that killed a senior Islamic State official and facilitator named Usamah Jamal Mohamed Ibrahim al-Janabi. "His death will disrupt ISIS's ability to resource and conduct terror attacks," it said in a statement on X. It said: "There is no indication any civilians were harmed in this strike."

Israel kills 17 Palestinians; 9 waiting for aid

Onslaught forces people to flee again

Reuters
Cairo

Israeli tanks backed by warplanes and drones advanced deeper into the western part of the Gaza Strip city of Rafah yesterday, killing eight people, according to residents and Palestinian medics.

Residents said the tanks moved into five neighbourhoods after midnight. Heavy shelling and gunfire hit the tents of displaced families in the Al-Mawasi area, further to the west of the coastal enclave, they said.

Some eight months into the war, there has been no sign of let up in the fighting as efforts by international mediators, backed by the United States, have so far failed to persuade Israel and Hamas to agree to a ceasefire.

Nine people were also killed yesterday when an Israeli strike hit a group of citizens and merchants in Salah al-Din Road in the southern Gaza Strip as they waited for convoys of aid trucks carrying goods through the Kerem Shalom crossing, medical sources told Reuters.

Israeli forces have laid waste to much of Gaza and seized most of the Palestinian territory.



Palestinians rush during Israeli bombardment in the area in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. **(AFP)**

Medics and Hamas media said eight Palestinians were killed in Al-Mawasi and many families fled north in panic. They did not identify the fatalities and the Israeli military said it was looking into the report.

Residents said Israeli army forces blew up several homes in western Rafah, which had sheltered over half of Gaza's 2.3mn people before last month, when Israel began its ground offensive and forced most of the population to head northwards.

Some United Nations and Palestinian figures put those who remained at under 100,000 people.

"Another night of horror in Rafah. They opened fire from planes, drones and tanks on the western areas to cover for their invasion," said one Rafah resident, who asked not to be named.

"Bullets and shells landed in the Mawasi area near where people slept, killing and wounding many," he told Reuters via a chat app.

The Israeli military remained in control of the borderline between Rafah and Egypt. Footage circulated on social media showed the Rafah crossing, the only window for most of Gaza's population with the outside world, was destroyed, buildings burnt, and Israeli tanks positioned there with the flag of Is-

rael flying over some places. The Israeli military said aid into Gaza had not been impeded by the damage.

Further north, Israel sent a column of tanks back into the Zeitoun neighbourhood in Gaza City and residents reported heavy fire from tanks and warplanes but also sounds of gun battles with Hamas-led fighters.

In another Gaza City suburb, Sheikh Radwan, an Israeli air strike on a house killed four Palestinians, including a child, medics said. A total of 20 people had been killed across Gaza.

The armed wings of Hamas and Islamic Jihad said fighters battled Israeli forces with anti-tank rockets and mortar bombs, and have in some areas detonated pre-planted explosive devices against army units.

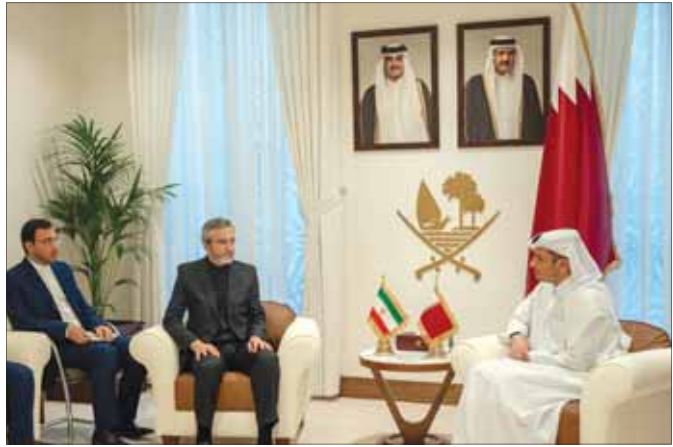
Israel's ground and air campaign has left Gaza in ruins, killed more than 37,400 people, according to Palestinian health authorities, and left much of the population homeless and destitute.

Since a week-long truce in November, repeated attempts to arrange a ceasefire have failed, with Hamas insisting on an end to the war and full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. Netanyahu refuses to end the war before Hamas is eradicated and the hostages are freed.

GCC states call for immediate ceasefire

The Gulf Co-operation Council's (GCC) states have condemned the ongoing Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, stressing their support for the brotherly Palestinian people in light of the current developments in the Gaza Strip and its surroundings. They also called for an immediate and permanent ceasefire, and an end to Israeli military operations which has led to humanitarian catastrophe, as well as to ensure the access of all humanitarian and relief aid and basic needs to the residents of Gaza. This came in a statement delivered by HE Dr Hind bint Abdulrahman al-Muftah, Permanent Representative of Qatar to the UN Office and other international organisations in Geneva. **(QNA)**

PM meets Iran's acting foreign minister



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met yesterday in Doha with Acting Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ali Bagheri Kani. They discussed bilateral co-operation and means to enhance it besides developments in the region and means to de-escalate, particularly joint mediation efforts to end the war in Gaza. The meeting also dealt with a number of issues of joint interest. **(QNA)**

UN inquiry condemns 'extermination' of Palestinians by Israel

Israeli forces may have repeatedly violated the laws of war and failed to distinguish between civilians and fighters in the Gaza conflict, the UN human rights office said yesterday.

Separately, the head of a UN inquiry accused the Israeli military of carrying out an "extermination" of Palestinians.

In a report on six deadly Israeli attacks, the UN human rights office (OHCHR) said Israeli forces "may have systematically violated the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions in attack".

"The requirement to select means and methods of warfare that avoid or at the very least minimise to every extent civilian harm appears to have been consistently violated in Israel's bombing campaign," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk said.

Israel's permanent mission to the United Nations in Geneva characterised the analysis as "factually, legally, and methodologically flawed".

In a separate meeting of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the head of a UN Commission of Inquiry, Navi Pillay, said perpetrators of abuses in the conflict must be brought to account.

She repeated findings from a report published last week about war crimes but said that Israel alone was responsible for the most serious abuses under international law known as "crimes against humanity".

She said the scale of Palestinian civilian losses amounted to "extermination".

"We found that the immense numbers of civilian casualties in Gaza and widespread destruction of civilian objects and infrastructure were the inevitable result of an intentional strategy to cause maximum damage," Pillay, a former UN rights chief and South African judge, told the meeting.

Israel, which does not typically co-operate with the inquiry, chose the mother of a hostage to speak on its behalf and criticised the report.

Israel's air and ground offensive has killed more than 37,400 people in the Hamas-ruled Palestinian territory, according to health authorities there.

The UN rights office report details six incidents that took place between October 7 and December 2, in which it was able to assess the kinds of weapons, the means and the methods used in these attacks.

Pillay also condemned Israel's military methods in Gaza, saying the use of heavy weapons in densely populated areas "constitutes an intentional and direct attack on the civilian population". **(Reuters)**

Qatar eyes sustainable future with eco initiatives

QNA
Doha

Within its tireless endeavours to develop a diversified economy and achieve sustainable development in the country, Qatar has made significant progress and taken huge and rapid steps towards establishing a green economy capable of keeping pace with global changes by launching a set of strategies and initiatives covering all components of the national economy.

Qatar places environmental and sustainability issues as key priorities within its National Vision 2030

and in its development strategies to preserve resources for future generations. This includes the use of renewable energy sources, reducing water and energy consumption, improving energy efficiency in industrial processes, and focusing on achieving a balance between human needs and preserving the environment, which enhances green economy trends.

The Ministry of Finance's recent announcement of the issuance of green bonds totalling \$2.5bn, the first of its kind in the region, marks the entry of Qatar into a new phase of funding environmentally friendly projects aimed at combating the negative effects of climate change and protecting the environment

through sustainable development.

This initiative, along with other projects and initiatives in the field of sustainability and environmentally friendly solutions, affirms that Qatar is moving forward rapidly and steadily on the path to becoming an exceptional centre in the region for the green economy model. This is in line with its international commitments and the perspective set by its National Vision 2030 to achieve a sustainable balance between economic and social development and environmental conservation.

Qatar's issuance of green bonds was preceded by many other strategies and initiatives, including the energy sector as one of the fun-

damental pillars of the national economy. QatarEnergy launched its updated Sustainability Strategy, which outlines multiple initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, including flagship projects such as the further deployment of carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology to capture over 11mn tonnes per annum of CO2 in Qatar by 2035.

The strategy will further reduce the carbon intensity of Qatar's LNG facilities by 35%, and of its upstream facilities by at least 25% (compared to previous targets of 25% and 15%, respectively), bolstering Qatar's commitment to responsibly supply cleaner LNG at scale in support of the energy transition. **To Page3**



An illustration depicting Qatar's interest in green economy through its efforts to establish a culture of sustainability and environmental preservation.



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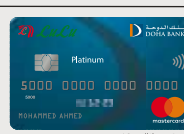


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Fourth batch of Qatari aid arrives for drought-affected in Namibia



A Qatari Armed Forces' plane arrived in Namibia yesterday, carrying 44 tonnes of aid (the fourth batch), provided by the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD). The aid comes within the framework of Qatar's support for Namibia and its people and its support for those affected by the drought that the country is suffering from. **(QNA)**

Deputy PM, Uganda's defence minister tour Joint Special Forces camp



HE the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Affairs Dr Khalid bin Mohamed al-Attiyah met with Minister of Defence and Veterans Affairs of the Republic of Uganda, Jacob Markson Oboth and his accompanying delegation, currently visiting Qatar. The meeting discussed topics of mutual interest and ways to boost and develop them. Accompanied by HE the Deputy PM, Uganda's defence minister visited the Joint Special Forces Camp. The visiting minister took an introductory tour and was familiarised with the camp's key facilities and the latest equipment owned by the Joint Special Forces. The meeting and visit were attended by Commander of Al-Zaeem Mohamed bin Abdullah Al Attiyah Air Academy, Major General (Pilot) Salem bin Abdullah al-Dosari; Commander of the Joint Special Forces Major General Jassim bin Ali al-Attiyah; and a number of senior officials and officers from both sides. **(QNA)**

Qatar's Haj pilgrims safe, begin journey back home

QNA
Makkah Al Mukaramah

The first groups of Qatar's pilgrims was to begin their return to the homeland yesterday after performing the Haj rituals this year with complete ease. In a statement on Tuesday, Deputy Head of the Medical Services Unit at the Qatari Haj Mission, Mishal Abdul-lah al-Musaifri, said that all Qatar's pilgrims are fine and in good health, indicating that they will return to the homeland safe and sound on Wednesday and Thursday after completing their Haj.

He added that all cadres of the Medical Services Unit, including specialised doctors, accompanied Qatar's pilgrims during their performance of all rituals, starting on the day of al-Tarwiyah in Mina, then in Arafat, as well as during



the journey to Muzdalifah. He indicated that the Medical Services Unit continued to provide healthcare to the state's pilgrims during the days of Tashreeq, through the presence of all members of the unit with the pilgrims in the Mina camps since their return

from Muzdalifah, during the first and second days of the days of Tashreeq, until all the pilgrims left to stone the Jamarat, where medical clinics for men and women operate around the clock.

Regarding diseases during the Haj season, the Deputy Head of the

Medical Services Unit at the Qatari Haj Mission said that most of the diseases during the Haj season centred around respiratory diseases and infections, noting that the medical staff at the Haj mission followed up on all the cases that visited the unit, and most of them were mild or moderate cases due to the common cold and coughs, some of which are due to the heat stress to which pilgrims are exposed due to the high temperatures.

Regarding emergency or critical medical cases, Dr al-Musaifri said that they were examined and provided with urgent and necessary healthcare, and then transferred to Mina Hospital, which is close to the headquarters of the pilgrims of Qatar. He noted that the Haj Mission contracted with a number of private hospitals in Makkah Al Mukaramah and near Qatar pilgrims' residences to treat cases that require hospitalisation.



Qatar calls for immediate end to Israel's occupation in Gaza

QNA
Geneva

Qatar has said that occupation and human rights are contradictory and cannot coexist, calling on the international community to take all necessary measures, pressure the Israeli government, and stop supporting it, in order to put an end to its occupation of Palestinian territories and its racist and illegal settlement policies.

It also called for the immediate and permanent end to Israel's aggression and war of genocide and forced displacement against the Palestinians in Gaza, for allowing the entry of humanitarian aid, lifting the blockade, and ensuring the Palestinian people reclaim all their inalienable rights, particularly the right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent and fully sovereign Palestinian state on the Jun 4, 1967 borders, as well as for hold-



ing all those responsible for the violations and crimes committed against the Palestinian people accountable.

This came in a statement delivered by HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the UN Office in Geneva Dr Hind Abdulrahman al-Muftah to the interactive dialogue with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, as part of the 56th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

HE al-Muftah emphasised that in its aggression on the Gaza Strip, the Israeli forces employed policies of killing, starvation, siege, and the complete destruction of infrastructure and civilian facilities such as hospitals and schools, as well as cutting off water, electricity, fuel, food, and medical supplies, which clearly reflect Israel's desire to continue its collective punishment and revenge on the Palestinians, along with rendering the Gaza Strip uninhabitable.

