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# Officials, experts discuss use of AI in public cleanliness management

QNA  
Doha

Officials, experts, and academics discussed, during the first national forum on public cleanliness held earlier this week, a range of vital issues related to innovation and the use of modern technologies in waste management, the promotion of environmental sustainability, and the protection of workers' rights in the cleanliness sector.

This took place through panel discussions and scientific sessions with the participation of representatives from the public and private sectors, universities, and academic institutions, in addition to the presentation of working papers, research projects, and student initiatives.

In this context, participants in the forum called for strengthening integration between the institutional and academic sectors and expanding the participation of universities in providing innovative solutions to support the public cleanliness system, while emphasising the importance of protecting workers' rights as a fundamental pillar of waste management and the achievement of environmental sustainability.

Strategic Planning Specialist at the Projects and Development Department of the Ministry of Municipality Moza al-Ameri, affirmed the role of academics in providing scientific and behavioural solutions. Al-Ameri said they were committed to supporting innovative research and student projects and link them directly to practical public cleanliness management practices, in a way that enhances integration between the academic and institutional sectors and serves national sustainability goals.

She added that academics were important partners in developing innovative solutions, and added that they were keen to involve them directly in future initiatives. She also stressed the need to continue strengthening co-operation between the Projects Department and the Public Cleanliness Department with academic institutions in order to adopt innovative student and research projects linked to initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life and achieving Qatar National Vision 2030.

Experts pointed to the importance of using smart solutions and modern technologies to improve waste management and public cleanliness operations, emphasising the need for integrated efforts by the government, private sectors, and civil society to achieve sustainable environmental and social impact, and to enhance community awareness of the importance of cleanliness and environmental protection.

In concluding remarks at the forum, speakers stressed the importance of continuing to organise such specialised events to enhance the exchange of expertise, support decision-making, and promote a sustainable approach to public cleanliness management and environmental protection in the State of Qatar.



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# Winter experiences light up Qatar

With open-air cinema, heritage festivals, desert escapes..., the family-friendly events are drawing residents and visitors alike from other GCC countries

By Joey Aguilar  
Doha

A range of outdoor, cultural, and family-friendly events are drawing residents and visitors across Qatar and other GCC countries this winter season, offering open-air cinema, heritage celebrations, immersive desert experiences.

At Msheireb Downtown Doha, the Baraha Cinema continues to present one-of-its-kind alfresco movie experience, turning the square into a premium cinema. Branded as the "Taste Cinema Experience", the venue combines film screenings with interactive activities and themed meals served on movie-inspired plates, creating a fully immersive outing for all ages. Opened on December 24, Baraha Cinema will run until January 3, 2026.

Culture and tradition take centre stage at the Qatari Heritage Festival at Ain Mohammad Heritage Village, which celebrates Qatar's heritage, Bedouin lifestyle and customs. The festival runs until December 29 and continues on weekends until February 14, 2026. Visitors can explore traditional Qatari cuisine, camel and falcon heritage zones, crafts, storytelling sessions, live folk performances



Lantern Festival at Al Bidda Park features over 400 illuminated lanterns. PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam and screengrab from Visit Qatar



Baraha Cinema

and a wide range of activities for children and families.

According to Visit Qatar, the festival offers an authentic cultural experience in a vibrant setting. Highlights include a traditional Qatari food court with live cooking and wood-fire grills, a Camel Heritage Zone with caretaking

demonstrations and guided interactions, and a Falconry Arena featuring daily shows and educational sessions. Other attractions include traditional Gulf games, weekend championships, artisan markets, heritage workshops and themed photo zones. Meanwhile, Qatar's newest immersive attraction, the

Lantern Festival, continues to attract large crowds at Al Bidda Park. The event features more than 400 illuminated lanterns spread across a 55,000sq m area, along with interactive displays, cultural performances and family-friendly activities. Organised by Safe Flight Solutions, the festival will run until



Qatari Heritage Festival

March 28, 2026 and aims to offer a warm, community-focused celebration of creativity and culture.

In western Qatar, Visit Qatar's Brouq events are running until January 17, 2026, providing visitors a unique desert escape near Our Habitas Ras Abrouq Resort. The Desert Escape experience includes dining, glamping and cultural activities set against the dramatic desert landscape. Our Habitas Ras Abrouq is a premium eco-retreat located at the edge of the Unesco-

protected Al-Reem Biosphere Reserve in north-west Qatar, around an hour's drive from Doha.

Visitors can explore events at Film City, Desert Escape and Our Habitas Ras Abrouq, while children can take part in workshops by Al-Hosh Gallery and enjoy daily performances and live entertainment. Guests can also stay overnight in fully equipped glamping tents overlooking the sea, with each tent including a food basket, beverages and a barbecue set.

# Qatar rolls out legal reforms

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Violators of the stipulations of the law receive strict penalties that can go up to five years in jail or a fine of up to QR500,000.

Law No 10 of 2025, issued in June, amending specific provisions of Law No 21 of 2018, on the regulation of business events in the country.

It focuses on updating the regulatory framework for organising conferences, exhibitions, and related commercial gatherings. The

law is part of Qatar's efforts to enhance its position as a destination for international business meetings and exhibitions.

The Judicial Enforcement Law No 4 of 2024, issued in October last year, has considerably modernised legal execution through the establishment of establishing a specialised Enforcement Court, digitalised procedures, and streamlining processes for faster judgment fulfilment. Among the key features bank cheques and fixed-term rental agreements

were recognised as direct executive instruments where the judge's powers over these issues were expanded to speed up the litigation processes.

Accordingly, Qatar has been constantly updating and enhancing its legal system to further promote transparency, accountability, protection and inclusion of all members and categories of the society and speed up progress and business opportunities that mainly aim to improve the lives of its people.

## From the archives



A QNA archive photo features the renovation of an ancient castle in Doha during the 1980s.

## Startups drive employment, human capital growth in Qatar

From Page 1

The report emphasised that the country's emphasis on human capital is embedded in Qatar National Vision 2030, which calls for a modern educational system that encourages analytical thinking, creativity, and innovation.

"To further support human development, Qatar will aspire to

be an active centre in the fields of scientific research and intellectual activity. Qatar aims to build a modern, world-class educational system that provides first-rate education. The system will also encourage analytical and critical thinking, as well as creativity and innovation," the report stated.

According to the report, the startup ecosystem supports this

vision by offering training, mentorship, and capacity-building programs that prepare Qataris for high-growth industries.

The report showed that job creation is not just a metric, but it is a strategic outcome. It also pointed to startups as a sector that is helping Qatar build an agile and skilled workforce that is ready to lead in a diversified economy.

## Logging violation spotted



As part of its ongoing efforts to protect vegetation cover, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change's monitoring patrols of the Wildlife Protection Department has apprehended a violator while he was cutting wild trees (illegal logging) in the northern region of the country.



# MES junior section organises debate on social media



## MES triumphs in ICC women's cricket fest

MES Indian School emerged triumphant at the 'International Cricket Council (ICC) CRIIO National Cricket Festival for Women', organised by the Qatar Cricket Association (QCA). The tournament, which aims to promote women's cricket, witnessed enthusiastic participation from various schools across Qatar. MES Indian School's MES Falcons Laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. and the MES Phoenix performed exceptionally, showcasing great skill, discipline, and determination. Team MES Falcons advanced confidently through the rounds, clinching the gold medal after a gripping final against Birla Public School. Meanwhile, Team MES Phoenix delivered a commendable performance, securing the bronze medal after a win over Bright Future School in the third-place play-off. A highlight of the event was the presence of



Jay Shah, chairman of the ICC, who honoured the winners and finalists. His words and presence greatly enriched the occasion and served as a source of inspiration for all participants. The school principal Dr Hameeda Kadar praised the exceptional

achievement and emphasised the school's commitment to nurturing girls' sports. The Physical Education Department and the coaching staff, Kabia Badoni, were lauded by the school management for guiding the students.

The Oratory Club of the junior section at MES Indian School recently organised a debate competition, titled 'Is Social Media Making Us Less Social?' for students of Classes I-IV, aimed at building confidence and communication skills among young learners. Two teams participated in the final round: Social Sparks, which presented the view that social media reduces real-life social

interaction; and Digital Minds, which argued that social media strengthens connections. Team Social Sparks opened the debate, emphasising that relying too much on digital platforms weakens real-world relationships and reduces the quality of meaningful conversations. Team Digital Minds countered these points by arguing that social media helps people stay connected across distances, share ideas instantly, and build supportive communities. Both teams presented strong arguments, supported by examples that resonated with the young audience. The best speaker award was bagged by Master Jonah Jijo of Class 4. Team Social Sparks was declared the winner. Trophies and certificates were awarded to all the participants. The debate was co-ordinated by Shalima Semeer and KaniMozhi, along with a team of teachers.



## MES Culinary Club spotlights tiny hands and tasty plates

The Culinary Club of the Junior Section at MES Indian School recently organised engaging activities for Classes I-IV. The main goals were to boost students' creativity, improve fine motor skills, and promote healthy eating habits using fruits and vegetables. Students from classes I and II took part in the Fruit/Veggie Face activity, using cut fruits and vegetables brought from home to craft cheerful and expressive faces on paper plates. This fun activity helped them explore shapes, colours, and patterns while arranging the items independently. For classes III and IV in the Fruit Platter Design, students created attractive patterns with fruits and vegetables on paper plates. MES noted that the Culinary Club activity was a joyful mix of creativity, nutrition education, and skill-building. The students



enjoyed the sessions, which boosted their confidence and imagination through hands-on learning. Fathima Gem, along with the team of teachers, co-ordinated the club activity.

## Kerala volunteers win FIFA Awards

The Kerala community in Qatar once again earned recognition on the global stage as Malayali volunteers were honoured at the FIFA Awards for Outstanding Volunteer Service 2025. The accolade reflects not only individual excellence but also the strength of an organised volunteer movement led by the Qatar Mallu Volunteers (QMV). Siddique Nambidi, a native of Kasaragod, Kerala, received the award for Best Volunteer Service in the FIFA Under-17 World Cup, while Riyad, also from Kerala, was recognised for his outstanding contribution during the FIFA Arab Cup 2025. The awards were presented during a grand felicitation ceremony held on December 19 at the Lusail Fan Zone. The awards ceremony was attended by Jassim al-Jassim, CEO of the Local Organising Committee; and Haya Mohammed al-Nuaimi, administrative executive director; along with other senior officials. Siddique, a resident



of Bombran, Kasaragod, has been living in Qatar for the past 15 years and is known for his sustained involvement in volunteer service. QMV noted that the recognition of Siddique and Riyad, along with the continued contribution



of Qatar Mallu Volunteers, stands as a testament to the discipline, professionalism, and community spirit of Keralites, whose voluntary service has significantly contributed to the successful hosting of world-class events in Qatar.

## MES bids farewell to Class XII students

MES Indian School organised a graduation ceremony, 'Au Revoir' to bid farewell to a total of 515 Class XII students belonging to the 2025-26 batch amidst jubilation at the Conference Hall recently. Ahamed Isham, director, Co-curricular and Cultural Activities, MES Governing Board, was the guest of honour at the ceremony. At the felicitation rites, Kashif Jaleel, president officiating; Aneesh P A, general secretary officiating; and the directors and the members of the school governing board gave certificates of merit. All major student officials, prefects, club secretaries, members of Scouts and Guides, Campus Care Force, as well as students who secured 100% attendance during the academic year 2025-26 were given certificates and mementos. Syed Dawar Abbas (Science), Muhammad Patel (Commerce) and Maher Mehdi Rudra (Humanities) were adjudged as the Best Outgoing Students in the Boys' section, while Minha Manaf (Science), Nivedhya Sudhir (Commerce) and Alvina Sakeer (Humanities) won the Best Outgoing Student title in the Girls' section. Mohamad Kamal Ali Badran and Hadiya Hashim were declared the Best All-Rounders of their respective sections. Kesav Shanker Mohan and Prarthana



Shaju Nair won the Talent of the Year award. Mohammed Abdul Muqet and Nimisha Liz Abraham were honoured with the Best Outgoing Prefect. Nasif Mohamed Ismail and Alina Elza Shaji won the Best Outgoing Sports Person of the year. Adnan Ashraf and Maria Theresa Jacob were honoured with the title, Best Outgoing All-Rounder in Sports. Abdul Hadi Hidayathulla and Diya Treasa Dijo were adjudged as the Best Outgoing Scout and Guide, respectively.

Mohammad Aiman Jamil and Fathima Sana Pookkayil were declared as the Best Outgoing Campus Care Force members of the school. Joshua John Mathew and Mayyasa Mujeeb Koyissery were declared as the Best Band Leader for the academic year 2025-26. Bharathi Prathyuksha was felicitated with a memento, for having maintained a 100% attendance record consistently from Class 1 through Class 12. The school principal, Dr Hameeda Kadar has congratulated the batch.

## International Migrants Day celebration



The Telangana Gulf Samithi - Qatar organised the International Migrants Day celebration, recognising and honouring the dedication, hard work, and sacrifices of migrant workers in Qatar. Chairperson Maitham Madhu highlighted the responsibilities of migrant workers and thanked their invaluable contributions. The event was graced by distinguished guests, including Khalid Abdul Rehman Fakhroo, Ministry Labour Relations specialist; and Shanwaj Bava, Indian Community Benevolent Forum president; Deepak Shetty, ICBF general secretary; Shankar Goud, head of Labour, ICBF;

Narsimhamurthy, APWA president; Nizam Khan, Rajasthan Community president; Satyanarayana Reddy, TKS president; Soumya, AKV general secretary; Krishna Kumar, Outreach Qatar president; and Uma Reddy, APWA vice-president. On this occasion, Ministry of Labour officials honoured five migrant workers who have been serving in Qatar for over 30 years: Sridhar Tadepu, Ramgiri Deepak, Aripelli Gangadhar, BurraKunta Sai Annagari and Arapelli Gangaram. The celebration featured cultural performances, drama, Telugu cuisine, and speeches by senior dignitaries.

