

He can estimate the number of the unregistered pilgrims at around 400,000," the official said. "Almost all of them from one nationality," the official added, an apparent reference to Egypt. Arab diplomats told AFP earlier this week that Egyptians accounted for 658 deaths, 630 of them unregistered pilgrims. A US State Department spokesman said yesterday that "multiple" US citizens died in the Hajj. He can confirm the deaths of multiple US citizens in Saudi Arabia," the spokesman said, without providing further details. The Hajj, whose timing is determined by the Islamic lunar calendar, fell again this year during the scorching Saudi summer.



King of Spain meets PM



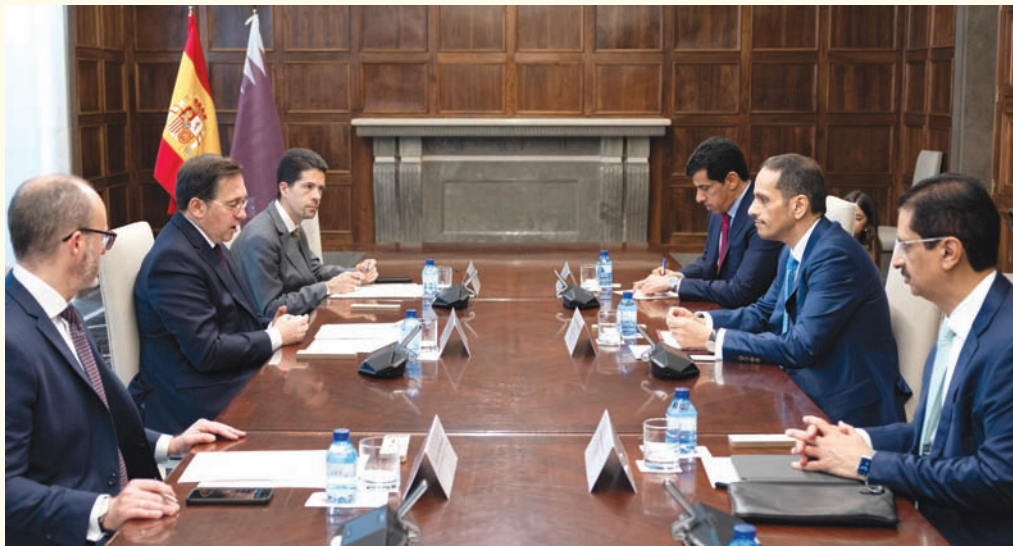
King Felipe VI of Spain met at the Viana Palace yesterday with HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani. During the meeting, the two parties discussed bilateral relations and explored ways to support and enhance them. They also discussed a host of topics of mutual interest. **(QNA)**

Spanish premier meets PM



Spanish Prime Minister Dr Pedro Sanchez met in Madrid yesterday with HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani. The meeting discussed bilateral relations and means to support and develop them, in addition to the latest regional and international developments. **(QNA)**

PM meets Spanish FM



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met in Madrid yesterday with Spain's Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Co-operation Jose Manuel Albares. The meeting discussed bilateral relations and ways to support and enhance them. The two sides also discussed the seriousness of the situation in the Gaza Strip and the occupied Palestinian territories, and the latest developments in the joint mediation efforts aimed at stopping the war in the Strip, and ensuring unhindered flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza, in addition to a host of topics of mutual interest. **(QNA)**

Qatar reiterates its firm position in support of Sudan's sovereignty

QNA
Geneva

Qatar has reiterated its firm position in support of the unity, stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sudan, and the right of the Sudanese people to life, freedom and security, and the fulfilment of their legitimate aspirations for peace, stability and development.

It expressed its rejection of any form of interference in its internal affairs. This came in the statement of the State of Qatar delivered by Deputy Permanent Representative of the Permanent Delegation of the State of Qatar in Geneva Jawhara bint Abdulaziz al-Suwaidi, during the interactive dialogue on the oral update of the fact-finding mission on Sudan, within the framework of the 56th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Al-Suwaidi said that Qatar is following with great interest and concern the deterioration of the humanitarian, security and eco-

Qatar renewed its confidence in the joint Saudi-US initiative, and welcomed other regional and international endeavours, expressing the hope that they will all come together to achieve the desired results

nomie conditions in Sudan, pointing out that it has become clear that this conflict, which is entering its second year, has not and will not reap the Sudanese people except more killing, destruction, displacement and suffering, which is getting longer day by day.

She added that the time has come for the parties to the conflict in Sudan to rule with the voice of reason, and to prevail over the interests of their country and its people by resuming comprehensive and serious dialogue to stop the fighting, restore security, end the current crisis, and spare the Sudanese from further suffering.

Qatar renewed its confidence in the joint Saudi-US initiative, and welcomed other regional and in-

ternational endeavours, expressing the hope that they will all come together to achieve the desired results.

She also emphasised the importance of stopping all crimes and violations committed against civilians in the context of this conflict, and the need to bring those responsible to effective accountability, stressing that Qatar will continue its efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to the Sudanese people, which have not ceased since the beginning of the crisis, and renewing the call on the international community to intensify its humanitarian support to Sudan, and to the conflict's parties to facilitate access of humanitarian aid to those who need it without restrictions.

Official

Qatar participates in session of permanent council of Francophonie

Qatar participated in 127th Extraordinary Session of the Permanent Council of the Francophonie, which was held via video conference and chaired by Secretary-General of the International Organisation of La Francophonie Louise Mushikiwabo. Qatar was represented at the session by ambassador of Qatar to the French Republic and Qatar's representative to the International Organisation of La Francophonie Sheikh Ali bin Jassim al-Thani. The participation of Qatar in the session reflected its firm commitment to supporting the values and principles of La Francophonie, and its constant endeavour to enhance joint work with member states since joining the organisation in 2012. **(QNA)**

Qatar working for urgent, sustainable truce in Gaza: PM

From Page 1

Spain's recognition of the State of Palestine is highly valued not only by Qatar and Arab countries but also by all free nations worldwide, seeing it as a just cause necessitating steps towards a two-state solution, HE Sheikh Mohamed said noting that Spain's recognition of Palestine sends a crucial message against double standards, especially in an era where many decisions are made based on the ethnicity of the aggressor and the victim, which is unacceptable.

In order to realise a multilateral international system that protects everyone and maintains international peace and security, the law must apply to all, and no one should be above the law, he asserted.

Qatar has strived since the beginning of the war to achieve a ceasefire and the release of hostages and prisoners, he said referring to US President Joe Biden's vision for a ceasefire in co-ordination with mediators, Israel, and Hamas.

He explained that there was some progress in the situation, pointing that Hamas' responses indicate that there are still gaps between what was proposed and what was responded to. This is natural in negotiations as solutions should be built on compromises between the parties, he explained.

Qatar's efforts in this regard have continued without interruption, with successive meetings with Hamas leaders in recent days to bridge gaps and reach an agreement on a ceasefire and the release of prisoners and hostages, he indicated stressing that efforts are still ongoing, and reaching a suitable and acceptable formula, will mark the beginning of communication with the Israeli side to bridge the gaps and reach an agreement as soon as possible.

HE Sheikh Mohamed pointed out that the entire world is counting on an agreement to release hostages and prisoners in order to reach a ceasefire, but the suffering of the brothers in the Gaza Strip continues daily, as we see killing in large numbers, and massacres occur day after day, there is a moral obligation to reach a ceasefire as quickly as possible.

He said that the Qatari-Spanish partnership represents a successful model for bilateral and regional alliances, as this partnership was established thanks to the close ties between our two friendly countries and peoples, and shared vision in all fields.

He added that the important visit of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to Madrid in 2022 represented a historic milestone in the process of bilateral relations, which resulted in raising relations between the two countries to the level of strategic partnership, and launching strategic dialogue under the banner of partnership towards peace and prosperity.

He noted that Qatar aspires, through this strategic dialogue to deepen co-operation in several areas, including regional and in-

ternational diplomacy, defence and security, energy, trade and investment, in addition to education and sports, and working to open new horizons for co-operation in culture, tourism, science, and innovation.

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs underscored that Spain is an important partner of Qatar, and one of the most important Qatari investment destinations that covers various sectors and economic activities, including; Energy, real estate investment, financial markets, and sports.

He explained that the joint efforts of the two countries have resulted in the growth of the volume of trade exchange in recent years, as it rose by a cumulative growth rate of about 22% annually during the years from 2020 to 2023, thanks largely to the energy file, as Qatar is one of the largest suppliers of natural gas to Spain. He noted that Qatari investments in Spain reached €5.9bn, according to the latest statistics by the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) and its subsidiaries, as well as some Qatari investors.

He pointed out that the successful and attractive investment environment in Qatar succeeded in attracting Spanish investments to the Qatari market, through the entry of many Spanish companies into the Qatari market, which numbered 220 companies in 2023, as they contributed positively to the efforts of the State of Qatar, its development agenda and economic diversification plans, in all sectors covered by the Qatar National Vision 2030.

He noted Qatar's aspiration for more Spanish companies and investments to enter the Qatari market, as well as increasing Qatari-Spanish partnerships in Spain.

Qatar and Spain are working on several initiatives to deepen the cultural partnership between the two friendly countries, he said.

Spanish Foreign Minister Albares praised Qatar's role and mediation efforts to release hostages and detainees and work towards restoring stability in the region.

The world is facing many global challenges, he said stressing that Spain supports a multifaceted approach in foreign policy to address the challenges in the region, giving priority to the situation in Gaza, where the condition has become dire and catastrophic, necessitating an immediate ceasefire.

He pointed out his country's pursuit of sustainable peace through the two-state solution and establishing a real Palestinian state, calling for an international peace conference.

Regarding the inaugural Qatari-Spanish Strategic Dialogue, Albares said that the strategic dialogue strengthens the partnership between the two countries, particularly following the visit of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to Spain and the visit of Spanish Prime Minister Dr Pedro Sanchez to Doha last April. He highlighted the co-ordination and co-operation between the two countries, particularly in working towards stability in the Middle East.

Fire Station embraces artistic diversity with two compelling exhibitions

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

The Fire Station: Artist in Residence (AIR) provides an opportunity for Qatar residents and visitors to explore two unique exhibitions this summer by established and emerging artists in Doha.

'Neighbours of the Sea', which opened on June 5 and on view until August 17 at Gallery 3, features the works of two celebrated pioneers of fine art in Qatar, Wafika Sultan al-Essa and Hassan al-Mulla. More than 30 mixed-media paintings, some created during their residency at the Fire Station Ruwad in Residence (2021-2023), are on display.

According to Qatar Museums (QM), this stunning exhibition showcases the distinctive bond between Qatari society and its surrounding landscape, a harmonious fusion of desert and sea.

The artwork explores the social, cultural, environmental, and urban aspects of Qatar's journey, offering viewers a glimpse into the country's history and essence. Through a compelling lens of social, cultural, environmental, and urban themes, these artworks paint a vivid picture of Qatar's evolution. They offer viewers a unique perspective on the country's rich history and enduring spirit.

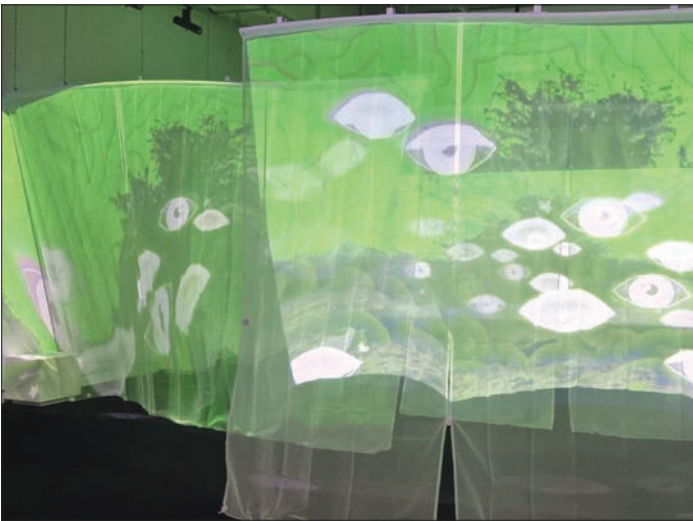
QM noted that al-Essa, one of Qatar's first female professional artists, is a founding member of the Qatar Fine Arts Association and has exhibited her work internationally

in Kuwait, London, Paris, and Tunis.

Al-Mulla, also a renowned Qatari visual artist, has served as president of the Qatar Society for Fine Arts and held solo exhibitions in Qatar, India, and Saudi Arabia. His work is collected by Qatari ministries, embassies, and QM. At Fire Station's Gallery 4, artificial intelligence (AI) artist Dr Alkhuzama Alharami and Qatar-based French sound artist Guillaume Rouseré present an immersive installation titled 'Etherscape'.

QM noted that this exhibition blends the power of image and sound. Visitors are swept away by a sensory experience that weaves together breathtaking video projections of desert landscapes and intricate calligraphy with mesmerising soundscapes. These soundscapes are crafted from authentic field recordings of the desert and other evocative sounds.

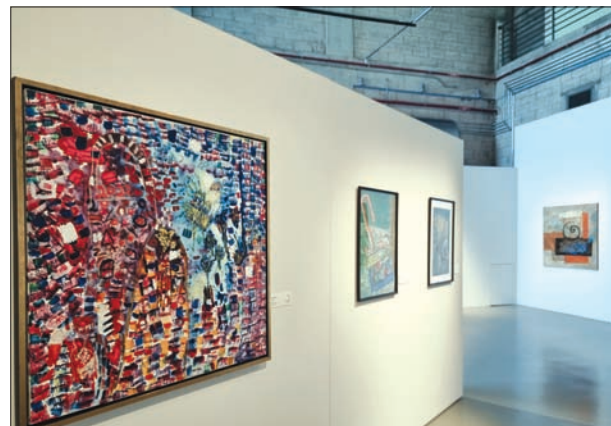
Etherscape provides a much-needed escape from the daily grind, offering a peaceful space for meditation. Alharami, with a doctorate in computer engineering, seeks to push the boundaries between AI and artistic expression. Her dynamic and immersive works reflect her personal experiences and invite viewers to become part of the artwork. Rouseré, whose diverse portfolio includes exhibitions, sound sculptures, immersive installations, and sound compositions, focuses on the relationship between sound and the environment. He has exhibited locally and internationally, including in Paris and China.



'Etherscape' is an immersive installation that blends the power of image and sound, and offers a peaceful space for meditation. It displays the stunning works of Dr Alkhuzama Alharami and Guillaume Rouseré. **PICTURES:** Joey Aguilar



'Neighbours of the Sea' displays the stunning works of Wafika Sultan al-Essa and Hassan al-Mulla, two celebrated pioneers of fine art in Qatar. More than 30 mixed-media paintings highlight the unique bond between Qatari society and its surrounding landscape.



Israel pounds Gaza as fears grow of wider war

From Page 1

Months of negotiations towards a truce and a hostage release have failed to make headway, but mediator Qatar insisted yesterday it was still working to “bridge the gap” between Israel and Hamas.

The war has destroyed much of Gaza’s infrastructure and left residents short of food, fuel and other essentials.

