

The WFP said that since the ceasefire began, around 600 trucks of humanitarian aid had been entering Gaza daily, including 50 carrying fuel.





## Amir's visit to Damascus marks a new phase of collaboration: Syrian media

**QNA**  
Damascus

The historic visit of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to Syria was highlighted yesterday by a number of Syrian newspapers and media outlets, which viewed it as a significant step that demonstrated Qatar's unwavering commitment to helping the Syrian people in a variety of ways.

The Amir's visit, as concurred by the media, marks a new phase of collaboration between the two nations and highlights Qatar's significant contribution in aiding Syria in recent years.

As the first visit of its kind for a head of state since the overthrow of the previous regime last December, the Syrian media noted that the Amir's visit to Damascus demonstrates the Qatari leadership's

strong commitment to aiding the Syrian people and validates its attempts to rally international support in order to realise Syrians' aspirations.

The intensive media coverage highlighted the significance of the visit and its political and humanitarian dimensions, praising the brotherly relations between the Syrian and Qatari peoples, and expressed the appreciation of the Syrians for the firm positions taken by Qatar to support their causes in various forums.

Syria TV paid great attention to the visit through special coverage, saying that this visit comes in light of the political and humanitarian support provided by Doha to the Syrian revolution since its beginning. With the arrival of the Amir in Damascus, this stage marks the opening of Syria and its new leadership to the countries of the region and the restoration of its role as a leading and influential country, it said.

For its part, the official Syrian news agency (SANA) gave a wide coverage, highlighting the importance of the Amir's visit and its role in strengthening bilateral relations, in addition to emphasising Qatar's continued support for Syria in various fields. The Syrian newspaper *Zaman Al-Wasl* published a report on a survey of the opinions of citizens who expressed their happiness and optimism about the visit, stressing that it represents a historic event and the beginning of a new stage of co-operation between the two countries.

Syrian academics and politicians expressed their great appreciation for the visit paid by the Amir, pointing out that the Syrian people always remember His Highness's firm positions and courageous efforts in supporting the Syrians and defending their cause.

Commenting on the importance of the visit, Syrian professor and academic Yahya

al-Aridi said that Syria remembers Qatar's firm and continuous position in support of the Syrian people at all levels – economic, political and humanitarian, and that Doha was the only place where the Syrian revolution had an embassy, which the Syrians greatly appreciate.

Secretary-general of the Syrian national movement Dr Zakaria Malahifji spoke about the popular and emotional dimension of this visit, stressing that Syria welcomes the Amir with joy and true love as the Syrian memory always remembers His Highness's positions and courageous efforts in defending the Syrian people and their cause. Director of the Syrian centre for community development Radwan al-Atrash said that this visit represents a major turning point, saying that the Amir's visit is not just a diplomatic step but a clear declaration of a new Arab openness towards Syria and a support for the tran-

sitional phase with the aim of achieving security, stability and reconstruction.

He added that Qatari projects such as Al Amal City in the Aleppo countryside constitute a fundamental pillar in improving the living conditions of Syrians, especially those returning to their areas after years of displacement. For his part, economic expert Dr Yasser al-Hussein said that the visit reflects Qatar's commitment to supporting the Syrian economy and opening new horizons for investment, saying that the resumption of Qatar Airways flights to Damascus International Airport is an indication of Syria's restoration of its relations with its Arab surroundings; and the Qatari aid that has been flowing since Dec 8, 2024, contributed to improving the humanitarian situation by supporting the health sector, securing food and shelter, and helping in the rehabilitation of infrastructure.

### Rwandan president meets al-Khulaifi



Rwandan President Paul Kagame met with HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi in Kigali yesterday. The meeting discussed bilateral relations and ways to support and enhance them as well as ways to reduce tensions in the Great Lakes region. During the meeting, HE Dr al-Khulaifi affirmed Qatar's support for all regional and international efforts aimed at restoring security and stability in the region. **(QNA)**

### Sheikha Alya meets UN official



Qatar's Permanent Representative to the UN HE Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani met with Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) Jorge Moreira da Silva at the Permanent Mission's headquarters in New York yesterday. The meeting discussed the strategic partnership between Qatar and the UNOPS as well as explored ways to deliver humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. **(QNA)**

### KIAHF 2025 continues to captivate



The third day of the Arabian Peninsula Horse Show at the Katara International Arabian Horse Festival (KIAHF 2025) continued to captivate audiences. The Senior Mares categories witnessed fierce competition, with Sheihana al-Nasser claiming first place in the 4-7 Years Old section (Class 3A) with 92.29 points. In the Senior Stallions categories, D Memzer took the top spot in the 4-6 Years Old section (Class 6A) with 92.00. In the 7+ Years Old section (Class 6B), GJ Faheem topped with 92.79 points. KIAHF 2025 continues until February 8.

### Push for eco-friendly boats



The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, represented by the Green Development and Environmental Sustainability Department, held a meeting with officials from the Sustainable Modernisation Project for Traditional Wooden Boats (Mahamel) at the University of Doha for Science and Technology. The meeting discussed the progress and achievements of the project and reviewed the prototype's performance in the laboratory. The project aims to develop a prototype of a traditional sailing boat powered by renewable energy and made from environment-friendly materials.



### Doha resident Indrani Kabi passes away

Indian expatriate Indrani Banerjee Kabi (43) passed away in Doha on Thursday night. She was under treatment for cancer. A Qatar resident for 15 years, Indrani was the vice-president of Marsh Qatar, a global insurance broker and risk management firm. She is survived by her husband Dr Basanta Kumar Kabi, employed with a government organisation, and their daughters Shreegeeta Kabi and Shriyanshi Kabi, students of Rajagiri Public School in Doha. The mortal remains will be taken to India on Sunday, according to Dr Kabi.

### Arabian Horse Festival a creative platform for visual artists

The cultural and artistic events accompanying Katara International Arabian Horse Festival 2025 has continued to attract significant public interest. The arts arenas alongside Katara Corniche have seen various creative activities celebrating the beauty of the purebred Arabian horses, highlighting the role of visual arts in documenting this rich heritage. One of the festival's standout activities was the mural painting event, where six visual artists gathered in open spaces to create live artworks before the audience. These pieces captured the aesthetics of the Arabian horses using various artistic styles. The participating artists expressed their joy in being part of this global cultural event, noting that the mural painting activity provides a unique opportunity to showcase the deep connection between equestrianism and visual arts.



### Plastic arts exhibition opened at Katara

Katara General Manager Prof Dr Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Sulaiti opened a plastic arts exhibition surrounding the Katara International Arabian Horse Festival 2025. The Symphony of Authenticity by artist Al Mimar takes visitors on a visual journey depicting the deep relationship between man and the Arabian horse. Al Mimar has excelled in depicting purebred Arabian horses in realistic, impressionistic or abstract styles, leveraging colour effects that blend authenticity and innovation. He hailed his Katara International Arabian Horse Festival 2025 engagement as a career milestone, adding his creations celebrate the long-standing presence of Arabian horse in Arab and Islamic history and culture. **(QNA)**





## Sheikh Joaan crowns winners of Marmi 2025



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani crowned the winners of the 16th edition of the Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi) 2025 yesterday at the festival site in Sabkhat Marmi, Sealine Area.



The crowning ceremony took place following the conclusion of the field championships, with the final of the Haddad Al Tahadi Championship. At the beginning of the ceremony, HE Sheikh Joaan, the patron of Marmi Festival, honoured Abdul-

rahman bin Abdul Latif al-Mannai, CEO of the Social and Sports Support Fund (Daam); and Misfer Saleh al-Bidaiwi, vice-president of Shell Qatar and a member of the Ras Laffan Community Outreach Programme. Following this, HE Sheikh



Joaan presented the awards to the winners of the remaining field championships. Marmi festival will conclude with the Mazayen (falcon Beauty) Contest today (Saturday) at Katara - the Cultural Village's Building 12.

# Bovet 1822 celebrates art, innovation at DJWE

Bovet 1822, the renowned Swiss luxury watchmaker, is showcasing art and innovation along with the elegant collections at the ongoing Doha Jewellery and Watches Exhibition (DJWE) at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre.

Among the highlights is the magnificent Récital 26 Brainstorm Chapter Two, honoured by its engineering brilliance that received the 2020 Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Genève award for Mechanical Exception.

"The Récital 26 Brainstorm Chapter Two is distinctive with several unique features," Audrey Raffy, vice-president, Bovet 1822, told *Gulf Times* yesterday.

The watch has a 47.80mm sapphire trademarked writing slope case with a three dimensional hemispheric precision moon, double face flying tourbillon, universal time display with indexable second-time zone for intuitive reading of the 24 Time Zones, exhibition case back and five-day power reserve.

The names of 24 global cities representing the time zones are printed on the rotating part of the dome which makes a complete revolution, by scanning the 24-hour graduation of the base ring. A three-dimensional V-shaped needle allows the collector to select the displayed time zone. This clever and innovative combination, united with the dome, allows optimal readability, despite the reduced diameter of the entire display.

The surface of the lunar ground is engraved by hand before luminescent material is applied, also, by hand. The two circular windows which overhang the dome make it possible to read the age of the moon according to the specific orientation of its crescent, whether one is in the northern hemisphere or the southern hemisphere of the earth.

The domes of the second time zone and the moon phase rotate by the patented mechanism of the radial guidance system, which increases the chronometry and the power reserve of the timepiece. The precision mechanism that drives this dome gives it an accuracy that requires a correction of one day every 122 years.

Audrey said that Bovet 1822 integrates innovation with vintage features to keep the legacy of the brand intact.

Buyers can choose from the wide range of watches that include The Miss Audrey, The Monsieur Bovet, The Or-



Bovet 1822 vice-president Audrey Raffy at DJWE yesterday. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam



bis Mundi, The Virtuoso series and The Récital series.

Asked about the presence in Qatar, Audrey said: "In Qatar, there's an incredible amount of taste for arts, crafts and engineering. The market here has so much taste and appreciation for the high level of expertise that we have in our watches that it's just a real pleasure to be here always."



She hailed the partnership with Al-fardan Jewellery saying everything is so much smoother when it comes to the business. "Bovet 1822 and Alfardan are family houses. There is so much in common between the two houses when it comes to values and principles," she said adding that the brand has plans to launch special editions and limited editions in partnership with Alfardan.

# MoPH develops an action plan to address food risks

The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) has devised a comprehensive action plan for monitoring and surveillance activities targeting various contaminants in all categories of food over the next five years. This initiative aligns with the objectives of the World Health Organisation's Global Strategy for Food Safety 2022-2030, which aims to reduce the burden of foodborne illnesses.

Implementation of the plan began at the start of 2024. The ministry's Food Safety Department's monitoring team analysed data from over 30,000 samples collected by regulatory authorities during 2023-2024, alongside 400,000 test results. This analysis aims to prioritise monitoring and surveillance programmes for potential food contaminants in Qatar.

The plan also includes the preparation and publication of a report on pesticide residues in imported and locally grown vegetables and fruits. This was achieved through collaboration between the inspection and food safety laboratories sections of the Food Safety Department. The findings were presented to the food risk management team at the ministry, which issued rec-

ommendations for implementing preventive measures to ensure the highest levels of safety for vegetables and fruits available in Qatar. Other monitoring programmes include assessing salt levels in bread and microbial contaminants in fish sold in central markets.

In line with the principle that "food safety is a shared responsibility" and to enhance cooperation with strategic partners, the Food Safety Department, in collaboration with the Ministry of Municipality, has developed a monitoring plan for veterinary drug residues in livestock slaughtered in Qatar. The plan includes a survey launched on Dec 1, initially targeting commercial abattoirs (Al Wakra Central slaughterhouse, and the abattoirs in Umm Salal and Al Khor) over a three-month period. The second phase, focusing on veterinary drug residues in livestock at private abattoirs, will follow for another three months.

Food risk monitoring and surveillance activities are conducted in line with the highest global practices, adopting a risk analysis approach. This approach ensures that risk management and decision-making are grounded in scientific evidence de-

rived from monitoring and risk analysis activities.

Monitoring and surveillance systems serve as the first line of defence against food-related risks, acting as an effective tool for early risk detection. This enables swift responses and effective management of food incidents, contributing to the reduction of exposure to foodborne pathogens.

