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SATURDAY Vol. XXXXVI No. 13308
March 8, 2025
Ramadan 8, 1446 AH
www.gulf-times.com 2 Riyals

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Prayer times
Fajr....4.34; Zuhr....11.45; Asr....3.08;
Maghrib.....5.42; Isha....7.12

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Qatar attends OIC meeting in Jeddah



Qatar participated yesterday in the extraordinary meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Member States of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC), held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to discuss the ongoing Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people and the calls for their displacement from their land. Qatar's delegation to the meeting was headed by HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi. **(QNA)**

Qatar reiterates its support for Syria govt

Qatar has condemned in the strongest terms the crimes committed by outlaw groups and their targeting of security forces in Syria. In a statement yesterday the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated Qatar's solidarity with the Syrian government and its support for all measures it takes to consolidate civil peace and maintain security and stability in the country. The ministry renewed Qatar's support for Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity and to achieve the aspirations of its people for freedom, development and prosperity. **(QNA)**

'Palestinian refugee camps uninhabitable'

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) said that the Israeli security forces left Jenin, Tulkarm, and Nur Shams refugee camps uninhabitable. The large-scale demolitions are an alarming new pattern. They have an unprecedented impact on the Palestine refugees and seek to permanently change the characteristics of the camps in the northern West Bank, UNRWA said in a press release. The demolitions are occurring in the context of the so-called Israeli Security Forces operation "Iron Wall" ongoing since Jan 21 in the northern West Bank – the single-longest and most destructive operation since the second intifada, it added. **(QNA)**



Ministry launches new strategy to enhance sports' role

The Ministry of Sports and Youth (MSY) has announced the launch of its new strategy, reflecting its future vision and aligning with the aspirations of Qatari youth. The initiative carries the slogan "Quality Life and Future-Ready Youth."

In a statement, the ministry highlighted that the strategy aims to enhance the role of sports in improving public health and reducing disease risks. It focuses on nurturing talents across priority sports, improving athlete performance, supporting the private sector in organising sports events, and developing Qatari professionals in sports and youth fields. Additionally, the strategy seeks to achieve operational efficiency in sports facilities.

The new strategy aspires to create an integrated sports environment that contributes to building a healthy and active society while expanding the base of Qatari talent.

HE the Minister of Sports and Youth Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani emphasised that the launch of the "Sports and Youth Excellence Strategy" marks a pivotal step towards sustainable development in this vital sector.

He said that in Qatar, sports and youth are fundamental pillars in building a vibrant and innovative society, highlighting the ministry's commitment to developing strategies that align with the ambitions of youth and reinforce Qatar's position as a

global destination for sports.

In his speech during the strategy's launch, HE the Minister added that this strategy reflects the State's vision of empowering youth and investing in their capabilities while enhancing sports as a means of achieving development and social cohesion.

He expressed his hope of achieving the ambitious goals of "Quality Life and Future-Ready Youth" in collaboration with all partners in the sports sector.

HE the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Sports and Youth Eng Yasser bin Abdullah al-Jamal described the new strategy as a roadmap for advancing this vital sector and its role in achieving Qatar National Vision 2030. He urged all those involved in its implementation to exert their utmost effort to ensure its goals are met, expressing confidence that the strategy will achieve significant milestones in the journey of excellence in the sports and youth sectors, strengthen Qatar's position globally, and meet stakeholders' aspirations.

Meanwhile, MSY's Director of the Planning, Quality, and Innovation Department Maha al-Rumaihi said that the strategy is the result of extensive collective efforts. She assured that the ministry is keen to ensure the strategy is comprehensive, sustainable, and based on global best practices, targeting the aspirations of Qatar's youth and sports community. **(QNA)**

GCC praises Qatar's efforts, supports Arab plan for Gaza

QNA
Makkah

The GCC Ministerial Council has praised the efforts made by Qatar, Egypt and the United States to reach a ceasefire agreement in the Gaza Strip. It emphasised the necessity of adhering to the agreement, halting the Israeli aggression on Gaza, and completely withdrawing from the Strip and all Palestinian territories.

The council, which concluded its meetings in the holy city of Makkah on Thursday, praised Qatar for organising the Doha Forum on Dec 7, 2024, providing a global platform for leading discussions on prominent global issues and challenges.

It reviewed the developments in joint Gulf action and the evolution of political issues regionally and internationally. It reiterated its commitment to the strength and cohesion of the GCC, the unity of its members, and the achievement of greater co-ordination, integration, and interconnectedness across all fields.

On the situation in Gaza, the council's final statement affirmed the GCC's solidarity with the brotherly Palestinian people in Gaza and its surroundings, calling for an end to the blockade imposed on the Strip, alleviating the plight of the Palestinian people, ensuring safe delivery of all humanitarian aid and essentials to Gaza's residents.

The council affirmed its support for the Palestinian-Egyptian-Arab plan, adopted by the extraordinary Arab summit "Palestine Summit" held on March 4 in Cairo. It stressed that the future of the Gaza Strip should be within the context of a unified Palestinian state and the implementation of the two-state solution.

It noted the efforts made by the GCC countries and Arab states on the political front to

Chinese FM: Gaza an inseparable part of Palestinian territory

China supports the plan for restoring peace in Gaza initiated by Egypt and other Arab countries, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday. Gaza belongs to the Palestinian people, and is an inseparable part of the Palestinian territory. Changing the status of Gaza by forceful means will not bring about peace, but only new chaos, Wang said in a press statement.

Wang called for efforts to promote a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire, ramp up humanitarian assistance, observe the principle of "the Palestinians governing Palestine," and contribute to the reconstruction in Gaza. Noting that the Palestinian question has always been at the heart of the Middle East issue, the Chinese foreign minister called on the international



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi

community to focus more on the two-state solution and give more support to independent statehood for Palestine. All Palestinian factions need to deliver on the Beijing Declaration to achieve unity and self-strengthening, he said, stressing the importance of supporting the Palestinian state and promoting peace in the region. **(QNA)**

stop Israeli assaults on the Gaza Strip, the humanitarian and relief assistance provided by GCC countries to Gaza, and the popular campaigns to aid the Palestinian people and deliver humanitarian aid to the besieged residents.

The council stressed the importance of respecting the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria, and rejecting foreign interference in its internal affairs, and that Syria's security and stability are a fundamental pillar of the stability of the region's security.

It reaffirmed the steadfast positions of the GCC in support of Lebanon, stressing its continuous support for the country's sovereignty, security, and stability. It highlighted the importance of implementing comprehensive structural political and economic reforms to ensure that Lebanon

overcomes its political and economic crisis.

The council affirmed the GCC's firm positions and decisions on the importance of preserving Sudan's sovereignty, security, stability and territorial integrity, supporting Sudan in confronting developments and repercussions of the current crisis, the need for calm, the need to favour dialogue and unify ranks, and return to the path of the political process leading to a civilian authority, alleviating the suffering of the brotherly Sudanese people, preserving the cohesion of national state institutions, preventing their collapse, and preventing the escalation of conflict and confrontations between the Sudanese parties, and urging them to engage seriously and effectively with crisis resolution initiatives, including the Jeddah Forum and neighbouring countries and others.

90,000 Palestinians perform Friday prayer at Al-Aqsa Mosque



Thousands of Palestinians performed the first Friday prayer of the holy month of Ramadan yesterday at Al-Aqsa Mosque, amid stringent military measures imposed by the Israeli occupation authorities to restrict access to the mosque.

The Islamic Endowments Department in Jerusalem estimated that around 90,000 people attended Friday prayer at Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Occupation forces were heavily deployed around the military checkpoints leading to the mosque, preventing a large number of worshippers from West Bank from entering and inspecting their personal IDs.

Additionally, thousands of Israeli police officers were stationed in the alleyways of the Old City of Jerusalem, around Al-Aqsa Mosque, and at its gates.

Since the ceasefire in Gaza Strip came into effect on Jan 19, the Israeli occupation forces have intensified their military measures in West Bank, including Jerusalem, by setting up barriers and iron gates at the entrance

es to Palestinian villages and cities.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the Israeli occupation authorities have no right to restrict the entry of Palestinian citizens for prayer at Al-Aqsa Mosque under any pretext or justification.

In a statement yesterday, the ministry said that setting age limits for worshippers constitutes a blatant violation of the obligations of the occupying power, as well as an infringement of international law and the fundamental right to freedom of movement and access to places of worship.

The ministry further noted that the restrictions related to age limitations for both men and women impose additional constraints on the number of worshippers on Fridays. It also rejected the occupation's justifications for imposing such age restrictions, emphasising that Jerusalem is occupied Palestinian territory according to international resolutions and does not fall under Israeli sovereignty. **(QNA)**



Lebanese PM meets Qatari ambassador



Lebanese Prime Minister Dr Nawaf Salam met yesterday with Qatar's ambassador in Beirut Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani. Discussions during the meeting dealt with bilateral relations between the two countries. The Lebanese prime minister thanked Qatar for its continuous support to Lebanon in all fields. The ambassador congratulated Dr Salam on his government gaining the confidence of the House of Representatives and wished him success in his national duties. He reiterated Qatar's permanent support for Lebanon and its brotherly people. **(QNA)**

Sheikha Alya meets UN special representative for Afghanistan

HE the Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani met with Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Roza Otunbayeva, at the Permanent Mission's headquarters in New York. During the meeting, they discussed the latest developments in Afghanistan and ongoing efforts to support stability and development in the country. **(QNA)**



Qatar reiterates its full support to women empowerment initiatives

QNA
Geneva

Qatar has reiterated its steadfast commitment to women's empowerment and inclusive economic growth, pledging to continue its collaboration with international partners to support initiatives that create opportunities for women exporters and provide them with the necessary tools for leadership, innovation, and success in the digital economy.

This statement was delivered by HE Qatar's Permanent Representative in Geneva Dr Hind Abdulrahman al-Muftah, during the event announcing the beneficiary countries of the Women Exporters



HE Dr Hind al-Muftah

in the Digital Economy (WEIDE) Fund, held at the headquarters of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

HE al-Muftah described the event as a pivotal moment in the journey toward women's economic empowerment and ex-

pressed Qatar's pride in the selection of four beneficiary countries: the Dominican Republic, Jordan, Mongolia and Nigeria. She emphasised that this initiative is not merely a financial investment but a catalyst for change, aimed at supporting women exporters and enabling them to access global markets.

She further highlighted Qatar's long-standing advocacy for women's empowerment in the global economy, stressing that as the world undergoes rapid digital transformation, it is crucial to provide resources, skills, and networks to women exporters so they can seize emerging opportunities. The WEIDE Fund, she explained, directly addresses this need by offering strategic financial support,

capacity building, and enhanced market access for women-led small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

She emphasised that Qatar is not merely a supporter of this initiative but a committed partner in driving sustainable economic progress through inclusivity. She added that Qatar's commitment extends beyond this fund, citing that the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 Legacy Fund has allocated \$50mn to support projects promoting social and economic development.

She noted that this investment reflects Qatar's deep-rooted dedication to supporting initiatives that enhance social and economic progress, highlighting Qatar's partnerships with the WTO, the

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the World Health Organisation (WHO), in collaboration with the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, to ensure a lasting global impact.

She described the WEIDE Fund as a game-changer for women's empowerment, as it removes barriers that hinder women exporters, provides them with opportunities to scale their businesses, expand into global markets, and contribute to economic growth. She stressed that women's empowerment goes beyond financial support, requiring enhanced access to digital platforms, appropriate financing, and technical support, all of which play a crucial role in shaping the future of the digital economy.

Official

Qatar strongly condemns attack in Pakistan

Qatar expressed its strong condemnation and denunciation of the attack that targeted a security facility in northwestern Pakistan, which resulted in deaths and injuries. In a statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated Qatar's position rejecting violence, terrorism and criminal acts, regardless of the motives and reasons. The ministry expressed Qatar's condolences to the families of the victims, and to the government and people of Pakistan, and its wishes for a speedy recovery for the wounded. **(QNA)**

Awqaf launches 11th Ramadan dialogues programme ‘Wa Aamanahum Min Khawf’

QNA
Doha

The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (Awqaf), represented by the Department of Da'wah and Religious Guidance, announced the launch of the 11th season of its Ramadan dialogues programme 'Wa Aamanahum Min Khawf' for the year 1446 AH (2025).

The ministry stated that the first session of the programme is scheduled to begin today, corresponding to the 8th of Ramadan, at the Imam Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab Mosque after Taraweeh prayers. The programme will run over four days, featuring a distinguished group of scholars and in-

tellectuals from Qatar and across the Islamic world. According to the ministry, 'Wa Aamanahum Min Khawf' serves as an intellectual dialogue platform organised annually during Ramadan, aiming to address contemporary issues relevant to the Islamic Ummah, enhance its cultural and intellectual security, correct misconceptions, and provide well-founded perspectives and intellectual reviews.

The programme will host a select group of scholars and thinkers known for their moderation and scholarly authority, addressing the challenges faced by the Islamic Ummah through a modern and civilisational lens.

In its 11th edition, the programme comprises four dialogue sessions, each lasting one hour and

twenty minutes, focusing on pivotal issues in the Islamic context. The first session, titled 'Tawheed,' will take place today, highlighting the importance and centrality of Tawheed in Islamic creed. The second session on Sunday will explore the role of the family in building a cohesive and healthy society under the title 'The Muslim Family'.

The third session, scheduled for Monday, the 10th of Ramadan, will delve into introducing Islam in the age of artificial intelligence by exploring ways to leverage modern technologies to present the true image of Islam. The fourth and final session, planned for Tuesday, will address the challenges of Islamophobia and strategies to combat it. The ministry has ensured that the public from Qatar and the

entire Islamic world can follow the 'Wa Aamanahum Min Khawf' sessions through live broadcasts on the ministry's social media accounts, ensuring the programme's content reaches a broad audience locally and internationally.