She also expressed Qatar's condemnation of the Israeli authorities' continued lack of cooperation with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory and its prevention from fulfilling its mandate by denying it access to the occupied Palestinian territories, something that aligns with the magnitude of Israel's genocidal crimes and serious violations of international laws and agreements, being the occupying power for over seven decades.

Qatar eyes sustainable future with eco initiatives

From Page 1

Furthermore, QatarEnergy will continue pursuing efforts to advance the midterm targets of increasing solar capacity to over 5GW, eliminating routine flaring, and limiting fugitive methane emissions along the gas value chain.

Qatar's interest in the green economy is also evident through its efforts to establish a culture of sustainability and environmental preservation by working to increase recycling processes, reduce the use of natural resources and carbon emissions, and preserve biodiversity, which contribute to reducing negative impacts on the climate and achieving a balance between human needs and preserving the environment for future generations.

The Ministry of Municipality has reached advanced stages in the process of recycling, waste treatment, and utilisation as it manages the solid waste treatment plant, its transfer stations, and sanitary landfills for waste and recycling in accordance with international specifications and standards. Additionally, it is developing necessary plans and strategies for handling solid waste to ensure public health and safety.

In the context of the successes achieved by Qatar regarding recycling, Qatar managed to recycle all waste generated during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 by achieving a 100 percent recycling rate, marking the first time this rate was achieved in the history of previous World Cup events.

According to data from the National Planning Council, the total number of new projects subject to environmental impact assessment increased from 2,428 projects in 2021 to 2,676 projects in 2022, reflecting a growing environmental focus alongside developmental progress.

These projects subjected to assessment in the past

year included 572 large projects, 1,433 small and medium-sized projects, and 671 industrial projects.

Statistics also indicate that 99.8% of treated wastewater in 2022 met environmental standards. Treated wastewater was utilised for agricultural irrigation, with a total of 76.13mn cubic metres used annually. Additionally, 113.34mn cubic metres of treated wastewater were used for landscaping irrigation, while around 50.60mn cubic metres were injected into underground reservoirs annually.

The environment is a vital issue for the state's economic growth direction and perspective. Qatar's National Vision 2030 focuses on achieving true sustainability in the areas of environment, economy, and society. Within this context, the pillars of sustainability are part of the Expo 2023 Doha's theme, encompassing the following:

- **Economic Pillar:** Investing in innovative agricultural technologies.
- **Social Pillar:** Strengthening the connection between humans and nature to increase awareness.
- **Environmental Pillar:** Transforming dry and barren lands into agricultural and forested areas.

Model projects and sustainable cities, such as Lusail City, Msheireb Downtown Doha, and Pearl Island, highlight Qatar's efforts in this field as a model for sustainable cities. The country has invested heavily in these cities and regions to provide green infrastructure and smart technologies to control energy consumption. In this context, Lusail seamlessly integrates smart technologies with energy-efficient buildings to intelligent transportation solutions, while Msheireb Downtown Doha weaves smart infrastructure into its fabric to establish a connected and environmentally conscious urban centre.

Eid celebration: A festive mix of tradition, entertainment

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Eid al-Adha celebrations in Qatar provided a lively and immersive blend of cultural and family-friendly entertainment, as well as exciting activities that attracted a large number of residents and visitors.

Msheireb Downtown Doha (MDD) has been a hub of festive cheer, attracting huge crowds with its various offerings. From June 16 to 22, the Msheireb Galleria has transformed into an entertainment haven, hosting a treasure hunt for kids, engaging live performances, interactive photo booths, and the immersive "Atlantis - The Immersive Odyssey" experience.

Katara - Cultural Village has also been a crowd-puller venue for residents and visitors, particularly from neighbouring GCC countries. One of the highlights was the enchanting "Garden of Dreams" play, accompanied by fascinating theatrical performances, drawing inspiration from

Asian and African cultural heritage.

Children enjoyed artistic workshops and live drawing activities, while the fireworks display each night throughout the holidays illuminated the sky, adding a touch of charm to the celebrations. Al Shaqab, the renowned equestrian centre, is set to conclude its three-day Eid celebrations today (June 20), offering a diverse mix of family-oriented activities. Visitors can still enjoy horseback riding, archery, the opportunity to interact with purebred Arabian horses, and engage in workshops and arts and crafts sessions.

The Old Doha Port embraced its maritime heritage with performances by a traditional maritime band, showcasing Qatar's rich cultural heritage. Open days for kayaking and stand-up paddle boarding provided water enthusiasts with the chance to enjoy the port's waters. The Mina District also featured carnival game booths for children.

Dadu: Children's Museum of Qatar, located at the National Museum of Qatar, hosted a series of free activities for the



Mascots entertain Msheireb Galleria visitors. **PICTURE:** Joey Aguilar

Eid holidays. Children engaged in crafting Glowing Eid Cards, participated in a Sheep Obstacle Race, and explored the rituals

linked to the Ka'aba through open-play activities.

Major malls across Doha witnessed a

surge in visitors, drawn to a variety of entertainment options, including arts and crafts, henna, face painting, mascots, and exciting contests, among others.

Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al-Thani Museum is also scheduled to conclude its Eid festivity today (June 20) featuring a guided tour highlighting spirituality and history, a treasure hunt, and a calligraphy workshop for children.

Qatar National Convention Centre (QNCC) hosted a series of musical performances, including Visit Qatar's "Zikra Remains", a musical tribute to the iconic Arab singer Thikra. Live performances by artists Asma Lmnawar and Oumaima Taleb, along with "Lailat El Zaman El Jameel," featuring Mai Farouk and Riham AbdelHakim, filled the evenings with enchanting and captivating melodies.

InflataCity, the indoor playground at QNCC, continues to be a popular attraction. With its 30,000sq m space, it offers a range of activities, from interactive carnival games to inflatable obstacle courses, until July 13.

Chief of Staff attends opening of Eurosatori 2024



HE the Chief of Staff of Qatar Armed Forces, Staff Lieutenant-General (Pilot) Salem bin Hamad al-Nabit attended the opening of the international land and air defence and security exhibition (Eurosatori 2024), held in Paris, France. The exhibition brings together more than 2,000 companies from 60 countries and covers a wide range of sectors; land, air, and sea vehicles; and innovations in vehicle technology. **(QNA)**



Filipino community organisations celebrate Independence Day

Filipino community organisations in Qatar held recently a Philippines Independence Day celebration in Doha, bringing together 500 expatriates from 38 organisations. Themed Independence through Strong Brotherhood (*Kalayaan Tungo sa Matatag na Kapatiran*), the event was organised by The Guardians Legion Qatar led by Rene M Lloren, in collaboration with Bayanihan Qatar, led by engineer Jerry Ronquillo and The Brotherhood Organisations, led by Pocholo Mejia.

The event's main highlights included the traditional flag raising, Filipino pledge to the Philippine flag and the community singing of *Bayan ko (My homeland)*. Cultural presentations were also held, including the Igorot's pattong demonstrated by Binak Qatar, Carifosa by Gabii, and community zumba led by the Dance Pirates Squad and GSSI Classics.

Pinoywise Qatar took part in the event and promoted Philippine tourism while other activities were held, including traditional games, administered by the TBO, medical mission by PNA Qatar, Vision Test Mission (CSR) by Al Jaber Opticians and Random Photoshoot by Pinoy-



Philippine ambassador Lilibeth V Pono (centre), along with leaders of Filipino organisations in Qatar – Jerry Ronquillo, Pocholo Mejia, Rene Lloren, and Mildred Ngoaban – at the event.

wise Qatar. Salem al-Mohannadi from the Ministry of Labour, who was one of the guest speakers during the event, congratulated the Filipinos on the celebration and stressed the Ministry's support to the Filipino community activities in Qatar. He encouraged every Filipino

to stay united and uplift the spirit of brotherhood toward a better and beneficial community to the society.

Philippine ambassador Lilibeth V Pono highlighted the essence of the celebration, saying: "We celebrate, we remember the freedom



A large number of attendees from Filipino community organisations at the Philippine Independence Day celebration in Doha.

that we have gained 126 years ago, we celebrate the heroism of our forefathers, we celebrate the freedom from our colonisers and we celebrate the founding of one of Asia's first republic, the Philippines on June 12, 1898. We want to honour the legacies of our heroes,

we want to honour the bravery of the Filipinos and we want to continue past of nation building". Mildred B Ngoaban, Filipino community's Philippine Independence Day celebration 2024 programme director, said: "We look up high on the unification of

the Filipino community to hold this momentous event in commemoration of the Philippine Independence day. The collective effort of every participant, attendees and all the leaders have made the event a resounding success."

Awareness session held on workers' rights, obligations for women leaders

The Women Community Leaders Forum in Qatar organised a training session in Doha recently on workers' rights awareness and obligation on case management. Women expatriate leaders from Nigeria, Kenya, Nepal, Ghana, Ethiopia, Cameroon, India and the Philippines spearheaded the event.

The objectives were equipping the participants with ample knowledge of labour laws and regulations relevant to the industry or region and enhance their understanding of workers' rights, including fair wages, safe working conditions, and freedom from gender-based violence and harassment.

Supported by Building Wood Workers International (BWI), the session was attended by 22 women, sharing their personal intervention on the actual case encountered by their members within the organisation and the workplace. Organisers noted that the discussion focused on understanding Law No. 14 of 2004 and Law No. 15



of 2017 by identifying the top four common problems. Cheryl Cayaban, president of Hero Qatar, told participants: "This is just the tip of the iceberg, your journey of learning the fundamentals of workers' rights (and obligations) has just begun. Keep this level of learning motivation, track your progress, and increase the level of engagement on these topics with your communities and promote healthy and productive exchange of lived experiences and debates."

According to the organisers, some key takeaways shared by the participant from Nigeria, Aisha Alabi, were insightful and useful,

while a representative from the Kenyan community, Pauline Kiio, found the "Bingo getting to know each other" as an icebreaker activity during the session.

From Nepal, Nisha Parajuli, described the group activity as a good point of learning and knowledge. Coming from Ethiopia, Zenaba Olika Tokiye, said that this session was an excellent platform for education and information and she will apply it to her community. Organisers and key contributors vowed to help and train their respective members and move forward to the next steps for future training plans.

Campaign to combat fake news

Campus & Students Life in Qatar, described as 'the nation's largest student community', has announced the launch of a campaign aimed at combating the spread of fake news.

"This initiative seeks to educate high school and university students on how to identify and debunk misinformation, promoting a culture of critical thinking and media literacy," a statement said yesterday.

"Fake news can have significant consequences, from influencing public opinion to undermining trust in legitimate news sources," stated Vahid Suljic (pictured), founder of Campus & Students Life in Qatar. "Fake news undermines the foundation of our society by spreading falsehoods and creating divisions. Through this campaign, we aim to empower students with the skills to critically analyse the information they encounter daily. I encourage all students to participate actively in our workshops and become ambassadors of truth in their communities."

"The campaign will focus on several key strategies for identifying fake news. Students will learn



taught to look for supporting evidence, as authentic news stories provide evidence and data, and to be wary of articles that make bold claims without supporting facts. Ensuring the news is current and relevant is crucial, as outdated articles can be misleading when re-circulated.

"Furthermore, students will learn to assess the tone, as legitimate news stories maintain a neutral and factual tone, while sensationalist language can often be a sign of fake news."

"The campaign will introduce students to various online tools designed to help identify fake news. Fact-checking websites such as Snopes, FactCheck.org, and PolitiFact specialise in debunking misinformation."

"Browser extensions like NewsGuard and Fake News Detector provide credibility ratings for websites. Additionally, Campus & Students Life in Qatar will offer free educational workshops to educate students on these tools and methods. These workshops will be conducted by experienced professionals and volunteers from the community."

to check the source to verify the credibility of websites and publications, as reputable sources are typically well-known and have a history of reliable reporting.

"They will be encouraged to cross-reference information by looking for the same news story on multiple trustworthy sites; if a story only appears on one site, its credibility should be questioned. Analysing the author's credentials and other articles they've written will also be emphasised, as a lack of verifiable information about the author is a red flag.

"Additionally, students will be

QNA organises blood donation campaign

The Qatar News Agency (QNA) organised a blood donation campaign for its employees in collaboration with the Qatar National Blood Donation Center at Hamad Medical Corporation, coinciding with World Blood Donor Day. The campaign witnessed a significant turnout from QNA staff, who were eager to donate blood to help bolster the blood bank's reserves at Hamad Medical Corporation, which consistently requires substantial quantities of blood from various blood types. The donations were carried out through the mobile blood donation unit provided by the Qatar National Blood Donation Center. World Blood Donor Day is celebrated annually to raise awareness about the importance of regular blood donations to ensure sufficient blood supplies for patients in need. It is also an occasion to thank voluntary blood donors.



Palestinian girl with burns from Israeli shelling hopes for healing



A wounded Palestinian girl, Hanan Akel, who suffered burn injuries in an Israeli strike, lies on a bed at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, amid the Israel-Hamas conflict, in Deir Al-Balah, in central Gaza Strip.