The food risk monitoring and surveillance activities also involve periodic updates to the list of precautionary measures for foodborne zoonotic diseases (such as avian influenza, foot-and-mouth disease, and bovine spongiform encephalopathy). These updates are managed by a joint team from the Food Safety Department and the Animal Wealth Department at the Ministry of Municipality. Updates are based on the epidemiological situation and the guidance of the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH).

Addressing food risks requires continuous enhancement of technical capabilities to trace potential risks through monitoring programmes, analysis, and ongoing investigative studies. (QNA)

## Bilingual education helps preserve identity, embrace diversity, QF experts say

The Education Development Institute (EDI), a member of Qatar Foundation (QF), hosted a symposium recently marking the International Day of Education and exploring the potential of bilingual education. The event focused on balancing the preservation of the mother tongue with embracing global cultures in educational curricula.

The symposium brought together a panel of educators and experts from QF and the region to address key topics, including fostering national identity through education, the challenges and opportunities of bilingual education, the significance of teaching Islamic civilisation in international schools, and advancing innovation and excellence in education. Dr Aisha al-Megbali, director, Qatar Academy, Al Khor, part of QF's Pre-University Education, highlighted the academy's experience with bilingual education, shedding light on the challenges faced by Arabic-speaking students. She noted that the adoption of the bilingual education model in 2008 was a direct response to the needs of the community. "Adopting the bilingual education model was a challenging step, but it was driven by the community's desire for an educational system that strengthens cultural and linguistic identity, particularly in Arabic language and Islamic studies, while embracing elements of international education. This vision has been fundamental to our success." "Many students initially struggled with mastering English, but over time, they gained confidence and the ability to use both languages fluently," Dr al-Megbali said. "Our goal is to graduate students who are not only bilingual but also capable of thriving and communicating effectively in diverse global contexts."

She emphasised the pivotal role of the community in the success of these educational models, saying: "The community is a key driver in shaping and supporting educational frameworks, which must be tailored to meet the specific needs of the surrounding environment."

Dr Martine Elie, manager, Research & Evaluation at QF's Pre-University Education and Dr Mohamed Mahgoub, an educational researcher, presented the findings of a recent study focusing on three key initiatives: Dual Language education, "Akhakuna" initiative, and the "Rasekh" initiative for curriculum localisation. These initiatives aim to strike a balance between global and local curricula while fostering national identity, culture, local knowledge, and language preservation.

"The data revealed that over 90% of parents emphasise the importance of preserving the Arabic language while maintaining a balance between Arabic and English, reflecting a growing awareness of the value of bilingual education," Dr Elie explained. Dr Elie also highlighted an intriguing paradox revealed by the study: while children predominantly use Arabic at home, the content they watch online, and television is often in English.

Dr Mahgoub emphasised that language is not merely a means of communication but an incubator for values, culture, and identity. He explained: "If we lose the language, we lose both identity and culture. Therefore, embedding cultural identity into educational curricula is not a choice but a necessity to ensure future generations preserve their heritage amidst globalization challenges."

"QF does doesn't simply adopt global curricula in their existing form; instead, it refines and adapts them to align with the Qatari context," Dr Mahgoub added.



Educators and experts from QF and the region addressed key topics at the event.

## CONDOLENCES

We extend our heartfelt condolences to the family of



HASSAN ABDULKARIM CHOUGULE on his sad demise.

## DYNAMIC FRIENDS CIRCLE

ANGADI CHANDESEKHR, DIAS WALTER, FARID M.I., FERNANDES ROCKY, JOHN DAVID, KANJANI HARISH, MOIDEEN MANZOOR, RAI RAMMOHAN, SAHNI RAJIV, SHANKAR RAVI, SINGH RAJESH, THERUVATH ABDULLA, VARGHESE K.M., VARGHESE SONNNY.

May Allah the Almighty grant peace and eternal paradise to the departed soul.





### Indian Republic Day symposium held



As part of the Indian Republic Day celebrations, the Center for Indian Community (CIC) organised a symposium in the Rayyan Zone. Rasheed Ahmed was the chief guest. Secretary Abdul Jaleel M M presided. Mohammed Rafeeq Thangal introduced the topic. Subul Abdul Aziz, Sherin Shabeer, Ibrahim Abubacker, Hashim and Safer participated in the discussion. Siddique Vengara proposed a vote of thanks.

### Fairy Tale Day marked at MES KG



The KG section of MES Indian School was transformed into a wonderland during Fairy Tale Day celebrations. From elegant princesses to brave knights and magical creatures, the tiny tots dressed up as their favourite fairy tale characters, danced to enchanting tunes during a warm-up session, and stole the show with a ramp walk.

## Malarvadi Qatar organises sport meet



With the aim of promoting the importance of sport and fostering enthusiasm and teamwork among children, Malarvadi Qatar chapter organised 'Playzy 2025' at Barwa Village.

Center for Indian Community president T K Qasim, Umai Qatar senior coach V T Nizamuddin, and Taekwondo national coach Ahmad Asad inaugurated the event.

Over 300 children from grades 3-7 participated in football, penalty shootout, long jump, and running competitions. In the sub-junior category, Aman Muhammad Ali and Ilham Bilal emerged as individual champions, while in the junior category, Bilal Yaseen and Amaya Fathima claimed the top spots. Wakrah Zone was crowned the overall



champions, and Thumama and Madinat Khalifa zones secured the second and third positions, respectively.

The event was led by programme convener Mujeeb Rahman, Malarvadi central

co-ordinator Nahiya Beevi, along with Babina Basheer, Ba-heejah, Shamsuddin, Rafeeq, Shane, Azhar Ali, Fazal Rahman, Sana Abdul Kareem, Rudaina, Tasneem, Shabana, and Sherin Shahana.

## Cultural shows held to celebrate Sir Syed Day



The AMU Old Boys Association of Qatar (Amuoba) hosted a vibrant 207th Sir Syed Day event in Doha recently, bringing together a gathering that enjoyed poetry and cultural performances.

Renowned Indian Urdu poet and Rajya Sabha member Imran Pratapgarhi was the chief guest. Amuoba president Moen Azmi welcomed the gathering.

The other guests included Brigadier Ahmad, The Institution of

Engineers (India ) Qatar chapter chairman Abdul Sattar, and Qatar Radio presenter Obaid Tahir.

Qatar-based poets Azeez Nabil, Ashfaq Deshmukh, Ahmad Ashfaq, Dr Wasiul Haque Wasi, Muzaffar Nayab and Shalini Verma presented their works to immense appreciation from the audience.

A highlight of the event was the quiz hosted by Sadia Khan, offering on-spot prizes. General secretary Mohammad Obaidullah gave a presentation highlighting

Amouba's diverse activities.

The event, which showcased spectacular performances from children, was hosted by Ayesha and Jihan.

Vice-president Mazhar Khan proposed a vote of thanks, acknowledging the contributions of all attendees, participants, and the executive committee team members, including Salman, Khubaib, Rameez, Saireen, Faraz, Shahid and others, to make the evening a success.



### NIA Hindi Toastmasters Club marks 150th meeting



NIA Hindi Toastmasters Club celebrated its 150th meeting in conjunction with the 76th Republic Day of India.

### VSF hosts Winter Vibe

The Vazhayoor Service Forum (VSF) Qatar hosted Winter Vibe 25, a grand family meetup and sports event. The occasion also saw chief advisor Mashood V C being feted for achieving the Distinguished Toastmaster (DTM) award.

VSF president Asif Kottupadam noted that Mashood is the first DTM awardee from Vazhayoor Panchayat. A variety of sport competitions, including badminton, volleyball, bowling, football, and swimming, were held. VSF secretary Sharat welcomed the gathering. The event was inaugurated by Amina Kottupadam. K N Sulaiman Madani, Rafeeq Karad, Naseef Thiruthiyad, Abudusalam Azhinjilam, Salam Kakov, Ratnakaran Karad, Ashraf Kakkove and Fasila Mashood addressed the gathering. Treasurer Jawad Vazhayur proposed a vote of thanks.



### Speech contest organised

Toastmasters Area 7 annual speech contest 2024-25 winners across categories were Mohd Aslam Chanda, Nirmal Raghuraman, Dalia Mathew, Vishwanath, Sheik Kader, Sathyanarayan, and D S Raja. Director Sridevi Lakshmanan led the event. Rajmohan Karthikeyan was the contest chair, with support from Bhaskar Rao, Mustafa Ali Syed, and Kumar Natarajan. Surya Narayanan was the chief judge, along with a panel of anonymous judges.



### Navothsav fest cricket tourney conducted

One-day district-level cricket tournament organised by Qatar KMCC Kozhikode district committee as part of Navothsav 2K24 fest, featuring eight teams, saw Nadapuram Mandalam led by Irshad Chekyat emerging as champions. Nadapuram's Faz Hamza, was the player of the final. Nadapuram's Mansoor was adjudged player of the match for his all-round performance.







## Sunflower's spiral splendour



The intricate spiral pattern of disc florets inside a sunflower is a captivating sight. Qatar's winter sunshine is a good season for growing sunflowers. PICTURE: *Gulf Times* news editor Bonnie James (Instagram: theexplorer7).

# Outreach Qatar observes Int'l Day of Education



Outreach Qatar (OQ) made the International Day of Education special for around 40 children with special needs and their parents, by providing them with the unique feel and experience of a school and classroom environment, at Bhavan's Public School.

Children were segregated on the basis of age into different classrooms and provided interesting and educative sessions by experienced trainers and teachers Pratiksha Bhosale, Manimala Kulasekaran, Sangeetha Nirmala, Thamarai Selvi, and Pushpa Sury-

anarayanan. The event aimed towards a greater initiative of instilling social skills in the children. A session on Mindful Parenting was imparted to the parents in a separate classroom by Sasikala Natarajan, occupational therapy specialist - Cardiac Rehabilitation Department of the Heart Hospital.

The parents were made aware of how an emotionally balanced mind and sound body allows effective parenting and well-being of the family.

The event co-ordination was conducted by Naveenapriya Ravagendran along with Subhashini

Prabhakar and Shobha Stevenson. The support at the venue was provided by Kanika Maheshwari, Rama Selvam, Saravanan Sachithanatham, Muhammed Anwarali, Ramesh Gobalakrishnan and Mani Bharati. A breakfast was arranged for all who attended by Skills Development Centre.

OQ president Avinash Gaikwad, advisory chairman P N Baburajan, honorary treasurer Krishnakumar, and advisory committee members Mahesh Gowda and Ravindra Prasad, visited the classes and addressed

the parents. An interactive assembly session for the children was organised after the classes by Pushpa Suryanarayanan.

The final gathering was convened by general secretary Sameer Moosa, wherein the trainers and teachers for the event were felicitated with mementos and certificates. Thamarai Selvi shed light how ventriloquism is an effective tool in helping interaction with children with special needs. The highlight of the segment was a painting dedicated to OQ by 12-year-old Gopika Elamurugan.

# Qatar-based artist gifts work to NCCCR

Qatar-based artist Bindu George has donated her painting, 'Blossoms of Hope', to the National Center for Cancer Care and Research (NCCCR) in Doha as a gesture of gratitude for the exceptional care her husband, George K Mamootil, received during his treatment at the facility.

The artwork symbolises resilience and renewal in the face of adversity.

"May this painting serve as a reminder that even in the darkest moments, light finds its way through, renewing strength, courage, and the promise of brighter days ahead," said Bindu George during the handover ceremony.

The expert care by oncologist Dr Mai Mostafa and specialist surgeon Dr Noof al-Naimi played a pivotal role in George Mamootil's recovery. "Their compassion and skill made all the difference," the artist told *Gulf Times*.

The painting was received on behalf of the NCCCR by Nayel al-Tarawneh, assistant executive director of Quality & Patient Safety.

The artwork now graces the walls of the NCCCR, offering patients and visitors alike a message of strength, hope and brighter days ahead. Artist's Instagram: bindugeorge2022



# MES evening batch holds investiture ceremony



To cultivate leadership and foster responsibility, the evening shift of MES Indian School organised the Investiture Ceremony 2025.

Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar was the chief guest, along with senior vice principal Shihabudeen Pulath.

Badges and sashes were distrib-

uted to the newly elected student leaders, followed by the handing over of house flags. School leader Hami Rahman P S led the oath-taking ceremony. In her

keynote address, the principal congratulated the student leaders and highlighted the essence of leadership as a journey of perseverance, humility, and dedication.

The senior vice principal urged the young leaders to embrace their roles with earnestness and to serve as role models. The event culminated with a vote of thanks by the

student editor, Niranjana. The proceedings were co-ordinated by overall in charge Sijila Das with the support of teachers Shabreena Hyder and Jeevan P.





