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Qatar gears up for event-packed start to 2025

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Qatar will kick off 2025 with a packed calendar of events, from desert escapes and shopping festivals to kite displays and a major marathon, promising a diverse range of attractions for both local and international visitors.

The ongoing Ras Abrouq events, which began on December 18 and running until January 18, 2025, marked the start of these festivities. Situated at the northern tip of the Zekreet Peninsula, Ras Abrouq borders the Al-Reem Biosphere Reserve, a Unesco World Heritage site.

This exclusive desert experience invites guests to explore the Film City and Desert Escape near the Our Habitas Ras Abrouq Resort. Attendees can immerse themselves in wellness activities, gourmet dining, live music, and cultural performances.

According to Visit Qatar, the month-long event also features children's workshops hosted by Al-Hosh Gallery, ensuring a blend of engaging experiences for all ages.

The highly-anticipated Shop Qatar 2025 will take place from



January 1-February 1. Dubbed as the nation's largest shopping festival, this month-long extravaganza will offer a variety of attractions, including live shows, family-friendly entertainment, interactive activations, and promotional offers. Shoppers will also have the chance to win prizes through raffle draws, with rewards ranging from cash to brand-new vehicles.

The preservation of Qatari heritage will take centre stage at the 16th Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2025), also scheduled for January 1-February 1 at Sabkhat

Marmi in the Sealine Area.

This annual event, organised by the Al Gannas Qatari Society, attracts a large audience of locals, expatriates, and international tourists eager to witness the various championships and competitions that showcase falconry, a deeply rooted tradition in Qatar and the wider GCC region.

Adding a splash of colour to Doha's skyline, the Qatar Kite Festival is set to return to Old Doha Port from January 16-18, 2025. Following its successful debut in February 2024, this three-day festival will feature dozens of kites from around the world, exhibiting a wide array



The allure of luxury will be in the spotlight from January 30 to February 5 with the 21st Doha Jewellery and Watches Exhibition, taking place at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre.

of designs, colours, and sizes. The highlight is set to be a spectacular day-night kite flying display that will captivate spectators.

Meanwhile, runners will lace up their shoes on January 17 for the 13th edition of the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo. Anticipating more than 15,000 participants, the event promises to be the largest ever, creating a vibrant atmosphere for both runners and their families. The marathon will start

and finish at Hotel Park and will follow a scenic route along Doha's Corniche.

The allure of luxury will be in the spotlight from January 30-February 5 with the 21st Doha Jewellery and Watches Exhibition. Taking place at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre, the exhibition will host more than 500 renowned brands, immersing attendees in the world of high-end design and craftsmanship. With an average of 30,000 visitors from 175 countries, this is a crucial event on the global jewellery and watch calendar.

February will continue with the annual Qatar International Food Festival taking place at Hotel Park from February 12-22. This popular food fair will showcase an array of local, regional, and international cuisines. The festival will also include nightly fireworks, live entertainment, and culinary workshops.

Visit Qatar noted that Web Summit Qatar will return to DECC from February 23-26. This Middle Eastern edition of the world's largest technology conference will bring thousands of entrepreneurs, investors, and innovators to Doha, creating opportunities for collaboration and the development of cutting-edge technologies.

Qatar prioritises humanitarian aid to Syria, says MoFA spokesperson

HE Adviser to the Prime Minister and Official Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Dr Majid bin Mohammed al-Ansari, stated that Qatar's priority in handling the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic is currently humanitarian aid to ensure providing all the essential help to maintain stability there.

During the weekly media briefing organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr al-Ansari, said an air bridge is being operated by Qatar to help the brotherly people of Syria.

He reiterated Qatar's call for the lifting of the international sanctions on Syria as soon as possible to ensure there would be no hindrance in getting all kinds of hu-



HE Dr Majid al-Ansari

manitarian aid to Syria and extend the Qatari air bridge to all airports in Syria.

During the Qatari delegation's visit to Damascus led by HE Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaf, the foremost needs of Syria were discussed, alongside how Qatar

can directly contribute to meeting those needs, he said, underlining that Qatar will spare no effort in providing the essential support for the brotherly people of Syria.

Regarding the negotiations for a ceasefire in Gaza, Dr Majid al-Ansari said that the negotiations are ongoing, with technical talks taking place in Doha and other tracks occurring in Cairo with continuous co-ordination with the Arab Republic of Egypt in this regard, adding that no one can predict a specific timeline for reaching an agreement.

Dr al-Ansari confirmed that the situation in Gaza has not improved at all, and the humanitarian crisis is worsening, reiterating the call to all parties to engage seriously with the Qatari-Egyptian-American mediation. (QNA) **Page 10**

Ministry of Labour launches updated complaints platform

QNA
Doha

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) has introduced significant updates to the Unified Complaints and Disputes Platform, extending its services to include services for employers.

This initiative forms part of the ministry's continuous efforts to enhance and modernise its services, further improving the labour environment within the country.

The latest updates allow private sector employers to file complaints against establishment workers, employers to lodge complaints against domestic workers, and both individuals and establishments to submit complaints against recruitment agencies registered with the Ministry of Labour.

Through the platform, private sector employers can now register complaints against workers under their employment. Access is facilitated via the National Authentication System (NAS) using the employers' smart card or that of their authorised representative, with the option to log in as an establishment. The platform also provides employers with the ability to track and review complaints they have filed, as well as monitor any complaints submitted by workers against them. The service for complaints against domestic workers allows employers to register grievances against domestic workers under their sponsorship. Additionally, employers can review and access a comprehensive record of all complaints they have filed or those lodged against them.

Israeli army forces patients out of N Gaza hospital

Reuters
Cairo

Israeli troops forced the evacuation of the Indonesian Hospital in northern Gaza and many patients, some of them on foot, arrived at another hospital miles away in Gaza City, the territory's health ministry said yesterday.

The Indonesian Hospital is one of the Gaza Strip's few still partially functioning hospitals, on its northern edge, an area that has been under intense Israeli military pressure for nearly three months.

Palestinians accuse Israel of seeking to permanently depopulate northern Gaza to create a buffer zone, which Israel denies.

Munir al-Bursh, director of the health ministry in the Hamas-run Gaza Strip, said the Israeli army had ordered hospital officials to evacuate it on Monday, before storming it in the early hours yesterday and forcing those inside to leave.

He said two other medical facilities in northern Gaza, Al-Awda and Kamal Adwan Hospitals, were also subject to frequent assaults by Israeli troops.

Israeli forces have operated in the vicinity of the Kamal Adwan hospital since Monday, medics said.

Officials at the three hospitals have refused orders by Israel to evacuate their facilities or leave patients unattended since the new military offensive began on Oct 5.

Hussam Abu Safiya, director of the Kamal Adwan Hospital, said they resisted a new order by the army to evacuate hundreds of patients, their companions and staff, adding that the hospital has been under constant Israeli fire that damaged generators, oxygen pumps and parts of the building.

45,338 massacred in Gaza

Israel's military offensive in the Gaza Strip has killed at least 45,338 Palestinians and wounded 107,764 since Oct 7, 2023, the enclave's



A girl reacts as Palestinians gather to receive food cooked by a charity kitchen, in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, yesterday.

health ministry said yesterday.

Meanwhile, Israeli bombardment continued elsewhere in the enclave and medics said at least

nine Palestinians, including a member of the civil emergency service, were killed in four separate military strikes yesterday.

Israeli team to return for 'consultations' on hostage deal

An Israeli negotiation team will return to Israel from Qatar on Tuesday evening for "internal consultations" regarding a hostage deal after a significant week of talks about Gaza, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said. (Reuters)

A new bid by mediators Egypt, Qatar and the US to end the fighting has gained momentum this month, though no breakthrough has been reported.

Gaps between Israel and Hamas over a possible Gaza ceasefire have narrowed, according to Israeli and Palestinian officials' remarks on Monday, though crucial differences have yet to be resolved.

GulfTimes wishes its Christian readers Happy Christmas

Qatar Charity sends second round of relief aid to Syria

Qatar Charity (QC) has sent a second humanitarian convoy to Syria, as part of its ongoing "Reviving Hope" campaign to support the Syrian people. The convoy consists of 24 trucks carrying essential relief supplies.

The supplies, according to an official statement, include food, warmth essentials, personal hygiene items, and medical supplies. This effort aims to address the urgent needs of the affected Syrian people in light of the difficult humanitarian conditions they are enduring. The second convoy departed from the Turkish-Syrian border, attended by engineer Youssef bin Ahmed al-Hammadi, a member of the Syria Response Team. "This convoy is part of QC's 'Reviving Hope' campaign. This initiative coincides with the ongoing return of many Syrians to the areas they were forced to leave years ago aiming to help them settle in suitable conditions and support their hopes for a better future," he said.

Al-Hammadi expressed hope that the convoy would provide much-needed assistance to help the people cope with the harsh winter and difficult living conditions. He highlighted Qatar's humanitarian spirit and the generosity of its people, who have supported Syria for over 13 years. He urged Qatari philanthropists to continue their support for the campaign, noting that further convoys would follow in quick succession to reach as many affected people as possible and maximise the impact. The second convoy in-



cludes flour for bakeries and needy families, food packages with essential supplies, winter clothing and shoes for five children, personal hygiene kits, medical supplies, and non-food items. These will be distributed in Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, and surrounding areas.

This aid comes in response to the needs of over 16 million people within Syria, according to UN estimates. The campaign focuses

on displaced and vulnerable families in urgent need of shelter, food, and essential services.

This convoy is an extension of the first convoy, which delivered humanitarian aid via 40 trucks just a few days ago. The third convoy, as part of the "Reviving Hope" campaign, is expected to be sent mid-next month, carrying flour bags, food baskets, personal hygiene items, non-food supplies, and winter clothing.

QU offers free Arabic course in collaboration with the 'edX'

In a step that strengthens the global status of the Arabic language and supports the principles of learning flexibility and self-directed education, the College of Arts and Sciences at Qatar University (QU), represented by the Arabic for Non-Native Speakers Centre (ANNS), has launched a new free Arabic language course.

The course is a part of the widely popular Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and is offered through the global "edX" open learning platform. This initiative coincided with the celebration of World Arabic Language Day on Dec 18. Dr Alaa Ibrahim, acting director of ANNS Centre at QU and one of the course instructors, affirmed that the new course aims to meet the growing demand from independent learners worldwide for learning Arabic in the digital space.

The course has been designed according to the highest quality standards for this type of educational approach in collaboration with the QU Office for Digital Learning and Online Education to ensure a unique learning experience and an interactive digital environment that fosters language skills development.

Dr Muntasar al-Hamad, associate professor at ANNS, pointed out that the course, which includes



several contributions from students at the centre during its production, is expected to expand the base of Arabic learners and enhance the presence of Arabic as a global language capable of building bridges of cultural and civilisational communication.

The "edX" platform provides easy access for students worldwide, along with educational materials designed to the highest academic quality standards. The first course previously launched in the field of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers achieved remarkable success, attracting more than 43,000 learners from all over the world and was ranked among the most popular online courses globally.

Ehsan launches 8th edition of innovation contest for students

Under the patronage of HE Buthaina bint Ali al-Jabr al-Nuaimi, Minister of Social Development and Family, the Elderly Empowerment and Care Center "Ehsan", one of the centres affiliated with the Qatar Foundation for Social Work under the Ministry of Social Development and Family has announced the launch of the 8th edition of the "Ehsan Scientific Research and Innovation Competition".

This competition, held under the theme "Improving the Quality of Life for the Elderly", targets the preparatory and secondary school students from both public and private schools.

This initiative is organised in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Qatar Research, Development, and Innovation Council, and Afaaq Company.

Anoud Mohamed al-Marri, Acting Director of the Planning and Development Office at Ehsan, said that the competition aims to engage the young generations in promoting social cohesion and encouraging scientific research among school students.

It serves as a unique platform to raise students' awareness about the issues and needs of the elderly, enhance their research skills, and inspire innovative solutions.

She stressed that centre's annual commitment to organizing this competition, reflecting its belief in the importance of scientific research in addressing societal phenomena related to the elderly.

Besides, it helps students develop their talents in research while reviewing the proposals and contributions presented in their studies.

She also highlighted that the competition adheres to several criteria, the most important being that the submitted research should creatively address the needs of the elderly and present innovative, original solutions that have not been tackled before.

A specialized team from the centre has been formed to follow up on the submitted research and provide guidance, data, and information to the students to support their work.

The 7th edition of the competition received significant participation, with 37 public schools from the middle and high school levels taking part.

A total of 138 students participated, submitting 46 specialised research studies on the elderly. The outstanding research projects were presented in a special exhibition held at Lusail University.

Farewell to Azerbaijan's ambassador



HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi met yesterday with Azerbaijan's ambassador to Qatar Mahir Muhammad Oglu Aliyev, on the end of his tenure. HE al-Muraikhi thanked the ambassador for his efforts in supporting and strengthening bilateral relations, wishing him success in his future duties. (QNA)

Kam Air commences flights between Kabul and Doha

Kam Air recently commenced operations between Kabul and Doha, reflecting the growing demand for travel between Afghanistan and Qatar. The inaugural flight from Kabul to Doha took place on December 18, marking a "significant milestone" for both Hamad International Airport and Kam Air.

The first touchdown was commemorated in the presence of executive members of Hamad International Airport, representatives from Kam Air, and officials from the embassies of Qatar and Afghanistan.

Kam Air will operate three weekly flights from Kabul to Doha on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays. The flights will arrive in Doha at 9:30pm and depart at 11:15pm (on these days), providing passengers with convenient travel options.

Commenting on the new



The inaugural flight from Kabul to Doha took place on December 18, marking a "significant milestone" for both Hamad International Airport and Kam Air.

partnership, Hamad International Airport Chief Operating Officer Hamad al-Khater said: "Kam Air's new route offers passengers more than just a journey between two cities. It represents convenience and connection, eliminating long layovers and reducing total travel time, all while maintaining our unwavering commitment to safety, security, and operational excellence."

The launch of Kam Air's flights to Doha is expected to enhance connectivity and facilitate the movement of passengers, ideas, and cultures. This new route is anticipated to contribute to economic growth across various sectors, including civil aviation, cargo, and commerce.

Al Jazeera condemns Fatah's incitement campaign against it

Al Jazeera Media Network has condemned the incitement campaign initiated by Fatah in the West Bank against Al Jazeera and its journalists, particularly against correspondent Mohamad Atrash, for covering the clashes between the Palestinian National Security Forces and Palestinian resistance fighters in Jenin.

"The network has been and remains a platform for the 'Opinion and the Other Opinion' and professional in its credible and impartial coverage," a statement issued by the Qatar-based TV network yesterday said.

"Al Jazeera has successfully maintained its professionalism throughout its coverage of the unfolding events in Jenin. The voices of both the Palestinian resistance and the spokesperson of the Palestinian National Security Forces have always been present on Al Jazeera's screens.

"The deplorable campaign puts the lives of journalist Mohamad Atrash and his colleagues at risk. The network holds Fatah, Palestinian National Security Forces, and relevant institutions of the Palestinian Authority accountable for any harm that may befall Mohamad Atrash or any of Al Jazeera journalists in the occupied West Bank," the statement added.

Qatar participates in 71st ACAO Executive Council

Qatar, represented by Qatar Civil Aviation Authority (QCAA), participated yesterday in the 71st session of the Executive Council of the Arab Civil Aviation Organisation (ACAO), held in Rabat, Morocco. QCAA Acting President Mohammed Faleh al-Hajri chaired the Qatari delegation to the meeting that discussed topics related to air transport, air navigation, aviation security, and environment. The attendees also deliberated ways to implement the ACAO's strategic objectives and boost joint work among member states. Today, Qatar will take part in an extraordinary session of the ACAO General Assembly. (QNA)



PHCC promotes oral health among kids with diabetes

The Oral Health Promotion & Prevention Department at the Primary Health Care Corporation (PHCC), in collaboration with the Qatar Diabetes Association, participated in the 25th edition of the Annual International Al Bawasil Camp.

The one-day workshop was organised for children recently at Aspire Academy for Sports Excellence and gathered 13 children from different countries. Dr Najat al-Yafei, manager of the Oral Health Promotion & Prevention Department, said the department aims to promote and enhance the children's competence and confidence in maintaining optimal oral and dental health, especially since they are living with diabetes.

He said: "Our slogan for Al Bawasil Camp was 'Nujoom Asnani', which means 'My Star Teeth' in Arabic, reflects our vision to inspire children to shine in their oral health practices and build a strong foundation for a healthier future."

Dr al-Yafei explained that a specific plan was developed for the dental team, including lectures tailored to the children's



Oral examinations were conducted for 58 children with diabetes, aged between seven and 11 years.

age groups and health conditions. Children were also trained in proper tooth-brushing techniques using dental models and were provided with practical advice on identifying diabetes-related oral health problems and effective ways to manage them. Additionally, Dr al-Yafei noted that oral examina-

tions were conducted for 58 children with diabetes, aged between seven and 11 years. The findings revealed that their oral health was fair, with some requiring dental treatment and improved daily oral care. The children were guided and informed about these needs during the workshop.