On June 16 the army said it would implement a daily “tactical pause of military activity” in a southern Gaza corridor to facilitate aid delivery. But yesterday Richard Peepkorn of the World Health Organisation said “we did not see an impact on the humanitarian supplies coming in”.

Hisham Salem in Jabalia camp told AFP: “The markets... used to be full, but now there is nothing left. I go around the entire market and I can’t find a kilo of onions, and if I do... it costs 140 shekels (\$37).”

Dr Thanos Gargavanis, a WHO trauma surgeon and emergency officer, said the UN in Gaza was trying to “operate in an unworkable environment”.

According to the WHO, only 17 of the 36 hospitals in Gaza are operational, but only partially.

It said that as of May 17, just 750 people remained in Rafah city where previously 1.4mn people had been sheltering.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is on trial for corruption charges, faces regular street protests accusing him of prolonging the war, and demanding an agreement to free the hostages.

But Netanyahu told relatives of captives killed in Gaza: “We will not leave the Gaza Strip until all of the hostages return.” On Thursday he said he was “prepared to suffer personal attacks provided that Israel receives the ammunition from the US that it needs in the war for its existence”.

His statement came as an apparent doubling down after he made a video statement accusing Washington of “withholding weapons and ammunitions to Israel”.

The White House on Thursday de-

scribed his comments as “vexing” and “disappointing”. Except for one shipment, “there are no other pauses. None,” press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said, referring to one paused delivery of 2,000-lb (907-kilo) bombs.

The war has revived a global push for Palestinians to be given a state of their own.

Armenia yesterday declared its recognition of “the State of Palestine”, prompting Israel to summon its ambassador for “a severe reprimand” (AFP)

Two Palestinians killed in troops’ West Bank operation



People gather at the site where two Palestinians were killed during an Israeli operation in Qalqilya in the occupied West Bank, yesterday.

AFP
Qalqilyah

Israeli and Palestinian authorities said at least two Palestinians were killed in an Israeli operation in the occupied West Bank city of Qalqilya yesterday.

“Police forces have killed two wanted fighters in Qalqilya”, Israeli authorities told AFP.

In a joint statement, the Israeli police, army, and Shin Bet security service said that Israeli forces “attempted to arrest two fighters” from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad group, one of whom “was planning to carry out an attack in

the area.” “During the arrest, fire was opened on our forces, who returned fire and neutralised the fighters”, the statement read, adding that the forces found handguns on the Palestinians.

The Palestinian ministry of civil affairs also reported the death of the two men. “The General Authority of Civil Affairs informed the Ministry of Health of the martyrdom of Mahmoud Hassan Abdul Rahman Zaid (28 years old) and Ihab Abdul Karim Musa Abu Hamed (29 years old) by Israeli gunfire in Qalqilya,” it said in a statement. The official Wafa Agency reported that eyewitnesses saw Israeli special forces firing

live ammunition at a vehicle yesterday afternoon as it passed along the main street of Qalqilya, in the northern West Bank.

Images taken by an AFP journalist on the ground showed the destroyed storefront of a downtown shoe shop and blood stains in front of it. The West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967, has experienced a surge in violence for more than a year, particularly since the Israel-Hamas war erupted in the first week of October.

At least 549 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces or settlers across the West Bank since October first week, according to Palestinian officials.

Israel ‘pause’ in Gaza had no impact on aid supplies: WHO

AFP
Geneva

A daily “pause” the Israeli military declared in Gaza to facilitate aid flows has had no impact on deliveries of badly needed aid, the UN’s health agency said yesterday.

“So overall, we the UN can say that we did not see an impact on the humanitarian supplies coming in since that, I will say, unilateral announcement of this technical pause,” said Richard Peepkorn, the World Health Organisation (WHO) representative in the Palestinian territories. “That is the overall assessment.”

Over the weekend, the Israeli military announced a daily humanitarian “pause” in fighting on a key road in southern Gaza.

Days later however, a United Nations spokesman said “this has yet to translate into more aid reaching people in need”.

According to the WHO, as of May 17, only 750 people remained in the city of Rafah.

There were between 60,000 and 75,000 in the Al-Mawasi area in the south of the Gaza Strip, where many Palestinians have taken refuge since the start of the Israeli offensive in Rafah.

Dr Thanos Gargavanis, a trauma surgeon and emergency officer at the WHO, said the UN in Gaza was trying to “operate in an unworkable environment”.

Returning from Gaza, the UN Women’s Special Representative for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Maryse Guimond, described the territory as a “world of devastation”.

She added: “More than one million people in Gaza are in constant displacement” in the hope of finding somewhere safe.

However, the WHO’s Dr Gargavanis said that “no place is safe”.

The WHO is calling for the Rafah crossing to be reopened for humanitarian aid and medical evacuations.

Another alternative for medical evacuations would be the Kerem Shalom crossing in Israel, Peepkorn said, adding that it

should only be done when safe.

It would be “for a sustained transfer of patients from Gaza to the West Bank and East Jerusalem referral hospitals. Just like it was prior to the war,” he said.

According to the WHO, only 17 of the 36 hospitals in Gaza are operational, but only partially.

Some 4,900 patients have been evacuated from Gaza for war-related or chronic medical reasons since October 7, and the WHO currently estimates that at least 10,000 more people need to be evacuated.

No patients have been evacuated since the closure of the Rafah crossing on May 7, the WHO added.

More than eight months of war, sparked by Hamas’ unprecedented October first week storming of Israel, have led to dire humanitarian conditions in the Palestinian territory and repeated UN warnings of famine.

Israel’s retaliatory offensive in Gaza has killed at least 37,431 people, also mostly civilians, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory.

Iranians split on presidential vote as hardships mount

AFP
Tehran

With just a week remaining before a presidential election, Iranians are divided over whether voting will address pressing economic issues and mandatory religious laws.

Iranians head to the polls on June 28 to choose from six candidates — five conservatives and a relative reformist — to succeed Ebrahim Raisi, who died in a helicopter crash last month.

The election comes as Iran grapples with economic pressures, international sanctions and enforcement of the compulsory headscarves for women.

“They promise change, but won’t do much,” said Hamid Habibi, a 54-year-old shop owner at Tehran’s bustling Grand Bazar.

“I’ve watched the debates and campaigns; they speak beautifully but need to back their words with action,” he said.

Despite his scepticism, Habibi plans to vote next week.

The candidates have held two debates, each pledging to tackle the financial challenges impacting the country’s 85mn people.

“The economic situation is deteriorating daily, and I don’t foresee any improvements,” said

Fariba, a 30-year-old who runs an online store.

“Regardless of who wins, our lives won’t change,” she said.

Others, like 57-year-old baker Taghi Dodangeh, remain hopeful.

“Change is certain,” he said, viewing voting as a religious duty and national obligation. But Jowzi, a 61-year-old housewife, expressed doubts, especially about the candidate line-up. “There’s hardly any differences between the six,” she said. “One cannot say any of them belongs to a different group.”

Iran’s Guardian Council approved six candidates after disqualifying most moderates and reformists.

Leading contenders include conservative parliament speaker Mohamed Bagher Ghalibaf, conservative former nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili and the sole reformist candidate, Masoud Pezeshkian.

Keshvar, a 53-year-old mother, intends to vote for the candidate with the most robust economic plan.

“Young people are grappling with economic hardships,” she said.

“Raisi made efforts, but on the ground, things didn’t change much for the general public, and they were unhappy.” In the 2021 election that brought Raisi to power, many voters stayed away,

resulting in a participation rate just under 49% — the lowest since the 1979 Revolution.

Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has urged a high voter turnout.

Yet, 26-year-old shopkeeper Mahdi Zeinali said he would only vote if a candidate proves to be “the right person”.

This election comes at a turbulent time, with the Gaza war raging between Israel and Palestinian group Hamas, along with ongoing diplomatic tensions over Iran’s nuclear programme.

Compulsory religious laws remain contentious, particularly since mass protests triggered by the 2022 death in custody of Mahsa Amini.

Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurd, was detained for an alleged breach of Iran’s dress code for women.

Fariba expressed concern that after the election, “things would go back to where they were”, and young women won’t be able to remove their headscarves.

Jowzi, an undecided voter who wears a veil, regards it as a “personal” choice and opposes state interference.

“It makes no difference who becomes president,” she said. “What’s important is what they actually do. It’s not important to me whether or not they have a turban. They need to act humanely.”

Flamingoes get heatwave relief



Flamingoes are sprayed with water in their enclosure to cool off during a heatwave at a zoo in Qamishli in Syria’s northeastern Hasakeh province, yesterday.

Rare LNG vessel sails through Red Sea amid Houthi attacks, data shows

The first liquefied natural gas (LNG) tanker since January is sailing through the Red Sea, just days after Yemen-based Houthi fighters sank their second vessel in attacks begun last November, Reuters reported from Singapore.

The vessel, Asya Energy, passed Yemen, travelling through the Bab al-Mandab Strait on Tuesday, shiptracking data from LSEG and Kpler showed, the same week that the second ship believed to have been hit by the fighters sank. “Asya Energy is the first LNG tanker to sail through the Strait since January, when LNG voyages through the Red Sea were suspended amid repeated rocket attacks,” said LSEG analyst Olumide Ajayi. Data showed the ship was carrying cargo, he added.

Most LNG tankers have avoided the route after the Houthis’ repeated drone and missile strikes in the Red Sea region. They call the attacks, since expanded to other busy waterways, acts of solidarity with Palestinians in Israel’s war in Gaza. The Suez Canal links the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, creating the shortest shipping route between Europe and Asia, and is connected to the Gulf of Aden by the Bab al-Mandab Strait between Yemen and Djibouti. Palau-flagged Asya Energy is heading for Gibraltar, Kpler data shows. It previously called at the Sohar port in Oman, LSEG data showed. It was not immediately clear who had chartered the ship. Nur Global Shipping manages the ship, which is owned by Lule One Services, Equasis data showed, with both companies based in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Nur Global Shipping did not immediately respond to a request for comment when contacted on LinkedIn.

Reuters could not find contact information for Lule One Services.

Lebanon cannot become another Gaza: UN chief

Reuters
UN

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said yesterday he is profoundly concerned by escalating tensions between Israel and Lebanon’s Hezbollah and that UN peacekeepers are working to calm the situation and prevent miscalculation.

“One rash move — one miscalculation — could trigger a catastrophe that goes far beyond the border, and frankly, beyond imagination,” he told reporters. “Let’s be clear: The people of the region and the people of the world cannot afford Lebanon to become another Gaza.” Hezbollah has been firing rockets at Israel in solidarity with its Palestinian ally Hamas since



People walk past the rubble of a building that was destroyed by previous Israeli bombardment in the village of Yaroun in south Lebanon near the border, yesterday, amid ongoing cross-border tensions.

the Gaza war erupted in October, forcing tens of thousands to flee homes in Israel, where political pressure is building for tougher action.

Tens of thousands of Lebanese

have also fled their homes following Israeli strikes in south Lebanon.

Iran’s mission to the UN said yesterday that Hezbollah has the capability to defend itself and Lebanon

against Israel, warning that “perhaps the time for the self-annihilation of this illegitimate regime has come.” “Any imprudent decision by the occupying Israeli regime to save itself could plunge the region into a new war,” Iran’s UN mission posted on X. A UN peacekeeping force UNIFIL, as well as unarmed technical observers known as UNTSO, have long been stationed in southern Lebanon to monitor hostilities along the demarcation line between Lebanon and Israel, known as the Blue Line. “UN peacekeepers are on the ground working to de-escalate tensions and help prevent miscalculation,” Guterres said.

“The world must say loudly and clearly: immediate de-escalation is not only possible — it is essential,” he said.

“There is no military solution.”

BPS event honours Qatar's rich heritage

The Kindergarten department of Birla Public School (BPS) recently hosted a dynamic Parent Morning event, immersing families in a celebration of Qatar's rich national identity. The event commenced with Qatar's national anthem. Students in traditional attire joined their parents. Throughout the event, attendees were treated to an array of cultural exhibitions, offering a glimpse into Qatar's vibrant tapestry of traditions. Featured were displays of traditional attires, language, cuisine, folk dances, tourist attractions and interactive live competitions. Principal Dr Anand Nair and vice-principal Edna Fernandez shared insights into Qatar's journey towards modernity while preserving its cultural roots. "We are proud to celebrate Qatar's national identity and heritage," Kindergarten headmistress Josephine Fernandes added.




ICC hosts tribute event for former Indian president A P J Abdul Kalam

Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) hosted a tribute to Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, India's 11th president. Dr Ponraj (pictured), a former scientific adviser to the late luminary, gave a motivational address for children.



Fashion contest, group dance enthral audience at ICC's fiesta

An environment-friendly fashion contest and colourful group dances captivated the audience at Indian Cultural Centre's 'Malhar 2.0' held as part of the Wednesday Fiesta in association with ICC Youth Wing.

Renowned lyricist Vayalar Sarath Chandra Varma and acclaimed Kannada singer Seema Raiker were the special guests. A highlight of the evening was the felicitation of Indian students who were recently awarded medals for educational excellence by His Highness the Amir.

The fashion contest showcased outfits made from recycled materials, highlighting the importance of environment conservation. ICC president A P Manikantan emphasised the importance of cultural preservation and community unity. Vice-president Subramanya Hebbagelu, general secretary Mohankumar Duraisamy, management committee members, ICC Youth Wing chairman Edwin Sebastian, general convener Dishari Roy, executive members and senior community leaders were present.

ICC Youth wing committee member Maran Chidambaram welcomed audience and Prathiksha Bhosale proposed a vote of thanks.





New committee installed

The Zeal Toastmasters Club in Doha installed its executive committee for 2024-25. The committee has President - Muna Fathima Moiz; vice-presidents - Elizabeth Thomas, Jayant Kadri, Samreen Shahanshah; treasurer - Merrin John; secretary - Yatika Tripathi; sergeant at arms - Mohamed Rafeek. Area 8 director Shweta Koshti was the installation officer. The immediate past president Seema Bhardwaj and her team were acknowledged for their contributions. Division 'B' director Nufaisa was the general evaluator for the meeting.



Utkalika Qatar hosts 'Raja festival' celebration

Utkalika Qatar celebrated the Raja festival, honouring womanhood and the fertility of Mother Earth. Traditionally celebrated in the Indian state of Odisha, the festival marks the beginning of the agricultural season and the onset of the monsoon. The event was a colourful spectacle, with members showcasing a variety of Odia delicacies, including traditional cakes and sweets. The spread included classics such as 'Poda Pitha', a baked rice cake, and 'Chakuli Pitha', a type of pancake, among other sweets and savouries.

The chief guest, Dr Maneesh Mangal, principal of Podar Pearl School, inaugurated the festival, addressed the gathering and feted the Class X and XII achievers along with Utkalika Qatar president Dr Basanta Kabi, general secretary Abinash Acharya, vice-president Nihar Ranjan Mohanty, joint secretary Ipsita



Satpathy, education secretary Satyajit Samal and joint educa-



Doha College celebrates Class of 2024 graduates



Doha College, one of Qatar's oldest international schools, recently celebrated the remarkable journey of its graduating Class of 2024.

