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Death toll from severe weather in Gaza rises to 13

A wave of severe weather and extreme cold that has been hitting the Gaza Strip since Thursday has claimed the lives of 13 Palestinians in less than 24 hours, in addition to a series of widespread collapses in several areas. Civil defence teams are continuing search and rescue operations under the rubble. Palestine's news agency (WAFA) quoted sources in the Civil Defence and ambulance services in Gaza as saying that six Palestinians died when a family home collapsed in the Bir Al-Na'ja area in the northern Gaza Strip. Two others died when a wall collapsed in the Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza City last evening, and one person died on Thursday after a wall collapsed in the Shati refugee camp. The sources added that a child died due to the extreme cold in Khan Younis, while two other children died as a result of the severe cold in Gaza City. A person also died when a residential building collapsed, and rescue teams are still searching for missing persons under the rubble. **Page 6**

WHO launches digital library on traditional medicine

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has launched a global digital library on traditional medicine, containing over 1.6mn scientific records, alongside a data network and framework to support indigenous knowledge, biodiversity, and health. Director of WHO's Global Centre for Traditional Medicine Shiama Korovila said ahead of the Traditional Medicine Summit in India (Dec 17-19) that 40-90% of populations in most WHO member states rely on traditional medicine. **(QNA)**

Darb Al Saai wows visitors with national, heritage activities

The 2025 National Day celebrations at Darb Al Saai featured an array of activities yesterday as large number of visitors thronged the venue, moving between pavilions and watching the daily procession.

The "Specter of the Sands" initiative at Darb Al Saai combines live documentation with interactive displays, presenting a comprehensive picture of Bedouin life, hospitality, and Qatari identity. The event allows visitors to immerse themselves in daily desert life while exploring the tangible and intangible heritage that has shaped Qatari society over generations.

The exhibition draws on the Desert Museum, founded by Qatari history and heritage researcher Abdulaziz Abdulrahim al-Bouhashim al-Sayed, which houses unique collections of artifacts, tools, and archives detailing Bedouin life.

In a statement, al-Sayed said: "Every displayed item and live activity aims to convey social and cultural values to the new generation, helping them feel a deep connection to Qatari identity and understand the significance of generosity, craftsmanship, and hunting as part of their nation's memory."

The crafts section highlights Sadu weaving and Bedouin tent-making, traditionally carried out by women transforming sheep's wool and goat hair into intricate art reflecting desert life.

The hobbies section showcases falconry, hunting, and wild game as part of Qatari heritage.

For the first time, a complete archive of hunting tools and bird hoods is displayed, alongside a specialised library documenting these ancient practices. This section highlights Qataris' passion for nature and younger generations' interest in preserving desert-linked traditions.

Al-Dama Council participates in the Al-Bidaa activity at Darb Al Saai, attracting strong attendance and reflecting growing interest in reviving traditional Qatari games. The council introduces visitors to the heritage of the game Al-Dama, one of the most prominent traditional games historically shaping social life.

The Qatar Publishers and Distributors Forum, affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, in collaboration with the Children's Literature Centre launched the sixth edition of "Children's Story Designer" at the event. The three-day event allows children to showcase stories they wrote, illustrated, and designed.

Jassim Ahmed al-Bouainain, director of the Qatar Publishers and Distributors Forum, said that the sixth edition's publications will be presented and sold at the 2026 Doha International Book Fair.

Asma Abdul Latif al-Kuwari, director of the Children's Literature Centre and programme founder, explained that "Children's Story Designer" is a pioneering national platform preparing young creators to produce children's books from concept to publication. **Pages 3, 11**

MoI launches project for vehicle number plate replacement

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has launched a project to change the existing vehicle number plates with newly developed plates starting from today.

The rollout of the new plates will begin with private vehicles, adding a single letter (Q) to their plate numbers, followed sequentially by the letters (T) and (R). MoI officials announced at a press conference yesterday. This will be implemented in several phases with the first phase starting through the Soom Application from Dec 13-16.

Colonel Dr Jabr Hamoud Jabr al-Nuaimi, assistant director, Public Relations Department and Official Spokesperson of the MoI, and Staff Colonel Ali Hassan al-Kaabi, assistant director, Licensing Affairs Department at the General Directorate of Traffic, addressed the press conference and provided the details of the project.

According to Col Dr al-Nuaimi, the new project comes with an enhanced design for the number plate that aligns with the best international standards and supports modern technologies used in smart traffic systems.

"This national project aims to strengthen the visual identity of vehicle plates and standardise them according to clearer and more precise criteria, thereby supporting the traffic system through the utilisation of advanced digital technologies. The project covers all categories of vehicle plates as part of an integrated development plan for the national plate numbering system, ensuring its sustainability and providing multiple future options that keep pace with the continuous growth in the number of vehicles," explained, Col Dr al-Nuaimi.

The official noted that the project will be implemented in



Colonel Dr Jabr Hamoud Jabr al-Nuaimi and Staff Colonel Ali Hassan al-Kaabi at the press conference. **PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam

several phases as phase one starts from today. During this phase, the letter (Q) will be allocated to vehicles whose owners obtain special plate numbers through the Soom Application from Dec 13-16.

Phase Two starts with the installation of new plates for private vehicles registered for the first time in the vehicle licensing system (new registrations), starting from April 1, 2026. These vehicles will be assigned the available letters within the numbering system at that time, such as Q, T, or R, in accordance with the approved sequence.

Phase Three includes all currently licensed private vehicles, whose plates will be replaced by adding the letter (Q) to their existing numbers, in accordance with timelines to be announced at a later date. Additional phases will subsequently be implemented for non-private vehicles, involving the addition of two letters to their plate numbers.

The official noted that until the announcement of the timelines, existing vehicle plates will con-

tinue to be used for permit renewals or plate damage until the scheduled implementation of the replacement plan for currently registered vehicles begins.

Staff Colonel al-Kaabi said the project represents a new phase in the development of the vehicle licence plate system in the country. He noted that it goes beyond simply changing the design of the plates to establish a smart and sustainable national numbering system with greater clarity and ease of reading both in the field and electronically. This system also offers better integration with smart traffic systems and vehicle licensing databases, while supporting the country's efforts in digital transformation and the development of smart transportation services according to the highest standards.

The officials highlighted that the new step is in line with MoI's comprehensive modernisation efforts to develop its services and enhance the efficiency of traffic systems, in accordance with best international practices.

Eight Arab, Islamic nations condemn storming of UNRWA HQ by Israeli forces

The foreign ministers of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkiye and Egypt have reaffirmed the indispensable role of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in safeguarding the rights and well-being of Palestinian refugees.

For decades, UNRWA has carried out a unique mandate entrusted to it by the international community, providing protection, education, health care, social services, and emergency assistance to millions of Palestinian refugees in its areas of operation, in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 302 (1949).

The adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution to renew UNRWA's mandate for an additional three years, reflects international confidence in the vital role played by the agency and the continuity of its operations.

The ministers condemned the storming of the UNRWA head-

quarters in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem by Israeli forces, as this attack represents a flagrant violation of international law and the inviolability of UN premises, which constitutes an unacceptable escalation, and violates the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice dated Oct 22, 2025, which clearly states that Israel, as an occupying power, is under an obligation not to impede the operations of UNRWA and, on the contrary, to facilitate them.

In light of the unprecedented humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, the ministers underscored the essential role UNRWA plays in delivering humanitarian assistance through its network of distribution centres, ensuring that food, relief items, and basic necessities reach those in need fairly and efficiently, in accordance with Security Council Resolution 2803.

UNRWA's schools and health facilities remain a lifeline for refugee communities in Gaza, con-

tinuing to provide education and essential primary health care under extremely challenging conditions, which contributes to the implementation of US President Trump's Plan on the ground and enables the Palestinian people to remain in their land and rebuild their homeland.

The ministers stressed that UNRWA's role is irreplaceable. No other entity possesses the infrastructure, expertise, and field presence required to meet the needs of Palestinian refugees or to ensure continuity of services at the necessary scale. Any weakening of the Agency's capacity would have grave humanitarian, social, and political repercussions across the region. Accordingly, the ministers called upon the international community to ensure sustainable and adequate funding for UNRWA, and to provide the agency with the political and operational space needed to continue its vital work "in all five fields of operations". **(QNA)**

Polo Al Marsa makes historic debut in Qatar

Polo Al Marsa, presented by Qatar Calendar, made its historic debut at Old Doha Port marking a milestone for Qatar's sporting calendar. During the three-day Polo Al Marsa Qatar 2025 from Dec 11-13 elite polo players from Qatar, Argentina and Chile to showcase their world-class exhibition matches. The highlight of the action was the historic appearance of Qatar's first homegrown polo players. **Sport Page 1**



Minister felicitates winners of Mathayel Nabati Poetry contest

QNA
Doha

HE the Minister of Culture Sheikh Abdulrahman bin Hamad al-Thani crowned the winners last evening at the conclusion of the Mathayel Nabati Poetry Competition, organised by the Ministry of Culture. The competition ran for nine months. Saudi poet Mohammed Khaled al-Subaie was announced the winner of the Mathayel Poet title, receiving a prize of QR1mn. In comparison, the other eight poets each received QR100,000, bringing the total prizes of the final episode to QR1.8mn.

Director of the Qatar Poetry Center Shabeeb bin Arar al-Nuaimi said in the closing ceremony that the grand finale of the second season of Mathayel represents an exceptional literary and cultural milestone, reflecting the success of the initiative in nurturing po-

etic talent and reviving the public's passion for authentic poetry. He said that the Mathayel competition was not launched merely as a creative contest, but as a living stage where creativity meets identity, talent meets heritage, and beauty meets deeper meaning. He noted that the Ministry of Culture ensured from the outset that the competition would provide a platform to discover poetic talent and reconnect the audience with eloquent verse and refined language.

He added that reaching the final stage this season reflects the fruits of sustained efforts over the past months, demonstrated in the advanced poetic works and the brilliance shown by the finalists, whose poems carried noble values, sincerity of emotion, and beauty of expression.

Al-Nuaimi praised the strong support the competition receives from HE the Minister of Culture Sheikh Abdulrahman bin Hamad

al-Thani, emphasising that his ongoing support for creativity and encouragement of talent reflects his belief in the role of literature in strengthening national identity, enriching the cultural landscape, and elevating poetry and poets. He expressed his gratitude to all poets who participated this season for contributing works that strengthened the competition's presence on the cultural scene. For his part, poet Mohammed Khaled al-Subaie, the winner of the second edition, expressed great happiness at winning. He said it was a great honour to be crowned in his second homeland, Qatar, and expressed gratitude to the Ministry of Culture, which he said had succeeded in advancing the literary movement in the region and the Arab world.

He noted that the competition was very strong, and that every poet proved his merit, with only slight differences separating them.

Art of inscription of 'Sadu Weaving' on Unesco's list

The Ministry of Culture has announced the inscription of the art of 'Sadu Weaving' on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity for 2025, in partnership with the Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. This inscription-approved during the 20th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, held in the Indian capital, New Delhi, marks a significant milestone in preserving Gulf cultural heritage and strengthening the presence of traditional elements that have shaped Bedouin identity throughout history. The inclusion of sadu on the

Intangible Heritage List reflects international recognition of its cultural and intellectual value. It also reaffirms the efforts of Qatar and the Ministry of Culture in safeguarding this art from decline amid contemporary transformations and the rise of industrial alternatives that threaten the continuity of traditional practices. This achievement supports pathways for education, documentation, and intergenerational knowledge transmission through national and regional programs, training workshops, specialised exhibitions, and research initiatives dedicated to studying this art as an element rich in aesthetic, anthropological, and social dimensions. It also elevates the global

recognition of craftspeople and opens new opportunities to integrate sadu products into modern creative industries. The Ministry of Culture emphasised that the inscription of sadu on Unesco's list is both a documentation milestone and a means to enhance community awareness of the value of intangible heritage, ensuring the sustainability of traditional practices that form an essential part of Gulf cultural identity. The ministry also stressed the continued co-operation with partner states and relevant cultural institutions to preserve this ancient art and ensure its vitality across generations. Sadu Weaving is one of the most prominent traditional weaving practices in Qatar and the wider Gulf region. **(QNA)**

Qatar to host Arab forum for housing and sustainable urban development

QNA
Doha

Qatar, represented by the Ministry of Social Development and Family, prepares to host the 6th Arab Ministerial Forum on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development 2025, under the slogan "Urban sustainability... for the future of generations". Under the patronage of HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani, the forum will be held from Dec 14-16. To be held on the sidelines of the 42nd session of the Council of Arab Ministers of Housing and Construction, the three-day forum will bring together a select group of experts and specialists from Arab, regional and international institutions.

The forum's first day features a high-level opening session with the participation of Arab ministers, followed by key sessions that will examine the future of housing policies in the Arab region, the role of urban planning in building resilient and sustainable cities, and the promotion of regional co-operation in the areas of housing and urban development, in addition to discussing innovation in meeting future housing demand.

The second day convenes spe-

cialised sessions and in-depth workshops addressing topics such as smart cities and digital transformation, post-crisis reconstruction strategies, affordable housing models, and sustainable urban environments, in addition to exploring mechanisms for enhancing urban inclusion.

The third day focuses on partnerships and future initiatives through sessions discussing the role of international and regional organisations in supporting housing policies, mechanisms for financing urban projects, and modern trends in enhancing the quality of life in cities. The forum concludes with the announcement of joint recommendations and an Arab roadmap for sustainable urban development.

A specialised exhibition will be held on the sidelines of the forum, with the participation of Arab and international governmental bodies, the private sector, and leading institutions in the field of urban development. The exhibition will showcase the latest urban development experiences and projects, smart solutions for future cities, innovative technologies in green buildings and energy efficiency, as well as practical examples of national initiatives in improving the quality of urban life.

Assistant Undersecretary for Social Development Affairs at the Ministry of Social Development

and Family Fahad Mohammed al-Khayarin affirmed that Qatar's hosting of this forum reflects its commitment to supporting urban and social development paths in the region and enhancing joint Arab action.

He noted that the forum represents a central Arab platform for enhancing co-operation, exchanging expertise, and building effective partnerships in the fields of housing and urban development. It also contributes to shaping future visions based on innovation and sustainability, and to improving the quality of urban services to meet the needs of Arab societies and the aspirations of future generations.

The participation of Qatar is an opportunity to showcase its pioneering experience in social and urban development and to highlight its successful models in empowering individuals and building more inclusive and prosperous cities.