Vodafone Qatar announces launch of all-new brovi 5G Mobile Wi-Fi Pro 5

Vodafone Qatar has announced the launch of the all-new brovi 5G Mobile Wi-Fi Pro 5 for customers in Qatar.

The next-generation mobile Wi-Fi device combines cutting-edge 5G technology with Wi-Fi 6 Plus for fast connectivity, all housed in an ultra-slim and lightweight design that redefines portability and performance.

With theoretical peak download speeds of up to 3.6 Gbps and upload speeds of 500

Mbps, the 5G Mobile Wi-Fi Pro 5 ensures customers can stream HD content, download 4K videos within seconds, and enjoy ultra-smooth online gaming.

Featuring an OLED touchscreen, the brovi 5G Mobile Wi-Fi Pro 5 provides intuitive device control, with the AI Life app ensuring seamless traffic management, parental controls, and advanced security for a smarter and safer experience.



The brovi 5G MiFi Pro 5 is also powered by Game Turbo 2.0 technology, boosting signal strength, reducing latency, and optimising over 40 popular games for an immersive gaming experience.

Supporting multiple simultaneous connections, the brovi 5G Mobile Wi-Fi Pro 5 is engineered to meet the needs of modern users, allowing up to 10 hours of continuous use, suitable for remote work and stay-

ing connected on the move.

Customers can purchase the brovi 5G MiFi, online, and from the following Vodafone retail stores, such as Villaggio Mall, City Centre Mall, Mall of Qatar, Landmark Mall, Doha Festival City, Place Vendôme, Tawar Mall, Lulu D-Ring Road, and Vodafone's Al Wakra branch.

For more information on pricing and specifications, visit <https://www.vodafone.qa/en/product/Brovi>

Visit Qatar to host multi-activity experience at Sealine Beach

Visit Qatar is gearing up to host a first-of-its-kind multi-activity village at Sealine Beach, developed in collaboration with key stakeholders including the Ministry of Sports and Youth, Qatar Sports for All, and Ministry of Environment and Climate Change.

Taking place over three weeks from January 3-27, 2025, Visit Qatar's Sealine Season will highlight Sealine Beach as an iconic destination, offering a vibrant range of family-friendly experiences and activities.

The initiative aims to cater to all segments of the community, with activities spanning sports, entertainment, cultural displays, and engaging attractions.

In a press statement, Visit Qatar's Festivals and Events director Ahmed Hamad al-Binali said: "Sealine Season represents a significant step in showcasing Qatar's diverse offerings, blending its natural beauty with dynamic cultural experiences. This three-week initiative provides local and regional visitors with a distinctive and memorable experience."

"Through collaboration with key government entities, partners, and sponsors, we are positioning Sealine as a leading destination for leisure, adventure, and cultural exploration."

"We look forward to welcoming visitors and delivering an exceptional experience that reflects Qatar's commitment to promote and enhance the winter activities in Sealine enhancing its status as a key destination."

Visit Qatar is working closely with several government entities to deliver a world-class experience, including Ministry of Sports and Youth, who will oversee the activation of sports competitions, including volleyball and football, and will manage a dedicated cultural area to highlight Qatar's heritage.

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change will provide space and will exhibit some oryxes.

Issa al-Harami, director of the Sports Affairs Department at the Ministry of Sports and Youth, expressed his delight in supporting the Sealine Season activities, which provide comprehensive experience that combines sports and entertainment.

He noted that these activations aim to foster interaction be-



tween the community and visitors through many innovative activities.

Al-Harami highlighted the ministry's focus on organising engaging sports competitions and recreational displays that reflect Qatar's rich heritage. These efforts, he explained, underscore the ministry's commitment to developing events that meet the aspirations of all community members, with a strong emphasis on delivering an exceptional and inclusive experience.

Saleh Hassan al-Kuwari, director of the Natural Reserves Department at the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, stated that the ministry's participation in the Sealine Season activation, organised by Visit Qatar, underscores its efforts to advance local eco-tourism. This includes offering unique recreational activities to attract visitors and raising awareness about the importance of preserving Qatar's biodiversity to ensure its sustainability for future generations.

Al-Kuwari explained that the Ministry has allocated a space within the Sealine Season to exhibit the Arabian Oryx, an iconic environmental and cultural symbol of Qatar.

This initiative provides visitors with an authentic representation of the region's wildlife, offering insights into Qatar's natural environment and highlighting the state's commitment to protecting endangered species.

He further noted that the activation presents an exceptional opportunity to highlight the unique environmental and cultural significance of the Sealine area, one of Qatar's premier eco-tourism destinations.

Sealine is renowned for its natural beauty, featuring towering sand dunes and extensive coastlines that

make it a standout location for eco-tourism.

Al-Kuwari also remarked that Sealine's distinctive environmental and geological features have fostered the development of a unique ecosystem, home to rare plant and animal species. These characteristics have earned the area the highest levels of environmental protection.

He concluded by emphasising that Sealine is a prominent site for diverse mammal populations and is distinguished by its high sand dunes, which create a remarkable combination of geological formations and environmental attributes.

Qatar Sports For All (QSFA) will facilitate community-based sporting activities aimed at promoting health and well-being, creating opportunities for all visitors to engage in physical activity.

Abdulrahman bin Musallam al-Dosari, president of QSFA Federation, emphasised that the Federation's participation in the Sealine Season activities reflects its commitment to social responsibility. As the executive arm of the Ministry of Sports and Youth, the Federation is dedicated to organising community sports activities that engage the widest possible segment of society. These initiatives aim to provide opportunities for all groups to participate in sports regularly.

Al-Dosari affirmed the Federation's commitment to collaborating with various entities and institutions across the country to contribute to sports and recreational events, all of which promote a healthy lifestyle.

During the mid-academic year break, the Federation focuses on delivering a diverse range of high-quality sports and recreational activities suitable for all ages. These activities are designed to reach family gathering spots and attract

youth, offering them constructive outlets while ensuring safe practices. The goal is to embed sports into everyday life, encouraging regular exercise in alignment with the Federation's mission to promote health and well-being.

Several sponsors will also contribute to the activation's success, including Seashore providing event facilities, Mawater, who will display classic cars.

Outpost Al Barari will have an Arabic tent set-up, with a set menu, and henna artists. Qatar Calendar House will offer interactive exhibits on astronomy, enhancing the activation with educational content.

Sealine Season will also count with two big concerts on January 3 (Saad Juma & Dhom Al Tlasy) and on January 10 (Mohammed al-Bakri and Abdulaziz al-Thuehi) and many other entertainment shows and a special fireworks display on Fridays, offering a visual highlight for attendees.

As a highlight, a Kite Festival will be hosted on January 16-18 and Qatar Racing Club will have a car show on January 24.

On January 23 and 24, visitors can enjoy dazzling drone shows.

Additional to that a special cooking competition will be held on Thursday and Fridays hosted by Chef BelSams.

Various Destination Management Companies will assist in ensuring smooth operations. Doha Bus will provide Desert Safari Tours and Monster Bus accommodates up to 32 seats for those seeking ultimate adventure across the stunning sand dunes.

Strong will provide different activities as ATV, R/C Track and half day safari tours. Asfary will provide tethered balloon experience. Oasis Stables offers horseback riding experiences and Halul Boat provides boat and fishing trips.

To complement the entertainment and activities there will be available F&B concessionaires, a Sports Family Zone Area and a kids obstacle course available to be used daily and calligraphy, falconry and facepainting during the weekends (Thursday, Fridays, and Saturdays).

Situated at Al Sarab on Sealine Beach Road, the venue can host up to 10,000 visitors at once. It will offer extensive parking, full accessibility, and a diverse range of activities, ensuring an unforgettable experience for everyone.

Awqaf opens revamped heritage mosque at Old Umm Al Qahab



The Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs, represented by the Department of Mosques, has opened the heritage mosque at Old Umm Al Qahab.

According to an official Awqaf statement, the mosque was opened after comprehensive maintenance work.

The work was carried out under the supervision of the Maintenance Department of the Engineering Affairs Department at the ministry in co-ordination with the Architectural Conservation Department at Qatar Museums and with funding from the General Administration of Endowments.

With number MS 396, the mosque has a main prayer hall with space for 34 worshippers. The mosque's courtyard can accommodate the same number of worshippers.

The mosque includes a courtyard with an area of 120sq m and the minaret is located on its southeastern corner.

The maintenance was carried out on the exterior and interior walls of the mosque while retaining the heritage elements. Also, a new roof for the mosque in the same old architectural spirit was built using special wood, bamboo sticks, mats and wooden panels. Also, thermal and water insulation were placed. Small pebbles were spread in the courtyard and a concrete walkway was set up for people with special needs. Awqaf said that while keen to preserve the heritage spirit of the mosque, the mosque was provided with a new electrical network along with air conditioning, lighting, sound and safety and security devices. The Department of Engineering Affairs at the ministry is concerned with fulfilling the needs

of the regions in the country for mosques and prayer grounds while providing temporary mosques and supervising their preservation as well as preparing the annual plan for the maintenance of mosques and imams' residences. These are in co-ordination with the competent authorities.

For mosque designs, the department takes into account the requirements of different areas along with the guidelines for green and sustainable buildings and preserving the aesthetics of heritage in designs that reflect the authenticity of Qatari and Islamic heritage by the highest standards.

The ministry's plans to build mosques also take into account the population density map along with engineering, architectural specifications, and heritage aspects within the framework of caring for the mosques to perform worship and serve the worshippers. Awqaf's website allows users to search for mosque locations geographically, according to the global navigation system, through accurate and specific maps that facilitate access to mosque locations in all cities across the country.



ICC conducts debrief session for Pravasi Bharatiya Divas delegates



The Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) in association with the Indian embassy has conducted a debrief session for the attendees of the 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas to be held in Bhubaneswar, India, from January 8-10, 2025. Indian ambassador Vipul and first secretary of the embassy of India Dr Vaibhav Tandale attended the session which was to promote the event. The ambassador underlined the importance of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and shared his experiences from the past events. He also urged the Indian diaspora members to attend this event in large numbers. ICC general secretary Mohan Kumar, president A P Manikantan, secretary Abraham Joseph and other functionaries attended.

QF hosts World Mathematics Team Championships

Qatar Foundation (QF)'s commitment to promoting STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education was recently showcased through its hosting of the World Mathematics Team Championships that took place from November 28-December 1.

Qatar is the first country in the Middle East and Arab region to host such a competition.

The international event was an opportunity to highlight the QF's efforts in advancing the study of mathematics and strengthening global scientific co-operation and co-ordination. Haia al-Naimi, manager of the Talent and Crea-

tivity Programme at the QF's Pre-University Education (PUE), said that this year's edition of the World Mathematics Team Championships (WMTC) was a platform to illustrate the scientific abilities of students at QF schools.

"They are talented; they are future leaders, and they are eager to show they can excel in a global competition such as this," she said. "The WMTC was an opportunity to enhance the capacity of students to solve mathematical problems through innovative methods, while also illustrating the contribution that Arab scholars have made to mathematics."

Al-Naimi added that the Qatar

edition of the competition was also to celebrate the legacy of al-Khawarizmi, highlight the significant contributions and legacy of Muslim scholars in the field of mathematics, while also showcasing the heritage of Qatar.

Sara al-Hajri, director of student affairs and community partnership at the PUE, said that the 15th edition of the event, which saw the participation of around 800 students, including 443 students from abroad, focused on the historical origins of mathematics and algorithms within Islam, and highlighted the contributions of Muslim scholars in this field such as al-Khawarizmi and Ibn Sina. (QNA)

Tasweer announces new photography course

Tasweer, Qatar's leading photography festival, announced the Frame & Focus: Advanced Photography Course in collaboration with The VII Foundation. Known for its commitment to empowering emerging voices in visual journalism, and Qatar Preparatory School (QPS), Qatar's upcoming vocational school for the creative industry, to bring this transformative course to life.

This exclusive three-month programme is designed for aspiring photographers who are eager to enhance their skills and elevate their craft.

This 12-week hybrid course will be held at the Doha Fire Station and online: the first and last weeks of the course will be held in person at the Fire Station, and the 10 weeks in between will be online, offering flexibility for participants.

The course will run from February 16-May 22, 2025 and will culminate in a final project that highlights each participant's progress. This programme is open to photographers aged 21+ living in Qatar and the GCC countries.

In a press statement, Tasweer director Khalifa al-Obaidly said: "At Tasweer, we have always been committed to advancing the photographic arts in Qatar. With Frame & Focus, we are not only enhancing the skills of photographers but also contributing to the future of visual storytelling in the region. We look forward to collaborating with The VII Foundation and QPS to make this programme a reality."

The course will cover the basics of



The three-month programme is designed for aspiring photographers who are eager to enhance their skills and elevate their craft. Image Courtesy of Themba B. Mtwazi-Tasweer Photo Festival Qatar

photography, followed by a range of advanced topics, including outdoor photography, portraiture, documentary, and object photography.

Participants will engage in practical exercises, work on technique development, and complete a final project that will showcase a cohesive body of work and an accompanying essay. "We're thrilled to offer this unique opportunity to photographers in Qatar and the wider region," said Maryam Wahid, head of Programme and Outreach, Tasweer.

"The Frame & Focus course is more than just an educational programme, it's a way for photographers to push their boundaries, refine their skills, and be part of a community that nurtures growth and creative exploration."

This course offers an exceptional opportunity for photographers, both locally and regionally to advance their photography skills and become part of The VII Foundation community. It aligns with Tasweer's mission to educate, build and support Qatar's growing photography community. In addition to its biennial festival, Tasweer also focuses on educational development by offering programmes such as workshops, masterclasses, and courses that help photographers reach the next level in their creative and technical expertise.

Alanoud al-Buainain, deputy director of Image and Narrative Practices, QPS, said: "This course will give participants the opportunity to learn from industry experts and will be a pivotal experience for photographers looking to take their work to the next level."

The open call to apply for the course will be available until January 8, 2025. Photographers interested in joining the course are encouraged to apply early, as this is a coveted opportunity to refine their photography practice and be part of an inspiring and supportive creative community.

A jury committee will review all applications which will shortlist eligible candidates. Apply for the course through <https://form.jotform.com/243320683742455>



HMC wins CIPD ME award for 'Best Wellbeing Programme'

Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC)'s Human Resources Department has been honoured with the 'Best Wellbeing Programme' award at the CIPD Middle East (ME) People Awards 2024, held recently at The Ritz-Carlton in Dubai.

This marks a historic milestone as HMC becomes the first organisation from Qatar to receive distinguished recognition, underscoring its commitment to creating a healthy and empowering workplace environment for its employees. The award acknowledges HMC's innovative and holistic Employee Wellbeing and Wellness Framework, which integrates mental and physical health support, financial wellbeing initiatives, employee support programmes, and social health initiatives. This comprehensive approach has played a pivotal role in transforming workplace wellness across Qatar's largest healthcare provider and beyond. Established in October 2021, under the visionary guidance of

Fatima Haidar H Abdulla, chief of Business Services, the Employee Wellbeing and Wellness Section was founded with the following mission: to create a holistic and healthy workplace environment that prioritises the overall wellbeing of employees.

Mona al-Homaiddi, Acting Chief Human Resources officer, said: "Winning this award reflects the dedication and collaborative efforts of our wellbeing team, who have worked tirelessly to build programs that support and empower our employees. This recognition is not just a milestone for HMC but also a testament to our leadership in workplace wellness across the region."

Husameldin Ali Rudwan, Acting executive director of Employee Wellbeing, Engagement and Performance Management, added: "This award is a stepping stone for our continued journey to enhance employee wellness. Through our programmes, we aim to create a healthier workplace environment



that impacts not only our staff but also the broader healthcare community. We are proud to lead the

way in shaping the future of workplace wellbeing in Qatar." HMC's award-winning well-

being programmes have also expanded beyond the corporation, supporting over 42,000 employees

across HMC the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and Primary Health Care Corporation (PHCC). These programmes have become a model of excellence, addressing diverse aspects of employee wellbeing through structured initiatives such as health education, mental health support, and employee engagement programmes.

As part of its vision, HMC aims to further enhance its wellbeing initiatives by incorporating advanced technologies, evidence-based interventions, and global collaborations. These efforts align with HMC's Healthcare Strategy 2024-2030, National Health Strategy 2024-2030, and Qatar National Vision 2030 and reinforce HMC's role as a leader in workplace health and wellness. The award is not only a recognition of HMC's relentless efforts but also an inspiration to continue striving for excellence, ensuring a healthier, happier, and more productive environment for healthcare professionals across Qatar.

GAC renews agreement with Malomatia to continue enhancing Al Nadeeb System

The General Authority of Customs (GAC) and the Malomatia Company signed a partnership renewal agreement on Tuesday morning aimed at developing the digital transformation programme for Qatar's Single Window for Customs Clearance, "Al Nadeeb."

The agreement was signed in Doha, in the presence of several dignitaries and officials from Malomatia and GAC. The renewal agreement will enhance customs efficiency, streamline logistical operations, and facilitate customs procedures through the latest digital and technological advancements.

