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SPORT | Page 1

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Qatar condemns attack on Chad's presidential palace

Qatar has expressed its strong condemnation and denunciation of the attack that targeted the presidential palace in Chad's capital N'Djamena, resulting in one death and a number of injuries. In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated Qatar's firm stance rejecting violence and criminal acts regardless of the motives and reasons, and its keenness to the maintenance of security and stability in Chad. The ministry expressed Qatar's condolences to the family of the victim and to the government and people of Chad, and wished a swift recovery to those injured. (QNA)

No jail time for Trump in hush-money case

A judge sentenced Donald Trump to an unconditional discharge yesterday for covering up hush money payments to an adult film star despite the US president-elect's last-ditch efforts to avoid becoming the first felon in the White House. New York judge Juan Merchan handed down no jail time or fine, but the discharge upholds the jury's guilty verdict - and confirmed Trump's infamy as the first former president convicted of a felony. The 34 counts of falsifying business records on which Trump was convicted in May 2024 carried potential jail time. (AFP) Page 6

Marmi 2025 challenge



A man carries a falcon during the Haddad Al Tahadi Championship, as part of the activities of the Qatar International Falconry and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2025) at the Sabkhat Marmi in Sealine, south of Doha, yesterday. (AFP)

Israel bombs power station and two ports in Yemen

Israeli warplanes bombed a power station and two ports in Houthi-controlled Yemen yesterday. Pro-Houthi media said at least one person had been killed and nine wounded. A series of air strikes targeted the Red Sea port of Ras Issa and six others the major port of Hodeidah, said Al Masirah TV, the main news outlet run by the Houthis, while Harf Sufyan District in Amran province also came under air attack. An employee at the Ras Issa port was killed and six others were injured, the outlet said. Earlier, British security firm Ambrey said air strikes on the Ras Issa port targeted oil storage facilities in the vicinity of shipping berths, though no merchant vessels were reported

to have been damaged. The supply of petroleum derivatives is stable, the Houthi government spokesperson Hashem Sharaf Eddine said after the attack. Thirteen air strikes also targeted the Hez Yaz central power station in Yemen's capital Sanaa, Al Masirah TV reported. It said three citizens had been injured, including a worker at Hez Yaz, and a number of homes had been damaged. Within the past 48 hours, the Houthis have fired three drones at Israel's commercial hub Tel Aviv and more drones and missiles at the US aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman in the Red Sea, Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Saree said. (Reuters)

PM meets Trump's envoy to the Middle East

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met yesterday with the visiting US President-elect Donald Trump's Middle East

envoy Steve Witkoff. Talks during the meeting focused on the latest developments in the region, especially the efforts aimed at reaching a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. (QNA)



Gaza war toll could be 40% higher: study

Reuters
London

An official Palestinian tally of direct deaths in the Israeli war on Gaza likely undercounted the number of casualties by around 40% in the first nine months of the war as the Gaza Strip's healthcare infrastructure unravelled, according to a study published on Thursday.

The peer-reviewed statistical analysis published in *The Lancet* journal was conducted by academics at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Yale University and other institutions.

Using a statistical method called capture-recapture analysis, the researchers sought to assess the death toll from Israel's air and ground campaign in Gaza

between October 2023 and the end of June 2024.

They estimated 64,260 deaths due to traumatic injury during this period, about 41% higher than the official Palestinian Health Ministry count. The study said 59.1% were women, children and people over the age of 65. It did not provide an estimate of Palestinian combatants among the dead.

More than 46,000 people have been killed in the Gaza war, according to Palestinian health officials, from a pre-war population of around 2.3mn.

A senior Israeli official, commenting on the study, said Israel's armed forces went to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties.

"No other army in the world has ever taken such wide-ranging measures," the official said. "These include providing ad-

vance warning to civilians to evacuate, safe zones and taking any and all measures to prevent harm to civilians. The figures provided in this report do not reflect the situation on the ground."

The Lancet study said the Palestinian health ministry's capacity for maintaining electronic death records had previously proven reliable, but deteriorated under Israel's military campaign, which has included raids on hospitals and other healthcare facilities and disruptions to digital communications.

Hamas denies Israeli accusation that it is using hospitals as cover for its operations.

Anecdotal reports suggested that a significant number of dead remained buried in the rubble of destroyed buildings and were therefore not included in some tallies. **To Page 5**

Italian FM proposes setting aside EU sanctions on Syria

Reuters
Beirut

Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said yesterday that he had called for a moratorium on EU sanctions on Syria for six months or one year, but that a final decision could only come from the entire bloc.

Speaking to reporters in Beirut after meeting Syria's new leaders in Damascus, Tajani said the EU sanctions had been imposed under President Bashar al-Assad,

who was toppled on Dec 8 by a sweeping rebel offensive.

"I think that we can begin to change things," he said. "The next step is the meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of the EU and we will talk on this. Italy is in favour." That meeting is set to take place in Brussels on Jan 27.

"A solution should be a moratorium - six months, one year. I put this idea on the table," Tajani said, but added that "lifting sanctions is not a national decision, they are a European bloc decision".

Tajani met both the new leader

of Syria's administration, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and its foreign minister, Asaad al-Shibani. He said they had pledged to address illegal immigration and drug trafficking, issues he described as crucial for Italy.

When asked what specific steps he would like to see the new Syrian administration take ahead of the EU meeting, Tajani said only that "the beginning has been positive" and that the new leaders in Damascus had made "very good declarations... not aggressive speeches".

France's foreign minister said



Syria's new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa receiving Italy's Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani in Damascus yesterday.

this week that EU sanctions that obstructed the delivery of humanitarian aid and hindered the country's recovery could be lifted swiftly.

The United States on Monday

issued a sanctions exemption for transactions with governing institutions in Syria for six months after the end of Assad's rule to try to ease the flow of humanitarian assistance.

2024 was the hottest year on record, scientists say

Reuters
Brussels

2024 was the hottest year on record, the World Meteorological Organisation said yesterday, and the first in which temperatures exceeded 1.5C above pre-industrial times - a threshold that may lead to more severe climate disasters.

The latest bleak assessment of the state of climate change comes as the death toll from wildfires raging in California climbs at the start of the new year.

The WMO and the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) said climate

change was pushing the planet's temperature to levels never before experienced by modern humans.

"Today's assessment from the World Meteorological Organisation is clear: Global heating is a cold, hard fact," UN Secretary-General António Guterres said in a statement. "There's still time to avoid the worst of climate catastrophe. But leaders must act - now." The planet's average temperature in 2024 was 1.6C higher than in the 1850-1900 pre-industrial period, C3S said. The last 10 years have all been in the top 10 hottest years on record, according to the World Meteorological Organisation.

"The trajectory is just incredible," C3S director Carlo Buontempo told Reuters, noting that every month in 2024 was the warmest or second-warmest for that month since records began.

"Today's assessment from the World Meteorological Organisation is clear: Global heating is a cold, hard fact" - UN Secretary-General António Guterres

Wildfires are one of the many disasters that climate change is making more frequent and severe. The fires raging in Los Angeles this week have killed at least 10 people and devoured nearly 10,000 structures.

But while the impacts of climate change now affect people from the richest to the poorest on earth, political will to address it has waned in some countries.

US President-elect Donald Trump, who takes office on Jan 20, has called climate change a hoax, despite the global scientific consensus that it is caused by humans.

Matthew Jones, a climate scien-

tist at the University of East Anglia in Britain, said fire-prone weather such as that affecting California will keep increasing "so long as progress on tackling the root causes of climate change remains sluggish".

The main cause of climate change is CO2 emissions from burning fossil fuels.

Recent European elections have also shifted political priorities towards industrial competitiveness, with some European Union governments seeking to weaken climate policies they say hurt business.

EU climate commissioner Wopke Hoekstra said the 1.5C breach last year showed climate action must be prioritised.

"It is extremely complicated, in a very difficult geopolitical setting, but we don't have an alternative," he told Reuters.

The 1.5C milestone should serve as "a rude awakening to key political actors to get their act together," said Chukwumerije Okereke, a professor of climate governance at Britain's University of Bristol.

Britain's Met Office confirmed 2024's likely breach of 1.5C, while estimating a slightly lower average temperature of 1.53C for the year. US scientists will also publish their 2024 climate data yesterday.

Governments promised under the 2015 Paris Agreement to try to prevent the average temperature rise exceeding 1.5C.



Katara international expo showcased heritage of amber and traditional crafts

The fifth edition of the Katara International Exhibition for Kahraman concluded yesterday. Organised by the Katara – the Cultural Village, the four-day expo saw a wide participation from key companies and brands specialised in amber from across the globe. It was a unique platform for amber lovers to view the rarest pieces and the latest designs, in addition to highlighting Doha's position as a global centre for amber trade. The exhibition featured handcrafted amber products from 14 countries displayed in 77 pavilions, showcasing products such as amber beads, jewellery, and antiques. Director of Public Relations and Communications at Katara Salem Mubkhout al-Marri said this year's event provided an integrated experience for



visitors by organising various activities, workshops and educational lectures, in addition to giving an opportunity for companies and exhibitors to communicate and establish fruitful partnerships. Visitors noted its distinction in promoting the heritage of amber and the traditional crafts associated

with it, while participants and exhibitors appreciated Katara's continued success in organizing this distinguished international event and its contribution to strengthening cultural and economic ties between exhibitors, amateurs and those interested in the heritage of amber. **(QNA)**



Official

Amir sends cables of congratulations to Sultan of Oman

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent cables of congratulations to Sultan Haitham bin Tariq of Oman on the anniversary of assuming the reins of power. **(QNA)**

EAA Foundation helps overcoming barriers to education in Somalia

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

As many as 127,237 marginalised children have been enrolled into quality primary education in Somalia with the 'Educate Your Children II project', a three-year initiative in Somalia led by Education Above All (EAA) Foundation's Educate A Child (EAC) programme and CARE USA. The EAA Foundation told *Gulf Times* that running from 2021 to 2024, the project improved infrastructure, trained 519 teachers, and achieved an 86% retention rate, with many students transitioning to formal schooling. The project marks a significant step forward for education in Somalia, addressing the significant education access gap in the country, while offering hope and opportunities to children who remain out of school.

Since 2013, EAA Foundation has been working in Somalia through its EAC programme, supporting the most marginalised with dif-

ferent partnership projects and successfully enrolling 300,005 out-of-school children across Puntland, Somaliland, and South Central Somalia Zones.

These joint projects with partners, such as, CARE USA, Mercy Corps, and Unicef, have been working to address barriers to education, including social, economic, disabilities and gender discrimination, with the aim of increasing enrolment and retention in quality primary education for children from excluded groups affected by recurrent conflict and crisis.

In Somalia, significant barriers to education persist, including poverty, lack of schools, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to qualified teachers.

Over half of the primary school-age children are out of school, and marginalised groups such as girls, internally displaced persons and nomadic populations are especially vulnerable.

These challenges are further compounded by ongoing conflict and environmental crises, which

disrupt education and hinder attendance. Iqra, a 12-year-old from Galkaio, Somalia, was one of the many who faced multiple barriers to education, and had to drop out of school in 2019 due to financial constraints. "I missed my classmates and the school. I always wanted to continue, but I was not able to. Being at school is always a joy," Iqra said.

It was only through Educate Your Children II project—a collaborative effort of EAC and CARE USA that enabled her to return to school. The project provided accelerated learning programmes, necessary school materials, and renovated the school infrastructure, enabling Iqra to pursue her education again.

Now back in school, Iqra is thriving in the fifth grade, with a passion for science and the Somali language. She aspires to become a doctor to help her community. "I love coming to school now! With our new classrooms, I can study without distractions," says Iqra.

Iqra's renewed access to education is just one example of how



A classroom in village in Somalia.

targeted programmes can transform lives, offering children in even the most challenging environments the chance for a better future. In celebration of the upcoming UN International Day of Education, EAA Foundation is hosting the Walk for Education: CSR & Sustainability Fair on

January 24, at Museum of Islamic Arts Park, Doha. The fair will unite schools, corporates, and the community to raise awareness and funds for the Foundation's global education projects aimed at providing marginalised children worldwide with access to quality education.

The event will feature a variety of community activities, including a football tournament, art workshops, symbolic walks, and the "Buy a Brick and Build a School" campaign, which allows attendees to donate to building schools for underprivileged and children with disabilities in Qatar.

HEC Paris aims for high-quality teaching materials through business research lab

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

HEC Paris Doha has set up a new initiative, the Business Research Lab to develop high-quality, locally and regionally relevant teaching materials for its programmes. "What sets it apart is the exceptional calibre of our diverse faculty and the broad scope of its activities.

These include writing business case studies, publishing industry insights for wider audiences, and conducting specialised research tailored to key industries," said Deval Kartik, senior case writer

at HEC Paris Doha. The lab also pioneers learning simulations to provide immersive educational experiences and collaborates with leading public and private entities in Qatar to create teaching materials with global relevance and impact. "Our selection process for case studies is largely guided by the sectors and priorities outlined in Qatar National Vision 2030 and the strategic goals of economies across the GCC. We focus on creating in-depth case studies that explore a wide range of entities, including start-ups, small and medium-sized enterprises, family businesses, non-profits, and large local and international companies

operating in the region," explained Kartik. According to Kartik, the alumni network of the university helps build and maintain strong connections with Qatari businesses and government entities.

"Many of our alumni hold influential positions within these organisations, and their support is instrumental in facilitating introductions to key leaders and decision-makers. This network allows us to identify opportunities for collaboration and engage with organisations that can provide valuable insights and data. These partnerships foster mutual growth and knowledge-sharing, enabling us to develop case studies that reflect

the unique challenges and opportunities within Qatar's business and governmental landscape," she continued.

The academic said that the Business Research Lab has significantly enhanced the learning experience by developing case studies tailored to the industry challenges faced by the custom programme clients. Kartik noted: "The Business Research Lab plays a key role in contributing to Qatar's vision of becoming a knowledge-based economy by developing local and regional case studies. These case studies address real-world business challenges and provide valuable insights, making them an

essential tool for fostering knowledge creation and learning. There is a strong demand for region-specific case studies, and we actively encourage more businesses to come forward and share their challenges."

