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SPORT | Page 1

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Amir, Deputy Amir congratulate Amir of Kuwait

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 the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Meshal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, on the anniversary of his assumption of power. **(QNA)**

Qatar welcomes US move to lift Syria sanctions

Qatar welcomed the US decision to lift sanctions imposed on Syria as part of the Caesar Act, saying its a step that supports stability and prosperity in Syria. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed, in a statement yesterday, Qatar's hope that the lifting of sanctions will contribute to opening new horizons for co-operation and partnerships with various countries and pave the way for the return of investments and the flow of international aid, which will help to accelerate the recovery of the economy and restore Syria to its natural position on the map of the global economy. The ministry reiterated Qatar's full support for Syria's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, and the aspirations of its brotherly people for security, stability, and development. **(QNA) Page 6**

Jordan's king, crown prince thank Qatar for excellent organisation of FIFA Arab Cup

King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein of Jordan and his Crown Prince, Al-Hussein bin Abdullah II, expressed their gratitude to Qatar for its excellent organisation of the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025 and its associated events. In a post on 'X' platform, the Jordanian monarch thanked Doha for bringing together all Arab brethren, and extended congratulations to Morocco on winning the title. For his part the crown prince wrote on his Instagram account, "Gratitude to the all the loyal fans for their presence and support of the Nashama. We congratulate our brothers in Morocco on winning the championship, and we extend our sincere appreciation to Qatar for the excellent organisation." Morocco were crowned champions of the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025 on Thursday evening, defeating their Jordanian counterparts 3-2 after extra time. **(QNA)**

COMMUNITY
See Pages 4 & 5

A dazzling festival of lights



One of the trees at the sprawling Al Bidda Park - the venue of the Lantern Festival, spanning 55,000sq m - is decorated with hundreds of small light bulbs and a handful of lanterns, providing joy and excitement to children and their families. The festival, which features more than 400 lanterns of different shapes and sizes, as well as other immersive sections, will run until March 28, 2026.

PICTURE:Shaji Kayamkulam **Page 12**

Hamas says Miami talks must end Israel 'violations'

AFP
Gaza City

Atop Hamas official said yesterday talks in Miami to advance the next phase of the Gaza ceasefire must aim to end Israeli truce "violations", as US Secretary of State Marco Rubio urged the group's disarmament.

US President Donald Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, is to meet officials from Qatar, Egypt and Turkiye in Florida, hoping to salvage efforts to

reach the second stage of the deal.

"Our people expect these talks to result in an agreement to put an end to ongoing Israeli lawlessness, halt all violations and compel the occupation to abide by the Sharm El-Sheikh agreement," Hamas political bureau member Bassem Naim told AFP.

During the second stage, Israel is supposed to withdraw from its positions in Gaza, an interim authority is to govern the Palestinian territory instead of Hamas, and an international stabilisation force is to be deployed.

Hamas' Gaza chief Khalil al-Hayya said on Sunday the group had a "legitimate right" to hold weapons. Israel has repeatedly insisted that Hamas will be disarmed.

Rubio also said yesterday he was confident that countries would send troops for the planned international stabilisation force.

"I feel very confident that we have a number of nation states acceptable to all sides in this who are willing to step forward and be a part of that stabilisation force," he said.

Gaza no longer in famine, hunger monitor says

There is no longer famine in Gaza, a global hunger monitor said yesterday, after access for humanitarian and commercial food deliveries improved following a fragile Oct 10 ceasefire in the war. The latest assessment by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification comes four months after it reported that 514,000 people - nearly a quarter of Palestin-

ians in the Gaza Strip - were experiencing famine. The IPC warned yesterday that the situation in the enclave remained critical. "Under a worst-case scenario, which would include renewed hostilities and a halt in humanitarian and commercial inflows, the entire Gaza Strip (would be) at risk of famine through mid-April 2026. This underscores the severe

and ongoing humanitarian crisis," the IPC said in the report. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that while famine had been pushed back, the gains were "perilously" fragile.

"Far more people are able to access the food they need to survive," he told reporters yesterday, but he added: "Needs are growing faster than aid can get in." (Reuters) **Page 6**

Officials highlight data's importance in shaping policies to fight corruption

Representatives of governments, international organisations, and civil society organisations highlighted the critical importance of detailed and comprehensive data in shaping effective anti-corruption policies. They reviewed innovations and lessons learned from the experiences of countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria in strengthening governance environments, and called for the development of more co-ordinated and inclusive data at both the national and international levels.

This took place during the session on harnessing data for inclusive and effective anti-corruption efforts, held as part of the 11th session of the Conference of the States Parties to the UN Convention against Corruption, hosted by Doha from Dec 15-19.

In this context, senior governance specialist at the World Bank Jens Kristensen affirmed that there is growing global recognition that reliable, comprehensive, and detailed data constitute the cornerstone of any effective anti-corruption system.

He said that for years, aggregate indicators have dominated international discussions, such as the Worldwide Governance Indicators, which attract broad attention despite the debates and criticism surrounding them, due to their role in directing attention and stimulating dialogue.

He added that the world is now witnessing a growing shift toward reliance on granular data, driven by the data revolution and rapid technological developments. According to him, this shift reflects a deeper understanding of the importance of precise data in designing more targeted and effective anti-corruption policies.

For her part, Ghana's Permanent Representative to the UN ambassador Matilda Aku said that her coun-

try has realised that ensuring integrity without data is like building a house without a solid foundation. Data, she noted, was increasingly serving as a benchmark for assessing successes and failures, and for formulating informed policy options and decisions.

She emphasised that effective anti-corruption efforts ultimately depend on the quality of the data on which they are based. She explained that moving beyond perception-based measurements and investing in indicators of governance, integrity, and equality makes it possible to gain a clearer picture of how corruption actually operates within public systems and how it affects different segments of society.

She added that aggregated data, disaggregated by gender, age, income, disability, geographic location, and other characteristics, help identify areas most vulnerable to corruption and reveal patterns of discriminatory corruption that might otherwise remain hidden.

Winston Kongo of Kenya's Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission said that anti-corruption efforts in Kenya are fundamentally data-driven. He noted that Kenya has clearly defined its objectives and goals in ways that help track progress, measure results, and guide strategic anti-corruption interventions in both prevention and law enforcement. For this purpose, he noted, the commission has established key partnerships with stakeholders at the national and international levels to generate and manage data for anti-corruption purposes.

He added that over the past two decades, Kenya has developed effective tools and gained valuable experience in conducting national anti-corruption surveys, with a focus on households, the business sector, and public servants. **(QNA) Page 2**



Ashghal says traffic back to normal following rain

The Public Works Authority (Ashghal) said that its field teams successfully dealt with the aftermath of heavy rainfall in the country on Thursday, Dec 18, restoring traffic flow back to normal on most roads and tunnels within a few hours.

Engineer Mohammed al-Kubaisi explained that from Ashghal's sewerage treatment plans had been implemented in preparedness from the moment the weather conditions were first monitored. He noted that field teams worked around the clock, in co-ordination with municipalities and the General Directorate of Traffic, to ensure smooth traffic flow and rapid response to water



accumulation.

He pointed out that, according to meteorological reports, the highest accumulated rainfall was recorded at about 90.4mm in the Al Kiranah area, 80.1mm in Al Wakra, and 71.5mm in Abu Samra. Al-Kubaisi said that more than 371 water tanker trucks were deployed to remove water, along

with more than 44 mobile pumps dedicated to rapid response teams, in addition to the deployment of dozens of technicians and workers in the most affected areas.

Rapid response teams were also stationed in the areas surrounding Lusail Stadium and Khalifa International Stadium, which hosted the finals of the FIFA Arab Cup Qa-

tar 2025, in order to secure traffic movement.

Ashghal confirmed that it monitors 111 tunnels across the country, none of which were affected by the rainfall. It explained that it received 414 reports related to water accumulation, all of which were addressed within no more than six hours. The most affected areas included Muthier, the Industrial Area, Mebaireek, and Al Wakra.

The authority called on the public to exercise caution while driving during rainfall and to contact the Customer Service Centre via 88 to report any emergency cases, affirming that Ashghal's teams continue to work in the field around the clock. **(QNA)**

Over 72mn gallons removed from waterlogged areas

The Joint Rain Emergency Committee, comprising relevant municipal authorities, the Public Works Authority (Ashghal), and security agencies from the Ministry of Interior, have undertaken intensive efforts to remove rainwater accumulations that affected the country. About 72,317,200 gallons of rainwater was removed by deploying 544 tankers and 36 pumps, making 12,191 trips. A total of 813 employees and workers from various relevant agencies participated in these efforts. The Ministry of Municipality also

received 1,452 reports related to waterlogging through its unified call centre. Of these reports 462 were addressed immediately and efficiently, while efforts are under way to address the remaining 990 reports, in accordance with the approved response plans. The relevant authorities confirmed that rainwater drainage operations are still ongoing in all affected municipalities, with continued field monitoring to ensure the safety of roads and public facilities. **(QNA)**



Qatar, US officials hold high-level dialogue on strategic partnership



HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi, held a series of meetings with senior US officials on the sidelines of the seventh strategic dialogue between the two countries in Washington. HE Dr al-Khulaifi met separately with Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Paul Kapur; Presidential Envoy and Senior Adviser for Africa at the Department of State, Massad Boulos; Acting Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Michael Kozak; Near Eastern Affairs Senior Officer, Robert Palladino; and CEO of the US International Development Finance Corp, Ben Black. Discussions focused on the close bilateral relations, ways to enhance co-operation across various sectors, and shared perspectives on regional and international issues. The US side highlighted the importance of continued co-ordination and consultation with Qatar, strengthening co-operation mechanisms, and further developing bilateral relations, while recognising Qatar's role as an effective mediator and trusted partner in resolving regional and international conflicts. **(QNA)**

Social protection for vulnerable groups stressed at Amman council

QNA
Amman

The 45th regular session of the Council of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs and the high-level Arab Conference on the Implementation of the Doha Declaration - issued by the Second World Summit for Social Development - concluded in Amman, in the presence of HE the Minister of Social Development and Family Buthaina bint Ali al-Jabr al-Nuaimi.

During the session, the Council of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs approved a number of decisions related to the work of the council, following extensive discussions among the participating delegations.

The participants stressed the need to prioritise social protection for the most vulnerable groups, particularly persons with disabilities, the elderly, women, and children, and to promote social inclusion and economic empowerment policies, and ensure equitable access to education, health, and basic services. The participants agreed to prepare a comprehensive Arab action plan to implement the Doha



Declaration, based on supporting the Arab Vision 2045, developing mechanisms for relief, early recovery and reconstruction, enhancing

food and water security, technological integration and artificial intelligence, and supporting lifelong learning and entrepreneurship.

The participants also called for intensified efforts to implement the Arab Strategic Framework for the Eradication of Multidimensional Poverty, support the operation of the Arab Center for Social Policy Studies and Poverty Eradication in Jordan, uphold the rights of persons with disabilities, implement the Amman-Berlin Declaration, and promote social dialogue.

At the conclusion of the council and conference, HE the Minister of Social Development and Family voiced her appreciation to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan for its excellent hosting and organisation, affirming the State of Qatar's commitment to promoting social development in the region.



UN conference discusses link between combating corruption, human rights

QNA
Doha

A session held yesterday, as part of the eleventh session of the Conference of the States Parties to the United Nations Convention against Corruption, discussed the topic of activating the links between combating corruption and human rights, with the participation of many international experts and officials.

The session focused on the fact that corruption was no longer viewed merely as a governance issue, but has become a direct violation of human rights, due to its negative impact on access to basic services and the enjoyment of rights and freedoms.

Speakers pointed out that the political Atlanta Declaration acknowledged the harmful impact of corruption on human rights, particularly its disproportionate effects on women, girls, and marginalised groups.

They emphasised that the current global landscape, marked by increasing conflicts, widening inequality gaps, shrinking civic space, and environmental crises, makes it imperative to address corruption as a fundamentally human



rights-based issue. They said that despite growing global awareness of the importance of linking the anti-corruption and human rights agendas, fragmented approaches remain prevalent, limiting the effectiveness of efforts in both fields.

They noted that civil society organisations, governments, and international institutions continue to face challenges in strengthening this integration due to the absence of coordinated strategies, a lack of practical tools, and insufficient, clear, actionable guidance.

Participants stressed the importance of moving from theoretical frameworks to practical application by adopting a comprehensive

approach that helps activate the links between combating corruption and protecting human rights, and by reviewing concrete experiences and steps taken in this regard.

Speakers affirmed that strengthening the connection between anti-corruption efforts and human rights can help countries enhance resilience, improve service delivery, protect civic space, promote integrity, and build public trust. They noted that today's discussions represent an important step toward translating this linkage into practical, implementable actions.

They also highlighted the im-

portance of creating complementarities and synergies between the anti-corruption and human rights tracks in order to advance both issues in parallel, expressing hope that more States Parties would begin conveying the same messages in relevant forums, thereby strengthening the ability of both tracks to support one another.