It also aims to strengthen collaboration and integration between government and private entities, which supports the national economy in achieving Qatar's Third National Development Strategy.

The renewal of the partnership is part of both entities' efforts to expand the scope of services across three main pillars. The first pillar, Operational Efficiency, focuses on managing "Al Nadeeb" around



the clock, continuously improving services, and achieving excellence in operations. It includes the development of security operations centre services and enhancing customer experience to ensure the highest performance standards in digital customs operations.

The second pillar, Advanced Information Technology, involves employing artificial intelligence for data management, developing a financial operations management platform, and establishing a centralised operations control centre. It also includes integrating internal and external systems into a unified platform to optimise

operations and adopting emerging technologies, such as the Internet of Things (IoT), to achieve new levels of efficiency and operational flexibility.

These efforts support the third pillar, Value-Added Services, which aims to provide innovative solutions that go beyond traditional technical services, including managed IT services and marketing solutions to support the General Authority of Customs.

Accordingly, Ahmed bin Abdullah al-Jamal, GAC Chairman, expressed his pleasure at renewing the partnership with Malomatia to develop the "Al Nadeeb" pro-

gramme and advance its system. He stressed that the partnership, which will continue for the next five years, aims to expand the scope of customs services, foster innovation in the customs and logistics sectors, and enhance procedural flexibility.

This will contribute to creating a transparent and secure customs environment while solidifying Qatar's position as a global hub for trade and logistics.

Meanwhile, Khalid al-Kuwari, CEO of Malomatia, highlighted the transformative impact of the "Al Nadeeb" programme over the past decade in the customs and logistics sectors through smart solutions and services that have streamlined procedures, making customs operations more seamless and efficient. He noted that the renewed partnership with GAC represents a pivotal step toward achieving operational excellence and adopting cutting-edge digital technologies such as artificial intelligence and IoT.

This initiative supports Qatar's vision of becoming an effective partner in facilitating global trade.



QRCS provides support for families in Syria

QNA
Doha

As part of its ongoing efforts to serve the most vulnerable groups, Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) has launched a humanitarian project to take care of families with orphans in Syria, by meeting the basic food, clothing, and education needs of those families who lost their breadwinners, as well as supporting and rehabilitating orphanages, thus helping reduce their financial and mental burdens and improve their living conditions.

QRCS personnel and Ataa Relief are co-implementing the project, which seeks to enhance the resilience and stability of 500 families, or 3,000 people, in the northern Aleppo countryside. E-coupons will be distributed to the beneficiaries to purchase the basic food products they need for the coming eight months.

In relation to education, the project will support orphaned children with stationery, textbooks, and transportation expenses.

Toward the end of the project, a ceremony will be held to honour outstanding students with gifts, as a form of motivation and psychological support. Another component of the project is the rehabilitation of three orphanages and families of inmates, as well as paying for the operating expenses of these homes, each of which houses about 160 orphans and their families.

The food coupon distribution has already begun, for the beneficiaries to get their food supplies from the contracted supermarkets. The project is expected to have a significantly positive impact on the lives of the target families, which will translate into better living and educational conditions and ensure their access to basic services.

Iran cyberspace council votes to lift ban on WhatsApp: state media

AFP
Tehran

Iran's top council responsible for safeguarding the Internet voted yesterday to lift a ban on the popular messaging application WhatsApp, which has been subject to restrictions for over two years, state media reported.

"The ban on WhatsApp and Google Play was removed by unanimous vote of the members of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace," the official IRNA news agency said. The council is headed by the president and its members include the parliament speaker, the head of the judiciary and several ministers.

"Today, we took the first step towards lifting internet restrictions

with unanimity and consensus," Minister of Communications Sattar Hashemi said on X. It was not immediately clear when the decision would come into force.

The move has sparked a debate in Iran, with critics of the restrictions arguing the controls were costly for the country.

"The restrictions have achieved nothing but anger and added costs

to people's lives," presidential adviser Ali Rabiei said on X yesterday.

"President Masoud Pezeshkian believes in removing restrictions and does not consider the bans to be in the interest of the people and the country. All experts also believe that this issue is not beneficial to the country's security," Vice-President Mohammad Javad Zarif said yesterday.

Uncertainty clouds fate of Syrians in Egypt after Assad ouster; new regulations in place

■ Egypt suspends Syrian residency renewals pending security checks
■ New law gives Egypt authority over refugee status
■ Rights groups criticise law for undermining refugee rights

Reuters
Cairo

Syrian refugees and residents in Egypt face an uncertain future as new regulations may jeopardise their right to remain in the country after Bashar al-Assad's ouster earlier this month. European countries quickly suspended Syrian asylum applications after the group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham swept into Damascus on Dec 8, forcing Assad to flee after a 13-year civil war.

Other countries are also responding to the changing political landscape. Egypt last week ratified a new law giving the government the power to determine refugee status. A decision has not been made on whether Syrians in Egypt would qualify as refugees under the new law, security sources told Reuters.

The UN refugee agency UNHCR estimates 6mn Syrians are living as refugees around the world, primarily in neighbouring countries. It expects 1mn to return in the next six months, but some

Syrian refugees fear being forced to return home.

Egypt is also suspending the renewal of existing residency permits, held by many Syrians for tourism, education, or business, pending a security check, security sources told Reuters. Syrian residents who spoke to Reuters were mostly unaware of the new rules, and many were also cautious about returning home. "The situation there is not stable and we still do not know what will happen," said Ahmed al-Akhras, owner of a car spare parts business, who said his children's schooling and his shop were other reasons to stay.

He said his residency permit renewal was delayed so, like a number of other Syrians, he recently applied for UNHCR refugee status. "If I go back to Syria, it won't be now," he said.

"We are afraid of the unknown, we don't know who the new person that took over is, we don't know the future," said another Syrian who had been in Egypt for 12 years.

Residency decisions would be based on security considerations, the sources said. One cited concerns about Egypt's own internal security after Assad's replacement by the rebels. Egypt has taken a diplomatic approach to the upheaval in Syria, but state-linked media have referred to the rebels as "terrorist" groups.

With Egypt tackling an economic crisis of its own, officials have often described refugees in the country, which they number at 10mn, as a burden. The UNHCR puts the number of refugees in Egypt at around 800,000, including about 159,000 Syrians. Hundreds of thousands more Syrians have residency permits in Egypt, and many own businesses.

"There is no other country in the globe hosting this number of refugees while receiving the same treatment as Egyptian citizens despite the fact we are not a rich country," Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty told reporters last week, citing the absence of refugee camps and access to free education, healthcare, and subsidies. "This law strikes a balance between upholding our international commitments, while preserving the national security of Egypt."

The law, ratified on Dec 17, transfers the asylum system to the government from the UN, and allows the government to collect more data on the number of refugees. "Of course, the increase in numbers of registered refugees will contribute in providing more aid (from the international community) to Egypt. This is not a bad thing," said lawmaker Freddy Elbaiahy.

The law includes provisions protecting refugee rights to work, health, and education and freedom from exploitation. Rights groups have criticised the new law. They point out that the definition of a refugee is ambiguous, and authorities have the right to deport anyone they deem does not qualify.

While there was no sign of a sudden deportation of Syrians, it was likely Cairo would change its perception of Syrians as a group in need of protection as the situation stabilises, said Karim Ennara of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, an independent human rights organisation.

In response to questions by Reuters, the UNHCR said it would continue to advocate for clear asylum procedures in Egypt.

The Transport Company
MOWASALAT (KARWA)

Mowasalat (Karwa) announces the following tender:

Tender Ref. No.	Tender Title	Tender Fee	Electronic Tender Fee Payment Dates	Tender Bond	Bid Closing Date
TC-050-MTS-2024	Supply & Maintenance of CNG Buses	QAR 2,000	25 December 2024 to 2 January 2025	QAR 155,000	19 January 2025

CONDITIONS:

▶ Interested bidder shall pay the tender fee to Mowasalat Bank Account details as shown:

▶ Bidder must submit proof of tender fee payment (Bank Deposit Slip + a Signed & Stamped Expression of Interest (indicating Tender Ref. No. and Title / Company Name and details of nominated contact person i.e., Tel. No., Fax No., and Email address) + Copy of valid Commercial Registration to Mowasalat Secretary - Tender Committee at email: tenders@mowasalat.com

▶ Tender documents will be released via email on the next working day after the tender fee payment date to all bidders who have submitted the bank deposit slip and other documents requested (i.e., 3 January 2025)

▶ Bonds: Tender Bond & Performance Bond: Bids must be accompanied by Bonds issued by a local bank operating in the State of Qatar as per the Qatar Central Bank template. Further details of bonds can be found in the tender documents. **Bids without Tender Bond shall not be considered.**

▶ Tender validity: Bid validity period shall be 180 days from the bid closing date.

▶ Tender documents submission: Bids must be submitted in 3 separate sealed (IN RED WAX) envelopes addressed to Secretary - Tender Committee clearly highlighting the Tender Ref. No. & Tender Title:

- Envelope 1# must include the Technical Bid submission (1 Original + 1 non-Editable copy in a USB)
- Envelope 2# must include Commercial Bid submission (1 Original + 1 Editable MS Excel spreadsheet copied in a USB)
- Envelope 3# must include the Tender Bond (1 Original) & Audited Financial Statement for the last 3 years.

▶ Bid Closing Date: Bid submission deadline is **12.00 noon Doha Local Time** as on the Bid closing date shown above. The 3 envelopes must be handed over to the Office of The Secretary - Tender Committee, located at Mowasalat Head Office, Industrial Area. Any tender submitted after the deadline will not be considered.

Beneficiary Name	MOWASALAT-KARWA COMPANY
A/C No.	0013 - 011272 - 060
IBAN	QA07 QNBA 0000 0000 0013 0112 7206 0
Swift Code No.	QNBAGAGA
Branch Address	Corporate Branch, P.O Box 1000, Doha - Qatar
Currency	QAR
CR No.	26887

Tel.: 4458 8724

Fax: 4458 8850

Somalia, Ethiopia forces in deadly clash days after deal

AFP
Mogadishu

Somalia accused Ethiopian forces of a deadly attack on its troops in a border region on Monday, just days after the two countries signed an accord aimed at resolving months of tension. The Somali foreign ministry said in a statement that Ethiopian troops had attacked its forces stationed at an airstrip in the border town of Doolow in Somalia's Jubaland state around 10am.

It said the attack targeted three bases manned by the army, police and National Intelligence and Security Agency, and had caused fatalities, without giving a precise number. But Jubaland state officials said the Ethiopian troops, who are also based at the airstrip as part of its mission against insurgents, had inter-

vened to protect a group of local politicians. Somalia's federal government has been clashing in recent weeks with forces of the semi-autonomous Jubaland over control of key areas in the state.

"The incident started this morning after the (federal) forces who were stationed here were given instructions to shoot an aircraft carrying a Jubaland state delegation...including state legislators, cabinet members and the governor," Jubaland security minister Yusuf Hussein Osman said at a press conference in Doolow. He said a firefight ensued in the town until Somali federal forces were "disarmed and some of them wounded".

"The pro-Jubaland forces and the Somali government security forces clashed and the Ethiopian forces who are stationed within the airstrip area intervened in support of the pro-Jubaland

Egypt troops to join African Union Somalia mission: FM

Egypt will contribute troops to an African Union Somalia peacekeeping mission, its foreign minister said, as ties between the two countries grow closer amid tensions with Ethiopia over recognition of Somaliland. "Egypt has decided to participate in the mission based on the Somali government's request and welcoming of the African Union's Peace and Security Council," said Badr Abdelatty during a press

conference in Cairo to mark a visit by the Somali foreign minister. The African Union stabilisation and support mission, known as AUSSOM, will replace an anti-terror mission ending this year. A dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia broke out this year over Addis Ababa's plan to build a port in the breakaway region of Somaliland, which had drawn in regional powers and threatened to further destabilise the Horn

of Africa. After talks mediated by Turkey, Somalia and Ethiopia said they would work together to resolve the issue. "We spoke about the situation in Somalia and Egypt's support of Somalia imposing its authority and sovereignty on all Somali national land and the refusal of any directives or unilateral moves that touch the unity, sovereignty and security of Somalia," Abdelatty added. —Reuters

this was never confirmed by Adis Ababa.

Somalia viewed this as a breach of its sovereignty, sparking a fierce diplomatic and military row. That appeared to be resolved when Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud met in Ankara on December 12 and signed a deal that is expected to offer land-locked Ethiopia an alternative sea access in Somalia. However, Somalia's foreign ministry said the agreement was undermined by Monday's incident in Doolow. "Regrettably, these actions by Ethiopia constitute a blatant violation of the Ankara Declaration," it said in the statement. "The Somali Federal Government warns that it will not remain silent in the face of such clear violations of Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

forces," a local resident, Mohammed Hassan, told AFP by phone.

"The pro-Somali government forces were later overpowered after the fighting spread in other areas inside town," he added. Somalia is a federation of semi-autonomous member states —

Puntland, Jubaland, Galmudug, Hirshabelle and South West — that have often clashed with the central government in Mogadishu.

The incident threatens to upend a deal brokered by Turkey less than two weeks ago to end a nearly year-long dispute be-

tween Somalia and Ethiopia. That dispute began in January when Ethiopia signed an agreement with another breakaway region of Somalia — Somaliland — to lease a stretch of coastline for a port and military base in exchange for recognition, although

Maputo tense after disputed poll result

AFP
Maputo

Mozambique's largely deserted capital was hit yesterday by skirmishes between protesters and police, AFP reporters said, the day after the ruling party was controversially confirmed winners in recent elections. Police in armoured vehicles patrolled the centre of the city, where hundreds of protesters in small, scattered groups threw objects and started fires.

Makeshift roadblocks on major thoroughfares were set alight on Monday evening, covering the city with thick smoke, soon after the country's highest court confirmed the victory of the ruling Frelimo party presidential candidate Daniel Chapo. Chapo's main challenger, exiled opposition leader Venancio Mondlane, has claimed the election was rigged, sparking fears of violence between rival party supporters.

Shops, banks, supermarkets, petrol stations and public buildings meanwhile were ransacked, with their windows smashed and contents looted.

Some were set on fire and reduced to smouldering rubble. "Maputo Central Hospital is operating in critical conditions, more than 200 employees have not been able to reach the site," its director Mouzinho Saide told AFP, adding that nearly 90 people had been admitted with injuries. Forty were injured by firearms and four by knives, he added.

Main roads leading to Maputo and the neighbouring city of Matola were blocked by barricades and burning tyres, while the road leading to Maputo airport was largely impassable. Most local residents stayed at home, with the few who ventured out doing so to look at the damage or do last-minute Christmas shopping.

Christmas Eve is normally a busy time, with large crowds in central Maputo but shops and even small neighbourhood grocery stores were closed, making petrol and bread unavailable. Public transport was also paralysed, with only ambulances and funeral vehicles running.

The unrest spread to several cities in the northern part of Mozambique, local media reported, with violence and vandalism in the provinces of Cabo Delgado, Nam-pula, Zambezia and Tete, where opposition support is strong.

More than 100 people have already died in the unprecedented post-election violence, with fears that the toll could increase after



Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) Presidential candidate Daniel Chapo celebrates his victory with supporters in Maputo.

Mondlane's claim of victory. Mozambicans are demanding "electoral truth", he said in a Facebook post. "We must continue the fight, remain united and strong."

Monday's confirmation of the result of the October 9 election came despite claims of irregularities from many observers. Chapo won 65.17% of the vote, more than five points lower than the initial results declared by the country's electoral commission.

In the National Assembly, Frelimo has a majority of 171 seats out of 250, down 24 from the announcement in October. "Venancio", as Mondlane is called on the street, repeated his assertion in a social media message yesterday that the constitutional court was "legalising fraud" and "the humiliation of the people". "We want to create a People's Constitutional Court, which will confirm Venancio Mondlane as president," he said of himself. "I will be sworn in and invested," he added.

Chapo, who is due to take office in mid-January, struck a conciliatory tone in his victory speech on Monday, promising to "talk to everyone", including his main opponent.

Mining disruption

Gemfields Group said yesterday disruptions were possible at its largest ruby mine in Mozambique, after people torched buildings in villages nearby in escalating unrest linked to October's disputed election. Mozambique's top court on Monday confirmed long-ruling party Frelimo's victory in the election that has sparked protests by opposition groups that say the vote was rigged.

At least 130 people have been killed in clashes with police, according to the civil society monitoring group Plataforma Decida, and the operations of other foreign



A man holds a spent bullet casing on a street in Maputo yesterday.

miners operating in Mozambique, including South32, have been affected.

Gemfields said in a statement that "groups associated with the illegal mining and trading of rubies have taken advantage of the political unrest". It said "instigators" had on Monday set fire to the police station in Namanhumbir, a village close to Gemfields' Montepuez Ruby Mining Limitada (MRM) in the northern Cabo Delgado province. An MRM office, a community centre and a community radio centre built by the company in Namanhumbir were also set ablaze.

"Based on the trajectory of the ongoing situation, there may be interruptions to MRM's mining operations resulting from this unrest," Gemfields said.