# Egyptians protest Trump displacement plan at Rafah border crossing



Demonstrators gather outside the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing with the Gaza Strip yesterday to protest against a plan floated by US President Donald Trump to move Palestinians from the Gaza Strip to Egypt and Jordan.

Reuters  
Cairo

Thousands of people demonstrated at the Rafah border crossing yesterday, an eyewitness told Reuters, in a rare state-sanctioned protest against a proposal earlier this week by US President Donald Trump for Egypt and Jordan to accept Gazan refugees.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on Wednesday rejected the idea that Egypt would facili-

tate the displacement of Gazans and said Egyptians would take to the streets to express their disapproval.

Protesters could be heard chanting “Long Live Egypt” and waving Egyptian and Palestinian flags.

“We say no to any displacement of Palestine or Gaza at the expense of Egypt, on the land of Sinai,” said Sinai resident Gazy Saeed.

Egyptian security sources told Reuters that parties close to Sisi had sent buses to ferry protest-

ers to the border crossing, where civilian movement is typically restricted, but said the outpouring expressed public and not just leadership disapproval of Trump’s proposal.

Trump said on Saturday that Egypt and Jordan should take in Palestinians from Gaza, which he called a “demolition site” following 15 months of Israeli bombardment that rendered most of its 2.3mn people homeless.

On Thursday, Trump forcefully reiterated the idea, saying “we do a lot for them, and they

are going to do it,” in apparent reference to abundant US aid, including military assistance, to both Egypt and Jordan.

Any suggestion that Palestinians leave Gaza — territory they hope will become part of an independent state — has been anathema to the Palestinian leadership for generations and repeatedly rejected by neighbouring Arab states since the Gaza war began in October 2023.

Jordan is already home to several million Palestinians, while tens of thousands live in Egypt.

# Two people killed in Israeli air strike on Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley

Reuters  
Dubai

Two people were killed in an Israeli strike in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley area, the Lebanese health ministry said yesterday, after the Israeli military said it had struck several Hezbollah targets overnight in the Bekaa Valley and along the Syrian-Lebanese border.

The Israeli army said in a statement that the targets included a facility used for underground weapons development and another linked to arms smuggling into Lebanon from neighbouring Syria.

The Israeli military statement did not mention casualties.

Lebanon’s health ministry said 10 people were also wounded. Its tolls do not distinguish between civilians and combatants.

Hezbollah official Ibrahim Moussawi condemned the air raids, calling them “a very dangerous violation and a blatant and

explicit aggression” and called on the Lebanese state to halt Israel’s attacks.

The strikes were the latest by Israel in Lebanon despite a ceasefire agreement reached in late November between Israel and Hezbollah that ended more than a year of fighting between the two countries.

The agreement calls for the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon and says that all “unauthorised arms” and military infrastructure should be dismantled, starting with southern Lebanon.

Hezbollah, however, has insisted that the agreement applies exclusively to southern Lebanon.

The deal also called for Israeli troops to leave southern Lebanon within 60 days, but that period was extended this week to Feb 18 to give more time for Israeli troops to pull out and for Lebanese troops to deploy to the area.

Israel says Lebanon has not yet fully implemented the deal’s terms and also specifically accuses Hez-

bollah of violating the ceasefire.

On Thursday, Israel said it had intercepted a surveillance drone launched by Hezbollah, calling it “a breach of the ceasefire agreement”. Hezbollah declined to comment.

Hezbollah chief Naim Qassem said on Monday that his group would “not accept any justification” to extend the deadline for Israeli troops to withdraw — but the group has not directly threatened to resume military operations.

Lebanon’s Prime Minister Najib Mikati has condemned Israel’s continued strikes, and the country’s US-backed military has accused Israel of procrastinating in its troop withdrawal.

The Israeli military has ordered some southern Lebanese areas near the border still out of bounds to residents and on Sunday Israeli forces killed two dozen people who had been attempting to return to their homes in defiance of those orders.



A man checks the rubble of a house that was destroyed during the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah, in the village of Al-Jibbain in southern Lebanon, yesterday.

## APPOINTMENT

### TikTok king Khaby Lamae joins Unicef as goodwill ambassador

The world’s most followed TikToker, Khaby Lamae, yesterday was named as ambassador for the UN children’s agency as he visited Senegal, where the Italian influencer was born, AFP reported from Dakar. The 24-year-old holds top spot on the TikTok app, with 162.8mn followers and has risen to fame for his short silent videos mocking the convoluted tutorials of tips that abound on the internet.

Lamae’s punctuates his videos with his trademark gesture — palms turned towards the sky, accompanied by a knowing smile and wide eyes - as he offers his own simple remedies.

“I am very proud to announce that Khaby Lamae is joining the Unicef family as a new goodwill ambassador,” the regional director for the agency, Gilles Fagninou, said during a ceremony at a hotel in Dakar, at the end of Lamae’s four-day visit to the west African country. “Khaby’s authenticity and his engagement make him an extraordinary ambassador for the country,” Fagninou said.

“From my own experience as a child fearing poverty, struggling to find my passion at school, and losing my job during the Covid-19 pandemic, to finding my place and calling in the world, I know that all children can thrive when they are given a chance and opportunity,” Lamae said in a statement on Unicef’s website.

# M23 group fighters advance south in DR Congo

AFP  
Goma

The Rwandan-backed M23 group yesterday advanced south after seizing the biggest city in mineral-rich eastern DR Congo, in violence that according to the UN has killed at least 700 people in less than a week.

The M-23 took Goma, the capital of North Kivu province after intense fighting earlier this week and has pushed further, vowing to march all the way to the capital Kinshasa.

The latest violence to wrack the mineral-rich region has killed at least 700 people and wounded another 2,800 since



A member of the M23 armed group monitors as residents listen to an address by local leaders alongside members of the M23 during a protest against the Congolese government in Goma, yesterday.

Sunday, according to UN estimates, a spokesman said at UN headquarters in New York.

The weeks-long M-23 offen-

sive is the latest to scar a region that has seen relentless conflict involving dozens of armed groups kill an estimated six million people over three decades.

The Democratic Republic of Congo accuses Rwanda of seeking to profit from the region’s mineral wealth, which is sought after for use in global electronics — a claim backed by UN experts, who say Kigali has “de facto control” over the M23.

Rwanda denies this — and any military involvement — saying its primary interest is to eradicate a group composed of Hutu militants formed in the wake of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

The burgeoning crisis has rattled the continent and international observers, as well as provoking warnings of a spiralling

humanitarian crisis in an area with hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

The southern African regional bloc SADC held an emergency summit in Zimbabwe’s capital Harare yesterday, which was attended remotely by Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi.

Before the leaders went into closed-door talks, the bloc’s chair, Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa, said “our region stands ready to intensify efforts to protect SADC citizens from all forms of instability”.

A new military governor for North Kivu was sworn in yesterday in the city of Beni, which was declared the new provincial capital after the fall of Goma.

North Kivu’s previous governor died last week after being shot near the front line.

Meanwhile, M23 fighters have been moving south towards the city of Kavumu in neighbouring South Kivu. The city has a strategic military airfield and is where the Congolese army has laid down its defensive line just 40 kilometres north of South Kivu capital Bukavu.

In Bukavu — home to two million people, and the second biggest city in eastern DR Congo after Goma — an AFP reporter saw long lines of volunteers queuing to join a Congolese militia that has been fighting alongside the army.



Palestinian mother Manal al-Harsh (centre) sits near rubble of her destroyed house during the Israeli offensive, in Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip.

Much of the rest of Gaza City also lies in ruins after 15 months of fighting and waves of Israeli air strikes and artillery barrages that left it a shell of the bustling urban centre it was before the war.

“We are practically sleeping here, but we don’t sleep. We are afraid someone might come upon us. We are sleeping and scared,” she said.

“I want to retrieve some clothes for the children to wear. We came with nothing. Life here is expensive, and there is no money to buy anything.”

Many of those returning, of-

ten laden with what personal possessions they still have after months of being moved around as the battlegrounds shifted, had trekked 20km or more along the coastal highway north.

Like many displaced Palestinians, al-Harsh faces uncertainty as she tries to salvage what remains. She had managed to pick some clothes from the rubble but they were in a sorry state. “It’s all torn. Nothing is good. As much as we do, as much as we retrieve, it is all stones,” she said. “Death is better,” al-Harsh said, her voice heavy with despair.

### US kills senior Al Qaeda operative in Syria strike

The US military said it killed a senior operative of Al Qaeda’s Syria branch in an air strike on northwestern Syria, AFP reported from Beirut. The area was the stronghold of interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa’s Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group before it led the rebel offensive that toppled Bashar al-Assad in December.

“US Central Command forces conducted a precision air strike in northwest Syria targeting and killing Muhammad Salah al-Zabir, a senior operative in the Hurras al-Din organisation, an Al Qaeda affiliate,” Centcom said in a statement. Britain-based-war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Zabir was killed when the vehicle he was travelling in on the Sarmada-Idlib road was hit by a US drone strike. The US strike came days after Hurras al-Din announced its dissolution in line with orders from the interim president. The Observatory said Hurras al-Din “announced its dissolution so as not to enter into armed conflict with HTS.” Sharaa’s faction was Al Qaeda’s Syria affiliate until it broke ties with the network in 2016. The US-based SITE Intelligence Group said Hurras al-Din was founded in February 2018. It did not confirm its allegiance to Al Qaeda until its dissolution announcement on Tuesday. The US designated Hurras al-Din as a “terrorist” organisation in 2019 and has offered financial rewards for information on several of its members.



# World awaits Trump tariff deadline on Canada, Mexico and China

AFP/Reuters  
Washington

The global economy is bracing for impact as US President Donald Trump's deadline to impose sweeping tariffs on the three largest US trading partners – Canada, Mexico and China – draws near.

Trump is expected to announce new tariffs on imports from Canada and Mexico that would become effective on March 1, but will include a process for the countries to seek specific exemptions for certain imports, three people familiar with the planning told Reuters.

The sources, who declined to be named because they are not authorised to speak publicly on the matter, said they did not have details on a final tariff rate, but noted Trump has consistently said he plans to impose a 25% tariff on imports from the two countries today.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said yesterday that Canada would immediately respond with forceful countermeasures, adding: "It's not what we want, but if he moves forward, we will also act."

Separately, an administration official said that Trump is reviewing tariff plans, which may

allow for some exemptions.

Still, any exemptions would be "few and far between", the official said.

While Trump has not specified tools for the tariffs, analysts have suggested that he could tap emergency economic powers – which allow the president to regulate imports during a national emergency.

However, this could be hindered by lawsuits.

He reiterated commitment on Thursday to levies on all three countries, alongside threats of 100% tariffs on Brics nations – a bloc including Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – if they create a rival to the US dollar.

JPMorgan analysts believe tariffs are "a bargaining chip" to accelerate the renegotiation of a trade deal between the United States, Mexico and Canada.

"However, potentially dismantling a decades-long free-trade area could be a significant shock," said a recent JPMorgan note.

One lesson from Trump's first term was that policy changes could be announced or threatened on short notice, it added.

Tariffs are paid by US businesses to the government on purchases from abroad and the economic weight can fall on importers, for-



Trucks drive yesterday to cross to US at Otay Commercial port in Tijuana, Baja California state, Mexico. - AFP

foreign suppliers or consumers.

Assistant professor Wendong Zhang of Cornell University said that Canada and Mexico would suffer the most under 25% US tariffs and with proportional retaliations.

"Canada and Mexico stand to

lose 3.6% and 2% of real GDP respectively, while the US would suffer a 0.3% real GDP loss," he added.

Oxford Economics analysts warned that blanket tariffs and pushback could tip Canada and Mexico into recessions, adding the

United States also risks a shallow downturn.

Mexico's biggest export sectors – food and beverages, transport equipment and electronics – account for the bulk of its manufacturing activity, said Joan Domene, chief Latin America economist at Oxford Economics.

Canada exported nearly 80% of its goods to the United States in 2023, and accounts for nearly 60% of US crude oil imports, noted the Congressional Research Service (CRS).

It is unclear if there could be exceptions. Trump said he expected to decide soon whether to include crude oil imports.

Canadian heavy oil, for example, is refined in the United States and regions dependent on it may lack a ready substitute.

