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16 January 2026

Published in
QATAR
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GULF TIMES



FRIDAY Vol. XXXXVI No. 13615

January 9, 2026
Rajab 20, 1447 AH

www.gulf-times.com 2 Riyals



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Yemen sacks defence minister amid claims STC head fled to UAE

Reuters
Aden

Yemen's presidential leadership council has dismissed Defence Minister Mohsen al-Daeri in the internationally recognised government, the state news agency Saba reported yesterday. The action followed Yemen's claim that the United Arab Emirates had spirited a separatist leader out of the country by boat in a dramatic twist as Yemeni forces advanced to the port of Aden.

The escape of Aidarous al-Zubaidi, head of a southern separatist group, could exacerbate tensions in the region.

The Saudi assertion that the UAE helped him escape raises the stakes in a crisis that erupted last month when the separatists swept through southern Yemen, including Aden, advancing within reach of the border with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh declared the move a threat to its national security.

The coalition said Zubaidi had left Yemen for Somaliland, before boarding an aircraft to Mogadishu that was later tracked to a military airport in Abu Dhabi. Somalia said it had launched an investigation to determine whether its airports were used to transport a "political fugitive", referring to Zubaidi.

The country's Immigration and Citizenship Agency said that if this proved to be true, it would constitute a "serious violation" of national sovereignty.

Zubaidi had failed to show up in Riyadh for crisis talks over turmoil in southern Yemen on Wednesday. Zubaidi's Southern Transitional Council (STC) said he had been asked to go under threat.

After Zubaidi's unexplained absence from the Riyadh talks, his group said he was overseeing military and security operations in Aden to prevent a security vacuum there.

Yesterday, a Reuters witness said the situation in Aden appeared stable with Yemeni government forces patrolling the streets, and no sign of STC forces. Authorities have imposed a nighttime curfew.



The officials of the collaborating organisations of the programme at the press conference yesterday.

PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam

Region's first Arabic-led PG diploma in career development launched

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

Qatar Career Development Center (QCDC) has launched the region's first Arabic-led Post-Graduate Diploma in Career Development, marking a new era in professional development and career guidance in Qatar. This specialised programme aims to prepare career guidance and career development practitioners through a practice-based approach in Qatar's context.

The programme, a collaboration among QCDC, Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE), Community College Qatar (CCQ) and EduCluster Finland, will start next week with the first cohort of about 25 participants and lasts for 12 months.

The announcement was made at a press conference yesterday with representatives from the collaborating entities at the Student Centre of Education City.

"This diploma represents a national investment in the quality of career guidance, delivered in Arabic for the first time in Qatar and the region, and grounded in global, evidence-based best practice," said Saad Abdulla al-Kharji, executive director of QCDC. "It raises professional

standards and strengthens practitioners' ability to empower students and jobseekers to make more informed, confident decisions. Career guidance is a specialist discipline that directly affects education outcomes, workforce readiness, and individual life decisions."

He highlighted that the programme has three pathways and applicants can choose according to their interest. The first pathway is for schools from K-12 grade, the second pathway is for higher education and training, while the third is for professionals and workplace settings.

Those who have completed a graduate degree are eligible to apply for the programme run by Community College of Qatar.

Dr Hareb Mohammed al-Jabri, assistant undersecretary for higher education at MoEHE, said: "This diploma sits at the heart of one of the Ministry's strategic priorities under the Third National Development Strategy, aligning education outcomes with labour market needs." He added that achieving this goal "requires highly capable career guidance practitioners with a comprehensive understanding of both the education ecosystem and the labour market, so students are guided toward pathways that match

their abilities and talents."

The programme aims to build a sustainable national pipeline of specialised practitioners and strengthen the quality, consistency, and measurable impact of career development services across education and workplace settings. Arabic-led delivery positions the diploma as a region-first milestone, designed around Qatar's professional realities while remaining aligned with internationally informed standards.

Dr Khalid Mohamed al-Horr, president of CCQ, said the diploma launch "reflects CCQ's commitment to offering high-quality, practice-based academic programmes that develop specialised cadres to support individuals in planning their career pathways and strengthen the alignment between education outcomes and labour market needs." The diploma carries 30 credits and includes approximately 1,500 total learning hours across theory, applied training, individual and group learning activities, and field-based practice. Dr David Marsh, co-ordination lead of the Academic Advisory Council at EduCluster Finland, added the diploma reflects "what can be achieved when partners unite their efforts and strengths".

Qatar's 'migration governance offers lessons for Eastern Mediterranean'

Greek foundation head hails Doha's diversity strength

By Peter Alagos
Business Editor

Qatar's approach to managing diverse populations and promoting resilience in the face of challenges offers important insights for the Eastern Mediterranean region, a top official from a Greece-based foundation and think tank has said.

Citing one of the central themes discussed by the Georgios M Mihalos Foundation and the Nisyros Dialogues – Bridging the East Med during the Doha Forum, its founder and president, Panagiotis G Mihalos, emphasised that Qatar's experience demonstrates that "diversity, when managed strategically, can be a strength rather than a vulnerability".

"Hosting people from dozens of nationalities requires strong governance, adaptability, and continuous reform – qualities Qatar has shown in practice," Mihalos told *Gulf Times* in an exclusive interview.

Mihalos explained: "The Doha

Forum's emphasis on delivery – captured clearly in its 2025 theme, 'Justice in Action: Beyond Promises to Progress' – helped frame migration not as theory, but as governance in action. This theme could not have been timelier. It captures the global fatigue with declarations that remain unimplemented, and it challenges policymakers to translate values into outcomes.

"For us, this theme resonated deeply. Migration, mediation, and regional cooperation all suffer when justice is spoken of abstractly rather than operationalised. Doha provided a space where justice was discussed not as rhetoric, but as policy, responsibility, and measurable progress; a mindset we seek to carry forward within the Nisyros Dialogues."

Mihalos lamented that migration in the Eastern Mediterranean "is often politicised". He lauded Qatar, noting that the country's model suggests the importance of structured inclusion, clear legal frameworks, and economic participation. "Migration cannot be addressed solely at borders; it must be managed through labour policy, urban planning, and social integration," he explained.

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Panagiotis G Mihalos, founder and president of the Georgios M Mihalos Foundation, and Maha al-Kuwaiti, general manager, Doha Forum, signing an MoU for a collaboration initiative between both parties on activities related to the Doha Forum 2026.

Inside Qatar's evolving rug business

By Shaima Sheriff
Staff Reporter

The 26-year journey of rug trader Riyaz Bhat in Doha illustrates how Qatar's niche craftsmanship market has changed in response to changes in the global economy, policy reforms, and shifting consumer behaviour in the luxury and heritage sectors.

Qatar's traditional craftsmanship market has subtly repositioned itself in an era characterised by rapid industrialisation, geopolitical unpredictability, and changing consumer priorities. Despite its small size, the rugs and handicrafts industry has responded to global pressures by balancing business sustainability with heritage.

For Riyaz Bhat, popularly referred to as 'The Rugman of Qatar', these shifts are lived realities rather than theoretical trends. Bhat, who is originally from Kashmir, founded his rug company in Doha in 2000, just as speciality art and craft retail was just getting started.

"The market was very limited



Riyaz Bhat, the 'Rugman of Qatar'.

"when I started," he remembers. There was very little competition, fewer businesses, and fewer buyers. The population, awareness, and expectations have all changed in the modern era. Both local development and worldwide advancements have influenced that change. Mass production, economic instability, and political unrest in important producing regions like Iran, Afghanistan, India, and Central Asia have presented increasing challenges for traditional rug-making communities worldwide. According to Bhat, "handmade

rugs are luxury items". People stop purchasing luxury goods first when there is political or economic instability. That has an immediate impact on the artisan as well as the seller. The industry has also been affected by tariffs and international trade barriers. In major international markets like the United States and Europe, which have historically been among the biggest consumers of handmade rugs, rising costs across supply chains have reduced margins and slowed purchasing cycles. To Page 3

Recognition of a model that raises it to the next level

By Kamran Rehmat
Doha

Last week's announcement naming Doha the GCC Tourism Capital for 2026 wasn't a surprise, it was inevitable. Qatar has been doing something far more impressive than being a show pony: building a tourism economy that actually works. This isn't a participation trophy. It's hard-won recognition that Doha has cracked the code on sustainable, profitable, visitor-focused tourism infrastructure.

The numbers don't lie. Over 2.6mn international visitors arrived in the first half of 2025 alone, which is a 3% year-on-year increase, with 36% from fellow GCC nations. The full-year figure hit a record 5.1mn, following a 25% surge in 2024. This isn't luck; it's the dividend of strategic



investment finally maturing.

Hamad International Airport, a perennial global top-five performer, connects Doha to over 170 destinations. Qatar Airways provides long-haul quality that is itself a destination draw. Within the

city, the clean, affordable, punctual metro system liberates tourists from taxi dependency, transforming Doha from transit hub into exploratory destination.

This seamless connectivity isn't window dressing; it's the foundation of tourism ecosystem that generated QR55bn (approximately \$15.1bn) in GDP contribution in 2024, accounting for 8% of the national economy. With targets to push this to 10-12% of GDP by 2030, the Tourism Capital momentum couldn't arrive at a better moment.

Here's where the designation transitions from prestige to powerful economic catalyst. Tourism is the quintessential diversification 2030 demands: a sustainable, high-value sector creating quality employment across hospitality, retail, technology, and creative industries. To Page 3

**MoL official meets head of IOM mission**

HE the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Labour (MoL) Sheikha Najwa bint Abdulrahman al-Thani has met with the Chief of Mission of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Firas Adel al-Budeiri. Discussions during the meeting dealt with aspects of joint co-operation between Qatar and the United Nations, and ways to support and develop it in the coming period. (QNA)

Qatar uses New Delhi book fair to deepen cultural exchange: envoy

QNA
New Delhi

Ambassador of Qatar to India Mohammed bin Hassan al-Jaber has hailed Doha's engagement as guest of honour at this year's New Delhi World Book Fair as a move aimed at strengthening cultural dialogue and knowledge exchange between the Arab world and India.