## Tribute event for Vijayakanth

Manithaneya Kalachara Peravai (MKP) Qatar marked its 10th anniversary with a grand cultural evening, titled "Forever Captain - A Tribute Night in Remembrance of Vijayakanth", held at the DPS-MIS Auditorium in Doha recently. The event drew more than 1,000 attendees, reflecting the strong emotional bond the Indian diaspora in Doha shares with the legacy of the late actor and leader Vijayakanth, fondly known as "captain." The highlight of the evening was the presence of R K Selvamani, renowned Indian film director, and Roja Selvamani, former minister for tourism, culture and youth advancement of Andhra Pradesh. The programme was also attended by Vaibhav A Tandale, counsellor (head of chancery



and consular), Indian embassy, along with several distinguished guests and representatives from Indian community organisations in Qatar.

# ISC 'Khel Mahotsav' ladies cricket season 2 concludes

The Ladies Box Cricket Season 2, conducted under the banner of the ISC 'Khel Mahotsav', concluded successfully with enthusiastic participation and high-quality competition, reflecting the growing engagement of women in sports and community activities in Qatar. The final match, held at the Doha Pearling International School ground, witnessed a closely contested encounter in which Mangalore Cricket Association 1 (MCCI) emerged as champions, registering a four-wicket

victory over Mangalore Cricket Association 2 (MCC2). The tournament saw participation from multiple women's teams across Qatar, including Alpha Squad, Captains Screw, Sealine Strikers, Team Al Khor, SNUB Thrissur, and others, underscoring the inclusive and competitive spirit of the event. For the individual awards, the Best Batter was awarded to Sathya Sasikumar (MCC2) while the Best Bowler went to Trupti Kale (MCCI).

Sathya Sasikumar (MCC2) received the the Most Valuable Player of the tournament. The matches were officiated by umpires Satya Anumalla and Kiran Kumar, ensuring fair play and smooth conduct throughout the tournament. The closing ceremony was attended by office-bearers and management committee members of the Indian Sports Centre. Trophies and awards were presented to the winners and outstanding performers.



MCC1 won the championship in the ISC women's cricket tournament.





# Fuel shortage forces Gaza hospital to suspend most services

AFP  
Khan Yunis

A major Gaza hospital said yesterday it had suspended several services because of critical fuel shortages in the devastated Palestinian territory, which faces a severe humanitarian crisis.

Ravaged by more than two years of war, the Al-Awda Hospital in central Gaza's Nuseirat district cares for around 60 in-patients and receives nearly 1,000 people seeking medical treatment each day.

"Most services have been temporarily stopped due to a shortage of the fuel needed for the generators," said Ahmed Mehanna, a senior official involved in managing the hospital.

"Only essential departments remain operational: the emergency unit, maternity ward and paediatrics."

To keep these services running, the hospital has been forced to rent a small generator, he added.

Under normal conditions, Al-Awda Hospital consumes between 1,000 and 1,200 litres of diesel per day. At present, however, it has only 800 litres available.

"We stress that this shutdown is temporary and linked to the availability of fuel," Mehanna said, warning that a prolonged fuel shortage "would pose a direct threat to the hospital's ability to deliver basic services".

Khitam Ayada, 30, who has taken refuge in Nuseirat, said she had gone to the facility after days of kidney pain.

But "they told me they didn't have electricity to perform an X-ray... and that they couldn't treat me," the displaced woman said.

"They gave me a painkiller and told me that if my condition didn't improve I should go" to another hospital, she said.

"We lack everything in our lives, even the most basic medical services," she added.

Hospital official Mehanna urged local and international organisations to intervene swiftly to ensure a steady fuel supply.

Despite a fragile truce observed since October 10, the Gaza Strip remains engulfed in a severe humanitarian crisis.

While the ceasefire agreement stipulated the entry of 600 aid trucks per day, only 100-300 carrying humanitarian assistance can currently enter, according to the United Nations and non-governmental organisations.

The remaining convoys largely transport commercial goods that remain inaccessible to most of Gaza's 2.2mn people.

The vast majority of Gaza's residents rely on aid from UN agencies and international NGOs for daily survival.

Gaza's health sector has been among the hardest hit by the war.

During the fighting, the Israeli military repeatedly struck hospitals and medical centres across Gaza, accusing Hamas of operating command centres there, an allegation the group denied.

International medical charity Doctors Without Borders now manages roughly one-third of Gaza's 2,300 hospital beds, while all five stabilisation centres for children suffering from severe malnutrition are supported by international NGOs.

The war in Gaza was sparked by an unprecedented Hamas storming of Israel in October 2023.

In Israel's ensuing military campaign in Gaza, at least 70,942 people - also mostly civilians - have been killed, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory.

These figures are considered reliable by the United Nations.



A general view of destroyed buildings in Jabalia, in the northern Gaza Strip.

## Germany supports transition to second phase of Gaza ceasefire agreement

QNA  
Berlin

German Foreign Minister Johannes Wadephul has affirmed that Berlin strongly supports the transition to the second phase of the ceasefire plan and post-war arrangements in Gaza, warning that prolonging the current situation would exacerbate human suffering and undermine the prospects for stability.

Wadephul added, in a statement to German media, that improving humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip is a top priority for Berlin, emphasising that the German government has intensified its contacts with international partners to facilitate the delivery of aid through all available channels.

Wadephul noted that Germany is among the largest international supporters of humanitarian organisations operating in the

Palestinian territories, explaining that these organisations need safe, sustained, and unimpeded access to expand their operations and meet the growing needs of the civilian population.

The German foreign minister affirmed Berlin's readiness to play a pivotal role in international efforts to rebuild the Gaza Strip, emphasising that this process requires substantial financial participation from the international community.

He cautioned that reconstruction must proceed in parallel with a clear political track that guarantees the prevention of a recurrence of cycles of violence.

He explained that Berlin supports the idea of holding an international conference for Gaza's reconstruction in the near future, with the participation of international and regional stakeholders, to co-ordinate efforts, define priorities, and ensure that aid is directed effectively and sustainably.

The German foreign minister ruled out his country's participation in any potential international force to stabilise the Gaza Strip, asserting that the German government does not see a realistic possibility at present of deploying German troops for such a mission.

He added that talk of an international force is not merely symbolic or political, but rather entails intervention to impose security in a highly complex environment.

He further stated that this type of mission is currently inconceivable for German forces. He clarified that Germany is instead focusing on contributing politically and diplomatically to international efforts aimed at reaching a sustainable settlement, noting that any future security arrangements in Gaza must be part of a comprehensive political process that enjoys clear international legitimacy and regional acceptance.

## Egypt condemns Israel's recognition of Somaliland

AFP  
Cairo

Egypt joined Türkiye, Somalia and Djibouti in condemning Israel's recognition of Somaliland as an independent state yesterday, the Egyptian foreign ministry said.

The countries' top diplomats spoke by phone following Israel's announcement, Egypt's foreign ministry said.

"The ministers affirmed their complete rejection and condemnation of Israel's recognition of the Somaliland region, and stressed their full support for the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Somalia," the statement added.

The ministers also rejected "any unilateral actions that would compromise Somali sovereignty or undermine the foundations of stability in the country" and "any attempts to impose parallel entities that conflict with the unity of

the Somali state", the statement added.

Somaliland, which declared independence from Somalia in 1991, has for decades pushed for international recognition.

The six-nation Gulf Co-operation Council said in a statement that the Israeli move "constitutes a grave violation of the principles of international law and a blatant infringement upon the sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Somalia.

"This recognition represents a dangerous precedent that will undermine the foundations of stability in the Horn of Africa region and open the door to further tensions and conflicts," the regional bloc's Secretary General Jassem Mohamed AlBudaiwi said a statement.

It also goes against "regional and international efforts aimed at strengthening international peace and security in the region", the statement added.

The Saudi-based Organisation of Islamic Co-operation also expressed its "categorical rejection" of the Israeli move, calling it a violation of Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Turkiye, a close ally of Somalia, yesterday criticised Israel's recognition of the breakaway territory of Somaliland as an independent state as "interference" in Somali matters, AFP reported from Istanbul.

"This initiative by Israel, which aligns with its expansionist policy and its efforts to do everything to prevent the recognition of a Palestinian state, constitutes overt interference in Somalia's domestic affairs," said a Turkish foreign ministry statement.

## Iran says foreign tanker carrying smuggled fuel seized in Gulf

Reuters  
Tehran

Iran has seized a foreign oil tanker near the Iranian island of Qeshm in the Gulf, saying it was carrying 4mn litres of smuggled fuel, state media reported yesterday.

Authorities did not name the vessel or disclose its nationality.

They said 16 foreign crew members had been detained on criminal charges. State TV said the tanker was seized on Wednesday.

Iranian news websites published video footage and photographs of what they said was the seized tanker.

Iran said last week it had seized another foreign tanker carrying 6mn litres of what it

described as smuggled diesel in the Gulf of Oman without identifying the vessel or its nationality.

Iran, which has some of the world's lowest fuel prices due to heavy subsidies and a sharp fall in the value of its national currency, has been seeking to curb widespread fuel smuggling by land to neighbouring countries and by sea to other states.

## Lebanon's cabinet approves draft law on financial crisis losses

AFP  
Beirut

Lebanon's government yesterday approved a draft law to distribute financial losses from the 2019 economic crisis that deprived many Lebanese of their deposits despite strong opposition from political and banking officials.

The draft law is a key demand from the international community, which has conditioned economic aid to Lebanon on financial reforms.

It will be submitted to the country's divided parliament for approval before it can become effective.

The cabinet passed the draft bill with 13 ministers in favour and nine against. It stipulates that each of the state, the central bank, commercial banks and depositors will share the losses accrued as a result of the financial crisis.

Prime Minister Nawaf Salam told journalists after the session that the bill "is not ideal... and may not meet everyone's aspirations" but is "a realistic and fair step on the path to restoring rights, stopping the collapse... and healing the banking sector".

According to government estimates, the losses resulting from the financial crisis amounted to about \$70bn, a figure that is expected to have increased over the six years that the crisis was left unaddressed.

Depositors who have less than



A photograph released by the Lebanese Government Press Office yesterday, shows Lebanon's Prime Minister Nawaf Salam speaking during a press conference after a cabinet session in Beirut, yesterday.

\$100,000 in the banks, and who constitute 85% of total accounts, will be able to recover them in full over a period of four years, Salam said.

Larger depositors will be able to obtain \$100,000 while the remaining part of their funds will be compensated through tradable bonds, which will be backed by the assets of the central bank.

The central bank's portfolio includes approximately \$50bn, according to Salam.

The premier said the bill includes "accountability and oversight for the first time".

"Everyone who transferred their money before the financial collapse in 2019 by exploiting their position or influence... and everyone who benefited from excessive profits or bonuses will be held accountable and required to pay compensation of up to 30% of these amounts," he said.

Responding to objections from banking officials, who claim components of the bill place a major burden on the banks, Salam said the law "also aims to revive the banking sector by assessing bank assets and recapitalising them".

The International Monetary Fund,

which closely monitored the drafting of the bill, previously insisted on the need to "restore the viability of the banking sector consistent with international standards" and protect small depositors.

Parliament passed a banking secrecy reform law in April, followed by a banking sector restructuring law in June, one of several key pieces of legislation aimed at reforming the financial system.

However, observers believe it is unlikely that parliament will pass the current bill before the next legislative elections in May.

## Drone attack kills two soldiers in Chad near Sudan border

Reuters  
NDjamena

A drone attack killed two Chadian soldiers at a military camp near the Sudan border before dawn yesterday, local authorities and a security source said, adding it was not immediately clear who was behind the strike.

Two people were killed and one seriously injured in the attack on the border town of Tine, said Hamit Hassan, prefect of the department that includes Tine. He said he had no information on who was responsible.

A Chadian military intelligence officer told Reuters the drone came from Sudan but it was unclear whether it was launched by the country's army or paramilitary Rapid Support Force.

"We are still in the process of confirming the origin of this drone. If it is a Sudanese military drone, we will exercise our right to retaliate," the officer, who asked not to be named because he wasn't authorised to speak on the record, told Reuters. "The air force base in (the eastern city) Abeche is already on high alert and ground reinforcements are already in Tine." Sudan's army and the RSF did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Tine serves as a transit camp for Sudanese refugees who later move on to safer camps away from the border, though humanitarian sources say a lack of funds to provide water, sanitation and shelter at inland camps has slowed relocation efforts. More than 12mn people have already been displaced by the ongoing war in Sudan, according to the International Rescue Committee (IRC).



# Parents of Guinea’s missing migrants face torment

AFP  
Conakry

Abdoul Aziz Balde sobbed as he spoke of his son Idrissa, who left Guinea in search of a better future, but has not been heard from since capsizing off the Moroccan coast. “I know that the boat my son was on sank, but we haven’t been shown his body, so to say that the boy is dead, I just don’t know,” the desperate father said. Thousands of young undocumented migrants from Guinea have disappeared along migration routes in recent years, leaving their families in a state of uncertainty and helplessness. Although it affects families across west Africa, the problem is particularly bad in Guinea, which has become one of the main departure points for those heading to North Africa and Europe.

One day they are in touch; the next seemingly gone forever. Some disappear after boarding overcrowded boats, others after crossing the desert with smugglers who have been known to abandon migrants. Still others have gone missing following police raids in North Africa, due to imprisonment in Libya or even once in Europe, disappearing voluntarily out of shame over having failed in their dream. Families are left to scour Facebook or watch macabre WhatsApp clips showing young people in morgues or corpses after shipwrecks. The Guinean Organisation for the Fight Against Irregular Migration (OGLMI) has pioneered a way to help families by collaborating with migrant aid associations around the world over the last year. The NGO estimates the number of missing Guineans to be in the thousands. “Out of 100 migrants who leave, at least 10 will never return,” said OGLMI executive director Elhadj Mohamed Diallo. “People have been missing for a long time but the issue has never been discussed at the civil society, government or international institution level,” he said.