In another village near MRM's operations, a water borehole was sabotaged, and in a third village people torched the police station, the residence of a local police commander and the administrative offices of Namanhumbir district. MRM is 75% owned by Gemfields and employs about 1,400 people, the company's website says. Frelimo has been repeatedly accused by opponents and election observers of rigging votes, although it has denied those accusations. The electoral commission has not commented on allegations of fraud in this year's election.



Pedestrians walk past a burning barricade in Maputo yesterday.

Land Royal Properties celebrates 10th anniversary with new mobile app launch



Land Royal Properties, a prominent name in Qatar's real estate and property management industry, marked its 10th anniversary with a grand celebration at the Radisson Blu Hotel, Doha. The event, themed "10 Royal Years," was a tribute to a decade of exceptional service and innovation.

Zuhair Azad, Managing Director of Land Royal Properties, expressed his gratitude to the company's employees, clients, and Qatari investors for their constant support. "This milestone belongs to every individual who has been part of our journey. Together, we have built a legacy in property management, setting new benchmarks for the industry in Qatar," Azad said.

Marking the journey towards the next 10 years, Land Royal Properties also unveiled its new mobile app, designed to revolutionize property management in Qatar. The app aims to enhance communication between tenants and the company, streamline processes, and elevate service standards. Another highlight of the event was the employee recognition ceremony, where Mohammed Ahmed Al Mansoori, the company's Qatari partner, honoured exceptional employees.

Selil Moideen, Director of Land Royal Properties, joined in celebrating the company's achievements and expressed gratitude to Qatari real estate investors and partners for their invaluable contributions.

Mohammed Miandad, Director of Land Royal Properties, emphasized the company's commitment to innovation and excellence. "We are excited about the future and our continued dedication to serving our clients," he said.

The evening was graced by the presence of esteemed guests, including Mohammed Al Mana, Ahmad Ishaq Hashmi, and Yusuf Al Karani.

As Land Royal Properties enters its second decade, the company remains committed to delivering exceptional services and driving innovation in Qatar's dynamic real estate sector.

Marking the journey towards the next 10 years, Land Royal Properties also unveiled its new mobile app, designed to revolutionize property management in Qatar. The app aims to enhance communication between tenants and the company, streamline processes, and elevate service standards.

Over 10 killed in Congo clashes

AFP
Goma

An exchange of fire between the Congolese army and a militia group fighting alongside it has killed up to eight civilians in the country's troubled east, sources told AFP yesterday. Since 2021, the Rwanda-backed M23 militia has seized swathes of territory in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, displacing thousands and causing a humanitarian crisis.

The Congolese armed forces (FARDC) have been fighting to recover territory, backed by groups of militia known as Wazalendo. But on Monday fire was exchanged between the Congolese army and Wa-

zalendo in a village in North Kivu province just outside the provincial capital Goma.

"The inhabitants of the village... were unpleasantly surprised by exchanges of fire between Wazalendo and FARDC based in this village on December 23," civil society leader Thierry Gasisiro told AFP.

He said that "seven people were shot dead, four people were injured and several damages were recorded", adding it is unknown what led to the exchange of fire or whether it was a mistake.

"We are shocked by what has happened," Gasisiro added.

A local official said there had been eight civilian fatalities as well as four deaths from the ranks of Congolese army and one Wazal-

endo fighter. A military source told AFP under condition of anonymity that seven civilians had been killed including four women and one child. The source added that the bodies of two Wazalendo had also been recovered.

President Felix Tshisekedi last week replaced the army chief as part of a reshuffle within the armed forces. In recent days, the rebels have again advanced and are now only around 50km from the town of Lubero and around 100km from the town of Butembo, a key commercial hub.

For 30 years, the mineral-rich east has suffered from the ravages of fighting between local and foreign armed groups, dating back to the regional wars of the 1990s.



Biden delivers on threat to veto bill to expand judiciary

Reuters
Washington

US President Joe Biden has vetoed legislation to add 66 new judges to understaffed federal courts nationally, a once widely bipartisan measure that would have been the first major expansion of the federal judiciary since 1990.

The JUDGES Act, initially supported by many members of both parties, would have increased the number of trial court judges in 25 federal district courts in 13 states including California, Florida and Texas, in six waves every two years through 2035.

Hundreds of judges appointed by presidents of both parties took the rare step of publicly advocating for the bill, saying that federal caseloads have increased by more than 30% since Congress last passed legislation to comprehensively expand the judiciary.

However, the outgoing Democratic president

made good on a veto threat issued two days before the bill passed the Republican-led House of Representatives on December 12 on a 236-173 vote.

In a message to the Senate formally rejecting the bill, Biden said it "hastily" creates new judgeships without addressing key questions about whether new judges were needed and how they would be allocated nationally.

Republican Senator Todd Young of Indiana, who sponsored the bill in the Senate, said that the veto was "partisan politics at its worst".

By staggering the new judgeships over three presidential administrations, the bill's sponsors had hoped to get around lawmakers' longstanding concerns about creating new vacancies that a president of an opposing party could fill.

It received the Democratic-led Senate's unanimous approval in August.

However, the bill lingered in the Republican-led House and was only taken up for a vote after Republican President-elect Donald Trump won the November 5 election and the opportunity to

name the first batch of 25 judges.

That prompted accusations from top House Democrats, who began to abandon the measure, that their Republican colleagues had broken a central promise of the legislation by having lawmakers approve the bill when no one knew who would appoint the initial wave of judges.

If the bill had been enacted, Trump would have been able to fill 22 permanent and three temporary judgeships over four years in office, on top of the 100-plus judicial appointments he is already expected to make.

Those appointments would allow Trump to further cement his influence on the judiciary.

He made 234 judicial appointments during his first term in office, including three members of the US Supreme Court's 6-3 conservative majority.

On Friday Biden surpassed Trump's total number of judicial appointments with 235, though he named fewer appellate judges and only one US Supreme Court justice during his tenure.



People look at the collapsed pier at the Santa Cruz Wharf in Santa Cruz, California. (AFP)

Pier breaks off, floats away in heavy California storm

A pier collapsed into the ocean and floated away off the US state of California on Monday, weather authorities said, as the region was pounded by a powerful storm.

Lifeguards rescued two people after the structure in Santa Cruz broke free, firefighters said.

Videos posted on social media showed part of the pier adrift in the water as waves lashed the coastline.

Santa Cruz resident Joe Merrill, who was working on the pier when it broke apart, told AFP that it happened suddenly.

"About 300-500' (90-150m) of the wharf collapsed," he said. "The crane, cargo...all of it just collapsed. Two people went in the water, but they were rescued. We had divers, boats, everything."

The National Weather Service (NWS) reposted a video of the aftermath, explaining: "A portion of the Santa Cruz Pier has collapsed, and is floating away."

"Look at the ominous wave action on the horizon," the agency said. "You are risking your life, and those of the people that would need to try and save you by getting in or too close to the water."

The NWS said towering waves were expected in the area over the next day.

"Dangerous and life-threatening beach conditions are forecast with very high surf, rip currents, sneaker waves, and coastal flooding through Tuesday for ALL beaches along the Pacific Coast," a message on X - formerly Twitter - said. "Very rough seas, breaking waves to 40' (12m) and extremely dangerous conditions."

The storm hitting California was expected to bring rain to many areas, even the usually-dry far south around Los Angeles, and snow over the mountains.

It was then expected to move inland.

"A series of Pacific storm systems will cross the Northwest US this week bringing gusty winds, periods of heavy rain, and mountain snow," a forecast said. "A few locally severe storms could occur across parts of central and East Texas" today. (AFP)



A USGS Hawaiian Volcano Observatory geologist checks a webcam located on the rim of the caldera during a new eruption which began early at the Kilauea volcano in Hawaii. (Reuters)



A lake of active lava in the summit caldera glows as the sun rises during a new eruption at Kilauea volcano in Hawaii. (Reuters)

Hawaii's Kilauea volcano erupts

AFP
Los Angeles

One of the world's most active volcanoes sprang into life again on Monday, spewing columns of lava 80m (260') above Hawaii, US vulcanologists said.

Images showed enormous fissures in the caldera of Kilauea, on Hawaii's Big Island, spraying jets of molten rock into the air.

The US Geological Service (USGS) Hawaiian Volcano Observatory said the eruption began just after 2am local time (1200 GMT) in the southwestern section of the caldera.

"At 4.30am, lava fountains were observed with heights up to 80m," the agency said. "Molten material, including lava bombs, is being ejected from the vents on the caldera floor up onto the west caldera rim."

The eruption was also sending matter much higher into the atmosphere.

"The plume of volcanic gas and fine volcanic particles is reaching elevations of 6,000-8,000' above sea level ... and winds are transporting it to the southwest."

"The eruption is occurring within a closed area" of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, the observatory said, adding that lava flows "are currently confined to Halema'uma'u and the eastern part of Kilauea caldera".

However, it warned that sulphur dioxide emanating from the fissure would react with other gases in the atmosphere.

So-called vog - volcanic smog - can affect people and animals, as well as crops.

Kilauea has been very active since 1983 and erupts relatively regularly, including most recently in September.

It is one of six active volcanoes located in the Hawaiian Islands, which also include Mauna Loa, the largest volcano in the world.

Kilauea is much smaller than neighbouring Mauna Loa, but is far more active and regularly wows helicopter-riding tourists who come to see its red-hot shows.

Panama leaders past and present reject Trump threat

The status of the Panama Canal is non-negotiable, President Jose Raul Mulino said in a statement on Monday, signed alongside former leaders of the country, after Donald Trump's recent threats to reclaim the man-made waterway.

On Saturday the US president-elect slammed what he called unfair fees for US ships passing through the Panama Canal and threatened to demand control of the waterway be returned to Washington.

Mulino dismissed Trump's comments on Sunday, saying that "every square metre of the Panama Canal and its adjacent areas belongs to Panama and will continue belonging to Panama".

He reiterated on Monday in a statement - also signed by former presidents Ernesto Perez Balladares, Martin Torrijos and Mireya Moscoso - that "the sovereignty of our country and our canal are not negotiable".

The canal "is part of our history of struggle and an irreversible conquest", read the statement, which the four politicians had signed after a meeting at the seat of the Panamanian government.

"Panamanians may think differently in many aspects, but when it comes to our canal and our sovereignty, we all unite under the same flag," the statement said.

Former leader Laurentino Cortizo, who did not attend the meeting, also showed support for the statement on social media, as did ex-president Ricardo Martinelli.

Yesterday dozens of demonstrators gathered outside the US embassy chanting "Trump, animal, leave the canal alone" and "Get out invading gringos" as about 20 police officers guarded the compound.

Some in the crowd carried banners reading "Donald Trump, public enemy of Panama".

"The (Panamanian) people have shown that they are capable of recovering their territory and we are not going to give it up again," protester Jorge Guzman told AFP.

"Panama is a sovereign territory and the canal here is Panamanian," said Saul Mendez, the leader of a construction union that jointly organised the protest.

"Donald Trump and his imperial delusion cannot claim even a single centimetre of land in Panama."

The 80km (50-mile) Panama Canal carries 5% of the world's maritime trade. Its main users are the United States, China, Japan, South Korea and Chile.

It was completed by the United States in 1914, and then returned to the Central American country under a 1977 deal signed by Democratic president Jimmy Carter.

Panama took full control in 1999. (AFP)

Chinese staff saved from 'slave-like conditions' in Brazil

More than 160 Chinese workers have been saved from "slave-like conditions" in Brazil, where they had been building an electric car factory for Chinese giant BYD, officials said yesterday.

BYD's Brazilian subsidiary said in a statement late on Monday that it has "broken with immediate effect" its contract with the company responsible for the work on the site, Jinjiang Construction Brazil Ltd.

The site is located in Camacari, in the northeast state of Bahia and, when completed, will be BYD's biggest electric car plant outside Asia, with a production capacity of 150,000 vehicles per year.

Work on part of the site was suspended by order of Bahia's public ministry for works (MPT).

Since November that state ministry and other authorities have been conducting inspections which the MPT said identified "163 workers who appeared to be in slave-like conditions with the Jinjiang company providing services for BYD".

An MPT spokesperson told AFP that all those workers identified were Chinese nationals.

In a statement, the MPT said it had found "an alarming situation of precariousness" where employees were being kept in "degrading working conditions".

"In one of the accommodations, workers slept on beds without mattresses and had no wardrobes for their personal effects, which were mixed together with food supplies," it said.

The MPT also found there was just one bathroom per 31 workers, "which forced them to get up at 4am to line up to be able to get ready before leaving to start work at 5.30am".

Once on the site, "the workers were exposed to intense solar radiation, presenting visible signs of skin damage".

The MPT said it suspected "forced labour" had been occurring, with the workers' passports confiscated and their employer "retaining 60% of their salary, and them receiving the other 40% in Chinese money".

Authorities have organised an online hearing tomorrow so that BYD and Jinjiang "can present the necessary provisions guaranteeing minimal accommodation conditions" and the rectification of the violations detected.

BYD's Brazilian subsidiary said "it does not tolerate violations of Brazilian law and human dignity", adding that it had transferred the workers to in hotels. (AFP)

Nasa probe makes closest ever pass by the Sun

AFP/Reuters
Washington

Nasa's pioneering Parker Solar Probe made history yesterday, flying closer to the Sun than any other spacecraft, with its heat shield exposed to scorching temperatures topping 1,700° Fahrenheit (930° Celsius).

Launched in August 2018, the spaceship is on a seven-year mission to deepen scientific understanding of our star and help forecast space-weather events that can affect life on Earth.

Yesterday's historic flyby should have occurred at 6.53am, although mission scientists will have to wait until Friday for confirmation as they lose contact with the craft for several days due to its proximity to the Sun.

"Right now, Parker Solar Probe is flying closer to a star than anything has ever been before," at 3.8mm miles (6.1mm km) away, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) official Nicky Fox said in a video on social media yesterday. "It is just a total 'yay, we did it,' moment".

If the distance between Earth and the Sun is the equivalent to the length of an American football field, the spacecraft should have been about four yards from the end zone at the moment of closest approach - known as perihelion.

"This is one example of Nasa's bold missions, doing something that no one else has ever done before to answer long-standing questions about our universe," Parker Solar Probe programme scientist Arik Posner said in a statement on Monday. "We can't wait to receive that first status update from the spacecraft and start receiving the science data in the coming weeks."

So effective is the heat shield that the probe's internal instruments remain near room temperature - around



A 2018 artist's concept shows the Parker Solar Probe spacecraft flying into the Sun's outer atmosphere, called the corona, on a mission to help scientists learn more about the Sun. (Reuters)

85F (29C) - as it explores the Sun's outer atmosphere, called the corona.

Parker will also be moving at a blistering pace of around 430,000mph (690,000kph), fast enough to fly from the US capital Washington to Japan's Tokyo in under a minute.

"Parker will truly be returning data from uncharted territory," said Nick Pinkine, mission operations manager at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory (APL) in Laurel, Maryland. "We're excited to hear back from the spacecraft when it swings back around the Sun."

"No human-made object has ever

passed this close to a star," he added.

By venturing into these extreme conditions, Parker has been helping scientists tackle some of the Sun's biggest mysteries: how solar wind originates, why the corona is hotter than the surface below, and how coronal mass ejections - massive clouds of plasma that hurl through space - are formed.

The Christmas Eve flyby is the first of three record-setting close passes, with the next two - on March 22 and June 19, 2025 - both expected to bring the probe back to a similarly close distance from the Sun.

ANNOUNCEMENT

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within 15 days from the publication of this notice.

OFFICIAL
China, Japan expected to discuss seafood ban today

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi will hold talks with his Japanese counterpart Takeshi Iwaya in Beijing today where both men are expected to address China's ban on Japanese seafood imports. Beijing imposed the ban last August after Tokyo began releasing treated radioactive water from the wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant despite Chinese opposition. Foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning urged Japan to fulfil its commitments under an agreement reached in September. The deal commits Japan to setting up an international monitoring arrangement and allowing stakeholders such as China to conduct independent sampling and monitoring.

PROPOSAL
Indonesia considers parole for ex-terror chiefs: official

Jailed former leaders of Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah militant group are being considered for parole, a senior counter-terror official said yesterday. The Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah network was responsible for some of the deadliest terror attacks in Indonesia, such as the 2002 Bali bombings that killed 202 people. The group declared their disbandment in late June and more than a thousand of their former members pledged allegiance to Indonesia in an event last week. Indonesia's counter-terrorism chief Eddy Hartono said authorities are considering proposing parole for ex-JI leaders Para Wijayanto and Abu Rusdan, who attended the pledge of allegiance event virtually.

CRIME
Japan, US blame N Koreans for \$300mn crypto theft

A North Korean hacking group stole \$300mn cryptocurrency from the Japan-based exchange DMM Bitcoin, according to Japanese police and the US' FBI. The TraderTraitor group - believed to be part of Lazarus Group, which is allegedly linked to the Pyongyang authorities - carried out the heist, Japan's National Police Agency said. Lazarus Group was accused of hacking into Sony Pictures as revenge for *The Interview* a film that mocked North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The FBI detailed "the theft of cryptocurrency worth \$308mn from the Japan-based cryptocurrency company DMM by North Korean cyber actors" in a separate statement.