Notably, the programme serves as an opportunity for the Ummah to renew its connection with its scholars and thinkers, discussing Islamic intellectual and cultural issues in a Ramadan atmosphere that fosters awareness and knowledge through a balanced and profound framework.

GCC Endowment Week

The General Directorate of Endowments at the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (Awqaf) is participating in the GCC

Endowment Week under the theme 'Endowment and Community Building,' an initiative aimed at promoting the culture of endowment and supporting charitable and social efforts across the Gulf.

Director-General of the General Directorate of Endowments Eng Hassan bin Abdullah al-Marzouqi highlighted that the initiative seeks to educate individuals, businesses, and institutions about the significance of endowments as a tool to support development initiatives. He emphasised the importance of collaboration among endowment organisations in GCC countries to enhance awareness and develop effective measures to monitor and improve endowment performance.

Al-Marzouqi noted that the GCC Endowment Week provides

a valuable opportunity for institutions to exchange expertise on establishing sustainable endowments that address community needs and aspirations.

He also showcased the innovative approach of reinvesting endowment revenues to create new endowments, which ensures both growth and sustainability. Held during the second week of Ramadan, the initiative leverages the spirit of the holy month to emphasise the role of endowments in fostering community development and solidarity. The General Directorate of Endowments also aligns its efforts with inclusive practices, offering a variety of endowment channels to cater to different philanthropic preferences and contribute to societal progress.

Qatar leads EM peers in AI readiness: IMF

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

Qatar is leading its Emerging Market peers in Artificial Intelligence (AI) readiness by embracing the transformative potential of AI, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), has said.

According to a latest report by research analyst Tongfang Yuan and released yesterday, IMF points out that Qatar's AI exposure has increased significantly over the years and increasing AI adoption is assessed to yield more opportunities than risks for the country's labour force.

The report notes that this has been made possible by the private sector's contribution in increasing jobs that are more likely to benefit from AI-driven productivity gains.

Qatar, the report notes, is well positioned to benefit from AI-boosted productivity gains. The country's proactive approach in enhancing digitalisation and embracing AI have bolstered its digital access and AI readiness, facilitating a rapid increase in AI exposure and labour force AI preparedness. The country's increased AI exposure is expected to bring more AI-driven productivity gains than risks.

Its expatriate-dominated labour structure also allows the country more flexibility in adjusting its labour force for swift AI adoption.

The report says that Qatar has been proactive in strategic planning for the transformative potential of AI, moving relatively early with high-level initiatives. "In 2019, the country launched

The country's proactive approach in enhancing digitalisation and embracing AI have bolstered its digital access and AI readiness

its first National AI Strategy, focusing on six key sectors: education, data access, employment, business, research, and ethics. This was followed by the establishment of the Artificial Intelligence Committee in 2021, which includes representatives from various ministries, universities, and financial institutions to co-ordinate AI governance and policy," explains the report.

"The national Digital Agenda 2030 reinforces this commitment by positioning AI as a crucial driver of digital transformation across sectors such as government services, healthcare, and finance.

The agenda also lays out AI-specific initiatives and workforce upskilling programmes, supporting the sustainable economic growth objectives in the Third National Development Strategy and Qatar National Vision 2030," continues the document. It highlights that the private sector plays a critical role in advancing AI adoption, creating job opportunities that align with AI's transformative potential. Estimates suggest that further AI adoption in Qatar could significantly boost productivity, with potential gains varying based on

factors such as speed of adoption and labour force exposure.

Qatar's AI strategies are underpinned by a range of initiatives in digital talent, digital infrastructure, government services, and investments and the economic impacts of AI are multifaceted and transformative.

Two main aspects of AI's impact on the labour market have been identified as productivity gains and job displacement risk. The extent of these gains or losses remains uncertain, contingent on the pace of AI technology upgrade, adoption by the economy and workforce readiness.

Staff analysis shows that Qatar's increased AI exposure is likely to bring more opportunities than risks. As of 2023, around 37% of Qatar's labour force see their jobs exposed to AI applications, representing an 18% point increase from 2014. This AI exposure level is comparable to the Emerging Markets average of 33% but lower than the Advanced Economies average of 58%.

The scenario analysis suggests that successful AI adoption could generate considerable gains in labour productivity. With the focus on private sector growth, continued investment in human capital and efforts to attract high-skilled expatriates, Qatar's labour force may enjoy more opportunities than risks. Combining existing estimates of global AI productivity impacts and domestic reform gains, the optimistic scenario suggests that Qatar's labour productivity growth could be lifted by an additional 1% point annually.

Qatar hails new Syrian govt-OPCW relationship

QNA
The Hague

Qatar's ambassador to the Netherlands and its Representative to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Dr Mutlaq bin Majed al-Qahtani, took part in the special session on Syria held during the OPCW Executive Council's 108th session. The session was attended by Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Asaad al-Shibani.

In a statement to the Executive Council, al-Qahtani affirmed that the participation of the Syrian foreign minister in the Executive Council's proceedings marks a pivotal historic moment for the Syrian people, as it paves the way for eliminating the chemical weapons programme left behind by the Assad regime.

He described it as a fundamental turning point in the relationship between the new Syrian government and the OPCW, noting that this development represents



a genuine start to opening a new page of constructive co-operation on this issue, in line with the aspirations of the free Syrian people for security, stability, and prosperity.

He expressed gratitude to the Executive Council's member states for supporting the extensive diplomatic efforts undertaken by Qatar, notably through its role in safeguarding the interests of Syria at the OPCW. He stressed that this active and ef-

fective involvement has substantially helped bridge many gaps, fostered trust and consensus, and opened new horizons for constructive collaboration between Syria and the organisation.

For his part, the Syrian foreign minister thanked Qatar for its ongoing, active support of Syria during this phase, particularly in facilitating communication and co-operation with the OPCW and in serving as a guardian of Syrian interests within the organisation.

Ministry welcomes Bhutan delegation



The Ministry of Labour welcomed a delegation from Bhutan's Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment, as part of ongoing efforts to enhance bilateral co-operation in the labour sector. The visit included a meeting with the directors of the Ministry of Labour's various departments, alongside representatives from Bhutan's ministry. The meeting discussed the latest legislative developments in the labour sector and the new programmes currently being implemented by the Ministry of Labour. They also explored the prospects of exchanging expertise to further enhance the work environment. **(QNA)**

Wonders on wheels: Katara's Ramadan car parade a key attraction



Katara Cultural Village comes alive every afternoon during Ramadan with a car parade featuring a wide range of vehicles, from vintage to the most modern cars, trucks, bikes and scooters. The parade, which winds its way up and down through Katara's Shakespeare Street from 3.30 to 5pm is pure eye candy and immensely instagrammable. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam





Ramadan: An opportunity for spiritual enhancement and soul redemption

Ramadan is a Muslim's recurring opportunity for spiritual enhancement and soul redemption. It is also an annual exercise in self-control and self-restraint, but above all, it is a physical manifestation of our total submission and obedience to Allah. Because of this submission and obeying of His order, the Muslim fasts, abstaining from food, drink, and sexual intercourse during the days of Ramadan, this is the physical aspect of fasting. By nightfall, the spiritual aspects take over, because while eating, drinking, and sex are permitted during nighttime, the Muslim then engages in prayers that take him/her deep into the night. It is a well-balanced program that lifts the spirit, strengthens the resolve, and asserts Tawheed as no other act of worship can.

The conduct of our Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, and his companions may Allah be pleased with them in Ramadan differs a lot from the way Muslims

do today. They dedicated their days and nights for worship. Their lives revolved completely around the book of Allah, the Qur'an. Reciting it in and out of prayers. The Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, used to review the whole Qur'an with Jibreel (Angel Gabriel) once every Ramadan. Imaam Al-Bukhari, may Allah have mercy upon him, narrated: "Jibreel used to repeat the recitation of the Qur'an with the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, once a year (in Ramadan) but he repeated it with him twice in the year he died." The Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, used to stay in I'tikaaf (seclusion in the Masjid for the purpose of worship) for ten days every year (during Ramadan) but in the year of his death, he stayed in I'tikaaf for 20 days.

Manifestation of Mercy
Ramadan is the month of mercy. This is manifested in the revelation of the Qur'an and the commission

There is no better time to start making positive changes in our lives than this blessed month

of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, to the Prophethood during this blessed month, as Mercy from Allah. Allah, The Most Exalted, asserts this in numerous verses of the Qur'an; such as (what means): "And We have sent down to you the Book (i.e. the Qur'an) as clarification for all things and as guidance and mercy and good tidings for the Muslims." [Qur'an 16:89] And (what means): "So there has [now] come to you clear evidence from your Lord and a guidance and mercy." [Qur'an 6:157] And (what means): "And We had certainly brought them a Book which We detailed by knowledge – as guidance and mercy to a people who believe." [Qur'an 7:52] And (what means): "And We send down of the Qur'an,

that which is healing and mercy for the believers, but it does not increase the wrongdoers except in loss." [Qur'an 17:82] And when Allah Almighty referred to the commission of our beloved Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, He said (what means): "And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds." [Qur'an 21:107]. Moreover, when the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said describing himself and listing his attributes: "I am the Prophet of mercy." [Al-Bukhari] There is no question that our beloved Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, possessed the highest forms of moral and human attributes. Among human beings, he, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, was the most generous, the most merciful, the most courageous, the 'most' and the 'best' of everything good in Islam, and as

described by his wife 'Aa'ishah, may Allah be pleased with her, his morals were the Qur'an. The question is: where does this leave us? Some people dismiss their shortcomings by saying: "I am not the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam", but where does it say that you have to be a prophet to be merciful, or to be generous, or to be anything for that matter? Granted, that no one can be compared to the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, or even hope to partially attain his high levels and standards, but that should not be an excuse for not following his example and striving to be the best Muslims that we can be.

There are many Prophetic narrations that refer to the deprivation of an individual from the very thing he deprives others from, or the rewards, in multiples, of that which he provides. Among these narrations are:

1. "Allah will not be Merciful to those who are not

merciful to mankind." [Al-Bukhari] 2. "Allah does not bestow His mercy except on the merciful among His slaves." [Al-Bukhari] 3. "Every good deed will be rewarded tenfold, up to seven hundred times, and Allah multiplies to whomever he wills." [Al-Bukhari and Muslim] 4. "Allah Says: Spend, o son of Aadam and I shall spend upon you." [Al-Bukhari and Muslim] There is no better time to start making positive changes in our lives than this blessed month. In Ramadan, many good things occur: the rewards are multiplied, the devils are chained, the gates of Hellfire are closed, and the gates of Paradise are opened. Every night of Ramadan, Allah redeems believers from the pains of Hellfire. It is the month of mercy, repentance, and charity. Use it or lose it!

Article source: <http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/>

Trade fair at Katara offers one-stop destination for Ramadan shoppers

By **Joey Aguilar**
Staff Reporter

The Tajheezat Shaban & Ramadan Trade Fair at Katara Cultural Village has become a one-stop destination for shoppers, as it is a vibrant marketplace filled with fashion, home décor, and culinary delights.

The free-entry event at Katara's south parking, running un-

til March 12, draws crowds from across Qatar and the other GCC countries. The fair is open from 10am to 10pm, Saturday through Thursday, and from 3pm to 10pm on Fridays.

Clothes are among the bestsellers, especially abayas and other modest apparel, giving eager shoppers to find the right outfits for Ramadan gatherings and celebrations.

Accessories are also proving

popular, with a diverse range of shoes, socks, jewellery, and bags available in various designs and styles.

Beyond fashion, the fair presents a selection of home decor items. High-quality carpets and unique decorative pieces are a major draw, reflecting a desire to refresh and beautify homes.

Adding to the allure, several shops showcasing beautifully-designed sandals for women are

attracting significant attention. A tempting array of food items, both local and international, is also a major highlight. Sweets, pickled products, dates, cakes, and pastries abound, offering customers a plethora of choices for their Ramadan tables.

Spices and nuts, including almonds, walnuts, and cashews, are also readily available, catering to those planning traditional Ramadan meals.



The Tajheezat Shaban & Ramadan Trade Fair at Katara's south parking is running until March 12. **PICTURES:** Joey Aguilar



Qatar's tech women leaders shine at Web Summit Qatar 2025

As International Women's Day follows on the heels of the recent Web Summit Qatar 2025, the Government Communications Office released a report shedding light on the influential women actively shaping Qatar's future through their expertise, vision and determination, building on Qatar's commitment to women's empowerment across sectors.

Leading discussions on Qatar's tech sector was Eman al-Kuwari, director of Digital Innovation at the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, who offered insights during the session 'From the Caucasus to the Gulf: A new digital excellence hub.'

She highlighted Qatar's approach to building digital partnerships that extend beyond tra-

ditional boundaries, emphasising the nation's strategic position in connecting diverse tech ecosystems and the various opportunities it provides to startups.

"Qatar has a rich story to tell, and it's not just about digital transformation, but how innovation is driving our social and economic development," said al-Kuwari while observing that technology is about solving real challenges and unlocking opportunities for the next generations.

On the occasion of Women's Day, she said: "Qatari women bring a very unique blend of cultural insight, resilience and forward-thinking leadership to the tech sector. We understand the needs of our communities while also having global exposure. This allows us to design solutions that are locally

relevant yet globally competitive. Our leadership style tends to emphasise on collaboration, inclusivity and long-term sustainability, and I think these are all critical factors in building an innovation ecosystem within the tech sector."

Speaking on the critical elements of success, Hessa al-Thani, head of Qatar & Mena's Professional Service Sector at the Qatar Financial Centre, emphasised the importance of having a holistic approach.

