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Amir greets new UK PM, wishes him success

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani yesterday congratulated Keir Starmer on assuming the prime ministership in the United Kingdom. On his official account on 'X' platform, His Highness the Amir congratulated Starmer, wishing him success and the friendly UK further development and prosperity. His Highness also expressed looking forward to strengthening the strategic and historical relations between the two countries in a way that enhances common interests.

- His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani sent a cable of congratulations to Keir Starmer on the occasion of assuming the position of prime minister of the United Kingdom, wishing him success and prosperity, and the relations between the two countries further development and growth. His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani also sent similar cables of congratulations to Starmer. **(QNA)**

Amir affirms aspiration to deepen Qatar ties with Poland

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani affirmed his aspiration to deepen relations and consolidate the bonds of friendship between Qatar and Poland, in a way that achieves the joint interest of the two countries. His Highness the Amir said, in a post on his official account on X that he held in Warsaw extensive discussions with Polish President Andrzej Duda, with the aim of strengthening co-operation between Qatar and Poland in various fields. He added that he looks forward the next stage to deepening bilateral relations and consolidating the bonds of friendship between the two countries in a way that achieves their joint interests. **(QNA)**

New PM Starmer names top team after vowing to 'rebuild' UK

AFP
London

Keir Starmer got down to work as Britain's new leader yesterday, appointing his ministerial team after his centre-left Labour party's landslide general election victory ended 14 years of Conservative rule. Starmer named Rachel Reeves the UK's first woman finance minister and appointed David Lammy as foreign secretary following his election win to become Labour's first prime minister since Gordon Brown in 2010. Flag-waving crowds of cheering Labour activists lined Downing Street as Starmer pledged to "rebuild" the UK after head of state King Charles III invited him to form a government during a meeting at Buckingham Palace. "Now, our country has voted decisively for change, for national renewal and a return of politics to public service," the 61-year-old said in his first speech as PM. "The work of change begins immediately, but have no doubt, we will rebuild Britain." A sombre Rishi Sunak conceded defeat during a torrid night for his Conservatives that claimed the scalps of at least 12 of his senior cabinet colleagues — and his predecessor Liz Truss. **Page 9**

Amir and Poland's president exchange decorations

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and Polish President Andrzej Duda exchanged the decorations of the two countries at the Presidential Palace in Warsaw yesterday. His Highness the Amir was accorded the Order of the White Eagle, Poland's highest decoration, by the Polish president, in appreciation for His Highness' efforts in strengthening friendship ties between the two countries. The Order of the White Eagle is Poland's highest decoration offered to kings and heads of state whose countries share outstanding relationships with Poland, alongside dignitaries who receive appreciation and honour. For his part, His Highness the Amir accorded the President of Poland the Sword of the Founder Sheikh Jassim bin Mohamed bin Thani, embodying his role in supporting and strengthening the relations between the two countries. The Sword of the Founder is highest national decoration in the state and is accorded to kings, princes and heads of state. **(QNA) Page 2**

Amir, Polish president lend impetus to bilateral relations

QNA
Warsaw

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and President of Poland Andrzej Duda held an official session of talks at the Presidential Palace in Warsaw yesterday. At the outset of the session, the Polish president welcomed His Highness the Amir and the accompanying delegation, hailing the ties of friendship and co-operation between the two countries. The president said this visit reflects the depth of outstanding relationships between the two countries, affirming that he looks forward to joint efforts to push them to broader levels in wide-ranging fields. He also lauded Qatar's diplomatic and humanitarian efforts, especially in Gaza and Ukraine. For his part, His Highness the Amir expressed his appreciation for the president for the warm reception during the visit, which represents an opportunity to discuss issues of shared interest and avenues for supporting bilateral

and strategic relationships between the two countries in a range of areas. During the session, they discussed bilateral relations and prospects of strengthening them to serve the shared strategic interests and lend impetus to bilateral relations to broader levels, particularly in the areas of energy, technology, education, and defence. They also discussed a range of issues in the region and the current developments, including the developments in the Gaza Strip and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Attending the session were HE the Chief of the Amiri Diwan Sheikh Saoud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, HE the Minister of

State for Energy Affairs Saad bin Sherida al-Kaabi, HE the Minister of Commerce and Industry Sheikh Mohamed bin Hamad bin Qassim al-Thani, HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi, alongside a number of members of the official delegation. **To Page 3 Business Pages 1, 2 & 4**

Qatar University develops innovative solar panel station

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

The Centre for Advanced Materials (CAM) at Qatar University (QU) has successfully developed and implemented an innovative solar panel station with autonomous dry-cleaning technology. This cutting-edge project is poised to be a cornerstone in renewable energy harvesting within the campus premises, notes an article by CAM director Prof Mohamed Refa'at Irshidat in the latest edition of QU Research Magazine. The project tackles a major challenge hindering solar energy efficiency in Qatar - dust accumulation. A project led by Prof Irshidat and research staff members Dr Zubair Ahmad, section head of Module Development and Pub-

From left: Dr Zubair Ahmad, Prof Mohamed Irshidat and Dr Kishor Sadasivuni.

lication at QU Young Scientists Centre and Dr Kishor Sadasivuni, research assistant professor from CAM successfully installed autonomous dry cleaning systems for solar panels. The one ingenious technology uses a miniaturised wind turbine to run the self-

sustainable dry-cleaning system while the second one utilises motorised brushes that automatically detect and remove dust, ensuring optimal performance. The initiative began with a comprehensive study utilising wind turbine-based portable so-

lar panel cleaning systems. Over a period of 30 days, various electrical parameters were measured to assess the performance of these panels. Real-time experiments at Al Duhail area confirmed a 5-8% efficiency improvement for solar panels equipped with the self-cleaning setup compared to those without any cleaning measures. The motor-based prototype consumes extremely low power due to the use of lightweight components and gives it an edge over other machines in the market. The self-sustainable solar cleaning prototype features a wind turbine, gears assembly and a dry brush for efficient auto-cleaning of solar panels. Renewable wind energy is utilised to rotate the wind turbine attached to the top of the solar panel. The rotational motion of the wind turbine is converted into the linear motion of the cleaning brush via a gear and chain as-

sembly. The gears were 3D printed using the fused deposition additive manufacturing method. The 3D printing gives control over the pitch of the grooves in gear for precise rotation and reduces the weight of the attachment. The incorporation of 3D printed parts makes the design more susceptible to incorporate modifications and changes relatively based on the specific requirements of the end user. The motor-based automated solar panel cleaning system operates based on input from the integrated dust detection sensor. Upon detecting dust accumulation on the solar panel, the cleaning process is activated and persists until the dust sensor feedback drops below the predefined threshold. Additionally, the cleaning apparatus is outfitted with sensors to restrict the movement of the cleaning brush within the confines of the solar panel

frame. The designed cleaning system has extremely low power consumption and the cleaning methodology eliminates any type and mass of dust. The developed prototypes can easily be installed on new solar panels or retrofitted with older ones. It is designed to work well for both flat and tilted solar panels, ensuring that nearly all angles are cleaned. The fully autonomous dry-cleaning system for solar panels is equally attractive and applicable for small, large and unattended installations in remote and dry areas where water is scarce. The developed prototypes are self-sufficient and work automatically. The dry-cleaning technology is non-abrasive, ensuring cleaning efficiency without affecting the solar panel glass surface. The system has been designed primarily to be simple, robust, lightweight, precise and credible.



Polish FM welcomes Amir's visit, commends Qatar's global role



Foreign Minister of Poland Radoslaw Sikorski affirmed the strength of the Qatar-Poland bilateral relationship, stressing the importance of supporting the trade relations and investment exchange between Warsaw and Doha for the shared interests of the friendly countries.

He lauded Qatar's positions in support of peace in the region, along with its active role as intermediary in wide-ranging regional and global issues.

In an interview with Qatar News Agency (QNA) in Warsaw, he highlighted the positive reflection of the forthcoming visit of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to Poland on the co-operative relationships between the countries in the coming period, emphasising that Poland strongly hopes that such a visit would strengthen the bilateral relations and further expand their horizons. He also expressed appreciation for the Doha-Warsaw trade relations, in addition to appointment of a new ambassador of Qatar to Poland, a step that would further boost bilateral ties.

The foreign minister affirmed that his country commends Qatar's position on the Russian military operation in Ukraine, along with the country's active participation in the High-level Summit on Peace in Ukraine, held in Zurich, Switzerland, in mid-June, 2024, as well as its salient role in peace-making efforts in the Middle East.

He touched on the current relationship between Poland and Qatar, adding that Qatar is the second and largest supplier of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) to Poland. He revealed that the amount of trade exchange between the two nations in 2022 exceeded the threshold of \$2bn across multiple priority fields of exchange.

Sikorski underlined that Poland's support for Qatar's candidacy for membership in the UN



Polish minister says Amir's visit will enhance cultural ties

Polish Minister of Culture and National Heritage Hanna Wroblewska stressed that the visit of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to Poland will positively impact the existing co-operation between the countries and contribute to elevating it to broader horizons, particularly in the cultural field. In exclusive statements to Qatar News Agency (QNA), she said that the cultural relations between Qatar and Poland are deep and extend back many years, noting the holding of a Qatari art exhibition in Poland and one for Polish art in Qatar. She pointed out that the Polish people have a strong desire to

learn about Qatari and Arab culture, and she hopes that the Qatari people share the same desire to increase cultural co-operation. She noted that recent years have seen several Polish cultural events organised in Qatar, where renowned Polish musicians have performed and been well-received by the Qatari people. She highlighted the signing of several agreements between Qatar and Poland to enhance bilateral co-operation, and expected that the coming years will witness further co-operation and the strengthening of cultural relations between the two countries. (QNA)

Human Rights Council for the term 2025-2027, is a testament to the rock-solid bilateral relationship, noting Qatar's instrumental role in bringing the Ukrainian children back home after they had been held hostages in Russia. He confirmed that the Polish public

opinion is incredibly grateful for this move.

He hoped that in the foreseeable future the bilateral relationship between the countries will be stronger than ever, in light of the coming summit, reminding of several co-operative fields, fore-

'Amir's visit elevates bilateral relations to highest levels'

Head of the Cabinet of the President of Poland Marcin Mastalerek highlighted the strong relations between Qatar and Poland, and the broad prospects for the bilateral ties in light of the summit of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and Polish President Andrzej Duda. Speaking to Qatar News Agency (QNA), Mastalerek underlined that Amir's visit to Poland will reflect positively on the bilateral relations, adding that Poland has high hopes for the visit to support the good relations between the two countries and elevate them to the highest levels, and to boost co-operation between Warsaw and Doha. He noted the role of mutual visits between the leaders of the countries in strengthening bilateral

relations. Highlighting the historical relations between the countries, which date back to 1971 with Poland's recognition of the independence of Qatar, Mastalerek expressed his country's pride in the decision to recognise the independence of Qatar, describing it as a positive decision that history has proven to be correct. He noted that President Duda always stresses the importance of good relations with Qatar; adding that despite the geographical distance, Poland and Qatar share commonalities as both the Polish and Qatari people love peace and believe in the same human values. He expressed his optimism about the future of good relations between the countries and great co-operation at all levels. (QNA)

most of which are investment, energy, education, food industries and the role of shared visits of senior officials in the countries in bolstering these ties.

Sikorski underlined that there is a convergence of views between the two countries pertaining to regional and global issues of shared concern, stressing that the two countries underscore the importance of respecting the international law and the rules-based international order in their foreign policies.

Regarding Poland's perspective

on Qatar's foreign policy and approach in leveraging dialogue and diplomatic means to resolve international conflicts and disputes, he affirmed that there should always be channels of communication between parties to a conflict, lauding Qatar's crucial role and good endeavours to mediate between the parties with respect to the current situation in the Palestinian territories. He asserted that Poland was among the countries that recognised the State of Palestine and had recently voted alongside 142 coun-

tries, for advancing the status of Palestine in the UN in the quest for full membership.

Pertaining to Qatar's role and efforts made in collaboration with partners to stop the war in Gaza and to subsequently reach a ceasefire deal, the Polish foreign minister said his country supports the two-state solution, adding that the matter is extremely difficult, because each party focused solely on their aspirations. And from this point, he said, the Qatari role and effort is highly appreciated. (QNA)



Amir congratulates presidents of Algeria, Cape Verde and Venezuela

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani sent cables of congratu-

lations to Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune on the anniversary of his country's Independence Day.

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs

Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani also sent a similar cable of congratulations to Prime Minister Nadir Larbaoui.

●His Highness the Amir and

His Highness the Deputy Amir sent cables of congratulations to President of Cape Verde Jose Maria Neves on the anniversary of his country's Independence Day. HE the Prime Minister and

Minister of Foreign Affairs also sent a similar cable of congratulations to Prime Minister Dr Jose Ulisses Correia e Silva.

●His Highness the Amir, His Highness the Deputy Amir and

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs sent cables of congratulations to Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro on the anniversary of his country's Independence Day. (QNA)



Amir, Polish president lend impetus to bilateral ties

From Page 1

On the Polish side, the session was attended by Chief of the Chancellery of the President Malgorzata Paprocka, Head of the Cabinet of the President of the Republic Marcin Mastalerek, Head of the International Policy Bureau Mieszko Pawlak, Special Envoy of the President for the Development of International Trade Co-operation and Polish Investments Abroad ambassador Rafal Kos, alongside high-ranking officials in the Polish government.

His Highness the Amir and the Polish president held a bilateral meeting during which they discussed avenues of co-operation between the two friendly countries, in addition to discussing a range of issues of mutual interest.

The president held an official luncheon banquet in honour of His Highness the Amir and the accompanying delegation at the Presidential Palace.

His Highness the Amir was previously accorded an official reception ceremony upon his arrival at the Palace.

The Amir and the Polish president shook hands with members of the diplomatic corps in Poland. – QNA



Council of the Arab League emphasises support for Qatar, Egypt's efforts for Gaza ceasefire

The Arab League has emphasised its support for Qatar and Egypt's efforts to achieve a permanent ceasefire and restore normalcy in the Gaza Strip.

This came in Resolution No 9059 issued during the extraordinary session of the Council of the Arab League at the level of permanent representatives, convened at the request of the State of Palestine in light of ongoing crimes committed by Israel against the Palestinian people for nearly nine consecutive months.

This is coupled with recent measures by the occupying government to hinder the realisation of Palestinian statehood and continue plans to annex occupied West Bank territories.