It was noted that, before the panel discussion, participants were asked about the extent to which a human rights perspective is integrated into anti-corruption policies and strategies. The responses showed that only a limited number of participants are currently working to link the two areas in an integrated manner.

Participants expressed hope that the coming years would witness tangible progress along this path, such that responses to the same question in the future would yield different results, underscoring the importance of sustaining dialogue and expanding participation.

At the conclusion of the session, the need to strengthen international co-operation and exchange expertise was emphasised in order to build effective policies that translate this linkage into practice and contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Arabic Day celebrated

QNA
Cairo

Qatar participated in an event organised by the Arab League's General Secretariat at its headquarters in Cairo, to celebrate the World Arabic Language Day. The Qatari delegation was headed by First Secretary at the Permanent Mission of Qatar to the Arab League Dr Essa Salem al-Kuwari.

The event, held with the participation of ambassadors and representatives of accredited foreign diplomatic missions, along with prominent religious and

cultural figures, highlighted the Arabic language as a historical legacy, a living communication tool, and a soft power capable of absorbing multiple cultures and building bridges of understanding between peoples.

It focused on anticipating the future of the Arabic language, by reviewing the map of Arabic language education in universities and international centres, in addition to researching the key obstacles facing non-native Arabic learners and ways to overcome them, and the role of artificial intelligence and digital transformation in facilitating the learning and dissemination of Arabic.



Qatar partakes in forum on disaster warning systems



Qatar participated in the proceedings of the first Arab Regional Forum on Early Warning Systems and Disaster Preparedness, which was held at the headquarters of the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States in Cairo. The Ministry of Interior delegation was headed by Director-General of Civil Defence Major-General Hamad Othman al-Dehaimi, and the state delegation included representatives from the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, and the General Civil Aviation Authority. The forum discussed Arab co-operation efforts, enhancing preparedness, and exchanging experiences and best practices in the areas of early warning and risk management. **(QNA)**

Sharjah Desert Theatre Festival ends with Qatar's participation

The ninth edition of the Sharjah Desert Theatre Festival has concluded, featuring theatrical productions from Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Egypt and Libya. The festival also included a diverse program of intellectual and critical discussions, along with competitions and interactive activities. Launched in 2015, the Sharjah Desert Theatre Festival explores the links between traditional arts developed by Arab desert communities and contemporary theatre. Over the years, it has become a leading cultural platform dedicated to preserving and developing this distinctive artistic and cultural connection. **(QNA)**

Experts stress importance of enhancing rights of corruption victims

QNA
Doha

Experts and specialists in the field of combating corruption affirmed that strengthening the rights of victims of corruption represents a fundamental pillar in building effective and inclusive justice systems.

They stressed that enabling victims to access justice and obtain redress contributes to consolidating integrity and enhanc-

ing trust in public institutions.

This came during a panel discussion held as part of the final day of the eleventh session of the Conference of the States Parties to the UN Convention against Corruption, held in Doha, with broad participation from government representatives, international experts, civil society organisations, and academic institutions.

Participants said that the international declaration on the rights of victims of corruption emphasises the importance of ac-

cess to justice and fair treatment, while underscoring several core principles. Chief among these is enabling victims to present their views and concerns and have them considered at appropriate stages of legal proceedings whenever their personal interests are affected, without prejudice to the rights of the accused and in a manner consistent with national criminal legislation.

Experts noted that the protection of victims is not limited to procedural aspects alone, but also

includes providing appropriate assistance throughout the legal process, taking necessary measures to protect their privacy when required, ensuring their safety and that of their families, and protecting witnesses who testify from any acts of intimidation or retaliation.

Speakers emphasised that these principles constitute an important foundation for activating Article 35 of the UN Convention against Corruption, which relates to access to justice and compen-

sation for harm. They pointed out that several Human Rights Council resolutions recognise the negative impact of corruption on the enjoyment of human rights and affirm the importance of victim participation in justice processes.

In this context, experts stressed that combating corruption cannot be effective if it is limited to punitive responses alone, but must be built on a comprehensive approach that places victims at the heart of public policy and links prevention, accountability,

redress, and respect for human rights.

Participants affirmed that the UN Convention against Corruption recognises that prevention is not a theoretical concept, but a practical programme requiring institutional design that reduces opportunities for abuse of power, enhances transparency, and ensures the existence of reliable accountability mechanisms, particularly in sectors characterised by broad discretionary authority and high-stakes decision-making.

Qatar's embassies, consular missions continue National Day celebrations



Qatar's diplomatic, consular, and representative missions abroad continued to celebrate the state's National Day, which falls on Dec 18 each year, in commemoration of the Founder Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani. The heads of the State of Qatar's diplomatic, consular, and representative missions abroad, conveyed their highest congratulations and best wishes to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, and to all the people of Qatar on this cherished occasion. This year's slogan for the National Day which is being celebrated this year under the slogan "With You It Rises, From You It Awaits." In statements marking the occasion, the heads of missions said that Qatar's National Day embodies the meanings of pride in the homeland, loyalty to forefathers and to their enduring sacrifices, and pride in wise leadership. They also pointed out that the State of Qatar adopts a foreign policy aimed at promoting international peace and security by encouraging the peaceful resolution of disputes. (QNA)



QF nurtures generation of purpose, pride, progress

Qatar Foundation (QF) has, across its 30-year lifespan, provided opportunities for individuals to define their life paths, contribute to building a stronger society, celebrate and perpetuate Arab and Islamic cultural heritage, and ensure that people of all abilities, ages, and interests can thrive.

The embodiments of QF's mission to support the continuing journey of Qatar's development are those who have become leaders, drivers of change, and ambassadors of service and citizenship.

Their full stories can be explored through 'The QF Generation', an immersive platform where 30 people whose lives have been shaped by QF relive their personal journeys, available at <https://link.qf.org.qa/generation>.

As 2025, QF's 30th anniversary year, draws toward its close, here is a snapshot of how some of those who illustrate QF's true legacy have played, and continue to play, their part in the advancement of Qatar's community.

Maryam al-Homaid's father, Yousef Ahmad, is one of Qatar and the GCC's leading artists. As a child, his studio was her playground. Now, the associate professor at QF partner university, Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar, is an artist herself, turning carpets into cultural archives of Qatar's history, identity, and journey.

"Carpets are part of our identity. We pray on them, sit on them, live with them. I wanted to take something so familiar. People see a pattern and say: 'That reminds me of my old neighbourhood'. That's the power of art and design. It connects us to memory. 'My art is about weaving memory into change - holding onto the details that make us who we are, even as we evolve.'"

Through QF partner university Georgetown University in Qatar and QF-founded QatarDebate, Moza al-Hajri became a world champion debater and a leading voice in taking discourse in the Arabic language to the global stage, exemplifying how young people with passion and purpose can shape conversations about the future of their societies. Now, as a QatarDebate mentor, adviser, and ambassador, she helps young students find their voices, as she found hers.

"QF didn't just support debate; it raised the bar for everyone. The level of training, the exposure, the coaches - no one else was doing it like that. We weren't translating Western frameworks. We were thinking in our own language, on our own terms."

"QF didn't just give me access. It gave me belief in myself, in the value of speaking up, and that someone would listen."

For three decades, Raja'a Shalabi



Hana al-Khater



Raja'a Shalabi

has been at the forefront of inclusive education at QF. She helped transform the Learning Centre at QF into a full K-12 school, now Awsaj Academy. Shalabi wrote Arabic-language curricula, trained teachers, and built dual-language inclusion programmes. She now works at Warif Academy, a specialised school catering for children with profound disabilities, estab-



Maryam al-Homaid

lished by QF and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

"It wasn't just Qatar Foundation that grew from one school to an entire city of schools, universities, and research centres. I grew, too, and so did many others. We grew in ways we never imagined, because we were given opportunities and shared a drive to build something better."



Moza al-Hajri.

Building future with people, learning, and culture: QF official

Kholoud M al-Ali, executive director of Community Engagement and Programming, Qatar Foundation (QF) has highlighted in her Qatar National Day commentary that nations are shaped over time by the choices they make about people - not only by what they build, but by how they invest in learning, curiosity, and the capacity of individuals to engage with the world around them.

"Progress rises through people, and the future depends on what they are empowered to become. As Qatar marks its National Day, this idea feels particularly present. 'With You It Rises, From You It Awaits', this year's Qatar National Day theme, is a reminder that national progress is inseparable from human development."

"At Qatar Foundation, we see this as a long-term commitment, strengthened through an ecosystem that places education, culture, and public engagement side by side," al-Ali said.

Al-Ali noted that learning does not begin or end at a particular stage of life, nor does it take place in a single setting.

She explained: "This belief is shaped by experience, by exposure, and by environments that allow people to ask questions and develop confidence in their own thinking. For societies to remain resilient, learning must extend beyond formal education and into public and cultural spaces."

According to the official, culture is central to this broader understanding of learning. She continued: "It is where identity takes form and where connection happens. Culture allows people to see themselves more clearly while also engaging with perspectives beyond their own. In Qatar, this dual role has long been understood. Cultural development for us has not been about the choice between tradition and modernity. Rather, it is more about creating a dialogue between them."

"Education City embodies this thinking. Established as an environment where learning is integrated rather than siloed, it is a place where opportunities for knowledge and development span disciplines, institutions, and experiences. Education, research, culture, and community life ex-



Kholoud M al-Ali

Education City has an environment where learning is integrated rather than siloed, it is a place where opportunities for knowledge and development span disciplines, institutions, and experiences

ist in proximity, reinforcing the idea that learning exists as much beyond the classroom as it does within it," she described.

"Lawh Wa Qalam: M F Husain Museum is part of this environment. Dedicated to one of the greatest of modern artists, Maqbool Fida Husain, the museum draws on the spirit of a visionary whose practice was shaped by constant movement, curiosity, and engagement with the world around him."

"His work was open, exploratory, and deeply human, and this way of thinking and approaching the world informs the role and the ethos of the museum that now bears his name: a place that encourages attention, reflection, and personal engagement, rather than passive viewing," al-Ali highlighted.

She underlined: "This approach reflects a broader understanding of education as something that belongs to the whole community. Skills such as observation, critical thinking, and openness to different viewpoints are developed through cultural engagement and carry value far beyond artistic contexts. They support individuals and strengthen the fabric of society, helping communities to adapt and move forward together."



BPS celebrates Qatar National Day



Birla Public School (BPS), Doha, celebrated Qatar National Day and World Arabic Day with a special morning assembly organised by the students of Grade VIII in collaboration with the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies.

The event highlighted the significance of Qatar's national values, heritage, and vision, and the global importance of the Arabic language. Students delivered presentations, reflections, and messages emphasising unity, faith, and cultural harmony.

The parade showcased patriotism, unity and respect for Qatari traditions. Subsequently, students assembled in front of the open stage, where the formal proceedings continued. In his address, principal Dr Anand R Nair emphasised on the importance of Qatar national values, cultural pride, and the role of education in shaping responsible and compassionate global citizens who remain deeply rooted in their national identity.

The Arabic and Islamic Studies Department head Hashim welcomed the school leaders for the formal function. He spoke about the history of the land and the transformation Qatar has seen since 1878. The event was further



enriched by a variety of student cultural performances, showcasing different aspects of Qatari culture, history, and Arab traditions through music, dance and expressive presentations.

The programme was graced by the presence and active support of the senior leadership team,

heads of departments, and faculty members, highlighting the collective commitment to promoting cultural appreciation and national awareness within the school community. In addition to the senior students' programme, a special celebration was organised by the Grade I students

at 12noon. The young learners conducted a special assembly and procession, followed by cultural performances.

Through songs, simple enactments, and presentations, the students showcased key elements of Qatar's culture, heritage, and history, adding

charm and vibrancy to the celebrations. The celebrations concluded on a proud, joyful and festive note, leaving students with a deeper appreciation of Qatar's heritage, a stronger connection to the Arabic language, and lasting memories of unity and cultural pride.



Grand Qatar National Day festivities at IIS



Ideal Indian School (IIS) celebrated Qatar National Day with a series of grand activities, with students from both the morning and evening sessions participating in a parade, cultural show, and exhibition showcasing Qatar's rich culture and heritage.

In his keynote address, principal Shaik Shamim Sahab praised the visionary leadership of Qatar's leaders and government in shaping a modern and progressive state.

He emphasised that the National Day celebrations serve as a unifying force within the school, promoting

Qatari pride and nurturing a sense of national identity among the students. The cultural show featured an array of colourful performances by students from the Kindergarten, Junior, Girls' and Boys' sections, showcasing the rich cultural heritage of Qatar. A highlight of the celebration was a grand procession within the school premises, where hundreds of students participated with enthusiasm.

Donning traditional Qatari attire, they showcased their love, respect, and solidarity for their host country in a vibrant display of unity and cultural pride.