The event brought together the graduates, their parents, teachers, siblings and many others from the Doha College community. Throughout the years, the Class of 2024 embraced everything from science fairs to sports tournaments, from Model United Nations conferences to artistic performances, from remote learning to International Awards residencies.

The ceremony was interspersed with captivating music and drama moments: a piano and violin duet delivered by Chaoyi Sha and Nicole Ong, a monologue from 'Dead Poets Society,' performed by Joseph Tomasichio, and a rendition of 'Wonderwall' by the very popular band 'Experimental BBQ.'

Guest speaker Fatima El-Mahdi, head of Thimun Qatar, delivered a passionate and inspiring speech. Senior vice-principal Jerome Scafe, head of Secondary, sent off the fresh graduates with these words: "To our stellar graduating class of 2024; we thank you for being excellent role models for our younger students. Our school community

will sorely miss the electricity you bring to the campus. Thank you for your indelible contributions to DC. This will always be your home away from home."

Doha College principal David Tongue, is confident about the opportunities awaiting the graduates, stating: "It was such a pleasure to be able to say a fond farewell to our departing Year 13 students. They have been such a wonderful group of individuals and those members of the year group who spoke or performed at the ceremony were so impressive. They have very bright futures ahead of them."


NIS observes 'Yoga Day'

Noble International School (NIS) observed International Yoga Day on June 20, highlighting the significance of yoga in promoting health and wellbeing. Principal Shibu Abdul Rasheed spoke about the profound impact of yoga on mental and physical health. The event featured demonstrations of various yoga asanas by trained teachers and students, showcasing their benefits. Following the practical session, several teachers shared their insights on the importance of incorporating yoga into daily routines. The event concluded with a collective meditation session, leaving the participants refreshed and inspired to embrace yoga as a vital part of their lifestyle.



QTMS fetes achievers in Silambam contest

Qatar Tamil Munnatra Sangam (QTMS) honoured students of Adhiran Silambam for their outstanding achievements in the ancient martial art form of Silambam at the International Open Silambam Competition in Malaysia recently. They won four gold, four silver and two bronze. The felicitation event was graced by Dr Ponraj, a scientific adviser to the late Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, the 11th president of India.



vibrant Odia attire, participated enthusiastically, showcasing the unity and cultural pride of the Odia community in Qatar. As the festival concluded, there was a palpable sense of joy and fulfilment among the attendees, who left with cherished memories and a strengthened sense of cultural pride. The event was organised by the Utkalika Ladies wing headed by Secretary Niharika Swain and Joint Secretary Jayashree Mohapatra.

tion secretary Priyadarshini Senapati. The event also featured

traditional music and dance performances. Attendees dressed in

Legal ruling leaves north Nigeria royal dispute in limbo

AFP
Kano, Nigeria

A federal court in northern Nigeria's largest city, Kano, has annulled the reappointment of an influential traditional emir, in the latest round of a tense dispute between two royals over the throne.

The royal tussle, dubbed "Game of Thrones" by locals, is part of a broader political fight between the ruling APC party and opposition

NNPP for control of Kano State, the region with the second largest number of voters.

Nigeria's many traditional rulers have no constitutional powers but are important cultural custodians, wielding enormous influence in Africa's most populous country. The dispute broke out last month when Kano State governor Abba Kabir Yusuf reappointed former emir Muhammadu Sanusi II to the throne, four years after he was deposed.

His predecessor Aminu Ado

Bayero was removed after Kano lawmakers amended the emirate law, created in 2019 by former governor Abdullahi Umar Ganduje, an APC chieftain and a rival of Yusuf, a NNPP leader.

But after he was deposed, Bayero returned to the city the next day and declared himself the bonafide emir, triggering a standoff between the two royals and a legal battle in several courts. In a ruling on Thursday, federal judge Abdullahi Muhammad Liman nullified the reappointment of Sanusi and rec-

ognised his dethroned predecessor Bayero as the rightful occupant of the throne. "I hereby order that every step taken by the (state) government is null and invalid," Liman said in the judgement read in the courtroom, heavily guarded by security personnel. The court said that despite a previous restraining court order, Yusuf illegally went ahead and reappointed Sanusi.

It ordered a stay of execution of the judgement pending an appeal before another court by the Kano government, challenging its juris-

diction. Tension has built in the city, with Sanusi moving into the palace where he holds daily court. Bayero is lodged in a royal guest house a few kilometres (miles) away where he receives his supporters.

Both palaces are heavily guarded by military and police. The emir of Kano by tradition is the second most senior Islamic ruler after the Sultan of Sokoto, the highest religious leader in Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north. Sanusi, a respected banker and former cen-

tral bank governor, was in 2014 appointed the 14th emir of Kano by then state governor Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso. Sanusi was removed in 2020 by Ganduje, Kwankwaso's deputy and protegee, for "disrespect" and "insubordination".

But the two Kano heavyweights, Kwankwaso and Ganduje, had parted ways and become political foes. Kwankwaso belongs to opposition New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP), while Ganduje is the national chairman of the ruling All Progressives Congress, or APC.

One killed in Kenya protests amid calls for national strike



A protester throws back a tear gas canister at Kenyan anti-riot police officers.

AFP
Nairobi

A man died on the sidelines of mass demonstrations by Kenyan youth against proposed tax hikes, police said yesterday, with protesters calling for a national strike in the coming week.

A police watchdog said it was investigating allegations that the man was shot by police after Thursday's demonstrations in the capital Nairobi.

Led largely by young Kenyans who livestreamed the demonstrations, the rallies began in Nairobi on Tuesday before spreading nationwide, with protesters yesterday sharing a poster calling for a national strike on June 25.

The protests have been galvanised by widespread discontent over President William Ruto's economic policies with many Kenyans already struggling to make ends meet. Thursday's demonstrations in Nairobi were mostly peaceful, but officers fired tear gas and water cannon throughout the day in an attempt to disperse protesters near parliament.

The Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA) said Friday it had "documented the death" of a 29-year-old man, "allegedly as a result of police shooting".

"The Authority has this morning launched investigations into the fatal shooting," the IPOA said in a statement, later adding that an autopsy would be undertaken. According to a Nairobi police report seen by AFP, a 29-year-old man was taken to hospital in Nairobi's central district at around 7pm on Thursday "unconscious with a thigh injury" before "succumb-

ing" to his injuries, without giving further details.

Mathias Kinyoda, spokesman for Amnesty International Kenya, told AFP that "one demonstrator was shot yesterday in the CBD (central business district) as he was trying to run away from the police". He said that the shooter "was wearing plain clothes but he was accompanying the police", and called for an investigation into the death. "We saw what happened," a witness told AFP, describing how he was among people gathered on the second floor of a building. "We could see police opening fire at the group that was gathered there," the man said. "It was a police officer in a baseball cap, because he got down from a police vehicle and ran back to it after the shooting when the crowd dispersed." Late Thursday, several organisations, including Amnesty International Kenya, said that at least 200 people were injured in Nairobi. The Kenyan Red Cross said on X that eight people were in critical condition.

As news of the demonstrator's death spread online, protesters shared a poster calling for a national strike on June 25. "Tuesday 25th June: #OccupyParliament and Total Shutdown Kenya. A national strike," read a poster shared widely online, adding that "Gen Z are granting all hard working Kenyans a day off. Parents keep your children at home in solidarity".

The strike call followed demonstrations on Thursday when thousands assembled across the country, from the Indian Ocean city of Mombasa to Ruto's Rift Valley bastion of Eldoret.

Following smaller-scale demonstrations in Nairobi earlier in the week, the cash-strapped govern-



A Kenyan Police Officer carrying a riot-control gun patrols next a barricade set alight by protesters.



A protester cries on the ground after being sprayed by a police water canon truck.

ment agreed to roll back several tax hikes laid out in a new bill.

But Ruto's administration still intends to increase some taxes, defending the proposed levies as necessary for filling its coffers and cutting reliance on external borrowing. After the decision to scrap levies on bread purchases,

car ownership as well as financial and mobile services, the treasury warned of a 200-bn-shilling (\$1.5-bn) shortfall. The proposed taxes were projected to raise 346.7bn shillings (\$2.7bn), equivalent to 1.9 percent of GDP, and reduce the budget deficit from 5.7% to 3.3% of GDP. The government has now

targeted an increase in fuel prices and export taxes to fill the void left by the changes, a move critics say will make life more expensive in a country battling high inflation. Kenya is one of the most dynamic economies in East Africa but a third of its 51.5mn people live in poverty.

Madagascar president opens new cable car in capital Antananarivo

AFP
Antananarivo

Madagascar's president Andry Rajoelina yesterday took a ride on a new cable car that the government says will help reduce traffic in the capital, Antananarivo. Re-elected for a third term last year in a vote boycotted by most opposition candidates, Rajoelina, 50, boarded the gondola lift with the prime minister and other government members for a maiden tour celebrated with great pomp.

"Antananarivo was built for 300,000 inhabitants. Now there are three million of us. This is going to reduce traffic jams and it's also a non-polluting form of transport," the head of state told AFP. The inauguration came just days before Independence Day celebrations. Only the first section of two planned lines has been finished and it might take months

before it is fully operational. Two French companies are currently in the running to be awarded the management of technical and commercial operations.

The project's construction cost was 152mn euros (\$162mn), a big expenditure in the impoverished nation. More than half was financed by France's public investment bank Bpifrance, with an additional 28-mn-euro loan from the French Treasury.

The president said tickets will cost between 3,000 and 5,000 Malagasy ariary (\$0.6 to \$1.1) - a hefty sum that most locals will struggle to afford. A bus ride in comparison costs 500 ariary. "I can assure you that it is within the reach of the middle class," Rajoelina said unfazed. "Myself, the members of my family and my colleagues will all be the first customers of our cable car. Not to mention company executives, students, pupils at the French school and tourists too," he said.

Niger reports 21 dead in floods

Torrential rains and floods in the African nation of Niger over three weeks have left 21 dead and nearly 6,000 people affected, according to interior ministry figures released.

The ministry said eight people had drowned and 13 had died in houses that collapsed in storms. Another 26 people have been injured and around 4,000 cattle have been killed or lost, officials said on state television. The Maradi region in central Niger has been worst hit by the start of the rainy season, accounting for 14 of the dead, the officials said. The rainy season traditionally runs from June through September in the African nation. In 2022, about 195 people were killed and 400,000 people were affected, many of whom lost their homes. —AFP

Burkina Faso junta leader Traore denies reports of military mutiny

Reuters
Cairo

Burkina Faso's military leader Ibrahim Traore appeared on national TV to deny reports of mutiny within the army following an attack by Al Qaeda-linked insurgents that killed over 100 soldiers near the border with Niger.

Commenting for the first time since the assault, Traore did not address a claim of responsibility by an Al Qaeda-linked group, but said Burkina Faso had launched an operation after the attack, and sent reinforcement troops.

Some media outlets and activists had been speculating about whether Traore was safe after gunfire was heard close to the presidency, and a rocket shell fell near state-run RTB Television's headquarters in the capital Ouagadougou on June 12.

"It's absolutely not the case. We are here," Traore told people gathered in front of RTB's headquar-

Some media outlets and activists had been speculating about whether Traore was safe after gunfire was heard close to the presidency

ters, denying mutiny allegations. "The incident happened while we were at the council of ministers."

He said a rocket was launched into RTB's courtyard by mistake by those who were there to protect the TV channel's staff, adding that nobody died although some were injured.

In the past week, planes carrying Russian reinforcements and some Malian officials were dispatched to bolster Traore's security after talks between the two countries' juntas, two sources with direct knowledge of the discussions told Reuters.

The reports point to the close ties between the neighbouring junta-led states and their growing reliance on Russia rather than Western powers for security support in a West African region be-

set by political instability and insurgencies.

A Russian-registered cargo plane made seven trips to Ouagadougou from Gao and Bamako in Mali between June 15 and June 18, according to a Reuters analysis of flight tracking data on Flight-Radar24. In his address, Traore said six Russian planes had flown from Gao carrying UN equipment following the conclusion of a mission there.

The UN peacekeeping mission in Mali did not immediately respond to a request for comment. A day before the events in Ouagadougou, the West African Sahel nation's army suffered one of the deadliest attacks in Mansiara area. Responsibility for that attack was claimed by Al Qaeda affiliate Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) group.

The SITE Intelligence Group quoted a JNIM statement as saying that "fighters stormed a military post in the town, where they killed 107 soldiers and took control of the site".

France reports nearly 200 cholera cases in Mayotte

AFP
Paris

Paris yesterday reported nearly 200 cases of cholera on the French Indian Ocean island of Mayotte, which is struggling to contain the deadly epidemic. "As of June 18, 2024, 193 cases of cholera have been reported in Mayotte," France's SPF public health agency reported in its weekly update.

Of those, 172 were locally acquired cases, while 21 were in people infected abroad in the neighbouring Comoros archipelago and countries on the African continent. Cholera is an infectious disease typically causing severe diarrhoea, vomiting and muscle cramps. It spreads easily in unsanitary conditions.

Mayotte, which is home to around 320,000 people, reported its first locally acquired cases of cholera in late April. Two people have died since the beginning of the epidemic, one of them a three-year-old girl. SPF warned there was a particularly high risk of transmission in disadvantaged neighbourhoods "as long as access to drinking water and sanitation is unsatisfactory".

French authorities have been criticised for failing to secure access to drinking water to prevent a cholera epidemic in its overseas territory. President Emmanuel Macron called for cholera to be "consigned to the past" when he hosted a summit on Thursday on vaccine production in Africa.

Many parts of Africa have recently seen fatal outbreaks of cholera, which has highlighted the shortage of local vaccine production. The Comoros, which has been affected by a cholera epidemic for the past four months, has recorded 134 deaths and more than 8,700 cases, according to a report published by local authorities this month.



Trump campaign reports having more cash than Biden campaign

For the first time, Donald Trump's presidential campaign reported having more cash in its main account than President Joe Biden's re-election campaign had in its account, financial disclosures showed on Thursday, as both sides built their war chests ahead of the November 5 election.

Trump's campaign had about \$116mn in the bank at the end of May, more than double what it had a month earlier, while Biden's campaign told the Federal Election Commission it had about \$91mn in the bank, just above what it had at the end of April.

The full financial picture for the two camps isn't clear because while both campaigns had a Thursday deadline to report their finances to the federal regulator, several of their associated fundraising committees won't report on recent activity until July.

Biden's campaign and his party had earlier released unofficial figures touting \$212mn in cash holdings, but did not detail which committees held that money.

The figures disclosed to the Federal Election Commission appear to represent a dramatic financial turnaround for the Trump campaign, which had lagged be-

hind Biden earlier in the year.

The two candidates are neck-and-neck in national public opinion polls, while Trump leads in several battleground states.

The Republican Party, which is raising money together with Trump to support his bid, also reported a jump in its cash holdings, to \$54mn from \$38mn.

The Democratic Party reported having about \$65mn in the bank, up from \$62mn in April.

Trump's fundraising has surged in recent months, including during the weeks leading up to his May 30 conviction on charges he falsified business records.

Both camps are also ramping up fundraising from billionaires who are allowed to give unlimited sums to groups allied to the campaigns known as super PACs.

A separate filing on Thursday showed conservative billionaire Timothy Mellon, an heir of the Pittsburgh-based Mellon banking family, gave \$50mn last month to a pro-Trump super PAC known as MAGA Inc.