The Council warned against Israel's continued genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza, as well as its plans for annexation of the occupied West Bank territories and expansion of illegal settlements.

In this regard, the council condemned Israel's refusal to comply with relevant

UN Security Council resolutions calling for ceasefire, and the binding orders of the International Court of Justice to cease the killing and infliction of physical and mental harm on civilians.

The council called on the international community and the Security Council to take effective and decisive action to immediately halt the genocide and hold Israel accountable for its crimes.

It strongly condemned the aggressive policies and measures taken by the Israeli occupation government against the State

of Palestine, aiming to prevent its independence on the ground, including the legalisation of five settlement outposts in strategic areas of the occupied West Bank, authorisation and construction of thousands of new settlement units, undermining the civil and economic authority of the Palestinian government over approximately 80% of the occupied West Bank territories, and confiscation of Palestinian government and people's funds, along with imposing sanctions on Palestinian officials.

The council affirmed that any Israeli government action to implement its plans to annex any part of the occupied Palestinian territory of 1967, whether de facto or through invalid legislation, constitutes a new Israeli war crime.

It called on the international community to exert pressure and impose deterrent measures on Israel to compel it to halt its unlawful annexation and colonial settlement practices, which undermine opportunities for achieving peace and a two-state solution. – QNA



Qatari arts exhibition opens at Katara

A fine art exhibition featuring 22 artworks and 12 sculptures and ceramics by 19 Qatari artists has been inaugurated at Katara's Building 19.

Opened by Katara – the Cultural Village general manager Prof Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Sulaiti, the exhibition is open to the public from 10am-10pm until December 31.

The participating artists are Tefla al-Kuwari, Suad al-Dosari, Dana al-Abduljabbar, Salem al-Hajri, Mohamed Mansour, Khalifa al-Obaidli, Lina al-Ali, Hessa Kala, Ahmed al-Subaie, Amna al-Badr, Humaid al-Qahtani, Ruqaya al-Mohannadi, Ahmed Haddad, Iman al-Saad, Khalid al-Fahd, Bakhita al-Sada, Haya al-Khuzai, Noura al-Tawar, and Ali al-Kuwari.

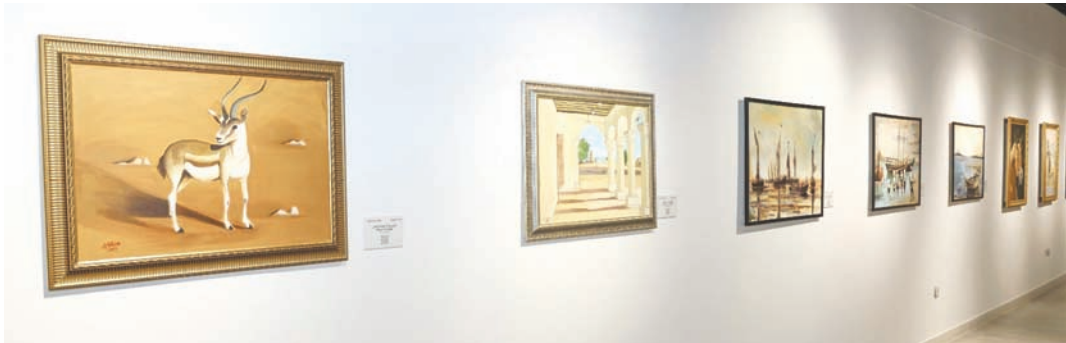
“Katara plays a pioneering role in supporting arts

and creativity in Qatar through various initiatives and programmes that encourage creativity and enhance the cultural identity of the society,” Prof al-Sulaiti said.

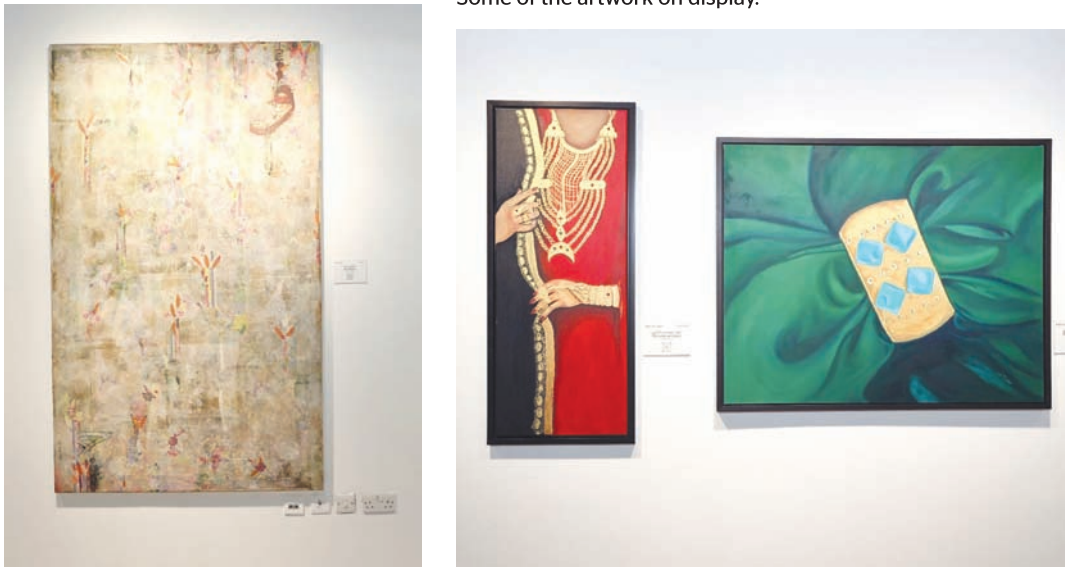
The art on display are unique and diverse expressions of Qatar's cultural and historical identity, reflecting the heritage and individual life experiences of the artists.

Some of the paintings use cultural symbols to express Qatar's heritage and culture, including Islamic art, traditional clothing, and traditional architectural landmarks, besides the use of light and colours that reflect the natural and architectural beauty of Qatar.

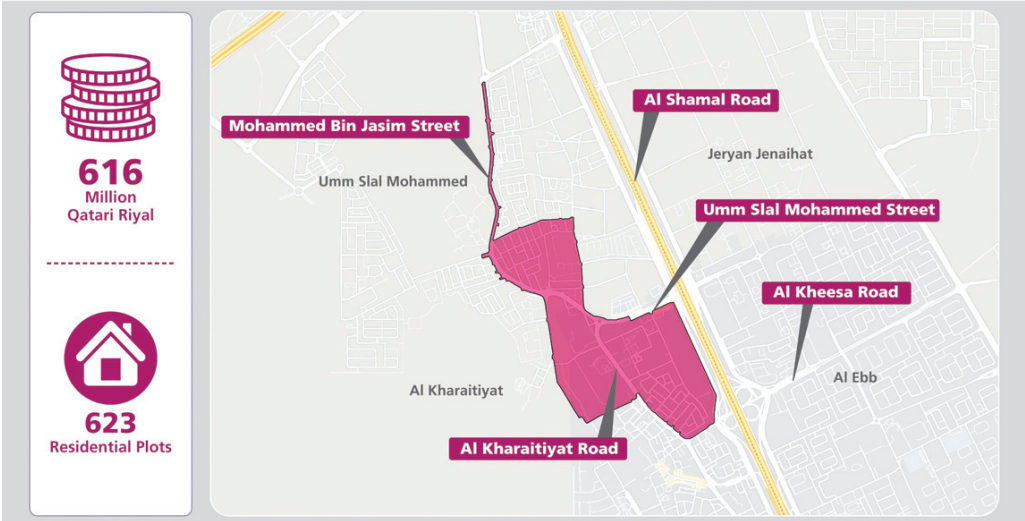
The artists employed various techniques, such as oil painting, acrylic, water colour, and graphic arts.



Some of the artwork on display.



Roads and Infrastructure Project in Umm Slal Mohammed, Package 1



Ashghal project to develop Umm Slal Mohammed

The Roads and Infrastructure Development Project in Umm Slal Mohammed (Package 1) by the Public Works Authority (Ashghal) is all set to provide an integrated infrastructure in the area.

According to information on Ashghal's website, the project is being implemented with advanced services along with internal streets to improve streamlined traffic flow and link with public utilities to be constructed in the future.

The QR616mm project to develop the area's rainwater drainage, groundwater and sewage networks is expected to be completed during the fourth quarter of 2024.

A 54km surface and groundwater drainage network is constructed and linked to the main surface water drainage network in order to protect the area from flooding during the rainy season.

Ashghal launched the project at the west of Al Shamal Road in the last quarter of 2020 as part of its efforts to implement comprehensive infrastructure development across Qatar.

A 15.8km treated water network is constructed to serve future green areas, besides establishing a 10km potable water network.

New drainage pipes are installed and extended to connect with the main drainage network and the present system of using household septic tanks is eliminated.

The project serves 623 plots of citizens' subdivisions in Umm Slal Mohammed.

The integrated infrastructure will be constructed with advanced services and internal streets to improve streamlined traffic flow and link with public utilities proposed in the area in the future.

It includes the development and construction of a 36km road network with the provision of traffic safety elements such as street lighting systems and poles, signboards and road signage, besides the provision of 4,310 parking spaces.

Local materials are being used in most of the project's work.

Local companies are relied upon to supply materials and elements such as gabbro, poles, street lighting lamps, directional panels, sewage pipes, rainwater drainage pipes, asphalt layers, and prefabricated manholes, in addition to concrete and steel reinforcement.

The local component is targeted to reach 85% of the project's work as part of Ta'heel initiative.

Qatar delegation in Barcelona port visit



A delegation from the Permanent Committee for the Management of Seaports, along with representatives from agencies operating at seaports and Qatar Tourism, visited the Barcelona Cruise Port in Spain, the Ministry of Interior posted on X. The delegation was led by the committee chairman Brigadier Dr Abdulhadi Mohamed Zaben al-Dosari. The visit is aimed at exchanging experiences and learning about the operational procedures and services provided to passengers at the Port of Barcelona, as well as its safety and security systems, the post added.



Versatile Neem tree thrives



Fruit-laden Neem trees are a ubiquitous sight in Qatar during summer. Neem (*Azadirachta indica*), a fast-growing tree of the mahogany family (*Meliaceae*), is valued as a medicinal plant, as a source of organic pesticides, and for its timber. Nearly all parts of the Neem tree are useful, and many of its medicinal and cosmetic uses are based on its antibacterial and antifungal properties.

PICTURE: Gulf Times news editor Bonnie James (Instagram: theexplorer7)

DBS celebrates graduation of Class of 2024

Doha British School (DBS) has announced the graduation of its sixth form students from both the Ain Khaled and Al Wakra campuses.

The ceremony was a culmination of years of dedication, perseverance and outstanding academic achievements by the graduating students, a statement said. As they completed rigorous exams in AS-Level, A-Level, BTEC and IB DP, their journey through secondary school came full circle amidst an atmosphere filled with pride and anticipation.

The evening was graced by guests, parents, faculty members and special invitees. The highlight of the event was a keynote address by Ghanim al-Sulaiti, who encouraged graduates to embrace responsibility and make meaningful contributions to society. His emphasis on environmental stewardship and global citizenship echoed the core values upheld by DBS, reinforcing its mission to nurture compassionate leaders of tomorrow.

The ceremony was enriched by music performances by students. The graduates are embarking on diverse paths to prestigious universities around the globe, in



fields ranging from engineering and medicine to business, hospitality, science and computer studies.

A significant number of graduates from the DBS Class of 2024 will be enrolling at the newly established, bespoke campus of

CUC Ulster University, in Doha's Lusail city. As an affiliate educational institution to DBS, CUC Ulster University offers a comprehensive array of internationally recognised UK degrees and diplomas.

DBS has also announced the relocation

of its Al Wakra campus to a state-of-the-art facility in September 2024, featuring expansive open spaces and a vibrant layout designed to enhance student-centred learning experiences. With over 3,500 students across its campuses in Ain Khaled,

Al Wakra, and Rawdat Al Hamama, DBS continues to create an environment which fosters innovation, creativity and critical thinking, offering an unparalleled learning experience which empowers students to excel in the 21st century, a statement added.

OICC Incas Qatar raises funds for Malkha Rouhi's treatment

Overseas Indian Cultural Congress (OICC) Incas Qatar has raised funds through its various bodies for the health and treatment support of Malkha Rouhi, an infant suffering from the rare disease of Spinal Muscular Atrophy - SMA Type 1. The amount was handed over to Qatar Charity officials at an event held at the Qatar Charity headquarters. OICC Incas Qatar working president, Anwar Sadath, general secretary Srijith S Nair, treasurer George Augustine, global committee members, John Gilbert, Nassar Vadakkekad, joint treasurer, Noushad T K, Central Committee officer-bearer Juttas Paul among others took part in the event.



Filipino HR group organises seminar on Qatar Labour Law

The Philippine Human Resource Practitioners - Qatar (PHRPQ) recently hosted a workshop on 'Recent Amendments to Qatar's Labour Law'. Chairperson Amelita D Andrada facilitated the session among Filipino HR professionals eager to stay abreast of the Labour Law. The workshop marks another milestone for PHRPQ, established in November 2022 to foster continu-

ous learning among HR practitioners. The seminar also underscores the PHRPQ's commitment to keeping its members informed about crucial developments in Qatar's labour landscape.

The PHRPQ's committee on Continuing Professional Development (CPD), headed by Dr Richelle Arugay, designs various programmes throughout the year, covering a wide spectrum

of HR-related topics. This latest seminar on Labour Law amendments demonstrates the organisation's responsiveness to the evolving needs of HR professionals in Qatar.

For HR practitioners interested in future PHRPQ events and further information on upcoming learning opportunities, contact Dr Richelle Arugay at phrpqatar@gmail.com



Filipino HR professionals participating in the event.

MES Indian School family donates QR100,000 for ailing baby



MES Indian School actively engaged in a fundraising drive carried out under the aegis of Qatar Charity (QC), for the treatment of four-month-old Malkha Rouhi who has been diagnosed with Type 1 Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA). Students of all classes contributed generously by donating money in collection boxes kept in each class. The proceeds collected from students and staff and a sizeable amount contributed by the school management for the relief fund, totalling QR100,000, were handed over to QC officials.

Blood donation drive



More than 200 people donated blood at a camp organised by Syro Malabar Cultural Association (SMCA) Qatar in collaboration with Hamad Medical Corporation recently.