She pointed out that several key research areas are emerging as crucial for both business education and the economic development of the GCC region, including sustainability, digital transformation, and diversity and inclusion. "As Qatar and the wider GCC region prioritise sustainable growth, research into sustainability will play a pivotal role in shaping business practices that balance economic goals



Deval Kartik

with environmental responsibility. Qatar National Vision 2030 exemplifies the region's commitment to green policies and sustainable development," added Kartik.

Ideal School bids farewell to outgoing students

In a recently held ceremony, Ideal Indian School bid farewell to the outgoing students of class XII, planned and executed by the students of Class XI. The outgoing students recounted their days in the school and expressed their gratitude to the teachers for their painstaking efforts in shaping their personalities. They also thanked their juniors wholeheartedly.

Speaking on the occasion, Principal Shaik Shamim Saheb extended his best wishes to the outgoing students as they prepared for their

upcoming exams. He emphasised the importance of hard work, determination and self-belief, urging the students to approach their future with enduring passion and resilience. The heads of both the Boys' and Girls' Sections addressed the gathering, offering words of guidance, encouragement and best wishes for the future endeavours of the graduating students. A ceremonial cake-cutting session served as a symbolic gesture to mark the joyous occasion, bringing a sense of unity and festivity to the gathering.

In a special award ceremony, students were honoured for their outstanding achievements, recognising the exemplary performance of Class XII students throughout the year in various domains, including academics, co-curricular activities and leadership. The winners of the Boys' section are: Best Boy- Science: Ananth Cheryalanthot, Commerce: Misab Abdussalam and Humanities: Aasim Faisal Bharde; Best in Conduct - Science: Mohammed El Ameen, Commerce: Jasim Manzoor Muldad and Humanities:

Mohamed Ahmed Abdelwahab; Best in Service - Science: Gouri Shankar Saiju, Commerce: Umeir Mohamed Nazar and Humanities: Talha Bin Ubaidur; Best in Talent - Science: Dafydd Reagan, Commerce: Dannie John and Humanities: Mohammed Taiyyabuddin Abubakar

Best in Sports - Science: Mohammed Affan and Ahamed Mohammed, Commerce: Ammar Obaid Qazi and Humanities: Altayb Osama; Best Prefect - Science: Asim Husham, Commerce: Sheik Mohammed Tanzil and Hu-

manities: Mohammad Ammar Farooque

Special Jury Award - Ishan Ismail, Jagreet Singh Sidhu, Bhavith Babu and Muhammed Sahil Shabeer.

Winners from Girls' section are: Best Girl - Science: Riti Milan Doshi, Commerce: Akshaya Jayakhosh and Humanities: Leya Maria Cecil; Best in Conduct - Science: Safa Shaikh, Commerce: Sandra S Samson and Humanities: Mareena Isa James; Best in Service - Science: Swathi Gireesh Kumar, Commerce: Haya Fatma and Humanities: Aysha Siham;

Best in Sports - Science: Lehen Shah, Commerce: Aishwarya Sunil and Humanities: Dana Abdel Malik S; Best in Talent - Science: Shreya Saravanan; Best Prefect: Fathima Femin, Fathima Neba K K and Raghad Elsadiq Abdalla and Special Jury Award: Elham Abdul Aziz, Fathima Zia, Alice Kalliath and Ayesha Anjum.

As a parting token, the school presented each of the outgoing students with a graduation souvenir. Heads of Sections, Heads of Departments and Teaching staff attended the function.



Outgoing students - Boys.



Outgoing students - Girls.

Palestinian support gathering in Yemen



Brigadier Yahya Saree Qasim, spokesman for Yemen's Houthi group, speaks during a rally denouncing Israel and in solidarity with Palestinians in Sanaa, yesterday.



Yemeni demonstrators raise Palestinian flags and placards during a rally denouncing Israel and in solidarity with Palestinians, in the Houthi-controlled capital Sanaa, yesterday.

Lebanon says Israeli strike kills five in south

AFP
Beirut

Israel struck south Lebanon yesterday, killing five people according to the Lebanese health ministry, with the Israeli military saying it targeted a Hezbollah weapons truck.

The air strike further strained a fragile ceasefire between Israel and the fighter group, which came into effect on November 27.

The Lebanese state-run National News Agency said "an Israeli drone targeted a car in Tayr Dibba", a village near the coastal city of Tyre some 20 kilometres from the Israeli border.

A Lebanese security source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP that a rocket launcher was hit and several munitions had exploded.

The Israeli military said it struck a truck carrying weapons.



A view shows the site of an Israeli strike on Tayr Dibba in southern Lebanon, yesterday.

"Several fighters were identified loading a truck with weapons used by the Hezbollah organisation in southern Lebanon," the military said in a statement.

The strike came with little more than a fortnight left to

complete the implementation of the November ceasefire, which both sides have accused each other of violating. The military statement said it was operating "in accordance with the ceasefire understandings between Israel and Lebanon".

Under the terms of the deal, Hezbollah is to dismantle its remaining military infrastructure in the south and pull its forces back north of the Litani River, around 30 kilometres from the border.

The UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon accused Israel on Saturday of a "flagrant violation" of the Security Council resolution which forms the basis of the ceasefire.

Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem warned that the group's patience with Israeli violations could run out before the January 26 implementation deadline.



Lebanese army members stand guard at the site of an Israeli strike in Tayr Dibba, in southern Lebanon, yesterday.

Stampede kills four, injures 16 in Umayyad Mosque in Damascus

Reuters
Damascus

Four people were killed and 16 injured in a stampede in the landmark Umayyad Mosque in Damascus yesterday, the Syrian state news agency (SANA) said.

Five children suffered fractures, severe bruises and fainting, the civil defence said in a statement.

Authorities were trying to determine the causes of the incident and will hold those responsible accountable, Damascus Governor Maher Marwan told SANA.

"We are working to take urgent

measures to ensure that such incidents are not repeated in public places in the future," SANA quoted him as saying. Syria's new rulers seized control of Damascus on Dec 8, forcing President Bashar al-Assad to flee after more than 13 years of civil war and ending his family's decades-long rule.

Thousands of armed militia in Iran march against 'threats'

AFP
Tehran

Thousands of fighters linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps paraded with heavy weapons and vehicles through the streets of Tehran yesterday showing their readiness to face "threats".

The parade by paramilitary Basij volunteers comes after the weakening of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, during wars with Israel.

It also follows last month's toppling by rebels of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, whom Tehran also supported.

Vehicles mounted with rocket launchers, artillery and naval commandos moved through the streets. Fighters in combat gear marched on foot with rocket launchers, and black-clad women carried rifles.

Some dragged coffins decorated with Israeli flags, as flags of Hezbollah flew along with Iranian and Palestinian banners.

A Guards commander, General Mohammadreza Naghdi, singled out Iran's enemies the United States and Israel during the gathering.



Members of Iranian militia forces (Basij) attend an anti-Israeli march in Tehran, yesterday.

The US, he said, was "behind all the misfortune in the Muslim world."

As for Israel, "if we are able to destroy the Zionist regime and withdraw the American bases in the region, one of our big problems will be resolved," he said.

The Guards' commander for the capital, General Hassan Hassan-zadeh, told state television that

one aim of the rally was to "support the population of Gaza and Palestine".

Supporting the Palestinian cause has been a pillar of Iranian foreign policy since the 1979 revolution. "We also want to show that the Basij are ready to confront all threats from enemies of the Islamic revolution," Hassan-zadeh said.

Decade after IS abduction, Yazidi survivor returns to Iraq

AFP
Sharya, Iraq

Her family had lost hope she would ever return after Islamic State fighters took her and thousands of other Yazidi women and girls as slaves for abuse from Iraq into Syria during their reign of terror.

A decade later, 27-year-old Silvana Khider walked for days across Syria as president Bashar al-Assad's rule came to an end, and was reunited with her sister in Iraq.

While she was taken by IS, she spent the last years of her ordeal in Syria's Idlib province, bastion of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group that spearheaded Assad's fall on December 8.

"I am very happy, but also very sad. My father and two of my brothers are dead. My mother and another of my brothers are missing. And I have four sisters in Europe," said Khider, who wore a black overcoat and her jet-black hair in a bun.

Her story echoed that of thou-

sands of other Yazidis whose community in northern Iraq suffered a murderous campaign in 2014 of death, mass physical abuse and enslavement that UN investigators have qualified as genocide.

In August that year, IS militants murdered thousands of Yazidi men, and took into neighbouring Syria thousands of women and girls to sell them in markets as wives for militants from around the world.

Militants took Khider, who was 17 at the time, from her village in Sinjar province to Tal Afar in northern Iraq.

After she tried to escape, they took her to Raqa in Syria, a self-declared IS capital.

She ended up in Baghuz, the militants' last bastion in eastern Syria until their defeat in March 2019 at the hands of a US-led coalition and Kurdish-led forces.

"I had no news for 10 years and six months of my sisters, and they knew nothing about me," Khider said in broken Arabic.

Forced to speak Arabic for more than a decade, her native Kurdish has also become poor.



Yazidi survivor Silvana Khider, 27, poses for a picture at her sister's home in the region of Sharya in northern Iraq.

"They thought I was dead. They even laid a tomb for me," she said.

It was not entirely clear why she was unable to return home immediately after the defeat of IS in 2019.

But she said she spent more than four years in Idlib province, which was ruled by HTS.

She said those years were

marked by "fear, hunger and aerial bombardment" of the last rebel holdout of Assad's era.

"In Idlib people helped me, there was no IS," she said, though she added that she lived "alone in a basement".

She said the sheikh of a local mosque helped her — but gave no details on the kind of help she

received. Asked whether she was forced to marry, she fell silent and then whispered: "No." While some Yazidi victims of violence have shared their story publicly, the sheer level of trauma has made it hard for many others to disclose the details of their captivity.

Equally unclear were the details of her journey home, which she made with the help of the Kidnapped Yazidi Rescue Office, an Iraqi Kurdish body.

Beginning her journey during the final days of Assad's rule, it took Khider five days to cross Syria, she said. First she went to Manbij, a flashpoint Kurdish town in northern Syria. Then she walked by night until she reached Raqa, she said.

She kept walking to the Kurdish towns of Hasake and Amuda in eastern Syria, and then a car took her to the Iraqi border.

MISSING RELATIVES

Yazidi families have told AFP they paid traffickers thousands of dollars for information on their missing loved ones and to try to secure their release.

Hussein Qaidi, who heads the

Kidnapped Yazidi Rescue Office, said IS abducted 6,416 Yazidis.

More than 3,500 have since been rescued in Iraq, Syria and Türkiye.

One Yazidi woman was repatriated from the Gaza Strip in October. But more than 2,600 Yazidis remain missing, according to data cited by the UN in Iraq. Qaidi told AFP his team had received information on Khider in the days following Assad's ouster, which allowed them to "contact her and to help to return".

Muluka Khider, Silvana's sister, recalled receiving a phone call informing her that she was still alive. "A few days later, I spoke with her by phone. It was a great joy," said Muluka.

Muluka too had been kidnapped by IS and taken to Raqa where she was sold in 2018, before she and a group of women escaped.

The remains of their father and two brothers were found in a mass grave, she said.

"We don't know what happened to our mother and our other brother. But I don't think they survived," she said.



Teapot showcase



A vendor organises traditional teapots displayed at a shop in Mubarakiya Market in central Kuwait City, yesterday.

UN says 3mn Sudan children facing acute malnutrition

AFP
Port Sudan

An estimated 3.2mn children under the age of five are expected to face acute malnutrition this year in war-torn Sudan, according to the UN Children's Fund (Unicef).

"Of this number, around 772,000 children are expected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition," Eva Hinds, Unicef Sudan's Head of Advocacy and Communication, said ate on Thursday.

Famine has already gripped five areas across Sudan, according to a report last month by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), a UN-backed assessment. Sudan has endured 20 months of war between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), killing tens of thousands and, according to the UN, uprooting 12mn in the world's largest displacement crisis.

Confirming to AFP that 3.2mn children are currently expected to face acute malnutrition, Hinds said "the number of severely malnourished children increased from an estimated 730,000 in 2024 to over 770,000 in 2025" The IPC expects famine to expand to five more parts of Sudan's western Darfur region by May – a vast area that has seen some of the conflict's worst violence. A further 17 areas in western and central Sudan are also at risk of famine, it said.

"Without immediate, unhindered humanitarian access facilitating a significant scale-up of a multisectoral response, malnutri-



A woman collects food at a location set up by a local humanitarian organisation to donate meals and medication to people displaced by the war in Sudan, in Meroe in the country's Northern State.



People wait to collect food at a location set up by a local humanitarian organisation to donate meals and medication to people displaced by the war in Sudan, in Meroe in the country's Northern State.

tion is likely to increase in these areas," Hinds warned.

Sudan's army-aligned government strongly rejected the IPC findings, while aid agencies complain that access is blocked by bureaucratic hurdles and ongoing violence. In October, experts appointed by the UN Human Rights Council accused both sides of using "starvation tactics". On

Tuesday the US determined that the RSF had "committed genocide" and imposed sanctions on the paramilitary group's leader. Across the country, more than 24.6mn people – around half the population – face "high levels of acute food insecurity," according to IPC, which said: "Only a ceasefire can reduce the risk of famine spreading further".

MSF appeals for 'flood' of food to Darfur as famine looms

AFP
Geneva

As Darfur faces the threat of famine, the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) charity chief has called for the war-ravaged Sudanese region to be flooded with food.

Sudan has been torn apart and pushed towards famine by the war that erupted in April 2023 between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Famine has already been declared in parts of Darfur, including at Zamzam camp for displaced people near the North Darfur capital El-Fasher, which has seen some of the war's fiercest fighting.