WILDLIFE
Man finds bear in living room

A man in rural Japan found a bear snuggled up in his living room, local media reported yesterday. Reports said a man in snowy Fukushima region found a bear lying under his kotatsu - a low table with a heating element underneath and a surrounding blanket that is common in Japanese houses. "I came home from work and there was a bear with its head shoved into the kotatsu," the man was quoted as saying. The man, who is in his 60s and lives alone, fled to a neighbour's place and phoned police before returning over an hour later to find the bear and his food scattered around.

Bangladesh protesters enter TV station owner's office, journalists sacked

AFP
Dhaka

A gang of Bangladesh student protesters entered the offices of the investor of a television station accusing it of "propaganda", protesters said yesterday, with at least five journalists subsequently fired.

The students had taken part in the August revolution that toppled prime minister Sheikh Hasina, whose tenure was marked as one of the worst periods for media freedom.

Hasnat Abdullah, convener of the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement, led around 15-20 students on December 17 to the offices of City Group, who invest in Somoy Television.

"Somoy Television was spreading propaganda, twisting my comments, and accommodating the views of a fallen political party," Hasnat said.

"We are staunch supporters of press freedom, but the press must remain unbiased," Hasnat said, adding that he saw no issue in making demands - but rejecting reports the students had handed over a list of those they wanted fired.

The managing director of the business conglomerate that funds the television station did not respond to repeated requests for comment. The incident has intensified fear among journalists in the wake of the revolution.

One journalist, Omar Faroque, who had been a senior editor of the television station, said he was among the five who received a ter-

Hasina's son rubbishes graft allegations

Ousted Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina's son and adviser yesterday described allegations of corruption involving the family in the 2015 awarding of a \$12.65bn nuclear power contract as "completely bogus" and a "smear campaign". Bangladesh's Anti-Corruption Commission on Monday launched an enquiry into allegations of corruption, embezzlement and money laundering in the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant project, backed by Russia's state-owned Rosatom. A deal for two power plants was signed in 2015. The commission has alleged that there were financial irregularities worth about \$5bn involving

Hasina, her son Sajeeb Wazed and her niece and British Treasury Minister Tulip Siddiq, through offshore accounts. Siddiq and Rosatom did not comment. A spokesperson for British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said Siddiq had denied any involvement in the claims and that he had confidence in her. Siddiq would continue in her role, the spokesperson added. In August, Bangladeshi media quoted Rosatom as rejecting an earlier media allegation of corruption, saying it was "committed to transparent working practices, strict anti-corruption policies, and openness in all procurement processes".

mination letter without reason.

"The television authorities requested a few of us to step down for the greater good of the station," Faroque said. "We demanded an explanation for the decision, but the authorities refused to provide any!"

Interim leader Muhammad Yunus has repeatedly insisted he wants media freedom. Yunus' press secretary Shafiqul Alam sought to distance the government, saying that if someone "takes any action, the responsibility lies with them". Press watchdogs say many journalists - seen by critics as having supported Hasina when she was in power - face police investigations in apparent retaliation for their past work.

At least four journalists were imprisoned, and scores are facing legal cases across the country.

Hasina and her government were frequently accused of exerting undue pressure on the handful of independent media outlets, including shutting down newspapers and TV channels, and imprisoning journalists.

After Hasina's government fell, several TV channels including Somoy TV came under attack for their alleged allegiance to her Awami League.

In November, protesters besieged the offices of Prothom Alo - the largest Bengali-language newspaper - and threatened to shut it down, as well as *The Daily Star*.

Press freedom in Bangladesh has long been under threat.

Bangladesh ranks 165 out of 180 countries in press freedom, according to Reporters Without Borders.

Hot Air Balloon Festival in Nepal



Hot-air balloons inflate during the International Hot Air Balloon Festival in Pokhara, Nepal, yesterday.

Manila rejects China's criticism of missile plan

AFP
Manila

The Philippine defence secretary rejected Chinese criticism of Manila's plans to acquire a US-built mid-range missile system, telling Beijing yesterday to stop its "sabre-rattling" and "interference" in internal affairs.

The Philippine Army announced plans on Monday to acquire the US Typhon missile system as part of a push to protect Manila's maritime interests, swiftly drawing a warning from

China about a regional "arms race". China's navy and coast guard have engaged in escalating confrontations with the Philippines in recent months over disputed reefs and waters in the South China Sea.

Beijing claims almost the entire South China Sea despite an international ruling that its assertion has no legal basis.

"The Philippines is a sovereign state, not any country's 'doorstep'," Defence Secretary Gilberto Teodoro said.

"Any deployment and procurement of assets related to the Philippines' security and defence fall

within its own sovereign prerogative and are not subject to any foreign veto," he said in a statement.

The US army deployed the Typhon missile system in the northern Philippines for annual joint military exercises with its long-time ally this year and decided to leave it there, despite criticism by Beijing that it was destabilising to Asia.

Philippine military officials said the Typhon system would be able to protect vessels up to 370km (200 nautical miles) of the coast, the limit of its maritime entitlement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Reptile star of Crocodile Dundee dies at 90

An Australian saltwater crocodile who starred in the hit film *Crocodile Dundee* has died aged 90, the reptile's zoo confirmed yesterday.

Burt, the 16.4 foot reptile died "peacefully", according to a statement from the Darwin aquarium, where he lived in Crocosaurus Cove.

"Burt's life story is one of strength, resilience, and a personality as bold as the Top End (Northern Territory) itself." The "confirmed bachelor" was captured in a Northern Territory river in the 1980s, before he became "one of the most recognised crocodiles in the world", the aquarium's statement said. In *Crocodile Dundee*, Burt was used in a scene where American reporter Sue Charlton, played by Linda Kozlowski, is attacked by a crocodile while refilling her water bottle, only to be rescued by Paul Hogan's Mick Dundee. The scene used footage of Burt "launching out of the water".

China holds Ice and Snow World Festival



A boy stands amongst ice sculptures at the Harbin Ice and Snow World Festival in Harbin, northeast China's Heilongjiang province. The 26th edition of the annual festival officially opened on December 21 in Harbin, also known as the "City of Ice".

UK seeks industry views on electric vehicle sales targets

Reuters
London

Britain began a consultation yesterday to review rules that force automakers to produce more electric vehicles, following industry warnings that the current plan could lead to factory closures and job losses.

The consultation will take views from the industry on changing the so-called Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) mandate, which requires automakers to sell a higher proportion of EVs each year, or pay fines.

Carmakers say lower-than-expected EV demand has forced them to spend billions of pounds on discounts to entice customers and meet the sales targets, which have hurt Britain's appeal as a manufacturing hub.

Last month Vauxhall owner Stellantis said it would shut a

van factory in southern England, risking more than 1,000 jobs, partly reflecting the impact of the ZEV mandates.

Britain's Labour government said it would consult to update the targets without compromising the overall direction of the regulations, which form part of Britain's wider climate goals.

The consultation will seek views on the restoration of a 2030 deadline to phase out new petrol and diesel car sales and whether vehicles such as hybrid cars can be sold alongside ZEVs.

It will also consider measures to boost consumer demand for electric vehicles. "We are steadfast in our mission to help our world-leading automotive industry thrive, and this consultation will look at how we can support manufacturers, investors, and the wider industry to reach their targets," Business Secretary Jonathan Reynolds said.

Hong Kong offers bounties for six more democrats

Reuters
Hong Kong

Hong Kong yesterday offered bounties of HK\$1mn (\$128,728) for six more pro-democracy campaigners deemed to have violated national security laws, and revoked the passports of seven more, as the Asian financial hub keeps up a security campaign.

The move to add more names to Hong Kong's wanted list comes as the city strives to revive economic growth and refurbish its international reputation after a years-long crackdown on dissent that attracted global criticism.

Chris Tang, the security secretary, accused the group, all based overseas in countries such as Britain and Canada, of the crimes of incitement to secession, subversion and collusion with foreign forces.

The six included Britain-based commentator Chung Kim-wah, former head of a pro-independence group Tony Chung, Carmen Lau of the Hong Kong Democracy Council and Chloe Cheung from the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation.

"(I) will not back down only because of an arrest warrant and a bounty," Lau wrote on X. "And I hope to have every one of you standing with me in this fight for

Hong Kong." On Instagram, Cheung, 19, wrote, "Fear cannot restrain me, and suppression cannot silence me."

China and Hong Kong authorities have defended the clampdown under sweeping national security laws, saying stability has been restored after mass pro-democracy protests in 2019.

European Union foreign affairs spokesman Anouar El Anoumi said in a statement on X that the EU condemned the new round of arrest warrants against activists in exile.

"The continued extraterritorial application of the National Security Law adds to our concerns and hurts the city's attractiveness as an inter-

national business hub." Separately, British Foreign Minister David Lammy called on the Hong Kong authorities "to end their targeting of individuals in the UK and elsewhere who stand up for freedom and democracy."

"We will not tolerate any attempts by foreign governments to coerce, intimidate, harass, or harm their critics overseas, especially in the UK," he said in a statement. "This government is deeply committed to supporting all members of the Hong Kong community who have relocated to the UK."

Tang said the six pro-democracy campaigners had engaged in activities such as speeches, social media

posts and lobbying for Hong Kong officials and judges to be sanctioned by foreign governments, thus endangering national security.

In a statement, China's office for safeguarding national security in Hong Kong said it supported the actions, as the individuals had engaged in "anti-China" and destabilising acts.

Others were deemed to have advocated independence from China for Hong Kong, a former British colony for more than 150 years that returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

"Instead of celebrating X'mas, it (Hong Kong) is taking a major step to escalate its transnational repression campaign," wrote Anna Kwok,

a US-based Hong Kong activist.

The latest additions take to 19 the tally of opposition figures on the city's wanted list, including lawyers Kevin Yam and Dennis Kwok, former lawmaker Ted Hui and activists Nathan Law and Joey Siu.

Tang said Hui had HK\$800,000 of his money confiscated from an unspecified bank in the city. Notices with black and white photographs of the "fugitives" have been posted in public places, such as the international airport.

Seven "absconders", including Hui, who are now based overseas, also had their passports revoked under Article 23, a new national security law adopted this year.



India's push for home-grown satellite constellation gets 30 aspirants

Reuters
Bengaluru

Thirty Indian companies have answered the space regulator's call to build and operate constellations of earth observation (EO) satellites in a groundbreaking private-public partnership to reduce the country's reliance on foreign data for defence, infrastructure manage-

ment and other critical mapping needs.

"We have received nine applications... Each applicant represents a consortium, involving a total of 30 companies," said Pawan Goenka, chairman of the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre, or IN-SPACe.

The regulator had sought "expressions of interest" (EoI) in July to build home-grown satellite constellations as part of a broader

strategy to monetise the sector and ensure data sovereignty.

India is doubling down on its small satellite and data services market to carve out a leading role in the global commercialisation of space. The market for such services, increasingly key for industries ranging from telecoms to climate monitoring, is projected to reach \$45bn by 2030.

The applicants for IN-SPACe's latest effort in this regard include

startups such as Google-backed Pixxel and Baring Private Equity-backed SatSure, as well as larger entities like Tata Group's Tata Advanced Systems. The companies did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Goenka said he expects technical evaluations to be completed by the end of January, after which a tender will be floated to determine the winning bidder.

IN-SPACe's eligibility criteria

include applicants raising or investing at least Rs850mn (\$10mn) in space-related activities, having a valuation of Rs8.5bn, or a turnover of Rs2bn in the past three years.

They must also set up spacecraft control centres in India or partner with ground station service providers for operational needs.

The government plans to loan up to Rs3.5bn to the winner, with private companies expected to cover the remaining costs, ac-

cording to a source familiar with the matter.

Since opening the sector to private players in February, India has established a Rs10bn-venture fund to support space startups.

The country has also unveiled ambitious plans for crewed space exploration and a mission to Venus, but the primary focus remains on fostering commercial ventures and scaling up private sector participation.

India reviews sulphur-cutting programme for coal plants

Reuters
New Delhi

India is reviewing a decade-old \$30bn programme requiring coal-fired power plants to install equipment to cut sulphur emissions after government-backed studies showed they had little impact on curbing pollution, according to a document.

Nearly 540 power plant units were required by 2026 to install flue-gas desulphurisation (FGD) systems that remove sulphur from the plants' exhaust gases, but only about 8% have done so, including those run by state-run NTPC and privately held JSW Power.

The government previously said expensive foreign technology and manpower were some of the hurdles in achieving the target. But with cities like New Delhi and Kanpur some of the most polluted in the world, India's government is under pressure to reduce the impact of the sector's emissions.

Instead of FGDs, government officials have proposed deploying locally made electrostatic precipitators, according to a document from the Office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to the government summarising a November 13 meeting between it and the ministries of

power, coal and the environment.

The precipitators, which remove fine particles such as dust and smoke from emissions, are one-fifth of the cost of an FGD system.

Representatives of the ministries and Ajay Kumar Sood, the principal scientific adviser who chaired the meeting, did not immediately respond to requests seeking comment.

The document showed several of the attendees agreed Indian power plants would be better off focusing on cutting emissions of tiny particulate matter that can lodge deep in the lungs rather than on sulphur reductions.

It cited a study by the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) that said Indian coal, which is used to generate 92% of the country's thermal power, has a sulphur content of only 0.5%.

Sulphur content is 0.9% on average for coal imported into India and more than 1% for coal used in China, where FGDs developed by companies like GE and Mitsubishi Power are common, said R Srikanth, head of the engineering school at NIAS.

"There was really never any case for having FGDs in India, in every place, every thermal power plant in the country," Srikanth, who attended the meeting, said yesterday.

"All our cities actually suffer from high particulate-matter pollution, not from sulphur dioxide pollution," he said.

Srikanth said more than 200 FGDs are currently waiting to be installed in India because companies are reluctant to shut down their power plants for nearly 45 days for the purpose.

The NIAS study said Indian coal's high ash content was a bigger problem for power plants, and high-efficiency electrostatic precipitators would be better at curbing that pollution.

The document also cited government-backed studies by the Indian Institute Of Technology (IIT) Delhi and National Environmental Engineering Research Institute that showed plants with the FGD systems showed negligible improvement in air quality.

An FGD system costs Rs12mn (\$141,000) per megawatt of capacity.

Insisting on FGDs could hamper India's goal of increasing coal-fired capacity by 37% by 2032 to meet surging power demand, it said.

A decision will be made based on further consultations, the document showed. India's government policy think tank, NITI Aayog, earlier this year proposed halting FGD installations.

Filmmaker Shyam Benegal dies



Bollywood actors Naseeruddin Shah (second right) and Boman Irani (right) pay respect during the funeral ceremony of late Indian film director and screenwriter Shyam Benegal, in Mumbai yesterday.

Small businesses drive jobs growth in India

Reuters
New Delhi

India's small businesses spanning the manufacturing, trade and services sectors added about 11mn jobs in the year to the end of September, with total employment rising to 120.6mn from 109.6mn the previous year, though wage growth was limited by high inflation.

Job creation remains a major challenge for Prime Minister Narendra Modi despite the economy growing at an average annual rate of more than 7% over the last decade, and unemployment

among young people remains persistently high. The number of small manufacturing businesses, mainly family-owned units such as garment makers, auto component makers and food processing enterprises, grew to 20.15mn in the 2023-24 year from 17.83mn the previous year, the government report released yesterday showed.

Meanwhile, the total number of small businesses across manufacturing, trade and services grew to 73.4mn from 65mn a year earlier.

The survey covers the period from October 2023 to the end of September this year.

"The unincorporated non-agricultural sector, comprising small

manufacturing, trade and other services, plays a crucial role in the economy...contributing significantly to employment," said Saunabh Garg, secretary at the ministry of statistics, while releasing the finding of the annual report.

During the survey period, the number of small businesses grew by 12.84%, while employment showed robust growth of more than 10%, Garg added. However, wages were affected by inflation. The average annual wage in nominal terms per hired worker rose 13% in 2023-24 to Rs141,071 (\$1,656), reflecting a modest increase compared with annual retail inflation of about 5.5%.

Traffic woes



Commuters wait amid a traffic jam on a road in Varanasi, India

India's growth trajectory 'to pick up in Oct-March'

Reuters
Mumbai

India's growth trajectory is expected to pick up in the second half of 2024-25, driven by domestic private consumption and a sustained revival of rural demand, the central bank said in its monthly bulletin released yesterday.

"High frequency indicators for the third quarter of 2024-25 indicate that the Indian economy is recovering from the slowdown in momentum witnessed in Q2, driven by strong festival activity and a sustained upswing in rural demand," the Reserve Bank of India said in an article titled 'State of the Economy'.

Additionally, the prospects for agriculture and rural consumption are looking up due to "brisk" expansion of rabi sowing, it said.

India's GDP growth rate fell

unexpectedly to 5.4% in the July-September quarter, its slowest pace in seven quarters, while inflation in November was well over the RBI's medium-term target of 4%.