DPS-MIS bids fond farewell to Grade XII silver jubilee batch

DPS-Modern Indian School (DPS-MIS) hosted a farewell-cum-graduation ceremony for the silver jubilee batch of Grade XII (2025-26) with the theme 'The Silver Voyage', symbolising reflection and new beginnings. Principal Asna Nafees reflected on the graduating batch's transformative journey, urging them to embrace empathy, integrity and self-belief, build mental strength, while highlighting alumni featured in the Forbes 30 under 30 list of 2025 and 2026 as inspiring examples of responsible and accomplished individuals. School director Sonny Varghese commended the batch for their achievements and urged them to uphold the school's values and legacy. Chief guest Yasir



Nainar, president, DPS Group of Institutions, Qatar, motivated students to remain connected with their alma mater and pursue life with clarity and purpose. The ceremony featured engaging performances by Grade XI students and video messages from the leadership team and teachers. Head boy Nikkil D' Cruz

and head girl Shamitha Anand expressed gratitude towards the school. As the ceremony came to a close, 304 graduates, in their graduation gowns, took their final walk through the halls of DPS-Modern Indian School, carrying cherished memories and stepping confidently into the world to chase their dreams.

BPS event showcases French culture, language

Birla Public School (BPS) celebrated 'French Fiesta' with a special assembly by the students of Grade I-II with the theme, 'Discover French culture and language'. The event highlighted the significance of the French language through a video, and a range of performances designed to reflect France's rich heritage and culture. The special assembly commenced with the school prayer, the school's vision, mission, objectives, Arabic word of the day, 'Discover India', and a motivational thought. Students showcased their talents through speeches, a short skit, group dance, and group song, all emphasising the beauty of the French language and the richness of French culture. Principal Anand R Nair and headmistress Josephine Fernandes in their addresses emphasised the importance of preserving and promoting culture and language in



daily life. The efforts of the students were appreciated and they were

motivated to uphold their cultural pride.



Grand QND celebrations at MES



MES Indian School celebrated Qatar National Day (QND) with a grand display of patriotism, cultural vibrancy, and community spirit, turning its campus into a festive landscape of national pride.

The celebration, held with enthusiasm and grace across all sections of the school, stood as a heartfelt tribute to the nation's unity, heritage, and progress.

Qatar Scout Activities consultant Ahmad al-Yousef was the chief guest. In her address, principal Dr Hameeda Kadar, highlighted the school's deep-rooted respect and admiration for Qatar's leadership, vision, and cultural legacy. A series of captivating cultural performances followed, including a traditional Arabic sword dance, a video presentation on Qatar's development, and patriotic stage presentations by the students.

At the boys' section quadrangle, a grand procession unfolded, featuring the national flag, the school band, and a disciplined march-past.

Demonstrations in silambam, karate, skating, and football showcased the students' co-scholastic talents. The Scout Parade, led by Rajesh K S, was particularly lauded for its impeccable co-ordination and grandeur.

Students in the Junior Section reflected the spirit of unity and patriotism through a well-co-ordinated march past, followed by cultural presentations that highlighted Qatar's growth and achievements.

The Kindergarten Section added charm to the celebration as the little children arrived dressed in maroon and white attire, symbolising the Qatari flag, while many wore traditional Qatari dresses, lending cultural richness. A special assembly was held to mark the occasion. The highlight was an Arabic dance performed by the KG students, beautifully capturing the spirit and traditions of Qatar.

The entire celebration was organised by a team of teachers, which included Anu Manoj, Sreejith, Namitha, Rassia Hamza, Fency, Limy, Jesna Siju, and Aswathi.



Financial literacy session conducted



The International Tamil Engineers Forum (ITEF) - Qatar chapter, an affiliate organisation of the Indian Business & Professional Council (IBPC) under the aegis of the embassy of India, Qatar, hosted a financial literacy programme, 'Smart Money Mastery'. The session brought together over 175 members, friends, and well-wishers from the Indian community, including community leaders, businessmen, professionals, engineers and homemakers. The programme was led by the members, board of governors, and executive committee of ITEF Qatar, under the leadership of president A Karthik Kadappa. The session was delivered by Veerappan Aiyappan, who presented practical perspectives on money management and financial decision-making.

MES wins first runners-up in quiz contest



The MES Indian School quiz team, comprising Diya Mariyam (Grade IX), Aysha Naja Khaleel (VII), and Ahan Abijith (VIII), secured the first runners-up position in the Annual Insijamu Qatar History Quiz Competition, held at Rajagiri Public School. The team was guided and mentored by the Department of Social Science co-ordinator Mujeeb Rahman and supervised by teacher in-charge Sunita Dahiya. Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar congratulated the winners and their trainers.



UN declares famine over in Gaza, says ‘situation remains critical’

AFP
Rome

A famine declared in Gaza in August is now over thanks to improved access for humanitarian aid, the UN said yesterday, but warned the food situation in the Palestinian territory remained dire.

More than 70% of the population is living in makeshift shelters, it said, with hunger exacerbated by winter floods and an increasing risk of hypothermia as temperatures plummet.

Although a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas fighter group that took effect in October has partially eased restrictions on goods and aid, delivery fluctuates daily and is limited and uneven across the territory, it said.

“No areas are classified in Famine,” said the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Initiative (IPC), a coalition of monitors tasked by the UN to warn of impending crises.

But it stressed that “the situation remains critical: the entire Gaza Strip is classified in Emergency”.

The US-sponsored ceasefire halted two years of fighting, sparked by Hamas’s storming of Israel in October 2023.

Yet the deal remains fragile as Israel and Hamas accuse each other almost daily of violations.

“Following the ceasefire... the latest IPC analysis indicates notable improvements in food security and nutrition compared to the August 2025 analysis, which detected famine,” the IPC said.

However, around 1.6mn people are still forecast to face “crisis” levels of food insecurity in the period running to April 15, it said.

And under a worst-case scenario involving renewed hostilities and a halt in humanitarian aid and commercial goods, the territories of North Gaza, Gaza Governorate, Deir Al-Balah and Khan Younis risk famine, it said.

The UN’s agencies said that despite the roll-back of famine, hunger, malnutrition, disease and the scale of agricultural destruction remains “alarmingly high”.

“Humanitarian needs remain



Displaced Palestinian child Yasser Arafat, 5, who, according to medics, suffers from severe acute malnutrition with nutritional edema, sits in front of his family’s tent at a displacement camp in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip.

staggering, with current assistance addressing only the most basic survival requirements,” the food, agriculture, health, and childrens’ agencies said in a joint statement.

“Only access, supplies and funding at scale can prevent famine from returning,” they said.

The UN’s declaration of famine in August – the first time it has done so in the Middle East – infuriated Israel, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu slamming the IPC report.

Yesterday, foreign ministry spokesman Oren Marmorstein said on X that faced with “overwhelming and unequivocal evidence, even the IPC had to admit that there is no famine in Gaza”.

But he also accused the IPC of continuing to present a “distorted” picture by relying “primarily on data related to UN trucks, which account for only 20% of all aid trucks”.

Oxfam said that despite the end of the famine, the levels of hunger in Gaza remain “appalling and preventable”, and accused Israel of blocking aid requests from dozens of well-established humanitarian agencies.

“Oxfam alone has \$2.5mn worth of aid including 4,000

food parcels, sitting in warehouses just across the border. Israeli authorities refuse it all,” said Nicolas Vercken, Campaigns and Advocacy Director at Oxfam France.

The IPC said hunger was not the only challenge to those in the Palestinian territory.

Access to water, sanitation and hygiene is severely limited, it said, with open defecation and overcrowded living conditions increasing the risk of disease outbreaks.

Over 96% of cropland in the Gaza Strip is either damaged, inaccessible, or both, it said, while livestock has been decimated.

“It breaks my heart to see the ongoing scale of human suffering in Gaza,” UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said yesterday.

“We need more crossings, the lifting of restrictions on critical items, the removal of red tape, safe routes inside Gaza, sustained funding, and unimpeded access – including for NGOs,” he said.

Guterres also urged the world “not lose sight of the rapidly deteriorating situation in the West Bank”, where Palestinians “face escalating Israeli settler violence, land seizures, demolitions and intensified movement restrictions.”

Over 1,000 patients have died awaiting evacuation from Gaza since July 2024: WHO

AFP
Geneva

More than 1,000 patients have died while waiting for urgent medical evacuation from war-ravaged Gaza in the last year and a half, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said yesterday.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on X that the UN agency and its partners had “evacuated over 10,600 patients from Gaza with severe health conditions, including over 5,600 children” since the start of the war more than two years ago.

But he warned that “many more patients remain in Gaza awaiting evacuation to receive appropriate healthcare”.

Citing numbers from the health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza, Tedros said that 1,092 patients were known to have died while awaiting medical evacuation just between July 2024 and November 28, 2025.

“This figure is likely underreported,” he warned, calling on “more countries to open doors to patients from Gaza, and for medical evacuation to the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, to be restored”.

“Lives depend on it.”

WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic told reporters in Geneva yesterday that some 18,500 patients were still in need of treatment outside Gaza, including more than 4,000 children.

A Doctors Without Borders official said earlier this month

that the WHO figures refer only to registered patients, and that the actual number of people in need of urgent evacuation was several times higher.

“Many of these people don’t have time to wait,” Jasarevic stressed.

Up to December 1, more than 30 countries had taken patients to patients from Gaza, but only a handful, including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, had accepted large numbers.

A US-sponsored ceasefire has halted fighting in Gaza, which began after Hamas’s storming of Israel in October 2023.

But the deal, in effect since October 10, remains fragile as Israel and Hamas accuse each other almost daily of violations.

Flights cancelled, roads flooded as rare storm soaks UAE

AFP
Dubai

UAE airport authorities cancelled or delayed dozens of flights and roads were flooded in major cities as the heaviest rainstorm in months lashed the desert nation yesterday.

Dubai’s Emirates airline axed 13 flights yesterday and there were also delays and cancellations at neighbouring Sharjah’s airport after the overnight downpour, which woke residents with lightning flashes and loud cracks of thunder.

Sharjah’s main street was completely flooded early yesterday, with residents seen wading through it in bare feet. One man rode his bicycle through the water, which reached the top of its wheels. The scenes evoked memories of April 2024, when record rains caused widespread flooding and forced the cancellation of more than 2,000 flights at Dubai’s major international air hub. On Thursday, Dubai police



Vehicles drive through floodwaters, in Dubai, yesterday.

had urged residents to stay in unless “absolutely necessary” as the rainstorm approached.

Early yesterday, water-pumping trucks were seen around Dubai clearing blocked roads and large puddles in the streets.

The Dubai Airports website showed dozens of flights had been delayed yesterday, and some cancelled. “Some flights... are cancelled or delayed due to adverse weather,” a Dubai Airports spokesperson said.

The National Center of Meteorology had warned of rainfall across the country from Thursday to yesterday, including in

Dubai and the capital Abu Dhabi.

Other Gulf states also experienced heavy rain, including Qatar where the Arab Cup football’s third-place play-off between Saudi Arabia and UAE was cancelled on Thursday. Last year’s downpours in the UAE, the heaviest since records began 76 years ago, killed at least four people and brought Dubai to a standstill for days. A study published by the World Weather Attribution group found that global warming caused by fossil fuel emissions “most likely” exacerbated the intense rains that lashed the UAE and Oman last year.



People wade through floodwaters after heavy rains in Dubai, yesterday.

Syria welcomes lifting of US sanctions

Syria’s foreign ministry yesterday welcomed the permanent ending by the United States of the so-called Caesar sanctions, paving the way for the return of investment to the war-ravaged nation, AFP reported from Damascus.

The US Congress on Wednesday permanently ended the sanctions imposed on Syria under Bashar al-Assad, who was ousted in December last year.

The Caesar Act, named after an anonymous photographer who documented atrocities in Assad’s prisons, severely restricted investment and cut off Syria from the international banking system. A foreign ministry statement in Damascus “welcomed” the step, calling it “an entrance to the phase of reconstruction and development”. It urged “all Syrians in the country and abroad to contribute in national recovery efforts”.

Rubio says immediate US goal on Sudan is cessation of hostilities into new year

Reuters
Washington

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio yesterday said Washington’s immediate goal on Sudan is a cessation of hostilities going into the new year that allows humanitarian organisations to deliver assistance.

Rubio, speaking to reporters at a news conference, said countries are providing weaponry and equipment to the parties, including transshipment of weapons particularly to the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, adding that Washington was engaging with the parties involved. “We’ve had the right and appropriate conversations with all sides of this conflict, because that is their leverage. Without their support, neither side can continue. So that’s why we need to engage, and that’s why we’ve engaged the parties involved in

all of this,” Rubio said. “We think that outside actors have the leverage and the influence over the players on the ground to bring about this humanitarian truce, and we are very focused on it. I had a conversation on it yesterday. We have spoken to the UAE, we’ve spoken to Saudi, we’ve spoken to Egypt,” he added.

US President Donald Trump said last week he would intervene to stop the conflict between the army and the RSF, which erupted in April 2023 out of a power struggle and has triggered famine, ethnic killings and mass displacement in Sudan.