Despite the rampant violence and insecurity in Darfur, MSF Secretary-General Christopher Lockyear, who recently visited the region, told AFP it was possible to scale up desperately-needed aid.

■What is the humanitarian situation in Darfur?

CL: "What we're seeing here is a catastrophe of severe proportions in terms of the humanitarian needs, but we're also seeing a global humanitarian failure in terms of the response." "The needs are acute across the board, whether that is in terms of feeding people or treating patients, and yet the response that we're seeing globally to this need is minuscule." "The pipelines that

are coming into Darfur of food are woefully inadequate."

■What can be done?

CL: "We need a concerted effort to flood Darfur with food and increase supply to food throughout Sudan." "As a humanitarian community, there is a vast amount that is possible to do more in that area." "Access is difficult. It's always difficult in a complex humanitarian emergency, but it's completely plausible to do so." "From what I have seen, it is possible for there to be a significant scale-up in the areas of Darfur that I visited... a lot more can be done." "We need much more UN and international organisational presence in Darfur itself." "The border is open. There are trucks coming across. There are not enough trucks coming across."

■How can a scale-up happen amid the constraints?

CL: "We need to challenge ourselves to get over those constraints, or perceived constraints." "Certainly, there's an attention or a lack of attention on Sudan, and it's important to draw that attention to Sudan." "There are funding questions, yes, but... there is an energy and a prioritisation and a political willingness to be able to respond, which is at the core of it." "What my journey tells me is the fact that it was possible to cross the border from Chad into Darfur. It was also possible to move around a large part of Darfur... A lot more

can be done." "What I witnessed in our hospitals, were hospitals that were largely fully stocked... that we were able to supply. Not always easy, and it's requiring a lot of effort, and it is physically or geographically difficult to move around, but it shows that it is possible."

■How many aid trucks are crossing from Chad?

CL: "If you look at the Chad crossing, the Adre crossing, since that was opened in August, there's been an average of five trucks a day crossing that border into Darfur."

"Our estimates are that for the Zamzam camp alone in North Darfur, we need 400 trucks a month just for that one camp, let alone the other 10mn people in Darfur." "So it is a massive scale-up that is needed across that border... The border is open, and we need to optimise access across that border." "It's not just about the trucks of food. It's also about... hands-on treating patients."

"The intensity of some of the treatment towards acute malnutrition... requires trained practitioners who are able to be in location."

"Food distribution is a complicated endeavour, and that requires NGOs and agencies to be on the ground to be able to ensure that that can be done safely." "So yes, we need much more food coming into Darfur, but that's only part of the picture."

Lebanon president to begin talks on new PM next week

AFP
Beirut

Lebanon's new President General Joseph Aoun will start consultations with political parties towards naming a prime minister from next week, the presidency said yesterday. Forming a government is key to lifting the war-battered country out of the worst financial crisis of its history.

After more than two years of deadlock resulting from deep political divisions, Lebanese lawmakers elected army chief General Aoun as head of state on Thursday. The president "will on Monday hold parliamentary consultations" in which he will receive representatives of all blocs in the chamber, as well as independent lawmakers, "towards naming a head of government", his office said yesterday. As he took office on Thursday, General Aoun pledged to work

towards naming a new prime minister who would be "a partner and not an opponent" as soon as possible. He noted the importance of choosing a prime minister who can gain the confidence of the international community and carry out urgently needed reforms to relaunch the economy. The process of selecting a prime minister and forming a government is often drawn out, as the president must receive approval from a majority of lawmakers before he can name the head of government.

By convention in the multi-confessional country, the president, the prime minister and the parliament speaker are picked from different religious backgrounds.

Analysts say the weakening of Hezbollah in last year's war with Israel allowed Lebanon's parliament to finally elect a president, after critics said the group had blocked a dozen previous attempts.

Iran again closes schools, offices to conserve power

Iran has ordered schools and public buildings in a third of the country's provinces, including Tehran, to close today, as several power plants remain shut down by fuel shortages, AFP reported from Tehran. Despite Iran's huge oil and gas reserves, the country hit by years of international sanctions has been forced to ration electricity in recent months as sub-zero temperatures have prompted a surge in demand that its ageing power stations have been unable to meet. The closures ordered yesterday include the capital Tehran as well as the shrine city of Qom, Kurdistan in the west and Mazandaran and Ardebil on the Caspian coast. The decision was taken "because of the cold and to manage electricity consumption," the official IRNA news agency said. Iran already ordered similar closures late last year after rolling blackouts plunged homes and businesses into darkness in November. Government offices in Tehran were closed for four straight days in December and school children ordered to stay home across more than half of the country.

Iran population ageing fast, bucking government efforts

AFP
Tehran

Iran's once-youthful population is ageing fast, fuelling economic fears as cash-strapped couples resist a government push for more children.

Driven by rising life expectancy and dramatically declining birth rates, Iran's demographic makeup has shifted over the years, mirroring trends across much of the world.

The National Population Research Institute has found that the country's 86mn-strong population is ageing five times faster than it is growing, according to official news agency IRNA, and the UN projects that by 2050 one-third of Iranians will be 60 or older – a three-fold increase from 2021.

"With this ongoing trend, the country will face a serious crisis in the future," Interior Minister Eskandar Momeni warned in December.

He said Iran's population could shrink by more than half its size over the next 75 years.

Authorities have launched public campaigns to encourage Iranians to have more children, with

eye-catching billboards and posters periodically popping up across the country.

"Children, the pulse of our lives!" read one poster, showing a couple with four children.

A billboard featuring a happy family had the caption: "Life is better when happy – having kids is better when you have many."

Shaho Sabbar of the University of Tehran said that the "negative impact" of Iran's changing demography "has started to be felt over the past decade".

The long-term impact could be "significant", Sabbar said.

"As the number of working-age individuals declines, Iran may face labour shortages, reduced economic growth and an increased burden on the younger generation to support the elderly."

During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, the Islamic republic experienced a baby boom, in part due to a successful government campaign to encourage more births.

But as the country was struggling to rebuild its economy after the war, the government reversed its policy, urging Iranian families to have no more than two children.

Fertility rates have since plummeted, from an average of 6.4



Authorities have gone to great lengths to encourage young Iranians to start a family.

children per woman to just 1.6 in 2023, National Population Research Institute head Mohammad Javad Mahmoudi said according to IRNA.

Population growth has also slowed from 1.29% in 2011 to just 0.6% in 2023, Mahmoudi said.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who initially supported the family planning policies

of the post-war era, later called them a "mistake". In August, he demanded measures to reverse the decline in births.

"The country needs a young population, and if it suffers the bitter consequences of population ageing, there is no cure," Khamenei said.

Struggling under the weight of international sanctions, high un-

employment and soaring prices, many Iranians have felt discouraged from having children.

"Raising a child is a huge undertaking," said Zohreh, a 39-year-old makeup artist from Tehran, who has been married for seven years.

Giving only her first name, she said her own experience growing up in the capital was marred by "the poor educational system" and the "dire" state of the economy following the war.

‘OVERWHELMING’ BURDEN

Sabbar said that beyond economic concerns, Iran's greying population could also herald an "overwhelming" burden on the national healthcare system.

"There will also be a potential pension and social security crisis," he said.

"With fewer working-age individuals, the government may struggle to provide for the increasing number of retirees." Authorities have gone to great lengths to encourage young Iranians to start a family, offering parents incentives such as low-interest housing loans, financial aid and free healthcare for mothers and children.

But the overall impact of the au-

thorities' push "has been limited", said Sabbar.

A 38-year-old public employee who gave only his last name, Etemadi, for fear of repercussions, said the incentives "are either too difficult to obtain or very small compared to the cost of raising a child".

He has three children, all born before the financial incentives were introduced in 2021, and so has been unable to benefit from them.

Other government measures enacted that same year include the launch of a dating app aimed at forging "lasting" unions.

Authorities in 2021 also restricted contraceptives and imposed strict limits on pregnancy screenings to detect genetic diseases.

Zohreh, the makeup artist, said the limits on pregnancy tests discouraged her, fearing that without them, "my child would be born with defects".

Sabbar said the solution lies far beyond family planning.

The government should "create a more favourable environment that makes saving, investment and immigration plausible", he said.

Historical roots lead to surge in Arabic learning in Turkiye

QNA
Istanbul

In recent years, Turkiye has seen a significant rise in the number of institutes dedicated to teaching Arabic.

This trend reflects the growing interest among Turkish citizens, especially young people, in learning the Arabic language.

Experts and educators specialising in Arabic language instruction explained to Qatar News Agency (QNA) that this heightened interest is rooted in religious, historical, cultural, and economic factors. Arabic holds a prominent historical position in Turkish society as the language of the Qur'an. Additionally, the influence of neighbouring Arab countries and the career opportunities available in translation for industries like trade, tourism, and manufacturing have fuelled this demand. Turkish academic, educational, cultural, and media institutions have also shown increasing interest in Arabic content.

Commenting on this trend, General Director of the Istanbul Academy for Language Center, Dr Muhammed Agiracka, told QNA that interest in learning Arabic among young people continues to grow due to religious, political, economic, tourism, media, historical, and cultural reasons.

He noted that the academy receives a large number of students from various Turkish cities each year, enrolling in morning and evening classes across different proficiency levels to study Arabic.

Agiracka highlighted that the academy prioritises employing highly qualified teachers who strive to ensure students achieve linguistic competence. This includes mastering correct pronunciation, strong comprehension, and fluency in key language skills.

Likewise, Nura Yamac, an Arabic teacher at the Istanbul Academy for Language Learning, told QNA that Arabic has become a popular choice for many young people eager to read the Qur'an, understand the Prophetic Hadiths, and explore Islamic teachings.

She added that some students are motivated by practical reasons, such as pursuing careers in translation for Arab tourists, traders, and companies, which have expanded significantly in Turkiye in recent years.

Dr Ibrahim Helalsah, director of International Arabic Center for Education Implementation and Research and head of "Aromer" Center at Istanbul 29 Mayis University, confirmed the strong interest in Arabic among Turks. He noted that one of the main reasons is its status as the language of the Qur'an, with many non-academic learners enrolling simply to understand Qur'an in its original language.

Helalsah explained that International Arabic Center for Education "Aromer" at Istanbul 29 Mayis University offers numerous courses year-round in fields like journalism and literature, with consistently high demand for these programmes.

It is worth noting that Arabic has long been taught in Turkiye's Imam Hatip schools, and Arabic language departments are now a core part of language and Sharia faculties. In recent years, the Turkish government has strengthened its focus on Arabic education, with over a million students learning Arabic in Imam Hatip schools. Additionally, universities have introduced Arabic-language programmes at both public and private institutions.

Some Turkish schools have also officially added Arabic classes to their curricula, offering two to five weekly lessons in certain schools.

Notably, Arabic Language Department at Gazi University in Ankara was established in 1985. Around the same time, Ankara University founded Tomer Language Institute, initially aimed at teaching Turkish to foreigners.

Over the years, Tomer expanded to include other languages, including Arabic, and was renamed "Turkish and Foreign Language Teaching Research and Application Center." It now operates multiple branches across many Turkish cities.

US to return \$52.88mn in assets forfeited by ex-Nigerian oil minister

Nigeria and the US signed an agreement yesterday to repatriate about \$52.88million in assets forfeited by former Nigerian oil minister Diezani Alison-Madueke and her associates, Reuters reported from Abuja.

The agreement opens the way for the first repatriation to Nigeria of assets outside the West African country linked to Alison-Madueke.

Nigerian Justice Minister

Latief Fagbemi said the agreement with the US enables "the repatriation of approximately \$52.88mn arising from the forfeiture of the Galactica assets, linked to the former Petroleum Resources Minister Diezani Alison-Madueke and her associates". The agreement follows a 2017 civil complaint filed by the US Justice Department aimed at recovering about \$144mn in assets allegedly obtained through bribes to the former minister.

Hot summer day plunge



A person dives from a springboard during a hot summer day at Sea Point swimming pool in Cape Town, South Africa, yesterday.

Uganda army chief quits X after years of controversy

AFP
Kampala

Uganda's army chief and son of President Yoweri Museveni, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, announced he was quitting X yesterday after a string of controversial posts including threatening to behead an opposition leader and invade neighbouring countries.

Seen as the likely successor to his 80-year-old father, Kainerugaba built up more than a million followers on X, formerly Twitter, thanks to his notorious posts.

Just this week, Kainerugaba, 50,

said it was only the presence of his father that prevented him from murdering musician-turned-opposition leader Bobi Wine.

"If Mzee was not there, I would cut off his head today," Kainerugaba posted, using an honorific for Museveni.

But Kainerugaba posted yesterday that the "great whirlwind and rousing journey" of his time on X was ending so he could concentrate on his duties as head of the Ugandan People's Defence Forces.

That may bring some relief to Uganda's diplomats.

The president was forced to apologise for his son's tweet in 2022 that appeared to threaten an

invasion of Kenya. "It wouldn't take us, my army and me, 2 weeks to capture Nairobi," Kainerugaba wrote. He has also tweeted his support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Tigrayan rebels fighting Ethiopia's government between 2020 and 2022.

Last month, Kainerugaba threatened to seize the Sudanese capital Khartoum as soon as US President-elect Donald Trump takes office, triggering more diplomatic uproar.

The post was later deleted and Uganda issued a statement saying the comments "do not represent the official position" of the government. Other posts have

been more light-hearted. Among Kainerugaba's final entries was a thread about the most handsome men in the world "not including me".

The list included Fidel Castro, Elvis Presley, Rwandan President Paul Kagame, with his father taking the top spot. He deactivated his account in April 2022, although barely two days later he was back – and tweeting. Museveni has been in power since 1986 and faces re-election next year. International observers and rights groups say the last poll in 2021 involved vote-rigging and brutal repression of the opposition led by Wine.

Al Qaeda-linked group claims deadly Benin attack

AFP
Cotonou

An Al Qaeda-linked group yesterday claimed responsibility for an attack in northern Benin near the borders with Burkina Faso and Niger that killed at least 28 troops this week.