Reuters
Deir Al-Balah

The disfiguring facial burns of 10-year-old Hanan Akel show how Israel's military campaign in Gaza is not only causing thousands of deaths but terrible injuries afflicting both old and young.

Hanan lay in a hospital cot in Deir Al-Balah in central Gaza Strip, struggling to move her mouth as she spoke and with her eyes partly shut, patches of her forehead still raw and stitched scars across her nose and lips.

When her mother Walaa Akel tried to clean her, she wailed. Israel has been at war in Gaza for more than eight months saying it wants to destroy Hamas, the Palestinian group.

The ground and air assault on Gaza has killed more than 37,396 people and injured 85,523 according to Palestinian health authorities, while driving nearly all the tiny territory's people from their

Hanan Akel was out walking in Al-Bureij refugee camp where the family had taken shelter after leaving their home when she was caught in Israeli shellfire, her mother said

homes with massive bombardments. Hanan was out walking in Al-Bureij refugee camp where the family had taken shelter after leaving their home when she was caught in Israeli shellfire, her mother Walaa said.

Instead of spending the Eid al-Adha festival playing with friends, she has spent it in the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital being treated for second and third degree burns on her face and limbs.

"I used to go with my friends. Play, buy things, eat and celebrate Eid. We were happy. We used to play on the swings and we used to wear our Eid clothes. We used to wear nice new shoes," she said. Now she hopes for treatment and for her face to heal.

"I want to go back to what I was like

before," she said. Since Israel expanded its offensive last month to include the southern city of Rafah, where the border post to Egypt is located, the frontier has been closed and Gaza residents have been unable to go abroad for medical help.

Doctor Mahmoud Mahani, the plastic surgeon treating Hanan at the hospital, said she needs urgent treatment somewhere with more advanced equipment. Walaa Akel said her daughter used to be "as beautiful as the moon". Now, Hanan often wants to look at videos and pictures of what her face was like before.

"She says to me 'mama, I wish I could walk. Mama, I wish I could stand. I wish I could play with my siblings,'" said Walaa.

Families search for missing pilgrims after Haj heat tragedy

AFP
Riyadh

Friends and family of missing Haj pilgrims searched hospitals and pleaded online for news yesterday, fearing the worst after hundreds died during the annual rites in Saudi Arabia.

Arab diplomats on Tuesday told AFP at least 550 pilgrims died this year, the majority due to heat-related illnesses after temperatures reached 51.8C in Makkah.

The total reported dead so far is more than 900, according to an AFP tally of figures released by various countries. About 1.8mn people attended the pilgrimage. Mabrouka bint Salem Shushana of Tunisia, in her early 70s, has been missing since the climax of the pilgrimage on Saturday at Mount Arafat, her husband Mohamed told AFP on Wednesday.

Because she was unregistered and did not have an official Haj permit, she was unable to access air-conditioned facilities that allow pilgrims to cool off after hours of outdoor prayers, Mohamed said.

"She's an old lady. She was tired. She was feeling so hot, and she had no place to sleep," he said. "I looked for her in all the hospitals. Until now I don't have a clue." He is far from the only one desperate for information. Facebook and other social media networks have been flooded with pictures of the missing and requests for information.

The searchers include family and friends of Ghada Mahmoud Ahmed Dawood, an Egyptian pilgrim unaccounted for since Saturday. "I received a call from her daughter in Egypt begging me to put any post on Facebook that can help track her or find her," said one family friend based in Saudi Arabia, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he did not want to anger Saudi authorities. "The good news is that until now we did not find her on the list of the dead people, which gives us hope she is still alive."

According to a Saudi study published last month, temperatures in the area are rising 0.4C each decade. The figure of 550 dead provided by diplomats on Tuesday came from the hospital morgue in Makkah's Al-Muaisem neighbourhood, one of the biggest in the city.

It includes 323 Egyptians and 60 Jordanians, said the Arab diplomats who briefed AFP on the figures, one of whom noted that nearly all the Egyptians died "because of heat".

Fatalities have also been confirmed by Indonesia, Iran, Senegal, Tunisia and Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region, though in many cases authorities have not specified the cause. On Wednesday



Pilgrims pray as sprinklers spray water to cool them down amid extremely hot weather, during the annual Haj pilgrimage, in Mina, Saudi Arabia.

an Asian diplomat told AFP there were "around 68 dead" from India and that others were missing.

"Some (died) because of natural causes and we had many old-age pilgrims. And some are due to the weather conditions, that's what we assume," he said. Saudi Arabia has not provided information on fatalities, though it reported more than 2,700 cases of "heat exhaustion" on Sunday alone.

Last year more than 200 pilgrims were reported dead, most of them from Indonesia. Each year tens of thousands of pilgrims attempt to perform the Haj through irregular channels as they cannot afford the often costly official permits. This has become easier since 2019 when Saudi Arabia introduced a general tourism visa, said Umer Karim, an expert on Saudi politics at the University of Birmingham. "Before, the only people who could have done that were residents of the kingdom, and they know the situation," he said. "For these tourist visa guys, it's like being on the migrant route without any idea of what to expect."

Even pilgrims who have official permits can be vulnerable, including Houria Ahmad Abdallah Sharif, a 70-year-old Egyptian pilgrim who has been missing since Saturday.

After praying on Mount Arafat, she told a friend she wanted to go a public bathroom to clean her abaya, but she never came back. "We've searched for her from door to door and we have not found her until now," said the friend, who also spoke on condition of anonymity.

"We know many who are still searching for their family members and relatives and they are not finding them, or if they are finding them they are finding them dead," the friend added.

Houthis believed to have sunk second ship, the Tutor, in Red Sea: UKMTO

Reuters
Cairo

Yemen's Houthis are believed to have sunk a second ship, the Tutor, in the Red Sea, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) said. The Greek-owned Tutor coal carrier was struck by missiles and an explosive-laden remote-controlled boat on June 12 and had been taking on water, according to previous reports from UKMTO, the Houthis and other sources.

"Military authorities report maritime debris and oil sighted in the (Tutor's) last reported location," UKMTO said in a security update. The Tutor's manager could not immediately be reached for

comment. One crew member, believed to be in the Tutor's engine room at the time of the attacks, remains missing.

The Houthis have been targeting commercial ships in the Red Sea region since November, in what they say are attacks in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza. The UK-owned Rubymar was the first ship sunk by the Houthis. It went down on March 2, about two weeks after being struck by missiles.

The UKMTO's report of the suspected Tutor sinking comes a week after the Houthis seriously damaged that Liberia-flagged ship, as well as the Palau-flagged Verbena, which was loaded with wood construction material.

Sailors from the Verbena abandoned ship when they were unable

to contain a fire sparked by the attacks. The Verbena is now drifting in the Gulf of Aden and vulnerable to sinking or further assaults.

Since November, the Houthis have also seized another vessel and killed three sailors in separate attacks. The Houthi drone and missile assaults have forced shipping firms to divert vessels from the Suez Canal trade shortcut to the longer route around Africa, disrupting global trade by delaying deliveries and sending costs higher.

US and British forces on Monday conducted airstrikes targeting Yemen's Hodeidah International Airport and Kamaran Island near the port of Salif off the Red Sea in what appeared to be retaliation for last week's ship attacks.

Hunger and despair in Gaza



Palestinians gather to receive food cooked by a charity kitchen, amid shortages of aid supplies, as the conflict between Israel and Hamas continues, in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip.



OMEGA Lunar Exhibition at Doha's Hamad International Airport Showcases the Legendary Speedmaster Moonwatch, In Partnership with Qatar Duty Free



OMEGA is currently displaying a captivating Lunar Exhibition showcase that brings the wonders of lunar exploration to tourists and residents passing through the award-winning Hamad International Airport (DOH) in Doha, Qatar. The exhibition, which launched on 2 May 2024, offers an extraordinary experience for watch enthusiasts, space aficionados, and travellers alike.

The exhibition includes the display of the OMEGA Speedmaster Moonwatch, one of the world's most iconic timepieces renowned for its unparalleled precision and reliability. The Speedmaster Moonwatch holds an eminent place in history as the only watch to have been part of all six moon landings, making this legendary chronograph a testament to OMEGA's adventurous pioneering spirit and its significant role in space exploration.

The exhibition takes visitors on a fascinating journey through the history of the Speedmaster Moonwatch, highlighting its pivotal moments during the Apollo missions and its contribution



to human spaceflight. Visitors can also marvel at the intricate design and engineering of the Moonwatch, with detailed explanations of its features and functionality that have stood the test of time in the most extreme environments.

Raynald Aeschlimann, President and CEO of OMEGA shared his enthusiasm: "The Speedmaster Moonwatch is more than just a timepiece - it's a symbol of human achievement and OMEGA's commitment to innovation. We

are delighted to bring this iconic watch to Qatar Duty Free and Hamad International Airport, allowing visitors to experience the legacy of the Moonwatch firsthand."

Thabet Musleh, Senior Vice President of Qatar Duty Free, added: "We are privileged to host the OMEGA Lunar Exhibition and be able to provide our travellers a unique opportunity to connect with a piece of space history, which also highlights the remarkable heritage of OMEGA."



Duterte exits Marcos cabinet as their alliance crumbles

Reuters
Manila

Philippine Vice-President Sara Duterte yesterday resigned from the cabinet of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and another key post, not a surprise move given that her alliance

with Marcos had long been expected to collapse. Marcos has accepted Duterte's resignation from the posts of education minister and vice-chair of an anti-insurgency task force, presidential communications secretary Cheloy Garafil said in a statement, adding that no reasons were given by her for stepping down.

Duterte, who will remain vice-president, said in a press conference that her "resignation is not because of weakness but because of true concern for teachers and the youth." Her resignation affirmed what political observers had predicted all along that the alliance between their families that brought Marcos

and her into power in 2022 was bound to collapse because of their political and policy differences. "It is the break we have all been waiting for," Jean Encinas-Franco, a political science professor at the University of the Philippines, said of the vice-president's decision to step down from her cabinet post, suggesting that it would now give her

more power to go against Marcos. Duterte, daughter of former president Rodrigo Duterte, was tipped to win the presidency in the 2022 elections, based on independent opinion polls, but she ran alongside Marcos, allowing the son of the late authoritarian leader to tap the Duterte family's huge support base and seal a comeback

for the disgraced Marcos dynasty. But the cracks in the alliance were laid bare several months into Marcos' presidency after he reversed many of his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte's policies from the South China Sea to the war on drugs as well as initiated potential peace talks with communist rebels.

Putin praises Vietnam for Ukraine stance

Reuters
Hanoi

Russia's President Vladimir Putin praised Vietnam for its "balanced" stance on the Ukraine war and listed progress on payments, energy and trade in an opinion piece published yesterday in the newspaper of Vietnam's Communist Party.

In the piece timed for Putin's state visit to Vietnam, he applauded the country for supporting "a pragmatic way to solve the crisis" in Ukraine, in comments published in the Nhan Dan newspaper.

Vietnam, which officially pursues a neutral foreign policy in its relations with major world powers, has abstained from condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine, a position that Western countries have considered as too close to the Kremlin.

Putin is due to arrive in Hanoi and plans to meet Vietnamese leaders today, on the heels of a trip to North Korea.

The Russian leader, who is making his first visit to Vietnam since 2017 when he attended an Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) summit, said Russia and Vietnam also shared "similar assessments of the situation in the Asia-Pacific region."

Vietnam's position on the South China Sea differs from that of China which claims the strategic waterway almost entirely as its own, including gas and oil fields in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone where Russian companies extract oil and gas.

Putin said energy was "an area of strategic importance in bilateral

co-operation" and cited Russia-Vietnam joint ventures on fossil fuels in the South China Sea and in northern Russia.

Gazprom also operates gas fields in Vietnam, he noted. Russian energy firm Novatek "plans to launch liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects in Vietnam," Putin said without elaborating.

He also cited an initiative "to establish a centre for nuclear science and technology in Vietnam" with the support of Rosatom, Russia's state-owned nuclear energy giant.

About a decade ago, Vietnam suspended a plan to develop a nuclear power plant and it is unclear whether it intends to reconsider that position. South Korea and Canada are among countries that have proposed nuclear energy options to Vietnam, according to people familiar with the matter.

Putin also praised progress on finance and trade. Settling payments between the two countries was made complex by Western sanctions on Russian banks, and the issue has long been a priority in bilateral meetings, officials have said.

Vietnam is historically a big importer of Russian weapons. Putin said transactions in roubles and Vietnamese dong accounted for 60% of bilateral trade payments in the first quarter of this year, up from more than 40% last year.

"Vietnam-Russia Joint Venture Bank plays an important role in ensuring reliable financial transactions," Putin wrote, referring to a Hanoi-based lender set up in 2006.

He also noted that bilateral trade was increasing.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un attend a gala concert in Pyongyang yesterday.

Russia and North Korea sign mutual defence pact

Reuters
Seoul

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday signed a deal with North Korea's Kim Jong-un that included a mutual defence pledge, one of Russia's most significant moves in Asia for years that Kim said amounted to an "alliance".