Canadian producers would bear the brunt of tariffs but US refiners would also be hit with higher costs, said Tom Kloza of the Oil Price Information Service.

This could bring gas price increases, he told AFP.

US merchandise imports from both countries largely enter duty free or with very low rates on average, said the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE).

A tariff hike would shock both

industrial buyers and consumers.

Canadian officials said that Ottawa would provide pandemic-level financial support to workers and businesses if US tariffs hit, vowing their readiness to respond.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said yesterday that her government is in close contact with Trump's administration.

Trump is also mulling more tariffs on Chinese goods.

White House spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt told reporters this week: "The president has said that he is very much still considering that for February 1st."

Beijing has vowed to defend its "national interests", and a foreign ministry spokeswoman previously warned that "there are no winners in a trade war".

On the election campaign trail, Trump raised the idea of levies of 60% or higher on Chinese imports.

Isaac Boltansky of financial services firm BTIG expects "incremental tariff increases" on Chinese goods, with consumer goods likely to face lower hikes.

"Our sense is that Trump will vacillate between carrots and sticks with China, with the ultimate goal being some sort of grand bargain before the end of his term," he said in a recent note.

# US restricts helicopter flights near Washington airport after fatal crash

Reuters/AFP  
Washington

Federal authorities have restricted helicopter flights near the US capital's Reagan Washington National Airport indefinitely, two days after a midair collision between a passenger jet and a military helicopter killed 67 people.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) took the action to reduce the risk of another collision as crews worked to pull the wreckage of America's deadliest air disaster in two decades from the Potomac River.

An FAA official told Reuters that the agency is barring most helicopters from parts of two routes near the airport and only allowing police and medical helicopters in the area between the airport and nearby bridges, pending a complete evaluation. It was not clear how long those restrictions would last.

The crash has cast a harsh spotlight on questions about air safety and a shortage of tower controllers at the heavily congested airport that serves the US capital.

Airspace is crowded around the Washington area, home to three commercial airports, multiple military bases and some senior government officials who are ferried around by helicopter.

Over a three-year period ending in 2019, there were 88,000 helicopter flights within 30 miles

(48km) of Reagan National Airport, including about 33,000 military and 18,000 law enforcement flights, the Government Accountability Office said in a 2021 report.

The American Airlines plane was trying to land at Reagan National Airport when it collided with an Army Black Hawk helicopter and crashed into the Potomac River on Wednesday evening.

Fresh from recovering the plane's so-called black boxes, divers aim to salvage both aircraft and find additional components, Washington's fire department said.

Authorities have not pinpointed a reason for the collision.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) said it aims to recover the helicopter's black box, which captures flight data and voices in the cockpit, on Friday.

The FAA is about 3,000 controllers behind staffing targets.

The agency said in 2023 that it had 10,700 certified controllers, about the same as a year earlier.

One controller rather than two was handling local plane and helicopter traffic on Wednesday at the airport, a situation deemed "not normal" but considered adequate for lower volumes of traffic, according to a person briefed on the matter.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy vowed to reform the FAA.

"I am in the process of developing an initial plan to fix the @



Search and rescue teams work near the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, in the aftermath of the collision of American Eagle flight 5342 and a Black Hawk helicopter that crashed into the Potomac River, in Arlington, Virginia. - Reuters

FAANews. I hope to put it out very shortly," Duffy said on X on Thursday.

The NTSB is studying the cockpit voice recorder and flight data recorder from the CRJ700 airplane, which carried 60 passengers and four crew members, all of whom perished in the crash.

The three members of the helicopter crew also died.

The military said the maximum altitude for the route the helicopter was taking is 200' (61m) but it may have been flying higher.

The collision occurred at an altitude of around 300', according to flight tracking website Flight-Radar24.

The NTSB expects to recover the data recorder from the helicopter later.

On Thursday Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered a 48-hour pause in flying for the Virginia-based Army unit involved, and said that could be extended.

"We should have that pause until we get to the bottom of this," he told Fox News.

President Donald Trump weighed in yesterday, saying that the helicopter involved in the crash was flying too high.

"The Blackhawk (sic) helicopter was flying too high, by a lot. It was far above the 200 foot limit. That's not really too complicated

to understand, is it???" Trump said in a Truth Social post.

US investigators have said that they will not bow to outside pressure on the Washington air collision, as Trump doubled down on political point scoring.

The Republican president has pinned the blame for the crash on his Democratic predecessors Joe Biden and Barack Obama, claiming without evidence that they had hired the wrong people due to anti-racism and other non-discrimination initiatives known as DEI.

"They actually came out with a directive: 'too white'. And we want the people that are competent," Trump said.

Online discussions buzzed with conspiracy theories fed by Trump's anti-DEI crusade.

NTSB member Todd Inman said the investigation would resist political pressure.

"Yes, absolutely," he told CNN.

"There are many people that have speculation and want to be heard in that regard. We understand that, but our job is to find, ultimately, what caused this and prevent it in the future."

The head of the Air Line Pilots Association likewise pleaded for official investigators to be allowed to do their work.

"A lot of details and speculation will come out in response to this tragedy, but we must remember to let the investigation run its course," Captain Jason Ambrosi said in a statement.

## ICE 'harassing' Native Americans

Native Americans and Democratic lawmakers allege that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents are harassing tribal members as they carry out President Donald Trump's crackdown on migrants.

Navajo Nation president Buu Nygren said his citizens have had "traumatising" experiences with ICE agents, and US Congressional Democrats called on Trump to stop the agency targeting Native Americans.

"ICE's dangerous behaviour of harassing American citizens, seemingly only due to the way they look, is unconstitutional and un-American," nine Democrats led by New Mexico Representative Teresa Leger Fernandez said in a Wednesday letter to Trump. - Reuters

## 13 bodies found in drifting boat

The coastguard of Saint Kitts and Nevis has discovered 13 decomposing bodies in a boat adrift off the coast, officials said on Thursday, days after another five bodies were found in a skiff near Trinidad and Tobago.

Officials of the two Caribbean islands said it was not immediately clear if there was any link between the two incidents, or who the deceased were.

Saint Kitts and Nevis deputy police commissioner Cromwell Henry said that the 13 bodies found on Wednesday were in an advanced state of decomposition.

He could not give the victims' age or gender.

The captainless boat was towed to shore and an investigation opened. - AFP

# Lady Gaga, Billie Eilish and Green Day boost Los Angeles at FireAid benefit

Reuters  
Los Angeles

Billie Eilish sang with Green Day and Stevie Nicks thanked the firefighters who saved her home at two star-studded concerts on Thursday to raise money for wildfire relief in Los Angeles.

The FireAid benefit featured surprise pairings and generation-spanning acts, many with connections to the devastated communities of Pacific Palisades and Altadena.

Artists at two venues in Inglewood near Los Angeles offered thanks to first responders in between soft ballads, poignant moments and rousing rock and pop performances.

Nicks, the Fleetwood Mac singer and solo artist, dedicated *Landslide* to the firefighters who kept the fast-moving Palisades blaze in early January away from her long-time home.

"They never gave up," she said. "Until you actually see it, you can't believe the bravery of these men."

In one of several surprises, Eilish joined Green Day to open the FireAid shows with a duet of the band's song *Last Night on Earth*.

"It's one of the most important gigs we've ever played," Billie Joe Armstrong, Green Day's lead singer, said in an interview before the show.

The Bay Area punk-rock group has recorded several albums in Hollywood, he said, and regarded Los Angeles as a second home.

"It's just really important for us to sort of do our part in a small way," Armstrong said.

Eilish, a Los Angeles native, later teamed with her brother Finneas for a "quiet and chill" acoustic set featuring *The Greatest and Birds of a Feather*.

Lady Gaga, the night's closing performer, sat at a piano and sang a "hopeful" song she said she wrote with her fiancé, businessman Michael Polansky, specifically for the FireAid show.

"All I need is time," she sang in an upbeat chorus, "to heal my broken wings, and then I'll soar."

Country singer Jelly Roll kicked off his set with his recent hit *I Am Not OK*.

"It's not OK, but we're all gonna be alright," he sang, before picking up the tempo with a cover of Bob Seger classic *Hollywood Nights*, joined by Blink-182 drummer Travis Barker.

In the crowd, men and women in



Green Day and Billie Eilish perform during the FireAid benefit concert for Los Angeles wildfire relief efforts, in Inglewood, California. - Reuters

"First Responder" T-shirts danced as Sting joined Stevie Wonder to sing Wonder's hit *Superstition*.

Among other performances, drummer Dave Grohl was joined by his daughter, Violet Grohl, who sang the Nirvana hit *All Apologies*.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers also took part, while Katy Perry waved a state flag as she danced across the stage to *California Gurls*.

Comedian Billy Crystal appeared in the navy hoodie, jeans and knit cap he had worn when he evacuated his home of 46 years in the Palisades.

Crystal said he wept when he saw the burned-out remains but was moved by the community's support.

"A young girl said she understood my pain because she had lost TikTok for a day," Crystal quipped.

Videos of fire survivors were interspersed between musical per-

formances. On television screens, viewers were given instructions on how to donate via text or a website.

"It's all about the love for me tonight," West Coast hip hop pioneer Dr Dre said, before leading the crowd in a sing-along of *California Love*.

Another Los Angeles icon, folk singer Joni Mitchell, delivered her ballad *Both Sides Now*, moving some of the audience members to tears.

Gracie Abrams, who grew up in the Palisades, sang an acoustic version of what she called "a love letter to LA", the Counting Crows song *A Long December*.

Money raised through FireAid will go to short-term and long-term recovery efforts, organisers said.

Funds will be distributed with advice from the Annenberg Foundation.

## WhatsApp says it disrupted a 'Paragon spyware campaign'

Meta-owned WhatsApp announced yesterday that it has disrupted a spyware operation by surveillance firm Paragon Solutions that targeted approximately 90 users, including journalists and civil society members, through malicious PDF files sent in group chats.

The messaging platform has directly notified affected users and provided them with security guidance, including resources from digital rights research group Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto.

It has also sent a cease and desist letter to Israeli-based Paragon Solutions.

"This is the latest example of why spyware companies must be held accountable for their unlawful actions," a WhatsApp spokesperson said. "WhatsApp will continue to protect peoples' ability to communicate privately."

WhatsApp declined to give further details on the incident, including the country or countries targeted in the campaign. The development highlights growing concerns over commercial spyware firms.

Paragon Solutions is among several firms that have emerged in recent years offering surveillance tools to government clients.

Critics argue these companies enable human rights abuses under the guise of national security operations.

The Israeli-founded NSO Group, maker of the notorious Pegasus spyware, has faced multiple lawsuits and sanctions after its software was allegedly used to surveil journalists, activists, and government officials worldwide.

In 2021, WhatsApp won a US court case against NSO Group over a similar targeting campaign.

WhatsApp said it has successfully blocked the exploitation method used in this campaign and continues to pursue legal action against spyware vendors who breach its terms of service.

Paragon Solutions did not reply to a request for comment.

The company on its website says it provides "ethically based tools, teams, and insights to disrupt intractable threats".

"History shows that secret surveillance technology carries a temptation to be used against civil society and journalists that is impossible to resist. It was true 50 years ago and it's true today," said John Scott-Railton, senior researcher at the Citizen Lab.

The FBI did not immediately return a message seeking comment.

Spyware merchants such as Paragon sell high-end surveillance software to government clients and typically pitch their services as critical to fighting crime and protecting national security. - AFP/Reuters





# On-site investigation of burned-out Air Busan plane to begin

Reuters  
Seoul

Passengers evacuated from an Air Busan plane that was engulfed in flames this week at a South Korean airport will have their checked baggage returned to them, after authorities yesterday deemed the jet safe for a full investigation. All 169 pas-

sengers and seven crew members were evacuated from the Airbus A321neo using emergency slides after the fire broke out on Tuesday, with only a few minor injuries, Air Busan said.

The fire, which began about 10:15pm as the single-aisle jet was preparing for departure to Hong Kong, was first detected by a flight attendant in an overhead luggage bin in the rear left-hand side of the

plane, an Air Busan spokesperson told Reuters on Friday. Authorities on Friday conducted a risk assessment of the plane, which still had a large amount of fuel and oxygen onboard. The burned-out jet remains on the tarmac at Gimhae International Airport in the southern city of Busan.

The transport ministry yesterday said the 35,900lbs (16,280kg) of jet fuel do not need to be of-

flooded, and other hazardous materials such as oxygen tanks will be secured. The plane will be covered by a canopy to protect it during the inspection, which will begin on Monday.