The raid, which was the deadliest the Beninese army has suffered in years, took place late Wednesday in the border area between Benin and its insurgency-hit neighbours.

Attacks in northern Benin have increased in recent years with authorities accusing the Islamic State and Al Qaeda groups based in neighbouring countries, including the JNIM.

"Our brothers the mujahideen were able to storm a Beninese army post in Oouda in Karimama province," the JNIM said in a statement cited and translated by the US group Site Intelligence.

The group, which operates in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, claimed a death toll of more than 30 and said it had seized weapons, ammunition and a drone, according to the statement cited by Site Intelligence.

A high-ranking military official told AFP on Thursday on condition of anonymity that 28 soldiers had been killed.

Beninese authorities, who rarely comment on attacks, reported in April 2023 about 20 cross-border incursions since 2021.

Army chief Colonel Faizou Gomina in a statement late Thursday said his forces had suffered a "very heavy loss".

Benin in January 2022 launched Operation Mirador to secure its borders amid a surge of militants' violence in west Africa and deployed nearly 3,000 troops.

The authorities also recruited 5,000 additional personnel to reinforce security in the vulnerable north.

"The position that was attacked... was one of

the strongest and most militarised of Operation Mirador," Gomina added. A diplomatic source told AFP this week that 121 Beninese military personnel had been killed between 2021 and December 2024. Gunmen in December killed three Operation Mirador soldiers and wounded four others who were guarding an oil pipeline in northeast Benin. In June, seven Beninese troops were killed in an attack at the Pendjari National Park on the border with Burkina Faso.

The United States in November sent \$6.6mn worth of armoured vehicles and defence equipment to Benin, while the European Union earlier this year announced 47mn euros (\$49mn) in anti-terror funding for the country.

But the latest attack proves that "equipment alone is not sufficient to win", said Gomina.

"The operational posture and the quality of our human resources are key to defeating this threat," he added.

Neighbouring Ghana and Togo have also suffered militant attacks in recent years.

Western powers 'warn' Syria over foreign fighters in army

Reuters
Beirut/Damascus

US, French and German envoys have warned Syria's new rulers that their appointment of foreign fighters to senior military posts is a security concern and bad for their image as they try to forge ties with foreign states, two sources familiar with the matter said.

The warning from the US, part of Western efforts to get Syria's new leaders to reconsider the move, was delivered in a meeting between US envoy Daniel Rubinstein and Syria's de facto ruler Ahmed al-Sharaa on Wednesday at the presidential palace overlooking Damascus, a US official said.

"These appointments will not help them with their reputation in the US," the official said.

The foreign ministers of France and Germany, Jean-Noel Barrot and Annalena Baerbock, also broached the issue of foreign fighters drafted into the army during their meeting with Sharaa on Jan 3, an official aware of the talks said.

Reuters reported the appointments on Dec 30. The envoys' comments on the appointments have not previously been reported.

Sharaa's armed group, Hayat Tahrir al-

Sham, led an offensive that ousted former president Bashar al-Assad on Dec 8 and has since installed a government and disbanded the Assad-era army. It is now making efforts to reconstitute the armed forces.

Late last year, it made nearly 50 appointments including at least six foreign fighters, among them Chinese and central Asian Uyghurs, a Turkish citizen, an Egyptian and a Jordanian, Reuters reported at the time.

Three were given the rank of brigadier-general and at least three others the rank of colonel, a Syrian military source said.

HTS and allied groups have hundreds of foreign fighters in their ranks who came to Syria during the country's 13-year civil war, many of them followers of hardline interpretations of religion.

Foreign capitals generally view foreign fighters as a key security threat as they suspect that some may seek to carry out attacks in their home countries after gaining experience abroad.

Officials of the new Syrian administration have said foreign fighters made sacrifices to help overthrow Assad and would have a place in Syria, adding they could be granted citizenship.

The Syrian defence ministry did not respond to a request for comment. The German foreign ministry did not comment.

A State Department spokesperson said

Washington is in a continuing dialogue with the interim authorities in Damascus.

"Discussions have been constructive and have covered a wide range of domestic and international issues," the spokesperson said, adding there has been "tangible progress on counter-terrorism priorities, including ISIS."

"During the war, some foreign fighters in Syria formed their own armed groups, while others joined established formations such as the Islamic State as it rampaged across Iraq and Syria before being beaten back.

Other groups of foreign fighters joined HTS, which disavowed previous links to Al Qaeda and Islamic State and fought bloody battles against them before going on to spearhead the lightning advance that toppled Assad.

The US, European and Arab States are engaging with the new administration to try to push it towards an inclusive political transition and also to seek co-operation on counter-terrorism and limiting foreign influence in the region.

But they remain wary of how the rebels-turned rulers will manage the country and have questions over how they will bring together disparate groups with varying views on the direction the new Syria should take.

From Page 1

To better account for such gaps, the Lancet study employed a method used to evaluate deaths in other conflict zones, including Kosovo and Sudan.

Using data from at least two independent sources, researchers look for individuals who appear on multiple lists of those killed. Less overlap between lists suggests more deaths have gone unrecorded, information that can be used to estimate the full number of deaths.

For the Gaza study, researchers compared the official Palestinian Health Ministry death count, which in the first months of war was based entirely on bodies that arrived in hospitals but later came to include other methods; an online survey distributed by the health ministry to Palestinians inside and outside the Gaza Strip, who were asked to provide data on Palestinian ID numbers, names, age at death, sex, location of death, and reporting source; and obituaries posted on social media.

"Our research reveals a stark reality: the true scale of traumatic injury deaths in Gaza is higher

than reported," lead author Zeina Jamaluddine told Reuters.

Dr Paul Spiegel, director of the Center for Humanitarian Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, told Reuters that the statistical methods deployed in the study provide a more complete estimate of the death toll in the war.

The study focused solely on deaths caused by traumatic injuries though, he said.

Deaths caused from indirect effects of conflict, such as disrupted health services and poor water and sanitation, often cause high excess deaths, said Spiegel, who co-authored a study last year that projected thousands of deaths due to the public health crisis spawned by the war.

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) estimates that, on top of the official death toll, around another 11,000 Palestinians are missing and presumed dead.

In total, PCBS said, citing Palestinian Health Ministry numbers, the population of Gaza has fallen 6% since the start of the war, as about 100,000 Palestinians have also left the enclave.



Venezuela's Maduro is sworn in for 3rd term

Reuters
Caracas

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, whose nearly 12 years in office have been marked by deep economic and social crisis, was sworn in for a third term yesterday despite a six-month-long election dispute, international calls for him to stand aside and an increase in the US reward offered for his capture.

Maduro, president since 2013, was declared the winner of July's election by both Venezuela's electoral authority and top court, though detailed tallies confirming his victory have never been published.

Venezuela's opposition says ballot box-level tallies show a landslide win for its former candidate Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia, who is recognised as president-elect by several countries including the United States. International election observers said the vote was not democratic.

The months since the election have seen Gonzalez Urrutia's flight to Spain in September, his ally Maria Corina Machado going into hiding in Venezuela, and the detentions of high-profile opposition figures and protesters.

In the latest in a series of punitive steps, the outgoing Biden administration increased its reward for information leading to the arrest or conviction of Maduro on drug trafficking charges to \$25mn, from a previous \$15mn.

It also issued a \$25mn reward for Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello and a \$15mn reward for Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino, as well as new sanctions against eight other officials including the head of state oil company PDVSA Hector Obregon.

The US indicted Maduro and others on narcotics and corruption charges, among others, in 2020. Maduro has rejected the accusations.

The US move coincided with sanctions by Britain and the European Union each targeting 15 officials, including members of the National Electoral Council and the security forces, and Canadian sanctions targeting 14 current and former officials.

The Maduro government has always rejected all sanctions, saying that they are illegitimate measures that amount to an "economic war" designed to cripple Venezuela.

"The outgoing government of



Maduro is seen on the day of his inauguration for a third six-year term, in Caracas. - Reuters

the United States doesn't know how to take revenge on us," Maduro said during his inauguration speech, without directly mentioning sanctions.

The Venezuelan communications ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the sanctions.

Maduro and his allies have cheered what they say is the country's resilience despite the measures, though they have historically blamed some economic hardships and shortages on sanctions.

Gonzalez Urrutia, who has been on a whistle-stop tour of the Americas this week, has said he will return to Venezuela to take up the mantle of president, but has given no details.

The government, which has accused the opposition of fomenting fascist plots against it, has said that Gonzalez Urrutia will be arrested if he returns and offered a \$100,000 reward for information leading to his capture.

Opposition leaders Gonzalez Urrutia and Machado are being investigated by the attorney-general's office for alleged conspiracy, but only the former has a public warrant out for his arrest.

Machado's first public appearance since August at an anti-government march in Caracas on Thursday was marred by a brief detention.

Her Vente Venezuela political movement said guns were fired and Machado was knocked off the motorcycle on which she was leaving the event.

She was then held and forced to film several videos, it said.

One video shared on social media and by government officials showed her sitting on a curb and recounting losing her wallet.

The government scoffed at the incident and denied any involvement.

Some 42 people have been detained for political reasons since Tuesday, judicial non-governmental organisation (NGO) Foro Penal said.

Maduro was sworn in at the national assembly in Caracas and said that he was taking his oath in the name of 16th century Indigenous leader Guaicaipuro and late president Hugo Chavez, his mentor, among others.

"May this new presidential term be a period of peace, of prosperity, of equality and the new democracy," Maduro said, adding he would convene a commission dedicated to constitutional reform. "This act is possible because Venezuela is peaceful, in full exercise of its national sovereignty, of its popular sovereignty, of its national independence."

Some 2,000 invitees from 125 countries attended the inauguration, according to the government.

Cuba's President Miguel Diaz-Canel and Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega, staunch allies of Maduro, attended as did Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament.

Venezuela's economy has experienced a prolonged crisis marked by triple-digit inflation and the exodus of more than 7mn migrants seeking better opportunities abroad.

Trump spared jail, fine for hush money conviction

AFP/Reuters
New York

A judge sentenced Donald Trump to an unconditional discharge yesterday for covering up hush money payments to an adult entertainment actor despite the US president-elect's last-ditch efforts to avoid becoming the first felon in the White House.

New York judge Juan Merchan handed down no jail time or fine, but the discharge upholds the jury's guilty verdict - and confirmed Trump's infamy as the first former president convicted of a felony.

Merchan said he was imposing the sentence sparing Trump jail, a fine or probation because the US Constitution shields presidents from criminal prosecution.

However, he said the protections afforded to the office "do not reduce the seriousness of a crime or justify its commission in any way".

"The considerable, indeed extraordinary, legal protection afforded by the office of the chief executive is a factor that overrides all others," Merchan said. "Despite the extraordinary breadth of those protections, one power they do not provide is the power to erase jury verdicts."

The 34 counts of falsifying business records on which Trump was convicted in May 2024 carried potential jail time.

US House votes to sanction International Criminal Court

The US House of Representatives has voted to sanction the International Criminal Court (ICC) in protest at its arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former defence minister over Israel's campaign in Gaza.

The vote was 243 to 140 in favour of the "Illegitimate Court Counteraction Act", which would sanction any foreigner who investigates, arrests, detains or prosecutes US citizens or those of an allied country, including Israel, who are not members of the court.

Forty-five Democrats joined 198 Republicans in backing the bill. No Republican voted against it.

The ICC said it noted the bill with concern and warned it could rob victims of atrocities of justice and hope. - Reuters



Trump attorney Emil Bove is seen while President-elect Donald Trump and his lawyer Todd Blanche appear remotely for a sentencing hearing at New York Criminal Court in Manhattan. - AFP

"Never before has this court been presented with such a unique and remarkable set of circumstances," said Merchan. "The only lawful sentence that permits entry of a judgment of conviction without encroaching on the highest office of the land is an unconditional discharge."

Trump attended his sentencing virtually, with the judge, lawyers and media packed into the scruffy Manhattan courtroom that was the backdrop to the trial's high drama, legal wrangling and vitriolic personal attacks by the divisive Republican.

"This has been a very terrible experience. I think it's been a tremendous setback for New York and the New York court system," Trump said in a rambling rant before the discharge was passed. "It was done to damage my reputation, so I would lose the election - obviously that didn't work."

The former president appeared on screens in the courtroom with two large US flags behind him, wearing a red tie with white stripes and looking on impatiently as the brief proceeding unfolded.

Ahead of the sentencing, prosecutor Joshua Steinglass said that Trump had been convicted of a "premeditated and continuous deception".

"The verdict in this case was unanimous and decisive and it must be respected," he said.

The trial saw Trump forced to look on as a string of witnesses

testified that he had fraudulently covered up illicit payments to the actor in an effort to stop her disclosing their tryst ahead of the 2016 presidential election, which he ultimately won.

Trump had sought a suspension of the criminal proceedings after a New York State appeals court dismissed his effort to have the hearing delayed.

However, the Supreme Court ruled that the sentencing could proceed.

Prosecutors opposed the effort to stave off sentencing, 10 days before Trump is due to be sworn in for a second term, arguing that it was wrong for the high court to hear the case when the mogul still had avenues of appeal to pursue in New York.

An unconditional discharge is a measure without any sanctions or restriction that nonetheless upholds the jury's guilty verdict - and Trump's infamy as the first former president to be convicted of a felony.

Trump, 78, had potentially faced up to four years in prison.

Trump was certified as the winner of the 2024 presidential election on Monday, four years after his supporters rioted at the US Capitol as he sought to overturn his 2020 defeat.

Now that he has been sentenced, Trump is free to pursue the appeal, a process which could take years and play out while he is serving a four-year term as president.

Lula, Macron say that free expression not a right to 'spread lies': statement

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and French counterpart Emmanuel Macron agreed in a phone call yesterday that freedom of expression was not a right to "spread lies".