Palestinian support gatherings



Protesters, mainly Houthi supporters, rally to show solidarity with Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, in Sanaa, Yemen, yesterday.



Demonstrators carry signs during a protest in support of Palestinians in Gaza, amid the ongoing conflict, in Amman, Jordan, yesterday.

Troops kill seven in West Bank raid



People and rescue workers assess the damage inflicted on a house during an Israeli raid in the occupied West Bank city of Jenin, yesterday.

AFP
Jenin

Israeli troops killed seven Palestinians — with Hamas claiming five as members — in a raid on Jenin in the occupied West Bank yesterday, officials said.

At least 14 Palestinians have now been killed in Israeli operations this week in the West Bank, where the Gaza war has fuelled tensions October.

The Israeli military said the raid was carried out to find fighters behind an attack last week in which an Israeli captain was killed. Hamas said one of the latest seven dead was a “commander” in the group.

An Israeli military statement said there was a gun battle in

the Jenin refugee camp and then troops surrounded a building in which “fighters barricaded themselves”.

The Wafa official Palestinian news agency said military vehicles surrounded a house and demands were made by loudspeaker for one occupant to surrender. Shoulder-launched missiles were fired and a drone used in the four-hour raid, it added.

According to the military, two fighters who took part in a bomb attack in which the captain died were killed.

“In addition, during the counterterrorism activity, an armed fighter cell that was identified in the area was eliminated” in an Israeli drone strike.

The Palestinian Authority health ministry said the seven dead were aged from 19-54.

A Hamas statement said five of the “martyrs” were members of the group that rules the Gaza Strip. One, Ahmed Mahmud al-Aridi, 30, was named as a Hamas “commander”. Mounting violence has gripped the West Bank since the start of the Gaza war in the first week of October last year. Seven Palestinians were killed in military operations this week, before the latest deadly operation. A woman and child died in an Israeli raid in a refugee camp near Tulkarem on Monday, four men in a drone attack on the same Nur Shams camp on Tuesday and one man in Jenin on Wednesday, according to the health ministry.

Fourteen people died in one two-day Israeli operation in Nur Shams in April, according to the Palestinian Red Crescent.

Psychological wounds hard to heal for Gaza war victims

AFP
El-Arish

On a floating hospital near Gaza, doctors aren’t just treating physical wounds — they’re providing emotional support too for children and adults haunted by months of terrifying war.

Child amputees and elderly people in wheelchairs are among the patients on the converted ship off Arish, northern Egypt, funded and operated by the United Arab Emirates.

About 2,400 people have been treated at the temporary facility, whose rows of tents below deck hold about 100 patients at a time, says deputy medical director Abdullah al-Zahmi.

If that only scratches the surface of the needs of Gaza, it reflects the difficulty of providing aid for the sealed and bombarded territory.

More than 38,000 Palestinians, mostly civilians, have been killed in Gaza since the Israel-Hamas war broke out nearly nine months ago, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory. The war was sparked by Hamas’s October first week storming of southern Israel last year.

Nine-year-old Yazan is one of those traumatised by the war, after being brought to the hospital about 40 kilometres from Gaza without his parents and having a leg amputated because of his wounds. Zahmi jokes with the boy, asks how his parents are doing in Gaza and assures him he will soon have a prosthetic leg fitted.

“The traditional relationship between the patient and the doctor” has dissolved, the doctor tells AFP.

“Every day we see each other, we speak comfortably, and we care about their needs, problems, and psychological pain.”

Yazan’s parents were not allowed to accompany him through the Rafah crossing into Egypt, Zahmi says, without giving further details. The route was closed by Israeli forces in early May.

The boy’s condition “was ini-



An ambulance transporting an injured Palestinian boy and his family members evacuated from the Gaza Strip, arrives to the Emirati floating hospital in the Egyptian port of Al-Arish.

tially a concern for us, as dealing with him was difficult because he was emotional and in need of his mother and father.”

“But as days passed, we began to include Yazan as one of our family...and now he has become an icon for us because of his clinging to life, his constant smile, and everyone’s love for him,” Zahmi says. The child is undergoing psychological and social rehabilitation and communicates daily with his family, Zahmi adds.

Smiling as he sits inside one of the tents, Yazan shows the doctor a picture of him with his father before the outbreak of war last October. After his artificial leg is fitted, Yazan says he wants to “walk and play football”, adding that his “favourite player is (Cristiano) Ronaldo”. “I would like to return to Gaza and live with my father and mother,” he says.

Zahmi says more than 840 operations have been carried out at the hospital, which has a surgical department, an intensive care and anaesthesia unit, X-ray facilities, a pharmacy and laboratory.

Its 60 staff span specialties including orthopaedics, internal care, neurosurgery and dentistry.

The hospital also provides communal spaces and communications with relatives in Gaza or elsewhere, Zahmi says.

“We provide them with high-speed Internet, outdoor areas for playing and resting, and a place

for prayer,” he says. In the main loading area of the 200-metre ship, ambulances are preparing to transfer patients to a plane to the UAE, where they will receive further treatment.

According to Zahmi, they are among those chosen as part of a UAE initiative to receive 1,000 wounded children and 1,000 cancer-sufferers from the Gaza Strip.

Other patients discharged from the hospital are taken to housing designated for them by Egyptian authorities. For any patients who need further treatment but who are not being flown to the UAE, the Emirates Red Crescent will cover their costs at an Egyptian hospital.

Fadia al-Madhun, 44, is on the floating hospital with her husband, who was injured in a bombing that targeted their Gaza home.

“We left the house. It was bombed. We did not take clothes or anything else,” says Madhun, wearing a floral hijab.

“They gave us everything (including) psychological support for our children,” she adds.

Zahmi says the hospital staff have seen “many families who lost their children and people who lost their fathers and mothers, and therefore we understand the tragedies”.

“We listen a lot and try to accept, but in the end, no matter how much we console them, the wound runs deep and remains in the memory,” he adds.

Gaza clothing workshop reborn from the rubble to provide jobs

Reuters
Khan Younis

In an upstairs room behind the shattered walls of a Gaza building, sewing machines whirl as men work at crowded tables — a Palestinian businessman’s effort to aid the enclave’s economy after nine months of Israeli bombardment.

Nearly all of the Gaza Strip’s 2.3mn inhabitants have lost their homes, and shops, markets and factories have been reduced to rubble by the Israeli military campaign launched in response to last year’s October first week Hamas storming of Israel.

Gaza’s desperate people, who are mostly now living in tents or crammed into communal shelters, struggle to afford the little food and other goods available in street markets set up among the ruins.

“I opened this factory for the displaced, so they can work and so I can create work for (them),” said Omar Samer Shaat, whose previous factory in Rafah in southern Gaza was destroyed by an Israeli bombardment.

Salvaging machinery, fabric, thread and other materials from the rubble of the fac-



Palestinian tailors work in a newly reopened sewing factory after the machines were retrieved from a building hit in an Israeli strike, amid the conflict, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip.

tory, he used them to start the new workshop in nearby Khan Younis and offered jobs to tailors who had been displaced by the fighting. Shaat estimates his economic losses due to the war at \$6mn.

Inside the factory, men work at tables with lightbulbs strung from the ceiling. Clothes are laid out carefully on the floor, with scissors and balls of thread close at hand. With Israel imposing a tight siege on Gaza at the start of the conflict and only allowing in some humanitarian supplies, ordinary goods such as clothes are in short supply. “The border crossings

have been shut for some time. Ready made clothes do not enter. Neither does fabric or anything. We decided to open this factory in this shelled house so it can produce for the people,” Shaat said. Sami Hassouna, one of the tailors in Shaat’s workshop, said he had been forced to leave his home and was sheltering in the area near Al-Aqsa University about an hour away.

“We retrieved the machinery, fabric and needles, all of that, we retrieved them from under the rubble,” he said.

“But we need continuity and this needs the entry of new raw material,” he added.

Iranians vote in run-off presidential race

Reuters
Dubai

Iranians voted yesterday for a run-off presidential election that will test the rulers’ popularity amid voter apathy at a time of regional tensions and a standoff with the West over Tehran’s nuclear programme.

State TV said polling stations opened their doors to voters at 8am local time (0430 GMT). Polling was to have ended at 6pm (1430 GMT), but was extended first until 8pm and then to 10pm (1830 GMT) in response to “renewed requests” from polling stations, an interior ministry spokesman told state TV.

Voting in past elections was often extended until as late as midnight.

It showed queues inside polling stations in several cities later in the day. The final result are expected today, although initial figures may come out sooner.

The run-off follows a June 28 ballot with historically low turn-

out, when over 60% of Iranian voters abstained from the snap election for a successor to Ebrahim Raisi, following his death in a helicopter crash. The low participation is seen by critics as a vote of no confidence in the Islamic Republic.

The vote is a tight race between low-key lawmaker Masoud Pezeshkian, the sole moderate in the original field of four candidates, and conservative former nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, a staunch advocate of deepening ties with Russia and China.

While the election is expected to have little impact on the nation’s policies, the president will be closely involved in selecting the successor to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s 85-year-old Supreme Leader who calls all the shots on top matters of state.

“I have heard that people’s zeal and interest is higher than in the first round. May God make it this way as this will be gratifying news,” Khamenei told state TV after casting his vote.

Khamenei acknowledged on Wednesday “a lower than expected turnout” last week, but said “it is wrong to assume those who abstained in the first round are opposed to existing rulers”.

Voter turnout has plunged over the past four years, which critics say underlines that support for the existing rule has eroded at a time of growing public discontent over economic hardship and curbs on political and social freedoms.

Only 48% of voters participated in the 2021 election that brought Raisi to power, and turnout was 41% in a parliamentary election in March.

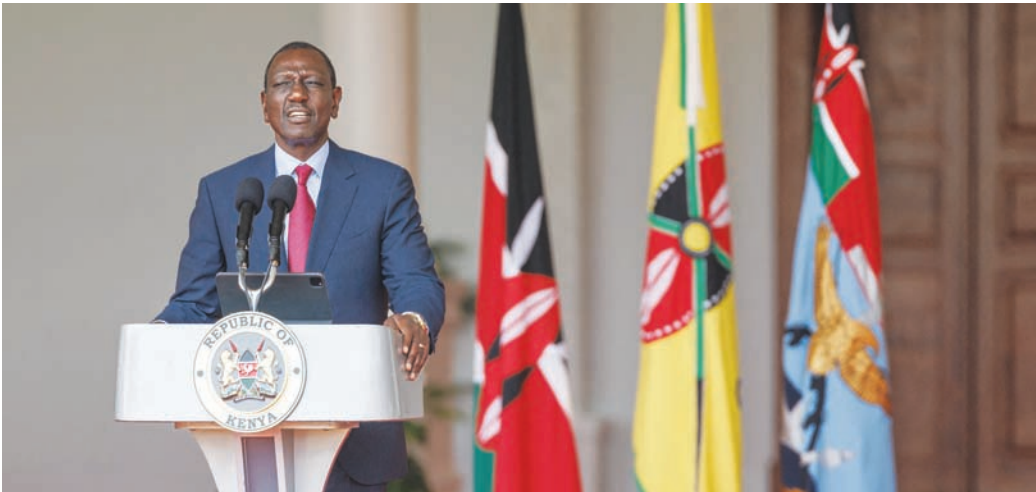
However, the interior ministry spokesman said early reports indicated “higher participation compared with the same hour in the first round of the election”.

“Voting gives power...even if there are criticisms, people should vote as each vote is like a missile launch (against enemies),” Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Aerospace Commander Amirali Hajizadeh told state media.

DECISION

Senegal to scrap Saudi desalination plant deal

Senegal plans to annul a 700mn-euro contract with a Saudi firm to build a water desalination plant, the government confirmed, the first major international deal to be scrapped since President Bassirou Diomaye Faye's election in March. Faye had pledged to review and potentially cancel deals signed by his predecessor Macky Sall, whom he accused of damaging the country's sovereignty by selling off state assets too cheap. The desalination project, hailed as one of the biggest private investments in the country, was signed by Saudi Arabia's Acwa Power and Senegal's state water company SONES in the final days of Sall's presidency.



Kenya's President William Ruto speaks during a press conference at State House in Nairobi yesterday.

Ruto proposes spending cuts after Kenya protests

Reuters
Nairobi

Kenyan President William Ruto yesterday proposed spending cuts and additional borrowing in roughly equal measure to fill a nearly \$2.7bn budget hole caused by his withdrawal of planned tax hikes in the face of nationwide protests.

Ruto scrapped the finance bill containing the tax increases in response to mass, youth-led demonstrations that have created the biggest crisis of his two-year-old presidency.

At least 39 people were killed in clashes with the police and some demonstrators briefly stormed parliament last week.

Ruto said in a televised address that he would ask parliament for spending cuts totalling 177bn shillings (\$1.39bn) for the fiscal year that began this month and that the government would increase borrowing by about 169bn shillings. The president has been caught

between the demands of lenders such as the International Monetary Fund to cut deficits, and a hard-pressed population reeling from rising living costs.

Analysts have said the bill's withdrawal is likely to result in Kenya missing targets in its IMF programme, although the government does not have debts coming due for which it urgently needs cash.

Kenya's budget deficit is now projected at 4.6% of gross domestic product in the 2024-25 financial year, up from an earlier estimate of 3.3%, Ruto said.

Austerity measures will include the dissolution of 47 state corporations, a 50% reduction in the number of government advisers, the suspension of non-essential travel by public office bearers and the removal of budget lines for the president and deputy president's spouses, he said.

"I believe these changes will set out our country on a trajectory towards economic transformation," Ruto said. He also announced a fo-

rensic audit of the country's debt, which sits at more than 70% of gross domestic product, and said he would announce changes to the government soon.

Following the speech, Ruto hosted a live audio forum on X to engage with young people. However, there appeared to be technical difficulties, with many users reporting not being able to join.

Leading activists involved in the protests had called for a boycott of Ruto's forum, saying they had already made their demands clear.

Protests have continued since Ruto scrapped the finance bill, with many demonstrators calling for the president to resign. But turnout has been down and some activists have called for a rethink of their strategy after Tuesday's demonstrations were marred by violence and looting.