Baggage in the cargo hold was removed on Friday, the ministry said. The incident came a month after the deadliest air disaster on South Korean soil, when a Jeju Air plane crashed on Muan Airport's

runway as it made an emergency belly landing, killing all but two of the 181 people on board. Air Busan's single-aisle 17-year-old plane has burnt out holes along the length of the fuselage roof. Its wings and engines were not burned, a transport ministry statement said.

South Korea's Aviation and Railway Accident Investigation Board is leading the investiga-

tion, and was joined on Thursday by representatives of France's BEA air accident investigation agency. France is the state of design for Airbus planes.

Budget airline Air Busan is part of South Korea's Asiana Airlines, which in December was acquired by Korean Air. Air Busan shares closed down 3.2% on Friday after dropping as much as 6.1%, following a four-day holiday break.

# Myanmar junta extends state of emergency by six months

AFP  
Yangon

Myanmar's junta extended a state of emergency by six months yesterday, four years after it seized power triggering a civil war that has claimed thousands of lives. The country is mired in a bloody, multi-sided conflict stemming from the February 1, 2021 putsch that ended a 10-year experiment with democracy.

The military is struggling to contain armed resistance to its rule, suffering a series of damaging battlefield losses over the past year to an alliance of ethnic minority armed groups in the north and west of the country. The ruling military council headed by army chief Min Aung Hlaing unanimously approved the extension, the junta's information team said in a statement.

"All members of National Defence and Security Council including the commander in chief as well as acting president decided in unison for the extension of the state of emergency for another six months," the statement said.



Myanmar's military chief Min Aung Hlaing addressing a National Defense and Security Council meeting in Naypyidaw.

Elections cannot be held under a state of emergency, so long-promised polls the junta has said will be held in 2025 will not take place until the second half of the year at the earliest.

Min Aung Hlaing told the ruling council that "peace and stability is still needed" before the state of emergency can be lifted and polls held. Critics and Western governments have said that any elections held under the auspices of the junta will be neither

free nor fair. The military seized power after making unsubstantiated allegations of fraud in 2020 elections which Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won in a landslide.

It has extended the state of emergency multiple times since as it battles established ethnic minority armed groups and newer pro-democracy "People's Defence Forces". More than 6,000 civilians have been killed since

the coup, and more than 20,000 arrested, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) monitoring group. On Thursday the UN's Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) said serious international crimes had been committed in the four years since the coup.

The conflict has forced more than 3.5mn people to flee their homes, while an estimated 19.9mn people — or more than a

third of Myanmar's population — will need humanitarian aid in 2025, according to the UN.

Earlier this month, foreign ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) regional bloc urged the junta to prioritise a ceasefire in the conflict over holding elections. Asean has led international efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis but, despite multiple meetings and declarations, has made no substantial progress.

## Philippines protest



Protesters hold placards and artwork with the faces of Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr (top L) and Philippine Vice-President Sara Duterte (top C) during a rally in support of the impeachment complaint against Duterte in Manila yesterday. Thousands of protesters took to the streets of Manila urging the Philippine House of Representatives to impeach Vice-President Sara Duterte.

## Trio of rare tiger cubs spotted in Thai park

A national park in Thailand has not one but three reasons to celebrate after confirming a rare Bengal tiger is raising a trio of cubs in the protected area. Park rangers first spotted a single cub with its mother on a camera trap last year in Kaeng Krachan National Park, around 130km southwest of Bangkok. But further footage, retrieved only this week from cameras damaged by heavy rain last year, confirmed that the litter is three-strong.

"This is the first time we have recorded a tiger raising three cubs in the national park," Kaeng Krachan National Park chief Mongkol Chaipakdee said in a statement sent to AFP yesterday. "We were only able to recover the footage this week because our camera was damaged due to rain last year."

The camera trap footage shows the three cubs scampering in leaf litter while their mother prowls around. The video of the feline

family captured in July was published by the national park on its Facebook page on Wednesday. "Based on the timeline, we estimate the cubs are now about six months old," Mongkol said.

Six adult Bengal tigers currently live in Kaeng Krachan National Park — a Unesco World Heritage site spread over densely forested mountains along the border with Myanmar — two males, two females and two whose sex is unknown. Bengal tiger sightings are rare. However, park officials spotted another Bengal tiger in Kui Buri National park, south of the capital Bangkok, earlier this year.

It was the first sighting of the animal in that park in more than a decade, according to Thai authorities. Thailand has one of the few remaining breeding populations of Bengal tigers, which roam just a handful of countries, including India, Nepal, Russia and Bhutan. —AFP

# Indonesia deforestation rises for third year running: NGO

AFP  
Bangkok

Deforestation in Indonesia rose in 2024 for a third year running, a local environmental NGO said yesterday, based on satellite image analysis and fieldwork.

A government official disputed the figures, saying they mischaracterised deforestation in the country. Indonesia has one of the world's highest rates of deforestation, with key drivers including timber plantations, palm oil cultivation and, increasingly, the mining of critical minerals.

Its rainforests are some of the world's most biodiverse, providing crucial habitats for threatened and endangered species, and are key carbon sinks. The report by NGO Auriga Nusantara said 261,575 hectares (646,366 acres) of primary and secondary forests across Indonesia were lost in 2024, over 4,000 more than the previous year.

The vast majority of the losses took place in areas opened for

**The report is based on satellite imagery, which was analysed to confirm deforestation, and followed up with field visits to areas representing tens of thousands of hectares of forest loss**

development by the government, the group added. "It is worrying, as it shows the increase of legal deforestation," said Auriga Nusantara's chair Timer Manurung.

He called for "urgent" protection of forest in Kalimantan, where the highest losses were recorded as the country's new capital is built, and in Sulawesi.

Ade Tri Ajikusumah, a senior official at Indonesia's environment and forestry ministry, said the deforestation figure failed to account for replanting.

He acknowledged that government figures for "gross" deforestation in 2024 are "not significantly different" from Auriga Nusantara's, but that the NGO did not account for reforestation of over 40,000 hectares. "We are

now working to maximise land use," he said, adding that development around Indonesia's new capital involves "land that has already been released from forest status". "These areas were previously managed by companies under existing permits. So it's not deforestation - it was already designated for development."

The report comes as Indonesian environmentalists raise alarm over government plans to convert millions of hectares of forests for food and energy use. President Prabowo Subianto, who assumed office in October, has pledged to boost food and energy self-sufficiency, including by expanding bio-based fuels to lower fuel imports. Environmental groups warn the plans would

spell disaster for the country's forests.

"We ask President Prabowo to issue a presidential regulation to protect all remaining natural forest," Timer told AFP.

The report is based on satellite imagery, which was analysed to confirm deforestation, and followed up with field visits to areas representing tens of thousands of hectares of forest loss, Auriga Nusantara said.

While deforestation occurred in all of Indonesia's provinces except the region around Jakarta, the biggest losses were in Kalimantan. One driver has been the designation of an area for the new capital, the report said.

Two regional governments in the area have proposed opening up hundreds of thousands of hectares of forest to potential development, the group warned.

Most deforestation however was driven by commodities, including timber, mining and palm oil.

Auriga Nusantara said its count excluded loss in timber plantations and plantation forest, but

does cover both primary forests and regenerated "secondary" forest.

The report also sounds the alarm on deforestation for biomass production, which has seen forest levelled to plant quick-growing species that will provide wood biomass.

Indonesia is keen to boost domestic use of biomass energy and export, particularly to Japan and South Korea.

And it highlighted deforestation on islands in Raja Ampat, an area known for its teeming coral reefs, as nickel mining advances.

"This area of such national and international acclaim has been unable to withstand the onslaught," the report said.

Nearly 200 hectares across four islands in the region have been deforested, the group said, with new nickel mining licences already issued for several more islands.

Auriga Nusantara said forest loss was also happening in conservation areas, despite legal protections.

## Sri Lanka records highest deflation in 65 years

Sri Lanka's consumer prices fell by 4.0 percent in January, the highest deflation rate since July 1960, official data showed yesterday, as the South Asian nation emerges from its worst economic meltdown. January was the fifth consecutive month of deflation, according to the Colombo Consumer Price Index. Inflation hit a record 69.8 percent in September 2022 at the height of the country's economic crisis, which saw months of widespread consumer goods shortages. Officials said sharp reductions in electricity and fuel costs contributed to the sharp fall in prices in January, but the central bank forecasts annual inflation in 2025 to be around 5.0 percent. Sri Lanka secured a \$2.9bn bailout loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) after the 2022 crash. President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, elected last year, has vowed to maintain the IMF bailout programme negotiated by his predecessor that includes higher taxes and cuts to state spending. —AFP

## Philippines arrests 100 suspects in online scam farm raid

AFP  
Manila

Philippine authorities arrested around 100 people yesterday in a raid on a suspected online scam farm in Manila they said extorted victims. The raid in the Makati financial district was part of a crackdown against online crime operators that often act under the guise of gaming firms.

Agents from the Presidential Anti-Organised Crime Commission (PAOCC) and the National Bureau of Investigation, armed with assault rifles, surrounded two offices of a lending agency and arrested the suspects as they worked side-by-side at computers.

The suspects, many of them young Filipinos, allegedly sought out victims via TikTok and other social media, offering collateral-free loans of up to 25,000 pesos (\$428).

Borrowers were charged 35 percent weekly interest and those who fell behind on payments were harassed, humiliated and threatened with having their personal information spread online, PAOCC director Gilberto Cruz told reporters at the scene.

"Some of those they harassed developed mental problems, others fell into depression, and there have even been some suicide incidents that occurred because of the harassment perpetrated by these people," Cruz said.

The suspects could be charged with fraud and other violations under the country's cybercrime laws, he added. The raided company, Wewill Tech Corp., required victims to provide personal information and family photographs, which the scammers then used for threats, according to Cruz.

Some victims of similar scams have reported having coffins and funeral wreaths delivered to their homes, he said. Authorities are checking the nationality of the owners, Cruz said, adding that they had arrested Chinese suspects running similar operations in the past.

The scam farm owners are suspected to be remnants of online gaming operators that were banned under orders of President Ferdinand Marcos last year, he said. "Most of their keyboard workers are Filipino" and communicated with victims in the local language, Cruz told reporters. "What is frightening here is it is Filipinos who are harassing and defrauding their fellow Filipinos," he said.



# South Korea, Ireland watchdogs to question DeepSeek on user data

AFP  
Seoul

Data watchdogs in South Korea and Ireland said yesterday they would ask Chinese AI startup DeepSeek to clarify how it manages users' personal information, as governments from around the world turned a spotlight on the service. DeepSeek launched its R1 chatbot this month, claiming it matches the capacity of artificial intelligence pace-setters in the United States for a fraction of the investment.

The news sparked a rout in tech titans - Nvidia dived 17 percent Monday - and raised questions about the hundreds of billions of dollars invested in AI in recent years. But countries now including South Korea, Ireland, France, Australia and Italy have questions about DeepSeek's data practices. "We intend to submit our request in writing as early as Friday to obtain information about how DeepSeek handles personal data," an official from South Korea's Personal Information Protection Commission told AFP, without giving further details.

Ireland's Data Protection Commission (DPC) told AFP it was "requesting information on the data processing conducted in relation to data subjects in Ireland" from DeepSeek. The DPC is a lead European tech watchdog, as many major firms have their EU headquarters in Ireland due to Dublin's generous tax incentives. Earlier this week Italy launched an investigation into the R1 model and blocked it from processing Italian users' data. The Italian Data Protection Agency is asking what information is used to train DeepSeek's AI system and, if the

data is scraped from the internet, how users are informed about the processing of their data. French watchdog CNIL also said it would question DeepSeek about its chatbot "to better understand the way it works and the risks regarding data protection". Australia's science minister Ed Husic has also raised privacy concerns over the company's AI service and urged users to think carefully before downloading it. "There are a lot of questions that will need to be answered in time on quality, consumer preferences, data and privacy management,"

Husic told national broadcaster ABC. "I would be very careful about that. These type of issues need to be weighed up carefully," he added. The Italian watchdog in December fined OpenAI €15mn (\$15.6mn) over the use of personal data by its popular ChatGPT chatbot, but the US tech firm said it would appeal. Italy also temporarily blocked ChatGPT over privacy concerns in March 2023, becoming the first Western country to take such action. DeepSeek has said it used less-advanced H800 chips - permitted for sale to China until 2023 under US export controls - to

power its large learning model. South Korean chip giants Samsung Electronics and SK hynix are key suppliers of advanced chips used in AI servers. Worries about the impact of DeepSeek battered stocks in Seoul as the market reopened after an extended break Friday. Samsung fell more than two percent, while SK hynix plunged almost 12 percent at one point. But several industry leaders have welcomed DeepSeek's arrival and the injection of competition, while analysts have flagged the benefits of the shake-up.