Addressing a press conference yesterday ahead of the fair's opening, al-Jaber said the participation, led by Qatar's Ministry of Culture, highlights the importance of deepening intellectual and cultural co-operation between two ancient civilisations with long traditions of scholarship and learning.

The book fair will run from January 10-18 and is expected to attract publishers and cultural institutions from more than 35 countries. Al-Jaber said Qatar's involvement reflects its commitment to building bridges between cultures, promoting openness and expanding co-operation in publishing, translation and knowledge production. He added that such engagement helps foster mutual understanding and reinforces the role of culture and reading in connecting societies.

The press conference was attended by a delegation from Qatar's Ministry of Culture including Jassim Ahmed al-Buainain, director of the Doha Interna-



tional Book Fair. The delegation outlined the main features of the exhibition, its accompanying cultural and intellectual programmes, and the role of international participation in supporting the publishing industry and cultural exchange.

Al-Buainain said Qatar's selection as guest of honour underlines its desire to maintain a strong presence at major international cultural events. He noted that Qatar's programme will include participation in panel discussions, translation and publishing rights conferences, and showcases of Qatari publishing houses.

He also highlighted the presentation of books translated into

Hindi, as well as performances by Qatari folk groups and a broader cultural program designed to reflect the diversity and richness of Qatar's cultural scene. For his part, Director of India's National Book Trust, Yuvraj Malik, has embraced Qatar's engagement as a demonstration of the depth of cultural relations between the two countries and a contributor to strengthening dialogue between India and the Arab world.

He said this year's fair features more than 1,000 publishers and over 3,000 exhibition stands, alongside more than 600 cultural and intellectual events, including seminars, panel discussions and programs for children and young people.

**QNL hosts National Library of Nigeria delegation for knowledge exchange**

QNA
Doha

Qatar National Library (QNL) hosted a senior delegation from the National Library of Nigeria for a three-day knowledge exchange, reinforcing QNL's role as a regional hub for innovation and international collaboration. The visit, held 6-8 January 2026, brought together library professionals to share expertise and explore collaborative approaches to modern library services, digital transformation, and cultural heritage preservation.

The Nigerian delegation toured QNL's facilities, including the Preservation and Conservation Center, where both institutions exchanged insights on heritage conservation techniques. Sessions also covered digital reposi-

tories, e-resources, smart library systems and automation as well as innovation in children's services and community engagement.

Executive Director of Qatar National Library Tan Huisman said: "Hosting the National Library of Nigeria reflects our commitment to international knowledge sharing and institutional learning."

"These exchanges allow us to share experiences and strengthen our capacity to serve our communities. We look forward to continued collaboration as we address the evolving needs of modern national libraries," she added.

In turn, Chief Executive Officer of National Library of Nigeria, Prof Anunobi Chinwe Veronica, said: "Visiting Qatar National Library has been a truly inspiring experience. This is a world-class institution, exceptional in its design, innovation, and the breadth

of its programmes and services.

From the Heritage Library to the Children's Library and the advanced circulation and book-handling technologies, every aspect reflects a deep commitment to excellence and knowledge sharing. What stood out most was not only the remarkable architecture and natural lighting, but also the openness and professionalism of the leadership and staff. We greatly value this experience and look forward to exploring future collaboration, as knowledge that creates impact should always be shared."

The event builds on QNL's ongoing efforts to foster a global community among libraries and cultural institutions, reinforcing the importance of international collaboration in advancing library services and cultural preservation.

Minister meets special representative of African Union for Mali, Sahel region

HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz al-Khulaifi, met yesterday with Special Representative of the African Union Commission for Mali and the Sahel region and Head of the African Union Mission in Mali and the Sahel, Maramadou Tangara, who is visiting the country. During the meeting, they discussed developments in the African Sahel region, in addition to initiatives to support stability and strengthen regional and international efforts aimed at achieving security and development in the Sahel countries.

■ HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi, also met, through video conferencing, with Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations of the United Nations Jean-Pierre Lacroix. The meeting discussed efforts to achieve peace and stability in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as the workings of the ceasefire oversight and verification mechanism that the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Congo River Alliance (March 23 Movement) agreed to establish in October, with facilitation from Qatar. HE the Minister of State reiterated Qatar's belief in the importance of dialogue as a means to resolve conflicts and its keenness to support peaceful efforts aimed at ending the conflict in eastern Congo. For his part, the UN under-secretary-general praised the efforts made by Qatar with its partners to facilitate dialogue between the conflicting parties in the region. (QNA)

Plastic surgeon, medical centre director held for illegal practice

QNA
Doha

HE the Attorney-General Dr Issa Saad al-Jafali al-Nuaimi ordered the arrest of a plastic and cosmetic surgeon and the director of a medical centre, and their referral to the competent criminal court to face charges related to the offences attributed to them.

The Public Prosecution had launched investigations into a case involving the illegal practice of the medical profession without a licence. The first defendant was apprehended by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) at the Ministry of Interior (MoI) for practising medicine at a pri-



vate medical centre despite having been suspended from practising the profession by the competent department at the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), pursuant to a decision issued by the Public

Prosecution in the interest of the investigation.

This followed the prosecution's review of several complaints filed against him over medical errors allegedly committed. The second defendant, who serves as the medical director responsible for managing the centre where the first defendant was working, was also arrested for allowing him to practice medicine at the medical centre despite being fully aware of the suspension.

HE the attorney-general ordered that both defendants be remanded in custody and referred to the competent criminal court to be tried and punished in accordance with the provisions of the Law Regulating the Practice of the Medical Profession.

QatarDebate announces launch of final rounds of Arabic school debating contest

QNA
Doha

QatarDebate Center (QDC), established by Qatar Foundation (QF), announced the launch of the final rounds of the 7th edition of the International Arabic School Debating Championship, one of the key global initiatives aimed at establishing a culture of dialogue and enhancing the presence of the Arabic language in international forums.

In a statement, QatarDebate indicated that the first final competitions will begin today and continue until Jan 11 in Doha, with the participation of 16 teams that qualified for the decisive stages after intensive competitions witnessed in the preliminary qualifiers that began in May 2025, with the participation of 35 teams representing 35 countries.

This year's championship is being held according to an integrated competitive system that combines in-person attendance and remote monitoring, allowing for the widest range of interaction and diversity.

The competitions will witness the participation of 12 teams in the open category, in addition to 4 teams from the Arabic language category for non-native speakers, in a model that reflects the global character of the tournament and

the cultural and linguistic openness that distinguishes it, and confirms its message in promoting dialogue and understanding among young people from different countries of the world.

The 7th edition of the competition adopts a precise competitive system, according to which the open category teams are divided into two groups, each of which competes through five qualifying rounds, so that two teams from each group qualify for the semi-final round, in preparation for the final round during which the winning team is crowned champion.

The final rounds are characterised by the broad and diverse participation of school students from different countries around the world, during which they compete to present the best arguments and analyse current and contemporary issues, in an atmosphere of constructive dialogue based on respect for differences and acceptance of multiple viewpoints, while adhering to the standards of critical and logical thinking.

The tournament is judged by 24 international and local judges, carefully selected from over 100 candidates, according to a rigorous evaluation process, along with QatarDebate Center trainers, ambassadors, and members of the Elite Academy, ensuring the highest levels of integrity and transparency in judging, and enhancing the

tournament's credibility and professional excellence.

In this context, Program Specialist at the QatarDebate Center Turki al-Suwaidi said that the final rounds highlight the pivotal role of debates in building the student's character and enhancing thinking, analytical and responsible dialogue skills.

He expressed his happiness with this great cultural diversity that comes together on one platform whose discussions are conducted in Arabic, which contributes to preparing a generation that is aware and capable of dialogue and shaping the future.

The International Arabic School Debating Championship is a leading global platform that contributes to developing critical thinking and effective communication skills among young people, and promotes a spirit of fair competition, in addition to its role in spreading the Arabic language and enhancing its global standing among Arabic and non-Arabic speakers.

QatarDebate urged the public and those interested to follow the course of the championship and the closing ceremony through its official accounts on social media platforms, stressing that the tournament represents an inspiring dialogue space to build a generation capable of responsible thinking and facing the challenges of the future.



QF deepens sustainability ties with national partners

Qatar Foundation (QF) is strengthening its collaboration with key national stakeholders to further embed sustainability across Qatar's development plans, with ministries and national institutions joining forces to advance policies, projects, and community initiatives aligning with Qatar National Vision 2030.

At a high-level reception at Al Khater House in Education City marking the 1st anniversary of the partnership between the QF's Earthna Centre for a Sustainable Future and The King's Foundation, attended by QF Vice-Chairperson HE Sheikha Hind bint Hamad al-Thani and senior officials from key ministries, leaders from the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC), Ministry of Social Development and Family, and Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD) reaffirmed their shared vision for sustainable development.

The gathering underscored a collective commitment to collaborating with the QF across priorities including biodiversity, urban resilience, education, heritage preservation, and climate adaptation.

Among the attendees was HE the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Dr Abdullah bin Abdulaziz bin Turki al-Subaie, who highlighted the ministry's longstanding support for the QF.

"The ministry values Earthna and Qatar Foundation as key partners in advancing sustainability policy and knowledge," HE Dr al-Subaie said. "Together we have collaborated on initiatives such as the Earthna Summit and Qatar Sustainability Week, while jointly representing Qatar at major glo-



HE Sheikha Hind with HE Dr al-Subaie and other dignitaries at the event.

bal platforms, including COPs and international environmental forums."

"We are especially proud to see our joint mangrove restoration efforts as mangroves are both a vital symbol of Qatar's biodiversity and a cornerstone of our heritage," the minister continued. "This collaboration reflects our shared commitment to embedding traditional knowledge into modern sustainability practices, and we look forward to continuing to build on this partnership to strengthen Qatar's resilience and leadership in the green and blue economy."