Previous efforts led by the US, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates have failed to bear fruit. The group submitted a proposal to the two forces in September. Sudan this month once again topped a watchlist of global humanitarian crises released by the International Rescue Committee aid organisation, as warring sides press on with the conflict that has killed tens of thousands of people.

UN appeals for assistance to DR Congo refugees in Burundi

AFP
Nairobi

The United Nations appealed for \$33mn in urgent funding to help more than 80,000 people who have fled to Burundi after the latest advance by foreign-backed fighters in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

After seizing the major Congolese cities of Goma in January and Bukavu in February, the M23 armed group launched a new offensive in early December near the Burundian border, even as Rwanda and the DRC signed a peace agreement in Washington.

The M23 on December 10 took control of Uvira, a city of hundreds of thousands of inhabit-



File photo shows Congolese civilians arrive at a reception centre in Gatumba, Burundi.

ants, giving it control of the land border with the DRC’s ally Burundi.

Under US pressure, the group said it would withdraw from Uvira but some of its police and intelligence agents were still deployed in the city on Thursday, accord-

ing to local and security sources. “Following recent violent clashes in South Kivu, notably around Uvira... a significant influx of refugees has occurred since December 5, with an estimated arrival of nearly 80,000 people through various entry points,” said the

office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The refugees include 71,989 Congolese and 8,000 Burundians, it added.

The organisation, which expects a total of 90,000 new arrivals, launched an appeal on Thursday for \$33.2mn (28.3mn euros) to enable it to host them in decent conditions.

It published a photo showing dozens of people camping under trees, without any infrastructure to accommodate them.

“Living conditions are very bad. We are in raining season here in Burundi, and without the necessary shelters... that is exposing people actually to even harsher conditions,” said Brigitte Mukanga-eno, the UNHCR representative in Burundi, who described the situation as “overwhelming”.

Bodies disappear across Tanzanian cities after protest crackdown: Amnesty

AFP
Nairobi

Bodies have disappeared from morgues in several Tanzanian cities after being taken by security forces in the aftermath of anti-government protests that were violently suppressed, Amnesty International said yesterday after weeks of investigation.

The East African nation descended into violence on October 29, the day of legislative and presidential elections which international observers deemed fraudulent.

According to the main opposition party, Chadema, more than 2,000 people were killed and over 5,000 injured in violence carried out by security forces in just one week.

During the Internet shutdown, security forces “arrested some

still in need of care, and collected bodies of victims of their brutality from mortuaries, taking them to unknown places,” Amnesty International said.

The NGO, which spoke with 35 witnesses, victims, or lawyers, said it interviewed among them relatives of eight people killed in the economic capital Dar es Salaam, as well as in Mwanza and Moshi (northwest), Arusha and Mbeya (northeast), and Tunduma (southwest), who were “unable to find their loved ones’ bodies, even after searching in various morgues.”

“Some of them shared with us pictures of empty coffins with photos of the deceased and their clothing... We spoke to doctors who actually also spoke to mortuary attendants and confirmed the security officers actually took away the bodies,” said Sikula Oniala, an Amnesty researcher.

Brown University mass shooting suspect dead

Reuters/AFP
Boston/Providence/New York

The suspect in last week-end's mass shooting at Brown University is dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, with investigators certain he also killed a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) professor two days later, officials said on Thursday.

The gunman, identified as Portuguese national Claudio Neves Valente, 48, was found dead on Thursday night in a storage rental facility in Salem, New Hampshire, where he had rented a unit last month, officials said.

Valente attended Brown University more than two decades ago as a PhD student in physics and was a former classmate in Portugal of slain MIT professor Nuno Loureiro, 47.

Despite those links, authorities said that his motive in the killings remains a mystery.

"I don't think we have any idea why now, or why Brown, or why these students, why this classroom," said Rhode Island Attorney-General Peter Neronha, at a Thursday night press conference in Providence, where the university is located.

"Tonight, our Providence neighbours can finally breathe a little bit easier," Mayor Brett Smiley told reporters.

Valente entered a building used for Brown's engineering and physics programmes on December 13 and fired at least 44 rounds from his 9mm pistol, killing two students and injuring another nine, according to the Providence police affidavit for his arrest.

Then, officials say, he fatally shot Loureiro inside his home before disappearing and leading investigators on a manhunt that stretched over five days.

Authorities said two guns – including the 9mm pistol they believe was used in the killings – were found by his corpse.

In Boston, US Attorney Leah Foley said at a press conference that investigators had evidence that made them certain that Valente, who was living in Miami and was a lawful permanent resident of the United States, murdered Loureiro in his home in Brookline, Massachusetts.

There have been more than 300 mass shootings in the United States so far this year, according to the Gun Violence Archive, which defines a mass shooting as four or more people shot.

TikTok signs joint venture deal to end US ban threat

Reuters
Washington

TikTok's Chinese owner, ByteDance, on Thursday signed binding agreements to hand control of the short video app's US operations to a group of investors, including Oracle, in a big step toward avoiding a US ban and ending years of uncertainty.

The deal is a milestone for the short video app used regularly by more than 170mn Americans after years of battles that began in August 2020, when President Donald Trump first tried unsuccessfully to ban the app over US national security concerns.

Financial terms of the deal, announced in an internal memo by TikTok (US) seen by Reuters, were not disclosed.

Other details of the deal are in line with those outlined in September, when Trump delayed until January 20 enforcement of the law that bans the app unless its Chinese owners sell it amid efforts to extract TikTok's US assets from the global platform.

He also declared the deal met the terms of the divestiture requirements under a 2024 law.

The new US company will be valued at around \$14bn, Vice-President J D Vance said in September.

That was below analysts' estimates and the final figure was not made public on Thursday.

Under the agreement, American and global investors including cloud computing giant Oracle, private equity group Silver Lake and Abu Dhabi-based MGX will hold an 80.1% stake in the new TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC, while ByteDance will retain 19.9%.

Oracle shares rose nearly 6% in premarket trading yesterday.

The White House said in September the new joint venture would operate TikTok's US app, but questions remain about the deal, including the business relationships between the new joint venture and ByteDance.

The White House on Thursday referred questions about the deal to TikTok.

TikTok chief executive Shou Zi Chew told employees the joint venture would "operate as an independent entity with authority over US data protection, algorithm security, content moderation and software assurance", according to the memo seen by Reuters.

The deal, set to close on January 22, would end years of efforts to force ByteDance to divest its US business over national security concerns.

US suspends green card lottery

The Trump administration has announced that it will suspend a green card lottery, following a mass shooting at Brown University in the United States (*see report on the left*).

Homeland security chief Kristi Noem wrote on social media on Thursday that Neves Valente "entered the United States through the diversity lottery immigrant visa programme (DV1) in 2017 and was granted a green card".

The US green card lottery grants up to 55,000 permanent resident visas annually to people "from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States", according to the State Department.

"At President Trump's direction, I am immediately directing USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) to pause the DV1 programme to ensure no more Americans are harmed by this disastrous programme," Noem said. – **AFP**

US judge convicted of helping immigrant evade arrest

A US judge accused of helping an undocumented man evade federal immigration agents was found guilty of obstruction on Thursday and now faces possible jail time, US media reported.

The case, which became a focal point in the Trump administration's battle with the judiciary over immigration, stems from a standoff in April with federal agents outside a court in the mid-western city of Milwaukee.

Milwaukee County Judge Hannah Dugan pleaded not guilty to charges of obstructing an official proceeding, a felony, and the misdemeanor concealing a person from arrest.

She was acquitted on Thursday on the lesser concealment charge.

Dugan, 66, faces up to five years in prison for the obstruction count, according to the media reports. A sentencing date has yet to be set.

During the April confrontation, agents had come to arrest Eduardo Flores-Ruiz, a 31-year-old Mexican immigrant appearing on misdemeanor battery charges.

Prosecutors say Dugan sent the agents down the hall to see the chief judge and, while they were away, directed Flores-Ruiz and his lawyer to a private exit used by judges and staff.

Immigration agents spotted Flores-Ruiz, however, and arrested him outside the building after a foot chase. He was subsequently deported.

Dugan was later arrested, and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director Kash Patel posted a photo on social media of her being led away in handcuffs.

Attorney-General Pam Bondi accused the judge of "protecting a criminal defendant over victims of crime".

US President Donald Trump has conducted a sweeping crackdown on migrants since returning to power in January.

Justice Department officials touted the case as an example of prosecutors' willingness to pursue powerful public officials.

The Trump administration has escalated immigration enforcement at state and local court-houses, viewing them as a reliable and safe venue to make arrests. – **AFP/Reuters**

Pentagon fails its eighth audit, targets 2028 to pass

Reuters
Washington

For the eighth year in a row, the Pentagon has failed an annual audit, the Department of Defence said yesterday, continuing a pattern of financial accountability problems that have drawn bipartisan criticism and emerged as a campaign issue.

The Pentagon's first audit was conducted in 2018 and it consistently failed, reflecting system and accounting problems across its

vast bureaucracy that have persisted.

"The Department cannot resolve decades of war, neglect of America's defence industrial base, and soaring national debt through unchecked spending," Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth said in a statement released with the audit.

On Thursday US President Donald Trump signed into law a nearly \$901bn annual defence policy bill.

The Department of Defence's assets are vast and decentralised, amounting to \$4.65tn alongside \$4.73tn in liabilities.

These are located in all 50 states and

thousands of sites around the world.

Auditors identified 26 material weaknesses and two significant deficiencies in the Department of Defence (DoD)'s internal controls over financial reporting for fiscal 2025.

A material weakness is worse than a significant deficiency because a material weakness indicates a severe control failure that could lead to a significant misstatement in financial reports.

"The Department of War is committed to resolving its critical issues and achieving an unmodified audit opinion by 2028," the department's chief financial officer wrote in a letter released with the report.

Trump has said he was changing the name of the Defence Department to the Department of War, but the change will not be official until it is approved by Congress.

Since the Pentagon began auditing itself in 2018 – the last department to do so after Congress required the practice across the government in 1990 – it has solved some of its accounting problems.

The department remains the only Cabinet-level agency that has never earned a clean financial report.

Famed institution renamed to 'Kennedy-Trump Centre'

US President Donald Trump sealed his takeover of Washington's famed Kennedy Centre on Thursday after the White House said the institution's board voted to rename it the "Trump-Kennedy Centre".

Trump hand-picked new board members of the US national cultural centre and installed himself as chairman earlier this year, as part of a crackdown on institutions he branded too woke.

However, family members of slain US president John F Kennedy, after whom the arts venue is named, slammed the decision as "beyond wild" and said it could not be renamed without Congress approval.

The centre did not respond to a question about whether congressional approval was required or would be sought for the new name.

Adding his own name to the storied venue is the latest in a series of grandiose Trump schemes including the demolition of the White House East Wing to build a \$400mn ballroom, and planning a large triumphal arch.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said the "highly respected" board of the Kennedy centre had "voted unanimously" to take the step of renaming it after a living president.

Leavitt said it was "because of



Workers adjust the name of the John F Kennedy Memorial Centre for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. The Kennedy Centre Board of Trustees voted in what they say was a unanimous decision to rename the facility to 'The Donald J Trump and The John F Kennedy Memorial Centre for the Performing Arts'. – **AFP**

the unbelievable work President Trump has done over the last year in saving the building".

"Congratulations to President Donald J Trump, and likewise, congratulations to President Kennedy, because this will be a truly great team long into the future!" she added.

Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. The white-marble arts centre on the banks of the Potomac River opened in 1971.

The website of the Kennedy centre later had a new "Trump-Kennedy Centre" logo.

The move met condemnation

from the Kennedy family, America's most storied political clan. "Can we not see what is happening here? C'mon, my fellow Americans! Wake up!" JFK's niece Maria Shriver said on X.

She added that it was "beyond wild" of Trump to think it was acceptable to add his name before her uncle's.

Former congressman Joe Kennedy III said the centre was a "living memorial" to his great-uncle and "can no sooner be renamed than can someone rename the Lincoln Memorial, no matter what anyone says".

Trump orders astronaut moon landing by 2025

President Donald Trump enshrined the US goal to put humans back on the moon by 2028 and defend space from weapon threats in an executive order issued on Thursday, the first major space policy move of his administration's second term.

The order, issued hours after billionaire private astronaut and former SpaceX customer Jared Isaacman was sworn in as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa)'s 15th administrator, also reorganised national space policy co-ordination under Trump's chief science adviser, Michael Kratsios.

Titled "ENSURING AMERICAN SPACE SUPERIORITY", the order calls on the Pentagon and US intelligence agencies to create a space security strategy, urges efficiency among private contractors and seeks demonstrations of missile-defence technologies under Trump's Golden Dome programme.

It appeared to cancel the White House's top space policy-co-ordinating body, the National Space Council, a panel of cabinet members that the president revived during his first term and has considered axing this year.

However, an administration official said it would not be cancelled and suggested it would live on under the White House's Office of Technology Policy with a different structure in which the president, rather than the vice-president, would be chairman.