"Success in tech requires passion and a comprehensive understanding that goes beyond technology itself. You have to focus not just on tech, but also on environmental and social aspects as they all play significant roles in the industry."

Al-Thani, who took part in a

session on unlocking startups' potential, also credits her success to significant exposure and collaborations with ecosystem partners. "It's always about passed-on knowledge, learning from others, and connecting with the right people from each sector to understand their expectations."

"My advice to Qatari women is to broaden your knowledge about what's happening globally and listen to diverse perspectives, both locally and internationally," she added. Representing Qatar's fintech ecosystem was Thuraya al-Mulla, CEO of Receipts, a retail technology company delivering digital receipts to customers' wallets or banking apps. She described representing Qatar at the Paris Fintech Forum as one of her proudest achievements.

"While many regions are still fighting for women's empowerment, in Qatar, women have long been supported by their families and country," she stated. "Women are leading in all sectors, including technology and financial technology. We're innovating and taking on leadership roles across industries. I think the world should look to Qatar when it comes to women in power."

Shaikha al-Shaibi, founder of ByShelves, shared insights about her pioneering application that connects users with bookstores, stationery stores and educational resources. She acknowledged the evolving business landscape for women in Qatar, stating: "As a young startup, we've discovered massive opportunities to collaborate with ministries and govern-

ment entities that have helped us develop our ideas further. Initially, entering the business field was challenging, but with the country's new strategies, it's become much easier for us to develop in the innovation and technology sectors."

Reflecting on International Women's Day, al-Shaibi offered advice to aspiring women entrepreneurs: "Never give up and don't start big. Start small because baby steps always lead to bigger impact. Choose the right people, plan ahead, and have a concrete timeline for your business."

The second edition of Web Summit Qatar featured strong female representation, with women making up 37% of attendees and female-founded startups reaching 47% of participating ventures – a 50% jump from last year's event.

Indian student trio shine at Web Summit Qatar



Students win top prize in QRDI's innovators contest

Three Indian students won the top prize in the 'Rising Innovators Competition' hosted by the Qatar Research, Development, and Innovation Council (QRDI) at Web Summit Qatar 2025.

The artificial intelligence-powered logistics innovation, Modular Automated Sorting Hub (MASH), is designed to transform logistics operations by efficiently sorting documents and parcels.

The winning trio are Hanish Abdulla from Kuttiady, Kozhikode, Kerala (first-year Computer Science student, Leeds University, England); Jai Adhithya from Chennai, Tamil Nadu (first-year Electrical Engineering student, BITS Pilani, Dubai Campus); and Nihal Ashik from Thrissur, Kerala (first-year Mechanical Engineering student, University of Doha for Science and Technology).

Their project received critical support from DHL Qatar, which provided the necessary infrastructure to develop the technology. Dr Kishore Kumar, a scientist at the Centre for Advanced Materials and Mechanical Engineering, Qatar University, mentored the students, offering expert guidance and lab access.

Following their Web Summit victory, a Silicon Valley-based startup and a global logistics company have expressed interest in commercialising MASH, opening doors for international expansion.

Built on a scalable, stand-alone modular system, MASH enables fast, cost-effective, and AI-driven sorting of parcels and documents. The technology also has potential applications in



industries such as food, medical, and printing.

The trio had already made headlines last year while plus two students at Birla Public School, Doha when they co-authored the book *Become A Maker: An Introduction to Hobby Robotics*, now available in international libraries and on Amazon. Their next stop is ITEX 2025 in May in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where they have been invited and representing Qatar.



Qatari athlete inspires Doha College students

Mariam Mamdouh Farid delivers talk on power of sport, education and perseverance

Doha College welcomed Qatari athlete Mariam Mamdouh Farid (pictured) during Secondary Sports Week, where she delivered an inspiring talk to over 1,000 pupils about the power of sport, education, and perseverance.

Mariam represented her country at the 17th World Athletics Championships in Doha in 2019, competing in the Women's 400-metre hurdles. Her journey, marked by resilience and dedication, resonated deeply with the students as she shared her experiences of overcoming challenges and breaking barriers.

Speaking on the final day of the competition, Mariam emphasised the significant role sports have played in shaping her physical and mental strength. "Sports helped me physically, mentally, and changed so much in my personality that made me a better person," she said. "I believe there's a lot of challenges that I've tried to overcome, but I think they were beautiful challenges." Mariam encour-



aged students to make the most of Doha College's world-class facilities, using them as a springboard for success in all aspects of life.

"You need to finish your studies. You need to have a degree," she stressed, underscoring the necessity of education alongside athletic pursuits.

One of the most impactful messages Mariam shared was about perseverance and the importance of pushing past setbacks.

"To all Doha College students, we all have obstacles, we all go through difficult times," she said. "The experience of not succeed-

ing in something is the beginning of you succeeding. So I just want to tell every single person: never give up. Stay focused. Discipline and consistency will lead you to big dreams, to success."

Mariam also spoke about her role in breaking stereotypes, particularly as a female athlete representing Qatar on the international stage while wearing the hijab. "Breaking stereotypes of a woman who's covered, wearing a hijab, or from a different culture, from a different religion — this shows that anyone can achieve something on a high level, nationally or internationally."

Principal David Tongue said: "Mariam's visit was truly inspiring for our students. Her story of perseverance, dedication, and the balance between sports and education perfectly aligns with our values at Doha College. We are committed to providing our students with opportunities to learn from role models like Mariam, who exemplify the power of resilience and ambition."

MES staff unwind at beach outing



In an effort to promote camaraderie and relaxation among its staff, MES Indian School organised an outing to Simaisma Beach, enabling them to unwind and enjoy a day filled with fun and recreation. The initiative was spearheaded by principal Dr Hameeda Kadar, who emphasised the importance of fostering a strong bond among the teaching faculty. They took part in singing, dancing and various games. About 150 teachers participated in the event, which was planned and executed by Department of English co-ordinator and staff secretary Atheen Bahanan, Department of Physical Education co-ordinator Steeson K Mathew, school officials and staff secretaries of all the sections.

ICAI Doha chapter marks Qatar National Sport Day



The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) - Doha chapter, led by chairperson Kishore Alex and the newly appointed 2025 committee, kicked off their journey with a celebration of Qatar National Sport Day (QNSD). The event brought together over 80 members and their families. The highlights of the day included basketball training by former Indian national men's team captain C V Sunny, outdoor activities for all ages led by 365 MFC founder Shammias T K and medals for all participants. ICAI members residing in Qatar and aspiring to join the Doha chapter can contact Arun Somanath (5506 0695) or Rakesh Bahety (33259957).

Expat forum hosts traditional Tamil sports event in Qatar

The newly established Qatari Tamil Traditional Sports (QTTTS) organisation, in association with the Indian Sports Centre, hosted its inaugural event featuring Palankuzhi, Kabaddi, Kho Kho, Uriyadi, and Silambam.

QTTTS aims to revive and promote Tamil traditional sports among the younger generation in Qatar.

The event had over 300 participants. It is planned to hold an International Silambam Championship in Qatar on April 25, along with training programmes for Valaippandu (Ring Ball) and traditional Tamil musical instruments Thavil and Nadaswaram.

QTTTS president Pazhanikumar Gurusamy, vice-president Prem Kala Saravanan, general secretary Silambam Saravanan, joint secretary Muhammad Kamarudheen, treasurer Nirmal Chandrabose, traditional sports head Srinivasan, secretary Vasanth, arts and culture head Vengat Prabhu, secretary Dakshinamurthy, IT and media secretary Manimala Ilamurugan and sponsorship secretary Durai were present.



Philippine embassy awards winners in art competition



Philippine ambassador Mardomel Celso D Melicor with the winners.

The Philippine embassy in Doha, in collaboration with the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and the Filipino Arts Society, held an awards ceremony to recognise the top five winners of a recent art competition.

The contest, held from February 9-25 in celebration of Philippine National Arts Month, received 73 submissions from Filipino high school students in Qatar. Students creatively interpreted this year's

theme, "Ani ng Sining, Diwa, at Damdamin".

Philippine ambassador Mardomel Celso D Melicor expressed the embassy's gratitude for the enthusiastic participation of the Filipino students, noting that the majority of entries came from Philippine International School Qatar and Philippine School Doha.

A judging committee, led by visiting NCCA deputy executive director Marichu Tellano and members of the Filipino Arts Soci-

ety Joan Espinosa and Arsenio Nido, Jr, selected the winning artworks based on their scores. The top five artworks were: "Ablaze of Creativity: Celebrating Filipino Artistry" (1st place); "Asenso ng Pilipino" (2nd place); "Fruits of Labor" (3rd place); "Luningning" (4th place); and "Ang kakanyahan ng Pagkakakilanlan" (5th place).

Each winner received a token from the embassy and a certificate of membership to the Filipino Arts Society.



Trump offers nuclear talks with Iran

AFP
Washington

US President Donald Trump said yesterday that he has written to Iran, pressing for talks on preventing the development of nuclear weapons and warning it faces possible military action if not. Iran's foreign minister told AFP yesterday that the country would not negotiate so long as the US applies "maximum pressure," but he was not responding directly to Trump's letter. Tehran's mission to the UN told AFP that "we have not received such a letter so far." It was unclear by what means Trump's

missive was transmitted to Tehran. Trump's outreach marks a departure at least in tone from the headline stance that marked his first term and could cause a rift with close ally Israel, which last year carried out bombing strikes inside Iran. Trump said he wrote a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei telling him that a negotiated solution "will be a lot better for Iran." "I've written them a letter, saying I hope you're going to negotiate because if we have to go in militarily it's going to be a terrible thing for them," Trump told Fox Business in a clip broadcast yesterday. "You can't let them have a nu-

clear weapon." A landmark 2015 deal negotiated under former president Barack Obama — known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — imposed curbs on Iran's nuclear programme in return for sanctions relief. It fell apart after Trump withdrew the US from the agreement in 2018 in his first presidential term and reimposed sweeping sanctions. Tehran adhered to the deal until a year after Washington pulled out, but then began rolling back its commitments. Trump, who returned to the White House in January, said he was reinstating his "maximum pressure" policy of sanctions against Iran but that he was do-

ing so only reluctantly. He has since sidelined officials from his first term associated with his Iran policy, as Trump accuses Washington's foreign policy establishment of encouraging war. Trump's brash billionaire confidant Elon Musk was reported to have met Iran's ambassador to the UN shortly after the election to deliver a message that Trump wants calm and diplomacy. Iran has been cautious about a return to diplomacy since the collapse of the JCPOA. "We will not enter any direct negotiations with the US so long as they continue their maximum pressure policy and their threats," Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said yesterday.

Speaking on the sidelines of an Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC) meeting in Jeddah, Araghchi also warned that Iran's nuclear programme "cannot be destroyed through military operations." "This is a technology that we have achieved, and the technology is in the brains and cannot be bombed," he said. Araghchi was a key negotiator of the JCPOA, brokered by a then reformist government. But Khamenei, 85, is the ultimate decision-maker in Iran's clerical system and has pointed to the JCPOA as proof that the US is not trustworthy. Trump's outreach comes as Iran faces challenges not seen

since the 1979 revolution. Israel devastated Iranian air defences and has also pounded two fighter movements allied with Iran: Hamas, which carried out the unprecedented storming of Israel in October 2023, and also Lebanon's Hezbollah. Iran's main regional ally, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, fell in December to rebel fighters. Iran has consistently denied claims that it is pursuing nuclear weapons. Last month, UN atomic agency chief Rafael Grossi said Iran was enriching uranium at 60% — "almost weapon level" — and that the 2015 deal was an "empty shell" that was "no longer fit for purpose."

Adopted orphan brings couple 'paradise' in Gaza



Rami al-Arouq and his wife Iman Farhat interact with their newly-adopted five-month-old orphaned baby Jannah (paradise in Arabic), at their home in Gaza City.

AFP
Gaza City

In their home in war-devastated Gaza City, Iman Farhat and her husband cherish the "paradise" brought by their newly-adopted baby, one of many orphans in the Palestinian territory after more than 15 months of fighting between Israel and Hamas. Wrapping five-month-old Jannah in a brightly coloured blanket, Farhat gently sang as she rocked her to sleep. "I chose Jannah just as she was," the new mother said smiling, explaining the couple simply wanted to adopt a young child without preference for gender or physical appearance. "Her name was Massa, and I officially changed her name from Massa to Jannah," which means "paradise" in Arabic, she added. Farhat, 45, and her husband Rami al-Arouqi, 47, adopted the well-behaved and chubby baby in January. "At first, we had mixed feelings of both joy and fear, because it is a huge responsibility and we had never had a child," said Arouqi, a Palestinian Authority employee. The couple already owned a

cat. "The idea of adopting a child had crossed our minds, but it was cemented during the war" which "wiped out entire families and left only orphans," he added. In September, the United Nations children's fund, Unicef, estimated there were 19,000 children who were unaccompanied or separated from their parents in Gaza, said Jonathan Crickx, Unicef's spokesman for the Palestinian territories. Data for the number of adoptions in Gaza was not immediately available. The war sparked by Palestinian Hamas group's October 2023 storming of Israel left more than 69% of Gaza's buildings damaged or destroyed, displaced almost the entire population and triggered widespread hunger, according to the United Nations. Israel's retaliatory military offensive has killed at least 48,446 people in Gaza, the majority of them civilians, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry. The UN considers these figures reliable. Farhat and her husband said that before Jannah's adoption, she was taken care of by the SOS Children's Villages — an international NGO which looks after

children in need. After the NGO's premises in the southern Gaza city of Rafah were destroyed in the war, the organisation had to move to nearby Khan Yunis where "they could not house all the children in buildings, so they set up tents for them," Farhat said. Her husband Arouqi said that another motive for adopting a child came from the idea that "Palestinians should stand by each other's side." "The whole world has abandoned and let us down, so we shouldn't let each other down," he added. Once the pair took Jannah home, "our life was turned upside down in a beautiful and pleasant way," he said. "Her name is Jannah and our world has truly become a paradise." A fragile truce took effect on January 19, largely halting the devastating fighting between Israel and Hamas Palestinian fighters. The ceasefire's first phase ended last weekend. While Israel has said it wants to extend the first phase until mid-April, Hamas has insisted on a transition to the deal's second phase, which should lead to a permanent end to the war.