AFP accompanied Diallo as he navigated the streets of a Conakry suburb on his motorcycle to visit the parents of Idrissa, who disappeared more than a year ago. The Balde family lives in a house shared with other tenants where the poverty is striking. With every family, it is the same ritual when Diallo visits: Idrissa’s parents scrolled through WhatsApp to find the last virtual trace of their child. One of the last photos was a smiling selfie. “He left to save us, and to save his little sister. But God didn’t want it to be,” Abdoul Aziz Balde, a 62-year-old driver, said, breaking down in tears. Despite being bright at school, Idrissa — who would now be 29 years old — saw no opportunity in Guinea, a recurring theme among many young people. From 2023, he made three unsuccessful attempts to migrate to Europe, reaching as far as Morocco. Each time, his father tried to stop him. Last year his parents financed his master’s studies in Senegal, but he was lured by others who did manage to reach Europe and left for Morocco again. In August his father received a fateful phone call: “Are you Mr Balde? Do you have a son who is in Morocco?” the voice on the other end asked. “My



Abdoul Aziz Balde, father of Idrissa Balde, poses for a portrait inside his home in the outskirts of Conakry, Guinea.

deepest condolences. They boarded small boats... they drowned.” Balde said he was “devastated” and had to break the news to his wife. “The whole family wept,” he said. They were able to contact a young girl on the same boat but she had lost consciousness when they were hit by a wave and did not see what happened to Idrissa. “Is he dead? Is he not dead?” Balde asked, his voice filled with anguish. Between 2014 and 2025, at least 33,220 migrants died or went missing in the Mediterranean and 17,768 in Africa, according to the International Organisation for Migration’s Missing Migrants Project. However, the figures are likely underestimated. In 2024 alone, the Spanish NGO Caminando Fronteras recorded 10,457 people dead or missing at sea on the western European-Africa border.

Guinean researcher Mahmoud Kaba is working on a study to shed light on “the large-scale phenomenon” of families who have lost loved ones during attempts to migrate from Guinea. Some “suffer strokes upon hearing the news, others experience insomnia and amnesia,” he told AFP. Families feel isolated due to increasingly restrictive border policies and controls in Europe, general indifference and the criminalisation of migrants. Abdoulaye Diallo, 67, told AFP he felt “abandoned”. His eldest son Abdou Karim, who would now be aged 25, went missing two years ago. “He stopped communicating with me in March 2023 which was unusual for him and that’s when the worry set in,” Diallo said. The family found some of Abdou’s last traces of life on Facebook. He had already left once, in 2018, barely aged 18, reaching Morocco, Tunisia and Libya, where he was imprisoned, but ended up back in Conakry. On a second attempt, while working in Rabat he told a friend he was leaving for Tangier and then on to Spain. Just east of Tangier, the massive Gourougou forest has become a base for thousands of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa seeking to enter the nearby Spanish enclave of Melilla illegally. Moroccan authorities often carry out raids to dislodge them.

“There is violence against migrants in Morocco, especially from the security forces. It’s a country where lives are senselessly lost,” Diallo said, breaking down in tears. One of Abdou’s brothers said he received information that he was in a detention centre in the Tangier region. Diallo said he tried to contact the authorities to inform the Guinean embassy in Morocco but had received no news. There is “no shame” in being the parents of a young migrant who has gone missing, he insisted. “It’s a wind that has swept through every home in Africa because of bad governance,” he said. OGLMI has set up WhatsApp groups in local languages to connect Guinean families, as well as a support group. Even when relatives try to report their child’s disappearance, there is often no follow-up, Diallo said. Guinea’s ruling junta, which took power in 2021, is reluctant to allow public discussion of illegal migration. “Admitting that we are losing our citizens at sea is also admitting a political failure and that we are not doing enough for our citizens,” Kaba, the researcher, said. But the head of the Directorate General for Guineans Living Abroad, Mamadou Saitiou Barry, said that the term “disappeared” should be used with “great caution”. He said there were “many situations” other than death that could cause a migrant to disappear. They include “those who have not succeeded and refuse to communicate, those who are hospitalised, those who are under arrest or detained,” he said. He added that Guinean authorities had helped families of shipwreck victims that they know about, often the few that gain media attention.



Residents inspect the damage after US forces had launched a strike against Islamic State militants in Nigeria at the request of Nigeria's government, in Offa, Kwara State, yesterday.

# Nigeria signals more strikes likely in ‘joint’ US operations

AFP  
Lagos

Nigeria yesterday signalled that more strikes against militant groups were expected after a Christmas Day bombardment by US forces against militants in the north of the country, which it said was a joint operation with its military. The west African country faces multiple interlinked security crises, with militants waging an insurgency in the northeast since 2009 and armed “bandit” gangs raiding villages and staging kidnappings in the northwest. The strikes came after Abuja and Washington were locked in a diplomatic dispute over what US President Donald Trump has characterised as the mass killing of Christians amid Nigeria’s myriad armed conflicts. A Pentagon official told AFP that “the Department of War worked with the government of Nigeria to carry out these strikes” and that they “were approved by the government of Nigeria”, without saying whether Nigeria’s military had been involved. US defence officials later posted a video of what appeared to be a nighttime missile launch from the deck of a battleship flying the US flag. Meanwhile, Nigeria’s military said in a statement that its forces, “in conjunction with the United States”, had conducted “precision strike operations”. Both countries said the strikes targeted militants linked to the Islamic State group, without providing details.

Washington’s framing of the violence in Nigeria as amounting to Christian “persecution” is rejected by the Nigerian government and independent analysts, but has nonetheless resulted in increased security co-ordination. “It’s Nigeria that provided the intelligence,” the country’s foreign minister, Yusuf Tuggar, told broadcaster Channels TV, saying he was on the phone with US State Secretary Marco Rubio ahead of the bombardment. Asked if there would be more strikes, Tuggar said: “It is an ongoing thing, and we are working with the US. We are working with other countries as well.” The Department of Defence’s US Africa Command said “multiple ISIS terrorists” were killed in an attack in the northwestern state of Sokoto. Residents in the far-flung villages of that state told AFP they were shocked by the blasts. The strikes hit multiple locations, including a town that residents said was not a militant stronghold. Which of Nigeria’s myriad, and well-documented, armed groups were targeted remains unclear. Nigeria’s militant groups are mostly concentrated in the northeast, but have made inroads into the northwest. Researchers have recently linked some members of an armed group known as Lakurawa - the main militant group located in Sokoto State - to Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), which is mostly active in neighbouring Niger and Mali. Other analysts have disputed those links, and research on Lakurawa is complicated as the

term has been used to describe various armed fighters in the northwest. “We initially thought it was (an) attack by Lakurawa,” said Haruna Kallah, a resident of Jabo town. That the explosions were in fact the result of a US strike “surprised us because this area has never been a Lakurawa enclave, and we have never had any attacks in the last two years.” Tukur Shehu, a resident of Tangaza, a neighbouring district, said two strikes targeted Warriya and Alkassim villages -- known to house Lakurawa camps, from where they launch attacks and keep hostages. Public opinion on the surprise strikes was split. “America has made its way by force in our country, to kill our people,” said Sulaiman Ibrahim, an imam in Lagos. Emmanuel Udoh, a member of the clergy at Living Faith Church, said: “We are grateful with what the US has done. We are grateful with what the Nigerian government is trying to do.” While the Nigerian government has welcomed the strikes, “I think Trump would not have accepted a ‘No,’” said Malik Samuel, an Abuja-based researcher for Good Governance Africa, an NGO. Nigerian authorities are keen to be seen as co-operating with the US, Samuel said. Security analyst Brant Philip called the timing, on Christmas Day, “a symbolic start to official US operations in Nigeria”, adding: “The operational results of the strikes are not significant, but much is expected soon.”

# Voters sceptical ahead of CAR election

AFP  
Bangui

Despite the official fanfare surrounding the Central African Republic’s general election tomorrow, the mood in the capital, Bangui, appeared to be more of jaded resignation. Several residents of Bangui told AFP they thought the country was a mess, that little had improved since outgoing president Faustin-Archange Touadera came to power a decade ago — and that the outcome of the elections was a foregone conclusion. Around half the population of 5.5mn are entitled to vote in tomorrow’s polls to select new local and regional officials, the national parliament and a new head of state. But several opposition parties have called for a boycott, complaining the elections are a sham, and a number of people AFP spoke to in Bangui said they were not impressed by the seven candidates vying for president. “No matter who we vote for, nothing will change,” said “Joshua”, a 38-year-old technician working at an NGO who declined to give his real name. He did not see the point of voting, he said, as the opposition had not been given the same opportunities to rally sup-



A man walks past a campaign billboard of President and presidential candidate Faustin-Archange Touadera, ahead of the presidential election scheduled for tomorrow, in Bangui, Central African Republic.

porters as the president, whose MCU party has urged the electorate to give it “a knock-out vote in the first round”. “They’ll steal the election no matter how we vote,” he said. “Esther”, a 39-year-old cook, cast her first — and last — ballot in the election that brought Touadera to power in 2016. Since then, she said, she had lost her voting card — but had

not bothered re-registering. She acknowledged that security had improved since the unrest and ethnic-religious violence that traumatised the country in 2012 and 2013. “Now all religious communities can walk together in the street,” she said. But she was too busy working to feed her children to be interested in politics.

“My vote won’t change anything anyway,” she said dismissively. “Garcon 5 Etoiles” — a pseudonym — agreed the country was safer now but saw little else in the way of progress since he voted for Touadera in 2016. The 44-year-old security manager said he was generally disappointed with the outgoing president’s 10 years in office in

what is still one of the poorest countries on Earth. “The issue of hospitals remains a tragedy — and I choose my words carefully,” he said, pointing to the advanced state of disrepair of the capital’s three main health facilities. He reeled off a string of other grievances. More than 70% of the population were living below the poverty line; the cost of living was excessive; basic education and health services were conspicuous by their absence; and so were baseline regulations, particularly on road safety. He complained of the “cronyism” that ensured people with family ties rather than competence got the best jobs in the administration and the army. So would he vote for Touadera again? No. But not would he vote for the opposition, he said, because their default position of simply disagreeing with everything was just unconstructive. So, like the others, he has planned and resigned himself to stay at home on election day. Provisional results are due on January 5, but Garcon 5 Etoiles said he was not holding his breath. “There’s no counterweight to President Touadera,” he concluded, “so we already know pretty much what the outcome will be.”

## Fresh clashes erupt in DR Congo’s Uvira

Fresh clashes erupted yesterday near Uvira in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s east between the M23 group and pro-government militia, local and security sources said, AFP reported from Bukavu. The M23 militia had seized the strategic city near the border with Burundi earlier this month, shortly after the Congolese and Rwandan governments signed a peace deal in Washington that US President Donald Trump hailed as a “great miracle”. After the US accused Rwanda of violating the peace agreement it signed with its neighbour in early December, M23 said it would withdraw from Uvira. But plainclothes M23 members have stayed behind in the city, according to local and security forces. Yesterday, “around 6:00am, two M23 patrol boats were hit in the Kalundu port before catching fire,” said Martin Mafikiri Mashimango, a local civil society leader. A Congolese security source told AFP on condition of anonymity that “two enemy patrol boats were hit by our drones in Kalundu,” a port on Lake Tanganyika. Clashes between M23 and pro-government forces erupted earlier in the week near Uvira when the group and a pro-Kinshasa militia called Wazalendo traded gunfire “that could be heard across Uvira,” Mashimango had told AFP at the time. The DRC’s armed forces have called the M23 withdrawal promise “a media coup designed to fool public opinion” and accused the group of re-deploying in the hillsides above Uvira.



## Venezuela frees 99 prisoners detained after post-election protests

Reuters/AFP  
Caracas

Venezuela freed 99 people jailed after last year's election protests, the prisons authority said on Thursday, but rights groups said they believed the figure was lower despite growing pressure from Washington on President Nicolas Maduro.

The US has amassed a huge military presence in the Caribbean, killed dozens in strikes on boats near the Venezuelan coast it alleges were carrying drugs, and seized two fully-loaded Venezuelan crude tankers. President Donald Trump has said it would be smart for Maduro to leave power.

Hundreds of people in Venezuela's capital Caracas and other parts of the South American nation took to the streets after the July 2024 presidential election, banging pots and pans and blocking roads, demanding the opposition be declared victors.

## Rubio calls Asfura, lauds support for US goals

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio called the Honduran president-elect to congratulate him on his election victory and commended his support of US strategic objectives, the State Department said yesterday.

Nasry Asfura, a conservative businessman backed by US President Donald Trump, was declared winner of the Honduran presidential vote on Wednesday, weeks after a tight election marred by delays and allegations of fraud.

Trump's support of Asfura had fuelled allegations of US interference in the election in what is one of Latin America's poorest countries.

Tommy Pigott, a State Department spokesman, said in a statement that Rubio called Asfura "to congratulate him on a clear electoral victory".

"Secretary Rubio commended President-Elect Asfura for his advocacy of US strategic objectives, including advancing our bilateral and regional security co-operation, and strengthening economic ties between our two countries," the statement said. "Both leaders expressed their readiness to deepen cooperation and strengthen the US-Honduras partnership."

Asfura's new term begins on January 27.

In the November 30 election, which was subject to prolonged recounts, Asfura prevailed with just 40.1% of the vote, narrowly beating another right-wing candidate, Salvador Nasralla, who had 39.5%, according to the official results.

Before the vote, Trump had endorsed Asfura, saying that they could "work together to fight the narcocommunist" and then warned "there will be hell to pay" if the conservative candidate's razor-thin lead was overturned in the count.

Trump regularly questions the integrity of elections whose results he dislikes, including his own US presidential election defeat to Joe Biden in 2020.

On the eve of the Honduran election, Trump in a surprise move pardoned former Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernandez, a member of Asfura's party who was serving a 45-year prison sentence in the US for drug trafficking. - AFP

At least 2,000 people were arrested in post-election violence, according to the government, whose top prosecutor in the following moments announced the release of several groups of detainees, including dozens aged under 18.

Venezuela's electoral authority and Supreme Court said Maduro had won the election and that the protests sought to undermine his victory for a third six-year term.