The goal to land humans on the moon by the end of Trump's second term in 2028 bears resemblance to the president's 2019 directive in his first term to make a lunar return by 2024, putting the moon at the centre of US space exploration policy with a timeline many in the industry regarded as unrealistic.

Development and testing delays with Nasa's Space Launch System and SpaceX's Starship gradually pushed that landing target date back.

A 2028 astronaut moon landing would be the first of many planned under Nasa's Artemis effort to build a long-term presence on the lunar surface.

Putting the priority on a lunar mission represents a policy shift from what Trump had said earlier this year; when he returned to the White House in January, he said he wanted to put the American flag on Mars before the end of his four-year term. – **Reuters/AFP**

Honduras begins manual count of presidential vote

Reuters
Tegucigalpa

Honduras' National Electoral Council on Thursday began a long-delayed manual count of about 15% of the votes cast in last month's presidential election, a task that could end up overturning the conservative candidate's lead.

The special review process will examine hundreds of thousands of ballots that had been left uncounted by computers due to inconsistencies with the tally sheets that

were identified by election officials.

The hand count could easily change the election's preliminary result, which gave Conservative Nasry Asfura of the National Party a razor-thin margin of 43,000 votes – out of more than 3mn cast – over centre-right Liberal Party candidate Salvador Nasralla.

It is unlikely, however, to quiet claims of fraud and demands for a new election by the ruling leftist LIBRE party, whose candidate Rixi Moncada is a distant third in the vote count.

The November 30 presidential election

has been rocked by a chaotic vote-tallying process, as well as political clashes and US intervention.

President Donald Trump has backed Asfura, the 67-year-old former mayor of Tegucigalpa, and suggested that Washington's support for Honduras would be conditional on Asfura winning the election.

Nasralla, a three-time presidential candidate, said that he believed Trump's comments had damaged his chances.

He has also said he believed the election was marred by fraud.

Both Nasralla and LIBRE have demanded

a manual recount of all ballots that were cast but the president of the election council rebuffed them, saying that there was no legal basis for a full recount without concrete evidence of irregularities.

Asfura has remained largely silent on the election, saying people should wait for the final results.

Major international election observers, including the European Union and the Organisation of American States, have expressed concern over the chaotic and delayed vote count but have not reported evidence of systemic fraud.

Brazil strips Bolsonaro's son of congressional seat

Brazil's Chamber of Deputies on Thursday stripped Eduardo Bolsonaro – one of former president Jair Bolsonaro's sons – of his seat in the lower house of parliament for his excessive absences.

Since February, Eduardo Bolsonaro has not attended parliament in Brasilia because he has

been living in the United States to lobby Washington over aiding his father, who is currently imprisoned for attempting a coup.

Bolsonaro's third son has exceeded the number of allowed absences from the chamber, according to a document obtained by AFP.

The lobbying efforts paid off to

some extent – at least initially.

US President Donald Trump repeatedly called the trial of ally Jair Bolsonaro a "witch hunt" – the same language he used after being accused of colluding with Russia to win the 2016 election.

Trump imposed a 40% tariff on Brazilian exports to the US in August before the price of coffee – a

key product of the Latin American country – began to spike.

Those tariffs were largely lifted in November, after Trump met with Brazil's leftist president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in October.

The Trump administration also sanctioned Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, who ruled

on Bolsonaro's case and sentenced him to 27 years in prison – but those sanctions were also lifted earlier this month.

Jair Bolsonaro, who has been serving time since November, could see his sentence reduced to two years under a law approved on Wednesday by parliament, where conservatives hold sway. – **AFP**



Australia plans gun buyback after Bondi massacre

Reuters
Sydney

Australia will launch a national gun buyback scheme following the mass shooting in Sydney, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said yesterday, as hundreds of surfers and swimmers paddled out

at Bondi Beach to honour victims. The buyback would be similar to gun reforms introduced soon after the massacre in 1996 in Tasmania's Port Arthur after a lone gunman killed 35 people, which prompted authorities to implement some of the world's toughest gun laws. "Australia's gun laws were last substantially reformed in the wake

of the Port Arthur tragedy. The terrible events at Bondi show we need to get more guns off our streets," Albanese said during a media briefing. Fifteen people were killed and dozens wounded on Sunday in Bondi after two gunmen opened fire at an event. In the shooting's aftermath, authorities have ramped up patrols and policing across the country in

an effort to prevent further violence. Both the federal government and the state government of New South Wales, where Sydney is located, have also pledged a raft of reforms, including tightening gun control laws. A 50-year-old gunman, who was killed at the scene, held a firearm licence and had six guns registered. If a man in Sydney's

suburbs needs "six high-powered rifles and is able to get them under existing licensing schemes, then there's something wrong", Albanese said. An estimated 4mn firearms are currently in the country. The government would work with states to target surplus, newly banned and illegal firearms, with the costs to be shared between the federal and state

governments, he said. On the same day, New South Wales Premier Chris Minns announced the state government would be recalled next week to enact the "toughest gun law reforms in the country". Changes would include limiting firearms to four per person, restricting access to high-risk weapons and components, and tightening licensing requirements.

Three killed in attacks at Taipei metro, suspect dead

AFP
Taipei

Attacks at metro stations in Taipei yesterday involving smoke bombs and stabbings killed at least three people, the Taiwanese city's fire department said, adding that the suspect was also dead. Taiwan's Premier Cho Jung-tai said the attacks at Taipei Main Station and Zhongshan station were "a deliberate act", although the motive was not immediately clear. Cho said in a statement that the suspect wore a mask and threw "five or six gasoline bombs or smoke grenades" at Taipei Main Station. According to the Taipei City Fire Department, a total of four people were confirmed dead including the suspect, a 27-year-old man.

Five other people were injured, the fire department said. The city's mayor said the suspect had apparently jumped off a building, and that he was wanted for evading military service. One of the victims was killed while trying to stop the attack at the Main Station, Mayor Chiang Wan-an told reporters. "Unfortunately, he was attacked and passed away... we are all deeply saddened," he said. A witness of the attack at the Main Station told local network EBC News that he had seen a "man rush up and try and subdue" the attacker,

who was "wearing a gas mask and a bulletproof vest". "At first I thought it was a drill, then I saw a person holding a knife and throwing smoke grenades," said the witness, who did not give his name. The mayor said that "we understand that the suspect committed suicide by jumping from a building to evade arrest, and has been confirmed dead." A second witness told EBC News that "someone ran out wearing a gas mask and started throwing canisters that released gas." "I quickly ran away. He kept throwing them behind me. I didn't count how many (canisters) but there was a constant banging and clanging sound," added the witness, who also did not give his name. "I didn't hear any explosions, but a lot of gas kept spraying out." Cho, the island's premier, earlier said three people suffered cardiac arrest as a result of the attacks, and several people had "injuries from stab wounds and blunt force trauma to various parts of their bodies". Authorities said they were ramping up security across the island in response to the attacks. "All important locations... including railway stations, highways, subway stations and airports are maintaining a high level of alert and vigilance," Cho told reporters. Images released by Taiwan's Central News Agency show a canister on the ground at the Main Station, with officers examining potential evidence at the scene.



Protesters block the Shahbagh intersection in Dhaka yesterday following the death of youth leader Sharif Osman Hadi.

Bangladesh protesters demand arrest of student leader's killers

AFP
Dhaka

Protesters rallied across Bangladesh yesterday for a second straight day calling for the arrest of the gunmen who shot and killed a key figure in last year's pro-democracy uprising. As news spread that 32-year-old student leader Sharif Osman Hadi died in hospital in Singapore on Thursday, crowds took to the streets in an outpouring of mourning and anger. Several buildings were vandalised including the offices of media outlets deemed to favour India - an old ally of Bangladesh's ousted leadership. Hadi, a staunch critic of India, was shot by masked gunmen while leaving a mosque in the capital Dhaka last week. He was initially wounded and flown to Singapore for treatment, but eventually succumbed to his

wounds. UN rights chief Volker Turk yesterday called for a "prompt, impartial, thorough and transparent" investigation. In Dhaka, protester Sajid Al Adeeb said "people have gathered here demanding the swift arrest of those who killed Hadi." The 20-year-old student said the killers were "currently in India" - a claim which New Delhi has not commented on. "I urge the government to take immediate and appropriate steps to arrest those responsible," he added. "Above all, I want Hadi's ideals to live on." Protests were also held in the cities of Gazipur, Sylhet and Chattogram yesterday. Hadi's remains were brought to Dhaka yesterday evening ahead of a funeral planned for today. The customary funeral prayer will be performed today in front of the parliament building, the government said. Hadi's body will then be placed at the central mosque of Dhaka University to allow peo-

ple to pay their last respects before his burial there. Amir Hossain, Hadi's brother-in-law, said the family wanted justice. "We don't need anything except justice. The perpetrators must be punished," Hossain said. The UN's Turk said in a statement that "he was deeply troubled" by Hadi's killing. "Retaliation and revenge will only deepen divisions and undermine the rights of all," he said. "I urge the authorities to conduct a prompt, impartial, thorough and transparent investigation into the attack that led to Hadi's death, and to ensure due process and accountability for those responsible." Ahead of the funeral, security has been beefed up in the capital with strict restriction on flying drones around the parliament building. The US embassy in Dhaka urged its citizens to remain vigilant and "remember that gatherings intended to be peaceful can turn confrontational and escalate into violence".

Singapore arrests man linked to tycoon in alleged scam empire

A Singaporean man sanctioned by the US over links to the suspected mastermind of one of Asia's largest scam networks has been arrested in the city-state, police said yesterday. Nigel Tang Wan Bao Nabil was detained on his return to Singapore on December 11 for his "suspected involvement in money laundering offences linked to Chen Zhi and the companies associated with him," police said in a statement. "Police investigations are ongoing." Tang, 32, was the captain of a superyacht owned by Chen, the Singapore-based Business Times reported. Chen is a British-Cambodian tycoon accused of running forced labour camps in Cambodia used as multi-billion dollar scam centres. He has been indicted in the US. Washington has said that Chen's multinational conglomerate, Prince Holding Group, served as a front for "one of Asia's largest transnational criminal organisations". Prince Group has denied the allegations.

Nepal ex-PM Oli re-elected party leader



Former Nepali prime minister and newly-elected leader of the Communist Party of Nepal - Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), K P Sharma Oli (left) receives flowers during the party's 11th general convention in Kathmandu. Members of ousted Nepali prime minister K P Sharma Oli's political party voted for him to retain leadership of the organisation on Thursday, meaning he will oversee its preparations for national elections next year.

Thailand-Cambodia ceasefire urged

Reuters
Bangkok/Phnom Penh

China and the US are renewing their separate efforts to reach a ceasefire between Thailand and Cambodia, days ahead of a special meeting of Southeast Asian ministers on the border conflict, the worst fighting between the two in recent history. Around 60 people have died and more than half a million have been displaced since hostilities resumed last week between the Southeast Asian neighbours, shattering a ceasefire that President Donald Trump had brokered in late July. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio called Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow yesterday, reiterating Washington's concerns and urging Thailand to de-escalate the situation and return to the ceasefire deal, the state department said. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke with his Thai and Cam-

bodian counterparts on Thursday and said both had "expressed their desire to ease tensions and achieve a ceasefire", China's foreign ministry said. "The intensity of this round of clashes has far exceeded previous incidents, and if it continues, it will benefit neither side and will undermine (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) unity," the ministry said in a statement, adding a special envoy had visited both countries in an effort to restore peace. The Thai foreign ministry said Sihasak had reaffirmed Bangkok's position to Rubio and "shared information on the way forward," including joining Monday's Asean meeting. The ministry also confirmed the call with Wang. Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn is also set to join the meeting in Kuala Lumpur on Monday, which would be the first face-to-face meeting between the governments since the fighting resumed on December 8.