The forum's convening in Doha reflects the State of Qatar's position as a regional hub for expertise and leading practices in the fields of housing and urban planning and aligns with the objectives of Qatar National Vision 2030, which calls for building a developed society and a sustainable economy and enhancing the quality of life for all members of society.

Amir sends cables of congratulations to president of Kenya

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani sent cables of congratulations to President of Kenya and Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces Dr William Samoei Ruto on the anniversary of his country's Independence Day. **(QNA)**

Qatar joins high-level forum for Year of Peace, Turkmenistan's 30th Neutrality anniversary

Qatar participated yesterday in the high-level international forum held on the occasion of the International Year of Peace and Trust and the 30th Anniversary of the Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan, in the Turkmen capital, Ashgabat. Qatar was represented at the forum by HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad. HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation also took part in the ceremony of laying flowers in front of the Neutrality Tower, which was built in Ashgabat to celebrate the permanent neutrality policy announced by Turkmenistan and recognised by the United Nations in 1995. **(QNA)**



CMU-Q hosts inaugural GCC Information Systems Symposium

Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar (CMU-Q) hosted the inaugural GCC Information Systems Symposium in Education City recently. This symposium is the first event of its kind, gathering Information System educators and scholars from across the Gulf region.

The one-day event brought together 70 participants, including scholars from each of the GCC countries, as well as Morocco, Turkey and the UK. Michael Trick, dean, CMU-Q, noted: "As artificial intelligence tools become more prevalent, it is essential for educators in the region to discuss the challenges and opportunities of the road ahead. We are educating future leaders, industry professionals and researchers, and together we can foster regional collaboration and guide the conversation about the critical role of Information Systems in the GCC."

Nui Vatanasakdakul, teaching professor, Information Systems at CMU-Q, who initiated this regional collaboration and served as chair of the symposium said: "It is imperative that we come together as experts across the region to define the future of Information Systems. This symposium is a cru-



Participants in the GCC symposium at CMU-Q.

cial platform where we transform local insights and academic research into actionable, collaborative strategies that will drive and accelerate the GCC's digital and AI transformation."

The organising committee included distinguished academics from across the Gulf Co-operation Council region: Salman Aljazzaf from Kuwait University, Kuwait; Jumanah Alshehri from Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Saudi Arabia; Eman Alyami from Saudi Electronic University, Saudi Arabia; Mona Alyami from Taif University, Saudi Arabia; Xin Huang from CMU-Q, Qatar; and Mazen Shawosh from King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, Saudi Arabia.

A centrepiece of the symposium was a Dean's Panel Series discussion moderated by dean Trick. The conversation delved into how Information Systems scholars, researchers, and industry professionals can ensure that AI is delivering measurable, ethical value.

Looking ahead, the Information Systems faculty at CMU-Q intend for the conversation to continue. "Our call to action is to more purposefully integrate the incredible Information Systems expertise we have in the GCC," said Vatanasakdakul. "Our goal is to work together to identify key challenges and lead digital and AI transformation that delivers meaningful, human-centred value across the GCC region."

Msheireb Museums, QC honour Gaza children at '241 Martyrs'

By Shaima Sherif
Doha

The '241 Martyrs' exhibition at Msheireb Museums, organised in collaboration with Qatar Charity (QC), is honouring 241 children in Gaza who were martyred in the recent conflict. The exhibition, which runs until December 18, presents the children's stories through photographs, letters and personal details.

According to Msheireb Museums, the exhibition aims to offer a space for reflection and raise awareness on the human impact of the conflict. "As a narrative museum, it is important that we talk about our present as much as our past," Abdullah al-Naama, general manager of Msheireb Museums, told *Gulf Times*. "This tragedy should be seen, understood and remembered because it is part of recent history."

He said the exhibition serves as a place for collective reflection and invites residents and visitors to attend.

Aisha al-Kuwari, director of Humanitarian Operations at QC, said the exhibition was created to



Aisha al-Kuwari speaking at the event.

highlight that each of the 241 children, who are under the sponsorship of QC, had a story and a future that was lost. "We are gathered in the centre of Doha to remember 241 children. They had hopes, dreams and futures that they never had the chance to live," she said.

Al-Kuwari noted that the impact of the conflict continues for families, parents and sponsors. "Their loss remains, even when the fighting stops," she said, adding that the exhibition also underscores the need to protect civilians, especially children.

Anas, a sponsor who supported a child in Gaza for four years, said he had developed a close bond with



Abdullah al-Naama at the opening of '241 Martyrs' exhibition at Msheireb Museums. **PICTURES:** Thajudheen

the boy despite never meeting him. "I only knew him from his picture and a handwritten letter. I never got to finish reading it. I cry every time I try," he said.

He added that he learned in November 2024 that the child he supported had died after months of silence during the conflict. "I felt like I lost someone from my own family. I still hope he's at peace."

The exhibition invites visitors to reflect on humanity, responsibility and remembrance as they move through its displays.



The exhibition presents the children's stories through photographs, letters and personal details.



Rich, unified showcase of creativity throughout Arab Cup 2025 at Katara

Katara Cultural Village continues to offer a rich array of events accompanying the Arab Cup 2025, transforming its corridors into an open exhibition that reflects a passion for art and depth of heritage.

At the Creativity Square, Katara noted that the Al Daad Festival present activities that celebrate the Arabic language as a vessel of identity and a source of knowledge.

It features engaging panel discussions, interactive workshops for children introducing them to the beauty of Arabic calligraphy, and an exhibition showcasing artworks that transform the Arabic letter into captivating visual forms.

The festival underscores Katara's role in strengthening the presence of the Arabic language and highlighting its cultural significance.

The fan zone also emerged as one of Katara's key attractions, transforming into a lively space where supporters gather in a spirited atmosphere.

Cheering for teams is paired with entertainment segments, live performances, and interactive activities.

The Puppet Workshop is attracting children and families, providing young participants the chance to design their own puppets, animate them, and interact with them.

The experience combines art and imagination, helping develop children's expressive and creative skills.

The workshop uses the Arabic language in story-

telling and theatrical scenes, turning puppets into a playful tool that brings children closer to the beauty and meaning of the Arabic script, opening new doors to learning through play and creativity.

Such presentation highlights the Arab cultural presence at Katara's spaces and demonstrates fashion's ability to act as an artistic language that expresses identity and offers audiences a window into the aesthetic traditions of the region.

The fine arts competition kicked off with the participation of 35 artists from Qatar and various Arab countries, painting their works live in front of the audience.

They draw inspiration from the beauty of the setting, the atmosphere of the tournament, and the authentic features of Qatari heritage.

Visitors experience vivid artistic moments as they watch colours take shape on canvases. The competition echoes Katara's message of making art a lived, dynamic experience, and not merely a displayed object.

The photography competition, held as part of the Katara Traditional Dhow Festival, also features strong participation as contestants strive to capture the most striking images documenting the beauty of traditional boats, the spirit of maritime craftsmanship, and the details of heritage-related trades.

The festival also presents a living heritage tableau that evokes the history of maritime navigation and traditional shipbuilding in Qatar and the region.



Visitors making merry memories at Darb Al Saai QND celebrations

The Qatar National Day (QND) celebrations at Darb Al Saai in the Umm Salal area continue to attract a large turnout of citizens and residents, with families making up the most prominent presence.

Held under the slogan "With you we rise, and from you we anticipate" and organised by the Ministry of Culture until December 20, the event features heritage and entertainment shows, competitions, and arts, among other cultural activations.

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) is taking part with a specially designed pavilion shaped as a comprehensive "security village".

It showcases the MoI's modern security ecosystem and its broad community engagement, with the participation of around 15 specialised departments and units.

The pavilion offers a blend of security education, direct public services, and innovative interactive activities tailored for all age groups.

The MoI aims to strengthen community partnership, foster direct communication with the public, highlight its vital role in maintaining national security and stability, and introduce



A unique mix of security education, direct services, and activities at the MoI pavilion.

younger generations to Qatar's heritage and values that underpin security and community work.

The General Directorate of Civil Defence presents live demonstrations and simulations of firefighting and rescue operations, along with essential educational materials on public safety and fire prevention.

Qatar Archives is also participating

this year with a pavilion at Darb Al Saai aimed at introducing the public to its mission.

Mohammed Hassan al-Shahrani, head of the Private Archives Department, said that this year's participation features a renewed approach, with the pavilion designed to align with the identity of the State of Qatar's emblem and highlight its historical evolution in

a simple, audience-friendly way.

The "Al Bidaa" activity at Darb Al Saai 2025 presents an advanced model of maritime heritage showcasing, through a specially designed space that reintroduces Qatar's maritime professions with a modern vision rooted in live documentation and interactive experiences.

Nayef Malallah al-Muhammadi, head of Al-Maha Folk Arts Group, said their participation adds significant value to the maritime arts segment.

This is the first year the group participates with a large number of Qatari *nahham* performers (maritime chanters), giving the performance a distinct presence.

The Maritime Museum at Darb Al Saai is one of the most popular stops, offering an immersive experience that showcases Qatar's maritime history and its role in shaping national identity.

The museum includes original heritage items such as diving and pearling tools, old navigation maps and routes, and models of traditional vessels used by ancestors.

It documents maritime professions and their evolution across eras.



QND celebrations at Darb Al Saai feature cultural and heritage activations.

QIAF 'provided global arts community with a platform for dialogue, collaboration'

The seventh edition of the Qatar International Arts Festival (QIAF) provided the international arts community with a broad platform for dialogue and interaction, and an opportunity to discover diverse artistic schools and styles from around the world.

The festival, which concluded yesterday at Katara Cultural Village, drew a large and diverse crowd, ranging from art enthusiasts to avid followers of the cultural scene.

Organised jointly by Katara and MAPS International, the festival presented what was described as an exceptional global artistic panorama, transforming the venue into a vibrant space of creativity.

More than 500 artists from 83 countries have gathered to share their experiences, cultures, and visions at the festival, offering Doha and the world a unique celebration of beauty, diversity, and imagination.

Syrian artist Azza Qashlan, participating with three works by her late father, the renowned Syrian artist Mamdouh Qashlan, said: "We are participating with three works by my late father, Mamdouh Qashlan.

"The first painting depicts three mothers with their children celebrating the arrival of a newborn, in addition to a work highlighting a

corner of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus," she said.

"This is our first participation at Katara and in the Arabian Gulf, and we have witnessed wonderful interaction from Arab and international artists," Qashlan added. "We hope this participation marks the beginning of a series of exhibitions of my father's works in Qatar and the Arab world."

Indian artist Daksha Kanwala, founder of Artnotra, said: "I am honoured to have been chosen as a senior ambassador for QIAF 2025, and I have selected 16 talented artists to represent the Artnotra platform this year."

"The artists are showcasing diverse styles including abstract, semi-abstract, landscape, cubist, and sculpture," she said. "We are pleased with the strong interaction from visitors, and we hope this participation will be a successful step that supports the artists."

Nepali artist Shivangi Rana, taking part in her first international exhibition, noted that she has spent a decade honing her craft, sold more than 500 pieces, and held five exhibitions.

Her abstract works are designed to bring positive energy into homes, and she expressed delight at seeing visitors respond warmly to them.

Meanwhile, Julia Savitskaya



Artists share cultures and visions at the QIAF 2025. **PICTURES:** Thajudheen and supplied



from Russia, partner and official agent of PS Kurgat Gallery, stated: "We are proud to represent a group of Russian artists at this exhibi-

tion, showcasing a diverse range of modern art."

"Our aim is to highlight the breadth and diversity of con-

temporary art and the artistic solutions it can offer for homes and interior design," she said, adding: "This is not our first time partici-

pating at QIAF, and we are always happy to be in Qatar. We hope the festival achieves even greater international recognition."



PISQ charity initiatives support QCS



Pakistan International School Qatar (PISQ) announced the remarkable success of two charity initiatives – the Girls’ Wing Bake Sale and the Cambridge Wing Bake Sale – organised to support the mission of the Qatar Cancer Society (QCS).

The events highlighted the values of empathy, compassion, leadership, and social responsibility deeply rooted within the PISQ community, a statement said.

The Girls’ Wing hosted a charity bake sale, led by the students of Grades 11 and 12 under the supervision of vice-principal and biology teacher Nishat Wajid.

The students prepared an impressive range of homemade baked items, showcasing not only their culinary creativity but also their commitment to serving humanity.



Students from Grades 5-12 participated by purchasing items and contributing generously.

The proceeds collected from the event will be donated to QCS, reaffirming PISQ’s dedication to charitable causes. The Girls’ Wing

thanked PISQ principal Ch Muhammad Afzal, for his constant encouragement and for providing students with the opportunity to lead impactful community service initiatives.

In another inspiring act of

generosity, the Cambridge Wing of PISQ organised a charity bake sale to support QCS.

Spearheaded by the Cambridge Students’ Council, the event demonstrated exceptional leadership, discipline, and community spirit.



Nearly 50 students took part by preparing homemade items, managing stalls, and motivating their peers to support the cause.

The bake sale was held under the guidance of vice-principal Aliya Ejaz. Teachers assisted the

students throughout the planning and implementation stages. All collected funds were formally handed over to QCS, contributing to their vital work in cancer awareness, patient support, and community health initiatives.



RPS holds ‘Numinova’ programme to enhance teaching excellence

The Mathematics Department of Rajagiri Public School (RPS), under the auspices of the Principal Forum Qatar, organised Numinova-2025, an inter-school capacity-building programme aimed to strengthen teaching excellence through innovation and reflective practice.

The event was inaugurated by RPS academic director Dr Prashant Palakkappallil, who underlined the importance of continuous professional development in an education system that continues to evolve. The programme, which began with a welcome address by vice-principal S Radhakrishnan, brought

together 52 teachers from various schools across Qatar.

Numinova-2025 also commemorated the birth anniversary of Srinivasa Ramanujan, celebrating India’s mathematical legacy and his notable contributions to number theory and infinite series. The day featured three key sessions. Elizabeth Dominic, headmistress for Grades I to IV, presented strategies for building thinking classrooms that encourage inquiry, reasoning, and collaboration.

Radhakrishnan led Ganitham Madhuram, demonstrating lively and engaging approaches to teaching mathematics through puzzles, shortcuts, and number

MES team excels in Malayalam quiz



Students of MES Indian School showcased an impressive performance at the ‘Keralam Nammude Keralam – Malayalam Quiz 2025 (Season 9)’, organised by Millennium Kids, Doha – Qatar, as part of their 25th anniversary celebrations.