A statement from the Brazilian presidency said the two leaders had discussed social media giant Meta's decision to pull the plug on fact-checking in the United States and "agreed that freedom of expression does not mean freedom to spread lies, prejudices and insults".

Brazil meanwhile gave social media giant Meta 72 hours to explain its fact-checking policy for the country, and how it plans to protect fundamental rights on its platforms.

Attorney-General Jorge Messias told journalists that his office could take "legal and judicial" measures against Meta if it does not respond in time to an extrajudicial notice filed yesterday.

Citing "the lack of transparency of this company", Messias said that it "will have 72 hours to inform the Brazilian government of its actual policy for Brazil".

Meta founder and chief executive Mark Zuckerberg stunned many with his announcement on Tuesday that he was pulling the plug on fact-checking at Facebook and Instagram in the United States, citing concerns about political bias and censorship.

The move has raised concerns in multiple countries, including Brazil, that are vulnerable to misinformation.

Meta, which runs the social media platforms Facebook, Instagram and Threads, published on Thursday in Portuguese its new, looser restrictions around topics such as gender and sexual identity.

The extrajudicial notice asks for clarity on how social media algorithms will be designed "in order to unwaveringly promote and protect fundamental rights".

Brazil also wants to know what measures will be adopted to prevent gender-based violence, racism, homophobia, transphobia, suicide, hate speech and other fundamental rights issues.

The country also wants details on how complaints can be filed, and how contradictions and disinformation in the new user-generated "community notes" system will be dealt with.

"The government will not stand idly by, as you can see," said Messias. - AFP

Wind lull offers hope in fires around Los Angeles

AFP/Reuters
Los Angeles

Winds were expected to drop around Los Angeles, bolstering a huge firefighting effort at the five major blazes wreaking havoc around America's second biggest city.

At least 10 people have died as infernos ripped through neighbourhoods, razing thousands of homes in one of the worst disasters ever to hit California, with one estimate suggesting the bill could hit \$150bn.

As the unimaginable scale of the damage started to come into focus, individuals began to grapple with heart-rending ruin.

"I lost everything. My house burned down and I lost everything," said Hester Callu, who reached a shelter after fleeing her Altadena home.

On Thursday California Governor Gavin Newsom deployed the National Guard to bolster law enforcement efforts.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Kathryn Barger said looters would face the full force of the law.

"I promise you, you will be held accountable," she said. "Shame on those who are preying on our residents during this time of crisis."

County Sheriff Robert Luna said on Thursday that his office was working on a nighttime curfew in areas ravaged by the fires.

"It looks like an atomic bomb dropped in these areas. I don't expect good news, and we're not looking forward to those numbers," he said at a press conference, referring to Pacific Palisades in the west and Altadena in the east.

The five separate fires have so far burned more than 35,000 acres (14,160 hectares) in Los Angeles, the state's fire agency reported.

The biggest of the blazes has ripped through almost 20,000 acres of the upscale Pacific Palisades neighbourhood, where firefighters said they were starting to get a handle on the fire.

By morning yesterday 6% of its perimeter was contained - meaning it can't spread any further in that direction.

However, the Eaton fire in the Altadena area remained entirely unchecked, with almost 14,000 acres scorched and key infrastructure - including communication towers at Mount Wilson - threatened.



US President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris listen during a briefing on the federal response to the Los Angeles wildfires as Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administrator Deanne Criswell (top left), California Governor Gavin Newsom and Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass appear virtually in the Oval Office of the White House. - AFP



Yard decoration items sit on a structure damaged by the Eaton Fire in Altadena, California. - Reuters

A third fire that exploded on Thursday afternoon near Calabasas and the wealthy Hidden Hills enclave, home to celebrities like Kim Kardashian, added to the feeling of encirclement.

"You just feel surrounded," one woman told a local broadcaster.

However, after a huge response to the blaze, including retardant drops from planes and helicopters dumping vast quantities of water, the fire was 35% surrounded, firefighters said yesterday.

Some of those forced out of their homes began to return to find scenes of devastation.

Kalen Astoor, a 36-year-old paralegal, said her mother's home had been spared by the inferno's seemingly random and chaotic destruction.

However, many other homes had not.

"The view now is of death and destruction," she told AFP. "I don't know if anyone can come back for a while."

An AFP overflight of the Pacific Palisades and Malibu revealed desolation.

"This is crazy... all these homes, gone," said helicopter pilot Albert Azouz.

On highly coveted Malibu oceanfront plots, skeletal frames of buildings indicated the scale of what has been destroyed.

Multimillion-dollar mansions have vanished entirely, seemingly swept into the Pacific Ocean by the force of the fire.

Socialite and hotel heiress Paris Hilton was among those whose home were lost.

"Heartbroken beyond words," she wrote on Instagram. "Sitting with my family, watching the news, and seeing our home in Malibu burn to the ground on live TV is something no one should ever have to experience. This home was where we built so many precious memories."

The fires could be the costliest ever recorded, with AccuWeather estimating total damage and loss between \$135bn and \$150bn.

President Joe Biden, who held a briefing on the fire response yesterday, has declared the fires a major disaster and said the federal government would reimburse 100% of the recovery for the next six months.

The Democratic president hands over the government on January 20 to his successor Republican Donald Trump, who along with his allies have sought to blame Democratic state and local officials as well and environmentalists for the deadly disaster.

Beyond the immediate carnage, life for millions of people in the area was disrupted: schools were closed, hundreds of thousands were without power and major events were cancelled or, in the case of an NFL playoff game between the Los Angeles Rams and the Minnesota Vikings, moved somewhere else.

Meteorologists have warned that "critical" windy and dry conditions, though abated, were not over.

A National Weather Service (NWS) bulletin said "significant fire growth" remained likely "with ongoing or new fires".

Wildfires occur naturally, but scientists say human-caused climate change is altering weather and changing the dynamics of the blazes.

Two wet years in Southern California have given way to a very dry one, leaving ample fuel dry and primed to burn.

State offices, schools to shut and police deployed for Philippine sect rally

AFP
Manila

Schools and government offices will close and thousands of police will be deployed on Monday to oversee a planned “million-strong” rally by an influential religious group opposing calls to unseat Philippine Vice-President Sara Duterte, officials said.

The security preparations were announced yesterday ahead of the “national rally for peace” by

the conservative Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), which said last month it opposed moves in the House of Representatives to impeach Duterte.

The powerful religious group, which is estimated to have more than 2mn members, has considerable clout in the Philippines, where 80% of the population are Catholics.

Three impeachment complaints have been filed in the past two months against Duterte, a former ally of President Ferdinand Marcos, and she is also being investi-

gated over an alleged plot to have him assassinated. Iglesia announced on its television network last month that it opposed calls for the impeachment of Duterte, the daughter of former leader Rodrigo Duterte and who is widely expected to run for president in 2028.

Members of the group are required to vote for political candidates who have been blessed by its leaders, making it a valuable political bloc. Iglesia’s official spokesman declined to comment when contacted by AFP yesterday. Government offices and schools

in the capital will be closed on Monday “to allow for the organised conduct of the event”, Marcos’ Executive Secretary Lucas Bersamin announced in a written order yesterday.

The Metropolitan Manila Development Authority is planning to close major roads in the capital for the rally. “We anticipate 1mn attendees coming from different provinces” to be bussed in for the rally using “thousands” of vehicles, the government agency’s director Romando Artes told a news conference.

Philippine police chief Rommel Marbil said yesterday that he will deploy 2,500 police officers to keep the peace during the Manila rally. Similar rallies are planned on the same day in 13 other provincial centres, Marbil said in an interview on Manila radio station DWPM. The impeachment complaints accuse Duterte of misusing millions of dollars in state funds and of plotting to have Marcos killed. She has denied the allegations. The House has yet to table any of the complaints for discussion ahead of the May 12

mid-term elections, in which the Iglesia voting bloc could decide the outcome of closely contested congressional and local government posts. The May polls are seen as a key test for the Duterte and Marcos families, the country’s two most influential political clans, ahead of an expected battle for the presidency in 2028.

Marcos has urged the House not to pursue an impeachment effort, which he said would serve no purpose but to distract the government from its development agenda.

Security chief of South Korea’s impeached president resigns

AFP
Seoul

South Korea’s presidential security chief resigned yesterday as he faced questioning over why his guards prevented the detention of impeached President Yoon Suk-yeol, and as investigators prepared to make a fresh arrest attempt.

Yoon last week resisted arrest in a standoff between his guards and investigators after his short-lived power grab on December 3 plunged South Korea into its worst political crisis in decades.

Yoon’s Presidential Security Service (PSS) chief Park Chong-jun – a former police officer – submitted his resignation yesterday morning “as he attended a police questioning”, a PSS official told AFP. It was later accepted by acting president Choi Sang-mok, an official from the interim leader’s office told reporters. It came as a joint investigation team from the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) and the police prepare to mount a new bid to arrest Yoon over his martial law declaration.

Park told reporters before being questioned at the Korean National Police Agency early yesterday that there must be no violence if investigators attempt another arrest of Yoon.

“I believe that under no circumstances should there be physical clashes or bloodshed,” the former security chief said.

Choi later said in a statement sent to AFP that both ruling and opposition parties should “agree on establishing a special prosecutor investigation law” to find a way out of the crisis. Rival protest camps in sub-zero temperatures are calling for Yoon’s impeachment to be declared invalid on one side, and for him to be immediately detained on the other. Yoon would become the first sitting South Korean president to be arrested if investigators are able to detain him. His legal team has said they will not comply with the current warrant.

The CIO said it will “prepare thoroughly” for the second arrest



Protesters attend a rally against the impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol near his residence in Seoul.



Posters and hand warmers are prepared before a rally against the impeached president near his residence in Seoul.

attempt and anyone obstructing them could be detained themselves. Police yesterday held a meeting of top commanders to plan for the renewed effort, Yonhap news agency reported. The National Office of Investigation, a police unit, sent a note to high-ranking police officials in Seoul requesting they prepare to mobilise 1,000 investigators for the fresh attempt, Yonhap reported.

Presidential security chief Park twice ignored police requests to appear for questioning over al-

legations of obstruction of public duty since his team blocked investigators. Police then warned they would consider an arrest warrant if he did not submit. “If I, as someone from the police, refuse the police’s summons, who among the citizens will agree to be investigated?” Park told reporters.

Meanwhile, Yoon’s guards have increased security at his Seoul residential compound with barbed wire installations and bus barricades. Yoon’s legal team said yesterday the guards “remain on high



Head of Presidential Security Service (PSS) Park Chong-jun (C) arrives outside the National Office of Investigation in Seoul.



A supporter of the impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol walks near his residence in Seoul.

alert 24/7” for another arrest attempt “despite immense pressure and stress”.

Separate from the insurrection probe, Yoon also faces ongoing impeachment proceedings – lawmakers have already suspended him, but the Constitutional Court will decide whether to uphold this or restore him to office.

The court has slated January 14 for the start of Yoon’s impeachment trial, which would proceed even in his absence.

Analysts have warned any vio-

lence during an arrest could hurt Yoon’s hopes of survival. “Physical confrontations would... likely weaken his position in the upcoming impeachment trial,” political commentator Park Sang-byung told AFP.

Polls show approval ratings for Yoon’s ruling party have been rising as the crisis drags on.

A new Gallup survey published Friday showed the People Power Party’s approval rating had risen to 34 percent from 24 percent three weeks ago.

Tibet earthquake highlights risk for dams on roof of the world

Reuters
Beijing

Tibet’s earthquake of magnitude 6.8 that killed 126 and damaged four water reservoirs this week highlights the risks from a hydropower building spree by Asian giants China and India in one of the world’s most remote, quake-prone regions, experts say. Some 68 major dams in the Himalayan region exploit the enormous hydropower potential of high-altitude lakes and rivers – just a fifth of which has been tapped, researchers say, but face seismic risks.

Another 101 are in the stages of being planned or built. Even before the quake centred on Tingri county, the northern gateway to the Mount Everest region, experts had voiced concern about both nations’ hydropower ambitions there, exemplified by China’s plan for the world’s largest hydropower dam. The project, more than three times the size of the Three Gorges Dam, the world’s largest, is set to provide 34 gigawatts of clean energy vital to China’s aim of peak carbon emissions before 2030.

“A strong earthquake could

cause direct damage,” Fan Xiao, a former chief engineer in the geology and mineral bureau of Sichuan in southwestern China, wrote in an article in October 2022 on the province’s Motuo project approved in late December. Fan, who warned the project was in an area prone to strong earthquakes, did not respond to Reuters questions on messaging app Wechat about the article. Hydropower projects in the remote mountainous area highlight the tension between the risks of building there and the enormous demand for clean power in China and India, the world’s No 1 and No 3 emitters of greenhouse gases respectively.

Earthquakes have damaged dams in the past, particularly by setting off landslides and rock-falls. A massive earthquake in Nepal in 2015 shuttered almost a fifth of its hydropower for more than a year, research published in 2018 showed. Building more dams in the Himalayas is not sustainable, said C P Rajendran, a geologist at India’s National Institute of Advanced Studies, citing ecological concerns and the earthquake risk from the weight of gigantic reservoirs on fault-lines.

China’s water resources ministry has raised concerns about ageing reservoirs, more than 80% built between the 1950s and 1970s.

However, it did not respond to a faxed request for comment and has not detailed the reservoirs damaged in the Tibet quake. The Motuo project has been rigorously tested for disaster prevention and mitigation, China’s foreign ministry has said. Tectonic activity in the region could make the site hazardous though analysis is needed to determine specific risks at the site on the upper reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo river, said Wolfgang Schwanghart, a Potsdam University expert who studies the formation and changes of the earth’s surface.

His research in 2018 showed about a quarter of the region’s projects were at risk of moderate to severe damage in a future earthquake. China says the dam will play a major role in reaching carbon peaking and neutrality goals and will stimulate the economy and create jobs. Hydropower generation is more reliable and flexible than intermittent wind and solar, and helps with the urgent need to transition away from polluting coal.