MAGA Inc disclosed in a filing to the Federal Election Commission that it took in more than \$68mn from donors last month, with most of the money coming from Mellon and another \$10mn from bil-

lionaires Liz and Dick Uihlein, who founded the Uline shipping and packaging company from their basement in 1980.

Forbes estimates that the Mellon family is worth some \$14.1bn.

The billionaire Winklevoss twins, founders of cryptocurrency company Gemini, said they had donated \$1mn in bitcoin to support Trump, but did not specify where the donations were sent.

On Biden's side, billionaire Mike Bloomberg gave \$19mn to FF Pac, a super PAC backing the president's re-election effort, a separate filing with the Federal Election Commission showed. – **Reuters**

Apex court upholds ban on domestic abusers owning guns

Reuters/AFP
Washington

The US Supreme Court upheld yesterday a federal law that makes it a crime for people under domestic violence restraining orders to have guns, handing a victory to President Joe Biden's administration as the justices opted not to further widen firearms rights after a major expansion in 2022.

The 8-1 ruling, authored by conservative Chief Justice John Roberts, overturned a lower court's decision striking down the 1994 law as a violation of the US Constitution's Second Amendment right to "keep and bear arms".

The law was challenged by a Texas man who was subject to a restraining order for assaulting his girlfriend in a parking lot and later threatening to shoot her.

The New Orleans-based 5th US Circuit Court of Appeals had concluded that the measure failed the Supreme Court's stringent test set in 2022 that required gun laws to be "consistent with the nation's historical tradition of firearm regulation" to comply with the Second Amendment.

Roberts wrote in the ruling that since the nation's founding, firearm laws have targeted people who threaten physical harm to others.

"When a restraining order contains a finding that an individual poses a credible threat to the physical safety of an intimate partner, that individual may – consistent with the Second Amendment – be banned from possessing firearms while the order is in effect," Roberts wrote.

Biden's administration defended the law as critical to protect public safety and abuse victims, who often are women.

It emphasised that guns pose a particularly serious threat in domestic violence situations and also are extremely dangerous to police officers called to respond.

"No one who has been abused should have to worry about their abuser getting a gun," Biden said, touting his record on gun control.

"As a result of (Friday's) ruling, survivors of domestic violence and their families will still be able to count on critical protections, just as they have for the past three decades."

"A woman who lives in a house with a domestic abuser is five times more likely to be murdered if he has access to a gun," Solicitor-General Elizabeth Prelogar said in November last year as she made the case for upholding the federal law for the Biden administration.

Conservative Justice Clarence Thomas, who authored the 2022 ruling in a case called *New York State Rifle and Pistol Association v. Bruen*, was the lone dissenter.



Christian Defence Coalition director Patrick Mahoney speaks to members of the media as he holds a sign that reads 'Abusers Should NOT Own Guns!' outside the Supreme Court in Washington, DC. – **AFP**

"Most states, including Texas, classify aggravated assault as a felony, punishable by up to 20 years' imprisonment. Thus, the question before us is not whether Rahimi and others like him can be disarmed consistent with the second amendment," Thomas wrote. "Instead, the question is whether the government can strip the second amendment right of anyone subject to a protective order – even if he has never been accused or convicted of a crime. It cannot."

"Not a single historical regulation justifies the statute at issue," Thomas wrote, adding that "in the interest of ensuring the government can regulate one subset of society, (yesterday's) decision puts at risk the Second Amendment rights of many more."

The case involved Zackey Rahimi, who pleaded guilty in 2021 to illegally possessing guns in violation of this law while subject to a restraining order.

Police found a pistol and rifle while searching Rahimi's residence in connection with at least five shootings, including using an assault-type rifle to fire at the home of a man to whom he had sold drugs.

A federal judge had rejected Rahimi's Second Amendment challenge and sentenced him to more than six years in prison.

Violating the domestic violence gun law initially was punishable by up to 10 years in prison but has since been raised to 15 years.

Gun safety groups called yesterday's ruling a legal victory that will help counter firearms violence.

However, they condemned actions by the 5th Circuit, perhaps the most conservative federal appeals court, that let the case get this far.

"As millions of domestic violence victims breathe a sigh of relief, it's worth remembering who put them in jeopardy: extreme Trump-appointed judges on the 5th Circuit who sided with

an abuser who wanted to keep his guns," said John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety, referring to Republican former president Donald Trump.

Rahimi's lawyer declined to comment on the ruling.

In a May Reuters/Ipsos poll, 75% of registered voters, including 84% of Democrats and 70% of Republicans, said that a person subject to a domestic violence restraining order should not be allowed to possess firearms.

In a nation bitterly divided over how to address firearms violence including frequent mass shootings, the Supreme Court often has taken an expansive view of the Second Amendment, broadening gun rights in landmark rulings in 2008, 2010 and 2022.

The 2022 *Bruen* ruling recognised a constitutional right to carry a handgun in public for self-defence, striking down a New York state's limits on carrying concealed handguns outside the home.

In another case, the Supreme Court in a 6-3 ruling on June 14 declared unlawful a federal ban on "bump stock" devices that enable semiautomatic weapons to fire rapidly like machine guns.

The 5th Circuit last year set aside Rahimi's conviction, concluding that although he was "hardly a model citizen", the 1994 law was an "outlier" that could not stand under the "historical tradition" standard the justices announced in *Bruen*.

Supporters of Rahimi have argued that judges too easily issue restraining orders in an unfair process that results in the deprivation of the constitutional gun rights of accused abusers.

Gun violence is common in the United States, where there are more firearms than people, and the Gun Violence Archive registered more than 40,000 deaths last year. Attempts to clamp down on gun rights are always met with stiff political resistance.

Trump: Foreigners who graduate from US colleges should get green cards

By Alexandra Ulmer and Gram Slattery
Reuters

Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in a podcast released on Thursday said that students graduating from US colleges should get a green card to stay in the country, a proposal that runs counter to his hardline immigration stance.

During the All-In podcast hosted by Silicon Valley tech investors, angel investor Jason Calacanis told Trump that the US needs to be able to legally retain more high-skilled workers, a major issue for the tech industry.

"Can you please promise us you will give us more ability to import the best and brightest around the world to America?" Calacanis said.

"I do promise," Trump said. "But I happen to agree, otherwise I wouldn't promise...you graduate from a college, I think you should get automatically as part of your diploma a green card to be able to stay in this country and that includes junior colleges too."

A green card, also known as a permanent resident card, allows individuals the right to live and work permanently in the United States and is a step towards citizenship.

It was not clear if Trump was referring to all foreigners, including those who came to the United States illegally or overstayed their visas, or only those people on student visas.

Asked for comment, the Trump campaign said in a statement that only after "the most aggressive vetting process in US history" would "the most skilled graduates who can make significant contributions to America" be able to stay.

The Biden campaign cast doubt on whether Trump would in fact enact the proposal he outlined on Thursday, given the hardline immigration stances he adopted during his 2017-2021 term.

"Every chance Donald Trump got in office, he made it his mission to rip apart immigrant families for his own political gain," said Biden campaign spokesperson Kevin Munoz. "Trump's empty promise is both a lie and an insult, especially to the countless people that have been permanently damaged by his first-term in office."

Immigration advocates were also unconvinced by Trump's proposal.

"I almost have to laugh because his administration adopted multiple policies aiming to restrict student visas and make it harder for people to stay in



This picture taken on Tuesday shows Trump at a campaign event in Racine, Wisconsin. – **Reuters**

the country after graduating," said Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, policy director at the American Immigration Council.

During his presidency, Trump's administration took steps aimed at curbing US companies' use of skilled foreign workers on H-1B visas, a key visa option for international students seeking to remain in the United States.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the Trump administration tried to force tens of thousands of foreign students to leave the country if their schools held all classes online.

Faced with lawsuits and strong opposition from colleges and universities, the administration later rescinded the order.

Trump has vowed a wide-ranging crackdown if re-elected in the November election against Democrat Joe Biden, and has lambasted Biden's efforts to curb the record number of migrants crossing into the US illegally.

Two of the All-In hosts, venture capitalists David Sacks and Chamath Palihapitiya, hosted a swanky fundraiser for Trump in San Francisco earlier this month, raising some \$12mn for his campaign.

During the interview, Trump ruled out committing US troops to Ukraine.

"I would guarantee it," he said, when asked if he would pledge not to put boots on the ground there. "I wouldn't do it, no."

Trump also appeared sceptical of creating a pathway for North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) membership for Ukraine.

The Biden administration supports Ukraine's eventual ascension into the mutual defence alliance.

On abortion rights, Trump said he would not support a federal ban, echoing previous comments.

Antiquities returning to Mexico include vase sold for \$4 in US store



The Mayan vase that is over 1,000 years old and purchased for about \$4 at a Washington area thrift shop. – **Reuters**

The Mexican government will welcome back 20 cultural artefacts that date to the country's storied ancient past, all found in the United States including a Mayan vase over 1,000 years old and purchased for about \$4 at a thrift shop.

Mexico's antiquities institute INAH announced the repatriation, which also include centuries-old plates, bowls as well as sculpted figures belonging to the Aztec, Totonac and Teotihuacan cultures, in a statement on Thursday.

The artefacts are set to be returned to Mexico.

The reddish-white Mayan vase has stoked particular interest.

According to a Washington DC television news report on Monday, local resident Anna Lee Dozier bought the Mayan vase for \$3.99 from a clearance rack at a nearby thrift store about five years ago.

Likely made during the Maya civilisation's classical zenith between 200-800 CE, according to INAH, the well-preserved vase is a colourful polychrome vessel painted with ornate glyphs and depicting seated figures in profile gesturing with their hands.

Major Mayan cities grew in prominence beginning some 3,000 years ago across a large swathe of present-day southern Mexico and several Central American nations, during a time of major human achievements in math, astronomy and art.

Earlier this year, following a trip to Mexico City, Dozier notified Mexico's US embassy that she might have a real artefact, instead of the rustic replica she initially thought she had purchased.

Dozier later turned over the vase to Mexican officials in Washington, telling the local television station she believed the historical piece should return to its country of origin.

She also expressed relief that the ancient artefact was no longer at risk at her home from her two young boys.

"I was petrified that after two thousand years I would be the one to wreck it!" – **Reuters**

US slaps sanctions on leaders of Kaspersky software firm

Reuters/AFP
Washington

The United States has slapped sanctions on 12 people in senior leadership roles at AO Kaspersky Lab, citing cybersecurity risks a day after the Biden administration announced plans to bar the sale of the company's antivirus software.

The sanctions targeted company leadership including the chief business development officer, chief operating officer, legal officer, corporate communications chief and others.

The Treasury Department did not designate Kaspersky Lab, its parent or subsidiary companies or its chief executive Eugene Kaspersky.

"Today's action underscores the leadership of Kaspersky Lab underscores our commitment to ensure the integrity of our cyber domain and to protect our citizens against



The headquarters of Kaspersky Lab in Moscow.

malicious cyber threats," Treasury Undersecretary Brian Nelson said in a statement.

The moves show the Biden administration is trying to stamp out any risks of Russian cyberattacks stemming from Kaspersky software and keep squeezing Moscow as its war effort in Ukraine has regained momentum and the United States has run low on sanctions it can impose on Russia.

AO Kaspersky is one of two Russian units of Kaspersky Lab placed on a Commerce trade-restriction list on Thursday for allegedly co-operating with Russian military

intelligence to support Moscow's cyber-intelligence goals.

That move was coupled on Thursday with an unprecedented ban on sales, resales and software updates for Kaspersky products in the US starting from September 29.

US authorities say the software poses serious risks, citing Russia's influence over the company, the software's privileged access to a computer's systems which could allow it to steal sensitive information from American computers, and its ability to install malware and withhold critical updates.

The designation announced yesterday prohibits American companies or citizens from trading or conducting financial transactions with the sanctioned executives and freezes assets held in the United States.

Thursday's move was the first such action taken since an executive order issued under Donald Trump's presidency gave the Commerce Department the power to investigate whether certain companies

pose a national security risk.

Kaspersky, in a statement to AFP on Thursday, vowed to "pursue all legally available options to preserve its current operations and relationships", adding that it "does not engage in activities which threaten US national security".

The decision to ban the sale of Kaspersky's antivirus software was criticised yesterday by Moscow.

"Kaspersky Lab is a company which is very, very competitive on the international level," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. "This is a favourite method of unfair competition from the part of the United States. They resort to such tactics every time."

While Kaspersky is headquartered in Moscow, it has offices in 31 countries around the world, servicing more than 400mn users and 270,000 corporate clients in more than 200 countries, according to the Commerce Department.

Police hunt mob that lynched local tourist

Pakistani authorities have begun an investigation to identify and arrest members of a mob that killed a local tourist accused of blasphemy, after they ransacked a police station holding him in protective custody, officials said yesterday.

A mob beat the man to death on Thursday night after accusing him of burning pages of the Qur'an.

They set the police station in the country's northwest ablaze and injured eight officers, Malankand division's regional police chief Mohamed Ali Gandapur told Reuters.

"After initially rescuing the man from a crowd, the police took him to the station in Madyan, but announcements from mosque loud speakers asked locals to come out," Gandapur said.

"To disperse the angry mob, police fired warning shots into the air, which further incited the crowd. The mob overpowered the police, dragged the man out, and beat him to death with sticks," the source said.

Later, some people poured oil on his body and set it ablaze, the source added.

A local official confirmed the incident, saying: "After killing the man, the enraged protesters started stoning the police, forcing them to abandon the station."

Graphic videos of the latest incident, verified to Reuters by the police, showed a frenzied mob dragging a naked and bloodied body through the streets, and then setting it on fire.

The footage went viral on social media and sparked outcry amongst Pakistani users.

Gandapur said the situation was under control and a case registered against the organisers of the mob.

He added the man had been visiting the Swat Valley, a popular tourist destination, for the Eid al-Adha. - **AFP/Reuters**

Five Pakistani soldiers killed in explosion: military

Five Pakistani soldiers were killed yesterday when a bomb detonated as their vehicle passed through the restive northwestern region bordering Afghanistan, the military said.

The latest attack was carried out in Kurram district of the mountainous Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which has long been a hive of religious militant groups including the Pakistani Taliban and the local chapter of the Islamic State group. "An improvised explosive device exploded on a vehicle of Security Forces," the military said in a statement.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. The Pakistani Taliban - known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) - is the most active militant group in the area and regularly targets security forces.

Attacks have spiked in Pakistan since the Taliban returned to power in neighbouring Afghanistan in August 2021.

In a similar attack earlier this month, seven soldiers were killed in the Lakki Marwat district of the same province.

Islamabad accuses Kabul's new rulers of failing to root out militants sheltering on Afghan soil as they prepare to stage attacks on Pakistan. - **AFP**

Hawaii reaches 'historic' agreement in climate lawsuit filed by youths

AFP/Reuters
Los Angeles

The US state of Hawaii has reached a historic agreement in response to litigation by youth activists, promising to speed up the de-carbonisation of its transport sector to protect their right to a safe and healthy climate.

Thirteen young people from across the islands brought the case in June 2022, arguing that their constitutional rights to a life-sustaining climate were being violated.