GCC seeks to integrate informal businesses for inclusive growth

QNA
Geneva

The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) stressed yesterday its countries' keenness to integrate informal businesses into the formal economy, as part of their comprehensive strategies for economic development. This came in a statement delivered by the Permanent Representative of Kuwait to the UN and other international organisations in Geneva ambassador Al Hain, in his capacity as Chair of the Council of Ambassadors of the GCC countries, during the 58th session of the UN Human Rights Council held in Geneva within the framework of the interactive dialogue

on the right to work and social security. Ambassador Al Hain highlighted the great importance that the GCC countries attach to ensuring labour rights and social security for all workers in line with the national and economic contexts of each country. He said that the GCC countries are keen to strengthen the formal economy in a way that contributes to achieving economic growth, financial stability and enhances social inclusion by providing social and economic services to all segments of society. He noted that the governments of the GCC countries have taken many measures to facilitate the process of integrating the informal sector, including simplifying the procedures for registering small projects, strengthening tax

systems, and promoting digital solutions that contribute to improving transparency and facilitating access to financial services. He stated that the GCC countries have established strong regulatory frameworks to protect workers from discrimination, exploitation and violations, and to ensure that they are treated with dignity and justice regardless of their employment status. In this context, ambassador Al Hain underlined the commitment of the GCC countries to support international efforts to achieve sustainable development goals, reduce inequalities and enhance access to basic services, stressing the need for policies to integrate the informal sector to take into account the national specificities of each country.

Scores killed as Syrian forces seek to crush insurgency

Reuters
Damascus

Syrian security forces battled for a second day yesterday to crush a nascent insurgency by fighters from Bashar al-Assad's Alawite sect, with scores reported killed as the government faced the biggest challenge yet to its authority. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that more than 130 people had been killed in two days of violence in the coastal region of western Syria, which is heavily populated by the members of the Alawite minority. They included at least two dozen male residents of the Alawite town of Al Mukhtareyah killed by gunmen yesterday, the Observatory and two Alawite activists said, citing contacts in the region and video footage from the scene. Syrian authorities said the violence began when remnants loyal to ousted leader Assad launched a deadly and well-planned attack on their forces on Thursday. The violence has shaken interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa's efforts to consolidate control as his administration struggles to get US sanctions lifted and grapples with wider security challenges, notably in the southwest, where Israel has said it will prevent Damascus from deploying forces. Syrians took to the streets to rally in support of the government

UN envoy 'deeply alarmed' by clashes, killings

The UN envoy for Syria voiced alarm yesterday at reports of clashes and killings in coastal areas between Syrian caretaker authority forces and elements loyal to toppled president Bashar al-Assad's regime, AFP reported from Geneva.

"While the situation remains fluid and we are still determining the precise facts, there is clearly an immediate need for restraint from all parties," Geir Pedersen said in a statement. He also called for "full respect for the protection of civilians in accordance with international law". His comment came after the fiercest attacks on the new

authorities since Assad was ousted in December. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 147 people have been killed since the clashes erupted on Thursday along the country's western coast.

Pedersen said he was "deeply alarmed" by the reports emerging from the area, decrying in particular "very troubling reports of civilian casualties".

"All parties should refrain from actions that could further inflame tensions, escalate conflict, exacerbate the suffering of affected communities, destabilise Syria, and jeopardise a credible and inclusive political transition."

in Damascus and other major cities, while Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both allies of the government, also signalled their backing. Images from Al Mukhtareyah showed at least 20 men lying in close proximity — some bloodied — by the side of a road in the town centre. Reuters was able to verify the location in the video, but not when it was filmed or by whom. The two Alawite activists, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, said the killings were yesterday and blamed them on gunmen affiliated with the ruling authorities. A government spokesperson and two officials linked to the rul-

ing authority did not immediately respond to text messages seeking comment. Syrian state news agency SANA, citing a security source, said "individual violations" had been perpetrated after large, unorganised crowds had headed to the coastal region following the attacks on government security personnel. "We are working to stop these violations," the source said, without giving details. The violence spiralled on Thursday when the authorities said groups of Assad-aligned militias targeted security patrols and checkpoints in the Jableh area and surrounding countryside, before spreading more widely.

CRIME Three dead in S Africa restaurant shooting

Three people were shot dead in an altercation over firearms at an upmarket restaurant in South Africa's economic hub Johannesburg, police said yesterday, AFP reported from Johannesburg. It is the latest in a string of shootouts that reinforces the country's bleak status as a murder capital. Thursday night's incident was sparked when the restaurant in Sandton — Africa's richest square mile — told a businessman they did not allow guns on its premises. "A man with a firearm wanted to enter the restaurant which has a no firearm policy," police said in a statement. "That is when the altercation started leading to a shooting between the man's bodyguards and securities."

Kenyan president and opposition veteran sign political deal

AFP
Nairobi

Kenyan President William Ruto signed a political co-operation deal with his former arch-rival Raila Odinga yesterday in a bid to boost his presidency after months of turmoil. Ruto's popularity has been dwindling after plans for new taxes sparked massive youth-led protests last year that saw at least 60 people killed, according to rights groups. The protests plunged Ruto's government into a crisis, forcing him to join forces with Odinga to form a "broad-based government" last year with several members of his party. They formalised that partnership yesterday, vowing to work together on the country's many challenges including its ballooning debt and cor-



Kenyan President William Ruto shakes hands with former arch-rival and veteran politician Raila Odinga (left), in Nairobi, yesterday.

ruption. Odinga is the perennial runner-up of Kenyan politics, having unsuccessfully run for the presidency five times. The deal "is to help ease the prevailing tension in the country," the 80-year-old said in a speech.

REQUEST South Sudan president appeals for calm after UN helicopter attack

South Sudan's president appealed for calm and pledged his country would "not go back to war", after a UN helicopter was attacked and a crew member killed on a rescue mission yesterday, AFP reported from Juba. A fragile power-sharing agreement between President Salva Kiir and First Vice-President Riek Machar has been threatened in recent weeks by clashes between their allied forces in the northeastern Upper Nile State. The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) said its team was attempting to extract members of the South Sudanese army from the area when their helicopter came under fire, killing a crew member and seriously injuring two others.

OUTRAGE Senator suspended over harassment claim

A lawmaker in Nigeria has been suspended from her office after she complained of physical harassment by the Senate president, sparking protests and condemnation from feminist groups, AFP reported from Abuja. Senator Natasha Akpoti Uduaghan accused the legislative body's president, Godswill Akpabio, of making unwanted advances towards her in an interview with Nigerian media last week and filed a petition against him. She was then suspended for six months, a move that was justified over an earlier argument that erupted in the Senate chambers about a change in her seating arrangement.

Democrat-led states join legal fight over mass firings of federal staffs

New York's attorney-general and 19 others filed a lawsuit on Thursday night against the Trump administration's mass firings of some federal workers, the first entry of states into the legal fight over the president's efforts to slash the bureaucracy.

The lawsuit in Maryland federal court – filed jointly with California, Arizona, Colorado and other Democrat-led states – alleges that President Donald Trump illegally fired tens of thousands of federal workers.

It asks the court to reinstate those workers and halt the administration from firing additional employees illegally.

Trump, a Republican, faces additional lawsuits by fired federal workers and has suffered recent legal setbacks as he and Tesla chief executive Elon Musk engage in a lightning campaign to root out what they describe as fraud and waste in government.

In their complaint on Thursday, the states allege the Trump administration violated laws and regulations for laying off federal workers by failing to notify them in advance and firing them without justification.

"The Trump administration's illegal mass firings of federal workers are a slap in the face to those who have spent their careers serving our country," New York Attorney-General Letitia said in a statement.

A judge overseeing a similar case on February 27 temporarily barred the Trump administration from directing the US Department of Defence and other agencies to fire new hires en masse.

And on March 6, a judge reinstated a Democratic member of the National Labour Relations Board fired by Trump.

The next day, a board that oversees the federal workforce reinstated thousands of fired workers at the US Department of Agriculture. – **Reuters**

US ends collective bargaining for 50,000 TSA officers

The Trump administration said yesterday that it is ending collective bargaining for about 50,000 Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers that staff checkpoints at US airports and other transportation hubs.

American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) president Everett Kelley called the decision "clear retaliation" because the "union has been out in front challenging this administration's unlawful actions targeting federal workers, both in the legal courts and in the court of public opinion".

The AFGE has challenged a number of actions by the Elon Musk-led DOGE team to cut the federal workforce.

The Homeland Security Department said the move will remove bureaucratic hurdles.

The AFGE said the department had made "false claims" about the number of transportation workers performing union duties.

On January 20 President Donald Trump forced out TSA administrator David Pekoske,

whom he had named to the job in 2017 and was reappointed by former president Joe Biden.

Trump has not yet named a candidate to replace Pekoske.

The TSA reached a new seven-year labour deal in May 2024 with the AFGE after nearly a year of negotiations.

The Biden administration expanded the scope of bargaining permitted in 2022 with TSA workers.

Workers got enhanced shift trade options, increased allowance for uniforms and the addition of parental bereavement leave and weather and safety leave as part of the labour deal.

The Homeland Security Department declined to answer if it planned to continue to honour any provisions of the existing contract.

Representative Bennie Thompson, top Democrat on the House Homeland Security Committee, said "attempting to negate their legally binding collective bargaining agreement now makes zero sense – it will only reduce morale and hamper the workforce". – **Reuters**

Columbia University loses \$400mn in grants, contracts

US President Donald Trump's administration has cancelled grants and contracts totalling \$400mn to Columbia University in New York City due to "inaction in the face of persistent harassment of Jewish students", the General Services Administration (GSA) said yesterday.

The US government said the cancelled funds would come out of \$5bn in grants committed to Columbia, the GSA said in a joint statement with the Department of Justice, the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Columbia has been at the centre of college protests in which demonstrators demanded an end to US support for Israel due to the civilian deaths and humanitarian crisis caused by Israel's assault on Gaza. There were allegations of antisemitism and Islamophobia in protests and counter-protests.

"Cancelling these taxpayer funds is our strongest signal yet that the federal government is not going to be party to an educational institution like Columbia that does not protect Jewish students and staff," said Leo Terrell, who leads the Justice Department's antisemitism task force.

It was not unclear which grants and contracts were being cut. – **Reuters**

Canada Liberals vote to replace Trudeau as PM

AFP
Ottawa

Canada's Liberal Party elects a new leader this weekend to replace Justin Trudeau (**pictured**) as prime minister and take charge of confronting the threats posed by US President Donald Trump.

Trudeau, who became Liberal leader in 2013 before taking over as prime minister two years later, announced in early January that he planned to resign, overcome by dismal polling numbers and internal party dissent.

Before Christmas, the opposition Conservatives looked certain to win a general election that must be held by October but could be called within weeks.

Trade chaos with the United States and Trump's repeated musing about annexing Canada have upended the political climate and surveys show the Liberals gaining ground.

"The context is completely unprecedented. Right now the only thing that matters to Canadians is 'who is the right person to take on Donald Trump?'" Frederic Boily of the University of Alberta told AFP.

Four candidates qualified to run in the Liberal leadership race but only two are seen as viable contenders.

The front-runner is Mark Carney, who led the Bank of Canada before becoming the first non-Briton to serve as governor of the Bank of England.

His main challenger is Chrystia Freeland, Trudeau's former finance minister who dramatically broke with the prime minister in December, issuing a scathing resignation letter



that partly pushed him to resign.

Both Carney and Freeland have anchored their campaigns on the Trump threat.

Carney, who has never held elected office, has sought to remind Liberal party voters that he led Canada's central bank through the 2008-09 financial crisis and steered the Bank of England through the turbulence that followed the Brexit vote.

"Canada faces one of the most serious crises in our history. I know how to manage crises and I know how to build strong economies," he said during a leadership debate.

Freeland has warned that Trump "is posing the gravest challenge our country has faced since the Second World War" and highlighted her experience negotiating directly with Trump's first administration.

The winner of the Liberal leadership race will be announced in Ottawa tomorrow.

The party says that 400,000 people have signed up to vote and boasted of unprecedented fundraising in recent weeks.

Trudeau declined this week to give a precise date for when he would hand over power, telling reporters that he would work out transition timelines with the new Liberal leader.

Trump mulls Russia sanctions until Ukraine peace is reached

Reuters/AFP
Washington/Kyiv

US President Donald Trump has raised the prospect of imposing large-scale US sanctions on Russia, days after pausing military aid and intelligence support to Ukraine, and he called on both countries to get on with negotiating a peace deal.

Trump's threat of banking curbs and tariffs followed a Reuters report on Monday that the White House was preparing to give Russia possible sanctions relief as part of the push to end the war and improve diplomatic and economic ties with Moscow.

"Based on the fact that Russia is absolutely 'pounding' Ukraine on the battlefield right now, I am strongly considering large-scale Banking Sanctions, Sanctions, and Tariffs on Russia until a Cease Fire and FINAL SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT ON PEACE IS REACHED," Trump said on his social media platform. "To Russia and Ukraine, get to the table right now, before it is too late. Thank you!!!"

Russian forces have almost surrounded thousands of Ukrainian troops who stormed into Russia's Kursk region last summer in a shock incursion which Kyiv had hoped to use as leverage over Moscow in any peace talks.

Ukraine's position in Kursk has deteriorated sharply in the last three days, open source maps show.