# Little fanfare as UK marks five years since EU exit

AFP  
London

Britain left the European Union five years ago on Friday, but the anniversary was met with little fanfare as Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer seeks closer relations with the bloc. Starmer, who voted to remain during the 2016 Brexit referendum, had no plans to mark the occasion, which fell just days before he heads to Brussels for talks with European counterparts. "We are very much looking forwards and we know we can do better to make Brexit work for the British people," his deputy spokesman told reporters in Downing Street. "It's in the UK's national interest to have a more cooperative relationship with the EU," he said, adding that the bloc was Britain's "largest trading partner and our closest neighbour". Britons voted to leave the EU by 52 percent to 48 percent in a vote that split family and friends and caused shock waves around the world. Three-and-a-half years of bitter wrangling over the nature of Britain's future relationship with the EU ensued before the UK officially left the block at 11:00pm (2300 GMT) on January 31, 2020. Then Conservative prime minister Boris Johnson said Britain could make its exit from the union after 47 years a "stunning success", although he conceded there might be "bumps in the road ahead".

Thousands of people waving Union Jack flags packed London's parliament square in celebration as the clock struck 11 - midnight in Brussels - while countless opponents worried about Britain's future stayed at home. Five years on, with many Britons still suffering from Brexit fatigue and barely healed scars, the fifth anniversary was set to pass with little more than a fleeting mention. Shadow foreign secretary Priti Patel said the date marked five years since her Conservative party "honoured the democratic will of the British people". She claimed the country had since "reaped the benefits of securing new trade deals with dynamic, fast-growing markets across the world and reclaiming sovereignty from Brussels". But Brexit cheerleader Nigel Farage, whose hard-right Reform UK party are riding high in the polls, said he was "disappointed in the way it's been delivered". The UK has not been able to sign many of the major trade deals touted by Brexiters, notably with the United States and Canada, while the economy has been enduring little-to-no growth for months. Polls now suggest that most Britons think Brexit was wrong, including one by YouGov published yesterday which found that 55 percent of respondents now support rejoining the EU. David Josephs, who runs a fruit and vegetable wholesaler in Covent Garden in central London, said Brexit had been a "complete

nightmare" for his business. He told AFP he had lost dozens of suppliers from across Europe due to an increase in paperwork. "I'm sorry to say there's been zero benefit. Literally zero. We've gone into the dark ages as regards being able to trade, communicate, travel," Josephs said. Brexit has, however been a boon for Steve Horton, who runs a customs clearance and logistics company in Dover, southeast England. "Business has grown on the back of the paperwork that is now needed," he told AFP, adding that his business has gone from "a single desk" to "50 staff across five offices". Starmer insists that his European "reset" will not reverse Brexit. He has ruled out signing Britain back up to the single market, customs union or freedom of movement. But he does want improvements to the existing Trade and Co-operation Agreement between the UK and the EU that is due for renewal in 2026, as well as a new defence and security pact and a veterinary agreement. The European Commission, meanwhile, has touted the possibility of a youth mobility programme and Britain joining a pan-European and North African customs scheme which allows for the tariff-free trade of some goods. On Monday, Starmer will become the first UK premier since Brexit to attend a European Council gathering when he attends an informal EU leaders retreat in Belgium to push his reset.

## Rainy day



Pedestrians shelter from the rain under umbrellas on the South Bank of the River Thames, with the Houses of Parliament seen behind, in London yesterday.

# Calls for British govt to allow bird flu vaccines for poultry

AFP  
London

Several farming organisations yesterday urged the UK government to allow vaccinations for poultry against bird flu amid an outbreak of the highly contagious disease in the country. To date 27 farms have had confirmed cases of bird flu, most being in England and with one outbreak discovered in Scotland. Yesterday, affected poultry were discovered on a commercial property in Norfolk, eastern England, and the birds were being destroyed. So far, health authorities have only detected one rare case of bird flu in a human during the latest outbreak, and say "the risk to the general public's health is very low". But

fears are rising among farmers that the disease may spread. The head of the National Farmers' Union poultry board, James Mottershead, said "for the long-term stability of the UK poultry sector" it was essential that the UK's environment department should prioritise its "efforts on an avian influenza vaccination plan for birds". There are rising concerns about the situation, Gary Ford, spokesman for the British Free Range Egg Producers Association, told AFP. "We regard vaccination as potentially an important tool in terms of tackling this dreadful disease and preventing more flocks from being infected with avian influenza," he added. Vaccinations against bird flu are currently not allowed in the UK, except in zoos.

To prevent further spread, the environment department has imposed mandatory culls of birds within a three kilometre radius of a confirmed case, as well as stepped up hygiene measures and controls across wider areas. Minister for food security Daniel Zeichner told parliament this week that the government would keep the issue of vaccinations "under consideration". But he cautioned that "involves international trade issues which are significant" for the UK, a major exporter of hatching eggs and day-old chicks. The environment ministry told AFP that the UK was continuing "to invest in the research and development of vaccines through our bird flu vaccination taskforce". It is hoped the results of the research can be published before the spring.

# Pharma major AstraZeneca ditches UK investment over cut in state subsidies

Reuters  
London

AstraZeneca yesterday scrapped plans to invest £450mn (\$558.3mn) in its vaccine manufacturing plant in northern England, citing a cut in British government support. The decision to ditch the development of an existing facility in the Speke area of Liverpool comes at a time when Prime Minister Keir Starmer is pushing hard to drum up investment in Britain to generate economic growth. "Following discussions with the current government, we are no longer pursuing our planned investment at Speke," a spokesperson for the London-listed bluechip drugmaker said in a statement.

"Several factors have influenced this decision, including the timing and reduction of the final offer compared to the previous government's proposal." Earlier this week finance minister Rachel Reeves named AstraZeneca as one of the "great companies" she said were delivering jobs and investment across the country. Her speech, focused on how to get the country's stagnant economy growing again, set out the importance of attracting investment and said the government was "determined to make Britain the best place in the world to invest". The spokesperson for AstraZeneca, which also plans to spend £200mn to expand its existing Cambridge presence, said the Liverpool site would continue to produce flu vaccines. Over the

past year, the company has set out billions of dollars worth of investment in various countries, from Singapore and Thailand to France and Canada. The most notable among those was the Anglo-Swedish drugmaker's \$2bn spending proposal on research and development and manufacturing plants in the United States. Britain's finance ministry said a change in "the make-up" of the investment originally proposed by AstraZeneca had led to a reduced government grant offer being made. "All government grant funding has to demonstrate value for the taxpayer and unfortunately, despite extensive work from government officials, it has not been possible to achieve a solution," a government spokesperson said.

## Festival flight



A helicopter carrying pilgrims takes off to fly over Sangam, the confluence of Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati rivers, at sunset during the Maha Kumbh Mela festival in Prayagraj yesterday.

# India forecasts slowing growth ahead of union budget today

AFP  
Mumbai

India's economy will grow 6.3-6.8% in the next fiscal year, a government report said yesterday, among the top-performing countries globally but sluggish compared with recent performance. The world's fifth-largest economy post-

ed 8.2% GDP growth in the 2023-24 financial year but has slowed down since due to lower infrastructure spending, a weaker manufacturing sector and muted urban consumption. "Looking ahead, India's economic prospects for FY26 are balanced. Headwinds to growth include elevated geopolitical and trade uncertainties and possible commodity price

shocks," the Finance Ministry said in its annual economic survey. The lower end of the predicted range comes just below the 6.4 percent GDP growth projection for the current financial year ending March 2025, which is the slowest the economy has expanded since the Covid-19 pandemic. It is, however, in line with global estimates including the World Bank, which has forecast

growth of 6.7% next fiscal year. The report said that, while an uptick in rural demand and an easing of food inflation offered an "upside to near-term growth", India will need to improve its global competitiveness to "reinforce its medium-term growth potential". The report comes a day before India is set to unveil its annual budget, with the spotlight on how Prime

Minister Narendra Modi will address the slowdown. Analysts say efforts to stimulate demand are likely. "In a quest to support consumption, we expect the finance minister to provide an effective personal income tax rate cut by further tweaking the tax slabs," analysts at Barclays said in a note last week. "We think a boost to consumption is needed, especially with private investment also

now awaiting the increase in demand growth." Modi was nonetheless upbeat in brief public remarks made yesterday to open the latest session of parliament ahead of today's budget. He said India was on track to become a developed country by 2047, a mantra of his government, the year coinciding with a century since the end of colonial rule by Britain.



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GULF TIMES

Climate displacement is also a health crisis

Every year, 21.5mn people are forcibly displaced by floods, droughts, wildfires, and storms. This number is set to rise dramatically over the coming decades, with up to 1.2bn people expected to be driven from their homes by 2050. The unfolding climate crisis is not just a humanitarian disaster but also a global health emergency.

Climate displacement poses both direct and indirect threats to public health. By disrupting care services, it deprives affected communities of access to doctors, hospitals, and pharmacies. Climate-induced migration also exacerbates poverty, overcrowding, and social instability. Food production is often severely affected, while unsanitary living conditions fuel the spread of infectious diseases.

As the climate crisis threatens to derail global efforts to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the health and well-being of hundreds of millions of people across the developing world are at risk. High-income countries are not immune: in the US, 3.2mn adults were displaced or evacuated due to natural disasters in 2022 alone.

Pharmaceutical companies must play a pivotal role in bolstering global health resilience. Their involvement is particularly critical in conflict zones at the forefront of the climate-displacement crisis, where life-saving medicines and vaccines are often in short supply.

By disrupting care services, climate displacement deprives affected communities of access to doctors, hospitals, and pharmacies

While the pharmaceutical industry has made strides in reducing carbon dioxide emissions and adopting more sustainable practices, its efforts fall far short of mitigating climate-related disruptions to supply chains.

Some pharmaceutical companies, such as Novartis and Novo Nordisk, have launched targeted programmes to aid populations displaced by extreme weather events, while others have donated cash or supplies in response to natural disasters. The demand for these donations has risen with increasing climate and humanitarian needs. Hikma, a generic medicine manufacturer founded in Jordan, reported \$4mn in donations in 2020, and \$4.9mn in 2023, mostly serving the needs in the surrounding region.

No company has developed a comprehensive strategy to ensure that displaced communities have sustained access to health products. A more holistic approach is needed. Amid the ongoing climate-displacement crisis, pharmaceutical companies should adopt a four-pronged strategy to strengthen healthcare systems. For starters, they could help deliver medicines to vulnerable communities in remote areas by revamping their supply-chains, from building redundancy into shipping networks to redesigning products to be more stable in hot climates where refrigeration may be unavailable.

Second, pharmaceutical companies must invest in research and development to create vaccines, diagnostics, and therapeutics targeting climate-sensitive diseases. Rising global temperatures are accelerating the spread of mosquito-borne illnesses such as dengue, malaria, and Zika, as well as waterborne diseases like cholera and shigella, putting displaced populations at even greater risk.

Third, pharmaceutical companies should forge long-term partnerships with humanitarian organisations focused on climate displacement. Public-private collaborations have also proven effective in strengthening health resilience. Since 2010, for example, leading vaccine manufacturers like GSK and Pfizer have supplied Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, with billions of vaccine doses, protecting vulnerable populations in some of the world's most resource-constrained countries.

Lastly, pharmaceutical companies must boost efforts to cut greenhouse-gas emissions across their value chains. While the climate impact of pharmaceuticals may get less attention than that of traditional manufacturing industries, the sector emits more CO2 per \$1mn of revenue than the automotive industry.

The active support and engagement of shareholders, employees, and other stakeholders is crucial. Investors, in particular, must encourage companies to align their business practices with global health and climate goals.

Climate displacement is not a distant or hypothetical threat; it is a rapidly escalating health emergency. The pharmaceutical industry has a moral responsibility to act. To do so effectively, companies must get ahead of the curve and provide vital, life-saving treatments to those on the front lines of the climate crisis. — Project Syndicate

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Armed conflicts, climate change: challenges to children's education

Armed conflicts and climate change around the world have profound and devastating impacts, creating a harsh reality for countless individuals, particularly women and children. Huge numbers from countries affected by conflicts and crises, such as the occupied Palestinian territories, Sudan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and others, have been displaced and sought refuge.