They asked the state government to take action to implement its goals of net negative emissions in the transport system by 2045.

"The passion demonstrated by these young people in advocating for a healthy, sustainable future for their generation and

those to come, is laudable," said Governor Josh Green in a statement issued after the two sides reached an agreement.

"This settlement informs how we as a state can best move forward to achieve life-sustaining goals and further, we can surely expect to see these and other youth in Hawaii continue to step up to build the type of future they desire," he said.

"We're addressing the impacts of climate change today, and needless to say, this is a priority because we know now that climate change is here," Green said. "It is not something that we're considering in an abstract way in the future."

The settlement was announced just days before the case was set to head to trial on Monday, with the youths represented by attorneys for the nonprofits Earthjustice and Our Children's Trust.

Navahine v. Hawaii Department of

Transportation (DOT) was the world's first youth-led constitutional climate case seeking to address climate pollution from the transportation sector.

Many of the plaintiffs were Native Hawaiian youths experiencing climate change harms including sea level rise, drought, floods and fires, which were threatening their lives and ability to carry out cultural practices, such as growing the karo plant, fishing, and gathering.

Under the agreement, the Hawaii DOT will take steps including establishing a greenhouse gas reduction plan within one year and make ambitious investments in clean transportation infrastructure, including completing the pedestrian, bicycle, and transit networks in five years.

A minimum of \$40mn will be dedicated to expanding the public electric vehicle charging network by 2030, while the de-

partment's budgeting process will prioritise greenhouse gas reduction, and a volunteer youth council will advise the department on its climate commitments.

"I am so proud of all the hard work to get us to this historic moment," said youth plaintiff Navahine F. "We got what we came for, and we got it faster than we expected. *Mai kuuhihewa* (make no mistake), young people have the power to make a difference for their futures."

Last August, a court in the US state of Montana ruled in favour of a group of youths who accused the state of violating their rights to a clean environment.

However, another high profile lawsuit brought by a group of California children who claimed the US federal government was harming them by failing to clamp down on pollution, was tossed out by a judge in May this year.

Brazil's wetlands see record fires even before dry season

AFP
Rio de Janeiro

Brazil's Pantanal, one of the world's largest tropical wetlands, is seeing record fires in June, even before the arrival of the dry season, satellite data showed yesterday.

The Brazilian Institute of Space Research (INPE) released data showing some 1,700 fires since the start of the month in a region teeming with one of the greatest concentrations of wildlife in South America.

This is more than four times the previous record for fires in June, set almost two decades ago.

"This resurgence of fires in the Pantanal even before the dry season (which usually begins in the second half of the year) is extremely worrying," Claudio Angelo, a member of the Climate Observatory collective, told AFP.

The worst year on record for the Pantanal, a region slightly bigger than England, was 2020, when 30% of the wetlands were affected by flames.

This year so far, is looking worse.

"Everything suggests that we are facing another extreme climate event, which makes us fear for the future of the biome in the coming months, when the drought reaches its peak," said Angelo.

The Pantanal, which extends into Bolivia and Paraguay, is home to millions of caimans, parrots, giant otters and the world's highest density of jaguars.

Environment Minister Marina Silva has sounded the alarm in recent weeks over the looming "severe" drought in several parts of the country, including the Pantanal and the Amazon rainforest.

Brazil has been battered by a series of extreme weather events,



This handout photo released by the Mato Grosso do Sul Fire Department shows firefighters battling yesterday to control a wildfire at Pantanal Biome, Abobral Region, located in the city of Corumba, in Brazil's Mato Grosso do Sul State. - **AFP**

most recently once-in-a-century flooding in the state of Rio Grande do Sul that left more than 170 people dead.

Greek wildfires claim first victim

Greek firefighters battled yesterday wildfires fanned by three days of fierce winds that have left at least one person dead, authorities said.

A 55-year-old man collapsed and died while helping to fight one of four major blazes ravaging the southern Peloponnese peninsula where several villages have been evacuated, according to a fire service spokesman.

Dozens of firefighters battled to put out one blaze near a power station outside the town of Magapoli, with six water-bomber aeroplanes and two helicopters brought in to help, according to the Greek news agency ANA.

The other fires are in the Argolis, Messenia and Achaea regions of the Peloponnese at a time when the peninsular is starting to hit its peak tourist season.

"The conditions are extremely challenging," fire department spokesman Vassilis Vathrakogiannis told reporters.

"The wind speeds have exceeded 95kph (60mph) in some regions," said Vathrakogiannis, who highlighted how the winds were battering aeroplanes dropping water on the fires.

In all, he said, "45 fire outbreaks have been recorded across the country".

The man who died was a resident of the Peloponnese village of Myrtia.

A fire service spokesman told AFP that according to witnesses he collapsed while fighting the flames

around his village. Several homes have been destroyed or damaged by the wildfires.

The fire service contained one blaze near the seaside resort of Mavro Lithari close to Athens, Vathrakogiannis said, urging civilians to take precautions.

Two other villages southeast of Athens were evacuated on Wednesday.

Greek authorities have warned of the growing wildfire risk due to strong winds and high temperatures, which in some areas have reached 40° Celsius (101° Fahrenheit).

Accustomed to searing summer heat, Greece has for weeks been preparing for a particularly difficult wildfire season.

After the warmest winter in its history, the Mediterranean nation experienced its earliest-ever heatwave last week, with the mercury topping 44C in some areas.

Last year, a two-week heatwave was followed by devastating wildfires in which 20 people died.

The flames consumed nearly 175,000 hectares (432,000 acres) of forest and farmland, according to the National Observatory of Athens.

Scientists warn that fossil fuel emissions caused by humans are worsening the length and intensity of heatwaves around the world.

Rising temperatures are leading to extended wildfire seasons and increasing the area burnt by the blazes, according to the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. - **AFP**

UK's richest family get jail terms for exploiting staff

AFP
Geneva

Swiss court handed jail sentences to four members of Britain's richest family yesterday, branding them "selfish" for exploiting Indian staff at their Geneva mansion.

The Hinduja family were acquitted of human trafficking, but convicted on other charges in a stunning verdict for the family, whose fortune is estimated at £37bn (\$47bn) by the *Sunday Times*.

Prakash Hinduja and his wife Kamal Hinduja each got four years and six months, while their son Ajay and his wife Namrata received four-year terms, the presiding judge in Geneva ruled.

They were found guilty of a charge of "usury" for taking advantage of their vulnerable immigrant staff to pay them a pittance.

"The employees' inexperience was exploited. They had little education or none at all and had no knowledge of their rights," presiding judge Sabina Mascotto said in her judgment.

"The defendants' motives were selfish," she said, adding that the Hinduja family were motivated "by the desire for gain".

Lawyers for the members of the Swiss-Indian family - who were not present in court - said that they would appeal the verdict.

The court acquitted them of the more serious charge of human trafficking, on the grounds



This picture taken in January this year shows Indian-Swiss billionaire family members Namrata (left) and Ajay Hinduja (second right) arriving at the Geneva courthouse with their lawyers Yael Hayat (centre) and Robert Assael (right) at the opening day of their trial for human trafficking. - **AFP**

that the workers had travelled to Switzerland willingly.

During the trial the family were accused of bringing servants from their native India and confiscating their passports once they got to Switzerland.

Prosecutor Yves Bertossa accused the Hinduja family of spending "more on their dog than on their domestic employees".

The Hinduja family paid the household staff a salary between 220 and 400 francs (\$250-450) a month, up to 90% less than the going rate, the court heard.

"The four Hinduja defendants knew the weak

position their employees were in and knew the law in Switzerland," Mascotto said.

The family denied the allegations, claiming that the prosecutors wanted to "do 'in' the Hinduja family".

The family had reached a confidential out-of-court settlement with the three employees who made the accusations against them.

Despite this, the prosecution decided to pursue the case due to the seriousness of the charges.

Following the verdict, Bertossa requested an immediate detention order for Ajay and Namrata Hinduja, claiming a flight risk.

The defence denied the risk on the grounds that Kamal Hinduja is hospitalised in Monaco and the three other family members were at her bedside.

Aged 78 and 75 respectively, both parents had been absent since the start of the trial for health reasons.

It was not immediately clear whether the four would be extradited from the principality to serve their sentences.

The defence argued that the three employees received ample benefits, were not kept in isolation and were free to leave the villa.

"We are not dealing with mistreated slaves," Nicolas Jeandin told the court.

Indeed, the employees "were grateful to the Hinduja family for offering them a better life", his fellow lawyer Robert Assael argued.



This handout photograph taken and released yesterday by the Turkish news agency DHA (Demiroren News Agency) shows a fire that swept through two areas between the provinces of Diyarbakir and Mardin. - **AFP**

Huge wildfire kills 11 in southeastern Türkiye

AFP
Cinar, Türkiye

A huge wildfire killed 11 people and critically injured five as it ripped through Türkiye's mainly Kurdish southeast overnight, the health minister said yesterday. Hundreds of animals also perished or were badly injured in the blaze that roared across the dry landscape, sending flames into the night sky.

By morning the fire had left huge areas of charred and blackened land across the Diyarbakir and Mardin provinces.

"Eleven people lost their lives," Health Minister Fahrettin Koca wrote on X, adding that another 78 people suffered injuries and smoke inhalation.

Of that number, five people were being treated in intensive care, he said.

Türkiye's pro-Kurdish DEM party, which won many municipalities in the southeast in the March local elections, criticised the government's intervention as "late and insufficient".

During the night, DEM had urged the government to send water bombers, saying fighting the blaze from the ground was "not enough".

An AFP reporter in Koksalan village in Diyarbakir province saw around 100 animals lying dead on the ground.

Residents told AFP around half their flock of about 1,000

sheep and goats had perished in the blaze.

A local vet, who did not want to give his name, confirmed around half the flock had died, and said many of those that survived were being treated for burns.

"We don't have very clear information on how many animals have been affected," the vet told AFPTV. "But at the moment, just under half of the survivors will have to be slaughtered because they can't be saved."

Seracettin Bedirhanoglu, a member of the opposition CHP party and leader of the eastern Van province, described the images as "unbearable", urging vets to go to the area to help treat the wounded animals.

"They are defenceless and helpless. In every big fire, they get hurt first. I ask my veterinarian brothers and sisters: please go to the fire zone because they need you," he wrote on X.

Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya blamed the fire on "a stubble burn" which started late on Thursday and spread quickly due to strong winds, affecting five villages.

Justice Minister Yilmaz Tunc said on X the public prosecutor's office had opened a probe into the cause of the fire.

Türkiye has suffered 74 wildfires so far this year, which have ravaged 12,910 hectares (31,900 acres) of land, according to the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS).



ANGER

Seoul summons Russian envoy over N Korea pact

South Korea's foreign ministry said it had summoned the Russian ambassador in protest of a pact between Russia and North Korea signed in Pyongyang this week. First vice-foreign minister Kim Hong-kyun conveyed Seoul's stance on the pact and military co-operation between Russia and North Korea to Georgy Zinoviev, the top Russian envoy to Seoul. Kim told Zinoviev that Russia's military support for North Korea harms South Korea's security and would inevitably have a "negative impact" on relations between Seoul and Moscow. He also urged Russia to "act responsibly," according to the ministry.

OFFICIAL

Australia seeks defence chiefs' dialogue with China

Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles yesterday said his country wants to restart annual dialogue with China's chief of defence to reduce misunderstandings between the militaries, with the matter raised with China's Premier Li Qiang this week. Albanese said the two countries would take steps to improve military communication to avoid incidents Marles said in an interview Australia wants to resume annual meetings between the two nations' chiefs of defence and defence department secretaries. Although some defence dialogue has restarted after years of frozen ties, it wasn't at the level it was 10 years ago, when the defence chiefs regularly met, he said.

TRAGEDY

Death toll in south China flooding jumps to 38

The death toll from heavy rains and flooding in southern China's Guangdong province this week rose sharply to 38 yesterday, state media reported. China has endured a spate of extreme weather so far this summer, with deluges in the south coming as a heatwave has swept across the north. Downpours in densely populated Guangdong this week sparked inundations and landslides, with some areas seeing record flooding. Authorities said on Thursday nine people had been killed around the city of Meizhou but the toll had jumped to 38 by mid-afternoon yesterday. More than 55,000 people were affected by the rains, state broadcaster CCTV said.

CRISIS

Clashes 'may have led to Rohingya entering Bangladesh'

Escalating violence in Myanmar's western Rakhine state in recent months may have spurred some Rohingya Muslims to cross into Bangladesh, a refugee official said, although Dhaka insists it cannot accept more refugees from its neighbour. Rohingya have faced persecution in Myanmar for decades, with large numbers fleeing to Bangladesh from Rakhine in 2017, following a military-led crackdown on the community. Mohamed Mizanur Rahman, the Bangladesh official tasked with refugee relief and repatriation, said his office had received reports of Rohingya crossing over to swell the figure of nearly a million housed in refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar area.

Subway under construction collapses



A metro station under construction in China's southwestern city of Chengdu collapsed early yesterday, opening up a large sinkhole in a road in a popular tourist and commercial district. No casualties were reported in the accident, which happened after two water pipes burst at the subway's construction pit, Chengdu Rail Construction said on its official Weibo page. State broadcaster CCTV also carried footage of the sink hole, which emergency staff told local media would not jeopardise the safety of surrounding buildings.

China warns of death penalty for Taiwan 'separatists'

Reuters
Beijing

China yesterday threatened to impose the death penalty in extreme cases for "diehard" Taiwan independence separatists, a ratcheting up of pressure even though Chinese courts have no jurisdiction on the island. China, which views Taiwan as its own territory, has made no secret of its dislike of President Lai Ching-te who took office last month, saying he is a "separatist", and staged war games

shortly after his inauguration. Taiwan has complained of a pattern of ramped up Chinese pressure since Lai won the election in January, including ongoing military actions, trade sanctions and coast guard patrols around Taiwan-controlled islands next to China. The new guidelines say China's courts, prosecutors, public and state security bodies should "severely punish Taiwan independence diehards for splitting the country and inciting secession crimes in accordance with the law, and resolutely defend national sovereignty, unity and

territorial integrity", according to China's state-run Xinhua news agency. The guidelines are being issued in accordance with laws already on the books, including the 2005 anti-succession law, Xinhua said. That law gives China the legal basis for military action against Taiwan if it secedes or seems about to. Sun Ping an official from China's ministry of public security, told reporters in Beijing the maximum penalty for the "crime of secession" was the death penalty.

US, China hold first informal nuclear talks in five years

Reuters
Hong Kong

The US and China resumed semi-official nuclear arms talks in March for the first time in five years, with Beijing's representatives telling US counterparts that they would not resort to atomic threats over Taiwan, according to two American delegates who attended. The Chinese representatives offered reassurances after their US interlocutors raised concerns that China might use, or threaten to use, nuclear weapons if it faced defeat in a conflict over Taiwan. "They told the US side that they were absolutely convinced that they are able to prevail in a conventional fight over Taiwan without using nuclear weapons," said scholar David Santoro, the US organiser of the Track Two talks, the details of which are being reported by Reuters for the first time. Participants in Track Two talks are generally former officials and academics who can speak with authority on their government's position, even if they are not directly involved with setting it. Government-to-government negotiations are known as Track One. Washington was represented by about half a dozen delegates, including former officials and scholars at the two-day discussions, which took place in a Shanghai hotel conference room. Beijing sent a delegation of scholars and analysts, which included several former People's Liberation Army officers.