The Russian counteroffensive has nearly cut the Ukrainian force in two and separated the main group from its principal supply lines.

"The situation (for Ukraine in Kursk) is very bad," Pasi Paroinen, a military analyst with the Finland-based Black Bird Group, told Reuters.

There was no official confirmation of the Russian thrust from either Russia or Ukraine, which both tend to report battlefield developments with a delay.

Russian forces also damaged energy and gas infrastructure inside Ukraine overnight in their



This file picture shows Putin with Trump during the latter's first presidency.

first major missile attack since the US paused intelligence sharing with Ukraine.

Ten people, including a child, were injured, Ukrainian officials said.

President Volodymyr Zelensky, seeking to shore up Western support for Ukraine after the apparent US diplomatic pivot towards Moscow, responded to the attack by calling for a truce covering air and sea.

"The first steps to establishing real peace should be forcing the sole source of this war, Russia, to stop such attacks," Zelensky said on the Telegram messaging app.

Moscow has rejected the idea of a temporary truce, which has also been proposed by Britain and France, and said it would never let peacekeepers from North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) countries into Ukraine, after the two countries suggested a European force could police any permanent settlement.

Russia, one of the world's biggest oil producers, is already subject to wide-ranging sanctions imposed by the United States and partners after Moscow invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

US sanctions on Russia include measures aimed at limiting its oil and gas revenues, including a cap of \$60 per barrel on Russia's oil exports.



Debris is seen streaking through the sky after SpaceX's Starship spacecraft tumbled and exploded in space, in Big Sampson Kay, Bahamas, in this screen grab obtained from social media video.

– **Reuters**

Moon mission confirmed over for private US lander

Intuitive Machines' second moon mission ended in disappointment yesterday after its spacecraft tipped over and was left unable to recharge its solar-powered batteries, mirroring the US company's first attempt last year.

It marked a premature conclusion to a mission that had sparked excitement in the space community, thanks to its cutting-edge payloads, including a futuristic hopping drone, multiple rovers, an ice drill, and a 4G network test.

Houston-based Intuitive Machines (IM) had hoped to make history with Athena, a hexagonal lander roughly the height of a giraffe, designed to touch down on a spot called the Mons Mouton plateau, closer to the lunar south pole than any mission before.

However, after blasting off last week aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket and travelling more than 1mn km through space, the spacecraft came to rest inside a crater, 250m from its intended target, face down on the lunar surface. – **AFP**

SpaceX faces new setback following Starship explosion

Elon Musk's SpaceX once again lost the upper stage of its massive Starship rocket in a fiery explosion on Thursday, even as the booster was successfully caught in its orbital test – a near replay of the previous attempt.

Starship was aiming to make nearly a full orbit around Earth and re-enter over the Indian Ocean for a splashdown, simulating a landing sequence that SpaceX wants to soon carry out on land as a key next phase of the rocket's development.

Minutes after liftoff and booster separation, a live video feed showed the upper stage tumbling uncontrollably before the signal abruptly cut.

Dramatic footage circulating online showed red-hot debris raining down over the Bahamas.

"During Starship's ascent burn, the vehicle experienced a rapid unscheduled disassembly and contact was lost," SpaceX said in a statement. "Our team immediately began co-ordination with safety officials to implement pre-planned contingency responses."

"Can confirm we did lose contact with the ship. Unfortunately, this happened last time, too," SpaceX spokesman Dan Huot said, referring to January's flight, which also ended with the upper stage disintegrating over the Caribbean.

The fallout immediately impacted US airspace.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) briefly activated a "debris response area", delaying flights from airports stretching from Newark and Philadelphia to Miami.

The FAA issued ground stops for aircraft departing for four Florida airports – Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Orlando and Palm Beach – that lasted for just over an hour.

The FAA said the incident resulted in 171 departure delays, 28 flights were diverted, and 40 airborne flights were held an average of 22 minutes while the agency's Debris Response Area was active.

The agency confirmed SpaceX will be required to conduct an investigation before it can fly again.

SpaceX said in a statement that an "energetic event in the aft portion of Starship" had "resulted in the loss of several Raptor engines".

"This in turn led to ... ultimately a loss of communications with Starship," it said, adding there were "no toxic materials present in the debris".

"We will conduct a thorough investigation, in co-ordination with the FAA, and implement corrective actions"

Despite the setback, SpaceX's "fail fast, learn fast" approach has helped it become the world's dominant launch services provider.

However, Musk's status as one of President Donald Trump's closest

advisers, and his influence over federal regulators, are raising concerns about potential conflicts of interest.

Starship – the world's largest and most powerful rocket – lifted off from SpaceX's Starbase facility in Boca Chica, Texas, shortly after 5.30pm (2330 GMT).

It marked its eighth uncrewed orbital test, after launch attempts were scrubbed on Monday and Wednesday.

While the upper stage was lost for a second consecutive flight, SpaceX successfully recovered the Super Heavy booster, catching it with the launch tower's mechanical "chopstick" arms for the third time – an impressive feat of engineering.

About 40 minutes after launch, SpaceX ended its livestream, without providing further details.

Standing 403' (123m) tall – about 100' taller than the Statue of Liberty – Starship is designed to eventually be fully reusable and is key to Musk's long-term vision of colonising Mars.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) is also awaiting a modified version of Starship as a lunar lander for its Artemis programme, which aims to return astronauts to the Moon this decade.

However, before SpaceX can carry out those missions, it must prove the vehicle is reliable, safe for crew, and capable of complex in-orbit refuelling – critical for deep space missions.

The FAA previously grounded Starship after its January 16 flight ended in an upper-stage explosion.

Last Friday, the agency allowed SpaceX to proceed with this latest test before finalising its investigation into that explosion.

During Joe Biden's presidency, Musk frequently clashed with the FAA, accusing it of over-regulating SpaceX over safety and environmental concerns.

Now, as Trump's chief adviser on cost-cutting initiatives, Musk faces scrutiny over his influence on federal agencies overseeing his companies.

According to Bloomberg News, a SpaceX engineer recently visited FAA headquarters, warning employees their jobs were at risk if they did not begin work on a programme to deploy thousands of the company's Starlink satellite terminals in support of the national airspace system.

Telecom giant Verizon holds a contract to upgrade the FAA's infrastructure, but that deal could be in jeopardy, Bloomberg reported.

SpaceX has denied the allegations, stating "recent media reports about SpaceX and the FAA are false". – **AFP/Reuters**



COMMENT

UK must reform welfare to cut costs: finance minister

Britain's finance minister said the UK's welfare system is "costing too much" and must be reformed. Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves is expected to cut spending on welfare by billions of pounds in the government's Spring Statement on March 26, a follow up to her inaugural budget last October, according to reports. "We've got to reform our welfare system, because at the moment, it's letting down taxpayers because it's costing too much," Reeves said on Sky News' Electoral Dysfunction podcast. She said that the system is "letting down our economy" and leaves people "trapped on benefits, rather than actively supported back into work".

LEGAL

Water firms fight off \$1.9bn lawsuits over sewage pollution

Six British water companies defeated mass lawsuits valued at over \$1.9bn for allegedly under-reporting sewage discharges and overcharging millions of customers. The utilities companies were accused of misleading industry regulator Ofwat about the number of pollution incidents. Environmental and water consultant Carolyn Roberts brought the case, which was the first environmental competition law action to be brought in the United Kingdom. But the six companies – which also include Anglian Water, Northumbrian Water, Severn Trent, United Utilities and Yorkshire Water – argued the cases should be thrown out at a hearing in September.

CO-OPERATION

Manila set to sign visiting forces deal with Canada

The Philippines and Canada have negotiated a deal for the deployment of troops, Manila said, in what will be once signed the latest security pact in the face of confrontations with China. Manila's defence department said it and Canada had "concluded negotiations", but gave no timetable for when a deal would be signed. "This agreement will establish a framework for increased co-operation", the statement read, saying it would foster "closer collaboration between defence and military establishments". The deal "underscored the Philippines' commitment to bolstering international partnerships and promoting regional security", it added.

PEOPLE

Japanese barber, 108, crowned world's oldest

A 108-year-old Japanese woman has been certified the world's oldest barber, Guinness World Records said – and she has pledged to keep working until at least 110. Shitsui Hakoishi, born in 1916, decided to become a barber at the age of 14 when a friend's mother asked if she wanted to become an apprentice at a hair salon in Tokyo. She still holds her own scissors, and took part this week in a celebration ceremony reportedly attended by her two children, an 85-year-old daughter and an 81-year-old son. "I'm very happy. My heart is full," she said at the ceremony in Nakagawa, a town in Tochigi.

Beijing taking independence crackdown overseas: Taiwan

Reuters
Taipei

Taiwan is considering warning citizens about risks of travelling to countries with strong ties to China, such as Laos and Cambodia, as they could be caught up in Beijing's campaign against Taiwan independence supporters, according to a senior Taiwan official and an internal memo. China, which claims Taiwan as its own despite the island's rejection, issued guidelines last year to punish "diehard" Taiwan independence activists, including with the death penalty, even though Chinese courts have no jurisdiction on the island.

Late last month, a senior Chinese official gave closed-door instructions to state security units to "implement" the guidelines in countries friendly to China, according to a government memo reviewed by Reuters and a senior Taiwan security official. Both cited intelligence gathered by Taipei for that assessment.

China's Taiwan Affairs Office and foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In a statement, Taiwan's foreign ministry said China had tried to use the guidelines to "shackle" Taiwan's democracy and freedom. The ministry said it had asked its overseas offices to monitor and assess related risks and would boost public awareness on travel safety.

Taiwan security agencies have been looking at whether to raise the alert level for travel to certain countries for its citizens, the official said. Reuters was not able to establish whether any decision had been made on the alert or the countries for which that review was underway.

Taiwanese in Cambodia, Laos and some unspecified African nations could risk being taken in for investigation on suspicion of backing independence, the official said, citing Taiwan's assessment of the development and speaking on condition of anonymity.

"They might be taken for questioning by the local or Chinese police there, at least to psychologically intimidate them," the official said.

The foreign ministries in Cambodia and Laos did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Taiwan has concluded that some countries, including some in Southeast Asia, have declined to co-operate with China's request, the official said.

Taiwan has complained of a pattern of ramped-up pressure by China in recent years, including military actions, trade sanctions and coast guard patrols around Taiwan-controlled islands next to China.

Beijing's guidelines issued in June instructed China's courts, prosecutors and state security agents to "severely punish Taiwan independence diehards" for what it called "secession."

Bangladesh police disperse rally by banned group



Bangladeshi police personnel baton-charge to disperse members of banned group Hizb ut-Tahrir during a rally outside the National Mosque Baitul Mukarram in Dhaka yesterday. Bangladeshi police fired tear gas to disperse the group after pledging to take a zero tolerance approach to the hardline outfit.

S Korea court paves way for President Yoon's jail release

Reuters
Seoul

A South Korean court cancelled impeached President Yoon Suk-yeol's arrest warrant yesterday, potentially paving the way for his release from jail while he faces trial on revolt charges over a brief imposition of martial law.

The Seoul Central District Court said in a statement that its ruling was based on the timing of the indictment that came after the initial detention period had expired, and noted "questions about the legality" of the investigation process that involved two separate agencies.

The ruling did not dismiss the criminal charges that led to Yoon's arrest on January 15, and the case is separate from his impeachment, which is still pending before the Constitutional Court.

Both were triggered by his December 3 martial law declaration that also led to the impeachment of the prime minister, who had taken over as acting president.

South Korea's Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok is now acting head of state, and has sought to calm economic markets and reassure international partners amid chaos in government leadership. Yoon's lawyers and his presidential office welcomed the district court decision, saying it showed the case against Yoon had been pursued for political purposes with no legal justification. "The court's decision to cancel the arrest

showed this country's rule of law is still alive," Yoon's lawyers said in a statement.

Yoon's lawyers called for his immediate release, though conceded he may not be immediately freed because prosecutors could appeal.

The prosecutors' office did not immediately comment on the ruling.

Protesters, both in support of and against Yoon, soon gathered in Seoul following the court decision.

"It will move the hearts of the public. Our president has suffered so much," Lee Yoon-nam, a 44-year-old pro-Yoon protester, said.

Yoo Seong-min, a 31-year-old anti-Yoon protester, said he came out to protest because "anger shot through" his head.

Tooth brushing lessons for children as UK battles dental care crisis

England yesterday launched a national campaign to teach children in schools and nurseries how to brush their teeth properly, as the nation grapples with a dental health crisis. Up to six in 10 children in some deprived areas have rotting teeth by the age of five, according to official data. Concern over the state of children's teeth comes amid a population-wide emergency in dental services that has seen people resorting to "Victorian-era" solutions such as pulling out their own teeth. "1 in 5 five-year-olds have tooth decay in the UK," Prime Minister Keir Starmer said on X as the scheme – expected to reach 600,000 children aged between three and five years – was rolled out. The British Dental Association says around 12mn people are currently looking for an NHS dentist providing free care as increasing numbers of practitioners turn their backs on the NHS in favour of more lucrative private practice.

Three dead in Indonesia floods



Residents gather items they can salvage in Sukabumi, West Java yesterday, after a flash flood hit the area. Floods and landslides on Indonesia's main island of Java killed three people and left five more missing after heavy rains inundated two dozen towns, an official said yesterday. Torrential rains this week hit capital Jakarta and its surrounding cities, forcing thousands of residents to evacuate and authorities to use weather modification technology.

Sri Lanka signs \$2.5bn debt deal with Japan

AFF
Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday signed a deal with Japan to restructure \$2.5bn in loans, marking the first agreement with official creditors who had pledged debt relief to the cash-strapped nation last year.