In recent years, the world has experienced significant climate events, such as earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes, and wildfires, causing widespread devastation and suffering. Countries like Syria, Turkiye, Morocco, the US, France, and others are examples. The first to suffer were children, who lost access to education and faced increasingly difficult living conditions. These challenges have placed the international community at a critical juncture, demanding solidarity to support, protect, and ensure that children receive the education they need.

In the context of addressing the challenges faced by children in areas of armed conflict around the world, and recognising the importance of supporting this vulnerable group, Qatar has consistently played a vital role. Based on its belief in the significance of this responsibility, Qatar has provided ongoing support to children worldwide, particularly Palestinian children, in order to ensure a safe and stable environment for children affected by wars, especially those in the occupied Palestinian territories.

To discuss the pivotal role of Qatar in this sector, HE the Permanent Representative to the UN Sheikhha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani met with Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, at the headquarters of the Permanent Mission in New York. Their discussions focused on Qatar's pivotal role, in co-operation with the UN, in supporting children's issues in areas of armed conflict worldwide.

Five years ago, Qatar launched a pioneering initiative in this field — the Peace Schools initiative, through the Education Above All Foundation. The initiative was designed to support students fleeing wars and conflicts from



countries such as Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and Palestine, who stayed in Qatar. It aims to provide educational opportunities for both Arabic speakers and those speaking other languages.

The experience of these schools covered many students representing approximately 13 nationalities, including those who have been out of school for some time due to conflicts and have come to Qatar because of the wars. They undergo an assessment test to determine the most suitable classes for their needs. Additionally, students who are unable to pay tuition fees are received, with their cases carefully reviewed to ensure they have the opportunity to continue their education. Qatar views education as a key strategic tool for both regional and international co-operation, and the Education Above All Foundation implemented, through the 'Educate a Child' programme, projects with 82 global partners in 50 countries, and achieved its goal of helping more than 10mn of the most marginalized and out-of-school children, and attainment of a good primary education.

According to the UN Education Cannot Wait Fund, the number of children in immediate need of education assistance has been estimated at 35mn children over the past three years, reaching 234mn by the end of 2024. The UN fund indicated that the escalation of conflicts and the impact of climate change increased the number of

children in need of assistance in the field of education.

It is estimated that achieving the sustainable development goals for education in some countries requires providing \$100bn in additional annual funding, especially in low-income countries. The fund and its international partners launched an appeal for additional funding worth \$600mn to achieve the goals set out in the strategic plan that was adopted over four years.

The UN report states that more than 473mn children live in areas affected by conflicts, as the world witnesses the highest number of conflicts since World War II. The percentage of children living in conflict areas has doubled from about 10% in the 1990s to nearly 19% today.

According to child education experts, governments in developing countries are increasingly finding it difficult to finance essential investments for children, due to slow growth, high debt, and insufficient tax revenues and development aid.

Amid growing geopolitical rivalries and the paralysis of multilateral institutions, both governmental and non-governmental bodies seem to be increasingly willing to violate international laws designed to protect civilian populations by attacking civilian infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. The decline in efforts to protect civilians over decades is taking

a heavy toll on children, not to mention the risks that threaten their lives and subject them to displacement, hunger, diseases and significant risks to their mental health.

The report indicates that children are disproportionately affected by climate change, and the impacts on their development, health, education and well-being could be permanent.

According to the UN report's indicators, experts believe that the year 2025 presents crucial opportunities to achieve progress towards global climate goals. This requires comprehensive and strong policies, adequate and fair financing and investments, strong regulatory and accountability frameworks, and effective monitoring systems.

Several digital trends are expected to shape the future of the world in 2025 and beyond, and rapid developments in emerging technologies will continue to shape all aspects of children's lives from education to communication and participation in the digital economy.

The annual Unicef global children's report calls for a response to the growing need and a sustained effort to address the losses of recent years, as well as drawing attention to the serious consequences that the multilateral system is struggling to achieve, in order to respond effectively to the issues of children around the globe. (QNA)

Ensuring Europe's supply of critical minerals

By Rüy a Perincek and Andreas Goldthau  
Brussels/Erfurt

The European Union's plan to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 has an Achilles' heel: the EU relies on external sources — particularly Chinese companies — for 70-90% of the massive amount of critical raw materials needed to manufacture wind turbines, solar cells, batteries, and other green technologies. This dependency poses a serious risk: China's recent ban on exports of gallium, germanium, antimony, and other dual-use materials to the US suggests that it could take similar action against Europe, especially in light of EU tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles.

The new European Commission has rightly put critical raw materials at the top of its agenda. Fortunately, it will not be starting from scratch. Last year, the EU adopted the Critical Raw Materials Act, which calls for the bloc to extract 10%, process 40%, and recycle 25% of what it consumes annually by 2030, and limits the share of any external supplier to 65%. To meet the CRMA's targets, the Commission must focus on co-ordinating funding, engaging in resource diplomacy with Africa, and establishing secondary material partnerships.

Mining is a capital-intensive industry, and overseas upstream activities require public support in terms of both equity and debt. The CRMA anticipates mobilising finance from various sources, including the EU's Global Gateway initiative and the European Investment Bank. Some member states have also established their own national funds. Germany launched a €1bn (\$1.04bn) raw-materials fund, while Italy introduced a €1bn "Made in Italy" fund for critical minerals, and France dedicated €500mn under its 2030 investment plan to enhance domestic industry's resilience to disruptions of the metal supply chain.

But while several public-finance streams are available, the funding landscape is scattered and not well aligned, creating confusion. Moreover, there are no explicit rules governing how the Critical Raw Materials Board, which was established to support the CRMA's implementation, designates projects



as "strategic" and thus eligible to receive EU funds. The European Commission can address these issues by streamlining existing funding lines, which would ensure that national and EU finance work in tandem to achieve the best results and scale, and by establishing timelines for decision-making, which would provide clarity for corporate investment in upstream, midstream, and downstream assets.

The CRMA must also establish partnerships with resource-rich countries that deliver quick and tangible results. Bolstering ties with African countries, which hold some 30% of the world's mineral resources, will be especially important. But, compared to other regions, investment in mineral exploration on the continent remains low, and China funds most of it. The EU's resource diplomacy should focus on lowering investment barriers while helping African partners move into higher-value-added activities, such as downstream processing, and invest in industrial upgrading.

AfricaMaVal, an EU-funded project promoting sustainable partnerships and responsible mining on the continent, should become a vehicle for linking European and African firms and addressing extraction needs. Building on comprehensive assessments of mining prospects across Africa, and taking into account the STEM (science, technology,

engineering, and mathematics) skills of local workforces, AfricaMaVal can identify new business opportunities along the value chain. This could evolve into a joint investment platform for the sustainable production of critical raw materials. The European Commission would thus be doing what it does best: catalysing private investment toward its policy goals, which, in this case, is building the infrastructure and clean-energy systems required for future mining projects.

Lastly, the Commission should address the CRMA's major blind spot: the lack of domestic feedstock to meet its recycling targets. Global competition for secondary materials is already stiff, as evidenced by businesses' increasing efforts to secure enough steel scrap. Recycling input rates — the share of total demand — are just 3% for light rare-earth elements and zero for battery-grade lithium.

Establishing secondary-materials partnerships with emerging economies, which have rapidly growing markets for cell phones, laptops, and other appliances, would boost the EU's supply of recycled critical raw materials, particularly rare-earth elements. The focus should be on optimising the recycling value chain by providing financing and capacity-building assistance for waste-sorting and collection systems in partner countries, creating mutually beneficial economic and environmental outcomes.

The EU is facing an uphill battle to source and produce the critical raw materials that will define its future. And while the CRMA hardly represents an easy fix for the bloc's import dependency, it can strengthen supply-chain resilience, contribute to EU sovereignty, and bolster Europe's economic security — in other words, boost the bloc's industrial competitiveness against a worsening geopolitical backdrop. But to realise the CRMA's full potential, the Commission must make it fit for purpose. — Project Syndicate

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## Russia slams Trump plan for missile shield

AFP/Reuters  
Moscow

Russia has criticised President Donald Trump's plan to build a *Star Wars*-like missile shield for the United States, saying that it risked turning space into an arena of "confrontation".

In an executive order on Monday, Trump called for the creation of an "Iron Dome for America" to counter ballistic and hypersonic missile threats, reviving parts of a controversial Reagan-era plan nicknamed "Star Wars" that would have placed missile interceptors in space.

The White House said the intention was to modernise an outdated system and address a "catastrophic threat" that had become more complex as US adversaries developed new delivery systems.

"We regard this as yet another confirmation of the US intent to

turn space into an arena of armed confrontation and to deploy weapons there," Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a briefing.

Zakharova said the plan would expand Washington's missile deterrence to a scale "comparable to Reagan's Star Wars", which she called "odious".

She said the move was primarily aimed at "devaluing Russian and Chinese strategic deterrence capabilities".

"To put it mildly, these US approaches will not contribute to reducing tensions," the spokeswoman said.

The "Iron Dome" in Trump's decree refers to a highly successful system employed by Israel to down short-range rockets.

Washington faces various missile threats from adversaries, but they differ significantly from the short-range weapons that Israel's Iron Dome is designed to counter.

Russian President Vladimir Putin last year unveiled a new hypersonic missile nicknamed "Oreshnik", a weapon that experts believe flies at 10 times the speed of sound.

The United States said in its 2022 National Defence Strategy that Beijing is also closing the gap with Washington when it comes to ballistic and hypersonic missile technology.

Both Moscow and Washington have traded accusations of weaponising space in recent years.

The United States accused Russia last May of deploying a "space weapon" into the same orbit as a US satellite.

In the sharpest Russian criticism so far of a policy announced by Trump's new administration, Zakharova said yesterday that the planned US move would hinder the prospects for talks on nuclear arms control - something that both Trump and Putin have said they favour.

"It (the plan) directly envisages a significant strengthening of the American nuclear arsenal and means for conducting combat operations in space, including the development and deployment of space-based interception systems," Zakharova told reporters at the briefing.

The White House's Iron Dome statement did not refer to strengthening the US nuclear arsenal, but said: "The Iron Dome will further the goals of peace through strength. By empowering the United States with a second-strike capability, the Iron Dome will deter adversaries from attacks on the homeland."

Trump and Putin have both said they would like to meet face-to-face to discuss a range of issues, including the Ukraine war, but Moscow says it has yet to receive any signals from the US on when and where such an encounter could take place.

## German parliament rejects tough migration bill

Reuters/AFP  
Berlin

Germany's parliament has rejected an opposition draft law on tightening immigration policy, averting the prospect of a law passing for the first time in modern German history thanks to the backing of the far-right.

On Wednesday the Bundestag lower house passed a non-binding motion on migration proposed by the opposition conservatives with the support of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), breaking a taboo against co-operating with the far-right party, which is under surveillance by Germany's security services.

However, this time 12 conservative lawmakers opted not to back the draft bill sponsored by their own leader Friedrich Merz, who opinion polls suggest will be Germany's next chancellor after a national election set for February 23.

Their failure to endorse his draft deals a blow to the authority of Merz, who had pushed for the law despite warnings from party colleagues that he risked being tarnished with the charge of voting alongside the far-right.

"The draft law is rejected," said parliament vice-president Petra Pau, announcing that 338 lawmakers had backed Merz's bill calling for restrictions on family reunification and more expulsions at the borders, while 350 had voted against it.

"I would have liked to see a different result but this creates clarity," Merz told reporters after the vote.

Wednesday's vote, which had passed with AfD backing, prompted nationwide protests, a high-profile resignation from Merz's CDU party, and rebukes from former chancellor Angela Merkel, a predecessor as party leader, and Germany's Protestant and Catholic churches.

Merz had argued that the restrictions outlined in yesterday's draft bill were a necessary response to a series of high-profile killings in public spaces by people with an immigrant background.

Outgoing Chancellor Olaf

Scholz's Social Democrats and their Greens coalition partner said that they would not back measures that they believed illegal under European law and which they said would not have helped prevent the deadly attacks.

Yesterday Scholz demonstratively placed a copy of Merkel's autobiography *Freedom* on his parliament desk.