Japan reaffirms no-nukes pledge after official floats weapons idea

Reuters
Tokyo

Japan yesterday reaffirmed its decades-old pledge never to possess nuclear weapons after local media reported that a senior security official suggested the country should acquire them to deter potential aggressors. The unnamed official said Japan needed nuclear weapons because of a worsening security environment but acknowledged that such a move would be politically difficult, public broadcaster NHK and other outlets reported, describing the official as being from Prime

Minister Sanae Takaichi's office. At a regular press briefing in Tokyo, chief cabinet secretary Minoru Kihara said Japan's nuclear policy had not changed, but declined to comment on the remarks or to say whether the person would remain in the post amid calls from opposition leaders for the official to be removed. There is a growing political and public willingness in Japan to loosen its three non-nuclear principles not to possess, develop or allow nuclear weapons into its territory, a Reuters investigation published in August found. While it remains a highly sensitive subject in the only country to

have suffered atomic bombings, doubts over the reliability of US security guarantees under President Donald Trump and growing threats from nuclear-armed neighbours China, Russia and North Korea have re-ignited the debate. Some lawmakers within Takaichi's ruling party have said the US should be allowed to bring nuclear weapons into Japan on submarines or other platforms to reinforce deterrence. Takaichi last month stirred debate on her own stance by declining to say whether there would be any changes to the three principles when her administration

formulates a new defence strategy next year. "Putting these trial balloons out creates an opportunity to start to build consensus around the direction to move on changes in security policy," said Stephen Nagy, a politics professor at the International Christian University in Tokyo. Beijing's assertiveness and growing missile cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang are "creating the momentum to really change Japan's thinking about security," he added. Taro Kono, a senior ruling-party lawmaker and former defence and foreign minister, said

yesterday Japan should not shy away from a broader debate on the pros and cons of acquiring nuclear weapons. Discussions about acquiring or hosting nuclear weapons have long been taboo due to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II and the country's pacifist constitution adopted after its defeat. Nihon Hidankyo, a group of atomic bomb survivors that won the Nobel Peace Prize last year for efforts to achieve a nuclear-free world, said in a statement that it "can never tolerate such a remark". Such talk also risks drawing ire from neighbouring countries, including regional security ri-

val China. "Should the information prove accurate, the situation would be extremely grave," Guo Jiakun, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said at a regular briefing when asked about the Japanese official's reported comments. "For some time now, Japan has persistently pursued erroneous actions and rhetoric on military security matters." Relations between Tokyo and Beijing have soured since Takaichi last month said a Chinese attack on Taiwan that also threatened Japan could trigger a military response. China claims the democratically governed island.

POLICY

India streamlines visa rules in boost for Chinese professionals

India has reformed its business visa regime to ease movement of foreign engineers and technicians, the government said, which will be a boost local firms leaning on Chinese professionals for manufacturing services. India's department for promotion of industry and internal trade said it had launched a new digital platform last month for companies to generate sponsorship letters to invite foreign professionals, has simplified visa forms and will no longer ask relevant ministries for additional recommendations. The visas have been eased for factory installation, commissioning, maintenance, and production, among other functions.

FALLOUT

IndiGo faces India antitrust scrutiny

India's competition regulator said it was reviewing allegations of antitrust violations by budget airline IndiGo following recent flight disruptions. The airline, which controls more than 60% of the domestic market, cancelled about 4,500 flights earlier this month due to poor pilot roster planning, stranding tens of thousands of passengers and triggering one of the country's biggest aviation crises. The Competition Commission of India said it had "taken cognisance of information filed against IndiGo in the context of the recent flight disruptions witnessed in the aviation sector, across various routes" and decided to proceed with an initial assessment.

DECISION

UK pauses trials of Ajax fighting vehicle

Britain said it was pausing all trials of the Ajax fighting vehicle, the latest setback for the army's troubled £6bn (\$8bn) programme after years of technical faults and delays. Luke Pollard, minister for defence readiness, announced the pause "out of an abundance of caution". It comes after he decided to pause the use of the vehicle in training and exercising in November to allow a safety investigation to take place. The development of the vehicles, made by General Dynamics in south Wales, has been beset by difficulties since Britain ordered them in 2014. During army trials last month, 30 troops reported feeling unwell from noise and vibration.

OBITUARY

Antony Price, fashion guru to UK pop stars, dies at 80

The fashion world paid tribute to British designer Antony Price, who crafted sharp, stylish looks for pop legends such as Mick Jagger, David Bowie and Duran Duran, after he died aged 80. Fashion house 16Arlington, which collaborated on Price's final show, said he was "a singular creative force and one of the most influential British designers of his generation". Price died Tuesday, only a few weeks after the show, in which singer Lily Allen made a splash wearing a black velvet dress said to resemble a famed look worn by princess Diana. The November show was his first in more than three decades.

India, France 'seal treaty revamp giving Paris dividend relief and Delhi tax rights'

Reuters
New Delhi

India and France have struck a deal to revise their 1992 treaty which will halve the tax on dividends paid by Indian units to French parents, potentially saving millions for companies with major operations in the South Asian nation, documents show.

In return, India will get to widen its powers to tax share sales by French investors, and revoke the "most favoured nation" status of France that gave it certain tax advantages, according to confidential Indian government documents.

Bilateral trade between India and France stood at \$15bn last year, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron have been forging warmer ties. The two sides have been working to recast their tax treaty since 2024 to modernise it by adapting global standards on tax transparency.

"The proposed amending protocol will boost flow of investment, technology and personnel between India and France, and will provide tax certainty," said one of the Indian government documents from August. The new treaty could have implications for large French portfolio investors as well as companies like Capgemini, Accor, Sanofi, Pernod Ricard, Danone, and L'Oreal - all of which have expanded their presence

in India in recent years. A key change is that French companies which hold a stake of more than 10% in any Indian entity will have to pay a 5% tax on the dividends they receive, instead of 10% earlier. For minority French shareholdings of under 10% in Indian companies, however, dividend tax will rise from 10% to 15%. Many French firms' Indian units like Capgemini Technology Services India, BNP Paribas Securities India and TotalEnergies Marketing India have declared dividends in the past, their Indian regulatory disclosures show. The Capgemini unit's dividend stood at \$500mn in 2023-24. France's tax office said it could not comment given the negotiations are ongoing, while the finance ministry did not respond to queries. India's foreign and finance ministries also did not respond.

Capgemini and Danone declined to comment while the other French companies did not respond to Reuters' queries.

Currently, India can impose taxes on any French entity's share sale, but only when it holds more than 10% of an Indian company. The new proposed treaty will remove that threshold.

The new treaty "will provide for full source-based taxation rights in respect of capital gains on equity shares (in India)," said the Indian documents.

France-based foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) own \$21bn worth of shares in Indian companies as of

November 2025, a third higher than levels in 2024, Indian share depositary data shows.

And more than 40 French companies hold stakes of under 10% in Indian entities, according to an analysis by Indian market intelligence platform Tracxn.

"This will impact French FPIs in India and also French companies holding minority interest in Indian companies. These investments were not subject to tax under the current treaty," said Riaz Thingna, a partner at Grant Thornton Bharat LLP.

One official familiar with the deliberations said Indian and French officials have agreed the terms of the new treaty, which will likely be signed in the coming weeks.

In New Delhi, the deal is subject to final approval by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cabinet, according to the documents.

India has also agreed to France's demand to limit tax on fees for technical services to cases where a French provider transfers technical know-how, removing most routine consultancy and support services from the scope of India's tax.

Differences over how to interpret the so-called most-favoured nation, or MFN, clause were among the main reasons for the renegotiation, the official said. If a country has an MFN clause with India under a signed treaty, it typically starts claiming lower tax rates if New Delhi strikes more favourable tax terms later with another OECD nation.

Anti-pollution measures in Delhi



Vehicles drive past anti-smog misting system installed on a road to control air pollution in New Delhi, India.

India parliament clears new rural jobs scheme

AFP
New Delhi

India's parliament yesterday pushed through an overhaul of a rural employment scheme despite an opposition walkout and a session that stretched well past midnight.

The Developed India Employment Guarantee and Sustenance Mission bill will supersede a decades-old rural jobs scheme for millions of the country's poorest.

It replaces the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), a de-

fining legacy of the previous left-leaning Congress government, which was in power from 2004-2014.

The older, \$9.5bn government-funded programme guaranteed 100 days of employment each year for any rural household that requested it. Around 160mn households registered last year, according to official figures.

The new scheme raises the guarantee per household to 125 days, but unlike the original model, where funding and jobs responded to workers' requests (demand-driven) the government will now allocate a fixed budget,

and dictate job availability up-front (supply-driven).

It also shifts 40% of the financial burden to state governments, with decisions on allocating work to be made by the central administration in New Delhi.

"A legal employment guarantee is reduced to a centrally managed publicity scheme at the expense of states," said John Brittas, of the opposition Communist Party of India-Marxist.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has defended the re-jigged scheme as an attempt to modernise the existing framework.

Harry and Meghan to revamp Archewell charitable arm

Britain's Prince Harry and his wife Meghan are to revamp their charitable organisation with the aim of expanding the royal couple's global philanthropic work, their spokesperson said yesterday. Shortly after leaving their official duties and moving to the US in 2020, the couple, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, set up the Archewell Foundation, the name being a nod to their son Archie. It was one of the main steps they took to creating new lives and careers in California following their acrimonious exit from the traditional world of the British royals. Under the new change, their foundation will become Archewell Philanthropies, transitioning to a fiscal sponsor model to streamline its administrative structure and give it greater flexibility, the couple's spokesperson said in a statement. It will broaden the family's "meaningful reach and maximum impact, grounded in the same values, partnerships, and their commitment to show up and do good", the spokesperson added.

King Charles visits BRNC



Britain's King Charles III, the Lord High Admiral, visits Britannia Royal Naval College (BRNC), in Dartmouth, Britain.

UK govt was hacked in October, says minister

Reuters
London

British Trade Department Minister Chris Bryant said the government had been hacked in October, partly confirming a report in the Sun newspaper, which said a Chinese group had breached systems to access Foreign Office data.

"There certainly has been a hack," Bryant told Times Radio yesterday.

"I'm not able to say whether it is directly related to Chinese operatives, or indeed, the Chinese state," he added.

The Sun named Storm 1849 as the Chinese cyber gang responsible for the breach, which it said was understood to possibly include tens of thousands of visa details. Bryant said that the reporting around the incident was "speculation" and that the government was continuing to

investigate, but at this stage it was "fairly confident" that there was a low risk any individual would be affected. "We managed to close the hole, as it were, very quickly," Bryant told Sky News, describing the breach. "It was a technical issue in one of our sites."

The Sun newspaper said the group, Storm 1849, was a China-linked gang which was part of a state-aligned hacking apparatus, and which has been accused of targeting politicians and groups critical of the Chinese government. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said earlier in December that China posed "national security threats" to Britain, but defended his government's decision to step up engagement with the country.

He is due to visit Beijing in late January, according to sources.

The incident at the Foreign Office follows two major cyber attacks on big British companies this year.

UK consumers 'reined in shopping in run-up to budget'

Reuters
London

British retail sales fell last month, official figures showed yesterday, the latest in a string of data suggesting a slowdown in the broader economy ahead of Finance Minister Rachel Reeves' budget at the end of last month.

Sales volumes dropped by 0.1% in November from October, as a boost from the Black Friday promotional offers failed to match the impact of previous years.

In October, sales fell by a revised 0.9%, a slightly less severe fall than a drop of 1.1% which was initially reported, the ONS said.

"A second consecutive month of decline in retail sales will be a big disappointment for retailers, particularly with Black Friday and early Christmas shopping captured in these figures," Oliver Vernon-Harcourt, head of retail at Deloitte, said.

Economists polled had expected sales volumes to rise by 0.4% in month-on-month terms last month.

"This year November's Black

Friday discounts did not boost sales as much as in some recent years," Office for National Statistics senior statistician Hannah Finselbach said.

"Meanwhile, our separate household survey showed that although some people said they were planning to do more shopping this Black Friday than last, almost twice as many said they were planning to do less."

In the three months to November, sales rose but the 0.6% rise was the weakest reading since the three months to August.

Supermarket sales volumes fell

for a fourth consecutive month and jewellers reported lower demand for gold items as prices of the precious metal stabilised after their surge.

The November data was collected between November 2 and 29. Reeves announced her budget on November 26.

Previously released figures from the ONS have shown a drop in economic output and rise in the unemployment rate to its highest since 2021 in the three months to October.

Paul Dales, chief UK economist at Capital Economics, said

yesterday's weak reading of retail sales supported his view that soft consumer spending would contribute to a slowing of economic growth to about 1.0% in 2026 from around 1.4% this year.

Earlier yesterday, Britain's longest-running consumer survey showed only a slight pick-up in confidence in the days after Reeves announced £26n (\$34.8bn) of tax increases but delayed the introduction of most of them.

Borrowing data published separately by the ONS yesterday underscored the scale of Reeves'

challenge to repair the public finances.

Recent updates from UK retailers have highlighted tough market conditions ahead of Christmas, with clarity about the budget having done little to lift the mood.

Card and gift retailer Card Factory warned on its profits. Frasers, a sportswear and fashion retailer, said excess inventory was weighing on the industry. Electricals retailer Currys said spending and confidence was "muted" and it did not expect an improvement in 2026.

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GULF TIMES

India’s exports defy tariffs, strengthen hand in US trade talks

India’s exports leapt in November in defiance of US President Donald Trump’s steep tariffs, providing fresh leverage in ongoing trade talks with Washington and easing pressure on New Delhi to strike a quick deal. Shipments to the US rose more than 22% in November from a year earlier, outpacing India’s overall export growth of more than 19%, which lifted total goods exports to \$38.13bn, government trade data showed.

Goods exports were the highest for any November in a decade.

Robust shipments have tempered fears of a prolonged tariff-led slump after trade talks between the two nations fell apart and Trump doubled duties on Indian goods to 50% in late August, the highest in the world. The hike included a 25% levy that was in retaliation for India’s purchases of Russian oil.