If inflation is allowed to run unchecked, it can undermine the prospects of the real economy, especially industry and exports, the RBI said.

However, the usual winter easing of food prices is setting in and the prospects of private consumption and exports accelerating are getting brighter, it said in the bulletin.

The RBI's Monetary Policy Committee kept its key interest rate unchanged earlier this month citing inflationary concerns. But it cut banks' cash reserve ratio for the first time in over four years, effectively easing monetary conditions as economic growth slowed.

Weather problems seen hitting sugar production hopes

Sugarcane yields in India are declining due to last year's drought and this year's excessive rains, which could reduce the country's sugar production below consumption levels for the first time in eight years, farmers and industry officials said. Lower-than-expected output by the world's second-largest sugar producer could eliminate the possibility of India allowing exports in the current season ending in September 2025, supporting global sugar prices. Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh account for more than 80% of the country's total sugar production, with lower cane yields in these states prompting trade houses to reduce their output estimates for the 2024-25 season. The production could fall to around 27mn metric tonnes from the last year's 32mn tonnes and below annual consumption of more than 29mn tonnes, said India head of a global trade house, who declined to be named.

Dalai Lama allays health concerns as succession planning looms

Reuters
Dharamshala, India

When the Dalai Lama went to New York in June for knee surgery, his followers worried about his overall health and the future of Tibetan Buddhists without him. He said last week there was nothing much to worry about.

"According to my dream, I may live 110 years," said the 89-year-old spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhists when asked about his health and how he was feeling.

The Nobel laureate has been disarming questioners with the same reply for years.

The knee too is improving, he said at his Himalayan residence in Dharamshala town in northern India after blessing more than 300 visitors from India and overseas at a regular audience. "Not much serious problem," he said after walking gingerly with the help of aides, although for longer distances he is taken around in a golf cart.

He spoke to Reuters only for a few minutes at the end of the audience.

The 14th Dalai Lama fled to India along with thousands of Tibetans in early 1959 after a failed uprising against Chinese rule. Beijing insists it will choose his successor, but the Dalai Lama has said it was possible his successor could be

found in India and warned that any other successor named by China would not be respected.

The Dalai Lama's prediction of living for another two decades is reassuring for his followers, but more clarity on his succession could come from him when he turns 90 in July, said Dolma Tsering Teykhang, the deputy speaker of the Tibetan parliament-in-exile, also based in Dharamshala. "We are just lay people, we can't fathom his wisdom, so we are waiting for his clear guidance," Teykhang said in her parliament office about 2km from the Dalai Lama's residence. Teykhang said that although even thinking of the current Dalai Lama's demise

brings tears to her eyes, there is a system in place for the Tibetan government-in-exile to continue its political work while officers of the Dalai Lama's Gaden Phodrang Foundation would be responsible for searching and recognising the next Dalai Lama. The current Dalai Lama set up the Zurich-based foundation in 2015 to "maintain and support the tradition and institution of the Dalai Lama with regard to the religious and spiritual duties of the Dalai Lama", according to its website.

Its senior officers include monks living in India and Switzerland.

"We can't take it for granted that he is going to live 113 years," said Teykhang, referring to a lifespan

the current Dalai Lama had earlier predicted for himself, and pointing out that the previous Dalai Lama died earlier than expected at 58.

"Without him, the struggle of Tibet, I don't know where it will go. But then I put my hope in the administration that he has built in 60 years from nothing to this level."

The knee surgery meant the Dalai Lama had to avoid audiences for nearly three months. He resumed in September and now sees hundreds of people three times a week at his home, a sprawling complex that has a temple and an office, surrounded by lush green and snow-topped hills.

For his session on Friday, he was

ushered into a hall full of people by red-robed monks who held his hands and walked closely next to him.

Dressed in his usual red and yellow robe, he limped onto a platform, where the aides helped him sit on a leather swivel chair.

The Dalai Lama held the hands of each visitor and touched the heads of some with his forehead.

The Dalai Lama last month congratulated Donald Trump for his victory in the US election and Teykhang said the incoming president could be good news for Tibetans "because he always was with Tibet, he was with human rights, he was with the fact that Tibet is not a part of China since antiquity".

Russian state ship sinks in Mediterranean

Reuters/AFP
Moscow

A Russian cargo ship called Ursa Major sank in the Mediterranean Sea overnight after an explosion ripped through its engine room and two of its crew are still missing, the Russian foreign ministry said yesterday.

The vessel, built in 2009, was controlled by Oboronlogistika, a company that is part of the Russian defence ministry's military construction operations, which had previously said it was en route to the Russian far eastern port of Vladivostok with two giant port cranes lashed to its deck.

The foreign ministry's crisis centre said in a statement that 14 of the ship's 16 crew members had been rescued and brought to Spain, but that two were still missing. It did not say what had caused the engine room explosion.

Russia's embassy in Spain was cited by

the state RIA news agency as saying it was looking into the circumstances of the sinking and was in touch with the authorities in Spain.

Oboronlogistika and SK-Yug, a company LSEG lists as part of the group and the ship's direct owner and operator, declined to comment on the sinking.

Both entities were placed under sanctions by the United States in 2022 for their ties to Russia's military as was the Ursa Major itself.

Unverified video footage of the ship heavily listing to its starboard side with its bow much lower down in the water than usual was filmed on December 23 by a passing ship and published on Russia's life.ru news outlet yesterday.

Spain's Maritime Rescue Service said it had received a distress signal from the Ursa Major on Monday when it was located about 57 miles off the coast of Almería.

It said it had contacted a ship nearby which had reported bad weather condi-

tions, a lifeboat in the water, and said the Ursa Major was listing to the starboard side.

Two vessels and a helicopter had been sent to the scene and the 14 surviving crew members taken to the Spanish port of Cartagena.

It cited the crew as saying that the ship had been carrying empty containers as well as the two port cranes on deck.

A Russian warship had later arrived on the scene, it said, and taken charge of rescue operations.

Oboronlogistika, the ship's ultimate owner, said in a statement on December 20 that the ship, which LSEG data showed was previously called Sparta III among other names, had been carrying specialised port cranes due to be installed at the port of Vladivostok as well as parts for new ice-breakers.

Two giant cranes could be seen strapped to the deck in the unverified video footage. LSEG ship tracking data shows the vessel

departed from the Russian port of St Petersburg on December 11 and was last seen sending a signal at 2204 GMT on Monday between Algeria and Spain where it sank.

On leaving St Petersburg it had indicated that its next port of call was the Russian port of Vladivostok, not the Syrian port of Tartous which it has called at in the past.

Separately, Ukraine's HUR military intelligence service - which tracks Russian ship movements - had said in a post on its official Telegram channel on Monday that a different Russian cargo ship, called Sparta, had temporarily run into technical problems off the coast of Portugal.

HUR said in an update that the Sparta's crew had fixed the problem however and that the ship was en route for Syria to collect military equipment and ammunition after the fall of close Russian ally Bashar al-Assad.

Reuters could not verify the HUR's assertions about the Sparta's destination or mission.



Russian cargo ship Ursa Major, which the Russian foreign ministry said sank in the Mediterranean Sea between Spain and Algeria after an explosion in its engine room, lists in this still image obtained from a video released on Monday. (Reuters)

Members of Greece's former royal family regain their citizenship

Greece's former royal family has been granted Greek citizenship and pledged loyalty to the republic in a landmark move 50 years after the country abolished the monarchy.

Ten members of the family, including the children and grandchildren of former king Constantine who died in 2023, applied for citizenship last week.

The former royals welcomed the decision with a statement on Monday, saying that the passing of their father and grandfather had marked the end of an era.

However, their choice to use the surname De Grèce - which in French means "of Greece" - has angered politicians who claim a nobility title is unconstitutional.

The former royals said picking a surname was a prerequisite for the reinstatement of their nationality, the loss of which had rendered them stateless and caused significant emotional distress.

The family, they said, was and would be loyal to Greece.

"It is with deep emotion that, after thirty years, we hold the Greek citizenship again," they said.

Greece's former king Constantine II ascended to the throne in 1964 but his reign was marred by political instability that culminated in a military coup in 1967.

After the fall of the junta in 1974, Greeks rejected monarchy in a referendum, making Constantine the last king of Greece.

Athens stripped him of his citizenship in 1994 and defined the terms under which he and his family could be recognised as Greek nationals. (Reuters)

Greenland is not for sale, its leader says in response to Trump

Reuters/AFP
Copenhagen

Greenland is not for sale, its elected leader said on Monday, responding to comments made by US President-elect Donald Trump regarding the "ownership and control" of the vast Arctic island that has been part of Denmark for over 600 years.

"Greenland is ours. We are not for sale and will never be for sale. We must not lose our long struggle for freedom," the island's Prime Minister Mute Egede said in a written comment.

Trump on Sunday announced that he had picked Ken Howey, a former envoy to Sweden, as his ambassador to Copenhagen, and commented on the status of Greenland, a semi-autonomous part of Denmark and

host to a large US Air Force base.

"For purposes of National Security and Freedom throughout the World, the United States of America feels that the ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity," Trump wrote on Truth Social.

Trump, who takes office on January 20, did not elaborate on the statement.

Denmark's foreign ministry and the prime minister's office were not immediately available for comment.

The Danish government must state in clear terms that control over Greenland is not up for discussion or negotiation, member of parliament Rasmus Jarlov of the opposition Conservative Party said on social media platform X.

"To the extent that US activities aim to take control of Danish territory, it must be prohibited and countered. Then they can't be there at all," said Jarlov, who heads par-

liament's defence committee.

The island, whose capital Nuuk is closer to New York than the Danish capital Copenhagen, boasts mineral, oil and natural gas wealth.

However, development has been slow, leaving its economy reliant on fishing and annual subsidies from Denmark.

With its Pituffik air base, Greenland is strategically important for the US military and its ballistic missile early-warning system, since the shortest route from Europe to North America runs via the island.

During his previous term in office, Trump in 2019 expressed interest in buying Greenland, but the proposal was promptly rejected by Denmark as well as by the island's own authorities before any formal discussions could take place.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen at the time labelled Trump's offer as

"absurd", triggering a cancellation of a state trip to Denmark by Trump, who called her remark "nasty".

Under President Joe Biden, the United States said it did not want a purchase but instead sought to strengthen ties.

Frederiksen remains in her role of Danish prime minister.

Since 2009 Greenland has held the right to declare independence from Denmark.

The island of some 56,000 inhabitants, which relies on significant budget transfers from Copenhagen each year, has so far refrained from doing so.

Separately on Sunday, Trump threatened to reassert US control over the Panama Canal, accusing Panama of charging excessive rates to use the Central American passage and drawing a sharp rebuke from Panamanian President Jose Raul Mulino (see report on Page 6).

11 killed in blast at explosives plant in northwest Turkiye

AFP
Istanbul

A powerful blast ripped through an explosives plant in northwestern Turkiye yesterday, killing 11 people and injuring seven others, officials said, downgrading their original casualty figures.

Footage showed shards of glass and metal scattered outside the plant north of the city of Balikesir, where ambulances stood by.

"There are unfortunately 11 deaths...eight women and three men. And we have seven injured," Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said at the scene.

Two of the seven injured were "under observation" in hospital, he added.



Firefighters work on the scene after a blast at an explosives factory in Balikesir, Turkiye. (Reuters)

The authorities previously put the death toll at 12, with five injured.

According to the governor of Balikesir province, Ismail Ustaog-

lu, the blast happened shortly before 8.30am (0530 GMT) because of a "technical malfunction" on a production line at the factory, which produces munitions and

explosives for civilian use.

Six employees of the same factory were injured in a previous explosion in 2014, according to Turkish media.

Images broadcast by Turkish television channels showed part of the factory completely destroyed, as well as metal panels and shattered glass on the ground.

One witness on the 24-hour news channel NTV described the scene as a "battlefield".

A fire that broke out following the explosion was extinguished by firefighters, and the factory was quickly evacuated.

An investigation has been opened and the theory of sabotage has already been ruled out, according to the authorities.

The factory is located 1km from the nearest village, according to

satellite images seen by AFP.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan offered his condolences and as well as the interior minister, he also sent defence and labour ministers to the scene.

He has promised a full investigation into the cause of the blast.

In June 2023, five people died in a blast at an explosives factory in Ankara province, near the Turkish capital.

Three years earlier, in July 2020, seven people were killed and nearly 130 injured in an explosion at a fireworks factory in the north-western province of Sakarya.

In 2009 and 2014, two explosions had already occurred at the same factory in Balikesir, killing two people and injuring around 40 others, according to Turkish media.

Ukraine says North Korea troops not making a major impact yet on fighting

AFP/Reuters
Kyiv

The presence of North Korean soldiers alongside Russian troops in the Russian region of Kursk has not yet had a major impact on the course of the fighting, a Ukrainian military intelligence official told AFP yesterday.

According to Kyiv, 12,000 North Korean soldiers, including "about 500 officers and three generals", are engaged in the border region, which has been partly occupied by Ukrainian forces since August.

Russian and North Korea have not confirmed their engagement on the frontlines.

"The involvement of the North Koreans in the fighting has not had a significant impact on the situation. It is not such a significant number of personnel," Yevgen Yerin, spokesman for the Ukrainian military intelligence service (GUR), told AFP.

The spokesman said that North Korea troops have little experience of modern warfare, particularly with drones, and use tactics that are "primitive, linked, frankly speaking, more to the times of the Second World War".

"But they are also learning. And we cannot underestimate the enemy. And we can see that they are already taking some things into account in their activities," he added.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Monday that nearly 3,000 North Korean soldiers had been "killed or wounded" so far.

South Korea reported 1,100 killed or wounded on Monday, and said that North Korea appears to be preparing to send new units to Russia as reinforcements or to relieve those already fighting, as well as drones.

Meanwhile, one person was killed and 11 were wounded by a ballistic missile strike on an apartment block in the central Ukrainian city of Kryvyi Rih, local officials said yesterday, and Kyiv condemned the Christmas eve attack.

"The monsters landed a direct hit on

a four-storey residential block with 32 apartments," the head of the city's military administration, Oleksandr Vilkul, wrote on Telegram.

One man whose body had been pulled from under the rubble could not be revived by medics, regional governor Serhiy Lysak said.

"While other countries of the world are celebrating Christmas, Ukrainians are continuing to suffer from endless Russian attacks," Ukraine's human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets wrote on Telegram.

Governor Lysak posted photographs of rescuers trawling through a large pile of rubble, recovering a person covered in dust and loading them into an ambulance.

"There may still be people under the rubble," he wrote shortly before 1800 local time (1600 GMT), more than two hours after the strike.

Kryvyi Rih, the hometown of Ukraine's President Zelenskyy, is a steelmaking city with a pre-war population of more than 600,000.

Its southern outskirts lie about 40 miles (65km) from the nearest Russian-occupied territory, and it has regularly been the target of Russian missile attacks throughout the war.

Russia says it does not deliberately target civilians, although thousands have been killed since Moscow launched its invasion in 2022.



This photograph taken on December 16 shows vendors selling traditional flatbreads at a roadside market in Kabul. (AFP)

Afghan bread, the humble centrepiece of every meal

By Qubad Wali
AFP

Every day before dawn, Jamil Ghafari gets to work on the floor of a cramped Kabul bakery with five other men churning out thousands of traditional flatbreads - the staple of every Afghan meal.

The common bread Ghafari has made for 27 years is fluffy with a satisfying crunchy edge, where each piece has been slapped onto the wall of an earthen oven sunk into the floor.

Afghans rely on bread, he told AFP.

So he and his colleagues, each in charge of one part of the five-step process, take pride in their work.

"We always try to provide good bread for people, our customers must be satisfied," he said in the north of the Afghan capital.

Piles of bread - some round, some stretched into canoe-like shapes, some sprinkled with sesame seeds or sugar - overlap like roof tiles lining the slanting display windows of bakeries in the Afghan capital.

Their bright lights pour out over streets on seemingly every corner.

"Afghanistan has a long tradition of relying

on bread," said bakery worker Shafiq. "Here bread consumption might go up, but it will never go down."

He said his shop sells around 3,500 a day, as he handed pieces folded into plastic bags out the window from his perch encircled by bread on display.

Men, women and children, rich and poor, rain or shine, stop by multiple times daily at their closest bakery for fresh bread to accompany their meals.

"In Afghanistan, without bread, eating a meal with others is incomplete," said Mohammad Masi, 28, while picking up several rounds on his way home on his bike on a recent chilly night.

"Bread is one of Afghanistan's most beloved and famous foods," he said.

Thick halves of homemade hardy loaves dotted the colourful cloth spread on the floor of Beg Murad Nabizada's home in eastern Kabul, where he shares evening meals with his family of four.

Most days it is the only time they can eat together.

"We prefer to make our bread at home because it's baked with our own hands," 51-year-old Nabizada said, scooping up rice, beans and

salad between pieces of bread.

For many in Afghanistan - one of the poorest countries in the world where 12.4mn people live in acute food insecurity, according to the World Food Programme (WFP) - bread makes up the largest part of meals.

Afghan bread is one of the few foods that everyone can afford, with prices as low as 10 Afghani (0.14 US cents) to 50 Afghani.