The preliminary event saw participation from over 1,000 students representing 20 schools across Qatar. MES Indian School

secured significant representation in the semi-finals with 14 students (seven teams) from the senior category (Grades IX–XII) and 18 students (nine teams) from the junior category (Grades V–VIII) qualifying among the top 25 teams in their respective divisions.

In the finals, Afina Faizal (VIII–N) and Fathima Hanin (VIII–N) in the junior category

clinched first prize.

In the senior category, Muhammed Razin Shahir (IX–C) and Muhammed Bashash (IX–C) were third.

Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar congratulated the winners and thanked the guidance of the teaching faculty of the Malayalam Department, which was co-ordinated by Bijily Mohanakumar.

Kathakali returns to Doha after long gap



In a spectacular showcase of India’s classical heritage, a Kathakali performance was organised by Fun Day Club in association with the Angamaly Kathakali Club and Indian Cultural Centre (ICC).

The event, which attracted Kathakali enthusiasts not only

from Qatar but also from India and abroad, carried special significance as the classical dance-drama from Kerala returned to Doha after a long span of 38 years.

Indian ambassador Vipul and ICC president A P Manikantan were among the guests who lauded the organisers for bringing an iconic art form like Kathakali to the forefront in Qatar. The performers included:

Preface -Appukkuttan Swaralayam; Characters - Bheeman - Kalamandalam Sreekumar, Panchali - Sreekanth Avanav, Hanuman - Sadanam Bhasi, Sangeetham (Vocal Music) - Kalamandalam Babu Nampoothiri, Sreedevan Cherumittam, Percussion - Chenda - Kalamandalam Udayan Nampoothiri, Maddalam - Biju Attupuram, Chutti (Costume Make-up) - Mithun Murali Thrippunithura.

Winners crowned at India Cup golf tourney



The sixth edition of the Hydrofab India Cup Golf Tournament was held recently under the patronage of the Embassy of India in Qatar at the Doha Golf Club, featuring 44 players in two categories - Individual Strokeplay Format on the 18 Hole Championship Course, and Two-Person Team Texas Scramble Format on the 9 Hole Academy Course.

In the Academy Course Texas Scramble Format, ‘Team Mohd Azfar Ali and Syed Ali Ahmed’ were declared champions. ‘Team Vilas Sangam and Manna Dey’ tied for the runners-up spot with ‘Team Ashish Jain and Samir Gupta.’ Special prizes went to Samir Gupta for ‘Longest Drive,’

and Kunal Bhatia for ‘Nearest to Pin’ as well as ‘Closest to Rope’.

In Championship Course Individual Strokeplay Format, Tasnim Kazi emerged the winner in the Ladies division with a score of Net 75. In the ‘Gross’ category, Sierra Leone ambassador Tejan Fadlu-Deen was the winner, followed by Saad Kazi as the runner-up.

In the ‘Net’ category, Chandrashekar Angadi was crowned India Cup Champion, with Senthil Kumar as the runner-up, while also aching the 17th with a Hole-In-One in the process, a first in the history of the championship. Special prizes went to Jalaj Srivastava for ‘Longest Drive,’ Prakash Iyer for ‘Longest Putt,’ and Senthil Kumar for ‘Nearest to Pin.’

Spearheaded by Indian ambassador Vipul, the event was organised by Fazal Kazi and managed by Qatar Golf Lovers (QGL). The prize distribution ceremony and dinner was embellished by a soulful and captivating sitar recital by Rukkaiya Pachisa. India’s former foreign secretary Ranjan Mathai, also a former ambassador to Qatar was present.

India Cup tournament director Sanjay Jain along with QGL president Manoj Meghchiani emceed the ceremony, which concluded with the winners being awarded by ambassadors Vipul and Fadlu-Deen and Serbia’s former ambassador Jasminko Pozderac, event sponsors Fazal Kazi, Seema Mobin, and Mohd Hassan Kunhi.

Expatriate group elects new managing committee

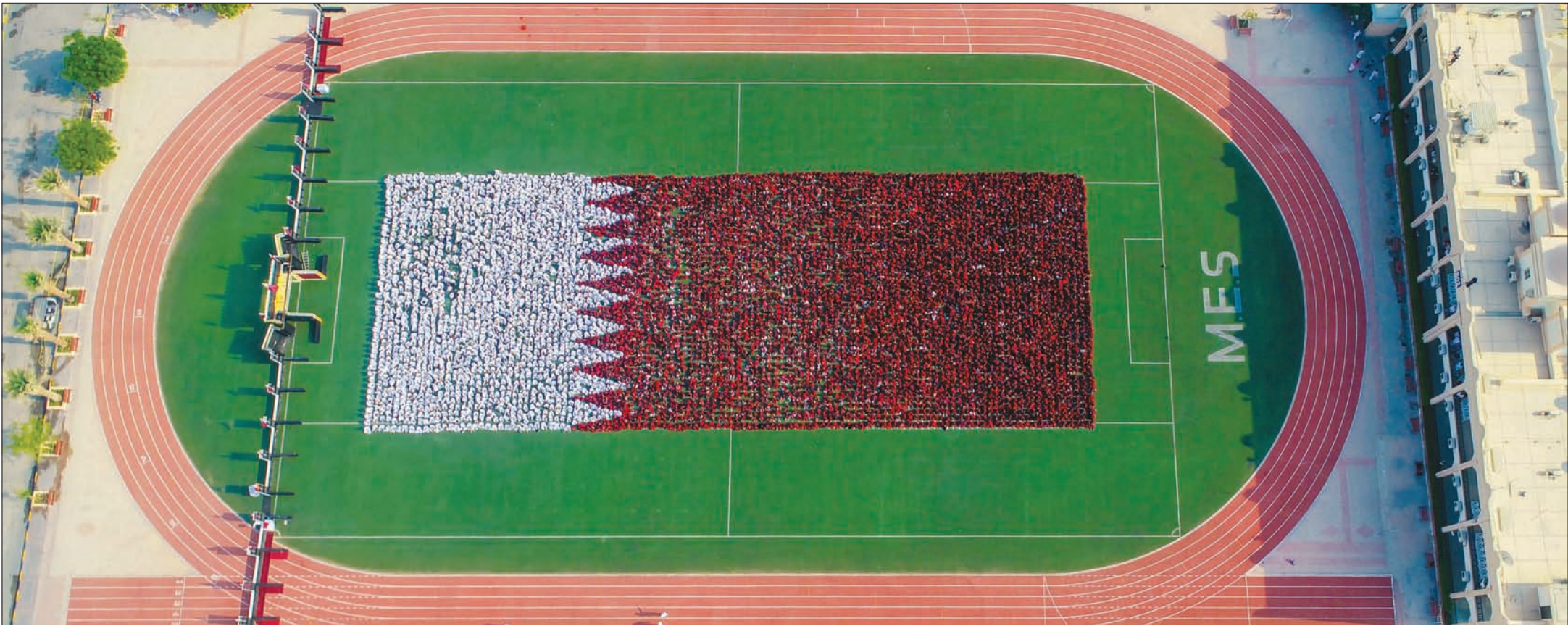
Nammude Adukkalathottam Doha (Our Kitchen Garden) has elected its new managing committee for the term 2025-2027. The newly elected team brings together a dedicated group of individuals committed to expanding the organisation’s activities, strengthening community engagement, and promoting sustainable home gardening practices among families in Doha.

The officials are Siroz Raveendran (president), Jawahar Bharathan (general secretary), Jainas Arakkal George (treasurer), Jitto James (vice-president), Ramla Samad



(joint secretary), and managing committee members Ambhara Pavithran, Mohammed Siyad, Rajesh Trikanthoor, Sudheer Shenoy, Hamza M V, and Nishad Hassankutty. The new committee has expressed its commitment to introducing more community-oriented gardening

initiatives, workshops, awareness programmes, and family engagement events in the upcoming term. With a renewed focus on sustainability, the team aims to encourage more households to cultivate their own vegetables and support a healthier, greener lifestyle.



MES creates largest Qatar flag formation



In a historic feat of unity and tribute to Qatar, about 7,700 students and staff of MES Indian School formed ‘the Largest Human Qatar Flag’, a magnificent sight to behold.

Ministry of Education and Higher Education’s private schools education consultant Mu-barak Abdullah al-Mansoori and Indian Doctors Club president Dr Saibu George were the observers



The entire display covered an area of 1,925sqm.

“Through this collaborative initiative reflecting unwavering commitment to excellence, we pay a heartfelt tribute to Qatar and the

visionary leadership that continues to inspire generations,” remarked principal Dr Hameeda Kadar.

MES governing board directors and members, officials, teaching, non-teaching staff and students

were present. The event was co-ordinated by the Department of Physical Education’s co-ordinator Salim J Nadaf and cultural committee convener Anver, along with a team of teachers.



Podar Pearl School excels in global moot court contest

A team from Podar Pearl School, Qatar’s only Round Square institution, made a mark at the SKV Saakshya International Moot Court Competition, hosted by Scindia Kanya Vidyalaya, Gwalior, India, in collaboration with BML Munjal University.

The four-day international event provided an immersive, real-world legal learning experience. Participants engaged in advanced legal research, memorial drafting, and structured oral advocacy, mirroring the rigour of actual courtroom proceedings.

The Podar Pearl School team of six Grade XI students - Noora

Abdul Rasheed, Yusuf Syed Mohammed Rawther, Shanvi S Raj, Nashwa Ibrahim, Sheraz Parantode Shanavas and Sanjana Nalluri - competed alongside students from around the world, showcasing exceptional analytical thinking, strategic reasoning, and public speaking skills.

Throughout the competition, the students argued both Petitioner and Respondent positions on a complex hypothetical case before distinguished judicial panels comprising seasoned legal professionals. These experts challenged participants to defend their arguments with clarity, depth, and precision.

Reflecting on the experience, a student representative, said: “The exposure to high standards of oral advocacy and the constructive feedback from judges was an invaluable learning opportunity.”

Beyond the courtroom, the delegation also embraced the event’s cultural and collaborative dimensions. Students took part in a mock flag march, interacted with peers from diverse countries, attended a workshop led by BML Munjal University faculty, and visited a local cultural landmark, achieving a meaningful balance of academic rigour and cultural exchange.

DPS-MIS student shines at Science Olympiad



DPS-Modern Indian School (DPS-MIS) Grade X student Amir Nawaz won a bronze at the 22nd International Junior Science Olympiad (IJSO 2025) in Sirius, Russia, held from November 23-December 2, representing Team Qatar. The Qatari team, comprising six exceptional students from both public and private schools, bagged two bronze in this global competition. The students were supported by academic supervisors from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, who guided them through scientific discussions, test translations, assessments, and co-ordination throughout the event.

NIS conducts career fair



Noble International School (NIS), Al Wukair Campus, organised a Career Fair for senior students, providing them with exposure to higher education opportunities. The event brought together representatives from various renowned universities across India, Germany, Dubai, Malaysia, and Kyrgyzstan. The delegates interacted with students, offering detailed information about undergraduate programmes, admission procedures, scholarship options, and future career prospects. The fair aimed to guide senior students in making informed decisions about their academic and professional pathways after graduation, empowering them to choose careers that align with their interests and aspirations.

IIS organises Annual Sports Day

The Annual Sports Day of Ideal Indian School (IIS) concluded recently, and was highlighted by a spectacular display featuring 1,200 students.

The two-day celebration marked the 41st Annual Sports Day of the Morning Session and the 2nd Annual Sports Day of the Evening Session.

Earlier, nearly 3,000 students participated in the preliminary heats of various track and field events across the sub-junior, junior, senior, and super senior categories in both sessions.

On the first day, school president Dr Hassan Kunhi M P was



the chief guest. IIS alumnus and national middle distance runner Abdurahman Saeed Hassan, who represented Qatar at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, was the guest of honour. Qatar Olympic Committee’s sports event co-ordinator

Fajar al-Athiya and IIS HR Committee member Ali Khalid al-Kubaisi and principal Shaik Shamim Saheb were present.

On the second day, the Evening Session of the Sports Meet had as chief guest Hussein Yasser — an

eminent Qatar National Football Team player, AFC Asian Cup 2011 representative, and former Manchester City footballer — along with al-Kubaisi as the guest of honour. In his annual sports report, the principal highlighted the



school’s achievements in international tournaments such as the CBSE Qatar cluster championships, CBSE National meets and various local sports events.

A colourful mass drill display by

the KG, Junior Section, Girls and Boys Sections enthralled the spectators. Students who brought laurels in national and international sports meets were honoured during the occasion.



Displaced Palestinians ride a donkey-drawn cart on a rain-flooded street in Gaza City, yesterday.

UN agency warns displaced Gazans face floods, as emergency supplies blocked

Reuters
Geneva

Hundreds of thousands of displaced Gazans face flooding of their tents and shelters by heavy rains, and materials for shelters and sandbags are not being allowed to enter the enclave, the UN International Organisation for Migration said yesterday.

Torrential rain swept across the Gaza Strip on Thursday, flooding tents sheltering families displaced by two years of war, and leading to the death of a baby girl due to exposure, local health officials said.

A total of 12 people are dead or missing as a result of the storm, with at least 13 buildings having collapsed and 27,000 tents flooded, the media office of the Hamas-run Gaza government said.

Nearly 795,000 displaced people are at heightened risk of potentially dangerous flooding in low-lying, rubble-filled areas where families are living in unsafe shelters, the IOM said. Insufficient drainage and waste management also heightened the risk of disease outbreak, the UN agency added.

Materials to help reinforce shelters such as timber and plywood, as well as sandbags and water pumps to help with flooding have been delayed from entering Gaza due to access restrictions, the IOM said. Israel says it is meeting its obligations and accuses agencies of inefficiency and failing to prevent theft by Hamas, which the



A displaced Palestinian boy uses a shovel as he stands in muddy water in a tent camp on a rainy day in Nuseirat, central Gaza Strip, yesterday.

group denies. Cogat, the Israeli military arm that oversees humanitarian matters, was not immediately available for comment.

In a displaced camp in Nuseirat, central Gaza, ankle-deep water had pooled around the tents, soaking mattresses, shoes and clothes. Working with a bucket, 50-year-old Youssef Tawtah was trying to bail the water out, but it had nowhere to go and he appeared to make little progress.

“All night long the children and I were on our feet,” he said. “How can the children handle it?”

As his family gathered around a small open fire on a sandy bank near the tent, he hauled a sopping mattress through the floodwaters. Even cooking a meal will be difficult. “Our food is ruined,” he said.