The move had initially hit exports and pushed the rupee to a record low as investors awaited progress in trade negotiations. Exports to the US had fallen nearly 9% year-on-year in October after touching a record low in September.

Analysts said November’s export recovery, coupled with India’s strong domestic economy, reduces the urgency for New Delhi to make concessions in talks with Washington.

“After the recovery in US exports despite no tariff relief, India now has the leverage to press for a tariff cut to 25% from 50%, especially after sharply reducing Russian crude imports,” said Ajay Srivastava, founder of the Global Trade Research Initiative.

Economists cited diversification and strong domestic demand as key drivers of resilience, which helped India’s economy beat forecasts to grow 8.2% in the July-September fiscal second quarter. GDP is forecast to accelerate to at least 7% in the 2025/26 year. “Improvement in exports signals resilience and diversification,” said economist Madhavi Arora from Emkay Global.

The US-bound exports have been led by tariff-free sectors such as electronics while tariff-hit sectors have performed better than expected, likely due to exporters tapping new markets, Arora said.

India’s exports of electronic goods during April to November jumped 38% from a year earlier, data showed.

Over the years, rising domestic production of smartphones by global giants such as Apple has been central to India’s manufacturing push. Between March and May, for instance, nearly all the iPhones exported by Foxconn from India went to the US, reflecting a realigning of its India exports to almost exclusively serve the US market this year.

Services exports also provided an additional buffer, totalling around \$35.86bn in November and contributing to a nearly \$18bn services trade surplus, according to government estimates. A weaker currency has also softened the tariff blow. The rupee has slid about 6% against the dollar this year, making it among the worst-performing major currencies globally. Encouraged by the improved data, Indian officials have maintained a firm stance against US trade demand, signalling limited flexibility in areas such as agricultural imports. India has no plans to increase imports of products such as corn or to allow genetically modified crops, which remain key US demands, a senior government official, involved in trade talks, said.

While overall marine exports rose about 20% during April-November to \$5.7bn, driven by higher shipments to China, Vietnam, Russia, the European Union and the Middle East, shipments to the US have plummeted. Exporters are concerned as US exports command higher profit margins.

Pawan Kumar, managing director of Sprint Exports and president of the Seafood Exporters Association of India, said his company’s exports to the US had dropped to near zero after tariffs of around 50% made shipments unviable.

“We are keenly watching the talks,” he said. “Regaining the US market is the only permanent solution.” – Reuters

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Britain’s fiscal watchdog doesn’t see what matters

By Paolo Surico
London

Like many developed economies, Britain faces a paradox: it has too many fiscal rules and too little purpose. Its fiscal watchdog keeps an eye on the numbers, but no one is keeping an eye on growth. Innovation has become a slogan, not a strategy. Institutions designed to ensure prudence have become an obstacle to progress.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves’s self-imposed fiscal constraints illustrate the larger problem. They will deter productive investment, especially in innovation, even though increasing government borrowing to fund public research and development would not break the rules.

Making matters worse, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), the country’s fiscal watchdog, clings to implausible assumptions about productivity trends, while overlooking what the recipients of this year’s Nobel Prize in Economics (Philippe Aghion, Peter Howitt, and Joel Mokyr) have shown: disruptive innovation, properly nurtured, is the wellspring of long-term prosperity.

Despite all the recent commentary about the “fiscal hole” created by the OBR’s upcoming productivity downgrade, few have noticed a larger problem. The OBR is assuming that the effects of most government policies on productivity vanish after five years. That is simply indefensible.

Recent evidence from the US shows that government spending can have both significant and persistent effects on output and productivity. When governments invest in R&D or infrastructure, the economic gains are realised not over quarters or even electoral cycles, but over decades.

The OBR’s short horizon reflects a deeper error. Productivity is treated as an external, policy-independent trend – in keeping with what economists call an exogenous growth model – implying that innovation, education, and R&D appear as residuals of progress, not as its engines. But Aghion and Howitt’s endogenous growth theory has overturned this view, demonstrating that productivity is shaped by policy, institutions, and ideas.

The OBR’s assumption that fiscal policy’s impact on productivity fades after five years effectively erases the link between government investment, innovation, and long-term growth. Yet as Mariana Mazzucato and William Janeway point out, many of the technologies that have defined the modern economy – from semiconductors to



British Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves poses with the red budget box outside her office in Downing Street in London, Britain, on November 26, 2025. (REUTERS/File Picture)

the internet – were seeded by public investment in basic research, later amplified by private enterprise.

A country whose policymakers rely on models that assume away innovation cannot hope to achieve it. Britain’s challenge is not fiscal capacity but institutional imagination. My own recent empirical work on the US quantifies the macroeconomic returns to public and private R&D investment, which can be used to generate productivity projections within a framework analogous to that used by the OBR. My co-authors and I find that a permanent 1% increase in R&D investment in the whole economy raises productivity (and thus GDP) by about 0.18% over a decade.

Moreover, our estimates suggest that, in Britain’s case, £1 (\$1.32) of additional public R&D investment crowds in between £0.57-1.03 of additional private R&D. So, to achieve a 1% increase in R&D investment for the whole UK economy, public R&D expenditure would have to increase by £360-460mn per year, a rise of 2-2.6%.

These findings demonstrate that public spending on innovation generates durable productivity gains well beyond the five-year horizon embedded in the OBR’s models. And other research has reported similar findings for the US and for the UK.

For its part, the Congressional Budget Office, the American equivalent of the OBR, has embraced Aghion and Howitt’s model, stating that:

“In contrast with the national

income accounting approach and on the basis of published studies of the US economy, CBO estimates that an additional dollar’s worth of infrastructure capital increases real potential (maximum sustainable) GDP by 12.4 cents, on average... Increases in federal spending on physical infrastructure, research and development, or education would boost private-sector TFP [total factor productivity] in the coming decades, contributing to economic growth that could lower the budgetary cost of that spending.”

Ignoring the long-run effects of both government-funded and privately funded innovation leads to systematic underestimation of potential output and fiscal headroom. A fiscal “hole” can appear or disappear not because policy has changed, but because one’s assumption about productivity has. This is not fiscal discipline; it is a fiscal illusion. Britain’s institutions, designed for prudence, have become prisoners of their own short-term calculus.

To restore credibility and a sense of purpose, the OBR’s independence must be matched by intellectual openness. One reform would be to establish an independent rotating panel of academic experts in macroeconomics and public finance who review the OBR’s framework every five years or so and issue methodological recommendations. Transparency about modelling choices is as vital as transparency about fiscal data.

A separate but complementary

reform concerns how the OBR communicates uncertainty. At present, it focuses on a single point estimate of future potential output, which then immediately becomes a numerical constraint on how much the government can spend. This approach mistakes precision for prudence. A better method would be to mirror the way the Bank of England conducts and communicates monetary policy, namely with fan charts that show a range of possible productivity, output, and debt-to-GDP paths over a ten-year horizon.

Under this reformed fiscal framework, the government should be required to act only when current or proposed policies are projected to push fiscal sustainability outside the guided ranges. In other words, fiscal policy should respond to genuine risks, not to decimal-point revisions.

The power of public policy to raise productivity may be difficult to quantify, but it is real. If Britain wants to recover a spirit of enterprise, it must escape the tyranny of short-horizon policymakers who are constrained by the next fiscal event. Prosperity will not come from ever finer rules or ever gloomier forecasts. It will come from the courage to invest, to innovate, and to imagine again what Britain can achieve. A country that guards only its guardians risks guarding nothing at all. – Project Syndicate

● Paolo Surico is Professor of Economics at London Business School.

Trade wars destroy the planet

By Qiyuan Xu
Beijing

Tariff wars are often justified as necessary to protect or reshore manufacturing jobs and to improve national security.

But, according to new research, these conflicts produce another outcome that is largely overlooked: pollution. When global supply chains are forced into inefficient detours, carbon dioxide emissions rise.

In a recent study of the US-China trade conflict’s environmental effects, my co-authors and I found that tariffs have directly increased global CO2 emissions. Based on our calculations, if both sides were to impose a 60% tariff on imports from the other – a level consistent with the recent escalations in April – this would lead to a one-time increase in global emissions of nearly 410mn tonnes, roughly the same amount produced by 165mn gas-powered cars (with 1.6L engines) each travelling 10,000km (6,213 miles).

This may seem counter-intuitive. Given that China is the world’s largest emitter and has a high carbon intensity (CO2 emissions per unit of GDP), some assume that shifting production out of the country would reduce global emissions. But in many manufacturing sectors, China’s carbon intensity is significantly lower than that of numerous developing economies, and in certain industries it is even lower than that of some advanced economies. The Chinese economy’s high overall carbon intensity simply reflects its heavy reliance on manufacturing – a classic example of Simpson’s paradox.

In effect, China bears a disproportionate share of the world’s emission-intensive production. According to the UNCTAD-EORA Global Value Chain database, in 2017 (before the trade war between the US and China began), 33.9% of the carbon embodied in US imports originated in China. These emissions did not vanish once tariffs disrupted bilateral trade; they have either been re-imported by the US through costlier domestic production or diverted to third countries.

If trade tensions reshape industrial structures in China and the US, the shift of production toward more energy-intensive activities will raise the weighted-average carbon intensity of both



economies, even without a change in sector-specific intensities. Our research shows that the emissions increase caused by structural shifts vastly exceeds the emissions decline associated with slower economic growth.

But the impact is more pronounced in third countries. The US merchandise-trade deficit has hovered above 4% of GDP for the past decade, implying that the country’s trade war with China has resulted in nearshoring and friendshoring, rather than reshoring.

We find that each percentage-point increase in US-China bilateral tariffs causes a 0.1-0.34% rise in carbon flows embodied in trade between third countries. Simulation results confirm that reduced US imports from China are largely replaced by imports from Southeast Asian or Latin American economies, where many industries have higher carbon intensities than in China. The US essentially swaps one supplier for another – only to increase the world’s total CO2 emissions.

This is not to say that Southeast Asia or Latin America should not attract investment or pursue growth. Under normal circumstances,

an economy’s carbon intensity follows the environmental Kuznets curve, rising in the early stages of development and then declining in the later stages, as cleaner technologies diffuse. In a world without trade wars, countries move along this curve from left to right, with rising emissions in developing economies offset by falling emissions in more advanced economies.

But trade conflicts disrupt this balance. High tariffs undermine economic performance in the US and China, pushing them left along the Kuznets curve, toward the phase where emissions rise rather than fall. At the same time, supply-chain diversion leads developing economies to increase their production and advance, as expected, along the curve’s ascending segment. The result is that emissions increase in economies on both sides of the curve. Taking the environmental Kuznets curve dynamics into consideration, the US-China trade war’s impact significantly exceeds our baseline estimate of a one-off increase of 410mn tonnes in global CO2 emissions.

The current US-China trade relationship is thus a “high-emissions” one that externalises pollution and erodes the world’s capacity to fight climate change. This is why we advocate a “green” trade relationship, with trade policy and climate goals explicitly aligned – for example, by lowering barriers to low-carbon technologies and recognising that tariff reduction can be a form of climate cooperation when it facilitates cleaner trade flows and discourages carbon-intensive production. In an age when climate risks are rapidly materialising, the same principle should be applied to all bilateral and multilateral trade relationships.

A more confrontational global trade environment risks locking the world into a vicious cycle of tariff escalation, supply-chain degradation, and rising emissions. If major powers continue down this path, ignoring the fact that trade wars damage the planetary systems on which every economy depends, all of us stand to lose. – Project Syndicate

● Qiyuan Xu, a senior fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, is the author of many books, including Reshaping the Global Industrial Chain: China’s Choices.

Pakistan accuses India of disrupting river flows

Pakistan said yesterday that it had detected “abrupt variations” of water flows on a river crucial to its farmers, accusing neighbouring India of releasing water without warning in defiance of a major treaty that New Delhi suspended this year.

India in April announced it was suspending the Indus Water Treaty in the lead up to armed conflict between the nuclear-armed neighbours and following a deadly militant attack in India-administered Kashmir that New Delhi blamed on Pakistan, which denied involvement.

Pakistan has said any attempt to stop or divert the flow of water into the country would be considered an “act of war”.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar told foreign diplomats yesterday that Pakistan’s water treaty commissioner had written a letter to his Indian counterpart over “unusual, abrupt variations” observed in the flow of the Chenab river from December 7-15, similar to changes detected in April and May.

“These variations in water flows are of extreme concern for Pakistan, as they point to unilateral release of water by India,” he said, according to a ministry statement.

India’s foreign ministry did not immediately respond to request for comment.

India suspended the treaty following a deadly attack on tourists in Indian-administered Kashmir on April 22 that killed 26 people.

New Delhi blamed Islamabad for backing the attack – which Islamabad denies – and said it was suspending the water treaty in response. – **AFP**

France to start 2026 without budget after negotiations fail

Reuters
Paris

France faces emergency stopgap legislation to avoid a government shutdown after lawmakers abandoned 2026 budget talks yesterday, failing to agree on a compromise bill.