Also in attendance was HE the Minister of Social Development and Family Buthaina bint Ali al-Jabri al-Nuaimi, who highlighted Qatar's priority of building resilient, sustainable urban environments aligned with Qatar National Vision 2030.

"As our region faces rapid population growth and complex challenges related to infrastructure, housing, climate change, and environmental sustainability, we recognise the importance of long-term planning, innovation, and collaboration across governments, the private sector, and civil society," she stated.

"We are proud to partner with Qatar Foundation and to see sustainability, traditional knowledge, and heritage reflected in initiatives such as Earthna's work, Herfah's revival of crafts, and the symbolic preservation of Al Khater House," HE al-Nuaimi added.

"These efforts – alongside our close collaboration with QF's Doha International Family Institute and QF's Pre-University Education division – and our engagement in global platforms, reaffirm Qatar's commitment to building inclusive,

resilient, and future-ready cities for generations to come," she said.

QFFD director-general HE Fahad al-Sulaiti reiterated the QFFD's potential commitment to advancing sustainability programs in partnership with Earthna and Qatar Foundation.

"The Qatar Fund for Development is proud to deepen its collaboration with Qatar Foundation and Earthna, working closely to advance sustainability programmes that address climate and resilience," he said.

"The four pilot projects that have resulted through the partnership with The King's Foundation represent an exciting new model for sustainable investment that is locally relevant, contextual, and impactful, and we are eager to continue exploring ways to be an active partner in these initiatives," HE al-Sulaiti added.

Recognition of a model that lifts it to next level

From Page 1



The prestigious awards honour the best in the region's hospitality industry, with both hotels redefining luxury at Katara Towers in Lusail.

The year-long programme of cultural and entertainment events generates sustained demand rather than seasonal volatility.

The Tourism Capital title provides extraordinary marketing leverage.

International attention translates directly into visitor numbers, which translates into economic growth across multiple sectors simultaneously.

What distinguishes Doha is its refusal to pursue superficial attractions.

The Museum of Islamic Art and National Museum of Qatar are world-class institutions, not vanity projects.

The calendar runs year-round: from the Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix to Art Basel's 2026 debut, ensuring consistent visitor appeal.

This isn't a theme park approach.

Perhaps most strategically, Doha's selection signals accelerated regional tourism integration.

The GCC Tourism Capital initiative is designed to lift the country's reputation as a world class host to the next level.

Qatar's proven capacity through the Hayya platform, which was initially developed for World Cup visitor management, provides a ready model for a potential unified Gulf visa system.

This could unlock enormous potential for multi-destination travel packages, making the entire region more accessible and globally competitive.

Imagine seamless travel from Muscat to Doha to Dubai to Riyadh on a single visa.

That's not fantasy – it's the logical next step, and Qatar's 2026 spotlight accelerates progress.

The infrastructure is world-class. The connectivity is unrivalled. The cultural offerings have genuine depth. The economic framework supports sustainable growth.

In 2026, Doha isn't merely hosting a title; it's showcasing a blueprint for how Gulf tourism can thrive whilst respecting cultural identity and environmental responsibility.

The Tourism Capital designation is the spark igniting the next growth phase: driving visitor numbers, solidifying economic diversification, and cementing Qatar's position as the Gulf's most complete destination.

Qatar's 'migration governance offers lessons for Eastern Mediterranean'

From Page 1

Asked what lessons from Qatar's labour and migration policies could be applied to the Eastern Mediterranean context, Mihalos said one key lesson is the willingness to evolve policies through dialogue with international organisations, employers, and civil society.

"Qatar has shown that reform is not a sign of weakness, but of confidence," he pointed out. "In the Eastern Mediterranean, this approach could help build trust among states and communities, particularly by linking migration to legal employment pathways, skills development, and regional economic needs

rather than irregular flows alone."

According to Mihalos, he believes Qatar can act as a model for economic inclusion and resilience in the face of migration challenges, particularly in demonstrating how migration can support national development while maintaining social stability.

"Qatar's resilience during regional and global crises, including the period of total embargo imposed by its neighbours, showed remarkable strategic maturity," he said. "The calm, principled posture Qatar adopted during that period mirrors the values promoted by the Doha Forum: restraint, dialogue, and confidence in diplomacy over escalation."

"The decision to take the high road,

avoid escalation, and invest in self-reliance and diplomacy is a powerful example and university test case for regions facing complex pressures, including the Eastern Mediterranean," Mihalos emphasised.

He added that he sees Doha as a catalyst for intercultural dialogue and joint research.

The official lauded Qatar's think tank culture, expressing optimism for creating new opportunities for new collaborations in 2026.

"Qatar brought depth, seriousness, and openness," Mihalos stressed. "The intellectual environment here encourages long-term thinking rather than short-term reactions. What Qatar has achieved is

the cultivation of intellectual credibility."

He praised the Doha Forum, emphasising its central role in "exporting this culture" and "setting a global benchmark for how ideas are debated with rigour, respect, and relevance".

"For us, it reaffirmed that dialogue is most effective when it is rooted in culture, history, and mutual respect, not just policy papers," Mihalos continued. "This environment elevated the Nisyros Dialogues. Being embedded in a forum of such stature sharpened our own approach, encouraging more honesty, more pragmatism, and more ambition in how we frame dialogue between the Eastern Mediterranean, Europe, and the Middle East."

He emphasised the complementarity between Qatari think tanks and the Mihalos Foundation, both combining global reach with regional significance.

The official also outlined opportunities for joint projects, including the "East Med-Gulf Dialogue Tracks", youth diplomacy programmes, and mediation simulations.

He proposed a series on "Dialogue of Civilisations in Practice", showcasing real case studies of cultural understanding in mediation.

Mihalos also sees strong potential for co-hosted dialogues on energy security, climate change, water shortage, and migration, among others.

Ooredoo, Al Abdulghani Motors sign sponsorship agreement for Doha Marathon by Ooredoo

Ooredoo has signed a strategic agreement with Al Abdulghani Motors, which will be the Exclusive Mobility Partner of the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo, for three years.

The agreement was signed by Doha Marathon by Ooredoo Committee vice-chairman Sabah Rabiah al-Kuwaiti and Al Abdulghani Motors chief operating officer Abdo Sweidan.

Under the partnership, Al Abdulghani Motors will provide two raffle draw vehicles during the marathon.

The company will also play a key role in supporting the event's mobility operations by providing the necessary workforce to ensure smooth and efficient operations throughout the event.

In addition, Toyota, through Al Abdulghani Motors, will supply a comprehensive fleet of vehicles, including sedans, SUVs, and buses, to ensure seamless

transportation for participants and organisers, contributing to the successful delivery of the event at the highest organisational standards.

A Toyota bZ4X, Toyota's fully electric SUV, will lead the race, while the Lexus UX 300h will be displayed at the event venue.

"Alongside seamless mobility solutions, the partnership also introduces raffle prizes for participants, while maintaining a strong focus on sustainability, safety, and community impact," al-Kuwaiti said.

"This agreement reflects our shared commitment to supporting national sporting events, promoting healthier and more active lifestyles, and contributing to initiatives that enhance community well-being," Sweidan said. "Through our role as Exclusive Mobility Partner, we look forward to supporting a safe, seamless, and inspiring experience for all participants."



Inside Qatar's evolving rug business

From Page 1

"We buy less stock when global markets slow down," he said.

And the weavers suffer when we make fewer purchases. It's a domino effect.

Doha has remained relatively resilient in the face of these pressures.

The demand for fine craftsmanship has been sustained by Qatar's economic stability and government-led cultural investment. Imports of visual arts and crafts products increased steadily between 2013 and 2018, according to data from Qatar's Planning and Statistics Authority, indicating ongoing consumer interest even in uncertain times.

Rugs have a unique commercial position in Qatar; they have their roots in local customs and are seen as long-term investments rather than just ornamental pieces.

According to Bhat, "rugs are a part of the home in the Middle East".

"They are not replaced; they are passed down," he said.

However, the market itself has changed.

Today's consumers are pickier, frequently deciding between the affordability of machine-made goods and the authenticity of handmade goods.

Due to pressure from the global economy, many consumers are choosing less expensive options, which has increased competition for established businesses.

"Every industry, including ours, has been overtaken by machines," Bhat said. "People choose something cheaper, even if it has less value, when they are concerned about savings or job security."

As a result, the craftsmanship market has become more niche but also more defined.

Nowadays, buyers in Doha can be divided into two distinct groups: design-conscious buyers looking for statement pieces and culturally motivated collectors appreciating craftsmanship, provenance, and heritage.

Business operations have changed as a result of this change.

These days, education and storytelling play a major role in sales.

According to Bhat, "you cannot sell a handmade rug without explaining its value".

"People want to know who made it, where it comes from, and why it costs what it does," he said.

This change has been greatly aided by Qatar's cultural ecosystem.

The public's knowledge of traditional arts has increased thanks to museums, exhibitions,

and heritage initiatives, which has indirectly boosted consumer confidence. Improved commercial frameworks and simpler business registration regulations have also encouraged traders and artisans to set up shop in the nation.

"There is much more support now," Bhat said. "Opening a business today is far easier than it was 25 years ago."

Yet challenges remain.

Global instability continues to affect sourcing, pricing and consumer sentiment.

Handmade rugs, which require months or years to produce, remain vulnerable to sudden market downturns.

Still, Bhat remains optimistic.

"As long as there are people who understand value, this industry will survive," he said.

As Qatar continues to diversify its economy, the rugs and handicrafts sector offers a compelling example of how heritage-driven businesses can adapt to modern market realities.

Though modest in size, the sector contributes to cultural preservation, cross-border employment and a more diversified retail landscape.

In a fast-moving global economy, Qatar's craftsmanship market stands as proof that tradition, when aligned with strategy, can remain commercially relevant.

20 falconers for Al Tala'a semi-finals at Marmi 2026

The qualifying stage of "Al Tala'a" Championship, which forms part of the 17th edition of the Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2026), concluded yesterday following the completion of the postponed group competitions.