Supplies already dispatched to Gaza, including waterproof tents, thermal blankets and tarpaulins, were not able to withstand the flooding, the IOM added.

“After this storm made landfall

yesterday, families are trying to protect their children with whatever they have,” IOM Director General Amy Pope said.

A ceasefire has broadly held since October, but the war destroyed much of Gaza’s infrastructure, and living conditions are dire. UN and Palestinian officials said at least 300,000 new tents are urgently needed for the roughly 1.5mn people still displaced.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said more than 4,000 people were living in what it described as high-risk areas on the coast, with 1,000 people directly affected by high waves from the sea.

It warned of health risks from pollution. “Thousands of families are sheltering in these low-lying and debris-filled coastal areas with no drainage or protective barriers, with heaps of garbage everywhere along the roads,” said WHO representative Rik Peepkorn.

November 2024 ceasefire that was supposed to end more than a year of hostilities with the Hezbollah fighter group, and has also kept troops in five areas it deems strategic. The Israeli military said in a statement that its forces “struck a training and qualification compound” used by Hezbollah’s elite Radwan Force where operatives “underwent shooting exercises and additional training on the use of various types of weapons”.

Series of Israeli strikes hit south and east Lebanon

A series of Israeli strikes hit south and east Lebanon yesterday, state media reported, as Israel’s army said it was targeting Hezbollah sites, the latest such raids despite a year-old ceasefire, AFP reported from Beirut. Lebanon’s state-run National News Agency (NNA) reported strikes in around a dozen locations, including up to around 30 kilometres from the Israeli border, citing at times “heavy raids”. Israel has kept up strikes on Lebanon despite a

Iran raising fuel prices for heavy users to curb consumption

Reuters
Dubai

Iran will raise the price of its heavily subsidised gasoline for heavy users today, state media reported, as the Opec member seeks to control rising fuel demand without triggering public anger.

Proposals to increase Iran’s fuel prices, some of the lowest in the world, have long been postponed amid apparent concerns that they might cause a repeat of widespread protests seen in 2019 that were crushed by the state.

The government will introduce a higher rate of 50,000 Iranian rials per litre (4 US cents

under the free market rate) at midnight yesterday for most consumers requiring more than 160 litres per month, state television reported on Friday.

Other drivers can still purchase up to 60 litres of gasoline at the existing rate of 15,000 rials per litre and up to another 100 litres at 30,000 rials per litre. According to local media, domestic fuel production of around 110mn litres per day lags rising demand which can go up to 140mn litres per day due to factors such as inefficient cars, smuggling to neighbouring countries and heat in summer.

Government officials have warned that subsidised fuel

prices in Iran are “not rational”, impose a heavy burden on state finances and encourage suboptimal consumption as well as necessitating fuel imports.

Private drivers owning several cars will only be able to buy fuel at the lower-priced quotas for one of their vehicles, while most government-owned vehicles, many newly-produced cars and imported vehicles will have to use the more expensive rate. Iran’s economy risks staggering into simultaneous hyperinflation and deep recession, officials and analysts have said, as the rulers scramble to preserve stability with limited room to manoeuvre after a snapback of UN sanctions.

Former Iraqi president Salih picked as new UNHCR chief

AFP
Geneva

Former Iraqi president Barham Salih is set to become the next UN High Commissioner for Refugees, according to a document seen by AFP on yesterday, taking over an agency tackling swingeing budget cuts.

Salih, 65, was president of Iraq from 2018-2022. He will replace Filippo Grandi, who is leaving at the end of December after 10 years as the UN refugees chief.

A moderate and veteran Kurdish politician, Salih’s long political career has included several senior positions in the Iraqi government and in the country’s autonomous Kurdistan region after the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled longtime ruler Saddam Hussein.

A letter from UN chief Antonio Guterres, seen by AFP, said he will propose Salih for approval by the UN General Assembly – typically a routine procedure – for a five-year term starting on January 1.

He will be stepping into a fire-fighting role from day one.

The Geneva-based UNHCR, like many other UN agencies, has



File photo of Barham Salih.

been clobbered by drastic international aid cuts. It has shed nearly 5,000 jobs this year – more than a quarter of its workforce.

The UNHCR is grappling with surging global displacement, while under President Donald Trump, the US – traditionally the world’s top donor – has heavily slashed foreign aid, causing havoc across the globe.

Washington previously accounted for more than 40% of the UNHCR’s budget, and its pull-back, along with belt-tightening by other major donor countries, has left the agency facing “bleak” numbers, according to Grandi.

The right to seek asylum, agreed by states in 1951, “is under threat – more now than in living memory”, the agency’s chief spokesman Ewan Watson told a press conference yesterday.

“At times, it can feel like fear and division are drowning out compassion.”

More than 117mn people are forcibly displaced from their homes, whether inside or outside their own borders. UNHCR’s funding has been slashed by 35% this year to date, “leaving millions without access to safety, food, shelter and vital protection services, let alone the means to re-start independently”, said Watson.

Numerous other candidates were in the running for the UNHCR job, including Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo and Jesper Brodin, the outgoing head of the holding company managing most of furniture giant Ikea’s stores.

Salih was a longstanding top official of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the second-largest Kurdish Iraqi party.

He was also part of an interim authority established by the US following the 2003 invasion.

He was one of Iraq’s deputy prime ministers from 2006 to 2009, then served as the Kurdish prime minister from 2009 to 2012.

Fluent in English, Arabic and Kurdish, Salih served for four years as Iraq’s president – a largely ceremonial office.

Food rations to Sudan to be reduced due to funding shortages: WFP

Reuters
Geneva

Food rations will be reduced for communities facing famine in Sudan from next month due to severe funding shortages, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) said yesterday.

A war that erupted in 2023 between Sudan’s army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has caused what the UN has described as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Communities in the Darfur region are facing famine and malnutrition following an 18-month RSF siege around the city of El-Fasher.

“We will be having to reduce from January to 70% rations for communities that are facing famine,

and 50% for those that are at risk of famine,” Ross Smith, the WFP Director of Emergency Preparedness and Response told reporters in Geneva, speaking via video link from Rome.

“As of April we will fall off a cliff when it comes to funding,” he added. The UN estimates that more than 100,000 people have fled from El-Fasher since its capture by the RSF in late October, with about 15,000 arriving in Tawila, a small nearby town under the control of neutral forces.

The UN says 650,000 people are now sheltered there in total, with hundreds of thousands of refugees having fled there during previous fighting from Zam Zam camp in April.

While the WFP is able to provide food to people in Tawila, it requires \$700mn to maintain its assistance over the next six months across Sudan.

Lagos’ first Street Art festival celebrates the city’s vibrancy

Reuters
Lagos

Lagos’ bustling streets have become a canvas for bold murals and vibrant graffiti as the city hosts its first Street Art Festival.

The ‘Legendary Lagos: City of Dreams’ event features 12 artists – nine from Nigeria and three international – painting large-scale works on walls across the city. Organisers say the goal is to make art accessible to everyone and inspire social change.

“We believe art shouldn’t be confined to galleries and museums,” said Osa Seven, one of the organisers. “Public art allows people to interact with creativity in their everyday environment. It’s about giving hope and showing what art can do to shape society.”

Lithuanian artist Andrey Adno said his mural, ‘The Pace of Lagos’, reflects the city’s energy.

Local artist HK Locks focused on themes of unity and migration, depicting Lagos as a melting pot of ethnicities and ambitions. “Lagos is where people come to chase dreams,” he said. “My piece shows collaboration and the hustle that defines this city.”



An artist poses for a photograph in front of his mural on Ozumba Mbadiwe Way, during the Lagos Street Art Festival in Victoria Island, Nigeria.

Benin issues arrest warrant for prominent activist after coup foiled

AFP
Cotonou

Benin issued an arrest warrant yesterday for anti-Western activist Kemi Seba for “inciting rebellion” after he supported a foiled coup over the weekend.

On Sunday morning, as mutinous soldiers claimed on television to have overthrown President Patrice Talon, Seba posted a video declaring it was “the day of liberation” for his country.

The coup attempt was thwarted later that day.

Seba, whose real name is Stelio Gilles Robert Capo Chichi, 44, heads the NGO Pan-Africanist Emergency and is known for his radical tirades against France and African governments allied with Paris. He has 1.5mn followers on social media. Born Franco-Beninese, Seba was stripped of his French nationality in 2024 and

openly supports the military juntas that came to power through coups in the Sahel region – hostile to Paris and close to Russia.

“Benin is liberated. Patriotic, dignified, courageous soldiers aligned with the voice of popular sovereignty – those who rise every day for dignity – have taken responsibility; they have arrested President Talon,” he said in the video.

However, Talon – backed by the Beninese army – was never detained, and the coup was thwarted during the day with support from Nigeria and France.

Kemi Seba’s lawyer, Juan Branco, declined to comment when contacted by AFP.

Pan-Africanism is a global movement that calls for solidarity, or even political union, between all people of African ancestry. It has been cited as a factor in struggles of African independence movements against colonial powers including France.

Bulgarian govt resigns after mass anti-graft protests

Bulgaria's president will consult parliamentary parties on the formation of a new government next week, the presidency said yesterday, with snap elections likely.

The Balkan EU member, which is introducing the euro from January, was plunged into fresh political turmoil after a series of anti-corruption protests in recent weeks prompted the government to resign on Thursday.

President Rumen Radev will start meeting political parties from Monday, the presidency said in a statement.

Prime Minister Rossen Jeliakov of the conservative GERB party announced on Thursday that his government was resigning after less than a year in office.

Parliament approved the government's resignation yesterday.

The demonstrations that began in late November were provoked by a 2026 draft budget, which protesters branded as an attempt to mask rampant corruption.

The government withdrew the budget last week but anger has persisted.

Last week, Radev declared his support for the protesters and urged the government to step down to make way for elections.

The European Union's poorest country is due to join the eurozone on January 1. – **AFP**

Trump threatens federal funding for states over AI regulations

Reuters
Washington

US President Donald Trump has said he will withhold federal broadband funding from states whose laws to regulate artificial intelligence (AI) are judged by his administration to be holding back American dominance in the technology.

"We want to have one central source of approval," Trump told reporters, flanked by top advisers, including Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, arguing that 50 different regulatory regimes hamper the growth of the nascent industry.

"To win, United States AI companies must be free to innovate without cumbersome regulation," the order said, adding that the current patchwork of different regulatory regimes made compliance more challenging, especially for start-ups.

The Trump administration will work with Congress in coming weeks and months to craft a single national framework to regulate developments in the field of AI, White House adviser Sriram Krishnan told CNBC yesterday.

He told CNBC's *First on CNBC* programme that the executive order signed by Trump was needed to ensure companies

could move forward with technology developments and not have to contend with over 1,000 state regulations already on the books.

However, eventually the issue would require legislation by Congress, Krishnan said.

"So we'll be working with Congress in the coming weeks and months to make sure that is a single national framework which makes sure we can win this race," he said.

Trump has embraced AI as a critical technology, working closely with US companies to boost investment in a sector where China has also made great strides.

However, critics worry that unfettered development could leave Americans vulnerable.

The order also reflects the Trump administration's broader attack against anti-discrimination efforts, taking aim at states such as Colorado that have sought to prevent discriminatory language from being embedded in AI models.

Such efforts could result in "ideological bias" and produce false results, it said.

The order will give the Trump administration tools to push back on the most "onerous" state regulations, said White House AI adviser David Sacks.

The administration will not oppose rules

governing AI that relate to child safety, he added.

It directs the secretary of commerce to evaluate state laws for conflicts with Trump's AI priorities and to block those states in conflict from accessing the \$42bn Broadband Equity Access and Deployment fund.

Democratic Representative Don Beyer, who co-chairs a bipartisan caucus on AI, said the order would squelch safety reforms passed by states and create "a lawless Wild West environment for AI companies that puts Americans at risk".

He warned that the order would reduce the likelihood of congressional action and likely violated the 10th Amendment, which says that any powers not specifically given to the federal government belong to the states or the people.

Trump's order called for his administration to work with Congress to craft a national standard that forbids state laws which conflict with federal policy, protects children, prevents censorship, respects copyrights and protects communities.

Until such a standard was in place, the order called for actions to "check the most onerous and excessive laws emerging from the states that threaten to stymie innovation".

Major AI players including ChatGPT

maker OpenAI, Alphabet's Google, Meta Platforms, and venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz have said the federal government, not states, should regulate the industry.

Yet state leaders from both major political parties have said they need the power to put guardrails around AI, particularly as Congress has consistently failed to pass laws governing the tech industry.

New York state last month became the first to enact a law requiring online retailers that employ "surveillance pricing" to disclose their use of algorithms and customers' personal data.

California and lawmakers in Washington are considering bans on such methods, which are also known as "personalised pricing".

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a Republican, has proposed an AI bill of rights that includes data privacy, parental controls and consumer protections.

California Governor Gavin Newsom, whose state is home to several major AI companies, signed off on a bill this year requiring major AI developers to explain plans to mitigate potential catastrophic risks.

Other states have passed laws banning AI-generated non-consensual imagery and unauthorised political deepfakes.

Italy arrests 34 'tomb raiders'

Italian authorities said yesterday that they had arrested 34 "tomb raiders" suspected of looting treasures from archaeological sites in Sicily and the neighbouring region of Calabria.

The looting of Italy's rich artistic and archaeological heritage is a centuries-old problem, but the Carabinieri police art squad has had some success in recent years in recovering stolen artefacts.

In Sicily, nine people were placed in pre-trial detention and 14 under house arrest on charges including criminal conspiracy, theft of cultural property, trading in stolen goods and counterfeiting, police and prosecutors said.

Officers seized around 10,000 archaeological artefacts, including 7,000 coins issued by Greek city states that existed on Sicily in ancient times, the Catania prosecutors' office said in a statement.

Police also seized hundreds of clay and terracotta vases, bronze rings, brooches and arrowheads.

The estimated total value of the recovered goods is €17mn (\$20mn), prosecutors said.

The word "tombaroli", or tomb raiders, is applied in Italy to criminals who loot any archaeological treasures, not only those found in ancient tombs or graves.

Authorities also discovered a clandestine lab in the eastern Sicilian province of Catania, which produced fake ancient coins, pottery and copper, and seized some looted coins in Germany, where they had been smuggled for resale.

In Calabria, two people were put in pre-trial detention and nine under house arrest on similar charges.

Prosecutors from the town of Catanzaro said the suspects had operated with the "implicit consent" of a local Ndrangheta mafia clan.