Activists have blamed the violence on thugs hired by politicians to discredit the protest movement. The government has said that opportunistic criminals are responsible.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Mali, Burkina, Niger junta chiefs to hold first summit today

The military rulers of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger will today hold their first joint summit since seizing power in a series of coups. Nigerien authorities said. "Our country will today be hosting the first summit of the AES (Alliance of Sahel States) heads of state from Burkina, Mali and Niger," they said in a statement read out on public radio. Niger's junta leader Abdourahamane Tiani will host Ibrahim Traore of Burkina Faso and Malian ruler Assimi Goita in Niamey from Friday ahead of the summit, the source said. Their meeting will be held on the eve of a summit of the Economic Community of West African States.

EVENT

Congo hosts African reforestation summit

The Republic of Congo hosted an African summit yesterday on replacing and planting trees to combat climate change and its consequences. Six leaders attended the conference, which is part of an "African and global decade of afforestation and reforestation" launched by Congolese President Denis Sassou Nguesso at COP27 in Egypt in 2023. "This conference seems to be the beginning of a process of research and a life-saving response. The situation we already know (climate change) remains worrying," Sassou Nguesso said. "The need for action is clear...it's all about the will to act and putting in the necessary effort," he added.

Migrants face 'unimaginable horrors' while crossing Africa, says UN

AFP
Geneva

Refugees and migrants face extreme violence, abuse and exploitation on land routes crossing Africa to get to the Mediterranean, with far more believed to be dying there than at sea, a UN-backed report said yesterday.

Nearly 30,000 migrants have been declared dead or missing attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe in the past decade.

But it could be even worse for those travelling through Africa to the coast, according to a report from United Nations agencies for refugees and migrants and the monitoring group Mixed Migration Centre.

Based on more than 31,000 interviews with refugees and migrants, the report found that 1,180 people were known to have died while crossing the Sahara desert between January 2020 and May 2024.

Five deaths a day are being recorded on the desert routes - taking the total to at least 870 so far this year - Laurence Hart of the UN's International Organisation for Migration told reporters in Geneva.

But these numbers are believed to be a vast underestimate.

While data is lacking, the bodies behind the report say there are clearly thousands of deaths each year. "Deaths of refugees and migrants in the desert (are) presumed to be double those happening at sea," they said in a statement.

"For everyone crossing the Sahara, you get the testimony of bodies being seen, being dropped," said Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR's special envoy for the central and western Mediterranean.

"Everyone that has crossed the Sahara can tell you of people they know who died in the desert," he told reporters.

POLITICS

Court declares Mauritanian President Ghazouani re-elected

Mauritania's Constitutional Council confirmed the re-election of President Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani in last weekend's elections. The court validated Monday's first-round results that put Ghazouani in the lead with 56.12% of the vote, ahead of his opponents Biram Dah Abeid and the Islamist candidate Hamadi Ould Sidi El Mokhtar. No appeals were lodged with the court within the permitted timeframe after the announcement of the results from Saturday's election, its secretary general Aminatou Mint El Khaless said at a ceremony in Nouakchott. The 67-year-old former army chief is widely credited with maintaining security in the country.

US to complete pullout from Niger's Air Base 101 tomorrow

Reuters
Washington

The US military is tomorrow set to complete the withdrawal of its personnel from Niger's Air Base 101 in the nation's capital and then will shift its focus to exiting a major drone base in the coming weeks, a US general said yesterday.

Niger's ruling junta in April ordered the US to withdraw its nearly 1,000 military personnel from the country, in an embarrassing setback for Washington that followed a coup last year in the West African nation.

Before the coup, Niger had been a key partner in the US fight against insurgents in the Sahel region of Africa, who have killed thousands of people and displaced millions more. Washington is searching for a Plan B in West Africa but the process is slow and officials caution that US intelligence is dimming on the fast-growing extremist groups in the region.

Air Force major general Kenneth Ekman, who is in Niger to co-ordinate the departure, said the US exit from Air Base 101 will be finalised with a ceremony tomorrow evening. The base is located next to Diori Hamani International Airport in the capital Niamey. "We will do a joint cer-

emony on that occasion that marks the departure of the last US C-17 (aircraft). The government of Niger will assume control of former US areas and facilities," Ekman said, speaking by video conference.

As the US exits, Russia has deployed military forces to the same base, where they are carrying out training activities.

US officials say there has been no contact between US and Russian personnel there and Ekman stressed he has received assurances from Niger the two nations' forces will be kept separate.

"When I last talked to a Nigerian interlocutor, he quantified the presence of Russian forces as under 100. And he also talked about when the Russians are done training them, they have told the Russians that they have to go home," Ekman said.

Since 2020, soldiers in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have carried out coups, blaming civilian leaders for allowing militants to gain ground. Once in power, juntas have torn up defence agreements with US, French and UN forces.

Niger's military rulers have given the US until September 15 to remove its troops, which also means leaving a \$100mn drone base near Agadez in central Niger that had provided crucial intelligence about groups allied to Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

US welcomes humanitarian truce in Congo

The US welcomed a two-week humanitarian truce in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the White House said, amid fierce fighting between government troops and Rwanda-backed M23 rebels. The fighting in North Kivu province has sent more than 1.7mn people fleeing their homes, driving up the number displaced in Congo by multiple conflicts to a record 7.2mn, according to United Nations estimates. The truce, which began at midnight local time yesterday extends through July 19 and covers areas where the conflict most affects civilian populations, the White House said. "The recent expansion of fighting in North Kivu has prevented humanitarian workers from reaching hundreds of thousands of IDPs in the area around Kanyabayonga and displaced more than 100,000 people from their homes," National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said in a statement.

Soldiers sentenced to death for desertion



Soldiers of the Democratic Republic of Congo Army attend their trial in Lubero yesterday. Twenty-five soldiers accused of "fleeing the enemy" while fighting M23 rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo were sentenced to death during a one-day trial, according to their lawyers. A total of 31 defendants, including 27 soldiers and four of their civilian wives, appeared before the Butembo garrison military court in North Kivu province, near the front line.

Bows at the ready, Chad villagers battle kidnappings

AFP
Pala, Chad

Bows and spears to hand, young villagers file through a wood in southwestern Chad, watching their leader for signals as they train to counter kidnappings.

Breaking up into small groups, some crouch behind eucalyptus tree trunks while others crawl on through the undergrowth in the early morning sunlight.

Another signal is given and everyone stops in their tracks - the strings of the bows and the elastic of slingshots are drawn back in the direction of an imaginary target.

A chorus of raised voices orders the hostages be released and that weapons be put down.

For more than 20 years, isolated villages in the densely populated Mayo-Kebbi Ouest region have been a hunting ground for kidnappers.

Feeling abandoned by the Chadian state, residents have formed committees to fight the wave of abductions using the few means at their disposal.

"Around 1am, armed men came into my father's house and abducted us with my cousin," student Beatrice Naguitta said, blankly staring into the distance.

"For two weeks as captives in the brush, while my father got together

the sum demanded, we were tortured," Naguitta, 22, said of the April 2023 ordeal. "As a woman, I lost my dignity," she added, speaking in the ochre earthen courtyard of her home in Pala, the region's main town.

Barka Tao, co-ordinator of the Organisation for Support of Development Initiatives, said precise figures for kidnap victims were hard to come by. "Some people refuse to talk out of fear of reprisals, but there could have been nearly 1,500 victims in 20 years," he said.

It used to be children from the Fulani semi-nomadic herder community, also known as the Peul, who were targeted because the group was perceived as wealthy.

But over the last decade, farmers, traders, civil servants, teachers and NGO workers have also been taken; no one is beyond risk.

Tao's organisation says kidnappings have been on the rise, with ever-higher ransoms, increasing violence and, at times, resulting in the death of the hostage.

One of the poorest countries in the world, Chad, a vast Sahelian nation in central Africa, has long grappled with rebellions and coups.

Its less arid regions, such as the south, also see frequent and deadly clashes when sedentary farmers accuse nomadic herders of allowing their animals to graze on their land or trample crops.

Kidnappers can also benefit from the complicity of some within the villages, Tao said, adding it was sometimes due to jealousy or just for payment. "There is also complicity among village chiefs and even within the security forces," Tao said, showing documents with contacts purportedly found in kidnappers' telephones.

The authorities did not respond to requests for comment on the claims.

Security Minister Mahamat Charfadine Margui acknowledged that local collusion occurred.

He said that after he took up his job in March 2023 he removed local officials in the area, including the governor and gendarmerie com-

manders. "But that didn't solve the problem. It's much more complex," he said.

Kidnappers also hide out and operate on the other side of Chad's porous borders, in Cameroon and the Central African Republic.

Army reinforcements since 2020 have not stopped the scourge.

Another hurdle is that the region - known as the Triangle of Death - is outside the state's control, said Nestor Deli, 51, a journalist and author who has been writing about the kidnappings for more than 20 years.

"The state seems more preoccupied with rebellions in the north and it considers that an epiphenomenon," he said.

Hurricane Beryl causes havoc in Mexico

Reuters/AFP
Cancun

Tropical Storm Beryl smashed into the Mexican coast near top beach destinations yesterday, whipping palm trees with strong winds and bringing heavy rain, after forging a deadly trail of destruction across the Caribbean.

The core of the storm, downgraded from a hurricane, shifted over the Yucatan Peninsula, with maximum sustained winds dipping to 70mph (113kph) after it passed over the coastal resort town of Tulum.

“On the initial reports, there appears to be no loss of life, and that is what matters most to us,” President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said in his daily press briefing.

The Mexican army, which deployed some 8,000 troops to Tulum, said it has food supplies and 34,000 litres of purified water to distribute to the population.

“After the gust of wind passed, people started coming,” said Amairani Och, who manages a shelter set up in a school in Tulum that had received 290 people by Thursday night.

Lucero Gazcon, a 67-year-old retiree, told AFP she was grateful for the “wonderful attention” at the shelter, where she found safety with her dog after they were forced to leave their apartment.

Virginia Rebollar, a Mexican tourist who travelled with three family members

to Tulum, said their flight out had been cancelled and “we had to pay for two extra nights”.

“We have some fear, but we are convinced that people are prepared and know what to do,” she added.

While Beryl’s passage over Mexico’s Quintana Roo and Yucatan states resulted in slower winds, the US National Hurricane Centre (NHC) forecast dangerous storm surges and destructive waves in the surrounding area.

“We’re asking everyone to stay in your homes, in your shelters, do not leave,” said Quintana Roo Governor Mara Lezama in a video message on social media platform X.

Among Mexico’s top tourist destinations, the Yucatan Peninsula is known for its white-sand beaches, lush landscapes and Mayan ruins.

While “rapid weakening” is expected as it moves further inland and crosses the peninsula, according to the NHC, Beryl is expected to pick up intensity once the sprawling system enters the Gulf of Mexico.

Beryl was the first hurricane of the 2024 Atlantic season.

It became this week the earliest Category 5 hurricane on record, with scientists pointing to its rapid strengthening as almost certainly fuelled by human-caused climate change.

Beryl is about 65 miles (105km) east-southeast of the port of Progreso and a short distance inland from Merida, the

colonial-era capital of Yucatan state.

The slow-moving storm churned north-west at just 15mph (24kph) by midmorning yesterday.

Along the empty streets of Cancun’s main hotel district, normally full of international tourists, heavy rain pounded the pavement.

Mexico’s national water commission, CONAGUA, flagged a risk of flooding around the tourist hubs, as well as in neighbouring Campeche state.

Quintana Roo schools were closed, as were local beaches.

Mexico’s defence ministry had opened around 120 storm shelters ahead of Beryl’s arrival.

Before reaching Mexico, Beryl wreaked havoc across several Caribbean islands. It swept through Jamaica, Grenada, St Vincent and the Grenadines, in addition to unleashing heavy rainfall on northern Venezuela.

It has claimed at least 11 lives, tearing apart buildings while felling power lines and trees.

The death toll may rise as more information becomes available.

The NHC predicts that Beryl will move toward northeastern Mexico and south Texas later in the weekend.

The storm forced the evacuation of around 3,000 tourists from Isla Mujeres, a popular tourist island near Mexico’s top beach resort of Cancun, according to the island’s tourism director Jose Magana.



A damaged gas station in Puerto Aventuras, Quintana Roo State, Mexico, yesterday, following strong wind brought by the passage of Hurricane Beryl. - AFP

Many residents had sought refuge in shelters in anticipation of the storm’s arrival.

About 100 flights were cancelled at Cancun’s main airport by Thursday, causing tourists to rush to catch the last outgoing flights.

Mexico’s major oil platforms, primarily located in the southern rim of the Gulf of Mexico, are not expected to be affected

or shut down, but some oil projects in US waters to the north had been temporarily paused due to Beryl’s expected path.

Research by the ClimaMeter consortium determined that climate change significantly intensified Beryl.

According to the study, the storm’s severity, along with its associated rainfall and wind speed, saw an increase of 10-30% as a direct result of climate change.

Scorching heat expected in US West, Southeast

AFP
Mariposa, California

Dangerously hot conditions will dominate over the rest of the July Fourth holiday weekend in much of the US West Coast, Southeast and Middle Atlantic seaboard, forecasters said yesterday, as California firefighters battled one of the first big wildfires of the season.

Around 108mn Americans will spend the remainder of the weekend under excessive heat advisories, with record-breaking temperatures forecast for many spots in California, southern Oregon and the Southwest, the National Weather Service (NWS) said.

The West Coast will hover 15°-30° above average, reaching 110° Fahrenheit (43° Celsius).

“Expect only subtle changes to our daily high temperatures through the weekend,” the NWS in Flagstaff, Arizona, said on X.

“Where did you go, monsoon? Hurry back,” it said, referring to a recent bout of torrential rain in the area, which is usually bone-dry this time of year.

Some of the hottest spots will include Phoenix where it will be 115F (46C), Washington DC where it is expected to climb to 100F (38C), and Palm Springs, California, where it will reach 119F (48C).

That is almost three times as hot as it will be in Yellowstone National Park in Montana, where the forecast was for temperatures to dip to 37F by nightfall.

The weather service urged people to stay hydrated, out of the sunlight, and in buildings with sufficient air-conditioning.

Stifling heat will also prevail from Mississippi to Florida, and north along the Eastern Seaboard to Pennsylvania, where temperatures will reach past 100F (37C).

The NWS warned that hot overnight conditions across the Mississippi Valley could lead to “a dangerous situation for those without access to adequate cooling”.

Hot, dry and windy conditions in the West were forcing fire officials and forecasters to issue warnings about the risk of wildfires.

The so-called Thompson Fire in Butte County, California, about 65 miles (105km) north of Sacramento, has scorched almost six square miles (16sq km) of scrub and brush since it started on Tuesday.