These competitions – groups 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, and 20 – were held, and three falconers qualified from these groups: Khalid Omair al-Nuaimi, the Barzan Team, and Shaheen Salem al-Dosari.

Committee chairman Mohamed bin Mubarak al-Ali, official spokesperson for the Marmi Festival, announced that the qualifiers resulted in 20 falconers advancing to Al Tala'a Championship semi-finals.

They will be divided into four groups to compete on January 11, with the final and the determination of the top positions scheduled for January 12.

Al-Ali lauded the high level of competition in the championship, noting that it produced strong hunting falcons, which means the upcoming stages will witness even greater rivalry and challenge on the road to the final.

He stressed that Al Tala'a Championship is one of the festival's most important competitions, as it represents traditional falconry hunting, allowing for actual hunting practice and reinforcing this authentic heritage that organisers are keen to preserve.

Several qualified and participating falconers affirmed that the

festivals has become a fixed annual destination for practising hunting and falconry, satisfying their passion for this traditional sport tied to the heritage of their fathers and grandfathers.

Barzan Team member Mehdi al-Anzi said he was delighted that the team has qualified seven falcons so far in Al Tala'a's Championship, describing the achievement as a reflection of the team's readiness and strong preparation.

Al-Shaqab Team member Mohammed Talib Hleil said the team delivered a strong performance, participating this year with six falcons, and expressed hopes of returning to the podium after previous successes in the championship.

Al-Hussain Team member Ab-

dullah Ahmed al-Ali al-Maadhid said participation in Marmi carries special significance beyond winning, praising the festival's role in supporting falconers and preserving heritage.

Shaheen Salem al-Dosari expressed his happiness at qualifying with more than one falcon, strengthening his ambition to reach the podium this year.

In the evening, competitions of the seventh group in the Hadd Al Tahabi Championship were held, resulting in the qualification of one falconer, Mubarak Abdulla al-Maadhid.

Hadd Al Tahabi Committee chairman Shawi al-Kaabi said the championship remains one of the strongest and most competitive, with 13 falconers qualifying so far.

Qatar's 'migration governance offers lessons for Eastern Mediterranean'

From Page 1

Asked what lessons from Qatar's labour and migration policies could be applied to the Eastern Mediterranean context, Mihalos said one key lesson is the willingness to evolve policies through dialogue with international organisations, employers, and civil society.

"Qatar has shown that reform is not a sign of weakness, but of confidence," he pointed out. "In the Eastern Mediterranean, this approach could help build trust among states and communities, particularly by linking migration to legal employment pathways, skills development, and regional economic needs

rather than irregular flows alone."

According to Mihalos, he believes Qatar can act as a model for economic inclusion and resilience in the face of migration challenges, particularly in demonstrating how migration can support national development while maintaining social stability.

"Qatar's resilience during regional and global crises, including the period of total embargo imposed by its neighbours, showed remarkable strategic maturity," he said. "The calm, principled posture Qatar adopted during that period mirrors the values promoted by the Doha Forum: restraint, dialogue, and confidence in diplomacy over escalation."

Clashes after ICE agent kills woman

AFP/Reuters
Minneapolis

Protesters clashed with law enforcement officers in Minneapolis yesterday after the fatal shooting of a woman by an immigration agent triggered outrage fuelled by the Trump administration's insistence that she was guilty of "domestic terrorism".

Federal officers armed with pepperball guns and tear gas jostled with a large crowd of protesters beside a government facility in Fort Snelling just outside Minneapolis, an AFP photographer saw.

The noisy crowd chanted slogans attacking the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency as officers pushed against protesters, detaining several including one who struck an agent with a cardboard sign.

The victim of Wednesday's shooting, identified as 37-year-old Renee Nicole Good, was hit at point-blank range as she apparently tried to drive away from agents who were crowding around her car, which they said was blocking their way.

Footage of the incident shows a masked ICE agent attempt to open the woman's car door before another masked agent fired three times into the Honda SUV.

The vehicle then hurtled out of control and smashed into stationary vehicles, as horrified onlook-



Protesters clash with federal agents outside the Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building in Saint Paul, Minnesota. -AFP

ers hurled abuse at the officers. Her bloodied body is then seen slumped in the crashed vehicle.

President Donald Trump and senior officials quickly claimed that Good was trying to kill the agents.

"I want to see nobody get shot. I want to see nobody screaming and trying to run over policemen either," Trump said in an interview with *The New York Times*.

He earlier said that the shooting was self-defence.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) chief Kristi Noem called the incident "domestic terrorism".

Minneapolis police chief Brian O'Hara told CNN that Good was not the target of immigration en-

forcement action and that she was only suspected of blocking traffic.

Vice-President J D Vance described the victim on social media as "a deranged leftist".

Protests grew after Minnesota's Democratic Governor Tim Walz called it a "patriotic duty" to demonstrate for justice.

"But it needs to be done safely," Walz said.

He said he had put the state's National Guard on alert.

Minneapolis public schools were closed yesterday and today as a precautionary measure.

With classes cancelled, 17-year-old Addie Flewelling attended the Minneapolis protest yesterday to condemn the shooting and show her opposition to

the immigration crackdown, including a raid at her high school earlier this week.

"Students were chased off of their place of education," she said. "This is not OK. I'm scared to go to school."

ICE federal agents have been at the forefront of the Trump administration's immigrant deportation drive, despite the objections of some state officials.

The DHS launched a recruitment campaign last summer to add 10,000 additional ICE agents to the existing 6,000-strong contingent.

That sparked criticism that new officers in the field were insufficiently trained.

Wednesday's incident came during protest action against immigration enforcement in the southern part of Minneapolis.

Witness Brandon Hewitt said he heard three shots.

"I got a bunch of video of them carrying the body to the ambulance," he told MS NOW.

Another witness interviewed by local station FOX9 described a grisly scene, saying "the surviving passenger got out of the car covered in blood".

He recounted seeing a man who identified himself as a doctor attempting to reach Good but being refused access by officers.

There have been widespread protests against immigration operations of the Trump administration, which has vowed to ar-

rest and deport what it says are "millions" of undocumented migrants.

Good was a mother and a poet who studied creative writing at Old Dominion University (ODU) in Norfolk, Virginia, US media reported.

She had a 15-year-old daughter and two sons aged 12 and 6, according to the *Washington Post*.

Good graduated in 2020 with a degree in English, the school's president, Brian Hemphill, confirmed in a statement.

"This is yet another clear example that fear and violence have sadly become commonplace in our nation," Hemphill said. "May Renee's life be a reminder of what unites us: freedom, love, and peace."

While at ODU, she won an undergraduate poetry prize, according to a 2020 Facebook post by the school's English department, which described her as hailing from Colorado Springs, Colorado.

US authorities said up to 2,000 officers were in Minneapolis for immigration sweeps.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Minnesota state officials are both investigating the shooting.

An officer shot dead an undocumented immigrant in Chicago in September after authorities alleged the man tried to resist detention by driving his car into the official.

Two die in shooting in church parking lot

Reuters
Salt Lake City

Two people were killed and several injured in a shooting during an altercation outside a funeral at a church in the Utah capital of Salt Lake City, police said on Wednesday, as they launched a manhunt for suspects.

The latest mass shooting in the United States follows more than 400 last year, according to a tally by the Gun Violence Archive of incidents involving "a minimum of four victims shot, either injured or killed" excluding shooters killed or injured.

The situation was still fluid after Wednesday's initial report of the incident in the parking lot outside a chapel of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a police spokesperson said.

"Out in the parking lot, there was some sort of altercation and that's when shots were fired," Glen Mills told reporters, adding that a funeral service was being held in the church at the time.

Among at least eight adult victims, two died of their injuries, the police said, while three of the survivors were critical and the medical condition of the rest was not known.

Police said they launched a manhunt for the suspects and aimed to interview witnesses among the dozens of people who attended the funeral.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) said it was offering assistance.

"We don't believe this was a targeted attack against a religion or anything like that," a police officer told a later press conference on live television.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, informally known as the Mormon church, follows the teachings of Jesus Christ and the 19th-century prophecies of Joseph Smith.

In a statement, it said it was cooperating with law enforcement after a serious incident outside a church meeting-house as a memorial service was being held in the chapel.

"We extend prayers for all who have been impacted by this tragedy and express deep concern that any sacred space intended for worship should be subjected to violence of any kind," it added.

Mexico's daily murder rate down 40% under Sheinbaum

Mexico's daily murder rate has fallen nearly 40% from where it was when Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum took office, government officials said yesterday, citing preliminary statistics.

The daily homicide average in December 2025 was 52.4, down from 86.9 in September 2024, the month before Sheinbaum took office.

"It is the lowest number since 2016," Sheinbaum said at her morning press conference alongside security officials.

For the full year, Mexico's national murder rate per 100,000 people was 17.5 in 2025, the lowest since 2015, according to a presentation by the head of Mexico's National Public Security System.

Sheinbaum said the numbers showed her government's security strategy was producing results and credited close collaboration between security and justice officials and state governors.

Homicide numbers are usually revised, often upwards, when they are formally released by the national statistics agency INEGI after going through a process of revisions, checks and adjustments. - Reuters

Humanoid robots go for knockout in high-tech Vegas fight

By Benjamin Legendre

AFP

Two robots the size of schoolchildren stepped into the ring at BattleBots Arena.

The human-like combatants stumbled a bit as they swung and kicked at each other in the Ultimate Fighting Robot (UFR) match, curiosity mixing with cheers from spectators at the event on the edge of the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.

The contenders were a departure from the usual lineup at the event, known for wheeled machines equipped with wrecking tools.

UFR backers are betting humanoid robots will win fans by transforming bouts from demolition derbies to mixed martial arts matches.



A referee signals a point as robots wearing boxing gloves exchange punches during the Ultimate Fighting Bots competition at the BattleBots Arena, on the sidelines of the annual Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Nevada. -AFP

A human referee addressed the robotic rivals as though they were flesh-and-blood fighters.