Merz launched his all-out immigration crackdown after police arrested an Afghan man following a deadly knife attack a week ago against a group of kindergarten children.

In December, police arrested a Saudi man over a car-ramming attack in which an SUV barrelled through a crowded Christmas market, killing six and wounding hundreds in the eastern city of Magdeburg.

Speaking after the parliamentary defeat, Merz said he regretted the outcome but maintained that he had emerged stronger from a battle that had "brought clarity" on where all parties stood.

Yesterday's bill would have boosted federal police powers to detain undocumented migrants and restricted family reunions for rejected asylum seekers with stays of deportation.

If the bill had passed, it would have been the first time in Germany's post-World War II history that a mainstream party relied on extremist backing to pass legislation.

Merz has faced a massive backlash for breaching a long-standing "firewall" against any co-operation with a right-wing extremist AfD, but defied the storm of opposition to stay the course.

He said he rejected the term "firewall" and, in reference to immigration and security, warned that "we must put out the fire and not let it become a wildfire".

Merz told parliament that "the people out there who are listening and watching in these turbulent days don't want us to argue among ourselves about the AfD".

"They want us to find solutions to the questions that concern people's everyday lives so that the people in our country can feel safe again," he said.

### Doctor convicted of abusing patients

A German court has handed a doctor a six-and-a-half-year jail term for raping female patients while carrying out colonoscopies.

The man, identified as Wolfgang H, was convicted of 17 counts of rape and sexual assault whilst exploiting a privileged relationship, the Munich court said in a statement.

Prosecutors had asked for a sentence of eight years.

The doctor was found to have violated the women during colonoscopies repeatedly between 2017 and 2021, according to the court.

He was cleared of two further counts of rape.

The *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper reported that the women were anaesthetised when their bowels were being examined in the Munich practice, and medical assistants witnessed what had happened.

The 52-year-old had denied the accusations against him, and plans to appeal the conviction.

Four female colleagues who saw what happened at the practice raised the alarm some time after the offences.

The court determined their testimony was consistent and detailed, and the fact they had reported the crimes long after the events could be plausibly explained by fears of reprisals at work. - **AFP**

## N Korean troops not seen at front in 3 weeks: Ukraine

Reuters/AFP  
Kyiv

Ukraine's special operations forces have not seen North Korean troops on the battlefield in Russia's Kursk region for around three weeks, suggesting that they have been forced to withdraw after taking heavy losses, a military spokesperson said yesterday.

Ukrainian and Western assessments say that some 11,000 troops from Russia's ally North Korea have been deployed in Kursk to support Moscow's forces.

Russia has neither confirmed nor denied their presence.

"The special operations forces speak exclusively for the areas where our units are deployed,

in this regard, we inform you that the presence of North Korean troops has not been noted for approximately three weeks," said Colonel Oleksandr Kindratenko, the forces' spokesperson.

"Presumably, having suffered heavy losses, they were forced to withdraw," he said.

The Ukrainian military spokesperson for the whole Kursk front told Reuters he could not officially comment on the situation.

It was unclear what sectors of the front in Kursk region the special operations forces are deployed along.

Ukraine launched a surprise incursion into the western Russian region of Kursk in August, trying to divert Moscow's forces to defend on a new front, boost morale and gain a bargaining chip.

Russia has since pushed Ukrainian troops

back, but so far proven unable to drive them all the way back to the border.

North Korean regular troops entered the war on Russia's side in October, according to Kyiv and its Western allies, which said they had been sent to Kursk region.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on January 11 that two North Korean soldiers had been captured alive on the battlefield by Ukrainian special forces working alongside paratroopers.

Asked yesterday about reports the North Korean soldiers had been withdrawn, the Kremlin declined to comment.

"There are a lot of different arguments out there, both right and wrong," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. "It's not worth commenting on every time."



This aerial photograph shows rescue personnel in a hovercraft navigating past warehouses submerged in flood waters, in Redon, western France. - **AFP**

## Russian man is charged with negligence over relatives' deaths after 66 days adrift

A Russian man who survived 66 days adrift at sea in an inflatable boat has been charged with negligence over the deaths of his relatives on board, investigators said yesterday.

Mikhail Pichugin, 46, was rescued by a fishing vessel in October off the coast of the far-eastern Kamchatka peninsula, more than two months after he set off on the dinghy with his brother and 15-year-old nephew, both of whom died during the ordeal.

Russian prosecutors have charged him with "violating traffic safety rules" resulting in the death of two people, a regional branch of Russia's Investigative Committee said, according to Russian news agencies.

Pichugin comes from the city of Ulan-Ude in Siberia but was working on the far-eastern island of Sakhalin as a driver.

He set off from the coast of the eastern Khabarovsk region on August 9 with his brother Sergei, 49, and nephew Ilya, 15, on a crossing to the island of Sakhalin meant to take a few hours.

When they failed to arrive, Russian rescuers surveyed the area by helicopter and plane, suspecting the boat had drifted towards the Kamchatka peninsula, but found nothing and the search was eventually called off.

The boat was found around 1,000km (670 miles) from its starting point.

According to prosecutors, Pichugin had no right to operate the vessel more than 1.6 nautical miles from shore.

They also accused him of not properly servicing the small boat's motor, the Interfax news agency reported.

"This led to a long uncontrolled drifting of the vessel in the waters of the Sea of Okhotsk," it quoted investigator Stanislav Astashenko as saying. "And, as a result, the tragic death of two persons, a son and a father."

Pichugin may have survived because of his portly 100kg stature, according to his wife.

Russian television reported he weighed only 50kg when found. - **AFP**

## Turkiye army expels officers for Atatürk pledge of allegiance

Turkiye's military said yesterday that it had dismissed five trainee officers and three of their superiors for pledging allegiance to the founder of modern Türkiye in front of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

During a swearing-in ceremony for new officers in August, the five held their swords to the sky, saying: "We are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal" and vowed to defend "the secular democratic republic".

They were referring to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded modern Türkiye in 1923 after the disintegration of the Ottoman

Empire at the end of World War I.

Atatürk pushed through many reforms and made Türkiye a strictly secular state - a move which Erdogan and his Islamist-rooted AKP party have pushed back against since coming to power in 2002.

Images of the troops taking the pledge in front of Erdogan sparked debate in Türkiye.

Long seen as the guardian of Atatürk's principles, the military staged coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980 and forced Erdogan's Islamist mentor, Necmettin Erbakan, to resign as premier in 1997.

## Second ship seized as part of Baltic Sea cable damage investigation

Norwegian police said yesterday that they had seized and boarded a Norwegian ship with an all-Russian crew on suspicion of involvement in causing damage to a telecoms cable in the Baltic Sea, the second vessel to be named by investigators in the case.

The *Silver Dania* cargo ship was seized at the request of Latvian authorities, and with the help of Norway's coastguard, police in

the northern Norwegian city of Tromsø said.

"It is suspected that the ship has been involved in serious damage to a fibre cable in the Baltic Sea between Latvia and Sweden," the police said in a statement.

The *Silver Dania*'s owner, the Silver Sea group, denied that the vessel was involved in the undersea fibre optic cable damage, Norwegian broadcaster TV2 reported.

Sweden and Latvia are investigating the suspected sabotage on Sunday of the cable linking the two countries, and Swedish police seized and boarded Maltese-flagged cargo ship *Vezhen* on suspicion it caused the damage.

Norwegian police said the two ship seizures were related to the same incident.

"The suspicion is that someone on the (*Silver Dania*) has something to do with the

cable incident," police lawyer Ronny Joergensen told a press conference. He declined to provide detail.

The Baltic Sea region is on high alert after a string of power cable, telecom link and gas pipeline outages since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) military alliance recently boosted its presence with frigates, aircraft and naval drones. - **Reuters**

### Suspects in Sweden killing released

Five suspects in the killing of Salwan Momika, who in 2023 repeatedly burned copies of the Qur'an, have all been freed, a prosecutor handling the case in Sweden said yesterday. "The suspects have been undermined and I see no reason to keep these people under arrest" over the killing on Wednesday, prosecutor Rasmus Oman said. The five were, however, still subject to further investigation, Oman said. Momika, 38, was shot on Wednesday in an apartment building in the city of Sodertalje, south of Stockholm, where he lived. He died soon after in hospital. The five people were arrested just hours after the shooting. A Stockholm court had been due to rule on Thursday whether Momika, a Christian Iraqi, was guilty of inciting ethnic hatred. - **Reuters/AFP**





## LuLu Qatar launches Quality Dairy from Britain

**L**uLu Qatar has launched its latest showcase of Quality Dairy from Britain, in partnership with the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) and the Department of Business and Trade (DBT).

Alongside the retailer's extensive range of products from the UK, LuLu this week offers an extended market leading range of dairy products from across the UK in most of its larger stores, a statement said.

“LuLu remains the leading retailer in Qatar for providing quality products from across the world and is helped by its international supply chain, Y International UK, to bring the best products from across the world to supermarkets here in Qatar,” the statement said.

"The showcase enabled customers to sample a wide range of cheese and yogurt



products and learn more about some of the emerging brands from the UK," it added. "This is part of LuLu's sustained commitment to bring the best ranges and the best value from across the world to Qatar."

The event was inaugurated by the British ambassador Neerav Patel, accompanied by the DBT director in Qatar, Jan

Mason, and the head of Welsh government country manager for Qatar, Aicha Srour.

"Thanks and support also goes to the support from Adil Khan, Lucy, Randolph and Rachael Speed from the AHDB, as well as support from Tim Barraclough of the DBT in the IUK" the statement added.

# Gewan Island hosts 'Crystal' Oud and Perfume Exhibition

In a step that highlights its status as a luxurious and sophisticated destination, Gewan Island is hosting the first edition of the “Crystal” Oud and Perfume Exhibition, featuring over 35 brands.

This event will be one of the most prominent celebrations of the finest perfume fragrances and luxurious oud varieties.

The exhibition will continue until February 8 at the Crystal Walk, a venue renowned for its elegant and modern design, a statement said.

"The venue reflects the uniqueness and excellence of Gewan Island, making this event a destination for enthusiasts of high-end perfumes and oud," it said.

"This time of year, offers mild and pleasant weather in Gewan Island, making visiting the exhibition an unforgettable outdoor experience," it added. "Visitors



will enjoy an atmosphere of luxury amidst breathtaking views."

"Gewan Island, the latest pioneering project in Qatar, is one of

the most prominent destinations that blends opulence with innovation," the statement said. "It represents a qualitative leap in the



world of tourism and commercial projects in the region.”

“The island boasts a strategic location and a modern design that

reflects Qatar's ambitious vision in developing innovative tourism and commercial destinations," it concluded. "It is the ideal place to host

such remarkable events, positioning Gewan Island at the heart of cultural and commercial happenings in the region."



An aerial view of The Pearl, Gewan islands.

# 62mn vehicles enter The Pearl and Gewan islands since 2021

The United Development Company (UDC), the master developer of The Pearl and Gewan Islands, has announced that approximately 62mn vehicles have entered The Pearl and Gewan Islands since 2021.

Further, 21mn vehicles were recorded as entering the two islands by the end of 2024, a 26% increase compared to vehicle flow in 2021, based on data collected during this period, a statement said.

The tracking of vehicles entering the two Islands is done using advanced technology and monitoring devices installed at the entrances.

Data indicates annual increase of 26% annual increase in vehicle counts over the past three years, reflecting the movement of visitors, tourists, and employees who work on the islands.

The opening of Gewan Island has significantly contributed to the increase in numbers, as the island has seen a large influx of visitors, even though most commercial stores have not yet opened.

It is expected that the number of vehicles entering will rise significantly with the full opening of the remaining commercial

stores and the relocation of residential unit owners to their homes on the island, which will further contribute to increased traffic.

As for The Pearl Island, it is expected that recently opened projects and those planned for opening this year will contribute to a rise in vehicle entry.

One of the most notable recently launched projects is the Pearl International Hospital.

Recent data indicates that approximately 10.76mn vehicles entered The Pearl and Gewan Islands in the second half of 2024 alone.

In comparison, the total number of vehicles for the entire year of 2021 was 16.45mn.

Vehicle entry numbers are expected to continue rising significantly throughout this year.

"The UDC reaffirms its commitment to enhancing the transportation experience on The Pearl and Gewan Islands, with plans for further improvements in the coming years," the statement said. "The steady growth in vehicle traffic underscores the continued success of the islands in maintaining their position as key destinations both locally and regionally."