As of morning yesterday, the fire was 46% contained after forcing some 13,000 households to evacuate.

Most of the evacuation orders have been lifted by early yesterday as firefighters made progress controlling the blaze, which had damaged or destroyed about 30 structures, fire officials said.



This image taken from social media shows fire and smoke rising from the French Fire in Mariposa, California. - Reuters

Some 225 miles (362km) south, firefighters battled the French Fire that threatened Mariposa, a gateway to Yosemite National Park.

The 800-acre (323-hectare) fire was 5% contained as winds calmed yesterday, helping firefighters make progress.

Southern Texas faces a different

sort of threat early next week when remnants of Hurricane Beryl are expected to dump heavy rains on the region.

Beryl, the first hurricane of the season, made landfall in Mexico yesterday after killing 11 people as it carved a path of destruction across the Caribbean earlier this week.

Trump campaign, allies intensify Harris attacks amid replacement talk

Reuters
Washington

Donald Trump’s campaign and some of his allies have launched a pre-emptive political strike on Vice-President Kamala Harris, moving swiftly to try to discredit her amid talk among some of her fellow Democrats that she might replace President Joe Biden atop the party’s 2024 presidential ticket.

On social media and in a flurry of statements over the past 48 hours, Trump’s campaign and his Republican allies appear to be laying the groundwork for an all-out assault on Harris should the 81-year-old Biden decide to end his re-election bid following his feeble debate performance last week.

While Biden has insisted that he is not quitting the race four months before the November 5 election, and Harris has stood firmly behind him, the Trump campaign has little to lose by attacking the vice-president now, so that if Harris does emerge as the nominee, she might do so in a weakened state.

Republicans have regularly criticised Harris, 59, during Biden’s term in office, but the attacks this week represented a sharp and seemingly co-ordinated escalation that appeared to be linked to increased



Biden and Harris are seen on the Truman Balcony of the White House, during the Independence Day fireworks display. - AFP

talk about her possibly replacing Biden as the Democratic presidential candidate.

The National Republican Congressional Committee, which oversees House Republican races, called her Biden’s “enabler in chief”.

MAGA Inc, a fundraising super PAC supporting Trump, released a statement calling her the “invasion czar”.

In March 2021 Biden said Harris would lead efforts with Mexico and Central American nations to address illegal immigration.

Republicans have seized on that to accuse her of failing to stem the flow of millions of migrants crossing illegally into the United States, although she was never directly responsible for securing the southern border.

“Kamala Harris is incompetent. She’s proven to be the weakest, worst vice-president in history, and she has 100% supported Joe Biden in every single disastrous policy that he has implemented over the last four years,” said Karoline Leavitt, a spokesperson for the Trump campaign.

Trump disparaged Harris in a video recorded at one of his golf courses, published by The Daily Beast on Wednesday, saying that Harris was “so bad, she’s so pathetic” before using an expletive to describe her.

Biden campaign spokesperson Sarafina Chitika said: “No, Donald. What is bad is taking away women’s rights; What is bad is losing an election and encouraging a violent mob to attack the Capitol.”

In a more public attack, Trump took to his Truth Social social media platform on Thursday to mock Harris for her poor performance in the Democratic primaries in 2020 while calling her a “highly talented politician”.

The Biden campaign pushed back against the escalating Republican criticism of Harris without addressing the question of whether the vice-president is waiting in the wings.

“Vice-President Harris is proud to be President Biden’s running mate,” said Rhyann Lake, a campaign spokesperson for Harris. “No matter what false attacks Trump and his extreme allies make, she

will continue to defend the Biden-Harris record and prosecute the case against Donald Trump.”

The swipes at Harris by Trump’s camp were reminiscent of a similar tactic that the Republican Trump, president from 2017-2021, used to successfully undermine Ron DeSantis, his main Republican rival, before the Florida governor jumped into their party’s 2024 election primary race last year.

Corey Lewandowski, a long-time Trump adviser, told Reuters that Harris was politically vulnerable given her role in addressing illegal immigration, among other issues that are part of extensive research the party has gathered on her record.

A former senior staffer in the Trump White House who is still in contact with the Trump campaign said the newfound emphasis on Harris made sense.

“If Joe Biden stays on top of the ticket, given what we’ve seen, she takes on even more importance. But if he does step aside, she’s the potential candidate. This is about defining her,” the staffer said, pointing to her low approval ratings in public opinion polls.

Despite her low ratings, a Reuters/Ipsos poll earlier this week showed Harris to be as formidable an opponent to Trump as Biden.

In a hypothetical matchup, Trump led

Harris by a single percentage point, 43% to 42%.

Even before the June 27 debate, the Trump campaign was beginning to turn its attention to Harris, releasing an attack ad online that mocked her for repeating lines in her speeches.

An online meme promoted by Republicans showed Harris repeating the same phrase “unburdened by what has been” again and again in remarks.

Harris’ defenders say she has become more of a target because of her leading role in attacking Trump over abortion rights and her vigorous defence of Biden on the campaign trail.

If Biden were to exit the race before the Democratic National Convention in August, there is no guarantee Harris would be the nominee.

However, as vice-president, she likely would be first in line.

She would benefit from Biden’s immense campaign war chest and likely see a large segment of Democrats rally around her in a bid to avoid a bitter intra-party battle.

And as the first black vice-president in US history, she provides a bridge to the party’s most dependable voting bloc.

Her background and relative youth would make for a sharp contrast with Trump, 78.

Biden seeks campaign reset with high-risk TV interview

President Joe Biden, scrambling to defuse a political crisis over his shaky debate performance, will participate in a television interview that will be closely watched for signs of whether his mental acuity is failing.

For 90 minutes on June 27, a raspy Biden struggled to express himself clearly, stumbling over words and losing his train of thought.

A growing chorus in his party has since called for him to prove he has the energy to defeat Trump in November, and handle another four years in the White House.

Biden will travel to Madison, Wisconsin, to rally Democratic voters.

During the trip he will be interviewed by ABC News, part of a flurry of events over the next week aimed at showing Americans he still has the stamina to run against Republican candidate Donald Trump in the November 5 election.

While Biden insists he is staying in the race and that his health is not faltering, he is under enormous pressure to step aside and open a path for his 59-year-old vice-president, Kamala Harris.

Some donors are making their displeasure known loudly, halting funding or looking at possible Democratic alternatives.

The White House has blamed a cold for Biden’s shaky performance and Biden himself

cited jet lag from back-to-back trips to Europe.

The ABC interview offers the likelihood of unscripted comments from the president, who relies heavily on the use of a teleprompter for his public remarks.

The interview with ABC presenter George Stephanopoulos will be a key moment for Biden to dispel the worries and reset expectations.

Biden will face a journalist who knows the workings of political communication like no one else.

Stephanopoulos worked for former Democratic president Bill Clinton during his first campaign and was one of his closest advisers during his first term in the White House. - Reuters/AFP



Trump:

ALERT

Dozens of Chinese warplanes detected around Taiwan

Taiwan's defence ministry yesterday said it had detected 36 Chinese military aircraft around the island in the previous 24 hours. A further 26 aircraft - including fighters, transport planes and drones - were detected after 6.55am (2255GMT) yesterday, the ministry said. China claims Taiwan as part of its territory and has said it would never renounce the use of force to bring it under Beijing's control. It has stepped up pressure on Taipei in recent years and held war games around the island following the May 20 inauguration of new Taiwanese leader Lai Ching-te, who Beijing regards as a "dangerous separatist".

ANNOUNCEMENT

Amazon to build 'top secret' cloud for Australia's spies

Top-secret Australian military intelligence will be stored on a custom cloud server built by US tech giant Amazon, Canberra said as it unveiled the US\$1.3bn deal. The Australian government said Amazon Web Services would design a "top secret" cloud for the country's military and intelligence agencies. It would lead to "greater interoperability and deeper collaboration with the US", one of Australia's most steadfast military allies, a statement said. Australian spy boss Rachel Noble said the cloud would also support the country's "Redspice" intelligence programme, which aims to counter the growing risk of cyber-attacks.

VERDICT

S Korean ex-opposition leader's attacker jailed

The man who stabbed South Korea's then-opposition leader Lee Jae-myung in January and left him hospitalised was sentenced to 15 years in prison yesterday, the Busan District Court said. The attacker, identified by local media only by his surname Kim, pretended to be a supporter and stabbed Lee in the neck as the politician was surrounded by journalists at an event held in the southern port city of Busan on January 2. Lee suffered a wound to his jugular vein and underwent emergency surgery, but recovered after being hospitalised for about a week. Kim had been charged with attempted murder and election law violations.

OFFBEAT

Canine weddings on the rise in China

It was a dream wedding, complete with picturesque outdoor setting, white lace gown and a delectable cake. The perfect day for golden retrievers - Bree and Bond - to tie the knot in front of their closest human and canine friends. Pet weddings are on the rise in China, where government policies have had little success in encouraging more humans to wed in this fast-ageing society. The popularity of pets and an increasing willingness to splurge on them are driving the trend. Spending on furry companions in 2023 rose 3.2% to 279.3 billion yuan (\$38.41 billion) from a year earlier, industry figures show.

Jailed separatist, Kashmir leader sworn into India parliament

AFP
New Delhi

A Sikh separatist and a Kashmiri politician temporarily left jail yesterday to be sworn into India's parliament after both men won resounding victories in last month's election from behind bars.

Firebrand preacher Amritpal Singh, 31, was arrested last year after a month-long police manhunt but defeated 26 other candidates to win his seat in Punjab state.

Sheikh Abdul "Engineer" Rashid, a former state legislator in Kashmir arrested on terrorism funding accusations, won his constituency by more than 200,000 votes.

Neither man has been convicted of the charges against him, leaving them both still eligible to sit in parliament despite their detention.

Both were briefly bailed from custody to be sworn into the legislature in New Delhi in a private ceremony that barred media access, weeks after their parliamentary colleagues took their own oaths of office.

Singh's mother told reporters that her son had been sworn in.

"I now request the government to release him from jail," she added.

Singh, 31, rose to prominence calling for a separate Sikh homeland known as Khalistan, the struggle for which sparked deadly

violence in India in the 1980s and 1990s.

Weeks before his April 2023 arrest, he and armed supporters raided a police station after one of his aides was arrested for assault and attempted kidnapping.

Rashid was temporarily released from jail in Delhi for his swearing-in, which was later confirmed in a post on his Facebook page.

Ubaid Shams, Rashid's lawyer, told AFP that his client had taken his oath of office in the presence of his wife and three children.

"He is back in prison. But he is now an official member of parliament," he said.

Rashid was arrested in 2019 after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government revoked the limited autonomy of Kashmir.

His son ran his election campaign on his behalf, using a pressure cooker as his election symbol, seen as a representation of drastically curtailed civil liberties in the region.

India has precedent for allowing jailed citizens to formally take office, but whether they are permitted to attend parliamentary sessions remains at the discretion of the judiciary.

Opposition lawmaker Sanjay Singh was sworn into the parliament's upper house this year despite being jailed awaiting trial on money laundering charges.

Modi won a third term in office in this year's poll, but his party failed to gain a majority, forcing it to rely on coalition allies to govern.

Flood fury



A man rows a boat through a flood-affected area at the Buraburi village in Morigaon district of Assam, India, yesterday. Torrential rains and surging rivers across northeast India and neighbouring Bangladesh have killed at least nine people, disaster officials said with more than 3mn people affected. Disaster authorities in India's northeastern state of Assam said eight people had died over the past day, taking the death toll due to the downpours since mid-May to 46.

Modi to focus on trade, Indian soldiers in talks with Putin

Reuters
New Delhi

Fixing India's trade imbalance with Russia and securing the discharge of Indians misled into fighting in the Ukraine war will be among Prime Minister Narendra Modi's priorities during talks in Moscow next week, a top official said yesterday.

Modi will visit Russia on July 8-9 for talks with President Vladimir Putin as part of annual summits between New Delhi and Moscow, launched in 2000.

Modi's visit coincides with the July 9-11 Nato summit in Washington at which the

Ukraine war will hold centre stage, and the timing has raised questions about the signal India could be sending.

But Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra, the most senior diplomat in the foreign ministry, rejected any connection and said Modi's visit was part of the calendar of summits between the two countries.

"The bilateral visit this time is just a scheduling priority that we have undertaken and that's what it is," he told reporters in response to a question at a briefing on Modi's visit.

Kwatra said India-Russia trade had seen a sharp increase in 2023-24 and touched close to \$65bn "primarily due to strong energy co-

operation", but Indian exports accounted for just \$4bn. "Trade remains imbalanced, which is a matter of priority in our discussions with the Russian side," he said, adding that India hopes to "correct" this by pushing exports across sectors including farm, technology, pharmaceuticals and services.

Modi will also take up the early discharge of Indian nationals who have been "misled" into serving in the Russian army, Kwatra said.

Several cases of Indians who were lured to Russia with the promise of lucrative jobs or education and ended up fighting against Ukraine have emerged this year and at least four Indian nationals have been killed in the war.

Malaysia rescues hundreds of tortoises from 'Ninja Turtle Gang'

Malaysian authorities have rescued hundreds of smuggled tortoises meant for sale in southeast Asia, disrupting an international crime ring called the "Ninja Turtle Gang", a wildlife official said.

Abdul Kadir Abu Hashim, wildlife and national parks department director-general, said 400 tortoises worth 3.8mn ringgit (\$805,084) bound for the lucrative exotic pet trade were seized during an operation by the police and wildlife officials.

Across Asia, many believe that tortoises bring good luck and prosperity.

"This is the biggest ever seizure in the past 10 years," Abdul Kadir said, adding that the reptiles were to be sold on to Thailand and Indonesia after local demand was met. He said the tortoises were believed to have been smuggled from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. The joint operation, codenamed 'United National Resource', crippled the tortoise smuggling ring known as the "Ninja Turtle Gang", he said.

The operation involved a car chase in which the driver of a vehicle thought to be used in the smuggling was arrested.

Force of nature



Lightning strikes as lava erupts from the crater of the Mount Ibu volcano in west Halmahera, North Maluku, Indonesia.

Australian east coast 'to face gas shortage by 2027'

Reuters
Sydney

Australia's east coast could face gas shortages from 2027, a year earlier than initially forecast, the country's competition regulator said yesterday, as it called for an urgent need to develop new sources of production and supply.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) said in an interim update that the warning reflects potential lower supply due to delays in approvals for new projects.