"This is the sport of the future," said Vitaly Bulatov, who co-founded UFR with his wife, Xenia.

The couple from Russia envisions fans being won over by the "human stories" of the real people piloting the robot combatants.

As the robots exchanged blows, commands to kick and punch came from human pilots ringside using a combination of cameras and motion-sensing Nintendo video game controllers.

Cameras captured the pilots' movements

in real time, which were then repeated, more or less accurately, by the robots.

The contenders looked at times like blind-folded boxers, triggering laughter with wild misses and cheers when blows landed.

"With some more advancements, it could definitely become more entertaining, as you see in movies like 'Real Steel,'" said Esteban Perez, a 25-year-old IT worker from Denver watching from the audience.

While today's bouts are less spectacular than those depicted in the 2011 science fiction film about robot boxing starring Hugh Jackman, UFR events have sold out in San Francisco, attracting young tech professionals.

"It is definitely better than MMA," Bulatov said, referring to mixed martial arts bouts.

"It's very hard to knock him out," he added with a nod toward the ring.

Beyond the thrills, the bouts provide opportunities to collect body movement data that can be used to train robot software.

"I'm excited to just see what the entertainment value is... also the characteristics of the different robots," said Yael Rosenblum, project manager for the Atlas humanoid robot built by Boston Dynamics, who was attending the event with colleagues.

US decision to exit key UN climate treaty criticised as self-sabotage

Reuters/AFP

Washington

The United States' decision to withdraw from the United Nations' key climate treaty is a "colossal own goal" that will harm the US economy, jobs and living standards, United Nations climate chief Simon Stiell said yesterday.

"While all other nations are stepping forward together, this latest step back from global leadership, climate co-operation and science can only harm the US economy, jobs and living standards, as wildfires, floods, mega-storms and droughts get rapidly worse," Stiell said in a statement.

"It is a colossal own goal which will leave the US less secure and less prosperous."

US President Donald Trump released a presidential memorandum on Wednesday ordering the withdrawal from 66 global organisations and treaties - roughly half affiliated with the United Nations - for being "contrary to the interests of the United States".

Trump, a vocal critic of renewable energy who has called climate change a "con job" and a hoax, went beyond his previous action of withdrawing the US from the Paris climate agreement by removing the country from the underlying UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The UNFCCC requires wealthy industrialised countries to take measures to cut their emissions,

adopt policies to limit greenhouse gas emissions, publicly report their emissions, and provide funding to help poorer nations address climate change.

Yesterday US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent announced that the US would immediately withdraw from the UNFCCC's main climate finance mechanism called the Green Climate Fund, and its governing board.

The US also withdrew from the UNFCCC, and the other vital international partnerships, the Trump administration is undoing decades of hard-won diplomacy, attempting to undermine climate science, and sowing distrust around the world," he said.

The UNFCCC was adopted 34 years ago at the Rio Earth Summit and approved by the US Senate during George H W Bush's presidency.

The US Constitution allows presidents to enter treaties "provided two thirds of Senators present concur", but it is silent on the process for withdrawing from them - a legal ambiguity that could invite court challenges.

Jean Su, a senior attorney for the nonprofit Centre for Biological Diversity, told AFP: "Pulling out of the UNFCCC is a whole order of magnitude different from pulling out of the Paris Agreement."

"It's legal for the President to unilaterally pull out of a treaty that required two thirds of the Senate vote," she continued. "We are looking at legal options to pursue that line of argument."

Trump seeks 50% hike in defence budget to \$1.5tn

President Donald Trump said on Wednesday that he wanted to increase the US defence budget by half next year to a giant \$1.5tn to deal with "troubled and dangerous times".

"I have determined that, for the Good of our Country, especially in these very troubled and dangerous times, our Military Budget for the year 2027 should not be \$1 Trillion Dollars, but rather \$1.5 Trillion Dollars," Trump wrote on Truth Social.

"This will allow us to build the 'Dream Military' that we have long been entitled to and, more importantly, that will keep us safe and SECURE, regardless of foe," the president wrote.

Trump said the increase is possible due to revenue from the sweeping tariffs he has imposed on friend and foe alike.

Any such increase in the military budget would require congressional authorisation, but Trump's Republicans, who hold slim majorities in both the Senate and House of Representatives, have shown little appetite for objecting to any such spending programmes.

The US is already by far the world's biggest military spender, and a hike to \$1.5tn would push Washington's financial outlay on its armed forces even farther ahead of its rivals China and Russia, though it could also spark an arms race with such countries.

Even as he announced budget goals that would be a major boon to defence contractors, Trump took aim at them.

Defence contractors are "issuing massive Dividends to their Shareholders and massive Stock Buybacks, at the expense and detriment of investing in Plants and Equipment" while pay packages for defence executives are "exorbitant and unjustifiable", Trump said.

The president said salaries should be capped at \$5mn and that he would prohibit stock buybacks and dividends "until such time as these problems are rectified", without specifying how he would do so. - AFP/Reuters

US proposes to ease airline penalties for consumer protection violations

The US Transportation Department is proposing to revise its guidance to de-emphasise imposing fines on airlines that violate consumer protection rules and drop policies that toughened enforcement.

The department's Office of Aviation Consumer Protection cited an executive order issued by President Donald Trump in February, saying that its enforcement focus "will be on ensuring compliance with civil rights and consumer protection regulations rather than finding and penalising entities for violations".

The department said that in the event of violations it "will attempt to address the problem by issuing a warning letter to help the regulated entity achieve compliance and resolve the issues before pursuing enforcement actions".

It is also proposing to drop guidance issued in 2023 under then-president Joe Biden that said the department would "intensify enforcement actions" and seek higher penalties for airlines that violate consumer protection rules. - Reuters



Lula vetoes law reducing Bolsonaro's sentence from 27 years to two

AFP/Reuters
Brasilia/Sao Paulo

Brazil's left-wing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has vetoed a law dramatically reducing the prison sentence of former far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro, convicted last year of coup plotting.

Lula vetoed the law adopted by Congress late last year on the third anniversary

of major riots by Bolsonaro supporters in the capital Brasilia over his defeat by Lula in 2022 elections.

Brazil's leader had made no secret of his plan to strike down the legislation, which reduces Bolsonaro's jail sentence from 27 years to a little over two.

However, Brazil's conservative-dominated Congress has the last word and can in turn reject his veto.

Bolsonaro, 70, began serving his sentence in November.

The Supreme Court rejected his appeal to serve his sentence under house arrest, on health grounds.

Under current rules, Bolsonaro is expected to serve at least eight years behind bars.

He was convicted over a scheme to stop Lula from taking office after his razor-thin loss in a bitter 2022 election that highlighted stark political divisions in Brazil.

The plot allegedly involved a plan to as-

sassinate Lula, his vice-president Geraldo Alckmin and Supreme Court judge Alexandre de Moraes.

Prosecutors said the scheme failed because of a lack of support from military brass.

The bill Lula vetoed also reduced sentences for those convicted over their roles in a January 2023 riot, when Bolsonaro supporters invaded and ransacked the presidential palace, Supreme Court and Congress.

About 2,000 people were arrested over the attack, which drew comparisons to the January 2021 attack on the US Capitol in Washington.

Many of those in Brazil have been convicted by the Supreme Court of attempting a coup, among other crimes.

"All of the (coup plotters) were tried transparently and impartially, and at the end of the trial they were convicted on the basis of strong evidence," Lula said at an event in Brasilia.

US could run Venezuela and its oil for years, says Trump

AFP
Washington

The United States could run Venezuela and tap into its oil reserves for years, President Donald Trump said in an interview published yesterday, less than a week after toppling its leader Nicolas Maduro.

"Only time will tell" how long Washington would demand direct oversight of the South American country, Trump told the *New York Times*.

However, when asked whether that meant three months, six months or a year, he replied: "I would say much longer."

The 79-year-old US leader also said he wanted to travel to Venezuela eventually.

"I think at some point it'll be safe," he said.

US special forces snatched president Maduro and his wife in a lightning raid on Saturday and whisked them to New York to face trial on drug and weapons charges, underscoring what Trump has called the "Donroe Doctrine" of US hegemony over its backyard.

Since then Trump has repeatedly asserted that the United States will "run" Venezuela, despite the fact that it has no boots on the ground.

Venezuela's interim leader Delcy Rodriguez insisted that no foreign power was governing her country.

"There is a stain on our relations

such as had never occurred in our history," Rodriguez said of the US attack.

However, she added it was "not unusual or irregular" to trade with the United States now, following an announcement by state oil firm PDVSA that it was in negotiations to sell crude to the United States.

Oil has in fact emerged as the key to US control over Venezuela, which has the world's largest proven reserves.

Trump announced a plan earlier this week for the United States to sell between 30mn and 50mn barrels of Venezuelan crude, with Caracas then using the money to buy US-made products.

On the streets of Caracas, opinions remain mixed about the oil plan.

"I feel we'll have more opportunities if the oil is in the hands of the United States than in the hands of the government," said Jose Antonio Blanco, 26. "The decisions they'll make are better."

Teresa Gonzalez, 52, said she didn't know if the oil sales plan was good or bad.

"It's a tangled mess. What we do is try to survive, if we don't work, we don't eat," she added.

Trump, who will meet oil executives today, is also considering a plan for the US to exert some control over Venezuela's PDVSA, the *Wall Street Journal* reported.

The US would then have a hand in controlling most of the oil reserves in the Western Hemisphere, as Trump aims to drive oil prices



A supporter of the government holds action figures of late president Hugo Chavez and 'Super Bigote' (Super Mustache) and 'Cillita', superheroes inspired by Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores, during a march in Caracas calling for the release of Maduro, days after he and his wife were captured following US strikes on Venezuela. - **Reuters**

down to \$50 a barrel, the paper reported.

Vice-President J D Vance underscored that "the way that we control Venezuela is we control the purse strings".