In solidarity with Rohingya



Civil rights activists demonstrate in front of the president’s office, calling on the government to treat Rohingya refugees who had arrived on the island in accordance with recognised international norms, in Colombo, yesterday.

Hammer attacker wounds eight at Japanese university: media

Eight people were wounded in a hammer attack at a university in Tokyo yesterday, with a 22-year-old student arrested at the scene, Japanese media said.

All those hurt were conscious, according to public broadcaster NHK, which cited police sources as saying that the afternoon attack took place at Hosei University’s Tama Campus.

NHK and other media outlets said the attacker, a woman sociology student, had swung a hammer during a class.

Several reports said people were seen bleeding from the head and that the woman had said she had pent-up frustration at being ignored.

Police could not immediately confirm details to AFP about a

rare instance of violent crime in Japan, which has strict gun control laws. Live footage broadcast by NHK showed a line of emergency vehicles with flashing lights at the campus in the suburban Machida district of the Japanese capital. There are occasional stabbings and even shootings in Japan, including the assassination of former prime minister Shinzo Abe in 2022. —AFP



Sinclair C5s: 40 years on



Sinclair C5s and their owners pose in the carpark at an event to mark the 40th anniversary of the original launch event at Alexandra Palace in London yesterday. The C5 electric tricycle was launched in January, 1985 and was seen by some as the future of transport. Designed by British entrepreneur Clive Sinclair, the vehicle, with a top speed on 15mph proved to be a spectacular flop, never selling in the quantities hoped for.

Frosty morning



The buildings of the City of London financial district are seen on a cold and frosty morning from south London as the sun rises over the capital. Temperatures continue to fall over the coming days, possibly reaching -20C in northern parts of the UK on Friday night, the Met Office has forecast.

UK retailers crank up search for savings ahead of April tax hikes

■ **UK retail sector says facing £7bn hike in extra costs**
■ **Bigger players say they can cope, smaller ones set to struggle**
■ **Retailers say more automation inevitable**

Reuters
London

Britain's big retailers, including Tesco, Sainsbury's, M&S and Next, say they are stepping up their drive for efficiency through automation and other measures, to limit the impact of rising costs on the prices they charge their customers.

As the UK economy struggles to grow, the new Labour government's solution is a hike in employer taxes to raise money for investment in infrastructure and public services, which has prompted criticism from the business community.

Retailers have said the increased social security payments, a rise in the national minimum wage, packaging levies and higher business rates - all coming in April - will cost the sector £7bn a year.

Concerns of the wider economic impact sent retail share prices sharply lower this week and drove up government borrowing costs. In the retail sector, larger players have more scope to adapt and are cushioned by previous healthy profits, but analysts have said smaller players could find themselves under severe pressure. Clothing retailer Next said it faced a £67mn increase in wage costs in its year to end-January 2026, but still forecast profit growth.

It reckons it can offset the higher wage bill with measures including



a 1% increase in prices that it said was "unwelcome, but still lower than UK general inflation". It can also increase operational efficiencies in its warehouses, distribution network and stores, the company said.

CEO Simon Wolfson said more automation was inevitable across the sector. "With any mechanisation project you're always looking at a pay-back on it - you're saying 'what's the saving versus the cost of the mechanisation, or AI or software'" he told Reuters. "If the price of the mechanisation doesn't go up, but the price of the labour it saves does go up, it's going to mean that more projects can be justified."

Baker and food-to-go chain Greggs last year opened a highly automated production line at its Newcastle, northeast England, site, meaning it can make up to 4mn more steak bakes and other products each week from its current 10mn.

Tesco, Britain's biggest supermarket, is also increasing automation and will open a robotic chilled distribution centre in Aylesford, southeast England, this year.

No 2 grocer Sainsbury's is encouraging more shoppers to use its SmartShop handheld self-scanning technology.

Even though Tesco faces a £250mn annual hit from the hike in employer national insurance contributions alone, CEO Ken Murphy said it would cope. Having navigated the Covid pandemic, supply chain disruption and commodity and energy inflation, he said Tesco was used to dealing with rising costs by finding savings elsewhere.

Finance chief Imran Nawaz said Tesco's "Save to Invest" programme was on track to deliver



A customer shops in the fruit aisle inside a Sainsbury's supermarket, in Richmond, West London.

£500mn of efficiency savings in its year to February 2025, having delivered £640mn in 2023/24. "As we look ahead it's clear it's going to be another year where we'll need to do a stellar job," Nawaz said, singling out savings from better buying by Tesco's procurement organisation, in logistics, in freight, and in cutting waste.

Sainsbury's, facing an additional £140mn national insurance headwind, is similarly targeting £1bn of cost savings by March 2027. Clothing and food retailer M&S, facing £120mn of extra wage costs, said it aimed to pass on "as little as possible" to consumers. One of the biggest names on the British high street, the 141-year-old retailer is in the middle of a successful turnaround programme and believes it can continue to grind out further savings, modernising its distribution and supply chain.

"My summary is: big job, but lots in our control and we've got to be ruthlessly focused on costs in these next 12 months," CEO Stuart Machin said.

"We talk a lot about volume



Boxes of mince pies are seen on the shelf of a Sainsbury's supermarket in Manchester.

growth, because the more we sell, the more that offsets some of these cost pressures."

But for many smaller players raising prices is the only option. A British Chambers of Commerce survey of 4,800 businesses, mostly with fewer than 250 staff, found 55% planned price increases

- potentially hampering the fight to contain inflation and grow the economy. And for some, more drastic action may be required. British discount retailer Shoe Zone has said the additional costs of the budget meant some stores had become unviable and would be closed.

India's rice stocks hit record high, wheat reserves deplete

India's rice stocks hit a record high at the start of January, reaching eight times the government's target, while wheat stocks continued to deplete as traders urged the government to increase wheat sales amid market shortages. Higher rice stocks would enable the world's biggest exporter of the staple to accelerate exports. However, dwindling wheat stocks will likely deter the government from releasing more stock to bulk consumers.

Rice reserves in state granaries, including unmilled paddy, totalled 60.9mn metric tonnes on Jan 1, compared to the government's target of 7.6mn tonnes, data compiled by the Food Corporation of India showed. Meanwhile, wheat stocks as on Jan 1 stood at 18.4mn tonnes against a targeted 13.8mn tonnes, but were far below the five-year average of 26.7mn tonnes.

Rice stocks have reached an alarmingly high level, said an exporter based in Kakinada in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. Paddy procurement is still ongoing in a few states, which will further complicate the government's task of creating storage space and disposing of them through welfare schemes, he said. India's rice exports have gained momentum after New Delhi removed most curbs in September and October.

Wheat stocks are not comfortable, considering that the government has been selling far less wheat in the open market than last year, said a Mumbai-based dealer with a global trade house. The government plans to sell 2.5mn tonnes of wheat from state reserves to bulk consumers in the year ending March 2025, compared to 10mn tonnes in the previous season.

"Flour mills are now seeking government supplies to continue their operations. Sufficient stocks are not available in the open market," the dealer said. — Reuters

Gas reserves 'concerningly low', warns biggest supplier

Britain's biggest gas supplier on Friday said UK storage levels are "concerningly low" owing to high demand caused by freezing weather and after Ukraine ended Russian gas transit to Europe.

"Ongoing colder-than-usual conditions in the UK combined with the end of Russian gas pipeline supplies through Ukraine... has meant that gas inventory levels across the UK are down," Centrica, owner of British Gas, said in a statement.

Such a "perfect storm" had reduced "UK winter gas storage to concerningly low levels", it added. A spokesman for Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the government is "confident" the country "will have a sufficient gas supply and electricity capacity to meet demand this winter, due to our diverse and resilient energy system". As of Thursday, UK gas inventory was down 26% compared with one year earlier, leaving storage sites around half full, Centrica said.

"This means the UK has less than a week of gas demand in store," the company signalled. Centrica noted that gas storage was already lower

than usual heading into December. "Combined with stubbornly high gas prices, this has meant that it has been more difficult to top up storage over Christmas."

Centrica said the rest of Europe faced a similar situation. "Despite many countries mandating minimum storage levels ahead of winter, European storage was at 69% capacity (on Tuesday), down from 84% at the same time" in 2024. Centrica noted that the UK's gas storage capacity is around 10 percent or less than in France, Germany or the Netherlands.

"We are an outlier from the rest of Europe when it comes to the role of storage in our energy system and we are now seeing the implications of that," Centrica chief executive Chris O'Shea said Friday. Deliveries of Russian gas to Europe via Ukraine pipelines stopped on January 1, after Kyiv refused to renew a decades-long arrangement that earned billions of dollars for both countries.

Although Russian gas accounted for less than 10% of the European Union's gas imports in 2023 - down from more than 40% before Moscow sent troops into Ukraine

in 2022 - some of the bloc's eastern members are still heavily reliant on Russian imports.

There has been a scramble for replacement supplies, particularly liquefied natural gas (LNG) that is delivered by ship, driving up prices. Britain, which is no longer a member of the EU following Brexit, is seeking to beef up its energy security by investing heavily in renewables - also in a bid to slash carbon emissions. "Energy storage is what keeps the lights on and homes warm when the sun doesn't shine and the wind doesn't blow," said O'Shea. "We need to think of storage as a very valuable insurance policy," he added in Friday's statement.

Data earlier this month showed Britain generated its cleanest electricity on record last year with production from fossil fuels at an all-time low and renewables reaching a record-high. Oil, gas and coal together produced 29 percent of the UK's electricity in 2024 while renewables - including wind and solar power - made up 45 percent, according to analysis from climate and energy website Carbon Brief. (AFP)

Farmers protest in Amritsar



Farmers shout slogans as they burn an effigy of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a protest against the union government demanding minimum support price (MSP) for their crops, on the outskirts of Amritsar, India, yesterday.



Nobel laureate Malala to visit native Pakistan for girls' summit

AFP
Islamabad

Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Malala Yousafzai (**pictured**) will attend an international summit on girls' education hosted by her native Pakistan, where she was nearly killed by militants as a schoolgirl.

Yousafzai was evacuated from the country in 2012 after being shot by the Pakistan Taliban, who were enraged by her activism, and she has returned to the country only a handful of times since.

A spokesperson for the Malala Fund charity confirmed that Yousafzai will appear in person at the summit, which will focus on education in Islamic nations.

"I am excited to join Muslim leaders from around the world for a critical conference on girls' education," she said yesterday in a

post on social media platform X. "On Sunday, I will speak about protecting rights for all girls to go to school, and why leaders must hold the Taliban accountable for their crimes against Afghan women & girls."

Pakistan's education minister, Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui, told AFP that the Taliban government in Afghanistan has been invited to attend, although Islamabad has not received a response.

"Nevertheless, representatives from various organisations dedicated to girls' education in Afghanistan will be participating in the event," he said.

Afghanistan is the only country in the world where girls and women are banned from going to school and university.

Since returning to power in 2021, the Taliban government there has imposed an austere version of Islamic law that the United Nations has called "gender apartheid".

Girls are only allowed to attend primary

school, while women are largely restricted to working in segregated environments in health or education.

The Taliban administration claims that Islamic law "guarantees" the rights of Afghan men and women.

The two-day summit backed by the Saudi Arabia-based Muslim World League will be held in the Pakistani capital today and tomorrow and opened by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

It brings together ministers, ambassadors and religious scholars from 44 countries, as well as representatives from the UN and World Bank.

Tens of millions of girls are out of school in Muslim-majority countries, including Bangladesh and Nigeria.

Pakistan is facing a severe education crisis with more than 26mn children out of school, mostly as a result of poverty, according to official government figures

- one of the highest rates in the world.

The summit will confirm "the shared commitment of (the) Muslim community to empower girls through education", according to a government statement.

Yousafzai became a household name after she was attacked by Pakistan Taliban militants on a school bus in the remote Swat valley.

Militancy was widespread in the region at the time as the war between the Afghan Taliban and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) forces raged across the border in Afghanistan.

The Pakistan and Afghan Taliban are separate groups but share close links and similar ideologies, including a strong disbelief in educating girls.

Yousafzai was evacuated to the United Kingdom and went on to become a global advocate for girls' education and, at the age of 17, the youngest Nobel Peace Prize winner.

First PIA flight to EU in years departs for Paris

AFP
Islamabad

Pakistan's state-owned airline, plagued by a history of deadly crashes and a pilot licence scandal, resumed flights to Europe yesterday after a four-year ban was lifted by EU regulators.

The Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flight took off from Islamabad around 12.40 noon (0740 GMT) heading for Paris, AFP journalists saw, becoming the only carrier to offer a direct route to and from the European Union.

"This is the first time I am travelling with PIA," said passenger Shumaila Rana, a 38-year-old schoolteacher living in Germany. "I'm nervous and I'm having a lot of anxiety, but I'm hoping it's gonna be a good flight."

Debt-ridden PIA was banned in June 2020 from flying to the European Union, United Kingdom and the United States, a month after one of its Airbus A-320s plunged into a Karachi street, killing nearly 100 people.

The disaster was attributed to human error by the pilots and air traffic control,



and was followed by allegations that nearly a third of the licences for its pilots were fake or dubious.

In 2016, a PIA plane burst into flames after one of its two turboprop engines failed during a flight from the remote north to Islamabad, killing more than 40 people.

In November, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency announced that it had lifted the ban, however it remains barred from flying in the UK and the United States.

At the time, it said it had "re-established sufficient confidence" in the Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority's oversight capabilities.

The airline flies to multiple cities inside Pakistan, including the mountainous north, as well as to the Gulf and Southeast Asia.

The PIA, which employs about 7,000 people, has long been accused of being bloated and poorly run - hobbled by un-



Ground staff are seen near the Pakistan International Airlines aircraft ahead of its takeoff for Paris at the Islamabad International Airport. - AFP

Left: Passengers wait at the immigration counter at the Islamabad International Airport before boarding their PIA flight to Paris. - AFP

paid bills, a poor safety record and regulatory issues.