Members of a joint committee of lawmakers from both houses gave up after less than an hour of talks to agree a budget bill.

Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu said he would consult with key political leaders on Monday on the next steps to be taken, adding there was no longer enough time for

a parliamentary vote on a budget before the end of the year.

The collapse forces Lecornu to seek emergency legislation to allow spending, tax collection and borrowing in the new year until a proper budget can be agreed.

Central bank governor Francois Villeroy de Galhau warned this offers only a short-term fix that makes no policy choices and includes no cost-saving or tax measures, potentially driving the deficit significantly higher.

France used similar emergency legislation last year, which Budget Minister Amelie de Montchalin said cost €12bn (\$14bn) before a full budget passed in February.

Investors and ratings agencies are scrutinising France’s finances as Lecornu struggles to rein in a budget deficit running at 5.4% of output this year – the euro zone’s highest.

The minority government insists on keeping the fiscal deficit below 5% next year, already retreating from its original 4.7% target after making costly concessions to Socialist lawmakers.

The Senate approved a 2026 budget on Monday with a fiscal deficit of 5.3% after conservatives blocked tax hikes to offset a bigger-than-planned funding shortfall in the social security budget that the lower house had approved.

Fresh negotiations in January may prove equally difficult.

Pressure is mounting on Lecornu to invoke special constitutional powers to bypass parliament – something he has pledged not to do.

Conservative Republicans party head Bruno Retailleau urged him to use those powers, though doing so would likely trigger a risky no-confidence vote.

Lecornu’s minority government has little room for manoeuvre in France’s parliament, where budget battles have already toppled three governments since President Emmanuel Macron lost his majority in a 2024 snap election.

Louvre staff call off strike

Staff at the Louvre voted yesterday against continuing their strike, union representatives told AFP, ending three days of disruption which have added to the problems of the world’s most-visited museum.

Management said the Louvre, which was the victim of an embarrassing daylight heist on October 19, would open “as normal”.

The former royal palace and its 400 rooms were shut to visitors all day on Monday, causing frustration for thousands of festive holidaymakers hoping to catch a glimpse of the Mona Lisa and other works.

The museum was closed for its usual day off on Tuesday and then re-opened only partially on Wednesday and Thursday as disgruntled staff pressed their demands for more recruitment and better maintenance of the vast complex of buildings.

Union leaders from the CGT and CFDT said staff had voted against another day of stoppages but warned of future industrial action because of “insufficient progress” in talks with management and the culture ministry.

Questions continue to swirl since the break-in over whether it was avoidable and why the stolen crown jewels worth more than \$100mn appeared to be so poorly protected.

Two intruders used a truck-mounted extendable platform to access a gallery containing the jewels, slicing through a glass door with disk-cutters in front of startled visitors before stealing eight priceless items.

As well as the robbery, two other recent incidents have highlighted maintenance problems inside the building which chief architect Francois Chatillon has described as “not in a good state”.

A water leak in November damaged hundreds of books and manuscripts in the Egyptian department, while management had to shut a gallery housing ancient Greek ceramics in October because ceiling beams above it risk giving way. – **AFP**

French government warns protesting farmers over Christmas blockades

AFP
Paris

The French government has warned protesting farmers against erecting blockades during the festive season, while unions were divided over further tactics in a standoff over a cow disease.

For more than a week, farmers in the southwest of the country have staged protests against a mass cull of cows to contain the spread of nodular dermatitis, known as lumpy skin disease.

They have blocked roads, sprayed manure and dumped garbage in front of government offices to force the authorities to review their mass slaughter policy.

The farmers have also been angered over a trade deal under negotiation between the European

Union and South American bloc Mercosur, which was this week postponed to January.

Yesterday farmers staged a protest in the northern resort city of Le Touquet, placing a coffin outside the residence of French President Emmanuel Macron.

In the northern town of Alencon, a protester threw red paint in front of a public building.

Representatives of farmers’ unions were received by Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu yesterday but their leaders were divided over the next course of action.

After the meeting, the hard-line Co-ordination Rurale (CR), which has been spearheading the protests together with the Confederation Paysanne union, stopped short of calling for a Christmas truce and the removal of the roadblocks.

CR head Bertrand Venteau said

it would be up to union leaders on the ground to decide what to do next, but nevertheless asked the protesting farmers to “go and rest” for several days.

“The population is behind us, we can’t alienate them,” he said.

Confederation Paysanne also indicated there was hope of coming to agreement.

However, spokesperson Stephane Galais said the union could not “call for the blockades to be lifted” without a commitment to stop a mass cull.

Government spokeswoman Maud Bregeon said yesterday that the authorities would not “tolerate new blockades” during the holiday season.

Interior Minister Laurent Nunez called for farmers “to act responsibly”.

The Young Farmers union backed the call for a Christmas truce.

Norway’s crown princess needs lung transplant, palace says

Reuters
Oslo

Norway’s Crown Princess Mette-Marit is expected to undergo a lung transplant following a deterioration of her health in recent months, the royal household said yesterday.

The 52-year-old wife of Crown Prince Haakon, the heir to the Norwegian throne, was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis in 2018, a chronic disease that causes scarring in the lungs and leads to a reduced oxygen uptake.

Tests performed in recent months showed a clear negative development in the crown princess’s health, the palace said in a statement.

“I had hoped to keep this illness in check with medicines, and the progression has been quite slow, but now it’s gone more rapidly than both I and the doctors had anticipated,” Mette-Marit told public broadcaster NRK.

It has not yet been decided when she will be placed on the transplant waiting list, the palace said.

“We are approaching the time when a lung transplant must be performed, and we are making the necessary preparations so that it will be possible when that time comes,” Professor Are Martin Holm of the Oslo University Hospital’s pulmonary unit said in the same statement.

Crown Prince Haakon said the family had noticed the change in Mette-Marit’s condition.

“We have seen that she is struggling more to breathe,” Haakon told NRK in the joint interview with his wife.

Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre praised the crown princess for being open about her condition and said it could help others suffering from similar problems.

“I think all of Norway wishes her all the best, and that she gets good treatment and a speedy recovery,” Støre told NRK.

Mette-Marit was 25, an unmarried single mother and a commoner when she met Haakon at a music festival in 1999, the beginning of an unlikely royal romance that started with a media furore and ended up winning over the bulk of the nation.



This picture taken in March shows Crown Princess Mette-Marit of Norway through a window in door during her visit to the Ulleval Hospital in Oslo. – **AFP**

Ball in court of Russia’s foes in Ukraine talks, says Putin

AFP/Reuters
Moscow

Vladimir Putin said yesterday that the ball was in the court of the West and Kyiv in talks to end the war in Ukraine, while hailing Moscow’s recent battlefield gains and threatening more.

“President (Donald) Trump is making serious efforts to end this conflict. He is doing so with complete sincerity,” he said. “The ball is entirely in the court of our Western opponents, primarily the leaders of the Kyiv regime, and in this case, first and foremost, their European sponsors. We are ready for both negotiations and a peaceful resolution to the conflict.”

Putin spoke during his annual end-of-year press conference – a staple of his 25-year rule – in which he told Russians Moscow was intent on pressing on in Ukraine, striking a confident tone.

The 73-year-old has repeatedly said in recent weeks that Moscow will seize the rest of Ukrainian land he has proclaimed as Russian by force if talks were to fail.

Putin was speaking hours after European Union leaders set aside a plan to use frozen Russian assets as backing for a loan to Ukraine, deciding instead to borrow cash to help fund Kyiv’s defence against Russia for the next two years.

The EU leaders said they reserved the right to use Russian assets to repay the loan if Moscow fails to pay war reparations to Ukraine.

Putin said the bloc had backed away from the original scheme because it would have faced serious



People watch a broadcast of Putin’s annual end-of-year press conference and phone-in, at an underground passage in Simferopol, Crimea. – **Reuters**

repercussions, and it had damaged its status as a safe place to store assets.

“Theft is not the appropriate term... It’s daylight robbery. Why can’t this robbery be carried out? Because the consequences could be grave for the robbers,” he said.

Putin also said he did not feel personally responsible for the tens of thousands of people killed since Moscow launched its 2022 offensive, which has become Europe’s worst conflict since World War II. “We did not start this war,” he said, repeating a frequent narrative pushed by Moscow throughout the conflict. “We do not consider ourselves responsible for the loss of life.”

Putin ordered the all-out assault in Ukraine in February 2022, sending troops and tanks towards Kyiv in a bid to topple Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Listing a string of cities and towns in eastern Ukraine now eyed by the Russian army, the Kremlin chief said he was certain that Moscow will take more settlements be-

fore the end of the year.

“Our troops are advancing along the entire line of contact,” Putin said. “I’m sure that before the end of this year we will still witness new success.”

The Russian army made its biggest advance in Ukraine in a year in November, AFP analysis of data from the US-based Institute for the Study of War showed.

In a message to the West, Putin said that Russia would not attack other countries – as long as it was treated “with respect” – without clarifying what he meant.

The hours-long televised event – a mix of questions from the press and call-ins from Russia’s 12 time zones – is a fixture of the Russian political calendar, garnering frenzied media coverage in the weeks leading up to it.

The Kremlin said almost 3mn people had sent questions to Putin and security was heavy in Moscow during the event.

Putin mused on everything from geopolitics to regional development issues, pledging to intervene

to fix the problems of citizens caught up in local bureaucracy.

Speaking on the economy, Putin downplayed the costs of the war for Moscow.

Russia has lived under massive Western sanctions for almost four years, while ramped up military spending had strained the public finances and price stability.

He admitted that the purchasing power of Russian families have taken a hit, promising to “do everything possible to ensure that the Russian economy, the macroeconomy, is healthy and strong, and that the country’s economy has such a solid foundation”.

Russia’s central bank said yesterday that it was cutting its benchmark interest rate to 16% amid slowing growth.

Putin also claimed Russians were still lining up in droves to register to fight in Ukraine, with around 400,000 new sign-ups this year.

In 2022, hundreds of thousands of Russians fled the country as Putin had announced a mobilisation drive to prop up the Ukraine offensive.

Criticism of the Ukraine offensive is banned in Russia under wartime censorship, and Moscow has punished thousands of its citizens for speaking out against it – either with fines or prison sentences in a crackdown unseen since Soviet times.

However, Putin rejected the argument that voicing an alternative point of view to the Kremlin has become dangerous in Russia.

“We have no repression,” he said.

All of Putin’s political opponents are in exile, prison or dead.

Rome to charge visitors for access to Trevi Fountain

AFP
Rome

Tourists will have to pay a €2 entrance fee to get close to Rome’s Trevi Fountain, which draws crowds daily, Mayor Roberto Gualtieri said yesterday.

The monument, located in a public square, will still be able to be viewed from a distance for

free, but closer access will be only for ticket holders, Gualtieri told a press conference.

“From February 1 we are introducing a paid ticket for six sites” in the Italian capital, including the Trevi Fountain, he said.

Entrance to the other five sites will cost €5.

The backdrop to the most famous scene in Federico Fellini’s film *La Dolce Vita*, when actress

Anita Ekberg takes a dip, the 18th-century fountain is top of the list for many visitors exploring the Eternal City.

Making a wish and tossing a coin into the water is such a tradition that authorities collect thousands of euros a week that are then given to the Caritas charity.

As a result of the fountain’s fame, the crowds in the square surrounding the Baroque masterpiece

are often so deep that it is hard to get a proper look.

Between January 1 and December 8 some 9mn tourists have visited the area just in front of the fountain – an average of 30,000 people a day, Gualtieri said.

Rome residents will be allowed free access.

City hall estimates the ticket for access to the Trevi Fountain could bring in €6.5mn euros a year, he said.

More than 500 migrants rescued off Crete: Greek coastguard

Nearly 540 migrants crammed on a sailing boat were rescued early yesterday south of the island of Crete, the Greek coastguard said.

The 539 would-be asylum-seekers were

rescued by a patrol vessel of EU border agency Frontex near the small island of Gavdos in the Libyan Sea, a coastguard spokeswoman said.

So far, the coastguard has recorded nationals from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Eritrea,

Somalia, Sudan and the Palestinian territories aboard the boat, the spokeswoman said.

Under standard EU procedure, all will undergo health checks before having their asylum claims processed. – **AFP**



The Lantern Festival at Al Bidda Park runs until March 28, 2026.



Lantern Festival continues to light up evenings

People are making the most of the post-Qatar National Day (QND) celebrations by visiting the Lantern Festival at Al Bidda Park. The festival, a first in Qatar, continues to draw visitors, both young and old. Over 400 lanterns strategically distributed across a 55,000sq m area provide not only a festive atmosphere, but a family-friendly destination, accentuated by the creativity of the 28 craftsmen whose creativity shines throughout the festival. Running until March 28, 2026, organisers of the Lantern Festival have promised to showcase different lanterns and other attractions, such as the 'Legends of Lights', the 'Glow Gardens', the 'Cultural Courtyard', and the 'Family Play Zone'. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