The ACCC warning came in two weeks after Australia's energy market operator said the east was facing an immediate gas shortage following a cold snap that drove up demand for heating. Meanwhile, supply dipped due to an extended outage at the region's main gas plant.

Australia produces more gas than it needs to meet its domestic demands, but most supply is contracted for export.

The decision to extend the clo-

sure of Origin Energy's Eraring coal-fired power plant, the country's largest, by two years until 2027 improved the energy outlook but it did not change "the fundamental trajectory of supply," the ACCC report said.

The southern states may have to rely on gas from Queensland state, where Shell, Origin Energy and Santos operate gas fields, unless new sources of supply are made available and demand remains the same. But from 2029, Queensland will also require new sources of supply, the regulator said.

Australia considers gas a critical element in its transition to cleaner energy as the country moves rapidly away from its dependence on coal-fired power stations. The Labor government in May backed long-term gas drilling despite its plans to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Governments should not ignore ACCC's warning and must fast-track new gas projects to prevent any shortfall, Australian Energy Producers chief executive Samantha McCulloch said.

Delhi's domestic airport terminal 'not likely to open soon'

Reuters
New Delhi

New Delhi's main domestic terminal is likely to remain shut for a few weeks with debris still scattered outside the airport following last week's roof collapse, two sources with direct knowledge of the matter said.

A portion of the roof, canopy and several beams at the domestic

terminal 1 collapsed after heavy rain in the Indian capital on Friday, killing one person, crushing cars and disrupting flights ever since.

The incident has put a spotlight on challenges Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government faces to overhaul infrastructure projects and has raised concerns about lax regulation and compliance issues.

The recently expanded terminal

is mostly used by low-cost carriers IndiGo and SpiceJet and has a capacity to handle 40mn passengers annually, but its closure is set to increase pressure on two other terminals from where domestic flights also operate.

A source at GMR Airports Infrastructure, which operates the airport, said "it could take few weeks, if the issue is small but very likely that it could take beyond a month if the problem is major".

"No matter how much time it takes, the terminal will not be reopened until everything has been checked thoroughly," the person added.

GMR said in a statement that it was "too early" to provide details of when the terminal could resume operations.

Delhi airport handles 1,400 flights a day across its three terminals. Flight operations from T1 were currently limited to less than

15% of the total as they were gradually resuming after the recent expansion and refurbishment.

More than 22,000 passengers have been affected in the past three days, with around 90 flights moved to other terminals, government data shows.

A Reuters photographer was not permitted to enter the accident site as the area has been cordoned off by authorities.

The second source said that the

debris would not be removed until an inspection was complete, which was likely to take a few weeks.

IndiGo and SpiceJet said their passengers were being informed about terminal changes.

However, yesterday, two passengers told Reuters near T1 they had no information on any change in their departure terminal. "I'm running late and it will affect my timing to board my flight," said Satyam, a 22-year old student.



New PM pledges to rebuild Britain

• Change begins immediately: Starmer • ‘Need to heal lack of trust in politics with actions’

Reuters
London

Britain's new Prime Minister Keir Starmer yesterday pledged to use his massive electoral majority to rebuild the country, saying he wanted to take the heat out of politics after years of upheaval and strife.

Standing outside his new office and residence at Number 10 Downing Street, Starmer acknowledged the scale of the challenge after his party's landslide victory in a parliamentary election ended 14 years of often tumultuous Conservative government.

He warned that any improvements would take time, and he would need to first rebuild faith in politics.

"This lack of trust can only be healed by actions, not words. I know that," he said.

"Whether you voted Labour or not, in fact, especially if you did not, I say to you directly - my government will serve you. Politics can be a force for good. We will

show that."

Starmer was greeted by huge cheers and took time before making his speech to shake hands with and hug aides and well-wishers who lined Downing Street - scenes that were reminiscent of Labour predecessor Tony Blair's arrival in government in 1997.

Standing behind a lectern, he said he understood that many Britons were disillusioned with politics after years of scandal and chaos under the Conservatives, who were roundly rejected in Thursday's election, suffering a historic loss.

Starmer said the rejection signalled that Britain was ready for a reset: "Because no matter how fierce the storms of history, one of the great strengths of this nation has always been our ability to navigate away to calmer waters."

The centre-left Labour won a massive majority in the 650-seat parliament, prompting Rishi Sunak's resignation yesterday morning, before Starmer went to meet King Charles and be formally named prime minister.



Incoming Prime Minister Keir Starmer and his wife Victoria arrive at Number 10 Downing Street, following the results of the election, in London, Britain, yesterday.

He said he would fight every day to rebuild trust, saying Britain would have a "government unburdened by doctrine", underlining something he had repeated during

the campaign - that he would put country first, party second.

"To defy, quietly, those who have written our country off. You have given us a clear mandate, and

we will use it to deliver change."

Despite Starmer's convincing victory, polls suggested there was little enthusiasm for Starmer or his party. Thanks to the quirk of Britain's first-past-the-post system and a low turnout, Labour's triumph was achieved with fewer votes than it secured in 2017 and 2019 - the latter its worst result in terms of seats won for 84 years.

The pound and British stocks and government bonds rose marginally yesterday, but Starmer comes to power at a time when the country is facing a series of daunting challenges. Britain's tax burden is set to hit its highest since just after World War II, net debt is almost equivalent to annual economic output, living standards have fallen, and public services are creaking, especially the much cherished National Health Service which has been dogged by strikes.

Some of Labour's more ambitious plans, such as its flagship green spending pledges, have already been scaled back, while Starmer has promised not to raise taxes for "working people".

Likewise, he has promised to scrap the Conservative's policy of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda, but with migration a key electoral issue, he will be under pressure himself to find a way to stop tens of thousands of people arriving across the Channel from France on small boats.

"I don't promise you it will be easy," Starmer said earlier at a victory rally. "Changing a country is not like flicking a switch. It's hard work. Patient, determined, work, and we will have to get moving immediately."

His first appointments to his top team of ministers contained no surprises.

Rachel Reeves was named as Britain's first female finance minister, Angela Rayner was made deputy prime minister and David Lammy was appointed foreign minister, all keeping the policy briefs they had held in opposition.

Starmer has promised to improve relations with the European Union after Brexit, but Labour has said rejoining the EU was not on the table.

Defeated Sunak quits with call for kindness, decency and tolerance



Outgoing Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, flanked by his wife Akshata Murty, delivers a speech at Number 10 Downing Street, following the results of the elections, in London, Britain, yesterday.

LONDON: Rishi Sunak yesterday said he would resign as prime minister and Conservative Party leader after losing heavily to Keir Starmer's Labour Party, leaving with an apology, a tribute to Britain, and a call to protect "kindness, decency and tolerance".

His defeat ends 14 years of Conservative government - a period marked by division, political instability and, more recently, economic pain. He hands control of the world's sixth largest economy to centre-left Labour Party leader Keir Starmer. "I have given this job my all, but you have sent a clear signal that the government of the United Kingdom must change, and yours is the only judgment that matters," Sunak said in a speech outside the prime minister's office in Downing Street. "I have heard your anger, your disappointment and I take responsibility for this loss," Sunak said whatever their disagreements, he respected Starmer as a "decent public-spirited man". "He and his family deserve the very best of our understanding as they make the huge transition to their new lives behind this door," he said.

Sunak's tone marked a stark contrast to his approach to the final weeks of the campaign when, increasingly desperate as the opinion polls refused to budge, he tore into Starmer, warning the Labour leader would hike taxes, hammer the economy and threaten its security. Sunak spent 20 months in charge of the party, inheriting an economy suffering soaring inflation and a Conservative reputation badly damaged by a messy end to Boris Johnson's tenure and the even more chaotic, and brief, leadership of Liz Truss. He called the election earlier than expected, banking on an improvement in economic data to help him close the gap with Labour, but failed to make any headway in a campaign beset by missteps, and delivered the worst result in the party's history. "I will step down as party leader, not immediately but once the formal arrangements for selecting my successor are in place," he said. "It is important that after 14 years in government the Conservative Party rebuilds, but also that it takes up its crucial role in opposition professionally and effectively." (Reuters)

Record number of cabinet ministers defeated

AFP
London

A record number of Cabinet ministers lost their seats yesterday in Britain's general election, leaving only a couple of obvious contenders for the party leadership if Rishi Sunak resigns.

Nine members of prime minister Rishi Sunak's top team failed to be re-elected, beating the previous high of seven who lost out in 1997, as the ruling Conservatives suffered a mauling at the hands of the main opposition Labour party.

Grant Shapps, the UK's defence secretary for nearly a year, was the most high-profile casualty, losing his Welwyn Hatfield seat north of London.

Liz Truss, Britain's shortest-serving prime minister, suffered further political ignominy yesterday when she sensationally lost her seat in parliament at the general election.

Truss's defeat came as the constituencies of all her predecessors since the Tories won power in 2010 turned either Labour or Liberal Democrat - a damning indictment on the Conservatives' 14 years in power.

Truss, who sparked financial turmoil during her 49 chaotic days in charge in 2022, lost

her Norfolk South West constituency in eastern England to Labour by 630 votes.

Labour candidate Terry Jermy overturned Truss's massive majority of more than 26,000 which she secured at the last election in 2019 - a notional 27.85% swing.

Truss - whose shelf-life as premier was lam-pooned as shorter than that of an Iceberg lettuce - said she had "a lot to think about" when asked if she wanted to stay in politics.

Leader of the Commons Penny Mordaunt, who shot to international attention as a sword carrier at King Charles III's coronation last May, lost in Portsmouth North on England's south coast.

A former defence secretary, she tried twice to become Tory leader, and was tipped to try again after Thursday's election, with Sunak expected to stand down.

Other Tory casualties included education secretary Gillian Keegan, justice secretary Alex Chalk, culture secretary Lucy Frazer, transport and science secretary Michelle Donelan.

Veteran minister Johnny Mercer and Brexit champion Jacob Rees-Mogg also lost out, as voters grew fed up with the Conservatives after 14 years in power.

The defeats have already sparked soul-search-

ing among re-elected and departing Conservatives, who said the party had been punished for a series of scandals and infighting in recent years.

"I think that we have seen in this election an astonishing ill-discipline within the party," said former justice secretary Robert Buckland, after losing his seat.

Shapps, an MP since 2005, criticised the Tories' "inability to iron out their differences" amid an endless political "soap opera" that saw five prime ministers since the 2016 Brexit vote.

"What is crystal clear to me - it is not so much that Labour won but that the Conservatives lost," he added.

Right-winger Suella Braverman, sacked as interior minister by Sunak late last year for a series of incendiary comments, was re-elected and finance minister Jeremy Hunt survived a major scare to squeak victory.

Current interior minister James Cleverly also held on to his seat. Secretary of state for business and trade Kemi Badenoch and security minister Tom Tugendhat also won their races.

Most of those high-profile survivors are expected to challenge for the leadership.

Braverman apologised to voters in her victory speech, saying the Tories had failed to listen to voters.



Labour Party supporters wave Union Jack, Welsh and Scottish flags as they wait outside 10 Downing Street in London yesterday.



On a night of sweeping change across British politics, one thing at the heart of the government remained the same yesterday morning: Larry the Downing Street cat. The white and tabby cat, who bears the official title Chief Mouser to the Cabinet Office, was seen padding around the famous high gloss black door to Number 10 - the office he will now share with his sixth prime minister.

Larry has been resident in the seat of British power since 2011 when, under then-prime minister David Cameron, he was adopted from the nearby Battersea Dogs & Cats Home. An unorthodox barometer on the state of British politics, he then served under prime ministers Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak during a tumultuous period of Conservative-led governments. Yesterday, his latest housemate, Labour Party leader Keir Starmer, took up office having won a landslide electoral victory.

While Larry is clearly going nowhere, he might soon have some company: Starmer already has a cat named JoJo who is expected to join him when he takes up residence in the street. Unperturbed by that prospect, Larry soon decided to ditch the unseasonably wet and windy weather by letting himself in to Number 10 in his customary manner - waiting by the door until a friendly policeman opened it for him.

Scottish independence hit as SNP suffers huge blow

AFP
London

The pro-separatist Scottish National Party was virtually obliterated at the UK general election yesterday, suffering a devastating blow to its withering independence movement.

Keir Starmer's Labour party overturned more than a decade of SNP domination by storming to a majority of Scotland's 57 seats, as it rode to power in Westminster.

The SNP lost dozens of lawmakers as it recorded its worst result in a British general election since 2010, with leader **John Swinney** (pictured) lamenting a "very, very difficult and



damaging" night for his party.

Swinney had targeted winning 29 seats as a mandate for reopening negotiations with the British government for another independence referendum, but it returned only nine MPs, with one result still to declare. That was down from the 48 it won at the last election in 2019.

Labour returned just one Scottish Labour MP last time round but sealed its comeback in its former heartland by sweeping every Glasgow seat as well as numerous others in Scotland's central belt.

The crushing loss for the SNP means it relinquished its position as Britain's third-biggest party, which brings a high-profile slot during the weekly Prime Minister's Questions session in parliament.

It will also lose out on public funding and key positions on parliamentary select committees.

"There will have to be a lot of soul-searching as a party as a consequence of these results that have come in tonight," SNP leader John

Swinney admitted to the BBC.

The SNP has dominated in Scotland in the last three UK elections, peaking with the 2015 vote when it won 56 seats out of 59 seats. In 2010, it got only six seats.

But the party has been under pressure from the resurgence of Labour in its former fiefdom north of the English border, as it rides a wave of displeasure against the Tories nationwide.

The SNP has been in turmoil for months as voters tire of its 17 years in charge of the devolved Scottish parliament in Edinburgh.

Critics have also accused it of focusing on independence at the expense of key issues such as the cost-of-living crisis, education and health.

Support for the SNP has also slumped amid a finances scandal that saw former SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon's husband, Peter Murrell, charged with embezzlement. Murrell is the party's former chief executive. Sturgeon herself was arrested, but released without charge.



Reform UK leader Nigel Farage reacts after being elected to become MP for Clacton at the Clacton count centre in Clacton-on-Sea, eastern England, early yesterday.

Farage elected to parliament

London: Nigel Farage was elected to parliament yesterday, marking the emergence of his populist Reform UK as a new force in British politics squeezing the Conservative vote from the right wing.