Late on Christmas Day, the penitentiary services ministry said on social media that authorities had "decided to evaluate each case individually and grant precautionary measures in accordance with the law, which has led to the release of 99 citizens".

It said the group had been detained "for their participation in acts of violence and incitement to hatred following the 2024 election day".

The ministry's statement confirmed an earlier report about the Christmas Day releases from the Committee for the Freedom of Political Prisoners, an advocacy group

made up of rights activists and relatives of political prisoners.

"We celebrate the release of more than 60 Venezuelans, who should never have been arbitrarily detained," committee head Andreina Baduel told AFP, citing an earlier release count. "Although they are not entirely free, we will continue working for their full freedom and that of all political prisoners."

Penal Forum, another NGO, said they had only been able to confirm the release of 45 people - 27 men, 15 women and three teenagers, who had been "arbitrarily detained for political reasons".

"We continue to verify other possible cases," it said.

In Venezuela, there are at least 902 political prisoners, according to the most recent count available from Penal Forum.

Maduro's government says it does not have political prisoners but rather "imprisoned politicians" who seek to destabilise the country.

## NWS: California faces more rain before drier weekend

Reuters  
Los Angeles

Storm-hit Southern California is at risk of more floods hampering millions of motorists travelling after Christmas, but the National Weather Service (NWS) predicts a drier weekend.

The holiday deluge that started in earnest on Christmas Eve was spawned by the region's latest atmospheric storm, a vast airborne current of dense moisture siphoned from the Pacific, that swept inland over the greater Los Angeles area.

It dumped 6" of rain in the Los Angeles area with up to 18" of rain in the mountains, washing out some roads, and spurred evacuations and some shelter-in-place orders.

An additional 1-3" of rain was expected yesterday, said Tom Kines, a senior meteorologist with AccuWeather, a commercial forecasting company.

"Our overall picture is that there's just one more day of this mess, mostly across Southern California, specifically in the LA area," Kines said yesterday. "We still have some issues today with bouts of heavy rain, but this weekend is mainly dry, thankfully."

More than 14.5mn Californians were expected to travel by car over the Christmas holiday, according to AAA.

The coming drier weather should make travelling easier, after days of slick or flooded roads, forecasters said.

The atmospheric river that brought the trouble will wind down throughout the day across California with lingering heavy rainfall, heavy mountain snow, and gusty winds.

Many of the evacuation warnings issued in Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties were lifted on Christmas Day.

However, the orders remained yesterday in the hard-hit town of Wrightwood, a rural community with a population of about 5,000 in the San Gabriel Mountains on

the border between Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties.

Aerial video footage posted online on Christmas Eve by the fire department showed rivers of mud coursing through inundated cabin neighbourhoods, and mud-covered cars and homes.

Videos posted online on Thursday showed some residents scrambling over washed-out roads, picking through rubble on Christmas Day as streams of water still flowed over mounds of mud and into gullies that were once streets.

Right: Vehicles are seen in this screengrab obtained from social media video as floodwaters gush through a washed-away section of a road, in the aftermath of torrential rains, in San Bernardino County, California. - Reuters

Below: A couple watches the water level of the Los Angeles river after heavy rains. - AFP



## White House to present plans for East Wing ballroom in January

Reuters  
Washington

The White House will unveil new details on President Donald Trump's planned East Wing ballroom during a hearing early next month, according to a federal commission tasked with reviewing the project.

The new ballroom, which Trump has said would cost \$400mn and would dwarf the adjacent White House building, has been challenged in court by preservationists, while Democratic lawmakers have called it an abuse of power and are investigating which donors are supporting it.

The National Capital Planning Commission, chartered by Congress to manage planning for Washington-area federal lands, said on its website that the White House will provide an "information presentation" on plans to rebuild the East Wing during a commission meeting on January 8.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The commission, chaired by a White House aide and one-time personal lawyer to Trump, Will Scharf, has declined to review the demolition of the former East Wing, preparation activities at the site, or potential effects to historic properties, in what would mark the biggest change to the historic property in decades.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation, a nonprofit organisation chartered by Congress, is suing to halt the construction, arguing that the proposed 90,000sq foot (8,360sq m) ballroom would dwarf the rest of the White House, at 55,000sq feet.

The judge in the case earlier this month declined to issue a temporary restraining order against work on the project, noting among other things that the size, scale and other specifications had not been finalised. A hearing is scheduled next month.

The president, a one-time real estate developer, has taken a hands-on role in what he has described as sprucing up the White House and the US capital city ahead of celebrations next year marking the Declaration

of Independence's 250th anniversary.

He has also proposed a new grand arch near Washington, while decorating the Oval Office extensively in gold leaf and installing plaques there offering his personal take on his predecessors' legacies.

The former East Wing was largely demolished in October, with comparatively little public notice or consultation.

In a recent notice posted online, the planning commission said a formal review taking place this coming spring will consider topics including lines of sight, public space and landscapes.

Members of the public will be allowed to submit comments or testify during the review, it said.

## Judge grants injunction blocking US from detaining UK activist

Reuters/AFP  
Washington/New York

A US judge has temporarily blocked the Trump administration from detaining British anti-disinformation campaigner Imran Ahmed, after the US permanent resident sued officials over an entry ban for his role in what Washington argues is online censorship.

Washington imposed visa bans on Tuesday on Ahmed and four Europeans, including French former EU commissioner Thierry Breton.

It accuses them of working to censor freedom of speech or unfairly target US tech giants with burdensome regulation.

Ahmed lives in New York and is believed to be the only of the five currently in the country.

The move sparked an outcry from European governments who argue regulations and the work of monitoring groups made the Internet safer by highlighting false information and compelling tech giants to do more to tackle illegal content, including hate speech and child abuse material.

For Ahmed, the 47-year-old chief executive of the US-based Centre for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), it also sparked fears of imminent deportation that would separate him from his wife and child, both US citizens, according to a lawsuit he filed on Wednesday in the Southern District of New York.

"I am proud to call the United States my home," he said in a statement. "My wife and daughter are American, and instead of spending Christmas with them, I am fighting to prevent my unlawful deportation from my home country."

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, when announcing the visa restrictions, said he had determined the presence of the five in the United States had potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States and they could therefore be deported.

Ahmed named Rubio, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem and other Trump officials in his lawsuit, arguing officials were violating his rights to free speech and due process with the threat of deportation.

US District Judge Vernon Broderick issued a temporary restraining order on Thursday, which enjoined officials from arresting, detaining or transferring Ahmed before he has an opportunity for his case to be heard, and scheduled a conference between the parties for December 29.

Ahmed, in a statement provided by a representative, praised the US legal system's checks and balances and said he was proud to call the country his home.

"I will not be bullied away from my life's work of fighting to keep children safe from social media's harm and stopping antisemitism online," he said.

In response to questions about the case, a State Department spokesperson said: "The Supreme Court and Congress have repeatedly made clear: the United States is under no obligation to allow foreign aliens to come to our country or reside here."

The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to a request for comment.

Legal permanent residents, known as green card holders, do not need a visa to remain in the US, but the Trump administration has attempted to deport at least one already this year.

Mahmoud Khalil, detained in March after his prominent involvement in pro-Palestinian protests at Columbia University, was released by a judge who argued punishing someone over a civil immigration matter was unconstitutional.

A US immigration judge in September ordered Khalil to be deported over claims that he omitted information from his green card application, but he appealed that ruling and separate orders blocking his deportation remain in place.

Ahmed's CCDH has also frequently clashed with Musk, reporting a spike in misinformation and hate speech on X since the billionaire's 2022 takeover.

## New York planning to require social media platforms to display mental health warnings

sive use," she said in a statement.

This month Australia imposed a social media ban for children under 16.

New York joins states like California and Minnesota that have similar social media laws.

The New York law includes platforms that offer "addic-

tive feeds", auto play or infinite scroll, according to the legislation.

The law applies to conduct occurring partly or wholly in New York but not when the platform is accessed by users physically outside the state.

It allows the state's attorney general to bring legal action and

seek civil penalties of up \$5,000 per violation of the law.

Hochul compared the social media labels to warnings on other products like tobacco, where they communicate the risk of cancer, or plastic packaging, where they warn of the risk of suffocation for small children.

Spokespeople for TikTok,

Snap, Meta, and Alphabet did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The effect of social media on children's mental health has become a growing global concern, with US school districts suing Meta Platforms and other social media companies.

In 2023, the US surgeon-general issued an advisory on safeguards for children and later called for social media warning labels like the one now required in New York. - Reuters



# Russian court sentences activist to six years in jail

AFP  
Moscow

A Russian court sentenced far-left activist Sergei Udaltsov to six years in prison after finding him guilty of a “justifying terrorism” charge, local media reported on Thursday.

Udaltsov, who has been in pre-trial detention since January 2024, would appeal the verdict and announced he was going on a hunger strike, Interfax news agency reported.

“Udaltsov is sentenced to six years in prison,” the judge at Moscow’s Second Western district military court announced, according to Interfax.

The 48-year-old would serve the sentence at a maximum-security penal colony.

Moscow has hugely stepped up a crackdown on opposition and free speech since launching its offensive in Ukraine in 2022 and regularly accuses anyone deemed not to toe the official line of “justifying terrorism”.

The prosecution had sought a seven-year prison sentence while Udaltsov’s defence team

had argued he should be acquitted.

The exact accusations in Udaltsov’s case are classified, but he said at an earlier court hearing that he is accused of voicing support online for Marxist activists charged with organising a “terrorist” group in the central Russian city of Ufa.

He was one of the opposition leaders who spoke at mass protests over President Vladimir Putin’s re-election in 2012.

Udaltsov was imprisoned in 2014 for organising “mass riots” and spent three years in prison.

However, he has expressed public support for Moscow’s offensive in Ukraine and said he opposed Putin from a patriotic stance.

Udaltsov is an ardent admirer of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin and has called for the reinstatement of the Soviet Union.

He told the independent TV Rain channel in 2012 that “Stalin wasn’t a criminal” and has been arrested and fined numerous times for holding memorial ceremonies on Stalin’s birthday.

# Zelensky to meet Trump for high-stakes talks tomorrow

Reuters/AFP  
Kyiv

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky will discuss territorial issues, the main stumbling block in talks to end the war, with US President Donald Trump in Florida tomorrow, as a 20-point peace framework and a security guarantees deal near completion.

Announcing the meeting, Zelensky said that “a lot can be decided before the New Year” as Washington continues to drive efforts to end Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine, Europe’s deadliest conflict since World War II.

“As for the sensitive issues: we will discuss both Donbas and the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. We will certainly discuss other issues as well,” he told reporters in a WhatsApp chat.

Russia wants Ukraine to withdraw from the parts of the eastern Donetsk region that its troops have failed to occupy during almost four years of war, as it seeks full control of the Donbas, comprising the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Kyiv wants fighting to be halted at current battle lines.

The US, seeking a compromise, proposed a free economic zone if Ukraine leaves the area. It remained unclear how that zone would function in practical terms.

Territorial issues remain a hurdle to negotiations moving forward.

Any compromises on territory should be decided by the Ukrainian people in a potential referendum, Zelensky said.

The Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, Europe’s biggest, is located on the front line and controlled by Russian forces.

Zelensky added that his meeting with Trump aimed to “refine things” in the drafts and discuss potential deals on Ukraine’s economy.

He said he was not ready to say if any deal would be signed during his visit, but Ukraine was open to it.

A security guarantees agreement between Ukraine and the US was “almost ready” and the 20-point plan draft was at 90% completion, Zelensky added.

Wary of failed guarantees from allies in the past, Ukraine is seeking robust and legally-binding deals to prevent any further Russian aggression.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Trump, who has at times expressed frustration with the slow pace of progress in the negotiations, previously suggested that he would meet with Zelensky if he felt that a major diplomatic advance was possible.

European leaders might join the talks online, according to Zelensky.

Yesterday he discussed “significant progress”

in peace efforts with Finland’s President Alexander Stubb.

It was not clear which peace plan proposals Moscow would be willing to accept.

Putin’s foreign policy aide, Yuri Ushakov, spoke with members of the Trump administration after Moscow received US proposals about a possible peace deal, the Kremlin said yesterday.

When asked how Moscow viewed the documents, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said he did not want to comment as Russia felt making remarks in public could undermine the negotiations.

Russia’s *Kommersant* newspaper reported that Putin told some of Russia’s top businessmen that he might be open to swapping some territory controlled by Russian forces elsewhere in Ukraine, but that in exchange he wanted the whole of the Donbas.

Even as the talks proceeded, Russia continued hammering Ukraine’s energy infrastructure and stepped up attacks on the southern region of Odesa, the site of Ukraine’s main seaports.

A Russian attack on the northeastern city of Kharkiv yesterday killed two.

Zelensky said he planned to raise the issue of placing additional pressure on Russia with Trump.

Tens of thousands have been killed, millions forced to flee their homes and much of eastern and southern Ukraine destroyed since Russia invaded in February 2022.

# Moscow imprisons former diplomat for passing secrets to US intelligence

Reuters  
Moscow

A Moscow court sentenced a former Russian diplomat to 12 years in a maximum-security penal colony for selling secrets to US intelligence while on a posting to the United States, the Federal Security Service (FSB) said yesterday.

The FSB, the main successor to the Soviet-era KGB, said that Arseniy Konovalov, who was born in 1987, had been found guilty of treason.

“It was established that AS Konovalov, an employee of the Russian foreign ministry, during a long-term foreign assignment in the United States, proactively transferred secret information to American intelligence for money,” the FSB said in a statement.

Konovalov was detained by the FSB, which leads Russian counter-intelligence, in March last year.

The Tass news agency published video of a shocked-looking Konovalov being detained while travelling in a van and told he was suspected of treason.

The FSB did not say what information Konovalov had passed to US intelligence, or which US agency he was accused of working with.

There was no immediate comment from US spy agencies.

Russia’s *Kommersant* newspaper said that Konovalov had served as second secretary of the Russian Consulate General in Houston.

He worked in the United States from 2014-2017, *Kommersant* said.