Pakistan's government has said it is committed to privatising the debt-ridden airline and has been scrambling to find a buyer.

Late last year, a deal fell through after a potential buyer reportedly offered a fraction of the asking price.

The government hopes the opening of European routes, which officials expect will be followed by a similar announcement by the UK later this

year, will boost its selling potential.

The PIA posted losses of \$270mn in 2023, according to local media.

Its liabilities were nearly \$3bn, about five times the total worth of its assets.

In the same year, amid a national economic crisis, dozens of domestic flights were cancelled when it could not afford fuel for its planes.

The PIA came into being in 1955 when the government nationalised a loss-making commercial airline, and enjoyed rapid growth until the 1990s.



This aerial view shows the tanker *Eventin*, flying the Panama flag and loaded with 99,000 tonnes of oil, as it is towed away to a port by the tug boat *Bremen Fighter* (front right) after it was unable to manoeuvre at sea north of the German Baltic Sea island of Ruegen, while the multi-purpose ship *Arkona* of the Waterways and Shipping Administration can be seen in the background. - AFP

Germany secures oil tanker adrift off its Baltic coast

Reuters/AFP
Berlin

A tugboat has stopped a tanker carrying around 99,000 metric tonnes of oil from Russia from drifting out of control off Germany's Baltic Sea coast near the island of Ruegen, emergency services said yesterday.

The 274m (899') Panama-flagged tanker, called *Eventin*, and travelling from Russia to Egypt, had been drifting slowly and unable to manoeuvre since earlier yesterday, Germany's Central Command for Maritime Emergencies said.

A tugboat was holding it in position and others were en route, CCME said, adding it was evaluating next steps.

Evacuation of the 24-member crew was not necessary, it said.

"Russia endangers our European security not only with its illegal war of aggression against Ukraine but also through severed cables ... disinformation campaigns, GPS jammers, and, indeed, with decrepit oil tankers," Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said in a statement. "With the unscrupulous use of a fleet of rusting tankers, (Russian President Vladimir) Putin not only circumvents sanctions but also deliberately accepts the risk of halting tourism in the Baltic Sea region."

Moscow did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

Baerbock said the incident is an example of why Germany, with other countries, had called for new sanctions against Russia's fleet of oil tankers in recent months.

Following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, Western countries have hit Russia's oil industry with an embargo and banned the provision of services to ships carrying oil by sea.

In response, Russia has relied on tankers with opaque ownership or without proper insurance to continue lucrative oil exports.

The number of ships in the "shadow fleet" has exploded since the start of the war in Ukraine, according to US think tank the Atlantic Council.

In addition to direct action against Russia's oil industry, Western countries have moved to sanction individual ships thought to be in the shadow fleet.

The European Union has so far sanctioned over 70 ships thought to be ferrying Russian oil.

The United States and Britain earlier on Friday moved to impose restrictions on some further 180 ships in the shadow fleet.

The efforts to curb the activities of the fleet have however so far only had a limited effect, the Atlantic Council has said.

Airlines face 'high risk' flying over Russia: EU agency

AFP
Paris

The downing of an Azerbaijan Airlines airplane shows that flying over Russia poses a "high risk" to civilian flights amid the war in Ukraine, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) said yesterday.

The EASA said the conflict "poses the risk of civil aircraft being unintentionally targeted in the airspace of the Russian Federation, due to possible civil-military co-ordination deficiencies, and the potential for misidentification".

The agency renewed its recommendation for airlines to avoid flying over western Russian airspace.

Russia has banned EU airlines from flying over its airspace but those from China, Turkey, Gulf states and other countries are still authorised.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has said that the Azerbaijan Airlines passenger jet, which crashed in Kazakhstan on December 25, killing 38 people, was shot at "from the ground" over the Russian city of Grozny where it had been due to land.

Russia has said its air defences were working

at the time repelling Ukrainian drones, but has stopped short of saying it shot at the plane.

The EASA said the activation of Russian air defence systems to counter Ukrainian missiles and drones launched into Russia "may have a direct impact on flight operations at several locations, including major international airports".

"Most of the incidents have occurred in airspace not closed by the Russian Federation during drones attacks or activation of air defence systems," the EASA safety bulletin said. "This poses a high risk to flight operations, as demonstrated by the incident involving Azerbaijan Airlines flight 8243 on 25 December 2024."

Dozens of German universities turn back on X accounts, citing ethical concerns

Dozens of German universities said yesterday that they would no longer use social network X - owned by the world's richest man, Elon Musk - citing ethical concerns.

More than 60 German universities and academic institutions said in a joint statement that X was now incompatible with their principles.

"The platform's current direction is not compatible with the basic values of the institutions concerned - openness to the world, scientific integrity, transparency and democratic discourse," they said.

Musk took over the platform, previously known as Twitter, in 2022 before firing about 80% of its staff, including those at content moderation teams. Researchers say the site has turned into a haven for misinformation.

Musk defended the changes in a 2023 interview with Britain's public broadcaster, the BBC, saying that they were necessary given Twitter's dire finances.

He has also described himself as a "free speech absolutist", with a permissive attitude towards content on X.

Musk also caused controversy in Germany on Thursday for broadcasting a discussion with Alice Weidel, leader of the extreme-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.

Parts of the party have attracted the attention of Germany's domestic intelligence agency for possible right-wing extremism.

The academic institutions which signed yester-

day's statement include Berlin's Humboldt University and a number of faculties which had already stopped using X, such as Berlin's Freie Universitaet.

"Changes on the X platform make it untenable to use it any further," they said, citing as an example the use of algorithms to boost "right-wing populist" content.

Two universities in the Austrian city of Innsbruck also put their names to the statement, which said the withdrawal from X "underlines the institutions' efforts for the sake of fact-based communication and against anti-democratic forces".

The universities are the latest in a string of German institutions to announce they are abandoning X.

On Thursday, the Federal Court of Justice said that it would no longer post on the site, as did several labour unions.

In recent months, other businesses and organisations, such as Bundesliga football team St Pauli and supermarket giant Aldi Nord, have also quit X.

The German government said it has no immediate plans to stop using the platform.

Government spokeswoman Christiane Hoffmann told a press conference yesterday: "We are very concerned about how X has developed but at the same time we have to constantly weigh up how we can reach people whom we otherwise wouldn't be able to address."

"For the moment we have decided to keep using our channels on X but it is a constant process of evaluation," she said. - AFP

Kazakhstan fines oil giants over \$6mn for pollution

A Kazakh court has fined a consortium of oil companies over \$6mn for excessive gas flaring from a giant oil field under the Caspian Sea.

The Central Asian country has stepped up fines on environmental violators in recent years, as it seeks to placate concerns about pollution while also exploiting its immense natural resources.

The North Caspian Operating Company - a group that

includes Shell, ExxonMobil, China's CNPC and TotalEnergies - was fined 3.5bn tenge (\$6.6mn) in damages "for excessive unauthorised flaring" at the vast Kashagan oilfield, Astana's court service said.

Flaring is the burning off of excess gas that comes from the ground during oil drilling.

It is carried out for safety reasons but the process often releases harmful environmental

pollutants into the air.

The Kashagan oil reservoir is one of the largest oil discoveries in recent decades, containing up to 13bn barrels of recoverable oil, according to the North Caspian Operating Company.

The Caspian Sea is particularly sensitive to pollution, with shrinking water levels, waste from oil extraction and agricultural run-off all contributing to habitat loss. - AFP

Anti-tank mines left near IKEA warehouse

Four Polish soldiers face charges of neglect of duty, prosecutors said yesterday, after the army lost track of 240 anti-tank mines in July, which were later found in a train wagon near a warehouse belonging to Swedish furniture retailer IKEA.

"The suspects are four soldiers, the case concerns neglect of duty regarding the unloading of a transport of munitions ... (they face) up to 5 years of imprisonment," spokesman for the District Prosecutor's Office in Poznan, Lukasz Wawrzyniak, said. "None of the suspects have pleaded guilty."

He said a cargo of mines being transported by rail from Hajnowka on Poland's eastern border to an ammunition depot in Mosty in the west was not completely offloaded when it arrived at its destination.

The transport took place between July 4-7.

As a result, part of the cargo - 240 anti-tank mines - moved on and was only found on July 16 in a rail siding near a furniture store warehouse.

"All the elements were sealed and ... immediately secured by the army," Wawrzyniak said.

IKEA Industry Poland chief executive Malgorzata Dobies-Turulska confirmed that the army had picked up the explosives from one of the wagons that arrived at a warehouse belonging to IKEA Industry Orla.

"The box was collected by the military police on the same day. Cooperation with the military police went very smoothly," she said.

Poland's Defence Minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz said all appropriate actions were taken after the incident. - Reuters

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka

Deputy Managing Editor

K T Chacko

Production Editor

Amjad Khan

✉ P.O.Box 2888, Doha, Qatar
✉ editor@gulf-times.com
☎ 44350478 (News),
☎ 44466404 (Sport),
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GULF TIMES

Politics, not climate, to drive sustainable finance trends in 2025

A turbulent year for sustainable finance is set to continue in 2025 as the return of Donald Trump as US president heralds more regional divergence on everything from fund flows to legal cases and market regulations.

Despite record high temperatures and more extreme weather events across the planet last year, the policy response by governments still remains too slow to meet the world's near 10-year-old goal of limiting global warming.

While regulators everywhere are gradually toughening up the rules that govern finance and companies in the real economy in an effort to cut climate-damaging carbon emissions faster, the pace of change is uneven with the US already lagging Europe.

A turbo-charged US political backlash over environmental, social and governance (ESG)-related policies under Trump means that gap could widen even if, in many cases, the economics, companies' near-term emissions reduction pledges and the rising costs of climate events keep the broad direction unchanged.

"We anticipate that in 2025, we'll see a resilience for sustainable investment globally, although it's likely that there will remain core differences between the US and Europe's approach," said Tom Willman, Regulatory Lead at sustainability tech firm Clarity AI.

"We anticipate that in 2025, we'll see a resilience for sustainable investment globally..."

"In the US, we can expect a more conservative approach, with investors prioritising long-term risk-adjusted returns to avoid potential political or reputational risks." While just over half of US executives expect new or expanded sustainability regulations this year, in Britain that figure is 60% and Singapore 80%, a December

survey of 1,600 executives by Workiva showed.

The US political reality has already spurred some US firms to curtail their climate and diversity efforts to avoid censure. In the latest sign of corporates changing tack, the biggest US banks recently left a sector coalition aimed at cutting emissions.

Legal pressure is also building on the world's climate efforts.

One in five climate litigation cases were not aligned with policies to reduce emissions, analysis last year by the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment showed. The majority of these were in the US.

The regional split was evident among sustainable investment in the year to the end of September, with US funds seeing clients withdraw a combined \$15.9bn as European funds took in \$37.3bn, data from industry tracker Morningstar showed.

The number of new ESG-focused funds launched in the US, meanwhile, fell to just 7 against 189 in Europe.

Across the world, more sustainable funds were closed than launched for the first time, hit by the US backlash, increasingly tough European Union rules aimed at forcing funds to evidence their sustainability credentials and market consolidation.

Demand for sustainable funds lagged the broader market in part because of mixed performance, concerns around whether some funds were as green as they purported to be, regulatory uncertainty and the ESG backlash, said Hortense Bioy, Head of Sustainable Investing Research, Morningstar Sustainability.

Despite an uncertain outlook given the potential for Trump to water down some ESG initiatives, for example government support for electric vehicles, many of the underlying market drivers of demand for sustainable finance, such as the need for green energy, remained, she added.

Charles French, co-chief investment officer at Impax Asset Management, said despite Trump's negative view on climate change — he has called it a hoax — companies in sectors from healthcare and industrials were eyeing climate tech solutions to cut costs.

"The era of tech-inspired transformation is not coming to an end. In many areas, it's just getting started," he said. — Reuters

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The dollar diplomacy we need

By Andrew Gallucci

Washington, DC

Amid the recent maelstrom of political news was an important development for the future of technology-enabled public money. During the Brics Summit in Kazan, Russia, the Bank for International Settlements revealed that it was withdrawing from the digital-asset and payments initiative Project mBridge.

Conceived in 2022 as a clearinghouse for central-bank digital currencies, mBridge had anchored the BIS's own work toward a global interbank settlement system to connect CBDs beyond the control by any single government. Capitalising on the efficiency gains of blockchain technology, mBridge offered an answer to all who are disenchanted with sluggish and unaffordable cross-border payments. As recently as June, the BIS had doubled down on the initiative, adding Saudi Arabia to its roster of founding central banks and advancing it out of the pilot phase.

Doubtless buffeted by the geopolitical headwinds coming out of Kazan, BIS General Manager Agustín Carstens told a Group of 30 meeting in late October that, "we cannot directly support any project for the Brics because we cannot operate with countries that are subject to sanctions." Carstens's comments reflect a growing tension in Western capitals. While many support efforts to use new technology to make the financial system more efficient and egalitarian, they don't want to usher in a world order that is no longer grounded in Western law and norms.

US intelligence agencies have long highlighted this tradeoff when warning about rogue states that are building sanctions-proof alternative settlement mechanisms or using virtual assets to facilitate bilateral trade (such as between Russia and China). In Kazan, Brics leaders made no secret of their efforts to create a new financial order and jettison the dollar, echoing long-standing Russian calls for a single blockchain-based Brics currency to fortify trade against Western sanctions.

The uncomfortable question facing Western policymakers is whether their vision of a borderless digital economy enshrined in Western values is truly best served by a public-led model in which central banks take centre stage and organise commerce at the supranational level. After all, a privately led, publicly refereed system has been the norm for the past 80 years.

It was intermediated private money that exported Western rules and norms, creating a financial bulwark beyond Nato members' borders and hard-coding US sanctions and anti-money-laundering measures into global banking and trade. Banks and multinationals have carried dollars to almost every corner of the planet,



The Bank for International Settlements



Representations of cryptocurrencies including Bitcoin, Dash, Ethereum, Ripple and Litecoin are seen in this illustration picture.

simultaneously serving as envoys for the US currency and financial system. For decades, this system has stymied money launderers, state sponsors of terrorism, drug traffickers, and other criminals, pushing them to find ever more creative methods of evasion.