Sicily is home to various ancient Roman and Greek archaeological sites, including the spectacular Valley of the Temples in Agrigento. Calabria also has a rich historical heritage. – **Reuters**

US, Canada floods force evacuations

AFP/Reuters
Los Angeles/Washington

Tens of thousands of people were under evacuation orders in western North America, after days of heavy rain forced rivers to burst their banks.

Storms have battered Washington state in the US and British Columbia over the Canadian border for several days, with rivers continuing to rise.

People living south of Seattle and Tacoma have been told to leave their homes, with aerial photographs showing farmland already under water, and populated areas perilously close.

"Level 3 (GO NOW) order is in place due to flooding. There is significant threat to life and or property," said a warning from the city of Orting. "Immediate threat to life. This is a lawful order to leave now. The area is lawfully closed to public access."

Several properties in Snohomish, north of Seattle, were already

flooded, while downtown parts of the border city of Sumas were under water.

Just over the frontier, swathes of the Canadian city of Abbotsford were swamped, with hundreds of properties at risk.

Several major highways leading in and out of Vancouver were closed in places, British Columbia platform Drive BC said on its website.

In British Columbia, five of the six Canadian highways leading to the Pacific port city of Vancouver were shut down due to floods, falling rocks and the risk of avalanches, local authorities said on Thursday.

"This situation is evolving and very dynamic," said the Transport Ministry of British Columbia, the province where Vancouver – the country's largest port – is located.

Access to Vancouver relies largely on a limited highway and railway network that crosses the Rocky Mountains, making it vulnerable to severe weather.

Meteorologists said an atmos-



A sign warning drivers about flood water is partially covered by water in an area flooded by the Snohomish River, as an atmospheric river brings rain and flooding to the Pacific Northwest, in Snohomish, Washington, US. – **Reuters**

pheric river chugging in from the Pacific Ocean has dumped more than 10" (25cm) of rain in some places.

The downpour lessened on Thursday, but the after-effects were expected to linger as the high volumes of water made

their way through the river system.

"While drier weather looks to be in store for this area of the country through the upcoming weekend, the major to catastrophic flooding effects are likely to continue for several days across portions of western Washington State and northwestern Oregon," the US National Weather Service (NWS) said.

Dozens of members of the Washington National Guard have been mobilised to help with sandbagging and other relief efforts, with another 200 troops on their way, the military said.

Scientists say human-caused climate change, driven chiefly by unchecked burning of fossil fuels throughout the industrial age, is worsening natural variations in rainfall.

A warmer atmosphere creates wilder swings in seasonal weather, causing more powerful storms and floods in some places, while leaving others dry for extended periods.

Pakistan partners with Binance to explore \$2bn blockchain conversion

Pakistan has signed a memorandum of understanding with Binance, one of the world's largest crypto exchanges, to explore converting up to \$2bn in sovereign bonds, T-bills and commodity reserves into blockchain-based instruments,

the country's finance ministry said.

Separately, Pakistan also gave initial clearance for Binance and HTX, a digital-asset platform, to register with regulators to set up local subsidiaries and begin preparations for full exchange licence applica-

tions, the virtual assets authority said.

The ministry said the agreement paved the way to explore a potential collaboration aimed at enabling the tokenisation and blockchain-based distribution of Pakistan's real-world assets.

These can include sovereign bonds, treasury bills, commodity reserves such as oil, gas, metals or other raw materials owned by the government.

Tokenisation is the process of creating a digital version of an asset. – **Reuters**

Indiana rejects Trump push to erase Democratic seats

Reuters/AFP
Washington

The Indiana Senate has rejected a new congressional map that would have boosted Republican chances of keeping control of the US House of Representatives in next year's midterm elections, dealing a blow to President Donald Trump's nationwide push to install more friendly maps.

The vote represented a rare rebuke to Trump by members of his own party, which he has largely ruled with an iron fist as president.

The tally was 31-19 against, with more than half of Republican senators joining all 10 Democrats in voting against the bill despite a months-long pressure campaign from the White House aimed at the holdouts.

Trump had threatened to support electoral challengers to any Republican senators who refused

to vote in favour of the map, calling several out by name in a series of hostile social media posts leading up to Thursday's vote.

Speaking to reporters after the vote, Trump said the new map "would have been nice" and could have resulted in two additional Republican seats.

However, he downplayed his role in the issue, saying that he hadn't been "working on it very hard".

Trump said he hoped Indiana Senate President Pro Tempore Rodric Bray, who opposed the redistricting, lost his next primary "because he's done a great disservice".

"I'm sure he'll go down," the president said at the White House. "I'll certainly support anybody that wants to go against him."

The map, which passed the Indiana state House last week, would likely have given Republicans a 9-0 sweep of the state's US House seats in next year's midterms,

when control of Congress will be at stake.

The redrawn map would have reshaped the two districts currently held by Democrats, including by splitting the state's largest city, Indianapolis, into four districts, a move that Democrats have said would harm minority voters in particular.

Republican lawmakers who backed the law on Thursday urged other Republicans to pass the bill and help Trump's agenda in Congress, warning that a Democratic House would pursue dangerous policies.

Redistricting typically occurs at the start of each decade to incorporate new US Census data.

However, Trump ignited a nationwide battle this summer, when he successfully urged Texas Republicans to draw a new congressional map taking aim at five Democratic incumbents.

In response, Democrats in Cali-

ifornia proposed their own redrawn map intended to flip five Republican seats, a plan that was overwhelmingly approved by voters in November.

Other states, both Republican and Democratic-controlled, have initiated their own redistricting efforts.

Some state lawmakers have balked. Trump's push stalled in Kansas amid reluctance from some Republicans, and Democrats in Maryland are split on whether to advance a new map.

Democrats must flip only three Republican seats in the 435-member House next year to win a majority.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson had told reporters that he had been personally calling state lawmakers to shore up support, while Trump mounted his own characteristically forceful intervention, blasting out a social-media tirade demanding a Republican gerrymander.

Trump 'issues pardon' to convicted US election denier

US President Donald Trump said on Thursday that he would "pardon" a Colorado official jailed on charges linked to efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election.

Tina Peters, a former official in Colorado's Mesa County, was sentenced in October 2024 for allowing an unauthorised Trump supporter to access confidential voting information several months after the 2020 election won by Democrat Joe Biden.

"Democrats have been relentless in their targeting of TINA PETERS, a Patriot who simply wanted to make sure that our Elections were Fair and Honest," Trump said in a post on social media on Thursday. "I am granting Tina a full Pardon for her attempts to expose Voter Fraud in the Rigged 2020 Presidential Election!"

Peters is jailed under state charges, making her ineligible for a presidential pardon. She was sentenced to nine years in prison.

Democratic Colorado Governor Jared Polis criticised the move, saying that Peters "was convicted by a jury of her peers, prosecuted by a Republican District Attorney, and found guilty of violating Colorado state laws, including criminal impersonation".

"No President has jurisdiction over state law nor the power to pardon a person for state convictions," Polis said in a social media post on Thursday. – **AFP**



At least 30 die in Myanmar after junta air strike hits hospital: report

Reuters
Bangkok

At least 30 people were killed, including patients, after an air strike by the country's ruling junta hit a hospital in Myanmar's western Rakhine state, according to a rebel group, an aid worker and a witness. More than 70 people were injured, they said.

UN human rights chief Volker Turk said such attacks may amount to a war crime and called for an investigation. A spokesperson for the US State Department called the reports "disturbing" and said the military government

should cease violence against civilians. The hospital in Rakhine's Mrauk U township was struck late on Wednesday by bombs dropped by a military aircraft, said Khine Thu Kha, a spokesman for the Arakan Army, which is battling the ruling junta along parts of the coastal state.

"The Mrauk U General Hospital was completely destroyed," Khine Thu Kha told Reuters. "The high number of casualties occurred because the hospital took a direct hit." A junta spokesman did not respond to calls for comment. Myanmar has been gripped by conflict since the military suppressed protests against a 2021 coup that

seated the elected government led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. The 300-bed hospital was overflowing with patients at the time of the strike, said aid worker Wai Hun Aung, as most healthcare services across swathes of Rakhine state have been suspended amid the ongoing fighting.

"I am appalled and condemn in strongest possible terms the strikes on Rakhine hospital," the UN's Volker Turk said in a post on X, adding he is concerned about new waves of acute violence and fear in the country.

On Thursday morning, the facility lay in complete ruins, with a collapsed roof, shattered columns

and beams, and the bodies of victims laid out on the ground, according to images shared by Wai Hun Aung that he also posted on social media. Reuters could not immediately verify the images. "The remaining patients have been moved to a safe location," he told Reuters. Soon after he heard the sound of explosions on Wednesday night, a 23-year-old resident of Mrauk U said he rushed to the scene. "When I arrived, the hospital was on fire," he said, asking not to be named because of security concerns. "I saw many bodies lying around and many injured people."

The junta, which has the only air force in Myanmar, has been

increasingly using airstrikes to hit targets inside rebel-held areas. From January to late November, the junta conducted 2,165 airstrikes, compared to 1,716 such incidents in all of 2024, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.

The US State Department spokesperson said Washington was deeply concerned about the Myanmar crisis and called on the junta to allow unhindered access to humanitarian assistance, release those unjustly detained, and engage in dialogue with opposition groups. "This is essential for a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region," the official said. Resist-

ance groups formed since the coup have combined with major ethnic armies like the Arakan Army to take on the military, which is fighting the rebellion on multiple frontlines. Since the breakdown of a ceasefire in 2023, the Arakan Army has pushed the military out of 14 of Rakhine's 17 townships, gaining control of an area larger than Belgium, according to an analysis published by the ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute.

Mrauk U township, in the north of Rakhine state, has been under the control of the Arakan Army since last year and there has been no recent fighting in the area, Khine Thu Kha said.

Thai PM dissolves parliament, paving way for national polls

AFP
Bangkok

Thailand's prime minister dissolved parliament yesterday, paving the way for general elections early next year as deadly border clashes continue with neighbour Cambodia.

The move comes earlier than expected and just three months after Anutin Charnvirakul - of the conservative Bhumjaithai party - became prime minister when his predecessor was removed from office over an ethics violation. "The House of Representatives is dissolved to hold a new general election for members of the House," a decree published in the Royal Gazette yesterday said.

Anutin was widely expected to wait until after Christmas to dissolve parliament.

"Since the administration is a minority government and domestic political conditions are fraught with multiple challenges, the government cannot continue administering state affairs continuously, efficiently, and with stability," the Royal Gazette said, citing a report received from Anutin. "Therefore, the appropriate solution is to dissolve the House of Representatives and hold a new general election."

The dissolution comes as fighting stemming from a decades-long territorial dispute over ancient temples has flared again on the border with Cambodia, where clashes have killed at least 20 people and displaced around 600,000, mostly in Thailand. In a statement, Cambodia's defence ministry said the Thai military continued to shell and fire machine guns into Cambodian territory yesterday morning.

AFP journalists heard continu-

ous artillery fire at the border yesterday, ahead of an expected call between Anutin and US president Donald Trump, who has made vocal attempts to broker peace between the Southeast Asian neighbours.

At the congressional ball at the White House on Thursday night, Trump claimed again to have solved eight wars.

"Although Thailand and Cambodia, I think I'm going to have to make a couple of phone calls on Thailand, but we'll get that one back on track," he said.

The two countries have blamed each other for the fresh fighting, which saw Thailand launch air strikes and use tanks against its neighbour on Monday.

Evacuees at a shelter in Thailand's Surin province told AFP they were less concerned about who leads the new government than about who would improve their lives along the border.

"I just care that the leader, whoever that is, is someone who helps ordinary farmers like us," said 68-year-old Somrak Suebsoontorn. Under Thai law, elections must be held between 45 and 60 days after parliament is dissolved, meaning polls are expected around the end of January or early February.

Anutin said in a Facebook post late Thursday he "would like to return power to the people", a signal in the kingdom that a prime minister intends to dissolve parliament. His coalition backer, the People's Party, said Thursday it would submit a motion of no-confidence in Anutin, claiming Bhumjaithai broke its agreement during a crucial vote on constitutional amendments.

"They said they wouldn't support me anymore. They asked me



Mean Chanyada, governor of Oddar Meanchey province, answers reporters' questions as people wait to receive supplies at Batthkav refugee camp.

to dissolve the house. I just followed their request," Anutin told reporters yesterday outside the Government House. The conservative took power in September with coalition backing conditional on dissolving parliament, becoming the kingdom's third leader in two years. He was once an ally of the influential political clan of Thaksin Shinawatra - who have been a dominant force in Thai politics since the turn of the century, but are increasingly faltering after a succession of legal and political setbacks.

Anutin abandoned his coalition with their Pheu Thai Party this summer in apparent outrage over former Thai prime minister Patongtarn Shinawatra's conduct during the border row with Cambodia.



People carry supplies at Batthkav refugee camp, amid clashes between Thailand and Cambodia along a disputed border area, in Chong Kal, Oddar Meanchey Province, Cambodia.

During his three months in office, Anutin has had to deal with the escalating military conflict, as well as attacks on scam hubs in Myanmar driving hundreds across the border into Thailand, and the death of the former queen Sirikit in October.

Indonesia floods were 'extinction level' for rare orangutans

AFP
Bangkok

Indonesia's deadly flooding was an "extinction-level disturbance" for the world's rarest great ape, the tapanuli orangutan, causing catastrophic damage to its habitat and survival prospects, scientists warned yesterday.

Only scientifically classified as a species in 2017, tapanulis are incredibly rare, with fewer than 800 left in the wild, confined to a small range in part of Indonesia's Sumatra. One dead suspected tapanuli orangutan has already been found in the region, conservationists told AFP.

"The loss of even a single orangutan is a devastating blow to the survival of the species," said Panut Hadisiswoyo, founder and chairman of the Orangutan Information

Centre in Indonesia. And analysis of satellite imagery combined with knowledge of the tapanuli's range suggests that flooding last month which killed nearly 1,000 people may also have devastated wildlife in the Batang Toru region.

The scientists focused on the so-called West Block, the most densely populated of three known tapanuli habitats, and home to an estimated 581 tapanulis before the disaster. There, "we think that between six and 11 percent of orangutans were likely killed," said Erik Meijaard, a longtime orangutan conservationist.

"Any kind of adult mortality that exceeds one percent, you're driving the species to extinction, irrespective of how big the population is at the start," he told AFP.