Farage, a driving force behind Britain's decision to leave the European Union, only entered the race last month, a move that caused shockwaves in a Conservative Party that was already polling far behind centre-left Labour. He was elected in Clacton, an Essex town that had one of highest 'Leave' votes in the Brexit referendum in 2016, with a 46% share of the vote, beating the Conservatives - among a handful of Reform candidates elected for the first time.

"There is a massive gap on the centre right of British politics and my job is to fill it, and that's exactly what I'm going to do," he said after being declared the winner. "Believe me folks, this is just the first step of something that is going to stun all of you."

Farage, a former member of the European Parliament, had failed in seven previous bids to be elected to Westminster. (Reuters)

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GULF TIMES

Investors put UK election winner Labour on credibility watch

Big investors are warming to Britain after a landslide election win for its new Labour government but remain wary of placing long term bets until Prime Minister Keir Starmer can convince them his economic growth plans are credible. Sterling, the strongest major currency against the dollar this year, nudged higher yesterday when the scale of Labour's victory became clear. The UK-focused FTSE 250 share index, which has outpaced the more global FTSE 100 year-to-date, rose to its highest since April 2022.

But investors said Labour still needed to revive long-term confidence in UK markets that have struggled since 2016's Brexit vote and the chaos wreaked by Conservative former prime minister Liz Truss' 2022 mini-Budget.

Left-leaning Labour has pledged to upgrade Britain's creaking infrastructure and solve a housing shortage while keeping spending tight as the UK's tax burden approaches an all-time high.

But credit rating agencies and Britain's lenders in international bond markets are twitchy about public debt that is expected to exceed 100% of gross domestic product.

"They have to walk a tightrope between economic growth and government debt. We have to see if debt issuance is going to rise, and if the economy can expand at a rate where extra borrowing is deemed acceptable," said Sheldon MacDonald, chief investment officer at UK asset manager Marlborough.

MacDonald said he had a neutral outlook on UK stocks but was slightly positive on gilts because of expected Bank of England rate cuts.

“They have to walk a tightrope between economic growth and government debt”

After years of relentless outflows, the combined market value of companies in the broad FTSE-All stock index, at £2.4tn (\$3.07tn), is below that of individual US tech stocks like Apple and chipmaker Nvidia.

After Rishi Sunak conceded defeat to Labour early yesterday and resigned as party leader, the Conservatives were set to choose their sixth leader since 2016 following years of infighting over Britain's post-Brexit future.

Investors hope Starmer and his incoming finance minister, former Bank of England economist Rachel Reeves, will provide more stable leadership as well as predictable tax and trade policies.

"Investors in New York or Hong Kong would have read the headlines and found it easy to say why bother, it's a basket case," said Toby Gibb, head of investment solutions at fund manager Artemis. "What (the election) does is relieve that uncertainty, it allows overseas investors to invest with more security." In one positive sign, sterling on a trade-weighted basis is back at levels last seen before the Brexit vote.

Gibb said he expected the pound to stay strong and was bullish on UK stocks.

Other investors were staying cautious.

"We know that a general incremental improvement can come from political stability but we don't know what changes are going to happen," said Janus Henderson European equities portfolio manager Tom O'Hara, whose UK exposure is below Britain's share of MSCI's broad European index.

"You need something more tangible," he explained, "such as which companies are going to benefit from which policies." Britain has not grown faster than 2% a year on a regular basis since before the 2008 global financial crisis.

Ben Mackie, fund manager at UK-based Hawkmoor Investment Management, said he was also not buying into a UK growth theme.

"The UK stock market and economy face big structural issues," he said, adding that outflows from UK equity funds had been "horrendously negative."

UK business investment is ranked 28th among 31 OECD economies, foreign direct investment has faltered and workplace productivity is weak.

British pension funds and insurers have slashed the share of UK stocks in their portfolios to about 4% from 50% in 2000 according to advisory group Ondra. — Reuters

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Britain's 'change election' changes nothing

By Anatole Kaletsky
London

“ Everything must change so that everything can stay the same.” This famous aphorism from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard) about how to survive revolutions, is a perfect description of what happened in the United Kingdom last night. Labour has secured the biggest swing from one party to another in British history, while the Conservatives, once described as the world's “most successful political party,” have suffered a near-extinction event.

This electoral revolution was propelled by the one-word title of Labour's manifesto: “Change.” But, ironically, everything that matters in the UK will stay much the same after Labour's landslide victory. That is because the Labour leadership, in sharp contrast to the party's electoral slogan, holds positions that are indistinguishable from the defeated Conservatives on four key policy issues: government spending and borrowing; restoring relations with the European Union; conflict with China and Russia; and reform of a voting system that can produce an elective dictatorship. These positions will severely restrict the new government's ability to change the country's course.

As a result, the medium-term outlook for the UK economy remains grim, especially compared to the rest of Europe, and will only improve once the new government reneges on its promises to continue Tory policies. A U-turn on fiscal policy seems likely, but only in a year or two – which is how long it will take the public to realise that Labour cannot deliver on its promises, from housing and health care to education and defence, while following the arbitrary “fiscal rules” that it inherited from the Tories, who only rarely honoured them.

The most likely outcome is that a major economic or political crisis – say, a wave of strikes by doctors, nurses, teachers, and police officers, disillusioned by the huge pay gaps between private and public workers that opened during the Covid-19 pandemic – will precipitate the necessary increase in public spending. In the meantime, the new Labour government is likely to tinker with taxes, especially for capital



Newly elected UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and his wife Victoria Starmer are clapped in by staff as they enter his official London residence at No 10 Downing Street for the first time after the Labour Party won a landslide victory at the 2024 General Election.

gains, in a way that damages financial and business confidence while raising very little additional revenue.

More fundamentally, the structural handicap of Brexit will continue to weigh down UK growth, productivity, and living standards. The charts below contrast the country's dismal economic record since the 2016 referendum with its world-leading performance in the preceding 25 years. During this pre-Brexit period, the UK enjoyed the benefits of participating in the EU's single market without suffering the costs inflicted on member states by the euro project and its misbegotten predecessor, the European Exchange Rate Mechanism.

The obvious way to accelerate the UK's dismal post-2016 growth rate, even without increasing public spending or borrowing, is to start restoring the pre-Brexit economic relationship with the EU, while remaining outside the bloc's political structures. But that would require the new Labour government to commit to the long process of rejoining the EU customs union, preparing for single-market membership, and restoring freedom of movement.

A year ago, this closer embrace of the EU might have been a viable Labour policy. But that is no longer

the case. To prove that a permanent divergence from Europe is now hardwired into Labour ideology, and not just a temporary expedient to win back working-class Brexit voters, Keir Starmer, the incoming Labour prime minister, went so far as to rule out rejoining the EU customs union or single market in his lifetime. Moreover, he made this statement only two days before the election, when his landslide victory was already secure.

If restoring the EU economic relationship is now out of the question, and stimulative fiscal policy only seems likely after some kind of economic or political crisis, is there anything else Starmer could do to boost economic growth? The nostrums proposed by the left and the right during the campaign were unconvincing: land-use reforms, “industrial policies” supposedly designed to accelerate technological progress; efficiency savings in government services; and better public-private partnerships in energy and utilities. These are not exactly revolutionary new ideas; indeed, many have been attempted by previous governments.

One economic policy that might have partly compensated for lost trade with the EU would have

been a new trade and investment partnership with China (the only persuasive economic argument that the Brexiters presented during the 2016 referendum). But the new Labour government's hostile stance toward China, shared by its Tory predecessor, rules out such a deal.

The UK will continue to underperform in the medium term, because the new government will fail to boost productivity and economic growth and deliver on its promises without increasing taxes or borrowing. In the short term, however, the temporary upsurge in consumer confidence that seems to occur around every UK general election could create a bullish trading opportunity in cyclical assets, as the chart below demonstrates.

There is no clear explanation for this regular pattern. Perhaps it reflects the UK electorate's optimism about its newly chosen leaders. But many voters eventually come to regret that choice, usually sooner rather than later. – Project Syndicate

• Anatole Kaletsky, Chief Economist and Co-Chairman of Gavekal Dragonomics, is the author of Capitalism 4.0: The Birth of a New Economy in the Aftermath of Crisis (PublicAffairs, 2011).

There's no debating who would be better for US economy

By Joseph E Stiglitz
New York

Something has been missing from the flood of commentary following the debate between US President Joe Biden and Donald Trump. While voters' judgments about a candidate's personality and personal strengths are important, everyone should remember the famous dictum: “It's the economy, stupid.” In the firehose of outright lies that Trump spewed throughout the debate, the most dangerous falsehoods concerned his and Biden's respective economic-policy records.

Assessing a president's management of the economy is always a tricky business, because many developments will have been set in motion by one's predecessors. Barack Obama had to deal with a deep recession because previous administrations had pursued financial deregulation and failed to head off the crisis that erupted in the fall of 2008. Then, with congressional Republicans tying the Obama administration's hands and calling for belt tightening, the country was deprived of the kinds of fiscal policies that might have brought the economy out of the Great Recession faster. By the time the economy was finally on the mend, Obama was on his way out, and Trump was on his way in.

Trump did not hesitate to claim credit for the growth that ensued. But while he and congressional Republicans slashed taxes for corporations and billionaires, the promised surge of investment never materialised. Instead, there was a wave of stock buybacks, which are on track to exceed \$1tn next year.

Although Trump cannot be blamed for Covid-19, he certainly bears responsibility for an inadequate response that left the US with a death toll far above that of other advanced economies. While the virus disproportionately claimed the lives of the elderly, it also cut into the workforce, and those losses contributed to the work shortages and inflation that Biden inherited.



Donald Trump speaks as he attends a presidential debate with Joe Biden, in Atlanta, Georgia, on June 27.

Biden's own economic record has been impressive. Immediately after taking office, he secured passage of the American Rescue Plan, which made the country's recovery from the pandemic stronger than that of any other advanced country. Then came the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which provided funding to start repairing crucial elements of the US economy after a half-century of neglect.

The next year, Biden signed the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, which launched a new era of industrial policy that will ensure the economy's future resilience and competitiveness (a sharp break from the fragility that marked the preceding neoliberal era). And with the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, the US finally joined the international community in fighting climate change and investing in the technologies of the future.

In addition to providing economic insurance against the possibility of a stubborn and ever-evolving virus, the American Rescue Plan nearly halved the rate of childhood poverty in the space of a year. But it also was blamed (including by some Democrats) for the subsequent inflation.

This charge simply does not hold water. There was no excessive aggregate demand from the American Rescue Plan, at least not of a magnitude that could account for the level of inflation. Most of the blame lay with pandemic- and war-induced supply-side interruptions and shifts in demand. Insofar as Biden could

combat these, he did so: he tapped the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to address oil shortages and worked to relieve bottlenecks at US ports.

Even more relevant to this election is what lies in the future. Careful economic modelling has shown that Trump's proposals would cause higher inflation – in spite of lower growth – and greater inequality.

For starters, Trump would raise tariffs, and the costs would mostly be passed on to US consumers. Trump assumes, contrary to basic economics, that China would simply lower its prices to offset the tariffs. But if it did that, no American jobs would be saved (consistency has never been one of Trump's strengths).

Moreover, Trump would curtail immigration, which would make the labour market tighter and increase the risk of labour shortages in some sectors. And he would increase the deficit, the effects of which might induce a worried US Federal Reserve to raise interest rates, thereby decreasing investment in housing, raising rents and housing costs (a major source of today's inflation) even further. In addition to slowing growth by dampening investment, higher interest rates would also push up the exchange rate, making US exports less competitive. Moreover, US exports would suffer from higher-cost inputs owing to higher tariffs, and the retaliation they would provoke.

e already know that the 2017 corporate tax cuts did not stimulate much investment, and that most of the benefits went to the very rich

and to foreigners (who own large shares of US corporations). The additional tax cuts that Trump is promising aren't likely to do any better, but they will almost certainly increase deficits and inequality.

Of course, there is considerable complexity in modelling these effects. It is unclear how fast or forcefully the Fed would respond to tariff-induced inflation, but its economists obviously would see the problem coming. Would they be tempted to nip it in the bud by hiking interest rates early? Would Trump then violate institutional norms by trying to fire the Fed chair? How would the markets (here and abroad) respond to this new era of uncertainty and chaos?

The longer-run prognosis is clearer – and worse. America owes much of its economic success in recent years to its technological prowess, which rests on solid scientific foundations. Yet Trump would continue attacking our universities and demanding massive cutbacks in research and development expenditures. The only reason these cuts weren't made during his previous term is that he did not have his party completely in tow. Now, he does.

Similarly, even though the US population is ageing, Trump would allow the workforce to shrink by curtailing immigration. And though economists have emphasised the importance of the rule of law for economic growth, Trump, a convicted felon, is not exactly known for his adherence to it.

Thus, on the question of who would be better for the economy – Trump or Biden (or any Democrat who might replace him, should he drop out) – there is simply no debate. – Project Syndicate

• Joseph E Stiglitz, a former chief economist of the World Bank and former chair of the US President's Council of Economic Advisers, is University Professor at Columbia University, a Nobel laureate in economics, and the author, most recently, of The Road to Freedom: Economics and the Good Society (W. W. Norton & Company, Allen Lane, 2024).

Vatican banishes major Pope critic for schism

Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, a fierce ultra-conservative critic of Pope Francis, has been found guilty of schism and excommunicated, the Vatican's doctrinal office said yesterday.

Vigano, the papal envoy in Washington from 2011-2016, went into hiding in 2018 after alleging that the Pope knew for years about sexual misconduct by US Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and did nothing about it.

He had said the Pope should resign.

The Vatican rejected Vigano's accusations of a cover-up of sexual misconduct and last month summoned him to answer charges of schism and denying the Pope's legitimacy.

In a statement yesterday, the doctrinal office said his public comments made it clear that he refused "to recognise and submit" to Pope Francis.

He had also rejected the legitimacy of liberal reforms made by the Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, it said.

"At the conclusion of the penal process, the Most Reverend Carlo Maria Vigano was found guilty of the reserved delict (violation of the law) of schism," the statement said, adding that he had been excommunicated, or banished, from the church.

In a message on X, the 83-year-old Vigano remained unrepentant, publishing the full text of the decision against him, which warned that he could be expelled from the Roman Catholic priesthood if he persisted in his stance.

He urged Catholic faithful to voice their support for him, quoting a line from the bible: "If they keep quiet, the stones themselves will start shouting."

The Vatican ruling was signed by Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez, head of the Doctrine of the Faith office, and by its secretary, Father John Joseph Kennedy.