Japan said it was granting concessions on a 369.45bn yen (\$2.5bn) loan under a comprehensive debt treatment plan, which the International Monetary Fund considers essential for Sri Lanka's economic recovery.

"The development of Sri Lanka, which is located at a strategic point in the Indian Ocean, is essential for the stability and prosperity of the entire Indo-Pacific region," the Japanese foreign ministry said in a statement. "Japan intends to further con-

tribute to the sustainable development of Sri Lanka."

Colombo's finance ministry said Tokyo had played a "pivotal role" in helping Sri Lanka restructure its debt. "Its leadership, commitment, and constructive engagement have been instrumental in helping Sri Lanka navigate the challenges of economic recovery," the ministry said.

Sri Lanka announced last June that it had reached an understanding with all its bilateral lenders to delay repayments until 2028. Formal agreements were delayed due to protracted negotiations, making yesterday's deal with Japan the first with an official creditor of the nation.

China remains Sri Lanka's largest bilateral lender, accounting for \$4.66bn of the \$10.58bn borrowed from other nations. Japan is the second-largest, with just over \$2.5bn in loans.

UK court cuts longest jail terms on activists

AFF
London

British court yesterday cut some of the heaviest jail terms imposed on climate activists for their high-profile protests, but threw out appeals from 10 others to have their prison sentences overturned.

The groups Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion have in recent years carried out spectacular, often disruptive protests, including stopping London's busy traffic and targeting famous places and paintings, as part of their campaign to

highlight climate change. But last July, five activists were stunned after being sentenced to between four and five years in prison for planning in an online call to block the M25 motorway around London, a key transport link for the capital.

They were among 16 activists who appealed their jail terms before the Court of Appeal in London in January.

In her ruling yesterday, Lady Chief Justice Sue Carr cut the heaviest jail term of five years imposed on Roger Hallam, 58, a co-founder of Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion, for the conspiracy case to four years.

Two other co-accused in that case had their sentences shortened from four years to three, with two others seeing their four-year terms reduced to 30 months.

One of the oldest activists, Gaie Delap, 78, also saw her sentence shortened from 20 to 18 months, for scaling one of the gantries on the M25. In the January appeal, defence lawyers had called the sentences imposed against all 16 activists involved in four separate protests "manifestly excessive".

The group also included two women who threw tomato soup on Vincent van Gogh's "Sunflowers" painting at London's National Gallery. Their sentences of 20 months

and two years were upheld in yesterday's ruling. Lawyer Danny Friedman said in January that the collective prison terms of between 15 months to five years were "the highest of their kind in modern British history". The activists "did what they did out of sacrifice" and were acting in the "best interests of the public, the planet and future generations," he said, asking for the jail terms to be reduced or quashed. But prosecutors argued the sentences had been merited as "all of these applicants went so far beyond what was reasonable".

Their actions also presented an "extreme danger" to the public and to themselves, they said.

The hearing has been closely watched amid fears that peaceful protest risks being stifled in Britain.

And NGOs and activists have warned the case could have far-reaching implications for future protests.

"Despite some modest reductions, these sentences are still unprecedented and they still have no place in a democracy that upholds the right to protest," said Greenpeace co-executive director Areeba Hamid.

Friends of the Earth lawyer Katie de Kauwe said in a statement the group was "pleased" that some of the sentences had been reduced.

But she added "ultimately however, we believe that locking up those motivated by their genuine concern for the climate crisis is neither right or makes any sense".

Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion launched their protests to fight the use of fossil fuels, which scientists say are causing global warming and climate change.

But the groups, which are urging the government to ban fossil fuel use by 2030, have attracted criticism over their eye-catching methods.

Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth had backed what they called "a critically important legal appeal over the right to protest".

L&T bets on space exploration as India expands private rocket industry

Reuters
Bengaluru

The Indian industrial conglomerate Larsen & Toubro said it is betting on aerospace as a potential growth engine, including launch vehicle and satellite manufacturing, as the country cuts reliance on imports and boosts private participation.

L&T, considered a bellwether

for India's infrastructure spending because of how many industries its work touches, is the country's largest private-sector defence manufacturer by revenue; its Precision Engineering and Systems unit posted revenue of Rs46.10bn (\$548.3mn) in the 2024 fiscal year, up 41% from the previous year.

At its factory in Coimbatore, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, L&T is assembling the country's first privately built Polar

Satellite Launch Vehicle, a mainstay of ISRO's launch programme, through a consortium with Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. It is also building equipment for ISRO's other deep space exploration programmes.

The company hopes to scale up its space business amid India's privatisation push, which has eased foreign investment limits and allocated a larger share of procurement budgets away from state-run

enterprises. "We have decades of experience in high-tech manufacturing, critical systems, and scaling up production. The same expertise applies to aerospace," AT Ramchandani, senior vice-president and head of L&T's Precision Engineering and Systems, said in an interview at the factory. He said the global launch vehicle market was expected to hit about \$160bn over the next decade. The Indian government has set a target of reach-

ing \$44bn for the country's commercial space sector in that time. India's space sector is valued at \$13bn, according to a February report by research firm DAM Capital.

L&T's plans intersect with India's strategy to position the country as a leading space power, with Prime Minister Modi's government pushing for the industry to become a force for further economic growth.

The country hopes liberalised regulations allowing private firms

to design, build and operate launch services will attract global players, mirroring the commercial space boom seen in the US and Europe.

The first launch of a privately built PSLV booster, delayed from early 2025, is expected to occur by mid-year, though an exact date had not yet been decided, Ramchandani said. Each rocket, several of which were in various stages of assembly in the factory, costs about \$30mn.

RBI set to ask lenders to tighten gold loan processes

Reuters
Mumbai/New Delhi

India's central bank plans to ask lenders to follow stricter underwriting processes for gold loans and monitor the end-use of funds as it tries to cool growth in the fast-growing segment, seven people, including industry sources and those aware of the regulator's thinking, said.

The Reserve Bank of India wants banks and non-banks to also bolster background checks on borrowers and ascertain the ownership of the gold that is being mortgaged, according to the sources, who did not want to be identified as they are not allowed to speak to the media.

"The Reserve Bank of India wants to ensure that the entities are following a standard protocol and any growth in the gold loan sector is not out of bounds," one of the sources aware of the central bank's thinking, said.

"It wants to make sure that any unethical business practices are curbed and financial stability is protected."

The RBI did not immediately reply to a e-mail seeking comment.

Since September 2024, banks' gold loans have been rising by 50%, sharply outpacing the growth in overall loans, bolstered in part by tighter norms for unsecured lending.

In India, the world's second-

biggest consumer of the precious metal, households typically buy gold during festivals and weddings. Record prices make gold loans more attractive.

In September, the central bank said it found several irregular practices in the gold loan industry and asked lenders to comprehensively review their lending processes to identify and address regulatory lapses.

The RBI has identified shortcomings in the sourcing of loans as well as the appraisal and gold valuation and "not all entities are following the standardised rules", a source aware of the central bank's thinking said.

In audits conducted over the last 12-to-16 months, the RBI found irregularities in the portfolios of non-bank lenders and weaknesses in monitoring the amount of funds that can be lent against gold, two of the sources said.

It also found that fintech agents of banks were collecting gold, storing and weighing it, tasks that lenders are meant to handle, one of the industry sources said.

Lenders were also auctioning gold without informing borrowers who had defaulted, the person said.

The regulator aims to treat all lenders uniformly to ensure no entity bypasses regulations, including for gold auctions and monitoring use of the loaned money through receipts, a second industry source said.

Belgian Economic Mission to India visits Navi Mumbai.



Princess Astrid of Belgium takes off her protective helmet after a tour at the John Cockerill India plant as part of the Belgian Economic Mission to India, in Navi Mumbai.

India has agreed to cut tariffs way down, says Trump

Reuters
New Delhi

US President Donald Trump yesterday said India has agreed to "cut tariffs way down". He said this while speaking to reporters at the Oval Office.

Trump's statement comes after India earlier in the day said the two sides were negotiating a multi-sector trade deal to tackle tariff and non-tariff barriers and increase market access.

This is the third time in as many days that Trump has remarked about India's tariffs. His comments come when India's Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal is in Washington for trade talks with his US counterpart Howard Lutnick.

India needs to buy more defence products and lower its tariffs on US products for the two countries to be able to sign a "grand" bilateral

deal, US commerce secretary Howard Lutnick told India Today television yesterday.

India's import tariffs, among the highest in the world, warrant a reassessment of its "special relationship" with the US, Lutnick said, speaking from Washington.

He also asked India to shift defence equipment purchases away from Russia.

"We would like to focus on a bilateral conversation just between India and the US - bring down the tariff levels that India has, that protects some of its areas," Lutnick said.

For sensitive industries like agriculture, which India has long shielded to support its small farmers, Lutnick suggested a trade agreement with quotas and limits but emphasised that India must open up the sector.

After a meeting between Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi last month, the two countries agreed to resolve tariff rows and

work on the first segment of a deal by the fall of 2025, aiming for bilateral trade worth \$500bn by 2030.

"Maybe certain products have quotas. Maybe certain products have limits...And then we do the same thing on the other side and craft an agreement that makes sense for both of us," Lutnick said.

"The Indian agriculture market has to open up. It can't just stay closed," he added. Referring to India's high tariffs, Lutnick called them among the steepest globally.

Washington wants India to bring tariffs down to zero or negligible in most sectors, except agriculture, under the bilateral trade deal.

The US has a \$45.6bn trade deficit with India. Overall, the US trade-weighted average tariff rate has been about 2.2%, according to World Trade Organisation data, compared with India's 12%.

Indian women pilot farm drones, earning a living

A group of women in rural India has found an unexpected path to earn an income and some independence: operating drones for agricultural uses such as crop spraying.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government launched the so-called "Drone Didi" or "Drone Sisters" initiative in 2023 and so far 500 drones have been distributed, the agriculture ministry said in parliament in December.

The programme equips women-led self-help groups with drones to provide agricultural services, aiming to empower them and enhance agricultural efficiency. It has a target of distributing 15,000 such devices.

Rupinder Kaur, a resident of the northern, breadbasket state of Punjab, enrolled in the programme in 2024 and uses industrial-sized drones weighing between 25kg and 35kg to spray pesticides and fertilisers on farmland.

Martial arts display



Indian army cadets perform Kalaripayattu martial arts, during an activity display at the Officers Training Academy in Chennai yesterday.

Court asks Adani to reply to Dharavi project claims

Reuters
New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday asked billionaire Gautam Adani's conglomerate to respond to allegations of unfairly winning a bid to redevelop one of Asia's largest slums in Mumbai, with the competing Dubai-based consortium offering to raise its bid.

The long-running legal battle focuses on whether SecLink Technologies was incorrectly excluded from the bidding process when the Indian billionaire won the Dharavi slum project with a \$619mn bid in 2023. A Mumbai court disagreed with SecLink's position last year, landing the dispute at India's highest court.

Adani and the government of Maharashtra, where the slum is

located, have denied wrongdoing. The Adani Group did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the court hearing.

While the Supreme Court declined SecLink's request to immediately put the Dharavi project on hold, it asked Adani Properties and the local authority to respond to the consortium's challenge.

"The contract awarded is obviously subject to the outcome of this case," the court said.

Adani wants to transform the slum into a modern city after years of delays and a ruling in the case could formally settle its future.

SecLink's lawyer C Aryama Sundaram told the Supreme Court it was willing to increase its original bid by 20%, but the judges asked for a written submission.

Home prices to climb faster than inflation this year: experts

Reuters
Bengaluru

India's average home prices and rental costs are set to outpace consumer inflation this year according to a poll of housing experts who were split on whether affordability for first-time homebuyers would worsen or improve.

While faltering economic growth, stagnant wages and a dearth of well-paying jobs have left millions of working-class families with depleted savings, home prices have nearly doubled in the past decade in a housing market dominated and driven by those

with high incomes. In addition, a mismatch between strong demand and limited supply has inflated home prices to a point where tens of millions are having to rent.

Average home prices in India will surge 6.5% this year and 6% next, following a rise of about 4% last year, according to median forecasts in a February 17-March 4 survey of 14 property market experts.

That outlook was barely changed from a December poll, taken before the Reserve Bank of India began cutting interest rates in what is expected to be a short and shallow cycle.

Urban rental costs were set to climb even faster, jumping 7%-

10% over the coming year. Such an increase would far outpace consumer inflation, which is expected to average 4.3% and 4.4% over the next two fiscal years, according to a separate Reuters survey.

With rents soaring, the path to homeownership is even steeper as first-time buyers struggle to save for a down payment.

"This is a double-whammy: home prices will outpace inflation and rents have already been skyrocketing for years. For millions I think homeownership is becoming a distant mirage," said Pankaj Kapoor, managing director at real estate research firm Ljases Foras.

"There isn't just one problem;

there are many. In short, economic growth isn't translating into higher incomes and jobs. Instead, we are seeing a housing market where only the wealthy can buy. I don't think this trend will change soon."

Ajay Sharma at Colliers International and Atif Khan at CBRE were in broad agreement.

Average home prices in India's two most populous cities, Mumbai and Delhi - including its surrounding National Capital Region - are expected to rise between 5.8% and 8.5% this year and next, while prices in Bengaluru and Chennai are forecast to increase 5%-7.3%.

Asked what will happen to affordability for first-time home buyers over the coming year, property market experts were split, with seven saying it would improve and seven saying worsen.

"With these price escalations, affordability for first-time buyers is likely to decline as rising costs outpace income growth making homeownership more challenging - especially in high-demand metropolitan regions," said Arvind Nandan, managing director of research at Savills India.

"This makes renting a more viable option than home buying."

Finding affordable housing remains a major challenge for the

millions migrating to cities as India rapidly urbanises, despite government initiatives to increase supply.