But tapanulis have such a small population and range to begin with

that they are especially vulnerable, he added. Satellite imagery shows massive gashes in the mountainous landscape, some of which extend for more than a kilometre and are nearly 100m wide, Meijaard said.

The tide of mud, trees and water toppling down hillsides would have carried away everything in its path, including other wildlife like elephants.

David Gaveau, a remote sensing expert and founder of conservation start-up The Tree Map, said he was flabbergasted by the before-and-after comparison of the region. "I have never seen anything like this before during my 20 years of monitoring deforestation in Indonesia with satellites," he told AFP.

The devastation means remaining tapanulis will be even more vulnerable, with sources of food and shelter now washed away. Over nine per-

cent of the West Block habitat may have been destroyed, the group of scientists estimated.

In a draft paper shared with AFP and set to be published as a pre-print in coming days, they warned the flooding represents an "extinction-level disturbance" for tapanulis.

Environmentalists have long campaigned against industrial activity in Batang Toru, particularly a hydroelectric dam and gold mine.

The highland homes currently inhabited by tapanulis are not their preferred habitat, but it is where remaining orangutans have been pushed by development elsewhere. Earlier this month, Indonesia's government said industrial plantations, hydropower and gold mining in the region had "contributed significantly to the pressure on the environment".

They announced they would

suspend operating permits for all projects in the region pending a review. The government, along with environmentalists, has said deforestation contributed to the scale of the flooding disaster. A study published Thursday also said climate change-linked heavier rains and warmer seas that can turbocharge storms played a role.

The orangutan experts are urging an immediate halt to development that will damage remaining tapanuli habitat, and an immediate survey of the region.

They also back the expansion of protected areas and work to restore lowland forests.

Panut said the region had become eerily quiet after the landslides. "This fragile and sensitive habitat in West Block must be fully protected by halting all habitat-damaging development," he told AFP.

Hong Kong media mogul Jimmy Lai verdict set for Monday

AFP
Hong Kong

Hong Kong court will issue a verdict on Monday in the national security trial of pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai, a case widely criticised as a sign of erosion of political freedoms in the Chinese city. Lai, who turned 78 this week, is charged with foreign collusion under Hong Kong's national security law, which Beijing imposed

following huge and sometimes violent pro-democracy protests in 2019.

The founder of the 'Apple Daily' newspaper has been behind bars since late 2020, reportedly in solitary confinement. Journalists had already started queuing on Friday outside the West Kowloon court-house for a place in the chamber where Lai's verdict will be read.

The hearing, before a three-judge panel, will begin at 10am on Monday, according to a court diary notice seen Friday. Previous

hearings for Lai's case often drew a crowd of supporters and press, some of whom had to watch a livestream of proceedings elsewhere in the court building as they could not fit into the courtroom. Aside from the collusion offence - which could land him in prison for life - Lai is also charged with "seditious publication", with prosecutors citing 161 items including op-eds with Lai's byline.

Apple Daily was forced to close in 2021 after police raids and the

arrests of its senior editors. The sprawling trial, which began in December 2023, has drawn criticism from Western nations and rights groups, who have called for Lai's release.

The Reporters Without Borders (RSF) group expressed outrage on Friday at the "short notice announcement" of the verdict, condemning the trial as "arbitrary and unlawful".

"The trial can only be described as a sham and has nothing to do with the rule of law," the group

said in a statement, calling on Britain and the United States to press Beijing for his release. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) called the trial "a travesty of justice". "His national security trial was originally expected to last 30 days when it started in December 2023, after multiple delays. It has gone on for two years now," Beh Lih Yi, CPJ's Asia-Pacific regional director, told AFP. She stressed "serious concerns that the 78-year-old may die in prison as each day passes".

Enormous pressure placed on students in South Korea's ultra-competitive education system has been partly blamed for teenage depression and suicide rates that are among the highest in the world.

This month, South Korea's National Assembly approved an amended law banning private English-language educational institutes from administering entrance tests to preschoolers.

And test scores have long been a highly sensitive and scrutinised issue.

Sovereign's Parade at Royal Military Academy



Britain's Princess Anne, Princess Royal, inspects Officer Cadets during the traditional No 251 Sovereign's Parade, at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, southwest of London yesterday. The parade marks the completion of 44 weeks of intensive training for the Officer Cadets of Commissioning Course 251.



Officer cadet Saudi Prince Turki bin Faisal al-Saud prepares to take part in the No 251 Sovereign's Parade.

UK health service hit by 'super flu' outbreak

AFP
London

The UK is facing an "unprecedented wave of super flu", a health chief warned yesterday as the health minister urged doctors to call off a threatened five-day strike ahead of Christmas.

Wes Streeting said the state-funded National Health Service (NHS) was in an "incredibly precarious situation" as flu cases mounted, and was facing a "challenge unlike any it has seen since the pandemic". NHS figures published on Thursday showed flu cases at a record level for the time of year.

The number of cases jumped 55% in a week to an average of 2,660 patients in hospital each day last week. "With record demand... and an impending resident (junior) doctors strike, this unprecedented wave of super flu is leaving the NHS facing a worst-case scenario for this time of year," said NHS National Medical Director Meghana Pandit.

Streeting said the numbers could triple before the peak and said the situation in hospitals was already "inexcusable". "That's why I am appealing directly to resident doctors to accept the government's offer," he wrote in The Times newspaper.

The functioning of the NHS is

a major political issue in Britain, with Prime Minister Keir Starmer's beleaguered Labour government under pressure to bring down waiting times.

The planned strike from Wednesday will be the 14th walk-out by medics since March 2023 if it goes ahead. Attempts to reduce patient waiting lists have been affected in part by the repeated industrial action by both resident doctors and consultants.

The resident doctors - those below consultant level - are in dispute with the government over pay and a shortage of training opportunities.

Streeting has agreed to the doctors' union's demand that UK-

trained medics get priority for training posts over candidates from overseas. The number of training places will also be boosted. But he insists the government "cannot and will not move on pay, especially not after a 28.9-percent pay rise over the last three years and the highest pay award across the entire public sector in the last two".

The British Medical Association, which represents resident doctors, is demanding an extra 26 percent it says is needed to achieve pay restoration after years of below inflation pay deals. It is due to put the government's new deal to members in an online survey, which will close on Monday.

British economy stumbled during run-up to budget

Reuters
Manchester

Britain's economy shrank unexpectedly in the three months to October, losing momentum in the fraught run-up to finance minister Rachel Reeves'

budget, according to data yesterday that underscored bets on Bank of England interest rate cuts. The Office for National Statistics said gross domestic product contracted by 0.1% in the August-to-October period. Economists polled by Reuters had forecast a flat reading. In October alone, the economy contracted by 0.1%, against forecasts for a 0.1% rise. While single-month GDP figures are volatile and prone to revision, Friday's data means the economy hasn't grown since June.

That underlined the tough economic backdrop faced by Reeves when she prepared her tax-raising budget, announced on November 26 after several weeks of speculation and briefings that had bamboozled investors, consumers and businesses. Reeves criticised the series of leaks this week. Sterling fell slightly against the US dollar and British government bond prices rose after Friday's data, which showed unexpectedly sharp declines in the dominant services sector as well as construction.

"Contractions in both services and construction indicate broad-based weakness, potentially reflecting uncertainty in the run-up to the budget," said

Fergus Jimenez-England, associate economist at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research think tank.

Friday's data casts doubt on the BoE's expectation that the economy will grow by around 0.3% in the fourth quarter as a whole. Economists polled by Reuters are unanimous that the BoE will cut interest rates on December 18 and financial markets assign a roughly 90% probability.

Manufacturing output, impaired in September by a cyber attack on Jaguar Land Rover, failed to recover as economists had hoped. The ONS said retailers in particular had a bad month, part of the reason why services output contracted by 0.3% in October against forecasts for a flat reading.

In response to the data, the finance ministry said it was determined to defy the forecasts on growth and create good jobs. Compared with a year earlier, economic output was 1.1% higher in October, the ONS said, weaker than the 1.4% expansion forecast by economists. The Confederation of British Industry on Friday bumped up its economic growth forecast for next year, citing a temporary boost to government spending following the budget, while warning that deep-rooted problems remain.

The business association predicted the economy will grow 1.3% next year, up from its previous forecast of 1.0% in June, bringing the CBI broadly into line with forecasts from the International Monetary Fund and the OECD.

King Charles records personal TV message about cancer 'journey'

AFP
London

Britain's King Charles III, who has broken royal taboos to talk openly about battling cancer, was set to appear in a "personal message" filmed for a TV campaign raising funds for research into the devastating disease.

Charles, 77, announced in February 2024 that he had been diagnosed with an undisclosed type of cancer the previous month. In a candid written message during a reception in April at Buckingham Palace for cancer campaigners, the monarch acknowledged that every cancer diagnosis is "daunting and at times frightening".

He said there were more than 1,000 new cancer cases diagnosed every day in the UK, or some 390,000 a year. "But as one among those statistics myself, I can vouch for the fact that it can also be an experience that brings into sharp focus the very best of humanity," he said.

The king's frankness about his illness is a marked departure from the reign of his mother, the late Queen Elizabeth II, whose health was for decades a closely-guarded secret.

Buckingham Palace said Charles



had pre-recorded a video message for the Stand Up To Cancer joint campaign between Cancer Research and Channel 4 that was to air at 8pm on Friday. The king "will stress the importance of cancer screening programmes in enabling early diagnosis and will reflect on his own recovery journey", the palace said.

Charles recorded the message during the last week of November at Clarence House, his London residence. Fundraisers and celebrity challenges have been taking place throughout the week leading up to Friday's show.

Stand Up To Cancer, which brings together UK celebrities in

a national, televised fund-raising drive, says to date it has raised more than £113mn (\$151mn). The funds aid research into more than 20 different types of cancer, including brain tumours, avoiding surgery for those with rectal cancer, and designing methods to lessen the often brutal side effects of chemotherapy.

Charles's cancer was detected in January 2024 during treatment for a benign prostate condition for which he had surgery. He has not revealed what kind of cancer he has been diagnosed with, although the palace said it was not related to his prostate issues.

Just six weeks after Charles an-

nounced his diagnosis, his daughter-in-law Catherine, Princess of Wales, revealed she also had cancer and had begun chemotherapy. The mother of three young children has also never discussed what kind of cancer she was suffering from. She is now in remission and cancer-free, after what her husband, heir to the throne Prince William, admitted had been a "brutal" year and the "hardest" of his life.

The king suspended his public duties for a few weeks before resuming them in April 2024, with his doctors saying they were "encouraged" by his recovery. He has been undergoing treatment ever since. He has stepped up his activities over the past year, making many royal visits around Britain as well as trips to Canada and the Vatican.

He was briefly hospitalized in March after experiencing "side effects" from his ongoing cancer treatment. At the April event, he sought to comfort those receiving a new cancer diagnosis, repeating the words of a late well-known British campaigner, Deborah James, who died from bowel cancer. "Find a life worth enjoying; take risks; love deeply; have no regrets; and always, always have rebellious hope."

Grieving families of Air India crash victims await answers

AFP
Ahmedabad

A flickering candle casts a dim light on the photo of 12-year-old Akash Patni, a pensive look on the face of the Indian boy who died in a plane crash that has left his family inconsolable. He is among dozens of people who died on June 12 when Air India flight 171 smashed into buildings in a neighbourhood of Ahmedabad, in the western state of Gujarat.

Since the disaster six months ago, Akash's parents and four siblings have gathered every day to pray in front of his picture, placed on a shelf in a corner of the small, dark space that serves as their living room. "My son was sitting near the tea stall when a part of the plane fell on him... there was smoke and fire everywhere and nobody could go near the site," said the father, Suresh Patni, a 48-year-old tea vendor. "The boy was burnt to ashes... We could not even take him to the hospital."

The Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner had just taken off for London when, for reasons that an investigation has not yet clarified, fuel

was cut to both of its engines. Deprived of power, the aircraft crashed onto buildings at the end of the runway, engulfing in flames 241 of its 242 passengers and crew, and 19 residents of Ahmedabad.

One passenger survived. "Everything happened before my own eyes," said Akash's mother Sita Patni, 45. From beneath the headscarf covering her grey hair and shoulders emerges a bare arm covered in large burn scars - the mark of her lost battle to pull her son from the flames. "I am in pain the whole day," she said softly.

"I tried to save him, but he did not survive."

Kiritsinh Chavda, 49, lost his brother and sister-in-law in the crash. He recalled the horror of receiving a call from his father, telling him that a plane had crashed in the neighbourhood where he lives. "He told me that my younger brother and his wife were unreachable," said Chavda, a police officer. When he arrived at the scene, chaos awaited him. "The bodies were very badly damaged and burned," he said. "It took nearly a week for my brother and his wife to be identified." Relatives of the victims have been looking for answers,

trying to understand what caused their loved ones' deaths. They are also just beginning to deal with the ordeal of compensation. Air India quickly paid the equivalent of \$28,000 to the families of each of the dead. The airline's owner, Tata Group, pledged to add another \$112,000. "We are yet to get the remaining amount," muttered Chavda. Air India has acknowledged the delay but asked for patience.

"The process for final compensation is underway," a spokesperson said. "We are deeply conscious of our responsibility and are providing support and care to all families affected by the tragedy, which remains our absolute priority."

To Chavda, "they should give whatever compensation they promised. That is enough for me." Badasab Saiyed, 60, said that for him, "compensation is secondary." A retired academic, he lost his brother, sister-in-law, a nephew and a niece in the accident.

They had initially planned to fly from New Delhi to London, but the flight was cancelled, and they took the doomed flight from Ahmedabad instead.

Saiyed did not hesitate long before joining a complaint filed by a

British law firm seeking answers. "The main thing is, who is the culprit responsible?" he said.

"Was there lax maintenance, or was there a problem with the Boeing plane itself? Or was it a small (pilot) fault? This should not have happened." The crash site has been cleared of all the aircraft debris. Only the charred ruins of the building that supported its tail remain, along with a few rusted shells of burned-out cars. Curled up in his grief, Suresh Patni cares little about getting answers. "I'm not interested in the investigation," he said. "I don't understand any of it."

Nor does he care about compensation. "What do we do with money?" he said. "We lost our son." The family had had high hopes for Akash. "He was our youngest and the most adored," his father said. "We wanted him to study and do something." "He was the brightest in our family," added his mother, who has not had the strength to return to, much less reopen, her tea stall. "I can't bear it, I keep on thinking about him," she said. "I can't bear the sound of a plane now. I keep looking down, can't look up in the sky."