## Day and night

People walk near New Year decorations in the form of the sun and planets in central Saint Petersburg. - Reuters

Right: The moon appears near the Eiffel Tower in Paris. - Reuters



Ukrainian children and adults wearing traditional clothing take part on Thursday in a Christmas procession at Sophia Square in Kyiv. - AFP



A protester speaks on the phone in front of a fire before leaving the A63 highway in Cestas, southwestern France, during a farmers' demonstration yesterday to protest the government's mandatory culling protocol for cattle herds affected by lumpy skin disease (dermatose nodulaire contagieuse). - AFP

# Kosovo snap poll unlikely to end damaging deadlock

By Ismet Hajdari  
AFP

Before the first vote is even cast in Kosovo’s snap election tomorrow, experts predict it is unlikely to end the political crisis that has been gripping Europe’s youngest country for almost a year.

The Balkan nation has been politically deadlocked since the inconclusive vote in February, which outgoing premier Albin Kurti’s Vetevendosje (VV) party won but without enough seats to form a government.

After months of wrangling in a stalled parliament, the caretaker prime minister is going back to the electorate in a vote that analysts say will change very little.

“I think that the December 28 elections will not bring any clarity,” economist Mehmet Gjata told AFP as he predicted Kurti’s party would come out on top again.

Political analyst Fatime Hajdari agreed that “chances were high” that VV would secure the most votes, but said little else was clear.

If anyone can secure a majority, Kurti, once dubbed Kosovo’s Che Guevara for his radical past, has a rare record.

His party swept to power in 2021 in the largest electoral victory since the country’s independence from Serbia in 2008, taking over 50% of the vote.

From a student radical to a political prisoner, Kurti’s long path to the prime ministership has made him one of the most recognisable and influential politicians in Kosovo.

His blend of nationalism and a reform agenda has proven popular in a country whose sovereignty is still contested by Serbia, more than two decades after its war for independence ended.

However, Gjata says things may have changed since Kurti’s last term.

“I’m afraid that the current political crisis will repeat itself, because VV will not get more than 50% of the votes,” the economist said. “We will have no winner again.”

The largest opposition parties have refused to join a Kurti coalition, all but assuring a fragmented parliament.

The only realistic challenge to VV would be “co-operation” between the three major opposition parties, former foreign minister and opposition candidate Enver Hoxhaj said.

“I think that only they can offer stability,” Hoxhaj said.

For Kurti and his party, countering Serbian influence in Kosovo has long been a focus, drawing support at home but criticism abroad.

When Serbian forces withdrew under North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) bombardment in 1999, it left many of its state structures in place for ethnic Serbs who live mainly in the north.

Kurti has labelled these services “instruments of intimidation, threat and control” and spent nearly his entire second term uprooting the system – and angering Belgrade in the process.

The resulting tensions in the north, which last flared into violence in 2023, have drawn sanctions from the European Union and caused Washington to accuse Kurti’s government of increasing “instability”.

However, among his voters, the removal of Serbian influence remains popular, analyst Hajdari said.

“The extension of sovereignty there is perceived by the citizens as a major success,” she said.

Most opposition parties avoid the issue, but the Serb List – which contests and retains most of the ten reserved Serb seats in

parliament – regularly clashes with Kurti’s agenda in the north.

The minor party, with close ties to Belgrade, has previously called the government’s moves in the north “ethnic cleansing” and has said they are willing to work with other parties to keep Kurti out of power.

Without a parliament, key international agreements have not been ratified, putting hundreds of millions of euros in assistance funds at risk.

Two national polls and a local election have cost one of Europe’s poorest nations at least €30mn (\$35mn) this year.

Over a dozen government institutions and agencies have also been left leaderless, as the mandates of their managers expired without new ones being appointed.

Gjata said “colossal damage” had been done to the economy by divided lawmakers over the past months.

“They have put Kosovo in a state of anarchy,” he said.

While lawmakers bickered, the cost of the crisis would be felt by the Balkan nation’s citizens, Hajdari warned.

“That is precisely why Kosovo needs a stable and functional government that would focus on development and welfare.”

# Russian drones ‘damage’ foreign-flagged vessels in Ukraine ports

Reuters  
Kyiv

Russian overnight drone attacks damaged Slovakia-, Palau- and Liberia-flagged vessels in ports in Ukraine’s Odesa and Mykolaiv regions, Ukraine’s deputy prime minister said yesterday.

In recent weeks, Russia has escalated attacks on the southern Odesa region, and Ukrainian officials said Moscow aimed to cut Ukraine off from the Black Sea and sow chaos among civilians.

There were no casualties in yesterday’s strikes, Oleksiy Kuleba said in a statement on the Telegram messaging app, but the attacks caused power cuts and damaged elevators and civilian warehouses in the Odesa region.

Separately, Kuleba added, drones damaged a locomotive and a freight car at the northwestern Kovel railway station, around 60km (37.28 miles) from Poland.

“Despite Russia’s deliberate terror, Ukraine’s logistics system continues to function,” Kuleba said.

Russia did not comment on the matter.

# Nearly 400 would-be migrants rescued off Greek island

AFP  
Athens

The Greek coastguard rescued nearly 400 would-be migrants from a fishing boat and another vessel off southern Crete, ANA news agency reported yesterday.

In one operation about 35 nautical miles from the small island of Gavdos, off Crete, a coastguard vessel, a Danish freighter and a helicopter took 365 people off a fishing boat, according to the agency.

Earlier about 30 people were moved onto a Frontex European frontier agency boat, about 25 nautical miles from Gavdos.

They were taken to Crete.

On Thursday Greek coastguard rescued 52 migrants in two separate incidents in the Aegean Sea, local media reported.

They found 13 migrants who had arrived on the small, uninhabited island of Farmakonisi, but one boy was reported missing from the group.

Another 39 migrants were found on board an inflatable boat off the southern island of Crete, according to the same source.

They were taken to the village of Kaloi Limenes in Crete.

The sea between Turkey and Greece and Libya to Greece are popular routes for undocumented migrants trying to reach Europe.

There are many accidents however.





A worker bows as a police car leaves the Yokohama Rubber Mishima Plant in Mishima, Shizuoka Prefecture, yesterday.

# Japan stabbing, liquid spray attack injures 15

AFP  
Mishima, Japan

Fifteen people were injured in a stabbing attack in a rubber factory in central Japan yesterday during which an unspecified liquid was also sprayed, emergency officials said.

"All 15 people were sent to hospital," a firefighting department official in the city of Mishima, southwest of Tokyo, said.

The official, declining to be named, said that of the 15 injuries, eight were the result of stabbing and seven due to the liquid.

Some local media outlets, quoting unnamed sources, said the liquid appeared to be bleach.

Five of the victims were classified as "requiring emergency care" by emergency workers at the scene, but all have remained conscious, the official said.

Tomoharu Sugiyama, another official from the fire-fighting department, said a call was initially received at about

4.30pm (0730GMT) from a rubber factory saying "people were stabbed by someone" and that a "spray-like liquid" had been used.

Japanese media, including public broadcaster NHK, reported that police had arrested a man on suspicion of attempted murder.

The Asahi Shimbun daily quoted investigative sources as saying that the man in his 30s was connected to the factory.

He was wearing what appeared to be a gas mask, the newspaper and other media said.

Asahi Shimbun also said that he was apparently armed with what it described as a survival knife.

NHK said the man told police that he was 38 years old.

A fleet of ambulances were dispatched to the Yokohama Rubber Co factory, which according to its website makes tyres for trucks and buses.

NHK aerial footage showed emergency workers and vehicles including fire trucks parked outside the factory.

Violent crime is relatively rare in Japan, which has a low murder rate and some of the world's toughest gun laws.

However, there are occasional stabbing attacks and even shootings, including the assassination of former prime minister Shinzo Abe in 2022.

A Japanese man was sentenced to death in October for a shooting and stabbing rampage that killed four people, including two police officers, in 2023.

A 43-year-old man was also charged with attempted murder in May over a knife attack at Tokyo's Toda-mae metro station.

Japan remains shaken by the memory of a major subway attack in 1995 when members of the Aum Shinrikyo cult released sarin gas on trains, killing 14 people and making more than 5,800 ill.

On March 20, 1995, five members of the Aum cult dropped bags of Nazi-developed sarin nerve agent inside morning commuter trains on March 20, 1995, piercing the pouches with sharpened umbrella tips before fleeing.

# Malaysia's ex-PM jailed for 15 more years in 1MDB saga's biggest trial

Reuters  
Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's influential former premier Najib Razak was yesterday jailed for a further 15 years and fined \$2.8bn for power abuse and money laundering in the biggest trial of the multibillion-dollar 1MDB scandal, a ruling that could have big political ramifications.

Malaysia and US investigators say at least \$4.5bn was stolen from 1Malaysia Development Berhad, a state fund Najib co-founded in 2009 during the first of his nine years in power in the southeast Asian country.

More than \$1bn allegedly made its way into accounts linked to 72-year-old Najib, who was first imprisoned in 2022 in another 1MDB case and has long insisted he has been made the scapegoat for Malaysia's biggest-ever financial scandal.

During a verdict that took five hours to deliver, high court judge Collin Lawrence Sequerah said Najib's contention that he was repeatedly deceived by others at 1MDB was implausible and to believe that would "stretch the imagination into the realms of pure fantasy".

The ruling could fuel further tensions in Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's governing alliance, which includes the once dominant United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party, over which Najib has retained significant influence even from jail. On a day of reckoning for arguably Malaysia's most divisive politician, Najib was found guilty of all four counts of abuse of power and all 21 money laundering charges, after a marathon legal battle that included multiple appeals and a partial royal pardon.

"The contention by the accused that the charges against him were a witch hunt and politically motivated were debunked by the cold, hard and incontrovertible evidence



Malaysia's former prime minister Najib Razak (second right) leaves after his verdict in the 1MDB trial at the Palace of Justice, which houses the Malaysian Court of Appeal and Federal Court, in Putrajaya yesterday.

against him that pointed towards the accused having abused his own powerful position in 1MDB, coupled with the extensive powers conferred upon him," judge Sequerah said in the verdict.

Sentences were handed down of 15 years for each count of power abuse and five years for each money laundering charge, to be served concurrently, after Najib's current jail term ends in 2028.

Najib was ordered to pay fines of 11.39bn ringgit (\$2.82bn), and the court said 2.08bn ringgit in assets must be recovered from him. Failure to deliver on both would result in additional jail time, it said.

Najib's lawyer Muhammad Shafee Abdullah said he would appeal the ruling on Monday.

Najib apologised last year for mishandling the scandal, saying he was misled by 1MDB officials and fugitive financier Jho Low about the source of the funds in his accounts. Low, who was charged in the US for his central role in the case, denies wrongdoing and his whereabouts are unknown.

Judge Sequerah said that as prime minister, Najib "stood at the very apex of the decision-making process" and evidence revealed he

had an "unmistakable bond and connection" with Low, who acted as his proxy and intermediary in 1MDB affairs.

In a statement read by his lawyer, Najib urged Malaysians to remain calm and rational and vowed to continue his fight. "This struggle is not an effort to avoid responsibility," he said. "It is an endeavour to uphold justice, to uphold the integrity of the constitution, and to defend the sovereignty of the rule of law without fear or favour."

Funds siphoned from 1MDB were used by the opulent-living Low and his associates to buy a trove of luxury assets from a private jet and a \$120mn superyacht to hotels, artworks and jewellery, and to finance the 2013 Hollywood film *The Wolf of Wall Street*, US lawsuits have said. Savvy networker Low had high-profile international connections and famously attended lavish parties with A-List American celebrities, including actors and singers.

Najib, who sat with his head down and shoulders slumped at numerous times during the verdict reading, has maintained Low and other 1MDB officials made him believe funds deposited into his account were donations.

## South Korea seeks 10-year jail term for ex-president

South Korea's special prosecutor yesterday requested a 10-year prison sentence for former president Yoon Suk-yeol on charges including attempted obstruction of his arrest following his failed bid to impose martial law.

Prosecutors have accused the ousted president of trying to block investigators seeking to arrest him in January by barricading himself inside the presidential compound.

The requested 10-year sentence was the first jail term sought by special prosecutors over the multiple charges Yoon faces.

"The defendant, who was supposed to safeguard the constitution and uphold the rule of law, abused his power and hurt the public," a prosecutor said in a recorded video clip of the trial before making the sentencing request.

"He has not apologised or shown remorse to the public, but instead tried to shift blame to his aides," the prosecutor added. - Reuters

## BNP leader pays tribute at father's grave



Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) acting chairman Tarique Rahman waves to supporters as he arrives to visit the grave of his father and Bangladesh's former president Ziaur Rahman in Dhaka yesterday.

## Myanmar junta lifts Yangon curfew ahead of elections

AFP  
Yangon, Myanmar

Myanmar's junta yesterday said it will lift a curfew imposed in Yangon since its 2021 coup, just days before the start of elections it touts as a return to normality.

The military staged a 2021 putsch ousting Myanmar's elected government and sparking massive pro-democracy protests in cities nationwide.

As security forces battled to put down the demonstrators, the junta enforced a dusk-to-dawn curfew in the largest city of Yangon, home to around 7mn people.

In the years since then, the span of the curfew has shrunk incrementally - and the junta said the remaining 1am-3am lockdown would be lifted as of today.

"Regional stability in Yangon region is improving now," said a statement shared by junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun.

The statement said the decision was made "in order to improve economic, social and religious matters, for the convenience of people's transportation and to improve business development".

The military crushed the protest movement, but many activists quit the cities to fight as guerrillas alongside powerful ethnic minority armies which have long held sway in the nation's fringes.

The dynamic has plunged Myanmar into a civil war killing thousands, displacing more than 3.6mn and leaving half the nation in poverty, according to the United Nations.

The military took over making allegations that the government of Aung San Suu Kyi trounced their pro-military opponents by means of massive voter fraud.

But the junta has organised new elections - starting in phases tomorrow and due to last a month - promising they will return democracy.