A state department spokesperson said in response to Reuters' questions that Track Two talks could be "beneficial". The department did not participate in the March meeting though it was aware of it, the spokesperson said. Such discussions cannot replace formal negotiations "that require participants to speak authoritatively on issues that are often highly compartmentalised within (Chinese) government circles," the spokesperson said. Members of the Chinese delegation and Beijing's defence ministry did not respond to requests for comment. The informal discussions between the nuclear-armed powers took place with the US and China at odds over major economic and geopolitical issues, with leaders in Washington and Beijing accusing each other of dealing in bad faith. The two countries briefly resumed Track One talks over nuclear arms in November but those negotiations have since stalled, with a top US official publicly expressing frustration at China's responsiveness. The Pentagon, which estimates that Beijing's nuclear arsenal increased by more than 20% between 2021 and 2023, said in October that China "would also consider nuclear use to restore deterrence if a conventional military defeat in Taiwan" threatened CCP rule. The Track Two talks are part of a two-decade nuclear weapons and posture dialogue that stalled after the Trump administration pulled funding in 2019.

After the Covid-19 pandemic, semi-official discussions resumed on broader security and energy issues, but only the Shanghai meeting dealt in detail with nuclear weapons and posture. Nuclear policy analyst William Alberque of the Henry Stimson Centre think-tank, who was not involved in the March discussions, said the Track Two negotiations were useful at a time of glacial US-Chinese relations. "It's important to continue talking with China with absolutely no expectations," he said, when nuclear arms are at issue. The US department of defence estimated last year that Beijing has 500 operational nuclear warheads and will probably field more than 1,000 by 2030. That compares to 1,770 and 1,710 operational warheads deployed by the US and Russia respectively. The Pentagon said that by 2030, much of Beijing's weapons will likely be held at higher readiness levels. Since 2020, China has also modernised its arsenal, starting production of its next-generation ballistic missile submarine, testing hypersonic glide vehicle warheads and conducting regular nuclear-armed sea patrols. Weapons on land, in the air and at sea give China the "nuclear triad" - a hallmark of a major nuclear power. A key point the US side wanted to discuss, according to Santoro, was whether China still stood by its no-first-use and minimal deterrence policies, which date from the creation of its first nuclear bomb in the early 1960s.

UN rights chief denies inaction on China report

UN officials yesterday denied they had done too little to address reports of serious rights violations in China's Xinjiang region, a day after leading campaigners called for greater action. On Thursday, rights groups urged UN rights chief Volker Turk to follow up on an explosive 2022 report detailing violations against Muslim minorities there, including against the Uyghurs. The report by Michelle Bachelet, Turk's predecessor as high commissioner for human rights, cited possible "crimes against humanity" in the region. The report highlighted "credible" allegations of widespread torture, arbitrary detention and violations of the religious and reproductive rights of Uyghurs and other Muslim groups. China had dismissed its contents. Yesterday, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the International Service for Human Rights and the World Uyghur Congress issued a joint call to action.



People wade through flood waters following heavy rainfall in Sylhet, Bangladesh, yesterday.

2mn stranded as floods wreak havoc in Bangladesh

Monsoon rains and upstream river water from India have caused widespread flooding in northeastern Bangladesh, stranding more than 2mn people, and the situation could worsen, officials said yesterday. The UN children's agency Unicef said trapped residents in the region, including more than 772,000 children, were in urgent need of assistance. "Children are the most vulnerable, facing heightened risks of drowning, malnutrition, deadly waterborne diseases, the trauma of displacement, and potential abuse in overcrowded shelters," said Sheldon Yett, Unicef representative to Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Meteorological Department forecast further heavy rainfall in the next few days that could exacerbate the flooding and cause landslides in hilly areas. At least 10 people, including eight Rohingya Muslims, were killed on Wednesday after heavy monsoon

rains triggered landslides in refugee camps in southern Bangladesh. The northeastern region has been particularly hard hit, with heavy rainfall and upstream water from India causing widespread inundation. Bangladesh is still recovering from a cyclone that hit its coastal belt in the south late last month. "I fear it could be as devastating as the 2022 floods," Sylhet resident Shameem Chowdhury said, referring to flooding that was the worst in the region for 122 years. TV footage showed extensive flooding in fields and villages with people wading through knee-deep water in Sylhet city as the rainfall dangerously swelled water levels along four rivers in the region. Vast areas of land are submerged, posing a significant threat to crops if the floodwaters linger for an extended period, agriculture ministry officials said.

Manila 'did not plan to invoke US pact over' China sea clash

Reuters
Manila

The Philippines did not consider invoking a mutual defence treaty with the US after accusing China of disrupting a resupply mission in the disputed South China Sea, officials said yesterday. A Philippine sailor suffered serious injury after what its military described as "intentional-high speed ramming" by the Chinese Coast Guard on Monday, aiming to disrupt a resupply mission for troops stationed on the Second Thomas Shoal.

Executive Secretary Lucas Bersamin, who also chairs the national maritime council, said the confrontation between Philippine navy sailors and the Chinese coast guard "was probably a misunderstanding or an accident". "We are not yet ready to classify this as an armed attack," Bersamin told a briefing. "I think this is a matter that can easily be resolved by us and if China wants to work with us, we can work with China." China's foreign ministry disputed the Philippines' account, with a spokesperson saying on Thursday that the necessary measures taken were lawful, professional and beyond reproach.

China's embassy in Manila did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The Philippines has a mutual defence treaty with the Washington, and US officials including President Joe Biden have reaffirmed its "ironclad" defence commitments against any attack on Philippine aircraft and vessels in the South China Sea. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in a call with the Philippines' foreign minister on Wednesday, "underscored the US' ironclad commitments to the Philippines under the Mutual Defence Treaty. Andres Centino, a presidential

assistant for maritime concerns, said invoking the treaty was not considered in discussions. The council, however, had recommended to President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. that its resupply missions to the disputed shoal should be announced and continue to be "scheduled regularly". Meanwhile, a spokesperson for China's embassy in Japan yesterday said Japan is not a party to the South China Sea issue and has no right to intervene in China-Philippines maritime matters. Japan's foreign ministry said this week that it was seriously concerned over repeated actions that obstruct freedom of naviga-

tion and increase regional tensions, including recent dangerous actions that damaged a Filipino vessel and injured Filipino on-board. "We express our strong dissatisfaction and resolute opposition to the fact that the Japanese side has once again made erroneous remarks on the South China Sea issue that manipulate right and wrong, and make unreasonable accusations against China," the spokesperson said. China claims almost all of the South China Sea as its own, infuriating neighbouring countries. The Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016 found China's sweeping

claims have no legal basis, a ruling Beijing rejects. Japan said it has consistently advocated upholding the rule of law at sea, and will continue to work with the international community, such as Asean member states and the US. "Japan's co-operation with the US and the Philippines must not undermine China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests," China's spokesperson said in a statement. The US, Canada, Japan, and the Philippines recently wrapped up a two-day joint maritime exercise in Manila's exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea.

RULING

Bail granted to Kejriwal in graft case suspended

An Indian court yesterday suspended a lower court's order granting bail to opposition leader and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in a graft case, extending his pre-trial detention at least until next week. Kejriwal is a fierce critic of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his decade-old Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) quickly rose to mainstream politics, although its clout is relatively small compared to older opposition parties. He was arrested by India's financial crime-fighting agency in March, weeks before national elections, on corruption allegations relating to Delhi's liquor policy and was granted bail by a city court on Thursday. Kejriwal has denied the allegations.

CRIME

NHS probes claims of hacked patient data being published

Britain's National Health Service yesterday said it was investigating claims that hackers had published confidential data stolen from several London hospitals in a cyber-attack on a blood testing lab. Services at large London hospitals including Guy's, St Thomas' and King's services were still being disrupted following the attack by hackers reportedly demanding ransom from Synnovis, a lab company which provides testing services, on June 3. "NHS England has been made aware that the cyber criminal group published data last night which they are claiming belongs to Synnovis and was stolen as part of this attack," the state-run unit said.

MUSIC

Taylor Swift fans welcomed with Eras-inspired Tube map

Taylor Swift's Eras tour was welcomed by a sparkling London Tube map redesigned in the singer's honour yesterday, as the British capital eyes a £300mn (\$379mn) windfall. Swift is due to perform eight shows at London's Wembley stadium attracting nearly 700,000 fans in total, the mayor's office said in a statement. Aside from spending on tickets and travel, her fans, known as 'Swifties,' splash out on glittery outfits and accessories to depict different musical eras of the 34-year-old's discography. Transport for London published a special version of its distinctive London Underground map to mark the occasion.

INDUSTRIAL ACTION

Tata Steel workers in Britain to begin indefinite strike

Around 1,500 Tata Steel workers in Britain will begin an indefinite strike from July 8 over the company's plans to close two blast furnaces and cut up to 2,800 jobs, the trade union Unite said yesterday. The strike action, described by Unite as the first strikes by British steel workers in 40 years, will take place at Tata's Port Talbot and Llanwern sites in Wales. The closures were announced in January as part of the Indian company's plan to turn around its loss-making UK business by switching to lower carbon electric arc furnaces, a proposal backed by £500mn (\$632mn) of government money.

Wildlife sanctuary flooded



An one-horned rhinoceros wades through flood waters at the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary in Morigaon district of Assam. Six people were killed after heavy rain triggered flash floods and landslides in a remote corner of India's northeast, officials said.

Election setback seen forcing Modi to amend food policy

Reuters
Mumbai/New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is facing a policy conundrum after losing ground in the recent election: how to control food inflation without resorting to export curbs and more imports - steps that have angered farmers, a sizeable voting bloc.

While Modi managed to retain power in a coalition government, his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) faces provincial elections later this year in two key agricultural states - Haryana and Maharashtra - that have strong farm lobbies.

Losses in the two states could diminish the BJP's stature in the newly formed coalition government, weakening Modi as he seeks the consent of allies for policy initiatives for the first time since he took office a decade ago.

"It is true that farmers have been angry with the government," said Rampal Jat, national president of the Kisan Mahapanchayat, or farmers' council. "Knee-jerk policy decisions to ban exports and allow cheaper imports into the country have undercut meagre agricultural incomes."

To hold down consumer prices, Modi's administration clamped down, starting in 2022, on exports of staples such as rice, wheat, sugar and onions. It also lowered tariffs on pulse and vegetable oils, allowing cheaper imports.

That did not go down well in the countryside, where more than 45% of India's 1.4bn people make a living from agriculture.

The BJP, which held 201 rural constituencies in the 543-member parliament, retained only 126 of them in the mammoth April-May election, according to a voter analysis.

Jat said farmers were made a scapegoat for the government's inability to manage inflationary pressures.

Since higher inflation was one of the factors that helped Modi sweep to power for the first time in 2014, his administration has focused on taming prices and used export curbs as a handy tool to rein in inflation.

Still, food inflation has remained at around 8% year-on-year since November 2023, largely because of higher fruit and vegetable prices, pushing up overall retail inflation above the central bank's medium-term target of 4%.

Ahead of assembly elections in Haryana and Maharashtra, the BJP will try to woo growers by trying to tilt the balance in favour of farmers, analysts and industry experts said.

"There is a realisation that farmers cannot be endlessly penalised for higher inflation, and consumers will have to feel the pinch if prices go up," said Harish Galipelli, director of ILA Commodities.

"Consumers, especially urban consumers, have deeper pockets these days but rural India is suffering."

India's food ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

Some decisions are imminent, like easing export curbs on at least two commodities to begin with, the experts said. Other longer-

term measures could also be considered, like boosting crop yields and raising government-mandated support prices by bigger margins, they said.

The government announced on Wednesday that it would increase support prices that are offered for summer-sown crops, but the raises were unlikely to placate farmers.

Last year, the government raised the rice purchase price by 7%, and this year's increase is only about 5.4%, so it is disappointing, said Ravindra Kajal, a rice grower from Haryana state.

"My feeling is that the government will open up rice and onion exports," said Ashok Gulati, India's leading farm economist.

"Because rice stocks are three-and-a-half times the required target and there is a forecast for good monsoon rains this year, the government should soon take a call on allowing exports," Gulati said.

Despite the increase in stocks, rice prices are around 7% higher than last year, reflecting the increase in government-set support prices announced at the start of the sowing season in 2023.

As the El Niño weather pattern threatened to curtail monsoon rains last year, India, the world's biggest rice exporter, banned overseas shipments of non-basmati white rice and imposed curbs on other grades.

Now, state granaries are brimming over with rice stocks and the government is examining all possibilities, including exports, to cut back inventories, said a government source who declined to be identified in line with official rules.

Peace at Chinese border key to flights resumption: India

Reuters
New Delhi

India's foreign ministry said peace on its border with China was critical for relations to become normal, reacting yesterday to a media report that New Delhi was not keen to restart direct flights with China amid a stand-off on their Himalayan frontier.

China has been pressing India to restart direct passenger flights after a four-year halt, but New Delhi is resisting as the border dispute continues to weigh

on ties between the world's two most populous countries, media reported on Thursday.

Asked about the lack of direct flights, foreign ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said "peace and tranquillity on the border is important" for ties with China to become normal. He did not elaborate.

India-China relations have been tense since the biggest military confrontation in decades on their disputed Himalayan border killed 20 Indian and at least four Chinese soldiers in June 2020. Thousands of troops

remain mobilised on each side. Direct India-China flights peaked in December 2019 with a total of 539 scheduled flights. Flights were halted four months later as the Covid-19 pandemic escalated, but they have not resumed even though India lifted Covid restrictions on international air routes a year later and China lifted all Covid travel measures in early 2023.

Since the border clash, India has made it difficult for Chinese companies to invest, banned hundreds of popular apps and severed passenger routes.

Poll manifesto launch



British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak speaks to shadow minister for housing and planning Mark Isherwood during the launch of the Welsh Conservatives general election manifesto in Rhyl, Britain, yesterday.

Fitch raises India's 2024-25 GDP forecast

Reuters
New Delhi

India is expected to grow by 7.2% in the current fiscal year, stronger than earlier expected, with its central bank opting for just a one-quarter-point rate cut in that period, Fitch Ratings said in its quarterly Global Economic Outlook (GEO) report.

The ratings agency has also raised its world growth forecast for 2024 to 2.6% from 2.4% earlier as confidence in European recovery prospects improve, China's export sector revives and domestic demand in emerging markets excluding China shows stronger momentum.

"We still expect the Reserve Bank of India to cut its policy rate this year, but only once, to 6.25%. In the March GEO we expected 50 basis points of cuts this year. We then expect 25 bps

of cuts in both 2025 and 2026," Fitch wrote.

India's growth forecast marks an upward revision of 0.2 percentage points versus their March forecast.

"Investment will continue to rise but more slowly than in recent quarters, while consumer spending will recover with elevated consumer confidence," Fitch said about India.

The agency, however, expects growth to slow in later years and approach their medium term trend estimate.