It's snowing in Beijing



Women dressed in traditional costumes pose for pictures amid snowfall in Forbidden City, in Beijing, China.



A motorist rides past bicycles covered by snow in Beijing.



A newly-wed couple dressed in costumes poses for pictures amid snowfall, in Beijing.



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GULF TIMES

EU sustainability cutbacks make low-carbon leaders harder to spot

A reduction in scope of the European Union’s sustainability disclosure rules may cut red tape for businesses but investors say less transparency will make it harder to identify which companies are genuinely moving toward low-carbon operations.

After months of pressure from companies and governments, the European Union has agreed to sharply scale back two flagship sustainability disclosure laws.

The changes affect the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) — the EU’s rulebook that requires large companies to publish detailed information on their environmental, social and governance performance, and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), which requires firms to check their supply chains for human rights abuses and environmental harm.

The CSDDD had also required companies to have and implement a plan to cut emissions to net zero, but that obligation has now been dropped.

“Without credible transition plans, Europe could lose comparability, visibility on progress and a potentially useful tool to access transition finance”

investors with poorer information for decision-making”

“Yes, EU reporting has become overly complex, but the solution is clearer guidance and better structure, not dilution. Stepping back from requirements doesn’t make the system easier, it just makes it less coherent.”

Some investors highlighted the scrapping of climate transition plans in the EU’s due diligence law as a major concern.

“Without credible transition plans, Europe could lose comparability, visibility on progress and a potentially useful tool to access transition finance. Investors rely on these plans to assess climate risks and opportunities,” said Carlota Garcia-Manas, head of climate transition at British investor Royal London Asset Management, which manages around £180bn (\$239.53bn). Hortense Bioy, Head of Sustainable Investing Research at industry tracker Morningstar Sustainability, said the changes would put the onus on investors to assess whether companies follow through on their promises.

“The responsibility will increasingly fall on asset managers offering these strategies to hold companies accountable.”

Under the changes to CSRD, only companies with more than 1,000 staff making more than €450mn would report, with financial firms excluded.

For CSDDD, the threshold was even higher at 5,000 staff and €1.5bn in net turnover, with a delayed start-date and breaches dealt with at the national rather than EU level, with added flexibility for companies on what to report.

Hans Stegeman, chief economist at sustainability-focused lender Triodos Bank, said the moves represented a “significant weakening of essential sustainability rules”

“Legislation meant to combat child labour, environmental pollution, and exploitation in supply chains is being hollowed out. The so-called ‘anti-looking-away law’ has had its scope drastically limited,” he said. Debated since February, the cuts to the EU laws follow months of pressure from companies and governments, who warned Brussels that the rules risked disrupting their gas supplies to Europe. Industry groups welcomed the move as relief from Europe’s complex sustainability regime, among the most ambitious globally.

BusinessEurope Director General Markus J Beyer said the EU was delivering on its pledge to slash red tape.

“Even with the improvements achieved... it will still be a substantial challenge for companies to comply with the new rules,” he added.

Oliver Moullin, Managing Director for Sustainable Finance at the Association for Financial Markets in Europe, said the changes were a step toward simplification but urged further streamlining.

“Notwithstanding these important simplification efforts, the EU’s sustainable finance framework is set to remain the most ambitious and comprehensive globally,” he said. — Reuters

Watering down the rules means investors will have less reliable, comparable information on companies’ sustainability efforts, making it harder to tell which businesses are serious about cutting emissions, managing climate risks and environmental, social and governance standards.

Eleanor Fraser-Smith, Head of Sustainability at investor Victory Hill Capital Partners, said the weakening of the rules would “leave

European tech sovereignty requires digital leverage, not self-sufficiency

By Anke Hassel and Frieder Mitsch
Berlin

On Nov 18, Berlin hosted the first Summit on European Digital Sovereignty. France and Germany used the occasion to unveil a set of new initiatives aimed at strengthening data protection, developing cloud markets, and advancing so-called frontier AI, alongside €12bn (\$13.9bn) in promised private investment. But despite its ambitious agenda, the summit still mischaracterised sovereignty as a question of capacity – how much infrastructure Europe can build – rather than control.

While European policymakers continue to insist that digital sovereignty is about self-sufficiency, infrastructure alone does not bring real power. For starters, it is costly to build and often fails to change who controls digital systems. To compete globally, the European Union must focus on the bottlenecks that characterise today’s digital economy – areas where data, value, and decision-making power concentrate – and use these choke points to gain leverage over Big Tech giants. The task ahead is not to construct parallel systems, but to secure Europe’s position within those that already shape global markets.

The political case for digital sovereignty is clear and compelling: the EU remains competitive in industrial production but lags in digital infrastructure and platform technologies. To reduce dependence on foreign providers, it must bolster its technological capabilities.

True sovereignty, however, is not about erecting barriers. It is about controlling the interfaces and standards that can give Europe leverage within global value chains. Whoever governs these bottlenecks wields outsized influence, setting the terms of access for everyone else. In this sense, sovereignty rests on indispensability rather than self-sufficiency.

SAP is a prime example. As one of the few major European players in the enterprise-software sector, its power lies not only in its scale but in its ability to establish the rules and standards of global commerce. By defining how manufacturers, suppliers, and regulators connect and exchange data, SAP occupies



Official branding backdrop for the “Summit on European Digital Sovereignty,” in Berlin on November 18, 2025. (Photo: bmds.bund.de)

a pivotal position within industrial processes worldwide. Sustaining such influence requires control over data architectures, stewardship of interoperability frameworks, and alignment with emerging data-exchange platforms and industrial cloud systems.

ASML, by contrast, shows what happens when European indispensability does not translate into strategic leverage. The company’s cutting-edge lithography machines effectively set technical standards for one of the world’s most critical sectors, advanced semiconductors. But ASML has little interest in turning its dominance into geopolitical influence for fear that politicisation could undermine its commercial standing. EU policymakers, for their part, have failed to use ASML’s unique position to advance the bloc’s interests.

To achieve digital sovereignty, the EU must support firms that develop technologies competitors cannot easily substitute. While international co-operation is essential, it must reinforce – not weaken – Europe’s grip on key layers of the digital stack. When firms are confined to the low-value layers of the stack, they become increasingly dependent on the foreign companies that control data flows, software standards, and update cycles.

German automakers’ dependence on companies like Nvidia, AWS, and Mobileye for the software and computing systems that underpin next-generation vehicles is a striking example

of the risks posed by Europe’s current trajectory. With vital components – from simulation tools to perception algorithms and remote-update infrastructure – remaining outside the EU’s control, Europe’s most important manufacturers could end up locked into systems designed elsewhere.

European firms cannot shift these dynamics alone, and the EU cannot regulate its way to digital power. Previous top-down solutions, from the Gaia-X initiative to the Chips Act, have faltered because leverage depends on firm positioning, not regulatory decree. Turning technological strength into a strategic edge requires public-policy support for firms through joint ventures, co-development consortia, and active engagement with sovereign cloud platforms and AI systems.

Infrastructure investment is necessary, but it is not enough. Digital sovereignty must be built from the bottom up, by supporting firms as they strengthen their foothold in the parts of value chains that drive learning, lock-in, and ecosystem co-ordination.

To this end, European governments must back firms willing to take risks by investing in proprietary AI tools, co-developing industry-specific platforms, or regaining control of data management and software-update processes. Crucially, public support should not replace private initiative but rather complement it through procurement, co-investment, and open-standard programmes. Equally important, partnerships with established

global providers should be structured so that European firms retain data rights, influence standards, and enhance long-term capabilities.

For EU policymakers, the challenge lies in directing public investment toward the layers of the digital stack where control can still be exercised. This is most realistic in sectors where Europe retains industrial strength, such as sensor-fusion software, robot operating systems, and industrial communication protocols like Open Platform Communications Unified Architecture. These layers channel data flows and influence switching costs, enabling European firms to create dependencies down the value chain.

To be sure, complete EU control is unlikely in highly competitive fields like AI and autonomous driving. But the bloc can still improve its position by establishing the operating practices and procedural norms that determine how these systems connect and communicate.

Above all, the EU must project power not by replicating every layer of America’s digital stack, but by ensuring European firms play a central role in designing the core infrastructures of the digital age. Only then will sovereignty become a source of resilience rather than a pretext for isolation. – Project Syndicate

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The transformative power of early childhood education

By Justin van Fleet and Pia Rebello Britto
London

The leaders’ declaration adopted at the end of the recent G20 summit in South Africa reaffirmed the group’s commitment to tackling some of the world’s most pressing challenges, from inequality and long-running conflicts to AI and climate change. It also marked a historic milestone: for the first time, the G20 identified education as one of its top global priorities.

The declaration went on to highlight the urgent need to invest in children’s early development, pledging to “advance a comprehensive approach” that recognises investment in early childhood care and education (ECCE) as “vital... for a country’s social and economic future”

This recognition is long overdue. In a world marked by economic volatility, the most effective investments are those made in people, and few yield greater returns than supporting children in their first five or six years of life, when they develop the skills that underpin long-term growth, social cohesion, and peace.

Today, we are failing far too many children before they even reach school age. Globally, more than 40% of preschool children – roughly 350mn – lack access to quality care. The result is a vast loss of human potential that holds back communities, economies, and societies.

Early childhood, when 90% of brain development occurs, is a unique window for establishing the foundations of lifelong learning, health, and well-being. Decades of evidence show that every dollar invested in ECCE generates up to \$17 in economic returns, helping to break cycles of poverty and reduce inequality. Expanding access to childcare also enables more women to enter and stay in the workforce, strengthening households and national economies alike.

The UN already recognised the importance of investing in ECCE when it adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015.



This was reaffirmed in Unesco’s 2022 Tashkent Declaration, with more than 150 countries pledging to provide at least one year of free, compulsory pre-primary education for all children and to allocate at least 10% of their education budgets to preschool programmes.

Despite these commitments, funding for early education remains woefully inadequate. In low- and middle-income countries, 180mn three- and four-year-olds still lack access to basic early-childhood services.

International aid to preschool programmes accounts for less than 2% of total education aid, and many low-income countries devote less than 2% of their education budgets to ECCE.

Against this discouraging backdrop, momentum for change is building, driven largely by major emerging economies within and beyond the G20. Early-childhood support was central to Brazil’s social-inclusion agenda during its G20 presidency, while the launch of the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty in late 2024 signalled a broader push to tackle intergenerational inequities.

Brazil has also introduced ambitious domestic measures. Earlier this year, it launched its National Integrated Policy for Early Childhood, which established a single national database to track children’s needs and support a unified strategy across

all of the country’s 5,568 municipalities, featuring a massive data platform covering daycare availability, vaccination records, and developmental milestones.

The recent G20 summit in Johannesburg – the first to be held in Africa – brought the scale and urgency of the problem into sharp focus. Childhood mortality rates across the continent remain 14 times higher than in high-income countries, and only one in four children in sub-Saharan Africa attends preschool. South Africa, which views investment in ECCE as a national priority, recently launched the largest early-years education programme in its history. President Cyril Ramaphosa has also used South Africa’s G20 presidency to frame early-childhood education as a global imperative and urge governments worldwide to invest in their youngest citizens.

Mobilising the political will and financing needed to transform ECCE will require a sustained, co-ordinated multilateral effort. Over the past two years, Theirworld has championed this agenda through its Act for Early Years campaign, and the recent announcement of the world’s first international gathering devoted specifically to funding pre-primary education – initiated by a coalition of stakeholders from both the Global South and North – indicates that early childhood is finally receiving the attention it deserves.

Looking ahead, the International Finance Summit for Early Childhood in 2027 offers a rare opportunity to raise new funding, redirect domestic investment, and unlock private capital. Crucially, it could demonstrate that investing in preschool education is not a secondary concern but a precondition for achieving the SDGs. One principle should guide the policy debates that will inevitably follow: putting children first is the surest route to a more prosperous, peaceful, and stable world. – Project Syndicate

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Customs chief praises nation’s progress, highlights milestones and future plans

Qatar National Day (QND) is a moment to renew loyalty to the nation and its leadership, General Authority of Customs chairman HE Ahmed bin Abdullah al-Jamal has said, praising the country’s progress and unity as it marks the annual celebration.

Speaking to the Qatar News Agency (QNA), he said the day serves as a “lasting national occasion” honouring the legacy of the state’s Founder, Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani, and the sacrifices of earlier generations who built the foundations of modern Qatar.

Al-Jamal said that the commemoration reflects “the values of loyalty, belonging and pride in our Arab and Islamic identity”, adding that people across the country reaffirm their commitment each year to the founder’s principles and to the develop-

ment path pursued under the leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani.

National Day, he added, stands as “a sincere national referendum” in which Qataris express gratitude for the achievements of the past and commitment to the country’s future.

Turning to the agency’s achievements in 2025, al-Jamal highlighted several milestones as part of its mandate to secure the movement of goods and travellers while facilitating trade.

These include advances in human resources, technology systems and regulatory procedures, as well as closer co-ordination with domestic and international partners.

He noted that the electronic customs clearance platform Al Nadeeb processed

more than 5.6mn customs declarations between January and October 2025 across air, sea, land, and free-zone entry points.

The authority also launched direct electronic integration between Al Nadeeb and the International Road Transport Union’s electronic TIR carnet system, in collaboration with Qatar Chamber.

Al-Jamal also pointed to ongoing development of customs facilities and staff.

This year, 50 employees completed academic programmes in customs administration at Community College of Qatar, while 98 students are currently studying in a specialised diploma programme.

The Customs Training Centre delivered 114 courses to more than 4,000 trainees.

Al-Jamal said the authority had also strengthened its strategic partnerships with the private sector over the past year,

noting that nine additional companies joined the GCC Authorised Economic Operator (AEO) programme in 2025.

The expansion brings the total number of accredited companies to 93 across import, export, and customs-clearance categories.

The AEO scheme offers trade facilitations and benefits to trusted operators across the international supply chain.

On enforcement, al-Jamal said the customs service recorded 3,397 violations up to November 2025, ranging from attempts to smuggle prohibited or restricted items to cases of invoice manipulation and falsified customs data.

He said Qatar had also taken part in several international operations targeting illicit trade and organised smuggling networks, working alongside domestic

bodies and global organisations.

Regionally, al-Jamal said Qatar Customs had reinforced its presence in GCC and Arab forums, chairing 138 external meetings this year and participating in sessions held under the World Customs Organisation.