"Here, poor people often only have bread to eat...with tea or water," said teacher Azeem.

Women in blue burkas huddle with children outside the brightly lit bakery windows, hoping someone will buy an extra piece for them.

For Wahida, 30, when her family sank into deep poverty two years ago, she turned to making bread to survive and feed her children.

She produces it at one of the women-run, home-based bakeries dotted around the outskirts of Kabul and often found in rural areas.

"Bread is important, it's beloved and eaten the most," she said.

Homemade or from the bakery, the only thing that matters for Kabul dentist Mohammad Masi is that bread with "breakfast, lunch and dinner is a must".

"If I don't eat bread, I feel like I haven't eaten anything at all," he said.



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GULF TIMES

Private firms looking to delay path to public markets

Private capital has shown great resilience in a volatile environment.

Something to the tune of about \$3tn is tied up for private equity-owned companies alone, as of October, according to a report from Bain & Co.

Private companies — especially those in tech — are raising billions of dollars to delay, and sometimes even shun, a path to public markets.

These efforts are creating vast wealth for employees and early-stage stakeholders, while shutting out most people who can't invest in them through things such as 401(k) retirement accounts provided by some US companies.

The numbers show a dramatic shift from just a few decades ago, and the trend has become even starker as initial public offerings (IPOs) have receded since a pandemic-era frenzy.

As a result, a relatively small group of people have access to the upside while the vast majority of potential investors can only watch from the sidelines.

Over the past two decades, the number of publicly listed companies around the globe has been shrinking. In the US alone, the number of publicly traded companies has dropped by nearly half, from roughly 7,500 in 1997 to fewer than 4,000 today, according to the Center for Research in Security Prices.

Professional investors, especially institutions, have been increasingly turning to private companies; while they carry more risk, they're drawing an ever-larger share of the capital available.

This shift in attention — and investment — to the private markets has resulted in companies such as OpenAI and SpaceX having an almost insatiable amount of demand from would-be buyers.

In the US alone, the number of publicly traded companies has dropped by nearly half, from roughly 7,500 in 1997 to fewer than 4,000 today

Elon Musk's SpaceX just hit a valuation of \$350bn, a number that would place it among the 25 largest companies in the S&P 500. Sam Altman's OpenAI raised \$6.6bn in new funding, bringing its valuation to \$157bn.

Fintech giant Stripe Inc bought back shares at a roughly \$70bn valuation. And software company Databricks Inc just raised \$10bn in new funding, taking its valuation to \$62bn.

As long as early-stage investors and employees are happy, the companies benefit from a more lax regulatory environment and don't have to deal with activist investors pushing for change,

or disclosing trade secrets and other matters that the firms would rather keep private.

Private equity firms, which raise funds to take or keep companies private, are dealing with a logjam of companies that they need to either take public or sell.

That number is likely similar for the traditional venture capital community, depending on the data. There are currently more than 1,400 venture-backed unicorns — companies valued at more than \$1bn — worth roughly \$5tn in total, data from PitchBook show.

The data show there are more than 57,000 private US companies with roughly a third of those fitting the mould of late-stage and venture growth startups — a group that's typically prime for public listings.

Private companies are valued based on what investors are willing to pay for a stake in them. The difference is that whereas the going price for a public company is updated and displayed in real time on stock exchanges during trading hours, the price paid to buy shares in a private company is in many cases a closely guarded secret, with the valuation occasionally disclosed in a press release after a rare funding round.

One important thing about being private: the company technically doesn't have to share any details of their business with the public. Yet many of the largest companies still do share details about how the business is operating, even without it being obligatory.

For more than a decade, private markets have enjoyed a remarkable period of sustained growth, more than doubling from \$9.7tn in assets under management in 2012, and are estimated to have reached \$24.4tn AUM by the end of 2023, according to an EY report.

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Qatar focuses on humanitarian aid for Syria

HE Adviser to the Prime Minister and Official Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr Majid bin Mohammed al-Ansari, has said that Qatar's priority in handling the situation in Syria is currently humanitarian to ensure providing all the essential help to maintain stability there.

During the weekly media briefing organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr al-Ansari said the air bridge being operated by Qatar to help the brotherly people of Syria is underway, as long as, there is a need for that.

He reiterated Qatar's call for the essential lifting of the international sanctions on Syria as soon as possible to ensure there would be no hindrance in getting all kinds of humanitarian aid to the brotherly people of Syria and extend the Qatari air bridge to all airports within the Syrian territories, thereby facilitating the delivery of these aids.

Dr al-Ansari added the Qatari position regarding the lifting of sanctions on Syria is crystal clear, especially since the reasons behind sanctions, which are represented in the former regime, have been diminished, implying that they no longer exist, and it is incumbent on international community to promptly act to lift those sanctions.

Within the framework of the Qatari delegation's visit to Damascus led by HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi, aboard the first flight of Qatar Airways to Damascus International Airport, the foremost needs were discussed there, alongside how Qatar can directly contribute to meeting those needs, pointed out Dr al-Ansari, underlining that the State will spare no effort in providing the essential support for the brotherly people of Syria.

He pointed out that the technical team that

accompanied HE Dr al-Khulaifi to Damascus was intended to get familiarized with the airport's technical needs and discussed how Qatar can perform a positive role in this respect to ensure it is swiftly recommissioned as an international airport, especially that it had been neglected for a very long time and came under shelling from the Israeli occupation.

He highlighted that the symbolic message associated with the landing of the Qatar Airways plane in Damascus International Airport reflects Qatar's commitment to taking all essential measures to ensure the airport's recommissioning and resuming flights to Syria, noting that flights will return to the airport simultaneously when technical requirements are in place.

He pointed out that the embassy of the Syrian opposition in Qatar is the first of the new Syrian embassies - a stance that reflects Qatar's unchanged position since the first day of the Syrian crisis, and supports the aspirations of the brotherly Syrian people by all available means.

He highlighted the resumption of the Qatari embassy in Syria on Dec 17, and the appointment of Khalifa Abdullah al-Mahmoud al-Sharif as charge d'affaires there.

He said that the resumption of embassy operations comes after about 13 years since all diplomatic relations were severed with the Syrian regime in 2011, expressing Qatar's principled stance in support of the Syrian people's revolution and its steadfast support for their demands for a dignified life, freedom, and social justice. It also reaffirms Qatar's unequivocal rejection of all the oppressive policies of the Syrian regime against its own people.

Dr al-Ansari added that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicated that the resumption

of the embassy's work in conjunction with the victory of the Syrian peoples revolution reflects the continued firm and supportive position of Qatar towards the Syrian people and their struggle to obtain their legitimate rights to a decent life, and enhances its relief efforts that began with an air bridge to help the Syrian people overcome the requirements of the transition process, noting the raising of the Qatari flag on December 21 in Damascus for the first time in 13 years.

Regarding the negotiations for a ceasefire in Gaza, Dr al-Ansari stated that the negotiations are ongoing, with technical talks taking place in Doha and other tracks occurring in Cairo with continuous co-ordination with Egypt in this regard, adding that no one can predict a specific timeline for reaching an agreement. He confirmed that the situation in Gaza has not improved at all, and the humanitarian crisis is worsening, reiterating the call to all parties to engage seriously with the Qatari-Egyptian-American mediation without any actions that might hinder the success of these negotiations.

Separately, Dr al-Ansari affirmed that Qatar-Iran relations are strong and solid, with both sides collaborating on certain gas projects in the region, praising the bilateral relationship with Iran, adding that their discussions on regional events are ongoing.

Regarding Qatar's relations with Russia, he said it remains ongoing and positive, highlighting Qatar's involvement in another mediation between Russia and Ukraine, aimed at reuniting children affected by the war with their families.

He reaffirmed Qatar's steadfast position towards Lebanon, its unity, and territorial integrity, and its continued support for the Lebanese people. **(QNA)**

Human smugglers cash in on Donald Trump's return

People smugglers expect Trump to boost business

Cartels control routes, extorting smugglers and migrants

Migrants face increased danger amid cartel turf war

By Diana Baptista
Mexico City

For the human smugglers who ferry migrants northwards from Central America, the return of Donald Trump is a welcome New Year gift that promises to supercharge their business. "Bless Donald Trump for winning," said one people smuggler, who talked to the Thomson Reuters Foundation on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal from Mexico's authorities as well as its drug cartels.

"We're eagerly waiting January 20th to be back in business and start earning some more dollars," said the 45-year-old, who has spent the past six years transporting undocumented migrants — most from Central America and the Caribbean — to the US. Now he is banking on a pickup in trade due to Trump's campaign promise to crack down on migrants once he takes office on Jan 20, vowing to lengthen the border wall to keep migrants out and enforce mass deportations on those who have made it.

Like thousands of other smugglers, he is hoping to cash in big time from Trump's return — expecting an increase of at least \$2,000 in profits per person.

Smugglers, or coyotes as they are called locally, are also tapping into a rising sense of panic among migrants, many of whom are fleeing deepening violence and poverty, fearing it will become harder to gain asylum under a second Trump presidency.

Even before Trump won re-election, smugglers were peddling disinformation and scams on social media, telling migrants to make it to the southern US border before Trump takes office as his presidency will make it harder to cross. In recent years, the father of three said he had ferried about 30 people a week to the US, be it young men or families with children, charging at least \$5,000 a head for passage to a new life by plane, bus or car.

His business comes from word-of-mouth recommendations from families who have successfully made it to the US, and the smuggler said he also connects migrants with a series of safe houses where they can eat, sleep and use the Internet.

This past year, he said, business was down a whopping 80% after the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency set up an app that let

migrants make their asylum claim at the border.

Instead of hiring a smuggler to get them across, migrants instead waited at the border in Mexico for an appointment — even if it meant living several months in areas rife with crime.

In 2023, there were 1,450 appointments available a day on the CBP One app. But as Trump has vowed to get rid of the app — effectively closing the main legal option for people seeking asylum — this will likely raise demand for smuggler services, which will in turn boost the fees that coyotes can charge.

"They say they will close the border, but we always find a hole to sneak people through. They can't close the entire border, it's impossible," said the smuggler.

The coyote said he had a near-100% success rate by scaling the wall in areas controlled by cartels. On the US side, he then drives the migrants to their chosen destination.

Trump is expected to declare illegal immigration a national emergency on taking office, pulling resources from across the government to crack down on both legal and illegal immigration.

Yet tightening the restrictions does not dissuade people from migrating, said Maureen Meyer with the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), a human rights advocacy group.

"Increased enforcement does very little to decrease migration flows to the US. What it does is feed profits into organised criminal groups," said Meyer, WOLA's vice president for programs.

According to 2017 estimates by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), human trafficking to the US earns criminal groups up to \$4.2bn a year.

As US and Mexican authorities tighten security along their border, a violent turf war is playing out further south over the Mexico-Guatemala border — changing the smuggling business, who controls it and heaping new dangers on migrants.

If smugglers once largely worked independently, operating within their own communities, many have now been recruited by the cartels, who control every step of the way to the border. Cartels run a vast transport network to facilitate their mass people smuggling: tourist buses, sweltering tractor-trailer trucks, motorcycles, taxis and app-based drivers who transport migrants through Mexico and into the US.

"We're always paying an extortion fee to do anything — move people, merchandise, food," said the smuggler, who has been recruited by a cartel that he preferred not to identify.

Smugglers also pay corrupt officials so they can get through checkpoints expressly set up to catch migrants, the coyote said.

Cartel violence is especially fierce in Chiapas state in southern Mexico, a key crossing point for migrants heading north from Central America or from as far as the Darien Gap — a perilous stretch of rainforest straddling Colombia and Panama. In Chiapas, factions from the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco Nueva Generacion Cartel are fighting for control of human trafficking, among other illegal businesses, said Armando Vargas, security expert with the think tank Mexico Evalua.

"Because people have different uses, from forced recruitment to sexual exploitation to organ removal," said Vargas, explaining how organized crime now makes more money from human traffic than it does from gun smuggling.

Every child and adult pays 1,200 pesos (\$60) to the cartel just for the right to cross the river that divides Mexico and Guatemala, the smuggler said. Whoever refuses to pay — migrant and smugglers alike — runs a high risk of kidnap or murder, he added. WOLA, and other human rights groups, have documented the acute dangers that migrants face on their journey north.

"They have often been subjected to horrendous abuse during the kidnapping including sexual assault, torture, withholding food and water as a way to send messages to the family members, oftentimes in the US, who are being extorted to pay ransom," said Meyer.

As cartels engage in more aggressive turf wars, Vargas expects this will also propel more Mexicans to risk all and head for the US in search of a better life.

"The risk of violence will increase for these vulnerable people, not only from Mexico, but from all of Latin America," said Vargas.

And despite the triple whammy for would-be migrants of greater violence, higher fees and tougher restrictions, the app-based driver-turned-coyote is banking on a highly profitable 2025.

"Migrants don't want to pay (for a smuggler), but I think we will become their only, and safest, option," he said. — Thomson Reuters Foundation



Migrants react near a razor wire fence, set by US to inhibit the crossing, after a member of the Texas National Guard fired tear gas, as seen from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, on December 19.



FILE PHOTO: A group of migrants attempt to go through a wire fence on the banks of the Rio Grande river as members of US National Guards stand guard on the other side of the fence in Eagle Pass, Texas, on February 27, 2024.

Norway is a Ukraine war profiteer

By Havard Halland and Knut Anton Mork
Edinburgh/Trondheim

When Russian President Vladimir Putin gave the order to invade Ukraine in February 2022, he surely did not expect that one of Russia's neighbours would be the main beneficiary of his war. Yet as Russian hydrocarbon exports to Europe cratered in the wake of the invasion, Norway emerged as the continent's largest supplier.

Owing to the steep increase in gas and oil prices that followed the outbreak of the war, Norway ultimately enjoyed a massive financial windfall. In 2022 and 2023, it reaped nearly kr1.3tn (\$111bn) in additional revenue from gas exports, according to recent estimates from the finance ministry.

Why, then, has Norway allocated only a little more than \$3.1bn for support to Ukraine in its 2025 budget? Combined with what it contributed in 2024, Norway's support for Ukraine amounts to less than 5% of its two-year war windfall. For comparison, Germany – Europe's largest single contributor – provided \$16.3bn in military, financial, and humanitarian support for Ukraine from January 2022 until the end of October 2024, and



FILE PHOTO: Norwegian flags flutter over building in Oslo, Norway, on May 31, 2017. (Reuters)

the US has contributed \$92bn. But while Norway's two-year windfall is larger than the US and German contributions combined, Norway's support for Ukraine as a share of GDP, at 0.7%, ranks only ninth in Europe, far behind Denmark (2%) and Estonia (2.2%).

Not only does Norway have the capacity to be making far more of a difference to

the outcome of the war and the subsequent civilian reconstruction; it has an obvious moral obligation to do so. Given that its excess revenues are a direct consequence of Russia's war, surely a greater share of them should go to those fighting and dying on the front lines to keep their country free.

Instead, Norway's government has effectively decided to be a

war profiteer, clinging greedily to its lucky gains. To their credit, opposition parties have proposed higher levels of support for Ukraine, ultimately pushing up the sum that the government initially proposed. No party, however, has come anywhere close to suggesting a transfer of the total war windfall to Ukraine.

The Norwegian government's position is puzzling, given that

Norway shares a border with Russia and has long relied on its allies' support for its defence. Its own national security would be jeopardised if Russia wins the war or is militarily emboldened by a peace agreement skewed in its favour.

Moreover, it is not as though Norway would be immiserated by transferring its war windfall to Ukraine. This windfall represents about 6% of its sovereign wealth fund, the world's largest, with assets valued at \$1.7tn – or \$308,000 for every Norwegian.

True, Norway channels all government revenue from oil and gas production to its sovereign wealth fund, and no more than 3% of the value of the fund can be drawn down and transferred to the government budget each year. This rule helps limit the effects on inflation and the exchange rate, and ensures that the fund exists in perpetuity.

But as a macroeconomic and national savings instrument, the drawdown rule was not designed with wartime demands in mind. It therefore should not be seen as an obstacle for a larger transfer to Ukraine. Since such a transfer would not enter the Norwegian economy, it would have no domestic inflationary or other macroeconomic implications. (With the 2025 budget largely set, it would need to be an extrabudgetary

measure justified by the wartime circumstances.)

This is not the first time that Norway's hoarding of its war windfall has been an issue. But it is the first time that we have been given an official estimate of the windfall's value. The finance ministry has assigned a number to natural-gas export revenues in excess of what they would have had gas prices remained around their five-year pre-invasion average. Although such counterfactuals will always be subject to uncertainty and debate, the official estimate is the closest we will get to a value for Norway's war windfall. In fact, the actual number is probably much higher, as the estimate does not include excess revenues resulting from higher oil prices following the invasion.