Putin's pledge overhauls Russia's entire post-Soviet policy on North Korea just as the US and its Asian allies try to gauge how far Russia could deepen support for the only country to have tested a nuclear weapon this century.

On his first visit to Pyongyang since July 2000, Putin explicitly linked Russia's deepening of ties with North Korea to the West's growing support for Ukraine and said Moscow could develop mili-

tary and technical co-operation with Pyongyang. After talks, they signed a "comprehensive strategic partnership" pact, which Putin said included a mutual defence clause in the case of aggression against either country.

"The comprehensive partnership agreement signed today provides, among other things, for mutual assistance in the event of aggression against one of the parties to this agreement," Putin said.

He said Western deliveries of advanced, long-range weaponry including F-16 fighters to Ukraine for strikes against Russia breached major agreements.

"In connection with this, Russia does not exclude for itself the development of military-technical co-operation with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," Putin said.

Kim praised Russia for making what he cast as an enormously significant strategic move to support North Korea, which was founded in 1948 with the Soviet Union's backing.

Depending on the exact wording of the pact, which was not released, it could be a dramatic shift in the strategic balance in northeast Asia by placing Russia's heft behind North Korea - which faces South Korea, backed by the US, across the heavily fortified demilitarised zone (DMZ).

While North Korea has a defence treaty with China, it does not have active military collaboration with Beijing like it has developed with Russia over the past year. North Korea also signed a 1961 treaty with the Soviet Union that included promises of mutual support in the event of an attack.

China, the North's main political and economic benefactor, had no immediate response.

Landslides kill 10 in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh

At least 10 people, including eight Rohingya Muslims, were killed and several others injured after heavy monsoon rains yesterday triggered landslides in refugee camps in southern Bangladesh, officials said. People died in landslides at four separate places in the early hours of yesterday, Mohamed Shamsud Douza, a senior Bangladesh government official in charge of refugees, said after days of heavy rain as the monsoon season began.

He said children and women are among the dead. More than 1mn Rohingya live in crowded camps in the border district of Cox's Bazar, the world's largest refugee settlement, after fleeing a military crackdown in neighbouring Myanmar in 2017. The Bangladesh weather office said it expected heavy rains to continue for the next few days. Rohingya refugees mostly live in shacks made of bamboo and plastic sheets, often on steep, bare hills. "We are facing a terrible situation in the camps due to the rain, even the narrow paths are so slippery and dangerous," Rohingya refugee Mohamed Kamal said.



Flood affected people take temporary shelter at a school in Sylhet, Bangladesh, yesterday.

China must not intensify sea dispute: Philippines

Reuters
Manila

The Philippines yesterday urged China to avoid actions that endanger sailors and vessels in the South China Sea, saying peace could not be achieved if China's words did not match its behaviour in the disputed waters.

The Philippine foreign ministry denounced as "illegal and aggressive" China's actions during a routine resupply mission on June 17, which the Philippine military said had severely injured a navy sailor and damaged Manila's vessels.

"The department has been exerting efforts to rebuild a conducive environment for dialogue and consultation with China on the South China Sea," the ministry said in a statement.

"This cannot be achieved if China's words do not match their actions on the waters."

A Philippine sailor suffered serious injury after what its military described as "intentional-high speed ramming" by the Chinese Coast Guard, aiming to disrupt a resupply mission for troops stationed on the Second Thomas Shoal.

China's Coast Guard disputed the statement, saying Manila's vessel deliberately and dangerously approached a Chinese ship in an unprofessional manner, forcing it to take control measures, including "boarding inspections and forced evictions".

A military spokesperson said the sailor, who received a medal for wounded personnel from the military chief yesterday, lost a finger and was recovering in a hospital.

Taiwan 'will not bow' to China's pressure: president

AFP
Taipei

Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te yesterday said China was attempting to force the island into submission but that it would not bow to pressure.

China claims Taiwan as part of its territory and has said it will never renounce the use of force to bring it under Beijing's control.

In recent years, Beijing has upped military and political pressure on the Taipei government, with the latest show of force coming three days after Lai's inauguration, when

China conducted war games around the island. Speaking at a press conference yesterday marking his first month in office, Lai said: "The annexation of Taiwan is a national policy of the People's Republic of China."

"In addition to military force, they have increasingly employed non-traditional methods of coercion to try to force Taiwan into submission," he said.

"However, Taiwan will not bow to the pressure. The people of Taiwan will resolutely defend national sovereignty and uphold the democratic and free constitutional way of life."

China had said the war games -

launched days after Lai's May 20 inauguration - were "punishment" for his inaugural speech, which Beijing dubbed a "confession of Taiwan independence".

Encircling Taiwan with warships, fighter jets and coastguard vessels, China said the three-day drills - dubbed Joint Sword-2024A - were a test of its ability to seize control of the island.

After the exercises, Beijing vowed military pressure would continue "as long as 'Taiwan independence' provocations continue".

Taiwan - separated from China by a narrow 180km - has its own government, military and currency. As China has increased pres-

ures around the island, Taiwan has sought to strengthen economic ties with friendly countries while ramping up military purchases from the US, a key partner.

The US switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979 but it has remained Taiwan's biggest arms supplier, sparking repeated condemnations from China.

On Tuesday, the US Pentagon in Washington announced the approval of two arms sales to Taiwan: \$300mn in unmanned aerial vehicles, and \$60.2mn for equipment including more than 700 Switchblades - a miniature, precision-guided missile.

Taiwan's defence ministry yes-

terday thanked Washington for the approval of the deals, which are expected to take effect in a month's time.

"In the face of the Chinese Communist Party's frequent military operations around Taiwan, the US side in this case agreed to sell arms items that... can respond quickly to enemy threats," the ministry said in a statement.

Earlier this month, Washington also approved the sale of equipment and parts for F-16 fighter jets worth approximately \$300mn.

Lai yesterday thanked the US for its support, reiterating the need to develop "resilience" in Taiwan's defence strategy. "The people of

Taiwan love peace and are kind to others, but peace must be backed by strength. Achieving peace through preparedness is the way to avoid conflict," he said.

The new president is regarded as a "dangerous separatist" by China and has hewed closely to the rhetoric of his predecessor Tsai Ing-wen, saying that there is no need for Taiwan to formally declare independence as it is "already independent".

Lai and Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party has long asserted Taiwanese sovereignty, and China has not conducted top-level communications with Taipei since 2016.

TRAGEDY

Indian farm worker dumped with severed arm dies in Italy

An Indian farm labourer working in Italy died yesterday after being left by the road following an accident that severed his arm. Satnam Singh was injured on Monday while working on a farm in Latina. "The worker, abandoned in very serious conditions has died," labour minister Marina Calderone said. Singh, who was 30 or 31 and working without legal papers, was cutting hay when his arm was sliced off by a machine, according to the Flai CGIL trade union. Police said they had been called by Singh's wife and friends, and an air ambulance was sent. "He was flown to a hospital in Rome but he died around midday," a police spokesman in Latina said.

CRIME

Police kill two suspected militants in Kashmir

Indian police yesterday said they had killed two suspected militants in Kashmir, a day before Prime Minister Narendra Modi visits. The clash erupted in a residential area of Kashmir's northern Sopore region. It is the latest violence in an uptick of militant attacks in the region. "Two terrorists have been killed in the encounter," Kashmir police said on social media. Modi is expected to arrive today in Srinagar to inaugurate development projects. He is also due to lead thousands in celebrations for international yoga day tomorrow. This month, a gunman opened fire on a bus in the southern Kashmir district of Reasi, killing nine and wounding dozens.

DATA

UK migrant boat crossings hit 19-month high

More than 800 asylum seekers arrived in Britain via small boats on Tuesday, the highest single-day figure since late 2022, adding to pressure on Prime Minister Rishi Sunak ahead of a July 4 national election. Provisional data from Britain's interior ministry showed 882 migrants arrived on Tuesday, taking the yearly total so far to above 12,300. The daily figure was last higher in November 2022, when 947 migrants arrived in a single day. Trailing far behind the opposition Labour party in opinion polls, and with immigration a major concern for some voters, "stopping the boats" and curbing illegal migration has been one of Sunak's flagship pledges.

LEGAL

UK aristocrat could face retrial over baby daughter's death

A judge yesterday discharged a jury unable to reach a verdict in the case of a British woman from a wealthy aristocratic family and her partner accused of the manslaughter of their newborn daughter. Constance Marten, 36, and her partner Mark Gordon, 49, were arrested after a police hunt during which they spent time living off-grid in a tent in the middle of winter. They were on trial over the death of their baby Victoria last year. Discharging the jury members at London's Old Bailey Court, Judge Mark Lucraft thanked them for their dedication. They had deliberated for more than 72 hours since April 30.

India reports over 40,000 suspected heatstroke cases

Reuters
New Delhi/Guwahati

India recorded more than 40,000 suspected heatstroke cases this summer as a prolonged heatwave killed more than 100 people across the country, while parts of its northeast grappled with floods from heavy rain, authorities said.

Billions across Asia are grappling with extreme heat this summer in a trend scientists say has been worsened by human-driven climate change, with temperatures in north India soaring to almost 50 degrees Celsius in one of the longest heatwave spells recorded.

Birds fell from the skies due to extreme heat and hospitals reported an inflow of heat-affected patients as both day and night time temperatures peaked in recent weeks since the start of summer in March.

The health ministry ordered federal and state institutions to ensure "immediate attention" to patients, while hospitals in the capital Delhi, which is also facing a water shortage, were directed make more beds available.

A health ministry official said there were more than 40,000 suspected heatstroke cases and at least 110 confirmed deaths between March 1 and June 18, when northwest and eastern India recorded twice the usual number of heatwave days.

The weather office has forecast

above normal temperatures for this month too, as authorities say Indian cities have become "heat traps" due to unbalanced growth.

"During the ongoing heat-wave, most bird rescue calls that we receive are due to birds falling from the skies," said Kartick Satyanarayan, co-founder and CEO of non-profit Wildlife SOS.

"In the past two weeks, Wildlife SOS has been receiving more than 35-40 rescue calls daily, in and around Delhi-National Capital Region. Most of the calls include bird rescue requests."

Separately, floods and landslides triggered by incessant rain in the northeastern state of Assam killed at least six people on Tuesday night, officials said.

"A landslide buried a woman and her three daughters alive," a state disaster management official, Siju Das, said by telephone.

"Their house was on a slope, and they died on the spot around midnight," he said, adding that the bodies were retrieved after a three-hour search operation by rescuers.

"A three-year-old was killed too."

In Assam, more than 160,000 people were affected, with waters surpassing the danger level in the Kopili, one of the largest tributaries of the Brahmaputra, which ranks among India's biggest rivers.

More than 30 people in the state have died since the end of May in floods and landslides brought by heavy rain, officials said.



US lawmakers including former House speaker Nancy Pelosi (third left) poses with Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama (centre) for photos after a meeting at his residence in Dharamsala, India.

US lawmakers meet Dalai Lama, pressure China on talks

Reuters
Dharamsala, India

A group of US lawmakers who met the Dalai Lama in India yesterday said they would not allow China to influence the choice of his successor, comments expected to anger Beijing, which calls the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader a separatist.

The remarks come as Washington and Beijing seek to steady rocky ties while India pushes China to secure lasting peace on their disputed Himalayan frontier, four years after a military clash strained ties.

The lawmakers also signalled that Washington would pressure Beijing to hold talks with Tibetan leaders, stalled since 2010, to resolve the Tibet issue, with a bill they said President Joe Biden would sign soon.

Although Washington recognises Tibet as a part of China, the bill appears to question that position and any change would be a major

shock to Beijing, analysts said. The bipartisan group of seven, led by Michael McCaul, a Republican representative from Texas, who also chairs the House foreign affairs committee, met the Nobel peace laureate at his monastery in the northern Indian town of Dharamsala.

"It is still my hope that one day the Dalai Lama and his people will return to Tibet in peace," McCaul told a public reception after the meeting.

Beijing has even attempted to insert itself into choosing the successor of the Dalai Lama, he said, but added, "We will not let that happen."

The Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959 after a failed uprising against Chinese rule in Tibet. The 88-year-old, who has battled health problems for years, is set to fly to the US this week for medical treatment.

The question of the Dalai Lama's successor has been a thorny issue, which analysts say highlights the power and influence of the role, fuelling Beijing's tussle to control it.

The US group, which includes Democratic former House speaker Nancy Pelosi, arrived on Tuesday for a two-day visit.

Pelosi said Congress approval of the legislation, titled the 'Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act' or the Resolve Tibet Act, sent a message to China that Washington was clear in its thinking on the issue of Tibet.

"This bill says to the Chinese government: things have changed now, get ready for that," she said to cheers from hundreds of Tibetans at yesterday's event.

Photographs on the Dalai Lama's website showed him holding a framed copy of the bill as the lawmakers stood alongside.

Beijing, which calls the Dalai Lama a dangerous "splittist" or separatist, has said it was seriously concerned about the bill and the lawmakers' visit, urging them not to contact what it calls the "Dalai clique" and Biden not to sign the bill.