Asked what would most likely drive an increase in the supply of affordable housing in major cities, 11 out of 13 respondents said intervention from central or local government. One cited market-driven adjustments and another said there would be no significant shift anytime soon.

"Although there have been policy measures to support demand and infusion of affordable housing in India...There is already an existing shortage of 10.1mn units," said Vivek Rathi, director of research at Knight Frank.

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GULF TIMES

Canada must learn from green backlash

As Canadians prepare to elect a new government, the rapid deterioration in relations with the US will be front of mind. But the slow pace of decarbonisation of our planet, and Canada's role in turning this around, must be right alongside it.

The chance of limiting global warming to 1.5C above preindustrial levels, as set out in the 2015 Paris climate agreement, is now vanishingly small. Despite many countries' efforts, global greenhouse-gas emissions have not even started to fall, and would have to decline by a staggering 7.5% per year to stay within the carbon budget envisaged by the Paris agreement. If this does not change soon, the planet will start to cross climate tipping points, from the collapses of the Greenland Ice Sheet and the Labrador Sea Current to the abrupt thawing of the permafrost.

Addressing this existential crisis requires implementing policies that will accelerate the pace of decarbonisation by leveraging the improvements in green-energy generation and infrastructure. The desire is seemingly there – global surveys show that voters want more, not less, climate action. But politicians rightly sense that they will be penalised in the next election for taking aggressive action, leading to an overly cautious approach. We are thus winning the war too slowly, which, as climate activist Bill McKibben has pointed out, is the same as losing.

The political backlash against climate action is growing worldwide. Green parties are in retreat across Europe, and the European Commission is rethinking its Green Deal legislation in light of the continent's declining competitiveness, stoking fears that the bloc may scale back its targets. From Australia to Germany, incumbent governments have faced public pressure to abandon green policies. In the US, President Donald Trump ran for re-election on a platform that promised to “drill, baby, drill” and to reverse Joe Biden's signature climate policy. Similarly, in Canada, the Conservatives have embraced the rallying cry “axe the tax” – referring to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's carbon tax.

Policy backsliding is to be expected on occasion, and global progress must be resilient to such lapses, as it was during the first Trump administration. But the populist revolt against green policies offers some important lessons for the next Canadian prime minister.

Some of this pushback reflects the fact that the costs of climate action are not evenly distributed. To be politically sustainable, such policies must internalise these costs in the initial design phase. For example, economists have rightly championed carbon taxation as the most efficient way to curb emissions. But sometimes efficiency must be sacrificed – in this case, by resorting to alternative instruments or complementary measures to soften the blow of the green transition on segments of society that are less able to bear the cost.

To be clear, that does not mean invoking the compensation principle, which claims that the most efficient policy maximises the resources available to provide compensation for those negatively affected (it does), but fails to recognise that such compensation rarely takes place. Nor is it enough to say that if carbon taxation is revenue-neutral, as it is designed to be in Canada, this will somehow ensure that compensation will reach those who need it. Voters are smart, and unless policy credibly convinces potential losers that they will be made whole, the mere risk that they will lose can provoke a backlash. And, as we are seeing now, even a small group of affected citizens can wield outsized political influence, and their cause can be taken up by populist politicians.

A voter backlash is avoidable when policy design ensures that those likely to lose disproportionately – whether poorer households or fossil-fuel firms – are protected, for example through social insurance, monetary compensation, or the gradual phase-in of green policies.

Climate policies must be compatible with social and political realities, and not based solely on economic efficiency. This is a lesson for all countries – including Canada – experiencing broad pushback against green measures. – Project Syndicate

The political backlash against climate action is growing worldwide

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Musk and DOGE are doing it wrong

By Diane Coyle
Cambridge

Billionaire and Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) czar Elon Musk and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer could not be more different. But they share a stated common goal: cutting red tape and reducing the burden of government on businesses, especially the tech sector.

To be sure, the two are going about this in very different ways. In the US, President Donald Trump's push to cut public spending and eliminate entire agencies risks gutting essential functions without a clear plan for technological replacements. The United Kingdom under Starmer has adopted a more measured approach, focusing on curbing regulatory overreach rather than dismantling the government.

Still, the overarching theme is similar. “The people voted for major government reform and that's what the people are going to get,” Musk declared. Starmer, for his part, focused on regulation: “If we don't curb regulator overreach, then we won't unlock the investment needed for a more prosperous future.”

Businesses understandably welcome such statements. Government oversight, by design, imposes costs and constraints, preventing firms from doing whatever they want. But while companies may oppose certain rules out of self-interest, those regulations are not necessarily bad for consumers or society. The real challenge lies in ensuring that regulations do not impose costs that outweigh their benefits. To this end, the US requires that every new regulation undergo a cost-benefit analysis.

Fuelled by frustration in their encounters with government bureaucracies, calls for deregulation and privatisation are gaining traction with voters around the world. While factors like high inflation certainly play a role, the driving force behind this trend is the stark contrast between the inefficiency of some public services and the streamlined, user-friendly experience offered by private companies.

Dealing with government bureaucracies is often time-consuming and Kafkaesque. Understaffed agencies fail to answer calls, their websites are outdated, and online services are clunky – if they exist at all. One possible solution is greater investment in digitising public services, a goal championed by both DOGE enthusiasts and the British government. But although there is



UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer (left) and Elon Musk.

no shortage of recommendations for how to modernise public services, implementing them remains a challenge.

At the same time, successful efforts to streamline government services rarely attract as much attention as failures, reinforcing the familiar narrative of excessive red tape and wasteful spending. For example, I recently received a thoughtful letter from a retired US naval officer who, though acknowledging the importance of university research, argued that taxpayer dollars were being squandered on ideological and frivolous projects – an all-too-common view among critics of government spending.

Of course, promises to curb excessive regulation and government waste are nothing new. Over the past 50 years, governments around the world have made similar pledges, only to find that doing so is far more complicated than it seems. In his 2018 book *The Fifth Risk*, author Michael Lewis highlighted the intricate, often unseen systems that keep modern governments running. DOGE's slash-and-burn approach now threatens to bring these vital systems to a screeching halt, with little regard for the potential consequences.

This helps explain why attempts to streamline bureaucracy and curb regulatory overreach often fall short. “Regulation” is a broad term that encompasses three distinct types of government intervention, each requiring a different strategy.

First, there are regulations that have simply outlived their usefulness or were flawed from the start and now impede economic activity. These include rules

requiring agencies to submit reports on paper and protections for species that no longer need them. In the UK, for example, housing developments have been stalled due to protections for jumping spiders, while £100mn (\$128mn) was spent on a tunnel for bats as part of the ill-fated HS2 rail project. Just as no one benefits from traffic bottlenecks, everyone benefits when such regulatory obstacles are identified and removed.

Second, just as speed limits prioritise accident prevention over faster travel times, some regulations require tradeoffs, particularly in areas like financial oversight and consumer safety. The way governments approach these tradeoffs often changes in times of crisis. After the 2008 financial crisis, for example, bank bailouts fuelled demand for stricter financial regulations. But in recent years, intense lobbying by the financial sector has reopened the debate.

The third category consists of regulations that provide businesses and consumers with clear rules, reducing uncertainty and allowing markets to function efficiently. These rules, such as specified weights and measures, some of which date back to ancient times, can be likened to traffic lights: by regulating when drivers can cross intersections, they ensure smooth traffic and keep drivers and pedestrians safe. Modern examples include food hygiene standards, copyright protections, and competition policies. While their specifics can be debated, the need for them is clear: in their absence, innovation stalls and economic growth falters.

The differences between the three types of regulation

underscore the need for a more strategic approach to cutting red tape. Despite what Musk may think, meaningful and lasting government reform requires more than just swinging a chainsaw.

In today's economic landscape, governments' role in providing the infrastructure and regulatory frameworks that support business growth and job creation is more important than ever. Some of the most vocal advocates of cutting public spending – particularly major US tech firms – have benefited enormously from government support and favourable policies. Their claims that red tape has stopped them from growing ring hollow; by and large, the regulatory environment has worked in their favour.

That said, government bureaucracies must be reformed to keep pace with the economic realities of the twenty-first century. Until governments can offer a seamless service experience like Amazon or Airbnb, many citizens will continue to see the private sector as more efficient. While that may be true in some cases, the risk is that poorly conceived efforts to make government operate like a business will undermine crucial public services, harming both the economy and people's lives. – Project Syndicate

• Diane Coyle, Professor of Public Policy at the University of Cambridge, is the author of *Cogs and Monsters: What Economics Is, and What It Should Be* (Princeton University Press, 2021) and the forthcoming *The Measure of Progress: Counting What Really Matters* (Princeton University Press, Spring 2025).

The end of globalisation as we know it

By Dalia Marin
Munich

As US President Donald Trump's administration prepares to impose “reciprocal tariffs” on America's trading partners, it is clear that firms can no longer assume that their business models will not be disrupted by new trade barriers – and even a full-blown trade war. Could this be the final nail in the coffin of globalisation?

It is no secret that globalisation has been in retreat for a while. But as my co-authors and I show in a new paper, this process began earlier than many realise, with the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) as the turning point. From 1990-2008 – call it the period of hyper-globalisation – trade, as a share of GDP, rose by more than one percentage point annually, on average. In 2000-07 alone, the share of total inputs advanced economies sourced from developing countries almost tripled. But after the GFC, this expansion ended abruptly, before reversing in 2011, and overall trade growth has since stagnated.

The likely explanation for this change is relatively straightforward: the GFC was the first in a long series of negative shocks. In 2012, the eurozone faced a sovereign-debt crisis. In 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. In 2018, Trump's first administration launched a tariff campaign against major US trading partners, especially China (which continued under Joe Biden). In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic began. In 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. And in 2024, Trump – the self-proclaimed “Tariff Man” – was elected for a second term.

When trade uncertainty is high, so is risk – and that makes global value chains costly. If firms fear that new tariffs might make imports of key inputs more expensive, or that new trade barriers or other disruptions might prevent those inputs from arriving at all, they will question whether buying those items from foreign suppliers still makes sense. With rapid technological advances enabling the automation of a fast-growing range of tasks, they may well conclude that it does not.

In this case, firms might “reshore”



production, whether by increasing their reliance on domestic suppliers or by moving production in-house (vertical integration). We found that higher uncertainty in developing economies leads to significant increases in the share of inputs produced in high-income countries – but only in highly robotised industries. In industries where automation is less widespread or feasible, the cost of local labour appears to be prohibitive for many firms.

We also found that, when reshoring, firms tend to favour vertical integration over dependence on domestic suppliers, whether because they want to exercise as much control as possible over their value chains – yet another hedge against uncertainty – or because it is too costly to source inputs from new suppliers. (Building relationships with suppliers typically involves investment, including the provision of knowledge and technology.) Small and medium-size firms are especially likely to take this route, as they generally lack the sprawling multinational networks that might facilitate a larger firm's search for new suppliers.

While firms in high-income countries engaged in some reshoring before the GFC, the reshoring response to uncertainty has more than tripled since 2008. The low-interest-rate environment that prevailed for over a decade after the GFC probably contributed to this shift – along with increased risk aversion and

advances in automation technologies – by making investment in robots more attractive.

Of course, reshoring is not the only possible response to uncertainty. Policymakers and consultancies often recommend that firms facing geopolitical, climate, or trade risks bolster supply-chain resilience by diversifying their input suppliers across locations, thereby limiting the impact of disruptions in one or more. But we find little evidence that firms heed this advice, largely because finding new suppliers is so costly. Moreover, some types of production are highly concentrated geographically. For example, rare-earth minerals and electric-vehicle batteries originate mostly in China.

Another strategy for coping with uncertainty is nearshoring – relocating supply chains to nearby countries, especially friendly ones (friendshoring). But we find little evidence that firms are embracing this approach, either. On the contrary, in industries where automation is an option, countries have been reshoring even from neighbours with which trade barriers are unlikely to emerge. Germany is a case in point: far from shifting production to its fellow EU members in Central and Eastern Europe, where labour costs are lower, it has moved production from those countries back onto its own territory. US firms have also reshored production from Mexico – though, again, having the option to use robots, rather than expensive domestic labour, is essential.

Since the GFC, rising economic, geopolitical, and climate risks, together with progress on automation, have fundamentally changed firms' calculations regarding global value chains, with offshoring viewed as increasingly costly. While firms have reason to keep some production on foreign soil – if it cannot be automated at home – the reshoring trend is likely to accelerate, driven not least by Trump's rapidly escalating trade war. Globalisation might not die, but it will never be the same. – Project Syndicate

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Pope ‘stable’ as he marks three weeks in hospital

Pope Francis’s condition remained stable but complex yesterday as he battles pneumonia in hospital, the Vatican said, a day after releasing an audio message in which the 88-year-old sounded weak and breathless.

The message broadcast to pilgrims in St Peter’s Square on Thursday evening was the first time the world had heard the Pope’s voice since he was admitted to Rome’s Gemelli hospital on February 14.

The Argentine Pontiff (**pictured**) has suffered several respiratory crises since his admission, most recently on Monday.

Amid increasingly lurid online speculation, fuelled by the absence of any photos of the Pope, the Holy See on Thursday released a short audio message recorded that day by Francis.

“I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your prayers for my health from the Square. I accompany you from here,” the Pope said, sounding weak and taking laboured breaths. “May God bless you and the Virgin protect you. Thank you.”

The Argentine spoke in his native Spanish, drawing speculation that he could not muster the strength to speak in Italian, which is used for official Vatican business.

However, a Vatican source insisted Francis wanted to speak in a language that would have a wider audience.

The Vatican press office said yesterday that the Pope’s status was “stable”, but he was still in a “complex clinical condition” so “the prognosis remains guarded”.

The Pope did a bit of work and some physiotherapy, but mostly rested and prayed, including spending around 20 minutes in the little chapel which is part of the hospital’s papal suite, it said.