# Thailand PM expresses hope for ceasefire with Cambodia

AFP  
Phnom Penh

Thailand's prime minister yesterday expressed hope for a ceasefire with Cambodia, even as Phnom Penh accused the Thai military of intensifying its bombardment of disputed border areas.

Anutin Charnvirakul said Thailand's National Security Council had agreed to send the country's defence minister to meet his Cambodian counterpart today - the

fourth day of border talks aimed at negotiating an end to deadly clashes.

"If the defence ministers can reach an agreement that both Thailand and Cambodia accept, the document they sign will largely follow the four main points" outlined in a previous joint declaration that followed a round of clashes earlier this year, he said.

The October declaration said the two sides would organise mine clearing efforts along their border, withdraw heavy weapons and allow access to ceasefire monitors.

"What matters is that we must keep our promise not to invade, threaten, provoke or escalate tensions between the two sides," Anutin told reporters at a news conference.

"You can trust Thailand. We always uphold our agreements and commitments. Let this be the final signing, so that peace can be restored and our people can return home."

The neighbours' long-standing border conflict reignited this month, shattering an earlier truce and killing more than 40 people,

according to official counts. Around a million people have also been displaced.

As Cambodian and Thai officials held their third day of talks at a border checkpoint yesterday, Cambodia's defence ministry said Thailand carried out a heavy bombardment of disputed border areas in Banteay Meanchey province.

"From 6am to 7.15am, the Thai military deployed F-16 fighter jets to drop as many as 40 bombs, to intensify its bombardment in the area of Chok Chey village," the defence ministry said in a statement.

Thai media said yesterday that Cambodian forces had launched heavy attacks overnight along the border in Sa Kaew province, where several homes were damaged by shelling.

The two countries blame each other for instigating the fresh fighting, which has spread to nearly every province along their border.

Both countries also claim to have acted in self-defence and accuse the other of attacking civilians.

The US, China and Malaysia

brokered a truce to end five days of deadly clashes in July, but the ceasefire broke down.

Earlier yesterday, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet said on Facebook that he had spoken by phone with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and the two discussed "ways to secure a ceasefire along the Cambodia-Thailand border".

The conflict stems from a territorial dispute over the colonial-era demarcation of their 800km frontier and a collection of temple ruins situated there.



### UK health minister vows to prevent renewed doctors' strikes

Britain's Health Minister Wes Streeting said he would do everything he could to prevent further strikes by hospital doctors who returned to work on Monday after a five-day walkout. The union for qualified medical practitioners in England staged another five-day strike last week in a dispute over pay and working conditions during one of the busiest periods for the health service. Streeting has been critical of the action, calling the doctors "self-indulgent, irresponsible and dangerous" in earlier comments as hospitals faced rising admissions due to a surge in flu cases. He said his door remained open to put an end to what he described as "these damaging cycles of

disruption". "I do not want to see a single day of industrial action in the NHS in 2026 and will be doing everything I can to make this a reality," he said, adding that talks with the British Medical Association (BMA) would resume early next year. Jack Fletcher, the BMA's chair, said the union wants "less name-calling and more deal-making" next year. "Strikes were not inevitable in 2025 and they are not in 2026 either," he said. The latest stoppage, which began on December 17, added pressure to an already stretched healthcare service after National Health Service England warned that hospitals were facing a "worst-case scenario" from a surge in cases of a virulent strain of flu.

### Boxing Day trail hunt



Members of the Old Surrey, Burstow and West Kent Hunt take part in the annual Boxing Day trail hunt, in Chiddingstone, Britain, yesterday.

## India ‘aims to tackle sugar surplus with higher exports’

Reuters

New Delhi

India aims to shield sugarcane farmers from income losses by managing surplus supplies through exports and diverting more sugar for ethanol production, a senior government official said.

Higher exports from the world's second-largest sugar producer could pressure benchmark New York and London futures - which are hovering near five-year lows.

"The surplus is going to hurt the farmers, which we cannot

afford to do. So, in their interest, and also in the interest of all the stakeholders, you need to ensure that the surplus stocks are contained," India's food secretary Sanjeev Chopra told reporters.

The government will try to contain the sugar surplus through all possible measures, he said. India's sugar production in the 2025/26 marketing year, which began on October 1, is projected to rise 18% to 30.9mn metric tonnes, even after diverting 3.4mn tonnes for ethanol production, Chopra said.

Domestic demand in the world's largest sugar consumer comes up to around 29mn tonnes

annually. With output set to exceed consumption, New Delhi last month approved exports of 1.5mn tonnes in the current season.

India was the world's second-largest sugar exporter in the five years to 2022/23, with shipments averaging 6.8mn tonnes annually. But a drought led the government to ban sugar exports in 2023/24, and it allowed only 1mn tonnes to be shipped overseas last year.

The sugar industry expects that by mid-January, when a glut in supplies is anticipated, prices will gradually decline, posing challenges for the sector, Chopra said.

## India's growth holds up in November: RBI

Reuters

Mumbai

The Indian economy continued to hold up its strong growth momentum in November, helped by private and urban consumption demand, the Reserve Bank of India said in its monthly bulletin.

"Demand conditions remained robust, with indicators of urban demand strengthening further," the RBI report said. "High-frequency indicators suggest that overall economic activity held up in the post-festival month of November."

India's economy expanded by 8.2% in the July-September quarter, its fastest pace in six quarters, showing "remarkable resilience" amidst persistent global trade uncertainties, the central bank said.

"Coordinated fiscal, mon-

etary and regulatory policies have helped to build resilience over the year," the RBI said.

Earlier this year, India cut taxes on hundreds of consumer items ranging from soaps to small cars to spur domestic demand in the face of economic headwinds from punishing US tariffs.

Additionally, the central bank cut its key interest rate by a total of 125 basis points in 2025, including a 25 bps reduction in December.

"The decisions were guided by the benign inflation outlook for both headline and core, which provided space for monetary policy to further support the growth momentum," the RBI said in its bulletin.

The central bank raised its GDP forecast for the current fiscal year to 7.3% from 6.8% earlier this month, while lowering its inflation projection to 2% from 2.6%.

# Migrant workers fill UK night shifts as local numbers fall

AFP

London

"We are ghosts on the night shift," says Leandro Cristovao from Angola, who has worked the graveyard shift at a south London market for seven years.

In the last decade, Britain's 9mn strong nighttime workforce has become increasingly reliant on migrants like Cristovao, as the number of UK-born workers doing night work shrinks.

"You have a lot of night work carried out by migrant night workers in - somewhat unfairly named - low-skilled sectors," explained Julius-Cezar Macarie, a sociology professor at University College Cork.

"Their work is very, very essential, because they maintain this ... 24-hour society," said Macarie, whose "Nightwork Footprint" project researches the invisibility of the shift.

Amid the raging debate in the UK about the number of migrants and irregular immigrants, those not born in the UK are twice as likely to work overnight as those born in the country, according to official data from 2022.

In the health and care sector, over a third of night workers are migrants.

As the government clamps down on overseas workers, migrants spoke about working in the shadows.

As the sun rose on a chilly morning in central London, Roxana Panozo Alba walked against the tide of suited-up bankers whose offices she spent the night cleaning.

The 46-year-old and her team - most of whom are migrants - clean toilets, kitchens, conference rooms and over 500 desks from 10pm to 7am.

She says she gets paid the London Living Wage (£13.85, \$18.47) per hour.

Alba, originally from Bolivia and a Spanish citizen through marriage, moved to the UK with her husband because "there was no work left in Spain".

She has worked nights for eight years to be with her kids - aged six and 15 - in the day, and

because she does not speak English, limiting opportunities.

"Working at night is not good, it damages your health," said Alba.

"You have to sleep (in the day), but you can't. The slightest noise and you can't get to sleep."

Omatule Ameh, 39, is an overnight support worker for children with learning disabilities in rural southeast England. He moved there from Nigeria in 2023 on a care worker visa.

During the day, Ameh looks after his own eight-year-old and 18-month-old while his wife works at the care home. Sometimes, he gets only three hours of sleep.

"You find that emotionally, mentally, it's taking a gradual toll on you," said Ameh, who earns minimum wage, around £12.20 an hour.

Judith Munyonga, 44, from Zimbabwe works from 7pm-7am four days a week, caring for patients with spinal cord injuries in Hertfordshire, north of London.

The former teacher monitors her patients while they sleep, often sitting besides them in darkness.

"I'll try to play music in one of my headphones to keep myself awake. When it's dark, I tell you, it's not easy," said Munyonga.

Both carers feel the government's move to end the social care visa route and rising anti-immigration rhetoric are "worrying".

Last month, the government announced it would triple the time before some "low-qualified" care workers can apply for residency from five to 15 years.

"It's like changing the rules in the middle of a game," Ameh lamented.

The Labour government has also ended the provision allowing care workers to bring their families to the UK - the path through which Munyonga brought her husband and children.

"It's sad," said Munyonga. "You are here to care for some family, (for them) to live a normal life. And yours is out there."

Ameh is taking management courses and wants to "move up the ladder".

Sandeep wipes grease from

the counter of a 24-hour London cafe before clocking off at 7am, after a 12-hour shift.

The 21-year-old Nepali has worked as a chef there for two years, first when he was a student, and now as a graduate, after he struggled to find a tech job.

"It's really hard to get a job at the moment," said the computer science graduate, adding he had "no option" but to work nights.

He moved to the UK from Nepal in 2023 because "there's nothing back there for youngsters like us".

But if he cannot find a job that pays more than his current minimum-wage work, he will have to return to Nepal in a year when his visa expires, as the government hikes the minimum salary requirement for foreign work visas.

"They gave me the hope... now what's the point of telling me to go back to your country?" said Sandeep, who did not want to share his full name.

"Everyone here is an immigrant," he added, gesturing towards the Nepalese team which dishes up traditional British fare through the night.

"If we couldn't do it, I think the boss has to shut down the place for night shift."

Cristovao, 36, packages wholesale produce which reaches UK restaurants, schools and hotels in the early morning hours.

When he first started, he would have "nightmares" and jolt awake during the day, thinking he was late for work.

"I almost became like a ghost," he said, speaking at the sprawling night market.

His boss Martin Dykes said the business, Nature's Choice, took a hit after Brexit, adding he is "worried" about new visa restrictions as local night workers are harder to find.

"My friends in the business, we wouldn't (be able to) do it. Restaurants wouldn't survive," said Dykes.

"But we are here," Cristovao said defiantly.

"While they are sleeping, we are here," he said, pointing to the residential skyscrapers behind him, where the lights are switched off.

### Teachers' protest in Chennai



A police personnel carries a teacher who fainted during a protest demanding salary hikes and regularisation of government jobs in Chennai, India, yesterday.

# India's Bollywood counts costs as star fees squeeze profits

AFP

Mumbai

From fleets of private trailers to personal chefs and sprawling entourages, Bollywood stars' "obnoxious" demands are driving up production costs and putting a strain on the Indian film industry's finances, insiders say.

Bollywood has long been unpredictable at the box office and the pandemic compounded problems, but producers argue that today's losses stem less from creative failure and more from top artists' runaway expenses.

"It is not so much about pro-

duction cost - it is more about star fees," says producer Ramesh Taurani, best known for the successful Race action franchise.

Actors, filmmakers say, increasingly arrive on set with a dozen-strong entourage - including makeup artists, hairdressers, stylists, gym trainers and assistants - all billed to production.

Stars are paid hefty fees of up to \$22.18mn per film but additional requests for first-class travel, five-star hotels, multiple private trailers and work-shy hours have become routine.

"Expansive support teams, premium travel and luxury accommodations often inflate budgets without proportionate creative

impact," said veteran producer Mukesh Bhatt. "The kind of demands stars make is obnoxious."

Distributor and trade analyst Raj Bansal added: "One actor usually comes with 10-15 staff members.

"Earlier, actors wouldn't mind sharing one vanity van. Then they decided to give one vanity van each to a big star - and demand went on increasing."

A single trailer hired for the duration of a film shoot can cost as much \$18,000. For some actors, insiders say, demanding more has become a status symbol.

Bollywood has always been considered high-risk, producing more flops than hits, but produc-

ers say the balance has tipped sharply as star-driven costs spiral beyond what box office returns can sustain.

The fragile model was shaken after the pandemic, when streaming platforms bought films at inflated prices.

When those deals dried up, producers faced a painful course correction as income plunged but actors' demands stayed elevated. And that problem continues today.

Competition has also intensi-

fied. "Audience behaviour has matured, streaming platforms have broadened horizons and regional cinema has elevated creative standards," says Bhatt.

"Yet, alongside this progress, rising production costs - particularly talent-driven budgets - have introduced a significant strain. It is not the films that falter, but the economics that lose balance."

Actor-filmmaker Aamir Khan slammed stars for burdening producers with these costs.

"You earn in crores (tens of millions of rupees)," Khan said, in a September interview with the YouTube show Game Changers. "Where's your self-respect?"

Industry insiders say actors' demands also have a cascading effect, as stars seek to exceed each other's perks.

"A measured approach will allow us to redirect resources to-

ward what truly defines cinema - the power of storytelling," said Bhatt.

Producers have pushed for partnership-style compensation models.

"When a film thrives, every contributor should benefit," Bhatt said. "When it struggles, the weight should not rest solely on the producer, who shoulders risk from the very beginning."

The 2024 science fiction action film *Bade Miyan Chote Miyan*, starring Akshay Kumar and Tiger Shroff, reportedly cost about \$42mn. After poor ticket sales, producers were reported to have mortgaged property to cover debts.





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GULF TIMES

## Innovation that works for women

Worldwide, women manage an estimated \$32tn in annual spending and are projected to control 75% of discretionary spending within the next five years. Yet across nearly every industry, most products fall short of meeting their needs, reflecting a tacit assumption that women are somehow a niche market.

For decades, companies have relied on superficial gestures: pink packaging, token “female-friendly” campaigns, and even the so-called pink tax, whereby women are charged more for the same product. Many of these “personalised” offerings amount to little more than marketing in disguise.

The result is a persistent gap between what women need and what companies deliver. Closing it requires designing products and services that reflect women’s priorities, decisions, careers, and lived experiences.