"We forecast real GDP growth of 6.5% in FY25-26 (unchanged from March), and 6.2% in FY26-27, driven by consumer spending and investment," they wrote.

Fitch expects headline inflation in the country to continue declining to 4.5% by calendar year-end, and average 4.3% in 2025 and 2026, staying slightly above the mid-point of the Reserve Bank of India's 2% to 6% target range.

Govt 'in touch with family of US murder plot suspect'

Reuters
New Delhi

New Delhi is in touch with the family of an Indian man who is accused of plotting with an Indian government official to kill a Sikh separatist in the US, the foreign ministry said yesterday in reaction to a media report.

Nikhil Gupta, extradited to the US this month after his arrest in Prague last year, has been accused by US federal prosecutors

of unsuccessfully plotting with an Indian official to kill Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a US citizen.

Gupta, 52, pleaded not guilty on Monday to murder-for-hire conspiracy charges in a court in Manhattan and a source close to his family said on Thursday that it wanted New Delhi's help to "get justice".

"We have so far not received any request for consular access from Gupta, but his family has got in touch with us," Indian foreign ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal told reporters. "We are in

touch with the family members and we are looking at the matter as to what can be done on their request"

"Regardless of the allegations raised against him, he is an Indian citizen and a patriot who deserves the rights and protections granted by the government to its citizens"

The US government has said it thwarted the alleged plot to kill

Pannun and warned India about concerns of its involvement.

India has designated Pannun an "individual terrorist" but has dissociated itself from the plot, saying it goes against government policy.

Pannun advocates for a sovereign Sikh state in northern India.

The source, who declined to be named given the sensitive nature of a case that has diplomatic implications, had said Gupta's family has not been able to establish direct contact with him since his extradition.

"Regardless of the allegations raised against him, he is an Indian citizen and a patriot who deserves the rights and protections granted by the government to its citizens."

The source said the family believed Gupta "is a victim in this series of events" but that "he will get justice".

The governments of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Joe Biden are trying to step up bilateral ties against their common rival China.

India said late last year it was

"matter of concern" that an Indian government official was linked to the plot and that it would formally investigate concerns raised by the US. No investigation report has been made public.

Separately, Canada has been investigating whether India's government was linked to the murder of another Sikh separatist leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, in June 2023 in the Canadian province of British Columbia. India has denied the charges and asked Canada to share more information.

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GULF TIMES

Cash is leaving China again, pressuring yuan

A sliding yuan and extensive outflows of cash from the mainland into Hong Kong show China's domestic investors are shelving expectations for any immediate recovery in their home markets and fleeing to the closest better-yielding assets.

The yuan has dropped to seven-month lows this week, alongside a reversal in equity investment flows into China.

Analysts said Hong Kong's stockpile of yuan deposits has also grown as mainland investors use their limited offshore investment channels to seek higher yields and companies prepare to pay annual dividends, adding to the pressure on the currency.

"Sentiment on China soured over the past month as the market has rallied ahead of improvement in macro data which continues to disappoint," said Gary Tan, a Singapore-based portfolio manager at Allspring Global Investments.

Tan, whose funds are underweight on Chinese stocks, said sentiment had come a long way from a time when mainland markets were considered "uninvestible" however, and he expected that would improve further.

But investor patience has worn thin after months of waiting for authorities to roll out more stimulus, mainly to support a sinking property sector.

"Beijing is likely to keep the easing measures more progressive than they were in the 18 months..."

The Shanghai benchmark stock index rose 20% between early February and mid-May but is down 6% since.

Foreigners who had returned to the market since February, after quitting in 2023, have turned sellers too this month, pulling out 33bn yuan (\$4.54bn) via the northbound leg of the Stock Connect Scheme.

Domestic investors have used the southbound leg to pump 129bn yuan into Hong Kong.

Analysts say investors have several reasons to pause and reflect, not just about how far the People's Bank of China (PBoC) will ease rates, but also on the approaching July plenum of China's Communist Party to shape economic and fiscal policy.

Chi Lo, senior market strategist for Asia-Pacific at BNP Paribas Asset Management, said foreign funds, though now positioned neutral on Chinese stocks, are turning positive.

"Beijing is likely to keep the easing measures more progressive than they were in the 18 months, in my view, and the plenum will likely reiterate that policy direction," Lo said.

The PBoC's daily guidance for the yuan, which it manages in a tight band, is stirring speculation that the authorities are allowing some depreciation to manage the pressure.

The yuan is down 2.2% against the dollar so far this year.

As mainland cash floods into Hong Kong, yuan deposits in the financial hub are at record levels, with latest official data for April showing they stand at 1.09tn yuan (\$150bn), close to peaks last seen in January 2022.

Ju Wang, head of Greater China currency and rates strategy at BNP Paribas, said mainland investors were thronging Hong Kong for better returns on offshore yuan, given low yields at home and expectations for further easing.

Persistent southbound flows and the traditional June-July transfers by Chinese firms to finance their dividend payments in Hong Kong had also led to selling of the offshore yuan and demand for Hong Kong dollars, she said.

Since early May, the CNH has fallen 1.9% against the Hong Kong dollar.

Also drawing money into Hong Kong is the expectation of peaking US dollar rates as the Federal Reserve prepares to ease policy, which, by virtue of the Hong Kong dollar's peg, will affect its economy too.

"US rate cuts are very important for Hong Kong's liquidity because of the currency peg, so once the Fed starts cutting rates, I think we will be flush with liquidity here, which will push up asset prices," said BNP Asset Management's Lo. — Reuters

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What the next EU leadership must do

By Carl Bildt
Stockholm

Now that voters across the European Union's 27 member states have elected the 720 members of the next European Parliament, the focus shifts to manning the institutions that will guide the bloc's work and set its strategic priorities over the next five years. This process will take some time. But by the end of the year – following all the predictable parliamentary haggling and turmoil – it should be complete.

All told, the shift in the political balance within the European Parliament was not as dramatic as many commentators expected. The share of seats held by traditional centre-right, centre-left, and liberal parties fell only from 59% to 56%. Most of the drama was confined to a few countries, not least France, where Marine Le Pen's National Rally trounced President Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance party. Though that outcome will not immediately affect the process of staffing EU institutions, a political sea change in one of the bloc's key members obviously could have a greater impact over time.

Looking back on the past five years, it is fair to say that the EU has outperformed expectations. It might not have transformed itself into the geopolitical power that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen envisioned in so many speeches, but it has proven to be an effective crisis manager through one "black swan" crisis after another (from the Covid-19 pandemic to Russia's invasion of Ukraine).

The road ahead may be even more challenging. A big question mark hovers over France as it holds a snap parliamentary election this month and a presidential election in 2027. Germany's three-party coalition government will probably stumble on, despite its members' poor showing in the European election. And it remains to be seen what kind of internal resistance the EU will face from the governments in Hungary, Slovakia, the Netherlands, and perhaps Austria (following its general election this fall).

Even without potential spoilers, the EU's political agenda would be



daunting. The EU got off to a good start on the green transition over the past decade, establishing itself as a global leader on climate issues; but domestic political pressures in many member states are now forcing policymakers to proceed more slowly. Meanwhile, its digital transition has been less impressive – a shortcoming that stands out even more as the age of artificial intelligence transforms the global economy.

European leaders are only gradually waking up to the fact that the EU has a competitiveness problem. In a world where the US is the innovation superpower and China is the production superpower, being a regulatory superpower is not enough.

How Europe tackles this issue will fundamentally shape its future. Many are calling for new tariffs, subsidies, and expensive industrial policies, often under the pretext of economic and national security. But such proposals sidestep the real issues. Until Europe completes its single market and establishes a true capital union, European entrepreneurs will struggle to

commercialise new innovations, and global investors will continue to favour the US and other markets.

These issues have grown more urgent with the return of war to the continent. Preserving peace and stability is the reason the EU was created in the first place. Born in the ashes of World War II, it has been extraordinarily successful so far. But Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine poses a direct challenge to the European project. If it is not met head-on, the entire European order could unravel in the coming years.

Preventing that outcome will require the EU to transform itself into a security union, in partnership with Nato, and to move ahead with enlargement to include Ukraine. The choice here is quite simple: Either we extend our stability eastward, or Russia will continue to push its project of destabilisation westward.

The discussions on EU leadership, personnel, and priorities over the coming weeks and months will be about preparing the bloc to meet these challenges. The EU has shown itself to be an effective crisis manager, but now it must

become a major strategic player in an increasingly difficult global environment. As if the Russian threat wasn't bad enough already, it will become even more acute if Donald Trump wins the US presidential election in November. A US administration that openly abandons allies and dismantles or de-fangs key pillars of the international order – including the World Trade Organisation, the World Health Organisation, global climate agreements, and Nato – will pose an altogether different and greater challenge.

Faced with the task of manoeuvring between Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping, a second Trump administration, and its own populists, the EU's situation is not going to get any easier. But Europe is not helpless. The more EU member states unify around shared institutions and common goals, the more secure they will be. – Project Syndicate

• Carl Bildt is a former prime minister and foreign minister of Sweden.

What climate-vulnerable developing countries need right now

By Mia Amor Mottley and Wale Edun
Bridgetown/Abuja

A problem as unprecedentedly large and destructive as climate change demands bold new thinking and urgent action. Yet since the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, geopolitical tensions have dominated the global agenda, hindering collective efforts to address this existential challenge.

Anticipating what lay in store for their countries, African finance ministers came together during the pandemic to call for a \$100bn stimulus package to weather the shock. Four years later, however, net financial flows to developing countries have turned negative – meaning more money is being paid out to lenders in mostly rich countries than is coming in – owing to spiralling debt-service costs, higher interest rates, and the lack of additional external financing options. It is now crucial that existing pledges – such as the €150bn (\$160bn) EU-Africa Global Gateway Investment Package – be implemented fully to support African countries.

US President Joe Biden and Kenyan President William Ruto acknowledged these challenges in their Nairobi-Washington Vision statement last month, when they committed to ensuring that "high ambition countries don't have to choose between servicing their debts and making necessary investments in their futures." The Biden administration recognises that positive net financial flows are critical to supporting countries in responding to the climate crisis and building low-carbon energy systems.

As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently reminded us, there is an 80% chance that the global average temperature will temporarily rise by more than 1.5C above pre-industrial levels in at



File photo: Vehicles are seen on a road after flood water broke the bank of river Benue, in Lokoja, Nigeria, on October 13, 2022.

least one of the next five years. The battle to keep global warming below the threshold established by the Paris climate agreement will be won or lost in the 2020s. The necessary investment and innovation needs to be happening now.

Countries like Nigeria and Sierra Leone are developing green growth plans and launching investment packages focused on renewables and climate-resilient infrastructure; and Barbados has just introduced its own 2035 investment plan to achieve prosperity and resilience. But these efforts all require financing.

The Bridgetown Initiative's proposals for reforming the global financial architecture can drive the kinds of changes we need. The G20 has already responded by seeking a wealth tax that could unlock around \$250bn in new finance, and we could mobilise up to a trillion dollars more in low-cost lending by leveraging multilateral development banks' (MDBs) balance sheets. Moreover, with climate clauses added to debt contracts, developing countries can preserve the fiscal space they need to respond to major climate shocks.

But we must do more. In May, the International Monetary Fund's board approved the use of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs, the IMF's unit of account) as hybrid capital, which will allow MDBs to expand their balance sheets. That is a good start, but G20 countries

must commit the SDRs needed to capitalise on this financial innovation.

We also must ensure that concessional finance (loans with accommodative terms) continues to flow to the most vulnerable and climate-afflicted countries. One-third of the countries eligible for support from the World Bank's International Development Association are now poorer than they were on the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic.

IDA countries have significant economic potential. They account for about 20% of global production of tin, copper, and gold; most are well-positioned to take advantage of solar energy (owing to abundant sunshine); and many possess deposits of minerals essential for the energy transition. But they are energy-poor and will need technical and financial support to provide electricity to 300mn people who lack it, as envisioned by a new programme launched by the World Bank and the African Development Bank. To achieve an ambitious replenishment of the IDA fund later this year and unlock \$120bn in grants and loans to make this possible, World Bank shareholders must step up with new resources.

Middle-income countries – especially the Vulnerable 20 (which now includes 68 countries) – also urgently need more access

to grants and long-term capital. Small island developing states should not be penalised for good performance by being forced to "graduate" from the IDA. That will put them at the mercy of capital markets when they still need quick, affordable finance to build resilience and maintain insurance against persistent climate shocks. The IMF's Resilience and Sustainability Trust has demonstrated the necessary sensitivity toward vulnerable low- and middle-income countries' need for long-term, affordable finance. But more of these kinds of facilities – and related mechanisms, like guarantees – are needed to accelerate progress over the coming decade.

We must continue to reduce the cost of capital for all countries seeking to invest in the energy transition. Our own countries face a premium when borrowing on capital markets, partly because credit rating agencies do not fully account for the conditions we face. The situation is not only unjust but also unwise. A good first step toward reducing borrowing costs and making investments commercially viable would be to reform IMF surcharges, which cost indebted borrower countries \$1.9bn in 2023 alone.

We also must continue to provide liquidity for developing countries through a new issuance of SDRs. This is a no-brainer, because it would stabilise currencies and help manage debt burdens without contributing to inflation. And finally, we must get carbon markets working to deter pollution and channel resources toward cleaner energy. Our collective stake in the planet's future requires us to act both now and at scale. – Project Syndicate

• Mia Amor Mottley is Prime Minister and Finance Minister of Barbados. Wale Edun is Finance Minister of Nigeria and Chair of the African Governors Forum at the World Bank.



With defence pledge, Putin makes shift towards N Korea

By **Guy Faulconbridge and Josh Smith**
Moscow/Seoul

Vladimir Putin, on his first visit to North Korea in 24 years, signed a mutual defence pledge with Kim Jong-un on Wednesday, underscoring just how far Russia has recast its relations with the only country to test a nuclear weapon this century.

Putin, who is locked into a major confrontation with the West over Ukraine, cemented his pivot to North Korea after nearly two decades of supporting UN sanctions against Pyongyang.

Depending on the exact wording of the pact, which was not immediately released, it could be a dramatic shift in the entire strategic situation in Northeast Asia, said Artyom Lukin, at Russia's Far Eastern Federal University.

"If Russia provides security guarantees to North Korea, then the DPRK becomes an analogue of Belarus, Russia's main ally in Eastern Europe," Lukin said, using the initials for North Korea's official name. "It will be an open challenge to the system of US-centric alliances in Northeast Asia. And, of course, it will be a huge problem for Seoul and Tokyo." 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.

China, by far North Korea's largest

trading partner and an increasingly important ally for Russia, has reacted cautiously to their burgeoning ties, avoiding any trilateral arrangement that might complicate its relations elsewhere.

The courting of Kim, which includes gifts of limousines, a tour of Russia's new space launch centre and a "strategic partnership" pact including a mutual defence clause, has alarmed the US and its Asian allies.

Their spy agencies are trying to work out just how far the 71-year-old Kremlin chief will go — and what missile or even nuclear technology Russia might pass to North Korea in exchange for munitions to fight in Ukraine.