However, rogue actors' rapid adoption of unregulated forms of digital money has invigorated discussions — among both Brics and Western leaders — about overhauling the existing global financial architecture. It is no surprise that the Brics have been at the forefront of projects like mBridge, given its potential to upend the established Bretton Woods order. But rather than shying away from mBridge and successful pilots of new global trade and payments rails, Western leaders should be considering how to make the most of them.

Just as the old international financial rails served Western policy objectives, so can the new digital ones. With mBridge already demonstrating that blockchain technology can connect the global economy through internet-speed transactions, the only question now is how to strike the right balance between public and private involvement.

The answer may be deceptively simple: The most promising alternative to the Brics vision is to keep the existing architecture but modernise the rails that distribute the dollar, euro, and pound. As matters stand, roughly 90% of foreign-exchange flows are still dollarised, but the Financial Stability Board's latest assessment of cross-border payments stresses that the fragile, slow, and expensive legacy fiat-currency system needs

an upgrade. With consumer cross-border payment costs rising, America's not-so-secret weapon to address the system's deficiencies and counter its adversaries' ambitions is simply to embrace regulated digital dollars and allow the private sector to keep doing what it has been doing.

Can Western policymakers match Brics leaders' enthusiasm for digitisation and take steps to regulate digital dollars? If so, one of their first steps should be to create a regulatory structure for digital private money in the form of dollar stablecoins, which already has bipartisan support in the US Senate and the House of Representatives. Codifying a US standard for the safe, sound, and regulated use of digital dollars — whether publicly or privately issued — would be an authoritative response to those who want to highlight a tradeoff between using dollars and participating in the digital economy.

By contrast, ignoring the technological implications of mBridge and tokenisation could result in a major strategic loss. The dollar is inching toward representing only a plurality, rather than a majority, of global settlements. To borrow Carstens's own prescient words in 2022: "Let's ensure that our financial system builds on the existing governance of money, serves the public interest, and works cooperatively with the private sector" — Project Syndicate

• Andrew Gallucci, a former illicit finance and macroeconomic official at the US Treasury Department and Central Intelligence Agency, is Director of Regulatory Strategy at Circle.

Will your encrypted messages remain private in Europe?

By Markéta Gregorová

Brussels

In recent years, civil-society organisations and industry players have joined forces to protect encrypted messaging from government intrusion. In an age of surveillance, notes the former Council of Europe commissioner for human rights, encryption is "a vital human rights tool". In my own work on security and foreign affairs as a member of the European Parliament, I have seen firsthand why this is true. Activists, journalists, human-rights defenders, and ordinary citizens all rely on the right to privacy, viewing it as a core European value that underpins freedom of expression and democracy itself.

Encryption is one of the most important privacy-enabling technologies in today's world, which is why most essential online services — messaging apps, calls, emails, file sharing, payments — rely on it. The most effective form, end-to-end encryption, ensures that only the communicating parties can decrypt and see the content of their messages, making unauthorised access impossible (as with Signal or WhatsApp).

But governments and law-enforcement agencies have been increasingly eager to access encrypted communications, even if that means undermining public confidence in privacy protection. Across EU member states, several governments want to weaken encryption technologies under the guise of fighting terrorism and other crime.

The message is clear: many governments and authorities see encryption not as a human-rights safeguard, but as an obstacle. The European Commission has established a high-level working group on "access to data for effective law enforcement". The group, composed of law-enforcement representatives, has recommended "lawful access by design" to data "en clair", meaning that communication services would be required to install "backdoors" enabling criminal investigators to access unencrypted data.

The push to weaken encryption reached a peak in 2022 with the European Commission's proposed Child Sexual Abuse Regulation (CSAR), nicknamed "Chat Control". This regulation would empower authorities to mandate indiscriminate scanning of private messages, including those on



end-to-end encrypted services, to detect child sexual abuse material.

Even if adopted with the best of intentions, such measures would inevitably create vulnerabilities that could be exploited by malicious actors. IT professionals have argued that it is impossible to break encryption safely; backdoors always create exploitable security gaps. Just weeks ago, news broke that major US internet service providers had been hacked by Chinese actors through legally accessible data channels.

Intelligence agencies (including in the Netherlands) rightly warn that undermining encryption presents an unmanageable cybersecurity risk. In fact, ongoing discussions within the Council of the EU have ruled out scanning for accounts deemed critical for national security, revealing a glaring double standard.

Nor is cybersecurity the only issue. The regulation also would invite a legal challenge. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights explicitly protects privacy in one's communications, and the EU Court of Justice has made clear that indiscriminate and comprehensive scanning of private communications constitutes a disproportionate infringement of this right. Independent internal analyses by both the Council of the EU and the European Parliament have reached similar conclusions, and the European Data Protection Board and European Data Protection Supervisor have raised both privacy and efficacy concerns about the proposed law. After all, criminals could easily circumvent detection.

The European Commission has also failed to address the broader implications of intercepting

encrypted messages under the pretense of combating child sexual abuse. Driven by a near-unlimited appetite for data, law-enforcement agencies would likely push to extend the surveillance regime to other domains. Europol, the EU police agency, has already recommended as much. And, contrary to the Commission's assurances, significant doubts remain about the reliability, effectiveness, and feasibility of software to detect child abuse.

For all of these reasons, the European Parliament has settled on a more balanced approach, ruling out scanning on encrypted services and limiting surveillance to targeted suspects or groups of suspects.

Meanwhile, the Council of the EU is discussing an approach known as "client-side scanning", whereby messages are intercepted before being sent. But while this method has been presented as a compromise between privacy, security, and child protection, what it actually does is compromise the integrity of encryption, ultimately raising the same privacy and cybersecurity concerns.

Acceptance of this approach would not bode well for privacy protection in Europe. Yet, the new European commissioner for internal affairs and migration, Magnus Brunner, has said that he is "convinced of the necessity and urgency to adopt the proposed Regulation". During his hearings before the European Parliament, he refused to commit to protecting encryption, and he avoided answering questions about the use of spyware by EU governments, another deeply invasive way to circumvent encryption.

Encryption is not just a technical safeguard; it is a cornerstone of our digital rights and democratic freedoms. As debates on the CSAR proposal continue, we must remain vigilant against policies that undermine these values under the guise of safety. Weakening encryption jeopardises not only individual privacy but also the broader digital ecosystem.

Rather than eroding encryption, the EU must champion robust privacy protections that balance security needs with fundamental rights. With this in mind, I signed a pledge to protect encryption. This is not just about defending technology; it is about defending the principles that define us as a society. — Project Syndicate

• Markéta Gregorová is a member of the European Parliament.

WORLD NEWS THROUGH THE LENS



In this aerial view taken from a helicopter, burned homes are seen from above during the Palisades fire near the Pacific Palisades neighbourhood of Los Angeles, California, on Thursday. Massive wildfires engulfed whole neighbourhoods and displaced thousands in Los Angeles. Swaths of the United States' second-largest city lay in ruins, with smoke blanketing the sky and an acrid smell pervading almost every building.



Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro gestures next to First Lady Cilia Flores on arrival at the Capitolio - house of the National Assembly - for the presidential inauguration, in Caracas yesterday. Maduro, in power since 2013, will take the oath of office for a third term despite a global outcry that brought thousands out in protest on the ceremony's eve.



Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado addresses supporters during a protest called by the opposition on the eve of the presidential inauguration, in Caracas on Thursday. Venezuela is on tenterhooks facing demonstrations called by both the opposition and government supporters. Machado emerged from hiding to lead protests in Caracas against the swearing-in of Nicolas Maduro for a highly controversial third term as president.



Vasco da Gama bridge is pictured during a foggy afternoon at Parque das Nacoes in Lisbon on Thursday.



A man reads the newspaper as he sits outdoors at a coffee shop in Egypt's southern city of Luxor.



Fishermen steer their boat as they leave the Costa do Sol informal fish market in Maputo yesterday.



A cat is comforted on its owner's shoulder before receiving a medical check by a vet in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, yesterday.



Day and night attractions at Sealine Season captivate visitors.
PICTURES: Visit Qatar



Entertainment shows on the main stage enthrall the audience.
PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam<-closing bold italic->



Plenty of fun and thrills this season at Sealine

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Sealine Beach has transformed into a vibrant hub of activity, targeting residents and visitors eager to experience the nighttime attractions offered at the Sealine Season.

It is learnt that the three-week event, organised by Visit Qatar and running until January 27, provides a significant boost to Qatar's tourism sector with its diverse offering of day and night-time entertainment.

The Sealine Season is a collaborative effort with key government entities, including the Ministry of Sports and Youth, Qatar Sports for All, and the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change.

While families and visitors continue to enjoy various daytime activities, including desert safaris, horse riding, and cultural activations, it is the dazzling array of night-time experiences that enthrall crowds, especially during the weekend.

Among the highlights is the tethered hot air balloon experience, offering a unique perspective of the Sealine landscape under the stars.

Roaming parades add a touch of theatrical magic as they wind their way through the crowds, creating a festive and immersive atmosphere.

The evening is capped by a spectacular fireworks display, filling the night sky with brilliant colour.

The "Chef on Fire" cooking competition, held every Thursday, has also been a popular attraction, showcasing local culinary talent and enthralling food enthusiasts.

Coupled with a pleasant weather, it is learnt that these nighttime activities are

key to the broader entertainment experience that has made Sealine Season a must-visit destination this January.

This activation is poised to gain further momentum with the upcoming Qatar Kite Festival, a lively and colourful showcase of creativity and culture.

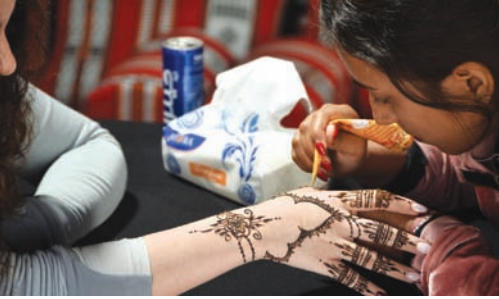
The festival will begin at Sealine Beach from January 16-18 before moving to Old Doha Port from January 19-25.

Apart from entertainment, some of the most popular activities at Sealine include desert safaris and "Monster Bus" safaris, which offer 4x4 rides across the dunes, along with ATV Buggy experiences.

Visitors can also enjoy family-friendly sports such as volleyball, football, and mini-soccer in the designated sports area, while those with artistic interests can take part in face painting, falconry demonstrations, and calligraphy sessions, all offered from 3pm-10pm.



Sealine Season is poised to gain further momentum with the upcoming Qatar Kite Festival, a lively and colourful showcase of creativity and culture. Meanwhile, visitors with artistic interests can take part in face painting, falconry demonstrations, and calligraphy sessions. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam



Torba Farm gains popularity sustainably

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Torba Farm, a family-run oasis of sustainable agriculture outside Doha, is gaining popularity this season as a destination for visitors seeking organic produce, locally crafted wellness goods, and a deep connection to nature.

The farm's increasing appeal has been highlighted by Visit Qatar, which recently featured Torba Farm in a video on their social media channels, describing it as "Qatar's organic treasure".

Established in the early 1980s in Al Khor by twins Mohammed and Fatma al-Khater, Torba Farm grew into a vibrant green sanctuary over the years.

It now boasts a diverse collection of medicinal, aromatic, and edible plants, along with a thriving ecosystem of local wildlife.

Driven by a passion for sustainability, the farm has evolved into a pioneering producer of 100% pure, therapeutic-grade essential oils, hydrosols, and other botanical products.

All products are rigorously tested for quality, reflecting the farm's mission to promote health and wellness through natural, chemical-free offerings that are ethically sourced and sustainably produced.

According to Torba Market's website, Torba Farm's commitment extends beyond its own production as it actively collaborates with local artisans who share its dedication to sustainability and offers a diverse range of high-quality, eco-friendly products.

Torba fosters these small businesses by developing exclusive lines for them and showcasing their goods through its store catalogue and farmers' market.

A key focus for Torba is environmental stewardship, imple-



Torba Farms was established in the early 1980s in Al Khor by twins Mohammed and Fatma al-Khater. - Screenshots from www.torba.qa

menting natural farming best practices, including regenerative agriculture, permaculture, and biodynamics.

It prioritises water conservation, soil health, and utilises natural and renewable resources, ensuring the land is cared for and respected.

The farm's current direction is steered by Mohammed and Fatma al-Khater, who took over five years ago.

Mohammed, inspired by traditional Arabic medicine, focuses on reviving time-honoured herbal remedies and re-establishing native Qatari flora.

Fatma meanwhile, became aware of the disconnection between modern life and the land and wanted to use the farm to grow organic fresh produce and create a local market to reconnect people with their food.

Torba Farm products, marketed under the brand "Torba Naturals", underlines quality and transparency.

The name "Torba" translates to pure soil, reflecting the farm's commitment to nurturing and natural processes.

Founded in 2019 with a vision of fostering communities that value nature, clean beauty,



health, wellness, and sustainable lifestyles, Torba Naturals offers a range of more than 100 essential oils and absolutes, all sourced from farm-grown plants.

Their collection includes high-quality hydrosols and handmade health and wellness items like chemical-free cleaning solutions, lotions, creams, and soaps.

Torba Farm encourages visitors to experience their farm firsthand, inviting them to discover the abundance of nature and the power of natural products while fostering a greater understanding of sustainable living.

For those seeking a unique and enriching experience, Torba Farm offers a chance to reconnect with the land and embrace a healthier, more mindful lifestyle. (Source: www.torba.qa)



All's good at Wakra beach

Wakra beach, with its breathtaking beauty, is a favourite spot for morning walks and other physical activities among the residents of the locality. Pictured is a serene early morning view of the beach and the surrounding areas. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