Historically, women have been expected to adapt to systems and services that were not built with them in mind. The evidence is everywhere: personal protective equipment is rarely made to fit, smartphones tend to be too large for smaller hands, and voice assistants consistently fail to recognise female voices. When male data are used as the benchmark for what’s considered “normal”, women are underserved, and entire markets remain underdeveloped.

This oversight represents one of today’s largest untapped growth opportunities. Consider financial services: women add \$5tn to the global wealth pool each year, but products still cater to men’s earning patterns and priorities. Despite managing a greater share of household budgets, women are up to eight percentage points less likely than men to feel financially skilled. Products that account for caregiving breaks, pay gaps, and longer lifespans could generate billions in value while improving women’s financial security.

**Women add \$5tn to the global wealth pool each year, but products still cater to men’s earning patterns and priorities**

Even in traditionally female-oriented industries like beauty, personal care, and groceries, only two-thirds of women feel their needs are met. While many brands continue to prioritise marketing over substance, most women say they would pay up to 15% more for safer, higher-quality, or more convenient options. To seize this opportunity, companies should focus on what women actually value rather than “feminising” existing products.

Nowhere are the stakes higher than in healthcare, where overlooking women’s experiences can have life-altering consequences. While women make 83% of household healthcare decisions, only 41% say their concerns are adequately addressed. Underdiagnosis and undertreatment – particularly related to menopause and bone, cognitive, and cardiovascular health – represent a \$100bn-plus market opportunity in the US alone. Cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death among women, illustrates the problem. It remains chronically underdiagnosed because screening protocols are based on male symptom profiles. Correcting those biases could expand the cardiovascular market by 74% to \$20bn by 2030. That same dynamic is playing out in nearly every industry: when women are excluded, markets underperform their potential; when they are addressed, well-being improves and profits rise.

But that requires a fundamental shift. Women’s lives are not linear; their health, careers, families, and identities constantly evolve, as do their goals and values. Designing with that evolution in mind is the foundation of meaningful innovation.

To achieve this, research must go beyond demographics. Companies should invest in female-specific, life-stage research that captures the full depth of women’s lived experiences. Collaborating with universities, health providers, and data scientists can help generate new insights and drive inclusive innovation. Companies must adopt agile R&D practices like rapid prototyping, cross-functional collaboration, and real-time feedback. Likewise, involving women early in product testing can lead to stronger sales and better marketing.

Perhaps most importantly, innovation thrives when the people making decisions understand the people they serve. When women shape strategy, investment, and product design, solutions naturally become more relevant and effective. Studies have consistently shown that diversity gives organisations a clear strategic edge. Finally, after decades of neglect, innovation and investment are beginning to catch up.

By involving women in the innovation process, companies can tap into markets that have been hiding in plain sight. Serving women better is more than fair; it could unleash a wave of global economic growth. – Project Syndicate

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# Global health workers strengthen US national security

By **Junaid Nabi**  
Boston

Last December, while visiting Nairobi for a global health workshop, I met a group of community health workers, the frontline professionals who play a vital role in providing HIV, tuberculosis, and maternal health services across Africa. They talked about navigating informal settlements to reach patients who missed appointments; building trust one conversation at a time; and knowing the ins and outs of their catchment area, including which children are orphaned, which traditional healers collaborate on referrals, and which patients struggle with adherence.

Their expertise was largely developed in programmes funded by the President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR), which US President George W Bush launched in 2003. By training and supporting community health workers, the programme has helped strengthen the continent’s healthcare systems. But these workers do more than deliver healthcare: they also function as an early-warning system for the next pandemic – a crucial role that directly benefits the US.

But US policymakers seem to have overlooked this, at least judging by the America First Global Health Strategy that the US Department of State released in September. It sets the ambitious goal of achieving the 95-95-95 targets (whereby 95% of HIV-infected people know their status, 95% of those who know are in treatment, and 95% of those being treated are virally suppressed). The strategy also aims to reduce both tuberculosis mortality and malaria mortality by 90% by 2030, and to detect epidemic outbreaks within seven days and mobilise a response within 72 hours of detection.

At the same time, to end the system’s “inefficiencies, waste, and dependency” (a major theme in the current US administration, which has already eliminated billions of dollars in foreign aid), the strategy calls for shifting 270,000 frontline healthcare workers from US-funded NGO programmes to recipient government payrolls starting in 2027. The problem is that PEPFAR-funded healthcare workers typically earn significantly more than their government counterparts, often requiring salary harmonisation when transitioning to government employment. In Malawi, nurses with international NGOs that are supported by PEPFAR have long



Ugandan doctors attend the contacts of a patient who had tested positive, during the launch of the vaccination for the Sudan strain of Ebola virus, with a trial vaccine at the Mulago Guest House (Isolation centre) in Kampala, Uganda, on February 3, 2025. (Reuters/File photo)

earned a notably higher median salary than nurses with local NGOs. In South Africa, absorbing 24,264 PEPFAR-funded workers would cost the government R2.82bn (\$167mn) – and even that represents only 63% of what PEPFAR currently spends on salaries, illustrating the compensation gap workers face during transition.

When faced with deep salary cuts, workers are likely to flee rural public health for better-paying jobs in urban clinics or other NGOs. This reveals a fundamental tension in the strategy: it seeks to maintain robust disease surveillance while effectively dismantling the workforce responsible for it.

The section on pandemic preparedness, correctly identified as a core national interest, is telling. It touts the US government’s proactive efforts to stop significant outbreaks of Ebola in Uganda and Marburg in Tanzania, celebrating that “zero cases reached American shores.” But there is no discussion of how this system works, particularly its dependence on the health workers now at risk.

PEPFAR infrastructure was essential to the rapid containment of Uganda’s Ebola outbreak in 2022-23: the programme’s transport system for HIV samples was repurposed for haemorrhagic fever samples, while local partners leveraged their relationships with clinics to educate more people about infection prevention and control. Likewise, during the Covid-19 pandemic, PEPFAR-supported laboratory sites across Africa performed testing, and community health workers applied

their strategies for HIV contact tracing to surveillance of the outbreak.

The 208,800 community health workers who are the PEPFAR programme’s eyes and ears are the first to notice unusual disease patterns, report unexplained illness clusters, and relay community signals to national surveillance teams. Lose them and America’s early-warning capacity collapses.

Responding to outbreaks where they originate is cheaper and safer than waiting until they reach America. Covid-19, after all, cost the US economy trillions of dollars and killed more than 1mn Americans. In view of this, PEPFAR’s annual budget of around \$6bn is hardly excessive; rather, it is a high-return investment in national security.

The US strategy aims to complete bilateral agreements by Dec 31 and begin implementation by April, giving policymakers a three-month window. But government employment processes typically require two years to navigate budget approvals, create positions, recruit competitive candidates, and set salaries. Uganda’s successful health-worker transition followed a similar timeline. Rushing the handover risks triggering a mass exodus.

The US government has promised to employ dedicated staff members in each country to focus on validating and auditing surveillance data. But without community health workers to conduct contact tracing during disease outbreaks and maintain the community trust required for rapid case identification, there will be no

data to process.

To be sure, the strategy identifies a major problem: less than 40% of PEPFAR funding goes to frontline supplies and healthcare workers. Reforms are clearly needed. But there is a difference between a thoughtful transition and a rapid dismantling. Continuity of institutional knowledge is crucial, and Congress should require the State Department to set realistic timelines that match administrative realities and develop comprehensive workforce transition plans that include terms for retention bonuses and severance packages. Bilateral agreements should include binding commitments from recipient governments to maintain pandemic-surveillance capacity regardless of domestic political pressures.

Most importantly, policymakers must understand that 270,000 healthcare workers are more than a line item; they are the backbone of the disease-surveillance system protecting American lives. The same community health workers testing for HIV today will test for tomorrow’s novel pathogen. The trust they build with marginalised populations now will be essential for vaccine uptake during the next outbreak. Funding the people who help keep Americans safe should not be seen as charity, but rather as spending that serves Americans’ own interest in staying healthy. – Project Syndicate

● *Junaid Nabi, a physician and scientist, is a senior fellow at the Aspen Institute and a Millennium Fellow at the Atlantic Council.*

## The Japanese canary in the global debt coal mine

By **Barry Eichengreen**  
Mumbai

Earlier this month, global bond markets were rocked by remarks from Bank of Japan (BoJ) Governor Kazuo Ueda suggesting that the BoJ would soon weigh whether to raise interest rates. The resulting sell-off in the US bond market raised yields on ten-year and 30-year US Treasuries sharply.

Normally, mild comments by a mild-mannered Japanese central banker are not enough to perturb US and global markets. But the BoJ has a well-earned reputation as a canary in a coal mine. In February 1999, it cut interest rates to zero in a desperate effort to fend off deflation, anticipating the zero-interest-rate policies of other central banks when they, too, confronted the spectre of deflation.

Today, the BoJ’s prospective move in the other direction could be indicating that not just Japan but also other heavily indebted economies, including the US, are about to face sharply higher yields on government bonds, with all the difficulties that entails.

The Japanese government’s total debt as a share of GDP is on the order of 230%, twice that of the US. Net debt, subtracting the Japanese government’s assets, is a more manageable, if still high, 130%. Unfortunately, many of those government assets, such as landholdings, are illiquid, so they are of little comfort to public debt managers.

None of this was a problem so long as interest rates – and therefore debt-service payments – were at or near zero. But if interest rates now rise to, say, 4%, debt service will begin to strain the government budget.



A Japanese flag flutters atop the Bank of Japan building in Tokyo. (Reuters)

The BoJ has kept rates low through a combination of bond buying and yield-curve control, whereby it targets specific maturities where the debt is concentrated. Now that inflation is back, this de facto subsidy is ending.

There are no easy solutions to Japan’s debt problem. Taxes as a share of GDP are above the OECD average. An elderly population complicates any effort to cut pension and healthcare costs. And Japan, like other countries, now faces geopolitical pressure to spend more on defence.

The only way out is to boost the debt ratio’s denominator: GDP. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi’s fiscal stimulus is designed to jumpstart growth. Subsidies for electricity bills, cash handouts to households with children, and payments to government-licensed bear hunters (you read that right) will stimulate demand.

The question is how to stimulate supply. More immigration would help. So would policies that raise female and elder labour-force participation, comprehensive reskilling for older workers, deregulation of the service sector, and tax incentives for technology upgrading by small and

medium-size enterprises. On the supply side, however, Japan is moving slowly, if at all.

So, the new government’s supplementary budget threatens to worsen the fiscal position instead of improving it. It may be premature to panic, but Mrs Watanabe, that mythical investor in Japanese government bonds, now appears fully awake to the risks.

Moreover, what happens in Japan doesn’t stay in Japan. It is transmitted to the US via two channels. First, if yields on Japanese government bonds go up, they will become more attractive relative to US Treasuries, putting upward pressure on US interest costs. Second, the more difficulty Japan has in managing its debt, the more investors will begin worrying about other heavily indebted countries.

Fortunately, the US has an easy way out. In the US, unlike Japan, taxes as a share of GDP are below the OECD average. Closing even half the gap between the US and advanced-economy averages would eliminate the primary budget deficit (excluding interest payments) and stabilise its debt ratio.

Of course, tax increases are for the US what supply-side reform is for Japan: a political third rail. President Donald Trump’s administration has futilely sought to address the deficit problem by cutting government spending. The result has been to cut muscle rather than fat, gutting government and university spending on research and public services essential for productivity growth. The legacy of Trump’s “Department of Government Efficiency” has been zero progress in curtailing the deficit.

Democrats are now focused, appropriately, on the affordability crisis caused by higher food, health-care, and housing costs. But they also need to worry about the mortgage costs that will follow from higher interest rates, and about the politically toxic inflation that will occur on what they hope will be their watch, after 2028.

A tax on billionaires won’t close the budget gap and fend off these dangers. What is needed is a broad-based but progressive increase in taxes, together with that fabled closing of loopholes such as carried interest.

Implementing this will require a very different Congress and a very different president. A crisis often is needed to trigger the kind of political realignment that can deliver both. A debt crisis, during which inflation and interest rates shoot up, would certainly qualify. The question is whether US politics can realign in the absence of one. – Project Syndicate

● *Barry Eichengreen, Professor of Economics and Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author, most recently, of the forthcoming Money Beyond Borders: Global Currencies From Croesus to Crypto (Princeton University Press, March 2026).*



# Can America secure the new race for scientific leadership?

By Nancy Qian  
Chicago

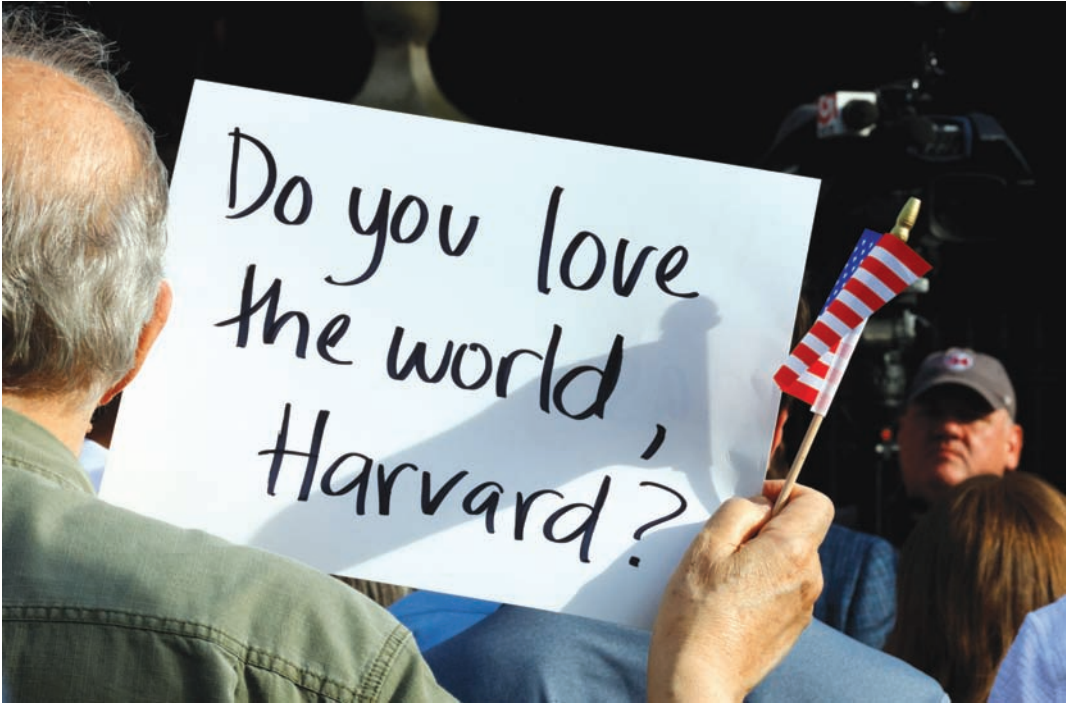
As geopolitical tensions rise, competition for the cutting-edge science and talent that underpins advanced technology has heated up. The United States, China, and other major powers now regard leadership in areas like AI, semiconductors, quantum technologies, and biotechnology as central to military capability, economic security, and ideological influence.