As is normal in such matters,



it was not signed by the Pope, but it is highly unlikely that the punishment was meted out without his approval.

Vigano, who mostly communicates via the X social network, said last month that he had refused to take part in the disciplinary proceedings because he did not accept the legitimacy of the institutions behind it.

"I do not recognise the authority of the tribunal that claims to judge me, nor of its Prefect, nor of the one who appointed him," he said, referring to Fernandez and to Francis.

The Pope (**pictured**) has angered many conservatives by making overtures towards divorcees and the gender minority community, and by saying that mercy and forgiveness should come before the strict enforcement of Catholic doctrine.

The pope has also put himself at odds with conservatives and traditionalists by championing migrant rights and the fight against climate change, and condemning the excesses of capitalism.

Last year, Francis took action against another arch-conservative critic from the US, dismissing bishop Joseph E Strickland of Tyler, Texas, after he refused to step down voluntarily following a Vatican investigation.

- Reuters

Hungary's Orban in Russia for Ukraine talks with Putin

AFP/Reuters
Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin told Viktor Orban yesterday that Ukraine must effectively capitulate if it wants peace, in a visit to Moscow by the Hungarian leader that angered the EU, US and Kyiv.

Putin was hosting Orban - the friendliest leader in the EU to Moscow - for talks at the Kremlin, described by the Russian president as a "really useful, frank conversation" on the conflict in Ukraine.

A string of EU officials blasted the Hungarian prime minister's surprise trip, saying that it threatened to undermine the 27-member bloc's stance on the conflict and stressed that he was not representing Brussels.

The pair "talked about the possible ways of resolving" the Ukraine conflict, Putin said in remarks after a bilateral meeting.

The Kremlin leader repeated his demand that Ukraine withdraw all its troops from regions that Moscow has annexed and said Kyiv was "not ready to drop the idea of waging war until a victorious end".

Putin said at the start of the talks that he wanted to "discuss the nuances that have developed" over the conflict in Ukraine with Orban, who visited Kyiv earlier this week.

Orban in turn said he had realised "positions are far apart" between the two sides.

"The number of steps needed to end the war and bring about peace is many," he said.

The visit came days after Hungary took over the EU's rotating presidency and Putin told Orban he expected him to outline "the position of European partners" on Ukraine.

The Ukrainian government lambasted the meeting, stressing that they had no hand in its planning.

"The decision to make this trip was made by the Hungarian side without any agreement or coordination with Ukraine," Kyiv's foreign ministry said in a statement.

European Union leaders lashed out at Orban over the trip.

"Appeasement will not stop Putin," European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen wrote on X. "Only unity and determination will pave the path to a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine."



This pool photograph distributed by the Russian state agency Sputnik shows Putin with Orban at the Kremlin. - AFP

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in a statement that Orban's "visit to Moscow takes place, exclusively, in the framework of the bilateral relations between Hungary and Russia".

"Orban has not received any mandate from the EU Council to visit Moscow," he added.

The EU has firmly opposed Russia's military offensive in Ukraine, imposing 14 rounds of unprecedented sanctions on Moscow.

"That position excludes official contacts between the EU and President Putin. The Hungarian Prime Minister is thus not representing the EU in any form," Borrell said. "It is worth recalling that President Putin has been indicted by the International Criminal Court and an arrest warrant released for his role in relation to the forced deportation of children from Ukraine to Russia".

EU Council chief Charles Michel had earlier reiterated the common stance that "no discussions about Ukraine can take place without Ukraine".

The White House also criticised the trip as "counterproductive" and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) military alliance, of which Hungary is a member, distanced itself.

Orban's visit "will not advance the cause of peace and is counterproductive to promoting Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence", White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said.

Nato head Jens Stoltenberg said Orban had

informed the alliance of his trip but stressed the Hungarian leader was "not representing Nato at these meetings. He's representing his own country".

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russian state TV the visit had been Orban's idea and Russian officials only heard about the trip on Wednesday - a day after Orban had visited Kyiv.

Hungary's six-month EU presidency gives the central European country sway over the bloc's agenda and priorities for the next six months.

Orban's visit to Moscow comes days after the right-wing nationalist made a surprise trip to Kyiv, where he urged Ukraine's leadership to work towards a rapid ceasefire with Russia.

Yesterday the Hungarian leader insisted that peace cannot be achieved without dialogue.

Orban said he recognised he had no EU mandate for the trip, but that peace could not be made "from a comfortable armchair in Brussels".

"We cannot sit back and wait for the war to miraculously end," he wrote on X.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk expressed disbelief at Orban's Moscow trip, while Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo called it "disturbing news".

An EU diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Orban's trip meant that scepticism within the bloc about Hungary's presidency was "unfortunately justified - it's all about promoting Budapest's interests".

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda accused Orban of undermining the EU presidency. "If you truly seek peace, you don't shake hands with a bloody dictator, you put all your efforts to support Ukraine," he wrote on X.

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, who is set to become the next EU foreign policy chief, said Orban was exploiting the EU presidency position to sow confusion.

"The EU is united, clearly behind Ukraine and against Russian aggression," she said.

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto hit back.

"Hungary is an independent country so I don't think we should pay attention to such kind of criticism. Time has proven...that without dialogue, without keeping the channels of communication open, there is no solution to this war," he said.

Go vote, parties tell French electorate ahead of cliffhanger runoff

Reuters
Paris

Parties across the political spectrum urged French voters to vote massively tomorrow to tilt the outcome either way as opinion polls forecast the far-right would be the largest party but fall short of an absolute majority.

Marine Le Pen's eurosceptic, anti-immigration National Rally (RN) topped the parliamentary election's first round with a third of the vote, opening the prospect of

the far-right leading a French government for the first time since World War II.

However, after a subsequent series of tactical withdrawals of candidacies from mainstream parties aimed at boosting whoever is best placed to beat the far-right, surveys have projected a drop in the number of seats the RN could win, making an absolute majority even harder to reach.

Le Pen, who has said the "republican front" of mainstream parties shows disdain for her voters, urged them to prove pollsters wrong in the decisive run-off election.

"I get the impression that all this is designed to demotivate our voters. Fortunately, I know them and I know they're highly motivated, so I tell them, really do go and vote," Le Pen told Europe 1 radio and CNews TV.

"We need everybody," she said on the last official day of campaigning ahead of tomorrow's vote.

An OpinionWay poll for French business daily *Les Echos* projected the RN winning 205-230 seats, ahead of the left-wing New Popular Front (NFP) with 145-175 seats, and President Emmanuel Macron's centrist bloc with 130-162 seats.

An Ipsos poll forecast the RN would get 175-205 seats and Ifop pollsters gave an 170-210 estimate.

For a ruling majority, 289 seats are needed in the National Assembly.

However, European Parliament lawmaker Raphael Glucksmann, one of the political leaders of the NFP, warned that no one should take those polls for granted.

"Commentators and politicians already speak as if the RN had no absolute majority and congratulate themselves on their efforts to block it...I think that could demobilise voters, and I am worried. There is a tidal wave in favour of the National Rally," he told RTL radio.

Much uncertainty remains, including whether voters will go along with these efforts to block the RN, pollsters say.

"The big unknown is the size of the republican front...will a left-wing voter cast a ballot for a right-wing candidate or a Macron camp candidate?" IFOP pollster



Posters on a street electricity box read 'The far-right feeds on despair', and 'Barrier against the far-right', prior to the second round of the early French parliamentary elections, in Nantes, France. - Reuters

Jerome Fourquet said on RMC radio.

So much was up in the air that a left-wing alliance outpacing the RN could not be entirely ruled out in the end, he said.

If the vote is in line with the latest surveys, the election will deliver a hung parliament.

Options would include attempting to pull together a coalition; a party running a minority government; and naming a caretaker government that would aim to strike deals on each legislative proposal.

Any of those scenarios would likely spell political uncertainty and obstruct policymaking, stunting economic reform efforts.

Some voters in France looked with envy at the decisiveness of Thursday's election in Britain in which the Labour Party surged to a landslide victory, ending 14 years of often tumultuous Conservative government.

"The British should count themselves lucky," lawyer Natacha Lesellier said in Paris.

Pakistan blocks 210,000 SIM cards to encourage tax payment

AFP
Karachi

Pakistan's tax authority said on Thursday that it has blocked 210,000 SIM cards of users who have not filed tax returns in a bid to widen the revenue bracket.

Only 5.2mn people of the more than 240mn population filed income tax returns in 2022.

The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) passed the edict in April and has since sent orders to the telecommunications authority to block the connections of 210,000 SIM cards, with 62,000 of them later restored, according to the board's data.

"We have unblocked the SIMs of those who have paid their taxes," FBR public relations official Bakhtiar Mohamed said. "Nobody voluntarily comes up and pays taxes. We have to make ways for the people to pay their taxes."

Pakistan has more than 192mn cellphone subscribers and four telecommunications service providers, according to the telecommunications authority.

Pakistanis must register a SIM card with their national identity number, which is often used for multiple connections.

"Access to telecom services is a basic human right and essential for many other fundamental services, including access to information, education, and emergency services," an official at one of the four tel-

communications companies told AFP on the condition of anonymity. "We are in dialogue with the authorities, convincing them to use technology to help increase tax collection, as abrupt measures could disrupt the provision of these critical services."

The country is struggling to increase its pitifully low revenue base but is hampered by a largely undocumented economy.

The government has been pushing for more loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help balance its books but the lender wants Islamabad to do more to mobilise its own resources.

"This is an absurd move. Not everyone who has SIMs earns enough to fall under the tax-paying category," Fareiha Aziz, a

digital rights activist, told AFP. "People's livelihoods are tied to their phones, this is an overreach."

The four telecommunications companies warned in a letter to the ministry of information technology in June that the new tax measures against non-tax filing cellphone users were "impractical" and "non-workable" and would scare away foreign investment.

Tauseef Gilani, a 66-year-old businessman in Islamabad, said the novel move was going too far.

"Whatever income I earn, it's my responsibility to contribute back to society," Gilani said. "However, blocking SIMs is unjust - it infringes upon freedom of expression and violates rights."

Brazilian paraglider falls to death in northern Pakistan

A Brazilian paraglider plummeted to his death in northern Pakistan, an official told AFP yesterday, the fourth foreign adventurer to die in the area since last month.

Northern Pakistan, home to towering peaks including K2, the world's second-highest mountain, attracts tourists from across the globe.

Fifty-five-year-old Chaddad Raineri Rodrigo was part of a seven-member team trekking to the base camp of K2, but was the only one who chose to paraglide.

"When he started paragliding his parachute burst and he fell," local police spokesman Mohamed Nazir told AFP over the phone from Shigar, where the accident happened.

The man's body has been recovered and will be returned to Brazil after consultations with his family, Nazir said. - AFP

Hundreds storm Balochistan power station to protest long outages

Hundreds of people in one of Pakistan's hottest cities stormed a power station in protest against cuts lasting up to 20 hours a day, police said.

The protesters also ransacked the station's neighbouring administrative office in Thursday

night's incident in rural Sibi, in southern Balochistan province, where temperatures peaked at 45°C Celsius (113°F Fahrenheit).

"People stormed the electricity supply office and ransacked it last night and a case has been lodged against them," police official Ana-

yatullah Bungulzai told AFP, adding that the group numbered 800.

Planned power cuts, also known as loadshedding, happen frequently in Pakistan due to fuel shortages.

In Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province by area, power out-

ages are prolonged due to both electricity production deficits and unpaid bills by consumers that affect entire neighbourhoods.

Afzal Baloch, spokesperson for the Quetta Electricity Supply Company, told AFP that the company suffers "significant"

monthly losses due to outstanding payments.

However, protester Noor Ahmad said yesterday that they were "compelled" to act over "the excessive loadshedding lasting for hours despite our timely payments of bills". - AFP



Qatar's growing popularity as a diving destination lies in its fascinating underwater beauty.



Khaled Zaki, along with another diver, exploring Qatar's underwater world.

Qatar's underwater world treasures a great attraction

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Qatar's underwater world remains a serene sanctuary for diving enthusiasts even during the summer, a master instructor and Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) ambassador told *Gulf Times*.

"The summer season is not a hindrance but an opportunity to explore Qatar's hidden treasures beneath the waves," he explained in an exclusive interview.

"Water temperature is not an issue for scuba diving, and both summer and winter offer unique experiences for divers," said Zaki, who is also an environmental and marine life activist.

He attributes the surge in diving popularity in Qatar since 2010 to its captivating underwater beauty. Diving has become a year-round activity, attracting enthusiasts who seek to discover the wonders of the underwater environment, whether during the day or under the enchanting night sky," he pointed out. "It's a passion, in fact, an addiction, and an incredible way to connect with nature".

Zaki's dedication to showcasing this hidden world is evident in his award-winning underwa-



Khaled Zaki with other divers.

ter photography and videography. His work has graced Qatar postal stamps and been featured in documentaries for international networks such as BBC, Qatar TV, and Alrayyan TV.

According to Zaki, also a prolific writer focusing on diving, tourism, and environmental issues, the growing interest in scuba diving in the country is also fuelled by a desire for adventure and a modern-day fascination with capturing experiences for social media.

He said divers seek relaxation and stress relief from the pressures of everyday life, adding that



Qatar as a peninsula makes it a prime destination for water sports enthusiasts and a popular adventure is diving.

the water (ocean) itself has therapeutic properties, offering a sense of well-being.

Zaki, drawing on his extensive experience, said that breathing underwater with ample oxygen is beneficial to the body, further enhancing the diving experience.

Besides adventure and exploration, it is learnt that Qatar's appeal for scuba divers also lies in its diverse marine life, thriving within its vast 560km coastline. The country boasts a diverse array of marine creatures, including the dugong, a gentle giant that finds its home in Qatar's waters. Visit Qatar noted

that Qatar holds the distinction of being home to the world's second-largest dugong population.

With its captivating underwater beauty, abundant marine life, and year-round accessibility, Qatar is quickly becoming a sought-after diving destination.

According to Visit Qatar, the country as a peninsula makes it a prime destination for water sports enthusiasts and a popular adventure is diving, where divers can encounter marine life and discover historical boat wrecks and stunning limestone formations.

Numerous diving centres and



Scuba divers are lured to Qatar by the promise of encountering a vast array of marine species. **PICTURES:** Khaled Zaki

tour operators across Qatar offer PADI training courses and dive trips, providing a range of options for all levels of experience.



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as you start this beautiful journey together*

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