With Europeans wringing their hands about the implications of Donald Trump's return to power, Norway's government and parliament should transfer the windfall to Ukraine in the form of military and financial support. Norway has a powerful national-security interest in doing the right thing. – Project Syndicate

• *Havard Halland, a former senior economist at the World Bank and OECD, is Professor of Sustainable Finance at Heriot-Watt University. Knut Anton Mork is Professor Emeritus of Economics at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.*

How the EU can scale up carbon removal

By Ludovic Chatoux and Sophia Escheu
Berlin/Paris

The European Union has committed to achieving net-zero greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions by 2050, and there are strong signals that EU policymakers will approve a new target to reduce emissions by 90% by 2040. The science is clear on what must be done to limit global warming to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels: rapid and dramatic cuts in emissions and the removal of 6-10 gigatons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere annually. And yet the former receives far more attention than the latter.

This must change – and fast. Removal of atmospheric CO2 will require scaling up investment in carbon-removal technologies from \$5-13bn today to \$6-16tn by 2050. For comparison, this is at least double the amount of revenues generated by the oil and gas industry each year.

Setting aside the moral – one could say existential – obligation to protect the climate, there is a business case for deploying carbon-removal technology across the EU. By 2050, a global carbon-removal industry capable of achieving net-zero emissions could be worth between \$300bn and \$1.2tn.

Besides private- and public-sector investments, carbon markets – where companies purchase credits to offset their emissions – have emerged as one of the most important sources of finance for carbon-removal projects. By putting a price on carbon, businesses are incentivized to improve energy efficiency and develop and deploy green solutions across their operations.

Today, there are two main approaches to carbon pricing: compliance and voluntary carbon markets. The compliance market is regulated by mandatory carbon-

reduction regimes, mainly targeting high-emitting industries such as steel, oil, and transportation, while the voluntary market operates independently, without direct regulatory oversight.

The EU's Emissions Trading System (ETS), the bloc's compliance market, works on a cap-and-trade principle, whereby firms in specific sectors receive emission allowances, the supply of which is capped at a level that reduces total CO2 emissions. They can sell unused allowances on the market, often to companies that require additional ones.

By contrast, voluntary carbon markets allow businesses and individuals to purchase credits from verified offset projects in order to meet sustainability goals independently from any emission allowances. These markets use different methodologies to ensure that the emissions reductions are real, measurable, and permanent.

Unfortunately, despite the urgency of climate action, recent debates about voluntary carbon markets have cast doubt on their usefulness. Sceptics argue that the lack of transparency and inconsistent standards lead to low-quality credits based on offsets that fail to deliver the promised emissions reductions. In their view, these markets allow large companies to engage in a sophisticated form of greenwashing.

The controversy came to a head earlier this year, when naysayers questioned the legitimacy of the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi), which develops the global standards and tools that enable companies to set GHG targets in line with reaching net-zero emissions by 2050.

The SBTi's decision to allow firms to include voluntary carbon credits in the calculation of their indirect emissions triggered a significant backlash, with many challenging the credibility of such instruments. A few months later,

the SBTi revised its position, clarifying that environmental attribute certificates – including carbon credits – cannot be used to offset a company's value-chain emissions.

These developments have held up critical financing for climate solutions – especially carbon removal. Neither the EU ETS nor the bloc's voluntary carbon markets can sustainably fund carbon-removal technologies. Many have suggested using advanced technology to improve the transparency and accountability of carbon markets. But given the situation's complexity and the lack of unified voluntary standards, scaling up carbon removal requires another tool: regulation.

Japan serves as a good example. The country's compliance carbon market now accepts credits from carbon-removal methods, including direct air capture and bioenergy carbon capture and storage. California's Carbon Dioxide Removal Market Development Act could likewise foster the widespread adoption and deployment of this technology by defining which types of emissions it can counterbalance.

The EU should require companies to reduce emissions to a certain threshold and purchase "negative emissions credits" to compensate for their remaining climate impact. Equally important, clear rules for certifying carbon-removal practices to ensure their effectiveness and long-term storage will incentivize businesses to invest in these technologies.

Some progress has already been made. The EU's adoption of the carbon removals certification framework this year was an important first step toward regulating this technology.

But more must be done. For starters, it is unclear how this new framework will work with existing regulations, including the ETS. Moreover, standards-setting organisations such as the SBTi must better integrate "beyond value chain mitigation" – a firm's efforts to reduce GHG emissions outside of its own business activities – and carbon removal into short-term corporate climate targets to help guide the regulatory response. As the EU prepares to revise the ETS in 2026, it must take advantage of this opportunity to take the lead in promoting a crucial green technology.

Disclosure: The authors of this article are, respectively, the CEO of a company that certifies credits for voluntary carbon markets and an investor with a stake in the company. – Project Syndicate,

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FILE PHOTO: An aerial picture taken on October 3, 2022 shows a dump truck dumping its load during emergency repairs to restore road access in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian in Matlacha, Florida. (AFP via Getty Images)

Digital financial inclusion strengthens climate resilience

By Ellen Jackowski
Purchase, New York

A group of economists came together earlier this year to complete the largest analysis of hurricanes' economic effects on the US to date. One of the most striking findings was that businesses with only a brick-and-mortar presence that were in a hurricane's path suffered a 56% drop in sales for roughly three weeks, whereas those with an online presence experienced a far shallower decline – just 23%.

The clear takeaway is that nearly every business – from a hardware store in North Carolina to a corner shop in Nairobi – can strengthen its resilience to climate change by joining in the digital economy.

The global effort to counteract climate change has expanded rapidly in recent years. The energy and automotive industries are overhauling supply chains to boost uptake of clean technologies. Governments are implementing policies to accelerate the green transition, from the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism to the United States' Inflation Reduction Act.

But measures to promote digital and financial inclusion – the critical work of providing internet access to left-behind communities, bank accounts to workers, and digital tools to entrepreneurs – are often missing in the fight against global warming. The report on the impact of hurricanes, conducted by the World Bank, the Sustainable and Green Finance Institute, and the Mastercard Economics Institute, illustrates why integrating these measures into climate action plans would have a powerful effect.

More than 1bn unbanked people live in the most climate-vulnerable countries, and improving their access to digital banking and payment services would make them and their communities more resilient to both economic and climate shocks. Following a natural disaster, households could more easily receive relief funds through digital money transfers, and businesses could continue selling to their customers online.

This represents a clear opportunity, especially for fintechs and nonprofits, to create more products and services at the intersection of climate resilience and digital inclusion. One good example is the

social enterprise Abalobi, an Earthshot Prize finalist in 2023. Abalobi created an app that small-scale fishers can use to input catches, showing exactly where they are fishing.

The app addresses two problems. First, it provides invaluable data to governments and scientists about who is fishing sustainably and who is not. Second, small-scale fishers often sell through middlemen who pay low prices, which forces them to reel in as much as they can to make a living. But by using the app's digital marketplace, these fishers can connect directly with restaurants and other buyers, enabling them to sell their catch for higher prices. This allows them to fish more selectively, in turn reducing the strain on marine life.

Yo! Pay Agric, powered by Mastercard Community Pass, likewise enables smallholder farmers to connect with regional buyers through their farmer cooperative organisations, bypassing middlemen and earning them higher prices for their crops. Transaction data from these sales can be used by farmers to establish their creditworthiness, making it easier for them to secure loans to invest in seeds, fertiliser, and clean-energy solutions such as solar-powered farm equipment.

Digital and financial inclusion must become a core pillar of future climate efforts, with a focus on reducing the number of unbanked individuals and building digital infrastructure in climate-vulnerable communities. To that end, private companies, governments, and nonprofits need to work together to create innovative solutions, including products like Abalobi and Yo! Pay. This approach would help local users improve their financial health while simultaneously promoting resilience.

Climate change and poverty are intertwined: we cannot effectively tackle one without addressing the other. Digital tools and access to financial services cannot stop climate-related disasters, but they can make it easier for people to recover from these shocks. Strengthening the financial resilience of the most climate-vulnerable households benefits local communities, while also benefiting the entire global economy. – Project Syndicate

• *Ellen Jackowski is Chief Sustainability Officer at Mastercard.*



DFI opens applications for Spring 2025 funding cycle

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

The Doha Film Institute (DFI) has announced that applications for its Spring 2025 funding cycle are now open until January 5.

The DFI's grants programme aims to find new cinematic talents and voices, and discover stories that can resonate globally.

The Spring 2025 cycle opened on December 22 and will close on January 5 at 5pm.

The institute's approach is to champion projects that aim to explore, expand and cultivate authentic storytelling, with a keen interest in propelling forward the medium of cinema.

The programme provides creative and financial assistance for short and feature-length films, subject to eligibility criteria, by Qatari and international first- and second-time directors, as well as established Mena (Middle East and North Africa) directors.

Financial support is also available for TV and Web series helmed by Mena scriptwriters and directors, subject to eligibility criteria.

The TV fiction and creative documentary series development grant aims to assist independent screenwriters/producers from the



Mena region in developing original serialised content intended for international markets.

The Web fiction and creative documentary series grant will support independent directors/producers from the Mena region in financing the production of original serialised content for the Web.

The DFI seeks to strengthen and empower Qatari voices in filmmaking that have the potential to make significant contributions to the art of cinema.

Its focus on the growth and evolution of Qatar's film community includes providing creative and logistical support, as well as financial

contribution to filmmakers from Qatar.

In addition to applying for funding through the Grants Programme, Qatari filmmakers with short and feature-length projects at any stage of evolution are invited to contact the Institute year-round at grants@dohafilminstitute.com to discuss grants, co-financing possibilities, internships with international productions, creative development seminars, mentorship initiatives and exhibition opportunities.

Development, production and post-production funding is available to first- and second-time directors from the Mena region for feature-length projects.

Short films are eligible for production funding only.

Established Mena directors may apply for post-production funding for feature-length projects.

Development funding is available to screenwriters from the Mena region for TV series.

Production funding is available to directors from the Mena region for Web series.

Post-production funding is available for feature-length films by first- and second-time non-Mena directors.

Interested candidates can apply via the following website: <https://www.dohafilminstitute.com/financing/grants/guidelines>



Abdullah Yahia (second from right) and the film crew.

Al Jazeera documentary wins Tanit Award in Carthage

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

The documentary film *Mattila* won the "Bronze Tanit" Award in the official documentary competition at the 35th Carthage Film Festival, which concluded its activities on Sunday in Tunisia.

The film, directed by Tunisian Abdullah Yahia and produced by Al Jazeera Documentary, tells the story of Rayan, a Tunisian teenager who was forced to face the challenges of the world of crime and delinquency after leaving school at an early age, as a result of the absence of his

parents who left the country illegally during the events of the Tunisian revolution in 2011.

Over the course of three years of filming, *Mattila* follows the journey of Rayan who found in football a safe haven away from delinquency and marginalisation.

The film also depicts his ambition to travel to France to meet his parents after a separation of more than 12 years.

Mattila is a testament to the social difficulties facing Tunisian youth, and highlights the strength of hope and determination in striving for a better future, despite the harsh circumstances.

Registration process for Marmi 2025 continues with more GCC participation

The registration process for the Hudad Al Tahadi Championship, part of the 16th edition Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2025), continued yesterday.

The process saw significant participation from the GCC region on the third day of registration at the Al Gannas Qatari Society headquarters in katara - the Cultural Village.

The festival, held under the patronage of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani and supported by the Fund for the Support of Social and Sports Activities (Daam), will take place from January 1-February 1 in Sabkha Marmi, the Sealine Area.

The Marmi International Falcons and Hunting Festival has become a hallmark

of the Al Gannas Qatari Society's efforts to preserve Qatari and Gulf heritage.

The festival aims to uphold the traditional and emotional values associated with this sport inherited from ancestors.

It also highlights the sport's significance in the Arab, particularly the Gulf and Qatari, cultural heritage.

The Hudad Al Tahadi Championship saw notable participation from citizens and GCC nationals.

Saad Issa al-Mohannadi, a Qatari participant, remarked: "This is my third year participating in the Marmi Festival. The championship witnesses fierce competition from both Qataris and GCC participants. I am fully prepared and currently training my falcon, which I specifically



purchased from Ukraine."

Abdullah al-Otaibi from Saudi Arabia expressed his excitement: "I am happy to participate in the Marmi Festival for the eighth year. Despite not achieving victory



so far, the competition is intense. I remain optimistic and hope to win this year with a special Shaheen falcon from Saudi Arabia."

Nasser al-Shamsi, member of participating team from the UAE, said: "We par-

ticipate annually in the Marmi Festival and eagerly await it each year. We have been fortunate to win in previous editions, and we are excited to compete again, this time with a large number of falcons."

Xiaomi SU7 revolutionises driving experience at Place Vendôme



As part of the collaboration, Intertec has initiated a special demonstration of the Xiaomi SU7.

The Xiaomi SU7, an electric vehicle (EV), is now on display at Place Vendôme, showcasing the future of mobility.

Intertec, the official distributor of Xiaomi smartphones and smart products in Qatar, presented the SU7 to the public.

Its longstanding partnership with Xiaomi ensures that customers in Qatar can experience the brand's latest innovations firsthand.

As part of the collaboration, Intertec has initiated a special demonstration of the Xiaomi SU7,

allowing visitors to explore the vehicle's advanced features, performance, and design.

The initiative aims to introduce the next generation of electric mobility to the Qatari market, combining Xiaomi's cutting-edge technology with Intertec's local expertise.

Intertec Group managing director Abdulla Khalifa A T al-Subaey said that the showcase of the Xiaomi SU7 Max in Qatar represents a significant step in the ongoing partnership with Xiaomi.

The collaboration reflects a

strong commitment to introducing innovative products and services that align with Xiaomi's vision for the future, he added.

"Intertec's strength is rooted in its robust partnerships and proven track record of delivering excellence across diverse industries," said Intertec Group chief financial officer George Thomas.

"By introducing the Xiaomi SU7 Max in Qatar, we are reinforcing our strong commitment to our partnership with Xiaomi," said Intertec Group senior chief operating officer Asraf N.K.

Auto Class Cars launches the Maxus D90 Max in Qatar

Auto Class Cars, the authorised general distributor for Maxus in Qatar, has revealed the all-new Maxus D90 Max in Qatar.

The launching ceremony was held at Ritz-Carlton Hotel Doha in the presence of Auto Class Cars general manager Frank Zauner, general sales manager Zaher Janbieh, and marketing manager Ahmad Firooz along with guests.

"Auto Class Cars is proud to launch the all-new Maxus D90 Max in Qatar, another significant step forward in our expansion strategy," Zauner said.

"The new vehicle offers a modern and luxurious driving experience while enabling customers to navigate all terrains with comfort and ease," Janbieh said.

The new Maxus D90 Max and the full line-up of Maxus vehicles are available at Auto Class Cars showroom on Salwa Road in Doha.

With maximum torque of up to 500Nm and a maximum power of 160kW, the Maxus D90 Max is equipped with 2.0T Diesel Dual Supercharge Engine that gives powerful performance and fuel economy of up to 8%, or 9.1 litres per 100km.

The 8-speed ZF transmission in the Maxus D90 Max increases fuel efficiency by over 10% and delivers smoother acceleration and ride with improving fuel efficiency.

The vehicle is an off-road warrior that conquers any terrain.



Auto Class Cars promotion on Lynk & Co vehicles

Auto Class Cars, the authorised general distributor of Lynk & Co in Qatar, presents its special offer on selected models of Lynk & Co vehicles.

Buyers can take advantage of the offer by visiting the Auto Class Cars showroom on Salwa Road.

The offer is valid until January 15 and includes the 01 Louder Pro starting at QR99,000, and the 05 Hyper Halo starting at QR109,000.

It includes a package of benefits such as free comprehensive insurance for the first year, free registration for the first year, regular oil and lubrication maintenance for two years or 40,000km (whichever comes first), and free window tinting.

The vehicles can be purchased through internal financing by Nasser Bin Khalid Financial Services, subject to terms and conditions.

The 01 Louder Pro 2023 is an FWD SUV equipped with a 2.0L engine, four cylinders, and 218 horsepower. The transmission is an 8-speed automatic, and the fuel economy is 14.9km/L.

The 05 Hyper Halo 2023 is an AWD SUV equipped with a 2.0L engine, four cylinders, and 254 horsepower. The transmission is an 8-speed automatic with a fuel economy of 14.2km/L.



MG Qatar launches 'End of Year' offer on selected cars

MG Qatar and Auto Class Cars, the authorised distributor of MG in Qatar, has launched the "End of Year" offer on selected MG cars with great benefits.

New buyers can leverage the offer at Auto Class Cars on Salwa Road.

Valid until January 15, the offer allows customers to purchase the MG 7 car at a starting price of QR84,000, the MG GT at a starting price from QR62,000, and the MG RX5 at a

price starting from QR74,000.

There is a package of added features, including one-year free car registration and comprehensive insurance, six-year warranty/200,000km (whichever comes first) and complimentary window tinting.

The full range of MG models can be purchased with the option of in-house financing with special rate interest through NBK Financial Services (terms and conditions apply).

The new MG 7 offers remarkable value for its class while combining economy, style, and performance with innovative features.

The new MG RX5 incorporates 22 stylish design enhancements, eight performance upgrades and 25 configuration upgrades.

The MG GT offers a fresh new alternative in the sedan sector, with its aggressive sporty looks and 1.5T powertrain for optimum power and performance.