He continues to switch between an oxygen mask at night and a cannula – a plastic tube tucking into the nostrils – delivering high-flow oxygen during the day.

When the message was broadcast in the square in front of St Peter’s Basilica, where prayers have been held every evening for the Pope, applause broke out among the hundreds of pilgrims gathered there.

“We were very happy that he could speak,” said John Maloney, a 76-year-old English pilgrim visiting Rome for the 2025 jubilee holy year celebrations.

“It’s a good sign that he’s actually able to speak,” he told AFP, adding: “He’s got a long way to go so he’s in the hands of God.”

However, for Claudia Bianchi, a 50-year-old Italian from Rome, “it struck me to hear him so tired”.

Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said it was Francis himself who wanted the message broadcast.

The Pope’s message was on the front page of many Italian newspapers, which reported that it was an attempt by the Vatican to battle disinformation about the Pontiff’s deterioration or even death.

They noted the weakness of his voice, with the *Corriere della Sera* daily describing it as “pained”.

In a bid for greater transparency, the Vatican has been publishing an update on how the Pope slept every morning, followed by a more detailed medical bulletin each evening.

During previous hospitalisations, the leader of the world’s 1.4bn Catholics appeared on the Gemelli balcony for his weekly Sunday Angelus prayer.

However, he has missed the last three, and no announcement has yet been made about whether he will make an appearance this weekend. – **AFP**

Pakistan tells illegals, Afghan Citizen Card holders to leave by March 31

Pakistan’s interior ministry has asked all “illegal foreigners” and Afghan Citizen Card holders to leave the country before March 31, warning that they would otherwise be deported from April 1.

Islamabad has in the past blamed militant attacks and crimes on Afghan citizens, who form the largest portion of migrants in the country.

Kabul has rejected the accusations.

“Pakistan has been a gracious host and continues to fulfil its commitments and obligations as a responsible state,” the country’s interior ministry said in a statement. “It is reiterated that individuals staying in Pakistan will have to fulfil all legal formalities.”

Pakistan launched its repatriation drive of foreign citizens, most of whom are Afghan, in 2023, but had said they were first focusing on foreigners with no

legal documentation.

More than 800,000 Afghans hold an Afghan Citizen Card in Pakistan, according to UN data.

Another roughly 1.3mn are formally registered with the Pakistan government and hold a separate Proof of Residence (PoR) card.

The statement did not specify how PoR holders would be affected.

The UN says that more than 800,000 Afghans have returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan since the repatriation drive began and that in total Pakistan hosted around 2.8mn Afghan refugees who crossed the border during 40 years of conflict in their homeland.

Among those are tens of thousands of Afghans in the process for resettlement to the United States and other Western nations following their withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 as the Taliban took over. – **Reuters**

Polish premier announces measures to boost defence

AFP
Warsaw

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has announced a slew of measures aimed at boosting his country’s defence, including a possible exit from a landmark anti-mines treaty and large-scale military trainings for men.

Poland, a staunch Ukraine ally, has been arming itself heavily as it eyes warily neighbouring Russia and amid calls from US President Donald Trump for European countries to take more responsibility for their own defence.

Warsaw is already far ahead of its allies in terms of military expenditure, aiming to spend 4.7% of its GDP on defence this year – and now it mulls new measures.

“We are facing a very serious race, and it is a race for security,” Tusk told the parliament.

“We must be aware that Poland must reach for the most modern possibilities, also related to nuclear weapons and modern unconventional weapons,” he said, pledging Poland would use “every available opportunity to increase our defence”.

A new military training scheme was intended to be ready by the end of the year “so that every adult man in Poland is trained in case of war”, Tusk announced.

The trainings will turn “those who do not join the army to fully-fledged and valuable soldiers during a conflict”, Tusk said, adding the goal was to have a military reserve force “adequate to potential threats”.

Tusk, who this week has called on Europe to strengthen its defences to win the “arms race” with Moscow, has also backed withdrawing his country from a landmark treaty prohibiting the use of anti-personnel landmines.

“I will recommend a positive opinion for Poland to withdraw from the Ottawa Convention and possibly from the Dublin Convention,” Tusk told lawmakers, referring to treaties on anti-personnel mines and on cluster munitions.

“Let’s face it: it’s not something nice, nothing pleasant. We know that very well,” Tusk said. “The problem is that in our environment, those we may be afraid of, or those who are at war, they all have it.”

Designed to be buried or hidden on the ground, anti-personnel mines often mutilate victims who are not immediately killed and aid groups have decried their long-term impact on civilians.

The Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention, also known as the Ottawa Convention, prohibits the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of landmines.

At least two North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) countries, Finland and Lithuania

– both also bordering Russia – have in the past months mulled exiting from the Convention.

On Thursday Lithuania quit the treaty banning cluster bombs, citing security concerns over a threat from Moscow, sparking outrage from human rights watchdogs.

Amnesty International called the move “disastrous”, while Human Rights Watch said it was “alarming”, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned it “weakens vital protections for civilians”.

Tusk brushed off a potential backlash. “We will not look at anyone. We will not fear anyone’s criticism,” he told the parliament.

Earlier yesterday Polish President Andrzej Duda said he had submitted an amendment to anchor in the constitution a defence spending mark of 4% of GDP, twice Nato’s current target.

Poland is far ahead of its allies in terms of military expenditure, aiming to spend 4.7% of its GDP on defence this year.

The amendment would be “a guarantee that these expenses will actually be carried out”, Duda, allied with the conservative right-wing opposition, told reporters.

Tusk said the proposal should be “analysed very seriously” but did not say if his ruling coalition would back it.

It would need a cross-party support of two-thirds of the lawmakers in the Polish parliament’s lower chamber to enter into force.

Pakistan names new ministers

Pakistan’s prime minister appointed new heads for the key petroleum and privatisation portfolios yesterday – both departments seen as central to the country’s recovery from an economic crisis.

Former junior finance minister Ali Pervaiz Malik was appointed as petroleum minister in a broader cabinet reshuffle.

His key task will be spearheading a major transaction in the Reko Diq copper and gold project.

Barrick Gold, which owns 50% of the project, is also in talks with railway authorities to revamp Port Qasim’s coal terminal for copper transport, chief executive Mark Bristow told Pakistan’s Dawn News in January.

Muhammad Ali, formerly the special assistant to the prime minister on the power sector, has taken over as adviser for privatisation.

This follows Pakistan’s failed attempt at offloading a 60% stake in debt-ridden Pakistan Airlines (PIA), which only received a single offer, well below the asking price.

Privatising the PIA and other state-owned enterprises is crucial for raising funds and reforming these entities under the ongoing \$7bn International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout programme, set up to address a economic crisis stoked by surging inflation and a trade deficit caused by ballooning energy imports.

Bilal Azhar Kayani will take over as Pakistan’s minister for railways.

The ministry is in talks with China to upgrade and reconstruct Pakistan’s railway network, and develop the Gwadar port, under China’s \$65bn investment in Pakistan, part of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). – **Reuters**

Thousands stranded as unexploded WWII bomb blocks Paris train station

Reuters/AFP
Paris

Paris’s Gare du Nord, Europe’s busiest train station, ground to a halt yesterday while an unexploded World War II bomb was defused, causing the cancellation of all Eurostar trains for the day and huge disruptions to nearby traffic.

Railway workers found the 500kg (1,100-lb) device 2m underground at around 0230 GMT in Saint-Denis, a northern Parisian suburb, during construction work on a bridge.

Police say the area is known to contain “vestiges” of the war.

Although the bomb was found 2.5km (1.6 miles) out from the station, it was located under the tracks, one of the network’s train lines wrote in a post on X.

Commuter trains and national and international services including Eurostar trains were all halted while bomb disposal experts were brought in to defuse the huge device.

Police evacuated 200 people living close to a security perimeter set up around the bomb, while others in the area were urged to stay inside throughout the operation, the department’s prefecture said.

Transport Minister Philippe Tabarot later announced that the demining operations were over and rail traffic would resume in stages from 1700 GMT.

Eurostar, which had to cancel all trains to and from Gare du Nord yesterday, said that services would resume today.

Its website advised travellers to reschedule their trips.

In addition to the huge disruption



A pedestrian crosses the closed and empty Paris ring road, Boulevard Peripherique, next to the Porte d'Aubervilliers, in Paris, after a World War II bomb was found nearby on railway tracks leading to Gare du Nord train station. – **AFP**

to train traffic, portions of the roads ringing the capital were closed.

Around 220mn passengers a year pass through Gare du Nord, travelling to and from destinations in northern France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, and across to London.

Clemence Fandard, an interface designer in Paris, said her 6.20am train to Amsterdam was initially delayed for 45 minutes before being cancelled.

“I had heard reports of these things happening from time to time,” Fandard said, adding: “We were unlucky!”

Another traveller, Kasman Ibrahim, said he had planned to catch a train to Cologne in Germany from Gare du Nord but would now look for an alternative route.

Owen Pritchard, a tourist

seeking to return to London, was philosophical.

“I don’t want to get on a train that runs over any unexploded World War II ordnance,” he said. “I would rather they clear that, and then make sure it’s safe to travel.”

In London, crowds gathered at St Pancras railway station.

Many travellers looked stressed as they made calls and searched for alternative options.

Yesterday was a rude start to Michelle Abeyie’s 40th birthday, which she had planned to celebrate with her friends on her first ever trip to the French capital.

“I’m really upset, disappointed, frustrated, stressed,” Abeyie told AFP.

“We would’ve gone to the Louvre and the Moulin Rouge tonight,” Abeyie said, wiping away a few tears.

Italy govt furious as court orders compensation for sea migrant

Reuters
Rome

An Eritrean who was among a group of sea migrants held on an Italian coast guard vessel for 10 days in 2018 is entitled to compensation, Italy’s top appeals court has ruled, triggering the fury of Italy’s right-wing government.

More than 150 migrants were blocked at sea on the Diciotti coastguard ship in August 2018 as then-interior minister Matteo Salvini refused to let them disembark in the Sicilian port of Catania.

Some 41 of them, from Eritrea, turned to the courts with the assistance of rights activists, seeking damages for illegal detention.

After their case was twice rejected by lower courts, in 2019 and 2024, one took it to the top Court of Cassation.

On Thursday the court ruled in favour of the migrant, who was not named.

“Government actions can never be considered exempt from judicial review when they go beyond the limits imposed by the Constitution and the law, especially when the fundamental rights of citizens (or foreigners) are at stake,” the court said.



Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (**pictured**), whose administration has taken a hard line on immigration and has clashed several times with the judiciary, including over a stalled plan to send sea migrants to Albania, vented her indignation. Writing on X, she said it was “very frustrating” to be forced to compensate “people who attempted to enter Italy illegally ... with the money of honest Italian citizens who pay taxes” when state resources are scarce.

The court left it to lower-level judges to determine how much compensation the migrant should get, but the amount is likely to be between €1,000 and €2,000

(\$1,087-2,174), according to experts.

“Let the judges pay and welcome the illegal immigrants, if they care so much,” Salvini, who is now deputy prime minister and transport minister, said on X, slamming the Court of Cassation’s ruling as “yet another disgrace”.

One of the activists who gave legal aid to the migrants, Giovanna Cavallo, told Reuters that all 41 of them had obtained refugee status, so calling them “clandestine”, as Meloni’s party has done on social media, was incorrect.

Nearly all have relocated to other European countries, Cavallo said.

She also said the 40 migrants who did not continue the legal battle might still earn the right to compensation and this would be decided by the courts in coming months.

In the 2018 episode, Salvini eventually relented after Albania and Ireland offered to accept some of the blocked migrants, and Italy’s Catholic Church agreed to take responsibility for the rest at no cost to the taxpayer.

Prosecutors in Sicily had sought in 2018 to investigate Salvini for abuse of power and kidnapping of the migrants, but the Italian Senate denied them permission, ending the case.

Zelensky’s approval rating increases in Ukraine after Trump spat, poll shows

Reuters
Kyiv

President Volodymyr Zelensky’s approval rating has risen by 10 percentage points since his White House spat with US President Donald Trump, a poll by a leading Ukrainian pollster showed yesterday.

The poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) showed that 67% of respondents trusted Zelensky in March, up from 57% a month earlier.

The survey was conducted from February 14 to March 4 – a challenging time for Zelensky as Kyiv’s relations with the United States, its biggest military backer, plunged into crisis after the Oval Office meeting on February 28.

KIIS executive director Anton Hrushetskyi said the poll showed Ukrainians were rallying behind Zelensky more than three years after Russia’s full-scale invasion.

“Ukrainians perceive the rhetoric of the new US administration as an attack on the whole of Ukraine and all Ukrainians,” Hrushetskyi said in a statement.

He said Ukrainians want peace but not a peace that comes at too high a cost.

“Ukrainians really want peace, but our results consistently show that the vast majority are against peace on any terms,” he said.

Zelensky, now 47, was elected Ukraine’s president in 2019.

Since the Russian invasion in February 2022, he has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance.

After last week’s meeting, Trump said that Zel-



This picture taken on February 28 shows Trump with Zelensky at the White House. – **Reuters**

ensky – whom he had already branded a “dictator” – was an obstacle to his vision of bringing peace to Ukraine.

The US has since then paused military aid to Ukraine and intelligence sharing.

Zelensky has tried to repair ties, saying this week that Kyiv was ready to come to the negotiating table as soon as possible and work under Trump’s leadership, calling the way things had gone in Washington “regrettable”.

The pollsters surveyed 1,029 people via telephone interviews, and the results were similar across the country, they said.

However, in the east Zelensky’s trust ratings were lower – at about 60%.

Ukraine’s eastern regions are where the fiercest fighting is taking place, with Russian troops devastating cities and towns and taking village after village.

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