"The first visit by Putin in 24 years shows this is about what Russia can get from North Korea — and that is driven by the war in Ukraine," said Ramon Pacheco Pardo, professor of international relations at King's College in London.

Pacheco Pardo, who has written books about both Koreas, said that he expected Russia to share some knowledge and expertise for the development of North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes, though not Moscow's most advanced technology.

"I think this is a big change in relation to North Korea," he said. "Without the invasion of Ukraine, I don't think Russia would have felt compelled to share such technology." Four diplomats who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity said they expected deeper ties with North Korea

but said that Russia, as the world's biggest nuclear power, would be highly selective about what technology it shared with Kim.

Another Western diplomat, based in Seoul, said the extent of Russia's co-operation with North Korea was injecting a sense of urgency in Europe's engagement with countries such as South Korea and Japan and may lead to more shifts in global alliances.

Russia says its relations with Pyongyang will accord to international agreements and that it will not be told how to conduct its relations by any other power, least of all the US.

Both Russia and North Korea have denied accusations by US and allied officials, and UN sanctions monitors, that Pyongyang is sharing weapons for use in Ukraine.

Putin said on Wednesday that Russia did "not exclude developing military-technical co-operation" with North Korea due to Western support for Ukraine.

"The deepening co-operation between Russia and the DPRK is something that should be of concern, especially to anyone that's interested in maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula," Major General Patrick Ryder, a Pentagon spokesperson, told reporters.

Putin's move towards North Korea is seen by diplomats as a major turning point in the international sanctions regime against North Korea, which was formed in 1948 with the backing of the then-Soviet Union.

In March, Russia vetoed the annual



Russia's President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un ride an Aurus car in Pyongyang, North Korea, in this image released by the Korean Central News Agency on Thursday.

renewal of a panel of experts monitoring enforcement of longstanding UN sanctions against North Korea over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes. China had abstained.

The next day, Russia said that major powers needed a new approach to North Korea, accusing the US and its allies of ratcheting up military tensions in Asia.

"The North Korea-Russia relationship started out as a marriage of convenience focusing on arms and tech transfers, so very transactional, but is now moving into payment systems, research collaboration and exchanges of different types," said Niklas Swanstrom, Director of the Institute for Security and Development Policy in Sweden. "It seems to have a depth that we have underestimated." There are, though, limits to the relationship, say analysts.

Russia, the world's biggest nuclear power, is not interested in major nuclear proliferation, especially by a neighbour.

Nor is China, which despite growing clashes with Washington on foreign policy and trade issues is far from the international pariah that Russia and North Korea have become.

Both Moscow and Beijing, while ready to needle the US and its Asian allies with public support for North Korea, have in the past criticised Pyongyang in public for its displays of missile or nuclear might.

Russia is due to outproduce all of the Nato military alliance on ammunition this year, so Putin's reliance on Kim is limited.

And while the Soviet Union helped North Korea build a research reactor at Yongbyon, the Soviet-era Kremlin was always wary of the nuclear ambitions of Kim Il-sung — the state founder and Kim Jong-un's grandfather — and found Pyongyang a provocative difficult partner, especially when it tried to nudge Moscow by deepening ties with China.

Russia has also historically balanced its approach to the North with its relations with South Korea, a US ally but economic powerhouse, said Anthony Rinna, a specialist in Korea-Russia relations at Sino-NK, a website that analyses the region.

"By sidling up to North Korea, especially by upgrading their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership, Russia risks undermining its policy of diplomatic equidistance," he said. — Reuters



Emmanuel Macron



Marine Le Pen

The financial risks of France's snap election

By **Brigitte Granville**
London

When former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was finance minister in the 1960s, he famously described America's status as the issuer of the world's reserve currency as an "exorbitant privilege". But his label applies equally well to his own country's position in the European monetary union. Despite persistently widening budget deficits, France has long been able to borrow almost as cheaply as fiscally prudent Germany. The bond market even shrugged off S&P's downgrade of French sovereign debt at the end of last month, implying that France was somehow immune from the usual credit discipline. Then politics intervened.

Following the surge of support for the French far-right in this month's European Parliament election, President Emmanuel Macron's abrupt decision to dissolve the National Assembly and call a snap election has met with a decidedly negative market reaction. But investors may now be underestimating the resilience of the French exorbitant privilege.

The seeds of this privilege were sown in the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht, which created a monetary union without a fiscal union. That scheme required a "no-bailout" rule, lest profligate countries free ride on more fiscally responsible members. But the 2010-12 euro crisis exposed the fatal flaw in this design: if the ban on bailouts meant that the European Central Bank (ECB) could not serve as lender of last resort, it would threaten the monetary union and, by extension, the entire European project.

The resulting compromise hinged on a fiscal rule. The ECB stood ready to buy unlimited quantities of eurozone member-state bonds, provided that their budget plans were consistent with fiscal rules set and enforced by the European Commission. Meanwhile, the fiscal police in Brussels remained very lenient toward French governments. The crises in smaller peripheral countries, and then in Italy, had been alarming enough. The last thing they wanted was a similar bust-up with France, the cornerstone of the entire European construct. So, they devised a fudge.

As a penalty for its routine non-compliance with fiscal rules, France would be placed on a naughty list. In accordance with the EU's "excessive deficit procedure," the French government would promise to tighten up, and the Commission would declare itself satisfied. The ECB then had political cover to buy French sovereign bonds (if necessary), and this resulted in markets valuing French government debt almost as highly as German Bunds, despite the absence of any real improvement in the French fiscal position.

There was no need for this charade when the eurozone fiscal rules were suspended in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. But the rules (with some modifications) have now been revived, and the French budget deficit, at 5.1% of GDP, is further than ever from the 3% threshold. Thus, even before the latest

political shock, the dance between Paris and Brussels was expected to be more sensitive than usual. France was going to have to commit to reduce the deficit by perhaps half a percentage point of GDP, and even that moderate adjustment might have triggered a vote of no-confidence in Macron's government in the lower house of parliament, where his party lost its majority in the 2022 election.

Two years later, the snap election could well replace Macron's limping centrist government with one led by parties whose campaigns have abandoned any pretense of fiscal discipline. The European Parliament election and the latest polling both show that the main challenge is coming from Marine Le Pen's National Rally and allied right-wing parties, and financial markets are already reacting the same way they did when Le Pen first made a credible run for power in 2017.

Back then, Le Pen was promising to abandon the euro and restore the French franc, which would have caused a systemic financial shock. Though she later dropped the idea of leaving the eurozone, she still rattled markets when she ran again for the presidency in 2022. It is no surprise that markets are spooked again.

If National Rally and its allies do win this election, though, it will not be in Le Pen's interest to trash the country's exorbitant privilege within the eurozone. In fact, she will have every incentive to exploit it, to smooth her path to the presidency in 2027. That is why her prime minister-designate, the charismatic 28-year-old Jordan Bardella, has already back-pedalled on the party's most fiscally costly campaign promise: reversing the increase in the retirement age (from 62 to 64) that Macron forced through last year in the teeth of public protest.

Thus, in the event of a right-wing government (which would rule in "cohabitation" with Macron), I would expect to see the same old fiscal charade vis-à-vis Brussels, albeit with more rhetorical brinkmanship that would further unsettle markets. And the same would go for a left-wing government elected on an aggressive tax-and-spend platform, since the revenues from higher taxes would likely satisfy the European fiscal police.

The outcome that would most fully justify the market's fears is a stalemate. If the right- and left-wing alliances each win around 200 seats while Macron's centrist bloc is reduced from 250 seats to 150 at most, it would be extremely difficult to form any kind of government, let alone a stable one. Although any future French government is likely to end up resuming the fiscal dance, it takes two to tango. A persistent political deadlock in Paris would leave Brussels with no government to engage, and the longer the political limbo lasted, the greater the financial instability and damage to the European economy would be. — Project Syndicate

• *Brigitte Granville, Professor of International Economics and Economic Policy at Queen Mary University of London, is the author of Remembering Inflation (Princeton University Press, 2013) and What Ails France? (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021).*

Europe's solar power surge hits prices, exposing storage needs

By **Nora Buli and Forrest Crellin**
Oslo/Paris

Europe has clocked a record number of hours of negative power prices this year due to a mismatch between demand and supply as solar power generation soars, potentially helping to shift investment to much needed storage solutions.

Wholesale power markets in most of Europe's key economies turned out zero or negative prices for a record number of hours in the first five months of this year at times of low demand. That means producers more frequently have to pay to offload power, or stop their plants.

"One could certainly say that, at this point, success is consuming its own offspring," Markus Hagel, energy policy expert at German utility Trianel, told Reuters. Strong hydro and nuclear power generation has played some part in the oversupply, but Europe has also seen a massive expansion of solar power.

Installed solar capacity in the European Union more than doubled to 263GW between 2019 and 2023, according to SolarPower Europe data. In 2023 alone, that is equivalent to an extra 306,000 solar panels being installed every day, the group said.

In the day-ahead market, this has seen more European markets experience price drops at the lowest demand point in the middle of the day.

Trianel told Reuters the company has invested in 800 megawatt (MW) of photovoltaic capacity and has a project pipeline of 2,000MW but the lower prices are forcing it to reconsider how it sells the power.

Solar has boomed in part because it no longer required subsidies as developers agreed power purchase agreements (PPAs) with buyers at fixed terms pegged to wholesale power market prices.

This allowed for a faster and bigger build-out than previous capped volume auctions for government-backed payments.

But as prices fall, developers are increasingly turning back to subsidy schemes again, Hagel said. Negative prices are nothing new for Germany, which hosts Europe's biggest capacity of volatile solar and wind power generation, but 2024 is the first year Spain is seeing them, after several years of strong solar power growth.

"It is not something that worries us at the moment. What does worry us is that it will be repeated or can be repeated over time," José María González Moya, director-general of renewable lobby APPA Renovables, said, adding that new contracts for PPAs are already declining.

"And yes, in a way, investment is slowing down. Not stopping, but slowing down," Moya said. Germany and Spain are still leading the PPA market, Jens Hollstein, head of advisory at PPA pricing platform Pexapark, said. However, solar producers were being forced to sell their power at increasing discounts to round-the-clock generators.

"The margin is getting thinner," Hollstein said. He expected a slowdown in investments if the development continued.

On the flip-side, the power market is now seeing a bigger gap between low and high-priced hours, increasing the incentive to invest in storage, he added. The International Energy Agency (IEA) highlighted the urgent need for energy storage in an annual report.

"Developers who choose not to co-locate their wind and solar PV power parks alongside battery storage or other sources of flexibility may see a drop in potential revenues during peak generation — hampering profits and discouraging investment," the IEA wrote.

The EU estimated that energy storage in the bloc will need to rise more than three-fold from 2022-2030, to match projections of a 69% share of renewable energy in its electricity system by then.

Norwegian renewable energy producer Statkraft, which operates across Europe, has said it could divest some wind and solar projects, but would likely hold onto its battery assets.

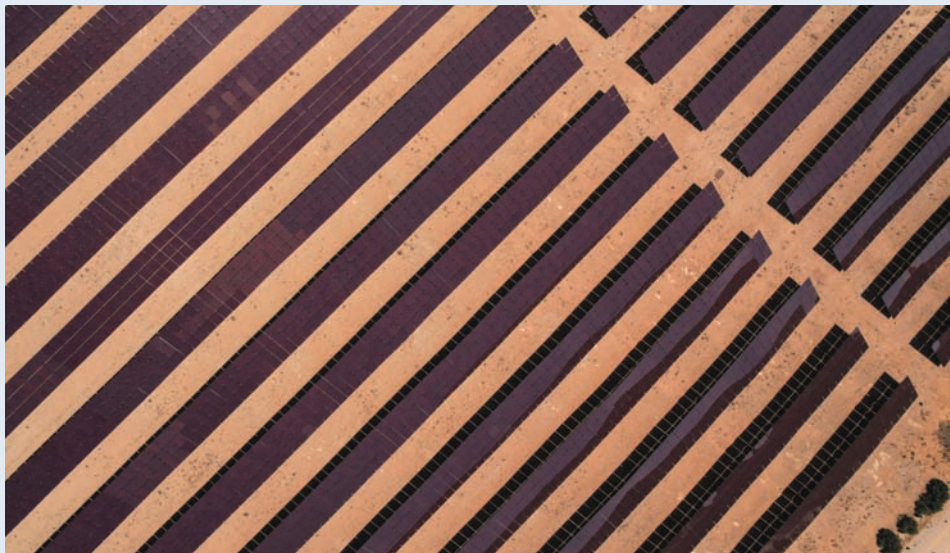
"For batteries it will be positive to have greater volatility and also negative prices," CEO Birgitte Ringstad Vartdal said, as batteries can be charged when prices are low while output can be sold when prices are high.

"That is one of the reasons why flexible projects will be attractive," Ringstad Vartdal added. Besides storing energy in batteries to deal with periods of excess supply, other options like AI-powered smart grids and meters could also help consumers optimise their electricity use.

Domestic end users, plagued by the surge in energy costs in the wake of the Ukraine war, have yet to enjoy lower bills because often they are locked into long term contracts.

Only those consumers that have invested in a heat pump, a charger for their electric car, or a storage system, are able to benefit from negative prices, spokesperson for Germany's association of local utilities VKU said.

Those on fixed priced contracts will only feel a positive impact from negative power prices once they have pulled down average market prices over the long term. — Reuters



FILE PHOTO: Solar panels are pictured at a solar energy park in Saelices, Spain.



Thousands in Doha take part in the 10th UN International Day of Yoga



Indian ambassador Vipul addressing the gathering.

More than 2,000 participants from all walks of life joined a public event yesterday evening at the Asian Town Cricket Stadium to mark the 10th UN International Day of Yoga.

The event, with the theme *Yoga for Self and Society*, was arranged by the Indian embassy in collaboration with the Indian Sports Centre (ISC) and other Indian community organisations.

The celebrations began with a video message from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who said: “Yoga is a time-less practice that celebrates oneness and harmony. Yoga has transcended cultural and geographical boundaries, uniting millions across the globe in the pursuit of holistic well-being. Yoga offers a sanctuary of calm, enabling us to navigate life’s chal-



The main element of the event was the performance of Common Yoga Protocol by all participants. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

lenges with calm and fortitude.”

Indian ambassador Vipul welcomed the participants and emphasised that this year’s theme stresses the holistic benefits that all can draw from this ancient Indian tradition.

The regular practice of yoga exercises and meditation, he explained, has a transformational effect on people’s mind and body, brings them closer to their nature and contributes in fostering harmony in society, according to a statement from the embassy.

The main highlight of the event was the performance of the Common Yoga Protocol by participants.

Enthusiastic participation was seen in yoga competitions held for both children and adults.

The celebrations concluded with felicitations and distribution of prizes and mementos to winners of competitions and yoga instructors.



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

The UN proclaimed June 21 as the International Day of Yoga by a resolution which was proposed by India and co-sponsored by a record 177 member states in December 2014.

Over the past few years, the day has been celebrated with great fanfare across the world, including in Doha.

In 2022, for the celebration of 8th International Yoga Day, an event was organised in Doha where 114 nationalities were represented and a new Guinness World Record was created for the most nationalities in one yoga session.