Looking ahead, the official said the authority is moving forward with its 2024-2030 strategic plan, which outlines 27 major projects aimed at modernising customs operations, strengthening national security and supporting the economy.

The plan aligns with Qatar’s Third National Development Strategy and the broader Qatar National Vision 2030.

“These efforts,” he said, “will help deliver the progress we aspire to and ensure sustainable development across all customs domains” – QNA

Invest Qatar chief hails National Day as symbol of unity and progress

Investment Promotion Agency Qatar (Invest Qatar) chief executive Sheikh Ali bin al-Waleed al-Thani has described the country’s National Day as a moment for citizens to celebrate their identity, unity and the values on which the state was founded.

Speaking to the Qatar News Agency (QNA), the official said that the annual celebration reflects the pride of belonging to the homeland and showcases the nation’s achievements across key sectors.

Sheikh Ali added that the occasion reinforces Qatar’s commitment to sustainable development under the Third National Development Strategy, which aims to strengthen the country’s international standing.

Qatar National Day (QND), he continued, also serves as a reminder of the sacrifices of Qatar’s founders and the accomplishments realised under the country’s leadership.

Outlining the agency’s progress in 2024, Sheikh Ali said that Invest Qatar had made “significant strides” in attracting foreign investment and promoting economic diversification.

The agency took part for the first time with its own pavilion at the World Economic Forum in Davos, showcasing Qatar’s competitive advantages to international investors.

Invest Qatar also concluded a series of strategic partnerships with global companies, including WPP, Level Infinite, Quantinuum, Schneider Electric, Ardian, Silian, Yuno, Naseej for Technology and East-West Digital, supporting their entry into, or expansion in, the Qatar market.

Internationally, the agency strengthened co-operation with organisations such as Invest India, ProColombia, StartUp Portugal, Uzbekistan’s ministry of digital technologies, and the Hong Kong Trade Development Council.

As part of efforts to attract high-value investments, the agency launched a \$1bn incentives programme, targeting priority sectors that are aligned with Third National Development Strategy.

Sheikh Ali highlighted the agency’s push towards digital transformation, including the deployment of Ai.SHA – an AI-powered virtual assistant developed with Microsoft’s Azure OpenAI service to support investors with real-time guidance.

The agency, he said, plans to intensify its efforts in 2026 by expanding strategic partnerships, adopting advanced digital solutions and launching sector-specific initiatives to reinforce Qatar’s position as a global investment hub. – QNA

QND an ‘occasion to fortify loyalty, renew allegiance to wise leadership’

Public Works Authority (Ashghal) president, engineer Mohammed bin Abdulaziz al-Meer, said that the Qatar National Day (QND) is a great national occasion through which the Qatari people express their pride in their identity and heritage, renew their loyalty to the wise leadership, and draw inspiration from the legacy of the Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani, who founded the state on the principles of dignity, sovereignty, and unity.

Speaking to the Qatar News Agency

(QNA), al-Meer said that the National Day embodies a sense of belonging and loyalty to the homeland and renewing the pledge to continuing on the path of development, in line with the vision of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani.

He pointed out that His Highness the Amir’s words “With You It Rises, From You It Awaits” express the essence of the national vision, which places the Qatari individual at the heart of progress and development.

Al-Meer said that the authority has

achieved over 320% growth in the number of Qatari employees over the past eight years, through locally and internationally accredited training programmes and external training opportunities that have helped prepare national cadres capable of efficiently leading infrastructure projects.

He also spoke of Ashghal’s five-year plan, revealing projects valued at over QR81bn, including the development of roads, sewage networks, and public buildings, in addition to the strategic outfall project for stormwa-

ter drainage in northern and southern Doha, and new public-private partnership projects to develop more than 5,500 residential plots.

The official added that over the past four years, Ashghal has completed more than 363,000sq m of green spaces and 995km of cycling and pedestrian paths, in addition to implementing advanced networks for the drainage of surface, groundwater, and stormwater, enhancing water-resource sustainability and the state’s ability to adapt to climate change. – QNA



Ready for QND

The country’s defence and security forces held a full dress rehearsal yesterday for the Qatar National Day (QND) celebrations, signalling the return of the traditional military parade to the Doha Corniche on December 18.

Units from the nation’s armed services assembled on the parade route for a drill of the event’s key elements, ensuring timing, co-ordination and manoeuvres were aligned ahead of the national holiday.

The event along the Corniche witnessed a display of military readiness, featuring Qatar Air Force fighter jets and helicopters conducting flyovers over the waterfront. Their passes served as both a patriotic spectacle and a final calibration of aerial components slated for the December 18 celebrations.

On the ground, the rehearsal featured mounted cavalry made up of horses and camels, ridden by well-trained jockeys. Members of the K9 unit were also present, with dog-handling teams practising their marching order alongside other security forces.

The full military procession at the Corniche serves as a centrepiece of QND festivities. A large number of citizens, residents, and visitors are expected to attend the occasion and watch the country’s armed forces showcase their capabilities, discipline, and national pride.

PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



QND ‘an occasion expressing meanings of solidarity and unity’

Iraq’s ambassador to Qatar Mohammed Jaafar al-Sadr has affirmed that the Qatar National Day (QND) is an occasion that expresses the meanings of solidarity, co-operation and unity among the people of Qatar, embodying loyalty to the homeland and its wise leadership, and the continuation of the message, whose foundations were laid by Founder Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani, in preserving the security and stability of the country, and moving forward towards development and prosperity.

In a statement to the Qatar News Agency (QNA), he said that successive generations in Qatar continue to add more glory to the history of Qatar, under the wise leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani.

The envoy noted Qatar’s positive diplomatic approach, pointing out that Doha has adopted an independent foreign policy based on dialogue, achieving peace, resolving conflicts, and maintaining balance in relations with various countries around the world.

Qatar’s diplomatic efforts are clearly visible, through Doha’s hosting of many conflicting parties and the signing of settlement agreements that satisfy all sides, al-Sadr added, praising Qatar’s prominent role in stopping the Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.

He said that Doha has become a centre where heads of state, leaders, senior officials, and representatives of regional and international organisations meet.

Bilateral relations between Qatar and Iraq, the envoy said, are characterised by historical depth and strong fraternal ties, based on unity of destiny, interests, goals and common aspirations.

Al-Sadr added that the two countries are witnessing high-level official visits by officials from both countries, which enhances peace, security, stability and prosperity in the region. – QNA

Austrian ambassador hails Qatar’s remarkable growth, renaissance

Austria’s ambassador to Qatar Erika Bernhard affirmed that Qatar’s remarkable growth over the past years is a key factor of the country’s comprehensive renaissance.

In a statement to the Qatar News Agency (QNA) on the occasion of Qatar National Day (QND), she said that Qatar, guided by Qatar National Vision 2030, has pursued a comprehensive renaissance that spans infrastructure, education, healthcare, culture, sports and the diversification of its economy, adding that one can see this not only in the impressive skyline or in world-class facilities, but also in the strategic thinking behind long-term investments in human capital and knowledge-based sectors.

The ambassador noted the strength of Austrian-Qatari relations, which celebrate 50 years of diplomatic relations this year, calling it a milestone that reflects a partnership built on trust, friendship and a very constructive dialogue at all levels.

Today, she mentioned, more than 60 Austrian companies are active in the Qatar market, adding that Austrian trade volume continues to grow, and Austrian products and expertise enjoy a strong reputation among Qatari partners.

Culturally, she noted, this year has been marked by a rich programme of joint activities and cultural events including the “Austria Luxury Showcase”, all celebrating 50 years of friendship between our two countries.

The envoy said that the future holds great potential for expanded co-operation in sustainable and smart technologies, in tourism and education, in culture and creative industries, and in working together for regional and global stability.

She expressed Austria’s desire to deepen this partnership over the next 50 years and beyond, as the first 50 constitute a very solid foundation, and are just the beginning.

“Qatar has developed an active and principled foreign policy, centred on dialogue, mediation and the peaceful resolution of conflicts,” Bernhard said. “It has established itself as a trusted interlocutor in regional and international crises, working to bring parties to the negotiating table and to open channels of com-

munication when they are most needed.”

“Qatar’s engagement has made an important contribution to regional stability, humanitarian access and de-escalation in sensitive contexts,” she continued. “We particularly value Qatar’s consistent commitment to multilateralism, international law and co-operative solutions, whether in the framework of the UN, regional organisations or informal diplomatic initiatives.”

The successful hosting of major international events, the envoy said, most notably the FIFA World Cup, Expo 2023 Doha, the Second World Summit for Social Development 2025 and a number of high-level political, economic and cultural conferences, has demonstrated Qatar’s ability to organise complex undertakings while

opening itself confidently to the world.

She added that Qatar has also been able to confidently open up to the world, while institutions such as the Museum of Islamic Art, the National Museum, Katara, and the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra highlight Qatar’s significant investment in culture and the preservation of its heritage, while simultaneously embracing innovation.

Bernhard extended her warmest congratulations to Qatar’s leadership, government and people, as well as expressing gratitude for the excellent co-operation between the two countries and that friendly relations will continue to grow deeper, in mutual understanding and in the common pursuit of peace, prosperity and cultural exchange. – QNA

Qatar International Art Festival 2025

Concludes with Phenomenal Success, Celebrating Six Days of Creativity, Culture & Global Artistic Unity



The 7th edition of the Qatar International Art Festival (QIAF) 2025 concluded today at Katara Cultural Village, marking the end of six extraordinary days of artistic brilliance, cultural exchange, and international camaraderie. Held from 12-7 December 2025, this year's festival has been hailed as one of the most successful editions to date, featuring over 500 artists from 73 countries, with more than 350 international artists travelling from outside Qatar to participate in one of the region's most prestigious celebrations of global art.

The festival opened on December 7th with a spectacular Red Carpet VIP Opening Ceremony, inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Khalid Bin Ibrahim Al Sulaiti, General Manager of Katara Cultural Village, who served as the Chief Guest. The opening set the tone for a vibrant, inspiring, and art-filled week, welcoming renowned artists, cultural ambassadors, diplomats, collectors, curators, journalists, and art enthusiasts from across the world.

A Week Filled with Over 15 Immersive Artistic Activities

QIAF 2025 brought together an impressive range of activities meticulously curated to inspire creativity, foster collaboration, and celebrate artistic diversity. Spanning across the beautiful spaces of Katara Cultural Village, the festival offered:

- Masterclasses by globally acclaimed artists
- Hands-on art workshops covering painting, mixed media, sculpture, and contemporary techniques
- Thought-provoking art panel discussions featuring leading voices from the international art fraternity
- A high-level Art Conference, exploring future trends, sustainability in art, and the role of cultural diplomacy
- Cultural tours across Doha's most iconic landmarks, giving international participants a deep immersion into Qatar's heritage
- Networking dinners and creative meetups, enabling artists to connect, collaborate, and share ideas
- Live painting sessions at Katara, attended by large crowds
- The Artistic and Sustainable Fashion Show, one of the festival's most anticipated highlights, showcasing eco-friendly fashion creations and wearable art
- QIAF Art Exhibition and Gallery Showcases throughout the week, visited by thousands of art lovers

Each of these activities reflected the essence of QIAF: an inclusive, vibrant, and multicultural platform dedicated to elevating artistic talent and strengthening global cultural bridges.

A Grand Finale: The QIAF 2025 Award & Felicitation Ceremony

The festival concluded on Friday, December 12th, with the magnificent Award and Felicitation Ceremony, honoring outstanding contributions, innovative artistic expressions, and exemplary achievements by participating artists. The ceremony celebrated creativity, perseverance, and the collective passion of the global art community that QIAF continues to nurture and champion.



Rashmi Agarwal's Closing Speech: A Heartfelt Tribute to the Global Art Community

Festival CEO and Founder Rashmi Agarwal delivered an inspiring and deeply emotional closing speech that resonated with every artist present. Her words encapsulated the spirit of unity and cultural harmony that QIAF stands for:

"QIAF 2025 has not just been an art festival—it has been a movement of creativity, connection, and compassion. When over 500 artists come together from 73 countries, carrying with them their stories, cultures, dreams, and colors, something extraordinary is created. This week has shown us the true power of art: to unite, to heal, and to inspire."

She extended profound gratitude to Prof. Dr. Khalid Bin Ibrahim Al Sulaiti, General Manager of Katara Cultural Village, praising his visionary leadership and unwavering support:

"This festival lives and thrives at Katara because of the incredible guidance and commitment of Prof. Dr. Khalid Bin Ibrahim Al Sulaiti. His belief in the potential of artists and the importance of cultural dialogue has shaped QIAF into an international landmark. We express our deepest appreciation to him and his entire Katara team for their remarkable support, cooperation, and hospitality."

Agarwal also acknowledged the invaluable role of the festival's partners and sponsors:

"To our partners and sponsors, thank you for standing by us, believing in our mission, and contributing to a festival that creates lasting impact. QIAF is a global celebration today because of your trust and encouragement."



A special mention was dedicated to the artists:

"To all our dear artists, each one of you is a star. You traveled from your homes, many of you from thousands of miles away, to be here with us. Your commitment, passion, and artistic spirit have elevated QIAF 2025 to new heights. We are proud of your creativity, your courage, and your cultural expression. This festival is yours."



She concluded with a forward-looking message:

"QIAF is more than an annual gathering, it is a growing family. A global family bonded by art, love, and respect. As we close this phenomenal edition, we look ahead with excitement to the future, promising even more innovation, artistic opportunities, and international collaborations. Let us continue to inspire the world, together."

A Festival that Strengthens Qatar's Vision for Cultural Diplomacy

QIAF 2025 once again reaffirmed Qatar's commitment to becoming a global cultural destination. With its diverse roster of international artists and its alignment with the nation's cultural vision, the festival continues to serve as a bridge between civilizations, shaping Qatar's role as a hub for artistic excellence.

The festival's impact extended beyond the walls of Katara, creating business opportunities for artists, fostering meaningful dialogues, and strengthening the international art ecosystem.

A Legacy of Excellence

As the curtains close on QIAF 2025, the festival stands as a testament to the power of human creativity and cross-cultural dialogue. Over the last six days, the world witnessed not just an exhibition, but a vibrant tapestry of global expression, woven with passion, talent, and unity.

QIAF continues to grow stronger each year, bringing together new voices, diverse cultures, and groundbreaking artistry. The 2025 edition has set a remarkable benchmark, one that reinforces the festival's reputation as one of the most significant international art festivals in the region and sets a strong foundation stone for the next year's festival QIAF 2026.