"We tell the regime, 'you're allowed to sell the oil so long as you serve America's national interest,'" he told Fox News host Jesse Watters in an interview broadcast late on Wednesday.

Vance, an Iraq veteran who is himself a sceptic of US military adventures, also addressed concerns from Trump's "Make America

Great Again" saying that the plan would exert pressure "without wasting a single American life".

The US Senate is voting on a "war powers" resolution to require congressional authorisation for military force against Venezuela, a test of Republican support for Trump's actions.

Caracas announced on Wednesday that at least 100 people had been killed in the US attack and a similar number wounded.

Havana says 32 Cuban soldiers were among them.

Trump's administration has so

US, Colombia vow joint fight against guerrillas

Colombia's leftist President Gustavo Petro agreed with his US counterpart Donald Trump to take "joint action" against cocaine-smuggling guerrillas on the border with Venezuela, Bogota's interior minister said yesterday.

The two leaders held their first phone call on Wednesday, de-escalating tensions after Trump had threatened military action against Colombia following the ouster of Venezuela's leftist leader Nicolas Maduro by US forces.

Trump and Petro "committed to taking joint actions" against the National Liberation Army (ELN), Colombia's last remaining major armed rebel group, Interior Minister Armando Benedetti said in an interview with Blu Radio.

Colombia accuses the ELN of launching attacks and kidnappings of Colombian soldiers and retreating to rear-base locations in Venezuela.

Petro asked Trump "to help strike hard at the ELN on the border" with Venezuela, Benedetti said.

He said the guerrillas must "be attacked in their rear" as well as on Colombian soil.

Colombia and Venezuela share a porous 2,200km (1,400-mile) border where various armed groups vie for control of the profits from drug trafficking, illegal mining and smuggling.

Petro tried to negotiate a peace settlement with the ELN after coming to power in 2022, but his attempts stalled.

He accepted Trump's invitation to meet in Washington, despite fierce exchanges over recent days in which Trump branded Petro a drug-trafficker and the Colombian leader vowed to take up arms against any US assault.

After Petro criticised the United States for seizing Maduro in Caracas on January 3, Trump told Petro to "watch his (posterior)".

Washington and Bogota have enjoyed security co-operation for decades, but ties have deteriorated since Trump began his second term last January. - **AFP**

far indicated that it intends to stick with Rodriguez and sideline opposition figures, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Corina Machado.

However, Rodriguez's leadership faces internal pressures, analysts have told AFP, notably from her powerful Interior Minister Diodosio Cabello and Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez.

"Her power comes from Washington, not from the internal structure. If Trump decides she's no longer useful, she'll go like Maduro," Venezuela's former infor-

mation minister Andres Izarra told AFP in an e-mail.

The US operation in Venezuela - and Trump's hints that other countries could be next - spread shockwaves through the Americas, but he has since dialled down tensions with Colombia.

A day after Colombia's leftist President Gustavo Petro spoke with Trump on Wednesday, Bogota said it had agreed to take "joint action" against cocaine-smuggling guerrillas on the border with Venezuela (*see accompanying report above*).

Chinese, Iranian warships in South Africa for exercises

AFP
Simon's Town, South Africa

Chinese and Iranian warships were docked off South Africa's main navy base yesterday ahead of exercises that officials said were also meant to involve Russia.

The January 9-16 "Will for Peace" drill hosted by South Africa risks further straining its ties with the United States, which is in dispute with many of the countries taking part.

AFP journalists saw two Chinese ships in Cape Town's False Bay harbour on Wednesday, joined by an Iranian vessel yesterday.

South African navy officials have said that warships from Russia were also expected to take part in the China-led exercises.

The drill was focused on the "safety of shipping and maritime economic activities", the South African defence force said in December when it announced the manoeuvres.

It was intended to "deepen co-opera-



A general view (from left) of the Chinese guided-missile destroyer Tangshan (Hull 122, foreground), the Iranian navy ship, the IRIS Makran 441, and the Chinese comprehensive supply ship Taihu (Hull 889) in the Simon's Town harbour, near Cape Town. - **AFP**

tion in support of peaceful maritime security initiatives," it said.

The statement said the exercise would involve navies from Brics (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries.

President Donald Trump has accused

countries in the Brics group of emerging nations of "anti-American" policies.

South Africa has drawn US criticism for its close ties with Russia and a range of other policies, including its decision to bring a genocide case against Israel at the Interna-

tional Court of Justice over the Gaza war.

South Africa's military was criticised for hosting naval exercises with Russia and China in 2023 that coincided with the one-year anniversary of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine.

US pauses some aid to Somalia, South Sudan over 'theft'

AFP
Washington

The United States paused aid to Somalia and South Sudan yesterday over reports of theft and government interference, declaring a "zero-tolerance policy" for the misuse of its assistance.

The suspension of aid to Somalia followed the destruction of a US-funded World Food Programme (WFP) warehouse in the capital Mogadishu, speaking on condition of anonymity, said.

"All the stocked supply was posted on X late on Wednesday that Somali officials had "illegally seized 76 metric tonnes of donor-funded food aid for vulnerable Somalis".

A WFP spokesperson confirmed to AFP that the warehouse had been demolished by port authorities, but the government and two local sources said the food had not been stolen.

"The warehouse was partially demolished during the weekend without the knowledge of the WFP team, but there was no looting involved," a WFP staff member in Mogadishu, speaking on condition of anonymity, said.

"All the stocked supply was

kept intact. The government gave the space for WFP to build the warehouse in the first place, and they wanted it back," a port staff member, also speaking anonymously, told AFP.

In a statement, the Somali government said the warehouse was demolished as part of "expansion and repurposing works" at the port.

US officials said any future aid would be "dependent on the Somali Federal Government taking accountability" and resolving the matter.

Meanwhile, the US embassy in South Sudan, another conflict-hit country in east Africa, said it

was suspending parts of its aid programme over the "continued abuse, exploitation, and theft directed against US foreign assistance by South Sudanese officials at national, state, and county levels".

It highlighted the detention of a US-linked aid worker after he refused to illegally hand over assets to a county commissioner in South Sudan's Ayod County in Jonglei state, and the refusal to allow the transfer of US-funded pharmaceutical supplies in Bahr El-Ghazal state.

The embassy said it was suspending aid in Ayod County and "considering significant reduc-

tions" in Bahr El-Ghazal.

The Trump administration has

slashed aid over the past year.

Somalis in the United States have also become a particular target for the administration in recent weeks, targeted in immigration raids.

They have also been accused of large-scale public benefit fraud in Minnesota, which has the largest Somali community in the country with around 80,000 members.

There has also been a rift with Somalia over Israel's recognition of Somaliland, a breakaway region of Somalia, which was sup-

ported by the US.

Cubans brace for additional hardship as US chokes off Venezuelan oil

Cubans braced for a deepening economic crisis after the United States seized two more Venezuela-linked oil tankers on Wednesday, a move that threatens to sever a critical energy lifeline for the Communist-run island just days after US forces captured Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

In the port of Matanzas where oil tankers dock, shuttered gas stations and long fuel lines reflected mounting supply shortages.

The latest US action is stoking fears that already-frequent, hours-long power cuts will worsen.

"Now I think that with this situation, things will get worse, because now they won't let oil come," William Gonzalez, a Matanzas resident, told Reuters. "Before oil came from Venezuela and Russia, now it will only come from Russia... So that's one less source of oil, so the country must get a little worse."

In a dramatic escalation of its pressure campaign, the US on Wednesday seized the Russian-flagged tanker *Marinera* in the Atlantic near Iceland after a two-week pursuit, US officials said.

The seizure, which a senior Russian lawmaker decried as "outright piracy", marks the fourth such interception since Washington imposed a blockade on all sanctioned vessels going in and out of Venezuelan waters in mid-December.

Earlier on Wednesday, the US Coast Guard had intercepted another Venezuela-linked tanker, the *M Sophia*, northeast of South America.

For Cuba, the loss of Venezuelan oil is devastating.

Between January and November of last year, Venezuela sent an average of 27,000 barrels per day (bpd) to the island, covering roughly 50% of Cuba's oil deficit, according to shipping data and documents from Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA.

"The repercussions are not going to be very good. Venezuela was one of the countries that helped us the most with energy and fuel," said Mario Valverde, a business owner in Havana.

While Mexico has become an "important supplier", President Claudia Sheinbaum said on Wednesday that Mexico is not sending more oil to Cuba than it has historically. - **Reuters**



Guards escort handcuffed accused scam boss Chen Zhi (centre) off a China Southern plane in Beijing.

'Scam centre' kingpin extradited to China

Reuters

Beijing

Chinese television showed footage of US-indicted tycoon Chen Zhi being escorted by armed police after his extradition to China from Cambodia, where authorities yesterday ordered the liquidation of a bank he founded linked to a massive "scam centre" network.

Chen, who chairs a conglomerate the US says is a front for a multifbillon-dollar online fraud operation, was shown in handcuffs and hooded as he was led off a plane at a Beijing airport by black-clad SWAT officers, with state broadcaster CCTV describing him as the "leader of a major transnational gambling and fraud crime syndicate".

The surprise arrest of Chen is the biggest step yet in efforts by a number of countries to crack down on sprawling compounds in southeast Asia that house tens of thousands of workers, many trafficked and forced into scamming victims around the world, in what the United Nations says has evolved into a sophisticated global industry.

The extradition of the young tycoon was announced late Wednesday by Cambodia, the base of his Prince Group of businesses, after what the interior ministry there said was a months-long joint

transnational crime investigation with China.

It is not immediately clear what charges China-born Chen faces, and China's ministry of foreign affairs said authorities were collaborating to combat cross-border telecom fraud scams.

"China is willing to strengthen law enforcement co-operation with neighbouring countries, including Cambodia, to safeguard the safety of people's lives and property," ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a regular briefing.

The US justice department in October indicted Chen for wire fraud conspiracy and money-laundering conspiracy, and authorities have linked Prince Group, which operated more than 100 businesses in 30 countries, to a network of scam centres mainly in Cambodia and Myanmar that have defrauded victims globally.