The Indian foreign ministry offered no immediate comment on the lawmakers' visit.

Scrutiny of Amazon warehouse labour practices demanded

India's human rights commission asked the government yesterday to look into allegations of labour law violations at an Amazon warehouse near New Delhi over alleged harsh working conditions during a severe heatwave.

Indian media this month reported that workers in the e-commerce giant's warehouse in Manesar, near New Delhi, complained of a lack of water and toilet breaks as they were under pressure to achieve packaging targets. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in a statement said the findings "raise a serious issue of human rights of the workers" and asked the labour ministry to look into the alleged labour law violations within one week.

While the NHRC statement referred to alleged misconduct by a multinational company, the commission confirmed it was in reference to the Amazon warehouse near New Delhi.

Sunak visits nuclear power plant



Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak arrives for a tour of the Sizewell B nuclear power facility training centre in Sizewell, Britain, yesterday.

Crop prices raised as Modi looks to woo farmers

Reuters
Mumbai/New Delhi

India yesterday raised the government-mandated price for summer-sown crops such as rice, soybean and cotton as Prime Minister Narendra Modi looks to woo millions of farmers ahead of key state elections later this year.

The country announces support prices for more than a dozen crops each year to set a benchmark. But analysts say the hike could hit government finances and also lift food inflation.

India has raised the price at which it will buy new-season common rice paddy from farmers by 5.4% to Rs2,300 (\$27.57) per 100kg, the Information Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said yesterday after a Cabinet meeting chaired by Modi.

Higher prices will encour-

age farmers to boost output in the world's second-biggest rice producer, and bountiful harvests could encourage the government to relax a ban on some exports.

India is the world's biggest exporter of rice. The paddy buying price has been raised to reflect the rising cost of production, which will encourage farmers to boost production, said B V Krishna Rao, president of the Rice Exporters Association of India. "However, this will also make Indian rice more expensive for overseas buyers. To mitigate this, the government should reduce the export duty from 20% to 15%," Rao said.

India has imposed a 20% duty on exports of parboiled rice after banning shipments of white rice last year. The BJP faces provincial elections later this year in two key agricultural states, Haryana and Maharashtra.

UK's Labour to win most seats in its history: YouGov

Reuters
London

Britain's opposition Labour Party is on track to win the most seats in the party's history at a July 4 election, according to a YouGov poll published yesterday.

The multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP) poll predicted that Labour would win 425 seats, with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservatives expected to win 108. Nigel Farage's Reform UK was set to win five seats, it forecast.

That would give Labour a majority of 200, it said. The poll was car-

ried out June 11-18, with YouGov speaking to nearly 40,000 voters.

That compared to a prediction of 422 seats for Labour and 140 for the Conservatives at its last MRP poll, published earlier this month before Farage entered the race.

A Savanta opinion poll published by the Telegraph newspaper showed Rishi Sunak is forecast to become the first sitting prime minister to lose their own parliamentary seat at an election.

Savanta polled around 18,000 people between June 7 and June 18.

The polling showed Sunak's Conservatives on track to be left with just 53 seats in Britain's 650-member House of Commons,

with the opposition Labour Party forecast to win 516.

Most opinion polls currently place Keir Starmer's Labour about 20 percentage points ahead of the governing Conservatives in the national vote share.

Despite forecasting Sunak would lose his parliamentary constituency in northern England, once considered a safe Conservative seat, Savanta said the contest was still in the balance given the close margins, the Telegraph reported.

More than 100 such seats are predicted by Savanta to be won by such narrow margins that they remain up for grabs, it said.

Earlier billionaire John Caud-

well, one of the governing Conservative Party's biggest donors before Britain's last national election in 2019, said he would instead be backing Keir Starmer's Labour Party at the upcoming July 4 vote.

"I can declare publicly that I will vote for Labour, and I encourage everybody to do the same," Caudwell said in a statement.

"We need a very strong Labour government that can take extremely bold decisions and you can rest assured that I will be doing my best to influence them wherever I can, in putting the great back in Britain."

Caudwell made nearly £1.5bn (\$1.9bn) in 2006 when he sold his

mobile phone retailer Phones 4u.

He said he had been despairing about the Conservatives' performance in government for "many years". Previously, in an interview with Reuters, Caudwell had expressed frustration at the Conservatives but described Labour as untested. He cited Sunak's handling of the economy during the Covid-19 pandemic - when he was finance minister - and what he said was a lowering of ethical standards under former leader Boris Johnson. He described Liz Truss's brief spell in charge, which spooked financial markets, as a "debacle".

Caudwell said he liked the focus on accelerating economic

growth in Labour's manifesto: "As I have always said, the government must be much more commercially minded to grow GDP in order to finance the public services that benefit all of society without increasing taxes." Labour leader Starmer welcomed the endorsement.

"I'm delighted that John, someone with such a successful track-record in business, has today thrown his support behind the changed Labour Party that I lead," he said.

"The message is clear: business backs change and economic stability with Labour, and rejects five more years of chaos and decline with the Tories."



Juneteenth People’s Parade



Members of the US Coloured Troops and Buffalo Soldiers, an organisation of living historians and re-enactors from Maryland, Georgia, Massachusetts and other states, gather at the Lincoln Memorial with Miss Juneteenth Georgia Nirvana Harrison (in red sash), 16, of Atlanta during the Juneteenth People's Parade, in Washington, DC, yesterday. The first federal holiday to be established in almost 40 years, the Juneteenth National Independence Day marks the day in 1865 when the last enslaved Black Americans in Galveston, Texas, learned that they had been freed two years earlier by the Emancipation Proclamation.

Families of Boeing 737 Max crash victims ask US to seek \$24bn fine

Reuters
Washington

Relatives of the victims of two fatal Boeing 737 Max crashes asked the Justice Department yesterday to seek a fine against the planemaker of up to \$24.78bn and move forward with a criminal prosecution.

“Because Boeing’s crime is the deadliest corporate crime in US history, a maximum fine of more than \$24bn is legally justified and clearly appropriate,” Paul Cassel, a lawyer representing 15 families, wrote in a letter to the Justice Department released yesterday.

The families said the Justice Department could potentially suspend \$14bn to \$22bn of the fine “on the condition that Boeing devote those suspended funds to an independent corporate monitor and related improvements in compliance and safety.” The Justice Department said in May it determined Boeing violated a 2021 deferred prosecution agreement that shielded the company from



File photo shows people working near the door of a 737 Max aircraft at the Boeing factory in Renton, Washington, US.

a criminal charge of conspiracy to commit fraud arising from fatal crashes in 2018 and 2019 that killed 346 people.

Boeing last week told the government it did not violate the agreement. Federal prosecutors have until July 7 to inform a federal judge in Texas of their plans, which could be proceeding with

a criminal case or negotiating a plea deal with Boeing. The Justice Department could also extend the deferred prosecution agreement for a year.

Justice Department officials found that Boeing violated the deferred prosecution agreement after a panel blew off a new Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 MAX 9 jet on

Jan. 5, just two days before the 2021 agreement expired. The incident exposed continued safety and quality issues at Boeing.

In the letter, the families also said Boeing’s board of directors should be ordered to meet with them and the department should “launch criminal prosecutions of the responsible corporate officials at Boeing at the time of the two crashes.” Boeing and the Justice Department did not immediately comment.

The letter noted that Senator Richard Blumenthal, who chairs the Senate’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations and held a hearing with Boeing CEO Dave Calhoun on Tuesday, said, “There is near overwhelming evidence in my view as a former prosecutor that prosecution should be pursued.” The two fatal crashes of Boeing 737 Max planes occurred in 2018 and 2019 in Indonesia and Ethiopia and led to the best-selling plane’s worldwide grounding for 20 months. A safety system called MCAS was linked to both fatal crashes.

Defying Lula, Brazil’s Congress advances conservative agenda

AFP
Brasília

Brazil’s majority conservative Congress has scored a series of victories in recent weeks, advancing bills on touchy cultural battles like abortion, traditional family values and gun use.

While leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva eked out a razor-thin victory over his far-right predecessor Jair Bolsonaro in the 2022 election, he did not win a majority in Congress.

Bolsonaro’s Liberal Party has the largest block in the lower house of Congress, with 96 of 513 lawmakers, while evangelicals with various parties hold 40% of the seats.

This has led to a flurry of legislative initiatives to push conservative values.

Last week, the lower house advanced a bill that equates abortion after 22 weeks with homicide, even in cases of rape. This can especially affect young girls who do not reveal they were physically abused, and whose pregnancies are often detected late.

The maximum prison term of 20 years is double that of a convicted rapist.

The decision to take the bill straight to the Chamber of Deputies, bypassing committees, sparked nationwide protests.

On Tuesday, the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Arthur Lira, agreed to create a commission to “debate the issue in a broad manner in the second half of the year.” A recent survey by the Datafolha pollster showed that 35% of Brazilians support banning abortion without exceptions.

Lula, who says he is generally against abor-

tion, described the bill as “madness” saying that young girls who are abused shouldn’t be forced to carry “a monster’s child.” If the bill is passed by Congress, Lula can veto it, but the veto could still be overridden by lawmakers.

In May, Congress overrode Lula’s veto of a law blocking the use of taxpayer money for abortions and gender reassignment surgery for minors. The law also prevents the allocation of public resources to “actions tending to influence children and adolescents, from kindergarten to high school, to have reproductive options different from the normal.”

Since Bolsonaro’s polarising presidency, cultural values have become “a national issue, a flag that politicians fight over and that wins them elections,” Carolina Botelho, from the Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of Sao Paulo, told AFP.

SA’s Ramaphosa sworn in for second full term as president

AFP
Pretoria

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa hailed “the beginning of a new era” yesterday as he was sworn in for a second full term after his weakened African National Congress (ANC) struck a hard-won government coalition deal to remain in power.

Lawmakers voted overwhelmingly to re-elect the 71-year-old last week after a May 29 general election produced no outright winner for the first time in three decades.

“The formation of a government of national unity is a moment of profound significance. It is the beginning of a new era,” Ramaphosa said, after taking the oath during a ceremony at the Union Buildings, the seat of government, in Pretoria.

Speaking before lawmakers, foreign dignitaries, religious and traditional leaders and cheering supporters, Ramaphosa said voters did not give any party a full mandate to govern alone.

“They have directed us to work together to address their plight and realise their aspirations,” he said.

Numerous heads of state, including Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Angola’s Joao Lourenco, Congo Brazzaville’s Denis Sassou Nguesso and Eswatini’s absolute leader King Mswati III attended the inauguration.

After Ramaphosa was sworn in, a band played the national anthem, followed by a 21-gun salute and a fly past by the air force.

In what observers said will be a “first test” for the coalition, the president is expected to announce his cabinet in the coming days, as talks among members continue.

“The tough part starts now,” political analyst Daniel Silke told AFP.

Ramaphosa will have to bal-

ance demands for key ministerial posts from his party and its new allies and mediate diverging views to come up with a common policy agenda on the economy and much else in a relatively short timeframe, he said.

The coalition includes the centre-right Democratic Alliance (DA), the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party – both historic ANC rivals – the anti-immigration Patriotic Alliance (PA) and the small centre-left GOOD party.

It was the third time Ramaphosa has taken the oath.

The former trade unionist turned millionaire businessman first came to power in 2018, after his predecessor and rival Jacob Zuma was forced out before the end of his term under the cloud of corruption allegations.

Ramaphosa was then re-appointed for a full five-year term in 2019.

He promised a new dawn for South Africa, launched an anti-graft drive and started to reform a collapsing energy system.

But under his watch, the economy languished, blighted by power cuts, crime remained rife and unemployment increased to 32.9%.

In May, he led the ANC into yet another vote, but the historic party of the late Nelson Mandela came out bruised.

It won only 40% – down from 57.5% five years earlier – and lost its absolute majority in parliament, leaving it scrambling to find partners to remain in power.

The coalition deal allowed Ramaphosa to comfortably see off a last-minute challenge by firebrand leftist politician Julius Malema, with 283 lawmakers in the 400-seat National Assembly voting to put him back in office.

But in a sign of the challenges ahead, the DA, which came second in the election with almost 22%, has already complained it was not consulted on the late inclusion of the PA.

Canada blacklists Iran’s Revolutionary Guards

Ottawa yesterday listed Iran’s Revolutionary Guards as a ‘terrorist’ entity while calling on Canadians in the Islamic country to leave, AFP reported from Ottawa. “Our government has made the decision to list the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as a ‘terrorist’ entity under the Criminal Code,” Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc told a news conference.

Flanked by Canada’s foreign and justice ministers, he accused the Iranian regime of “support for fighters” and “having consistently displayed disregard for human rights both inside and outside of Iran, as well as a willingness to destabilise the international rules-based order.”

Foreign Minister Melanie Joly, noting that Ottawa broke off diplomatic ties with Tehran several years ago, urged Canadians against travel to Iran. “For those who are in Iran right now. It’s time to come back home,” she added.