Little wonder, then, that governments are pouring money into strategic technologies, tightening export controls and investment screening, and subjecting international scientific collaboration to new security requirements. Research institutions are increasingly treated as frontline national-security assets. The logic of great-power rivalry is reshaping, and often constraining, cross-border academic relationships and the mobility of scientists.

Some have called the current tech race a new “cold war”, drawing parallels to the Cold War-era space race between the US and the Soviet Union, which began when the latter launched Sputnik in 1957. While there are indeed parallels, the irony is that the US is not following its successful Cold War strategy – China is.

To be sure, the US used export controls and alliance coordination during the Cold War to keep advanced weapons, nuclear materials, and dual-use technologies out of the Soviet bloc. But its overarching approach to science from the 1960s to the 1980s was forward-looking and proactive, rather than defensive.

The US government invested



A person holds a placard and a flag as members of the Harvard community take part in a “Harvard Stand United” rally to “support and celebrate” the school’s international students at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. - Reuters

heavily in basic scientific research, which policymakers believed was the key to outperforming the Soviet Union over the long term. That meant massively expanding support for university research through agencies like the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, creating new national laboratories, and establishing the Advanced Research Projects Agency (later renamed the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency) to back high-risk, high-reward projects in computing, materials science, and communications.

While the space race supercharged funding for physics,

engineering, and mathematics, programs such as the GI Bill (enacted during World War II to pay college tuition for US veterans) and increased federal student aid greatly boosted the supply of scientists and engineers.

The US also actively sought foreign talent during the Cold War. It paired generous research opportunities with relatively open – and often strategically targeted – immigration policies. America’s well-funded universities, national labs, and government agencies attracted scientists from all over the world. Some, such as those willing to leave communist regimes in Eastern Europe, were deliberately recruited and

sometimes given accelerated security clearances. Over time, student visas, Fulbright scholarships, and immigration preferences for highly skilled professionals broadened and routinised the inflow.

The message was clear: if you were a talented scientist, the best place to build your career and raise your family was the US. But this is no longer a given. The proactive Cold War strategy of increasing support for science and welcoming foreign talent contrasts sharply with the Trump administration’s efforts to slash federal spending and isolate the US from the global research community.

The second Trump administration’s move to reduce government research grants accelerates the slowdown in federal funding for basic science that began in the 1980s. Overall investment in research and development since the end of the Cold War has increasingly been funded by profit-seeking corporations. At the same time, recent visa crackdowns and anti-immigrant rhetoric have made the US feel less welcoming to many international students and foreign-born professionals, who account for roughly one-fifth of the country’s STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) workforce and more than 40% of PhD-level scientists and engineers. Slashing investment in basic science and discouraging foreign talent risks eroding the underpinnings of US scientific leadership.

Meanwhile, China is increasingly following a playbook similar to the one America used in the Cold War. Yes, the Chinese government has restricted the outflow of critical technology and data. But it has also significantly increased investment in basic science and implemented a host of measures to attract foreign researchers and overseas Chinese talent in key sectors such as AI, semiconductors, and biotechnology. Most notably, China recently introduced a new K visa targeted at young STEM and tech workers who want to study or do business in the country, marketing it as a rough equivalent to the H-1B visa in the US.

China’s boldness stands in stark opposition to America’s insecurity. Over the past decade, US policy has centred overwhelmingly on defending the country from China, Russia, and

other rivals through economic sanctions, export controls, and tighter immigration restrictions. But a far more effective long-term strategy would be to expand investment in scientific research, welcome foreign STEM talent, and strengthen efforts to retain it.

This approach is sound under any circumstances. If fears of a second Cold War prove accurate, then America’s best chance of success is to return to the strategy that helped it win the first one: advancing the scientific frontier at home. And if those fears turn out to be exaggerated, investments in basic research – especially in universities and non-profit institutions – will still yield technologies that benefit everyone.

The first Cold War made the case convincingly. Transformative breakthroughs such as the internet, personal computers, modern climate and weather monitoring systems, MRI machines, and radiation-based cancer therapies were all products of sustained scientific investment.

Trying to wall off the US is ultimately self-defeating when America’s competitors are actively recruiting the world’s brightest minds. The US can still lead in science, but only if it remains an open global hub, rather than withdrawing into a moated fortress. - Project Syndicate

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## Europe’s tech firms need regulation to grow

By Max von Thun  
Brussels

Europeans have long lamented the continent’s lack of globally competitive tech companies. But since Donald Trump’s return to the White House, the goal of ending Europe’s reliance on US-based tech giants has taken on new urgency. With US tech oligarchs interfering in European elections and the Trump administration seeking to sabotage European digital regulation, this dependency is no longer just an economic problem; it poses a grave threat to security, sovereignty, and democracy in Europe.

Europeans are well aware of this, but are of two views on how best to respond. One camp argues that, far from bowing to Trumpian pressure, the European Union should double down on efforts to regulate Big Tech, pursuing an even more ambitious approach that would break the tech giants’ market dominance and mitigate their products’ social harms.

The other camp calls for a massive increase in public and private investment in tech infrastructure, both to limit Europe’s vulnerability to foreign coercion and to strengthen its economic competitiveness. These positions are not as far apart as they might seem. Robust, well-designed, and vigorously enforced regulation could neutralise the advantages of incumbent tech firms, create breathing room for challengers, and entrench the shared standards and norms that underpin both democracy and open, decentralised markets.

At the same time, the existence of credible European social-media platforms, AI models, and cloud-computing capabilities would greatly strengthen EU competitiveness and sovereignty. Unfortunately, the complementary nature of these positions is rarely acknowledged. Instead, the “competitiveness first” camp tends either to dismiss regulation as a waste of time, noting that past efforts to rein in Big Tech have always fallen short, or to condemn it for supposedly thwarting Europe’s tech ambitions.

The latter view, on display at last month’s Digital Sovereignty Summit in Berlin, helps to explain why the European Commission is now rushing to water down landmark digital legislation, including the AI Act and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), through its so-called “Omnibus” package.

This push for deregulation is based on faulty logic. The tech gap with the US emerged several decades ago – long before the GDPR and the AI Act were a twinkle in Eurocrats’ eyes. While there is evidence that small businesses have struggled to comply with the GDPR, blaming it for the EU tech sector’s shortcomings requires a large leap of logic. Other flagship EU digital laws, such as the Digital Services Act and the AI Act, are too recent to judge their impact.

Europe’s failure to produce globally competitive tech firms should not be attributed to excessive regulation, but rather to weak enforcement. Despite having the authority to break up monopolies and block killer acquisitions, the European Commission has rarely used it, fearing that it would impede innovation or invite retaliation by the United States.

To be sure, where enforcement has created openings for new entrants, US firms have proven far better equipped to take advantage of them than their European counterparts have. But, as scholars like Anu Bradford have observed, this probably reflects factors like regulatory divergences among member states, shallow capital markets, punitive bankruptcy laws, a risk-averse culture, and difficulties attracting foreign talent.

EU officials’ failure to enforce legislation, especially competition law, has compounded the problem, by allowing Big Tech either to crush promising European startups (like the Portuguese app store Aptoido) or acquire them (as with Sweden’s iZettle, Estonia’s Skype, and Britain’s DeepMind).

One could thus argue that determined regulatory enforcement,



including robust control of mergers, is a prerequisite for Europe to develop a strong tech industry. Without it, efforts to build European alternatives will continue to be thwarted by Big Tech’s anti-competitive tactics, including its exploitation of market power to collect huge amounts of user data and close off a growing array of markets to smaller rivals.

Consider cloud services. Demand for sovereign cloud solutions is growing in the EU, and capable European providers exist. Yet Amazon, Google, and Microsoft remain as dominant as ever, thanks to a panoply of well-documented unfair practices, including unjustified interoperability restrictions, disproportionate data-transfer fees, and discriminatory pricing.

The European Commission is coming to recognise this: last month, it opened several investigations into Amazon and Microsoft’s cloud-market dominance under the Digital Markets Act. But this is only the first step toward reining these firms in, which will require Europe to stand firm in the face of stiff resistance from the Trump administration and the tech giants.

Meanwhile, the same giants are rapidly entrenching their dominance over the nascent AI market. As the former CEO of Aleph Alpha – a once-leading German AI firm that effectively gave up – observed last year, the “big players” are able to “use one monopoly to endlessly fund the fight for dominance in a new area.”

Rather than choosing between stronger tech regulation and increased incentives and support for the tech sector, Europe must embrace a coordinated approach that squeezes today’s US tech giants from both sides. Without credible local alternatives, regulators will struggle to govern tech monopolies that are “too big to care”. And without strong enforcement to break tech monopolies, cash thrown at European businesses and technologies is likely to end up wasted or, worse, in the vaults of the US giants. - Project Syndicate

• Max von Thun is Director of Europe and Transatlantic Partnerships at the Open Markets Institute.

## Why is Myanmar’s junta holding an election during a civil war?

Myanmar’s military-led administration will hold a multi-phased general election starting tomorrow, even as a civil war rages across large parts of the Southeast Asian country. The military ousted the elected government of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi in a February 2021 coup, just as it was preparing for its second term in office following a landslide election win months earlier.

The generals accused Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) party of electoral fraud, which she rejected. International election monitors reported no irregularities. Suu Kyi and much of the NLD were detained along with thousands of junta opponents.

Voting will be held in phases, on December 28 in 102 townships, and on January 11 in 100 townships, and January 25 in 63 townships, covering a total of 265 townships out of a total of 330.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing has acknowledged polls will not be nationwide. Dates for counting and results have not been publicised. The military-backed election commission has said its more than 50,000 electronic voting machines will speed up counting.

In line with an army-drafted 2008 constitution, 25% of upper and lower house seats are reserved for serving military personnel selected by the armed forces chief.

Only six parties are competing on a national level, with 51 contesting within a single region or state. Many parties that ran in the past two elections have been disbanded and anti-junta rebels have refused to take part.

That has left in the fray only junta-

approved parties, including the military’s proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party, which won the last election held by a junta in 2010. The USDP is fielding 1,018 candidates, a fifth of the total registered. The USDP, led by former generals, was routed by the NLD in landslides in 2015 and 2020 elections, the latter annulled after the coup.

According to the constitution, parliament must convene within 90 days of the start of the election. Speakers will be elected and at a later date, a president.

To choose a president, three electoral colleges are formed comprising members of the upper and lower houses, which each nominate one candidate for president. Two of the colleges are elected lawmakers while the third is exclusively comprised of military-appointed lawmakers.

A plenary vote of the bicameral legislature will be held and the candidate with most votes becomes president, with the runners up as vice presidents. A cabinet will then be appointed by the president.

The United Nations, many Western countries and human rights groups say the election is a sham exercise aimed at perpetrating military rule. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations bloc, of which Myanmar is a member, has called for a fair and inclusive election and may find it difficult to re-engage even after the polls.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing, however, has made a major diplomatic push this year to win support for the polls, including two trips each to key allies China and Russia, which are backing the election, as is India, according to state media. — Reuters



A resident takes part in early voting ahead of the start of Myanmar’s general election in Yangon yesterday. (AFP)





Snapshots from the 'Beyond Reality' show at Old Souq Al Wakrah. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

# 'Beyond Reality' draws winter crowds to Old Souq Al Wakrah



By Joey Aguilar  
Doha

The third edition of the International Circus show "Beyond Reality" at Old Souq Al Wakrah has become one of the standout attractions of Qatar's winter season, drawing large crowds with its blend of spectacle, family-friendly entertainment, and international talent.

Organised by the celebrations committee of the Private Engineering Office, the show brings together an array of world-class performances, ranging from animal acts to illusionists, offering audiences a lively and immersive entertainment experience.

Many of the performances are being staged in Qatar for the first time, adding to the appeal of the event and highlighting its reputation as a must-visit seasonal attraction.

Among the highlights are performances of different groups of animals, including dogs, tigers and leopards, which have captivated audiences during each of the seven scheduled shows.

These acts, combined with illusionists and other circus performers, delivered a varied programme designed to appeal to all age groups.

Set against the heritage backdrop of Old Souq Al Wakrah, the circus complements the souq's traditional architecture and sea-side atmosphere, creating a unique setting that enhances the overall experience.

Families, children and tourists gather in the evenings to enjoy the performances, while also exploring the souq's restaurants, cafés and waterfront promenade before and after the shows.

According to organisers, the strong public turnout reflects a combination of favourable timing and seasonal travel trends.

With schools on holiday and many parents and students enjoying their winter break, attendance has been boosted by residents looking for engaging activities for children.

In addition, it is learnt that Qatar has seen an influx of visitors from neighbouring GCC countries as well as from Europe and other regions, many of whom are spending their December holidays in the country.

The pleasant winter weather has also played a key role, encouraging people to explore outdoor attractions throughout the day and into the evening.

Old Souq Al Wakrah, with its open-air layout and coastal views, has remained popular during this period.



The show brings together an array of world-class performances.