Cambodia's central bank yesterday announced the liquidation of Prince Bank, lender founded by Chen, the latest in a series of moves against entities under or linked to the group across Asia, from Hong Kong and Singapore to Taiwan and South Korea.

It gave no reason for the liquidation and it was not immediately clear if Cambodian authorities would target other Prince Group entities. Britain and the US sanctioned Prince Group in October and weeks later authorities in Hong Kong and Singapore froze

or seized assets worth \$354mn and \$116mn linked to the company, which has businesses ranging from real estate and financial services to banking, leisure and hospitality.

Prince Bank did not immediately respond to a request for comment yesterday and Prince Group could not be reached.

Prince Group had in November said US allegations of criminal activity by Chen were baseless and aimed at unlawfully seizing billions of dollars.

CCTV in its report yesterday said Chen was wanted on suspicion of fraud and operating illegal casinos, and it added that authorities would release a wanted list of key members of the "Chen Zhi criminal group" whom it urged to surrender at once.

Cambodia's interior ministry said on Wednesday that it had extradited three Chinese nationals including Chen to China at Beijing's request.

The Cambodian ministry statement did not provide details on Chen or his alleged crimes, but it said his Cambodian citizenship had been revoked.

Beijing's public security bureau had set up a special task force to investigate individuals involved with Cambodia's Prince Group in 2020, calling the group a "mega cross-border online gambling syndicate", a Chinese court document released in 2022 showed.

He did not say whether rare earth elements were covered by the restrictions, and did not comment when asked about reports by state media that the commerce ministry was weighing whether to further tighten rare-earths export licences to Japan.

China has an export control list of around 1,100 dual-use items and technologies that manufacturers require a licence for to ship overseas, wherever the end user may be.

That list contains at least seven categories of medium and heavy rare earths. It has, however, not specified which items may be affected by the ban on exports to Japan.

Ties between Beijing and Tokyo have deteriorated since Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said in November that a Chinese attack on Taiwan threatening Japan's survival could trigger a military response, a remark that Beijing said was "provocative".

"Exports to Japan for military purposes, that could find a military application, and all other end-uses contributing to the enhancement of Japan's military capabilities are prohibited," He said.

"The objective of halting Japan's re-militarisation and nuclear ambitions is entirely legitimate, justified and lawful," he added.

Japan's Vice-Foreign Minister Takehiro Funakoshi yesterday strongly protested the ban to Wu Jianguo, China's ambassador to Japan, and demanded China withdraw the measures, the ministry said in a statement.

Wu rejected the representations, the Chinese embassy said in its statement.

Last month, Japan's cabinet approved a record spending package for the fiscal year starting in April that includes a 3.8% increase in the country's annual military budget to 9tn yen (\$58bn).

Meanwhile, Japan yesterday lodged a protest with China over the operation of a mobile drilling vessel in an area of the East China Sea rich in gas deposits.

Tokyo and Beijing agreed in June 2008 to cooperate over oil and gas resources in the East China Sea, but negotiations stopped two years later and have not resumed.

"We have confirmed that a mobile drilling vessel has been moored and anchored in waters" on the Chinese side of the two countries' median line, chief Cabinet secretary Minoru Kihara said yesterday.

Japan's coastguard had issued a navigation warning on January 2, he added. "The boundaries of the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in the East China Sea have yet to be determined. Under these circumstances, it is deeply regrettable that China continues its unilateral development activities," Kihara said.

"We have strongly protested to China through diplomatic channels."

The operation is believed to be exploratory drilling for a new gas field, Kyodo news agency reported.

The gas field under the joint development agreement lies in an area where both countries' EEZs overlap.

Japan says the median line between the two nations should mark the limits of their respective EEZs.

But China insists the border should be drawn closer to Japan, taking into account the continental shelf and other features of the ocean.

Malaysian ex-army chief detained in graft probe

A Malaysian former army chief and his two wives were among five people detained during a graft investigation into a military procurement project, according to the country's anti-corruption agency and local media. Authorities have raided several companies over the case since late last year, and six bank accounts belonging to an unidentified suspect and his family members have also been seized. Details of the case have not been disclosed, but it is understood to focus on payments purportedly made into the bank account of a senior army officer.

The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) announced a series of detentions in a statement but did not name the suspects.

But local media quoted MACC chief commissioner Azam Baki as confirming that former army chief Muhammad Hafizuddein Jantan was arrested along with his two wives. Hafizuddein had been placed on leave in late December pending an investigation into his conduct. A married couple were also among those detained, according to MACC. "MACC is committed to carrying out investigations with full transparency and professionalism," the statement said.



Malaysian anti-graft officers escort former army chief after the authorities managed to get a court order to hold him in custody to assist in an investigation into alleged bribery involving military procurement contracts, in Putrajaya, Malaysia, yesterday.

Sajid Akram and his son Naveed allegedly targeted an event near the beach in an ISIS-inspired attack on December 14, the nation's worst mass shooting for 30 years.

The federal royal commission - the highest level of government inquiry - will probe everything including intelligence failures.

Victims' families, business leaders, sports stars and eminent scientists have put their names to open letters urging a sweeping investigation into the attack.

The Bondi Beach shooting inquiry will be led by Virginia Bell, a widely respected former high court judge.

Alleged gunman Sajid Akram,

focused on "urgent action", but mounting public pressure led him to relent.

"What we've done is listen, and we've concluded that where we have landed today is an appropriate way forward for national unity," Albanese said.

Royal commissions hold public hearings and can sometimes run for years.

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Alleged gunman Sajid Akram,

50, was shot and killed by police during the assault.

An Indian national, he entered Australia on a visa in 1998.

His 24-year-old son Naveed, an Australian-born citizen who remains in prison, has been charged with terrorism and 15 murders.

The mass shooting has sparked anger and promises to stiffen gun laws. Police and intelligence agencies are facing difficult questions about whether they could have acted earlier.

Naveed Akram was flagged by Australia's intelligence agency in

2019 but he slipped off the radar after it decided that he posed no imminent threat.

The prime minister said a review into the security services' response, which is due to report in April, will now be incorporated into the work of the royal commission.

The Akram duo travelled to the southern Philippines in the weeks before the shooting, fuelling suspicions they may be linked to extremists in the region.

Evidence so far suggested they had acted alone, police said.

"There is no evidence to suggest

these alleged offenders were part of a broader terrorist cell, or were directed by others to carry out the attack," Australian Federal Police commissioner Crissy Barrett said in December. Australia is cracking down on gun ownership and hate speech in the wake of the attack.

The government in December announced a sweeping buyback scheme to "get guns off our streets".

It is the largest gun buyback since 1996, when Australia tightened firearms laws in the wake of a mass shooting that killed 35 people at Port Arthur.

Japan nuclear official loses phone with confidential data in China

An employee of Japan's nuclear regulator lost a smartphone, possibly in China, containing a confidential list of contacts, an official and local media reports said.

The case became public this week as China continues to raise pressure on Tokyo after Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi suggested in November that Japan may react militarily if Taiwan were to come under an attack. The news also came as Tokyo Electric Power (Tepco), which operated the crippled Fukushima atomic plant, moves to restart the world's biggest nuclear plant later this month.

A Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA) employee has

lost a work-issued smartphone, used during disasters such as major earthquakes, an agency official said yesterday on the customary condition of anonymity. The incident was reported in November to a Japanese body that governs proper handling of personal information, he said. The device is primarily used for telephone calls and texting, and not for accessing nuclear data at the agency, he added.

The smartphone contained the names and contact details of staff members in the authority's nuclear security division, according to major media, including Kyodo News and the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper.

Ban on exports of dual-use items to Japan to only hit military firms: China

Reuters

Beijing

China's export ban on dual-use items to Japan will only affect military firms, the commerce ministry said yesterday, helping calm fears that Beijing might curb rare-earths shipments vital to Japan's automotive industry over Tokyo's remarks on Taiwan.

Dual-use items are goods, software or technologies that have both civilian and military applications. They include certain rare earth magnets that power motors in car parts such as side mirrors, speakers and oil pumps. They play an even bigger role in EVs.

"Civilian users will not be affected," He Yadong, a commerce ministry spokesperson, told reporters. "China has always been committed to the stability and security of global production and supply chains," he added.

He did not say whether rare earth elements were covered by the restrictions, and did not comment when asked about reports by state media that the commerce ministry was weighing whether to further tighten rare-earths export licences to Japan.

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Australia to hold royal commission inquiry into beach shooting

AFP

Sydney

Australia will hold a royal commission inquiry into the mass shooting that killed 15 people at Bondi Beach, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said yesterday, as he faced public demands for answers.

"I've repeatedly said that our government's priority is to promote unity and social cohesion. And this is what Australia needs to heal," he told reporters.

Victims' families, business leaders, sports stars and eminent scientists have put their names to open letters urging a sweeping investigation into the attack.

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Evidence so far suggested they had acted alone, police said.

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India climate activist firm denies misuse of foreign funds

AFP
New Delhi

An Indian climate advocacy firm led by a prominent activist has denied allegations by authorities that it misused foreign funds to influence policy and threaten the country's energy secu-

rity. Satat Sampada said in a statement it had fully co-operated with India's top financial crimes agency, the enforcement directorate (ED), which carried out searches on Monday of the organisation's offices and the home of its co-founders, climate activist Harjeet Singh and his wife Jyoti Awasthi.

The ED said Singh had been de-

tained by the Uttar Pradesh state excise department in connection with the seizure of alcohol exceeding permissible limits. Satat Sampada said he had been granted bail, without sharing details of the charges. The ED has alleged that the company received more than \$666,000 in foreign remittances between 2021 and 2025 under the

"garb" of consultancy fees.