The listing bars members of the Guards from entering Canada and Canadians from having any dealings with individual members or the group. Any assets the Guards or its members hold in Canada may also be seized. Iranian expats and families of the victims of Flight PS752, which was downed by Iran shortly after takeoff from Tehran in January 2020, killing all 176 passengers and crew, including 85 Canadian citizens and permanent residents, have long pressed Ottawa to designate the militia as a ‘terrorist’ entity. MPs last month unanimously voted to do so.

Cuban immigrant finds ‘dream’ of work, community in US

AFP
Grand Island

Israel Gomez Estrada, like thousands of other Cubans and millions more immigrants from around the world, left his home and family in search of a better life in the US.

Now he is legally settled in Grand Island, Nebraska – a small city with a population of 50,000, and one Cuban restaurant. Tornadoes are frequent and winters can be harsh.

“Some of my friends have suggested that I move to another state, but I’m not leaving,” Gomez Estrada, 46, told AFP recently.

In March, he received a coveted green card, entitling him to work. Cubans can apply for one just a year after setting foot on American soil, while other immigrants must typically wait years before they can do so.

Despite difficulty with English, he quickly found a job in a food

processing plant. He hopes to soon be joined by his wife and children.

Immigrants come to America, “with the aim of succeeding, and with a dream,” he said. “For us, it’s not difficult, because we know how to work hard.” Nebraska is short of labour, so immigration is a solution for employers.

Before taking the plunge, Gomez Estrada said he had consulted online job offers from Cuba and spotted “lots of opportunities.” “I decided to leave my country, my family, a very difficult situation, because my father has a prostate condition and the medicine doesn’t exist in my country,” he said.

Gomez Estrada flicked through pictures on his phone to show his parents, his wife, his teenage children, and the parties he has missed since he left home.

Because of his green card, he is now allowed to visit them in Cuba, but the plane ticket is expensive.

On the coffee table in front of him sits a cup painted with the

colours of his island, filled with thick, sweet Cuban coffee.

He now lives in a small one-bedroom apartment at the end of a long white wooden house which has been divided into several flats, where other Cubans live.

The apartment holds the promise of a new life for Gomez Estrada after a “very difficult” journey: To get to the US, he said he spent 13 days crossing the hellish jungles and rivers of Central America.

He moved to Nebraska on the advice of a Cuban friend who lived in the city.

But his friend had to move soon after his arrival, leaving him “in the snow, without knowing anyone.” Gomez Estrada had always dreamed of seeing snowflakes, and the first time he did so, “it was wonderful,” he said. “I never thought it would be so beautiful.” – ‘So kind’ – He found support from the congregation of the local Destiny Church, a building made from corrugated iron painted grey and orange, perched on the side



A young boy leads cattle on a farm in Aurora, Nebraska.

of a road. He was offered accommodation for several months and even a car, saving him the seven-kilometre walk to the grocery store.

Tim Rust, the church’s pastor, remembers meeting Gomez Estrada for the first time.

“He was here in the country,

wanted to work legally, could not,” he told AFP.

Because the two men couldn’t speak the same language, they initially communicated by translating phrases on a cell phone.

“I didn’t notice a lot of racism when he came into the church,” Rust said. “He was well accepted,

and people loved him.” “Grand Island is open to the immigrants,” he said.

“We have some people maybe don’t like it, and they don’t understand a lot of things,” he added. “But as a general rule, I think that the employers here and the people have a good attitude towards immigrants.” Gomez Estrada says he has not experienced any racism since his arrival.

The subject of immigration is a sensitive one, especially in the middle of an election campaign.

Two-thirds of the residents of Grand Island County voted for then-president Donald Trump in 2020.

He lost to Democrat Joe Biden, but is seeking a rematch in November’s election.

Biden’s policy “favours us, the immigrants,” Gomez Estrada said, adding it was “positive” that Trump wants “people who come to this country to come with the intention of working and contributing.”

US soldier jailed for nearly four years in Russia after love story turns sour

Reuters
Vladivostok

A US soldier was sentenced yesterday to nearly four years in a Russian penal colony after being found guilty by a Russian court of stealing \$113 from his girlfriend and making threats to kill her, a Reuters witness reported from the courtroom.

The judgement brings an end to a tempestuous love story that brought together – and then tore apart – a married US staff sergeant and a Russian woman after an international romance that stretched from South Korea to Russia.

Gordon Black, a 34-year-old US staff sergeant, was detained on May 2 in Russia's far eastern city of Vladivostok after an argument with his girlfriend, Alexandra Vashchuk, whom he had met while in South Korea.

Judge Yelena Stepankova of the Pervomaisky District Court of Vladivostok found Black guilty of stealing 10,000 roubles (\$113) from Vashchuk's purse and threatening to kill her.

"The court found that Black G. K. in the period from 05/01/2024 to 05/02/2024, while in an apartment on Sakhalinskaya Street in Vladivostok, during a quarrel that arose on the basis of personal hostility, threatened to kill the victim," the court said.

He "also committed theft,"



Gordon Black, a US Army staff sergeant, who was detained in Russia on May 2 on suspicion of stealing from a woman, is escorted in a court in Vladivostok, Russia, yesterday.

the court said. Black, standing in a glass cage in the court room, was sentenced to three years and nine months in a Russian penal colony and ordered to pay back the 10,000 roubles.

He pleaded not guilty to threatening to kill her but admitted he was partially guilty of taking the money, though out of necessity. His defence lawyer will appeal the verdict.

Prosecutors said that during an argument at Vashchuk's apartment, Black had grabbed her by the neck and then took the money. Black argued that Vashchuk had drunk half a bottle of vodka that day, was aggressive and had struck him.

Prosecutors had asked for a prison sentence of four years and eight months, while the defence asked for Black to be acquitted of all charges.

Vashchuk did not come to the court on Wednesday. Before they fell out, she had previously referred to Black on social media as her "husband" and affectionately as "pindos", a Russian slang word for Americans that roughly translates to "Yankee punk".

Black in April signed out of the Eighth Army at Camp Hum-

phreys in the Republic of South Korea on a permanent change of station to return to Fort Cavazos in Texas, but instead he flew to China and then to Russia to meet Vashchuk.

The Pentagon has said that he broke army rules by travelling to Russia and China without authorisation.

Black has a wife and child in Texas. His wife Megan told Reuters last month that he and Vashchuk had a tempestuous relationship. Black's mother, Melody Jones, told Reuters he had followed his girlfriend to Russia even though they "fought like cats and dogs".

Russia is holding at least a dozen American citizens in jail, including *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, who will go on trial behind closed door on charges of espionage next week. Gershkovich has denied the charges of collecting secrets for the US CIA.

US President Joe Biden says he is doing all he can to bring back the Americans held in Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin says contacts over a possible swap involving Gershkovich have taken place but the Kremlin has repeatedly warned Washington that such talks need to take place without media publicity. The US State Department advises against all travel to Russia, which it ranks as a maximum danger alongside countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, Iran and Sudan.

Poland's top court backs president in row over two convicted lawmakers

Poland's top court backed President Andrzej Duda yesterday in a dispute with the government over the validity of bills passed without the presence of two convicted lawmakers, Reuters reported from Warsaw.

The decision by the Constitutional Tribunal, which rules on the validity of laws but whose independence is questioned by the new government that took power in December, looked likely to deepen chaos in Poland's legal system.

The dispute over the lawmakers is also part of a political battle in which centrist Prime Minister Donald Tusk is trying to reverse changes made by the previous government, including to the Constitutional Tribunal's line-up.

The Tribunal ruled yesterday that two minor bills adopted in parliamentary votes in which former Interior Minister Mariusz Kaminski and his deputy, Maciej Wasik, were unable to take part were unconstitutional.

France's Muslim voters fear far-right election victory

AFP
Paris

Muslim voters are increasingly worried about the prospect of a far-right victory less than two weeks before France's snap parliamentary elections, fearing the possible restrictions that could follow.

For Sarah, there's a "real risk" of seeing the National Rally (RN) win the ballot, called by President Emmanuel Macron after the far-right party trounced his centrists in early June's EU elections.

The 23-year-old member of a Muslim women's collective told AFP that would give the party of Marine Le Pen free rein to pass laws restricting her freedoms in matters of dress and worship.

The RN has made no secret of its hostility to ritual slaughter, which would effectively ban halal and kosher meat.

A bill it tabled in 2021 called for bans on "religious ideologies" and on the wearing of headscarves in all public places.

The current law prohibits the wearing of headscarves in public schools, and bans the wearing of full-face veils, such as the burqa, in public.

The centrist government of Macron also banned the wearing in schools of the abaya gown worn by many women from this

school year. Appearing on French TV this week, RN party leader Jordan Bardella said it wanted to ban the wearing of the Muslim headscarf in public.

But he said even if the RN won the polls the measure would not come into force until after the next presidential elections in 2027.

Sarah – who like most people interviewed did not want to give her last name – was also concerned about the "legitimisation" of hostility to Muslims.

For her, if there is "an openly racist party in charge of the state, Islamophobic acts will multiply".

With around 6mn people of Islamic faith or background, France is home to one of Europe's largest Muslim communities.

On Saturday evening, around 40 ultra-right-wing supporters marched through the streets of the southeastern city of Lyon, chanting "we are Nazis" and "get others out of Europe", according to videos on social media. The march was condemned by the rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris, Chems-eddine Hafiz, who called on the authorities to act in the face of "the liberation of extremist speech".

Hafiz had already condemned the "worrying rise of the extreme right" on June 11.

For him, Muslims and North Africans had "become the scapegoats, the symbols of all that is perceived as threatening, as foreign, as incompatible with a supposedly homo-

geneous national identity.

Many Muslims complain about the media treatment reserved for them in the wake of the wave of attacks committed in France since 2015.

Maryam, a 46-year-old mother-of-two has advised her grown children "to study so that they can go elsewhere", as life as a Muslim in France had become "more difficult than it was 15 years ago".

This echoed a recent sociological survey, "La France, tu l'aimes mais tu la quittes" ("France, you love it but you leave it"), charting the unease of some young Muslims tempted to leave the country.

Yet older Muslims are also expressing their dismay at the upcoming two-round election on June 30 and July 7.

"We're obviously scared, not so much about religion, but more for everyday life," said 70-year-old Fatima.

However, Karim Tricoteaux, a 32-year-old French-Algerian, told AFP he took hope from the feeling that "the left-wing parties are coming together and are more powerful".

He said he would vote in the parliamentary polls, convinced that "that'll do the trick".

At the European elections in early June, 62% of Muslim voters who went to the polls opted for the hard left France Unbowed party (LFI), according to an Ifop poll for the newspaper *La Croix*.

But as many as 59% of Muslims abstained.

Nature close-up



A spider is seen on its web inside a residential house in Peshawar, Pakistan, yesterday.

RESTRICTION

Cyprus set to ban mobile use in schools: minister

Cyprus is to ban mobile phone use in schools, the education minister said yesterday, saying they were too much of a distraction for students and led to anti-social behaviour, Reuters reported from Nicosia. Authorities plan to introduce the ban once it is discussed with parliament, Minister Athena Michaelidou said. Cyprus will follow several European states in enacting a ban following recommendations from the UN agency Unesco, she said. "It's clear that the use of a mobile phone distracts students from their lessons, but primarily, its linked to an increase in anti-social behaviour," Michaelidou said. Students will not be banned from bringing their phones to school but they will not be able to switch them on, she said.

Greece tames wildfire near Athens, arson suspected

Reuters
Athens

Greek firefighters appeared close to containing a wildfire near Athens yesterday that forced dozens to flee their homes, and authorities now believe the fire was the result of arson as well as hot, dry conditions.

Traffic was suspended along a main highway connecting Koropi to Athens' southern suburbs, about 30km south of Athens.

There were no reports of deaths or injuries. A fire service official said the intensity of the blaze had eased but it was not out, noting that high winds carry sparks that can quickly open new fronts.

Civil protection minister Vassilis Kikilias said officials have verified indications that the fire near Athens was the result of arson as well as extreme weather conditions.

He said there is a video and photos of the suspected arsonist and authorities will publish them.

In Koropi, a storage facility and at least one home were burned, and flames crept into a boat dry dock and across fields of dry grass and olive trees. Authorities evacuated two nearby villages.

"I saw a lot of smoke behind our building, it was very close to us. It went around the hill and passed in front of us," local resident Anastasia Papadopoulou told Reuters. Volunteer and professional firefighters dragged hoses over blackened fields in 35 degree Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit) heat.



A firefighter uses a water hose to cool off the ground during a wildfire, in Kitsi, near the town of Koropi, Greece, yesterday.

Much of the area has had no rain for weeks, leaving large areas bone dry. Six firefighting planes, 16 helicopters, dozens of fire engines and more than 150 firefighters were dispatched to the scene, the fire service said. Several hundred firefighters were deployed to battle more than 60 forest fires across the country, with 16 fires still active, including a big one in Peloponnese. High winds and hot temperatures will extend the risk into Thursday.

"Since noon we had a new fire breaking out almost every 10 minutes," Kikilias said.

After forest fires last year forced 19,000 people to flee the island of Rhodes and killed 20 in the northern mainland, Greece has scaled up its preparations this year by hiring more staff and increasing training.

Italian coastguard recovers six bodies after shipwreck

AFP
Rome

Italy's coastguard said yesterday it had recovered six bodies after a migrant boat sank this week off the southern coast with more than 60 people reported missing, including many children.

Twelve people were rescued after the sailing boat sank around 120 nautical miles off the coast of Calabria overnight Sunday-Monday, although one of them died after disembarking.

Italy's Ansa news agency reported that she was a 25-year-old woman of Iraqi origin.

The coastguard said yesterday it continued to search the area around the semi-submerged boat, which is still visible, on sea and in the air.

"Following the searches carried out so far, six lifeless bodies have been recovered," it said.

Ansa said they were four men and two women.

Doctors Without Borders (MSF) has been helping the survivors, who reported that 66 people had been missing after the shipwreck, "including at least 26 children, some of them a few months old".

Shakilla Mohammadi, cultural mediator for the medical charity, on Tuesday said those rescued were "traumatised, their pain tangible".

"I talked to one young man who had lost his girlfriend," she said.

"Entire families from Afghanistan are believed to have died.

"They left Türkiye eight days ago and had been taking on water for three or four days.

"They told us that they were travelling without life jackets and that some boats did not stop to help them." Ten bodies were found in a separate shipwrecked migrant boat on Monday off the Italian island of Lampedusa, according to German aid group ResQship.

Some 3,155 migrants died or disappeared in the Mediterranean Sea last year, according to the UN's International Organisation for Migration.

More than 1,000 have died or are missing so far this year.

The Central Mediterranean – the area between the coast of North Africa and Italy and Malta – is the deadliest known migration route in the world, accounting for 80% of the deaths and disappearances in the Med.

Many migrants set off from Tunisia or Libya by boat for Europe, with Italy often their first port of call.

Arrivals have dropped considerably since the start of the year, with 24,100 people landing in Italy so far, compared to more than 57,500 in the same period in 2023, according to the interior ministry.

Study shows Germany's working-age population to decline by 2% by 2045

Germany will see its working-age population decrease by 2% by 2045, according to a forecast released yesterday that is likely to add to fears over growth constraints in Europe's largest economy, Reuters reported from Berlin. Though its overall population will grow by 0.9% or 800,000 people within that timeframe due to net migration, the number of people between 20 and 67 years old is set to fall by 2%, the study from the federal institute for research on building, urban affairs and spatial development (BBSR) showed. The number of people aged 67 or above and therefore eligible for retirement, on the other hand, will grow by 13.6% or 2.2mn people, according to the forecast. German officials have warned that the biggest challenge for the economy will be growth constraints due to a workforce shortage, with some 1.57mn jobs currently unfilled. In 2023, net migration to the country compensated for its Germany's birth rate and ageing population, leading to a rise of 300,000 to a new record of 84.7mn people. Germany is "becoming older and more diverse," said Construction Minister Klara Geywitz. The challenges facing the country over the next two decades will include "securing skilled workers, integration, more age-appropriate housing, digitization across the country and adapting social infrastructures," Geywitz said.

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GULF TIMES

EU’s new AI rules ignite battle over data transparency

A new set of laws governing the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the European Union will force companies to be more transparent about the data used to train their systems, prying open one of the industry’s most closely guarded secrets.

In the 18 months since Microsoft-backed OpenAI unveiled ChatGPT to the public, there has been a surge of public engagement and investment in generative AI, a set of applications that can be used to rapidly produce text, images, and audio content.

But as the industry booms, questions have been raised over how AI companies obtain the data used to train their models, and whether feeding them bestselling books and Hollywood movies without their creators’ permission amounts to a breach of copyright.

The EU’s recently-passed AI Act is being rolled out in phases over the next two years, giving regulators time to implement the new laws while businesses grapple with a new set of obligations. But how exactly some of these rules will work in practice is still unknown.

One of the more contentious sections of the Act states that organisations deploying general-purpose AI models, such as ChatGPT, will have to provide “detailed summaries” of the content used to train them. The newly established AI Office said it plans to release a template for organisations to follow in early 2025, following a consultation with stakeholders.

While the details have yet to be hammered out, AI companies are highly resistant to revealing what their models have been trained on, describing the information as a trade secret that would give competitors an unfair advantage were it made public.

Senior lawmakers across the continent remain divided

Google, OpenAI, and Stability AI have faced lawsuits from creators claiming their content was improperly used to train their models. While US President Joe Biden has passed a number of executive orders focused on the security risks of AI, questions over copyright have not been fully tested. Calls for tech companies to pay rights holders for data have received bipartisan support in Congress.

Amid growing scrutiny, tech companies have signed a flurry of content-licencing deals with media outlets and websites. Among others, OpenAI signed deals with the *Financial Times* and *The Atlantic*, while Google struck deals with NewsCorp social media site Reddit. Despite such moves, OpenAI drew criticism in March when CTO Mira Murati declined to answer a question from the *Wall Street Journal* on whether YouTube videos had been used to train its video-generating tool Sora, which the company said would breach its terms and conditions.

Last month, OpenAI faced further backlash for featuring an AI-generated voice described as “eerily similar” to her own by actress Scarlett Johansson in a public demonstration of the newest version of ChatGPT. Thomas Wolf, co-founder of leading AI startup Hugging Face, said he supported greater transparency, but that sentiment was not shared across the industry. “It’s hard to know how it will work out. There is still a lot to be decided,” he said.

Senior lawmakers across the continent remain divided.

Dragos Tudorache, one of the lawmakers who oversaw the drafting of the AI Act in the European parliament, said that AI companies should be compelled to make their datasets public.

“They have to be detailed enough for Scarlett Johansson, Beyonce, or for whoever to know if their work, their songs, their voice, their art, or their science were used in training the algorithm,” he said.

A Commission official said: “The AI Act acknowledges the need to ensure an appropriate balance between the legitimate need to protect trade secrets and, on the other hand, the need to facilitate the ability of parties with legitimate interests, including copyright holders, to exercise their rights under Union law.”

Under President Emmanuel Macron, the French government has privately opposed introducing rules that could hinder European AI startups’ competitiveness. Speaking at the Viva Technology conference in Paris in May, French finance minister Bruno Le Maire said he wanted Europe to be a world leader in AI, and not only a consumer of American and Chinese products. — Reuters

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Why besieged Macron is risking an election

By Zaki Laïdi
Paris

Contrary to expectations, the European elections this month did not bring major political changes to the continent. The political balance within the European Parliament remains more or less stable, notwithstanding a slight increase in seats held by the far right and, above all, by independents.

While fears of a far-right wave were overblown, the big exception is France, where President Emmanuel Macron’s Renaissance party won only 14.6% of the vote, compared to 31.4% for Marine Le Pen’s right-wing National Rally. Macron immediately responded with the shocking announcement that he is dissolving the National Assembly and calling a snap election.

Although the French constitution permits Macron to dissolve parliament if he determines that he no longer has a political mandate, French presidents have rarely taken this step. The only comparable precedent is Jacques Chirac’s 1997 decision to dissolve parliament, and that backfired spectacularly. Thus, Macron’s gambit is highly significant. Why did he do it? From one point of view, his decision was perfectly logical, given that he has struggled to secure a stable parliamentary majority ever since the 2022 election. For two years, he has tried to create a coalition at the National Assembly by reaching an arrangement with the traditional right. But these efforts have been unsuccessful.

Coalitions are the rule in many European countries, but not in France. This is largely owing to the two-round voting system, which tends toward bipolarity, even though the broader political realm is tri-polar or even quadrupolar (extreme right, right, centre, and left). To come to power in the French system, you need to broaden your base to win at the second round. As long as National Rally was perceived as an extremist party, this was easily done. That is how Macron secured his victories in the 2017 and 2022 elections.

But over the past 20 years, National Rally (previously the National Front) has gradually grown at the expense of the traditional right, breaking through the ceiling that once limited its influence. And in the European elections, it came out on top in almost every voting district, with support in the 30-40% range in many cases. No longer can the party simply be bypassed by appealing to the centre left and right.

Moreover, Macron’s own support has fallen in recent years, partly because of his policy positions, but largely because of his authoritarian personality, arrogance, and apparent inability to listen even to his own camp. He is brilliant, but unbearably so, especially in the eyes of the working class.

By surprising everyone with a snap election, Macron is hoping to shock the electorate out of its complacency about the far right and catch his opponents off guard. National Rally certainly did not expect such a quick decision, and nor did the conservative Republicans. Le Pen’s party will

need to win 201 additional seats to secure an absolute majority.

To avert that outcome, Macron must attract some share of voters from the traditional right and left. But this is going to be an uphill battle. Renaissance is not terribly attractive to these constituencies.

Moreover, there is a huge risk that, in the second round, it will be squeezed between National Rally and the left, both of which decided to present one unique candidate in each district. To reach the second round, a candidate needs to secure at least 12.5% of registered voters, which means at least 20% of the votes (after accounting for abstentions). Given that Macron’s party secured only 14.6% of the votes on Sunday, it is easy to see how it could be toppled as the primary political force in the country.

Indeed, it is already looking like Macron’s own party, which was never consulted, will lose at least 100 seats to either the Republicans or to the left. A rebellion within the ranks of Renaissance thus cannot be ruled out. Former prime minister Édouard Philippe, who aspires to succeed Macron, and who is upset by his decision to call an election, will try to take the lead. He is now in open conflict with Macron, and refuses to let the president run the show. Philippe does not want to pay the political price for Macron’s mistakes.

The elections most likely will result in a victory for National Rally, reaffirming the results from the European elections. Even if Le Pen cannot secure an absolute majority, she may form an alliance with some segment

of the traditional right or various independents. The traditional right is already on the verge of an explosion. The right-wing faction of the Republicans is calling for an alliance with National Rally, while the rest of the party is upset by that choice. The French political scene is on the verge of chaos, and apart from National Rally, all forces are in serious trouble.

Macron has been unable to govern the country for two years, and his legitimacy has been considerably eroded. Feeling like he has nothing to lose, he is going “all in” with his current hand, as they say in poker. As in the past, he is confident that his personal involvement will allow him to regain lost ground. He has always had a very personalised vision of French politics, which he sees as organised wholly around himself.

Moreover, Macron is betting that if National Rally does come to power, voters will get a taste of what it truly represents before the 2027 French presidential elections. Burdened with the actual responsibilities of governance, the party will no longer enjoy the benefits of political virginity. Macron wants to do to National Rally what François Mitterrand did to the right in 1986. If Le Pen’s bid for the presidency in 2027 fails, Macron can leave power with no regrets, claiming that he has done France a service. If he fails, his already damaged legacy will suffer another massive blow. — Project Syndicate

• Zaki Laïdi is a professor at Sciences Po.



French President Emmanuel Macron gestures as he speaks to the media during the G7 Summit at the Borgo Egnazia resort in Savelletri, near Bari, Italy, last Friday. (AFP)

Tracking Ukraine reconstruction funds an expensive undertaking

By Wolfgang Fengler and
Vladyslav Rashkovan
Washington, DC

It is safe to say that Ukraine's reconstruction will be the most significant and expensive undertaking in Europe since the post-World War II Marshall Plan. The World Bank estimates that rebuilding the country will require nearly \$500bn over the next decade, dwarfing the costs of the most destructive natural disasters in recent years, including the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia's Aceh province and the 2023 earthquake in Türkiye and Syria.

Moreover, unlike natural disasters, the ongoing war in Ukraine has taken a greater toll on the country's finances, necessitating massive military and economic aid. Consider that in 2022-23, Ukraine relied on \$74bn in budgetary assistance from its international partners to keep the government functioning. This suggests that almost all reconstruction funds will come from foreign donors.

Managing an undertaking as costly and complex as Ukraine's postwar reconstruction will require a comprehensive, systems-oriented approach. Digital tools, in particular, should be used to streamline the process, increase transparency, and provide accountability.

To that end, the Ukrainian government has already established the Digital Restoration Ecosystem for Accountable Management (DREAM), while a coalition of NGOs has developed the Big Recovery Portal, to collect, organise, and publish open data on recovery projects at all stages. This helps create an environment where citizens and organisations can actively participate in the oversight process.

These systems are a step in the right direction. But when it comes to implementing them, it is instructive to



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky addresses closing press conference of the Summit on peace in Ukraine, at the luxury Burgenstock resort, near Lucerne, on Sunday. The two-day gathering brought together Ukrainian President and more than 50 other heads of state and government to try to work out a way towards a peace process for Ukraine. (AFP)

consider recent large-scale reconstruction programmes. Specifically, the rebuilding of Aceh after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, an effort led by the Indonesian government and supported by the World Bank, holds important lessons for how to use digital tools effectively and efficiently.

First, it is important to remember that, even with the latest technology, people need to track money. Data collection and analysis remain labour-intensive, as automated information systems are invariably susceptible to errors that only humans can detect. In Aceh, in the early phase, data on reconstruction projects were not always consolidated or analysed, resulting in double-counting. Moreover, the people entering data were overwhelmed by the level of detail required for tracking outcomes, meaning that even

easy-to-obtain financial information was initially not available.

Second, excessive planning has delayed many reconstruction efforts. Instead of creating a master plan, as Indonesia did for Aceh, Ukraine should establish a framework with core principles such as minimum requirements for building design and construction in order to focus on speed. Some projects – interim housing, for example – will necessarily be temporary. Platforms like DREAM and the Big Recovery Portal should thus capture reconstruction data in real time to ensure continuous analysis and eventual course correction.

Third, Ukraine should track financial commitments and disbursements separately. The Kiel Institute for the World Economy is already listing and quantifying the support that governments have

committed to Ukraine. But monitoring disbursements will be just as important because they better reflect on-the-ground activities. This can be challenging, as funding often flows through many channels and is recorded at various stages before it reaches beneficiaries, and careful tracking will be required to prevent double- and triple-counting.

In Aceh, the Reconstruction Expenditure Tracking Analysis Methodology captured individual projects at the level of the executing agencies to avoid this problem. DREAM should do the same in Ukraine.

Moreover, aid must be distributed equitably. After the tsunami, government monitoring in Aceh found that the majority of recovery funds were initially allocated to health and education projects, rather than essential infrastructure, owing to donors' priorities. To avoid this outcome, DREAM should separate funding types, which would allow it to exclude emergency assistance and focus instead on investments aimed at replacing damaged or destroyed assets such as schools, bridges, and roads. Such an approach, coupled with a strategy that considers the needs of all sectors and regions, would highlight the practical aspects of fund utilisation, especially where aid is allocated, and promote the reconstruction of critical infrastructure.

But effective aid delivery depends as much on local capacity as it does on financing streams. Thorough and realistic needs assessments are thus an important part of reconstruction efforts, as they can improve alignment with available resources.

In Aceh, the cost of rebuilding was initially estimated at \$6.2bn (including inflation). But while the total amount of financial resources for reconstruction exceeded \$7bn, allocation gaps in the environmental, energy, food, and irrigation sectors have limited recovery to pre-tsunami levels.

Lastly, while a wide range of donors and implementing agencies are contributing to Ukraine's reconstruction, strategic management of the most important players – the institutions accounting for roughly 85% of the total portfolio – is crucial. This will ensure that the bulk of investments are used as efficiently as possible and adhere to the highest standards of transparency and accountability. Establishing a centralised co-ordination body and data-management system could help achieve this. It would also foster a unified approach to rebuilding the country, whereby the largest donors are aligned with the government's goals and with each other.

When reconstructing Aceh, the World Bank team worked closely with the top ten donors and carefully analysed the government's reconstruction budget, leading to a more co-ordinated effort. But that is not to say that only the largest projects are relevant to strategic planning and resource allocation. On the contrary, projects of all sizes should be meticulously tracked to develop a comprehensive strategy. Ukraine's reconstruction needs will be vast. Given this, and because the Ukrainian population has suffered enormously from Russia's war of aggression, the international community must draw the right lessons from recent catastrophes to help the country rebuild quickly and to the highest standards. As Ukraine prepares to embark on tens of thousands of critical infrastructure projects, it will need the right digital tools and human capacity to monitor its progress.

— Project Syndicate

- Wolfgang Fengler, a former lead economist at the World Bank, is CEO of World Data Lab.
- Vladyslav Rashkovan is an alternate executive director at the International Monetary Fund.

Slovakia's anti-democratic govt is doubling down

By Soňa Muzikárová
Bratislava

Just as Slovakia entered a moratorium on public speeches and campaigning ahead of this month's European Parliament elections, Prime Minister Robert Fico delivered his first public remarks since he was seriously injured in an assassination attempt in May.

On May 15, Fico was shot four times at close range in the former mining town of Handlová in central Slovakia after chairing an offsite cabinet meeting. He was transported to the hospital in critical condition, underwent several surgeries, and is now recuperating at his home in Bratislava.

In a recorded video address, Fico said he "forgives" the man who tried to kill him. But he swiftly blamed the "politically unsuccessful and frustrated" opposition for the circumstances that led to the shooting, calling the assailant the opposition's "messenger of evil and political hatred," adding that he has "no reason to believe this was an attack by a lone madman."

The shooter, Juraj Cintula – a 71-year-old poet and former security guard – reportedly opposed Fico's media policies and his government's stance on Ukraine. But as an anti-minority, anti-immigrant activist with ties to an ultra-nationalist group that has acted as a pro-Russia propaganda tool, Cintula could hardly be described as a supporter of the progressive liberal opposition, let alone its "messenger."

Nevertheless, the attempted assassination is indicative of Slovakia's toxic political climate and deepening polarisation (among the highest in Europe), which reflects three main factors. First, an intense intergenerational conflict is playing out across Slovakia's political spectrum as older, rural, and often disillusioned voters find themselves at odds with the opposition's younger, urban, and more pro-Western voter base.

These groups increasingly struggle to find common ground, causing rifts within households and local communities. For example, while the current government's supporters are preoccupied with pensions, social benefits, and "preserving peace" – having been convinced by Fico that aiding Ukraine would drag Slovakia into a military conflict with Russia – younger voters view the country's Nato and EU



SPOTLIGHT: Robert Fico

memberships as crucial security guarantees.

Meanwhile, social conservatives, viewing "progressive" or "liberal" politics a threat to traditional family and religious values, assume a defensive stance that stifles constructive political dialogue.

Second, Slovakian voters have been inundated with incendiary rhetoric, misinformation, and hate speech, all amplified by social media. Fico himself has repeatedly – and falsely – accused former president Zuzana Čaputová of being a "foreign agent" serving "American interests," possibly contributing to death threats against her and her loved ones. His cabinet members similarly mischaracterised pro-Western presidential candidate Ivan Korčok as a "warmonger" to stoke fears among supporters of the ruling party, Smer - Social Democracy.

Lastly, Fico's return to power has exacerbated the problem. Fico, Slovakia's longest-serving prime minister, staged an unlikely political comeback in 2023, five years after he was forced to step down to quell a political crisis sparked by the murder of a journalist investigating allegations of high-level corruption. Over the past few years, several members of Fico's former cabinet have been suspected of, and in some cases charged with, serious criminal offences.

Consequently, the government dismantled the Special Prosecutor's Office – responsible for investigating such crimes – and tried to overhaul the penal code immediately after assuming office, triggering widespread protests. The government has also sought to restructure public media to tighten control over news content, thereby undermining press freedom and the European Union's rule-of-law standards.

The outcome of April's presidential election could further undermine democratic checks and balances, as the government-

aligned president, Peter Pellegrini, is unlikely to challenge the executive branch, as Čaputová has done. Notably, the president is responsible for appointing constitutional court judges and has the authority to pardon convicted criminals. With Pellegrini's victory, the administration's control of the legislative and executive branches may extend to the presidency.

Any hope that Fico's shooting would serve as a wake-up call and unite Slovaks in support of their fledgling democracy has been dashed. Shortly after the assassination attempt, several senior government officials suggested that the media played a role in radicalising the prime minister's shooter, telling journalists to "look in the mirror." Fico's address has made it abundantly clear that the government intends to use this tragedy to suppress the opposition and independent media, enabling it to pass controversial laws with little pushback.

Fico's shooting could also fuel political violence across Europe and beyond, as populists around the world push for peace in Ukraine at the expense of Ukraine's territorial integrity. In the days following the assassination attempt, Michal Šimečka, the leader of Slovakia's main pro-democracy opposition party, and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk both received death threats.

But while Fico appears emboldened, the government might be overestimating how long it can maintain its current policy course, given Slovakia's heavy reliance on its trading partners, allies, and international investors. The looming threat of losing crucial EU funds could constrain the government's illiberal reforms, especially as Slovakia faces increased pressure from soaring energy prices and the EU's reformed Stability and Growth Pact, with its rigid debt-reduction targets.

Even if Fico's shooting bolsters his political support, the opposition and the media must continue to scrutinise and challenge the ruling coalition.

— Project Syndicate

- Soňa Muzikárová, a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a research fellow at the European University Institute, is a former economist at the European Central Bank, a former diplomat at the OECD, and a former senior adviser to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic.

Why Europe needs Chinese investment

By Dalia Marin
Munich

Over the past two decades, the productivity gap between Europe and the United States has steadily widened, with labour productivity in the US growing at more than twice the pace of the eurozone's. The European "competitiveness crisis" can be attributed to several factors, including insufficient public and private investment, a shortage of tech firms and venture-capital funds, and the continent's demographic decline. Another possible explanation that is often overlooked is the decline in foreign direct investment (FDI).

FDI is a crucial driver of productivity growth, introducing recipient countries to new technologies, knowledge, and management skills. After falling by 4% in 2023, Europe's FDI inflows are now 14% below their 2017 peak. Germany experienced a sharp 12% drop in foreign investment last year, undermining its post-pandemic recovery. In the United Kingdom, inward FDI declined by nearly 30% since 2016-17, as Brexit prompted foreign firms to redirect investments to other European countries. French policymakers seem determined to benefit from this shift, with President Emmanuel Macron actively marketing his country to foreign investors.

Attracting FDI is crucial for the European Union as it grapples with two emerging challenges: de-risking its supply chains and preventing member states' economies from experiencing a China shock similar to the one the US experienced after China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001.

FDI flows may play a key role in addressing both of these challenges. Climate change and heightened geopolitical tensions have made global supply chains increasingly vulnerable, especially since most inputs for green industries, such as semiconductors and battery cells for electric vehicles (EVs), come from Taiwan, South Korea, and China. A 2012 paper by MIT economist Daron Acemoglu and co-authors suggests that such geographic concentrations of input suppliers increase the risk of economic shocks. As supply disruptions reverberate across the global economy, they create multiplier effects that compound the initial disruption.

Moreover, firms cannot protect themselves against such disruptions by diversifying their suppliers, since no alternative sources are available outside Asia. This vulnerability was underscored in 2021 when the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) had to shut down some of its factories due to the Covid-19 pandemic and a severe drought, halting automobile production worldwide.

To foster diversification, the EU has begun subsidising foreign investments in battery cells and semiconductors through the European Chips Act and the European Battery Alliance. Much like the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act in the US, these measures aim to ensure that enough alternative suppliers are available in the event of a climate disaster or geopolitical conflict.

Despite these efforts, however, there are signs that Europe has begun to experience its own China shock. In 2022, for the first time ever, Germany

imported more cars and machinery from China than it exported. A recent study by Allianz Research finds that China has surpassed Germany in key sectors of the global export market. For example, China's share of machinery and equipment exports increased to 29% in 2022, compared to Germany's 15%. While Germany still leads in exports of automobiles and transport equipment, with a 17% share compared to China's 9%, its lead is diminishing.

This should alarm policymakers for two reasons. First, losing its lead in critical high-tech sectors poses a major threat to Germany's economic model. Second, a European China shock could fuel the rise of far-right parties like the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).

The US should serve as a cautionary tale. The China shock of the early 2000s had a devastating impact on manufacturing regions, as workers displaced by Chinese competition struggled to find new jobs and often had to settle for significantly lower wages. The decline in manufacturing employment contributed to an epidemic of "deaths of despair" – from suicide, drug overdoses, and alcoholism-related liver disease – and set the stage for Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election.

With this in mind, EU policymakers are considering imposing import tariffs on Chinese EVs. In a recent speech, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that the Commission has launched an anti-subsidy investigation into the Chinese EV industry and accused China of violating fair competition rules in an effort to "flood our market with massively subsidised electric cars."

US President Joe Biden's decision to impose a 100% tariff on Chinese-made EVs is likely to redirect Chinese EV exports from the US to Europe, which leaves European policymakers with no choice but to impose their own import tariffs.

Such a move could have the added benefit of boosting Chinese FDI flows to the EU, as Chinese carmakers might try to bypass import tariffs by building new factories in Europe and selling EVs directly to European consumers.

But more must be done. By forming partnerships with companies in technologically advanced economies like China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Israel, European firms could bridge the EV and digital knowledge gap and increase FDI flows to the EU. For decades, China has used this strategy to become a world leader in green technologies, forcing Western companies to form joint ventures with domestic manufacturers to access the vast Chinese market.

Today, the roles are reversed: China is now a technologically advanced economy seeking access to the large EU market for its EVs, and European countries lack the necessary technical expertise to remain competitive. To boost FDI flows and improve its competitiveness, the EU should reverse engineer China's industrial policy and require Chinese EV manufacturers to establish joint ventures with domestic companies in exchange for market access.

— Project Syndicate

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Fun-filled Eid festivities at Al Shaqab conclude today

The three-day Eid al-Adha festivities at Al Shaqab, the renowned equestrian centre in Doha, conclude today after attracting a large number of visitors to a diverse array of family-oriented activities and entertainment. Between 4pm-8pm, at Longines Indoor Arena, visitors of all ages can enjoy a series of entertainment activities. Children can enjoy horse riding, archery, interact with purebred Arabian horses, workshops, and arts and crafts.

PICTURES: Thajudheen



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