Instead, the ED alleged, the funds were used to promote the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty (FF-NPT), a proposed international agreement to phase out fossil fuel production. "While presented as a climate initiative, its (FF-NPT) adoption could expose India to legal challenges in international forums

like the International Court of Justice and severely compromise the nation's energy security and economic development," an ED statement said. It also alleged that the company functioned as a front for foreign-influenced activism and that some funds were diverted for personal use. "We categorically state that the allegations being re-

ported are baseless, biased and misleading," Satat Sampada said. The company also rejected scrutiny of Singh's visits to countries that have tensions with India, including neighbouring Pakistan, saying he had travelled internationally for over two decades to attend climate conferences and policy forums in a professional capacity.

Britons splurge on food, cut back on gifts as retailers warn of tough '26

Reuters
London

Britons prioritised festive food but thought twice about spending on clothing and gifts over Christmas, trading updates from Tesco, Marks & Spencer and Primark showed yesterday.

December's solid food sales offered some relief for major retailers, but lingering consumer caution and stubborn inflation cloud the outlook for 2026.

Tesco, Britain's biggest food retailer, reported a 3.2% rise in underlying UK sales for the six-week festive period, calling it a "strong" Christmas, with its market share hitting a decade high.

However, with sales growth below the summer's 4.6% and slightly under analyst forecasts its shares fell 5.5%, paring gains over the last year to 16%.

Marks & Spencer's underlying food sales jumped 5.6% in the Christmas quarter, but clothing, home and beauty dropped 2.9%, hit by weak demand and the tail end of fallout from last year's cyber hack.

That dovetailed with Primark owner Associated British Foods, which said Britain's clothing market was "difficult" in the Christmas quarter.

Its shares slumped 12% after it also warned of falling sales in continental Europe and tough trading for its food businesses in the US. Profit in its 2025-26 year would fall, it said.

Greggs, Britain's biggest fast-food chain, flagged subdued con-

sumer confidence and guided to flat profit this year. CEO Roisin Currie said she remained cautious about prospects in 2026. Greggs shares fell 7%, extending losses over the last year to 38%.

Tesco CEO Ken Murphy said UK consumers were keen to treat themselves at Christmas, with many trading up to premium ranges.

But he said consumer confidence was mixed: "You are seeing consumers whose household budgets are in pretty good shape and then you're seeing a lot of people that are really counting every penny."

In 2026, Murphy expects a continuation of the trend of consumers eating more at home rather than dining out to save cash and the building of a trend of people wanting to eat more healthily while still indulging at weekends.

He was unsure whether rising demand for GLP-1 weight-loss drugs in Britain would have a big impact on food sales this year. "We'll stay very close to how customers are behaving and what they're looking for and respond accordingly," he said.

Recent data and surveys have shown UK consumer confidence remains fragile as unemployment rises. Official data last month showed Britain's jobless rate at its highest since early 2021.

On Tuesday, fashion retailer Next reported better-than-expected Christmas sales but warned growth would slow in 2026. CEO Simon Wolfson said he feared employment pressures would weigh on spending as the year progresses.

India plans to end curbs on China firms bidding for govt contracts

Reuters
New Delhi

India's finance ministry plans to scrap five-year-old restrictions on Chinese firms bidding for government contracts, two government sources said, as New Delhi seeks to revive commercial ties in an environment of reduced border tensions.

The curbs, imposed in 2020 after a deadly clash between the countries' troops, required Chinese bidders to register with an Indian government committee and obtain political and security clearances.

The measures effectively barred Chinese firms from competing for Indian government contracts that were estimated to be worth \$700-750bn.

Reuters is the first to report on the plan to ease the restrictions.

One of the sources said officials were working to remove the registration requirement.

Both sources, who declined to be named as they were not authorised to speak publicly, said Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's office will make the final decision.

India's finance ministry and the prime minister's office did not respond to requests for comment.

The restrictions had a significant impact: months after they were made public, China's state-owned CRRC was disqualified from bidding for a \$216mn train-manufacturing contract.

The ministry of finance's plan to ease the curbs followed requests from other government departments that face shortages and project delays due to the 2020 restrictions, the sources said.

A high-level committee headed by a former cabinet secretary, Rajiv Gauba, has also recommended easing the restrictions. Gauba is a member of a prominent government think-tank.

India sugar export deals gain traction on lower prices

Reuters
Mumbai/London

Indian mills have signed export contracts for around 180,000 metric tonnes of sugar this season with a domestic price correction and weaker rupee belatedly driving overseas sales in recent weeks, trade and industry officials said.

The federal government in November approved exports of 1.5mn tonnes of sugar from the current season, which opened on October 1. But high prices on the local market have led to sluggish export activity.

That slower-than-expected pace of shipments from India, the world's second-largest sugar producer, could support global prices, which are trading near their lowest levels in five years.

Five dealers said mills have so far contracted shipments to Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and East African countries. All the sources declined to be named, because they were not authorised to speak publicly on the matter.

"Mills used to get better prices from exports than from the domestic market. This time, there's no real incentive to export," said a Mumbai-based dealer with a global trade house.

"Still, some mills are stepping forward because they need cash to pay farmers for cane."

Local prices had been holding above global benchmarks.

They have only corrected in the past three months, slipping 6% to Rs36,125 (\$401.35) per tonne as supplies from the new season began arriving. Output reached 11.9mn tonnes from October to December, a 25% increase on the previous year. Indian sugar is now being offered at around \$450 per ton on a free-on-board (FOB) basis, or nearly \$20 per tonne above benchmark London futures, the dealers said.

"Supply pressure has brought down local prices. Exports are not profitable at current price levels, but they are no longer loss-making as they were last month," said B B Thombare, president of the West Indian Sugar Mills Association.

London police 'failed to vet thousands of recruits'

AFP
London

London's police force failed to carry out proper checks when hiring thousands of officers, an internal review has found, as the government yesterday announced an inquiry into its vetting practices.

Dozens of officers who were hired after vetting checks were lowered went on to commit crimes or misconduct, including two who were later convicted as serial rapists, the review revealed.

The Met report added: "The scale and impact of these deviations that have been identified throughout this review have led to the recruitment and retention of individuals who should not have joined the Metropolitan police service, contributing to police-perpetrated harm and public distrust."

The report added: "It is known that the scale and impact of these deviations ranged, with some tolerable and minor in nature, to those having a more substantive impact, including the recruitment and likely retention

of individuals who have gone on to cause harm through criminality and misconduct – events that have undermined public confidence in the MPS."

The Metropolitan police, Britain's largest force, blamed the lapses on increased pressure to meet recruitment targets between 2019 and 2023.

The force has been shaken by a string of scandals in recent years, including the convictions of several serving officers for sexual offences.

A landmark report in 2023 found the Met was "institu-

tionally" racist and sexist.

David Carrick, one of the UK's worst sex offenders who was jailed for life in 2017, when the hiring checks failed to uncover an allegation of domestic abuse against him.

In all, Carrick was convicted of 85 offences, dozens of which took place after 2017, when he passed revetting.

Another officer, Cliff Mitchell, later convicted of rape, was allowed to join the force in 2020 after a vetting panel overturned a decision to reject his application

– despite a previous allegation of raping a child.

The Met's inquiries established that five other police forces in England and Wales had also made vetting errors.

The vetting panel, which has now been disbanded, was in part set up to improve diversity. Between 2019 and 2023, it overturned rejections of 114 people – 25 of whom went on to commit a misconduct or be accused of a crime.

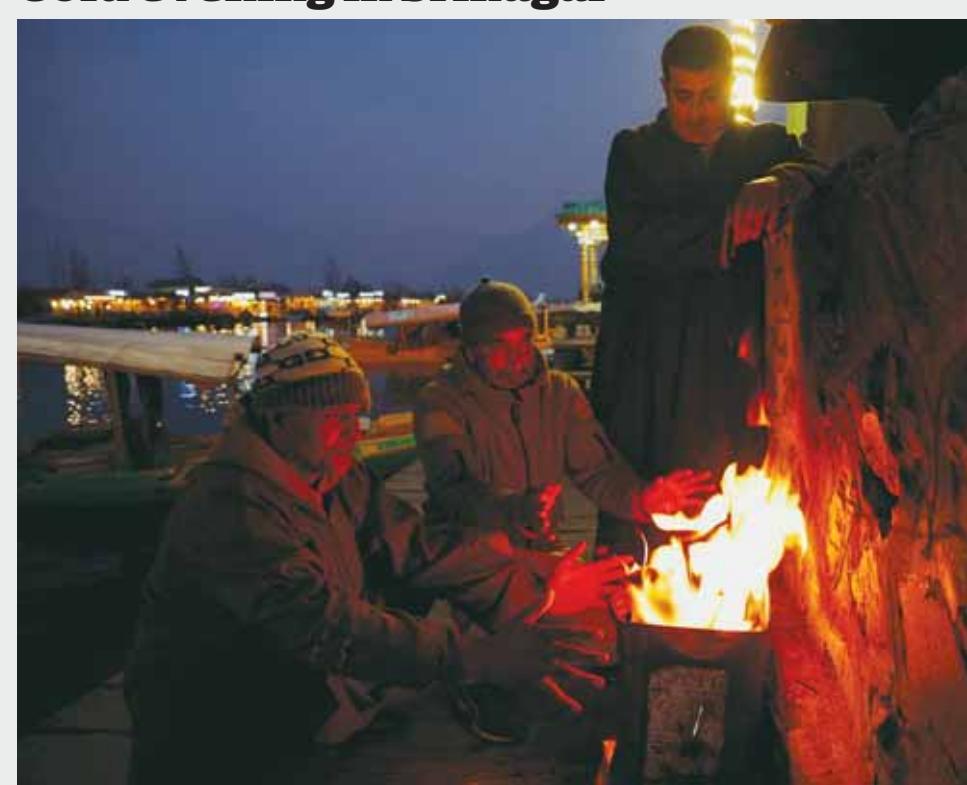
The policing inspectorate will carry out an urgent independent inspection into the Metropolitan

Police's recruitment and vetting standards," the interior ministry said in a statement after the review was published.

"Abandoning vetting checks on officers was a dereliction of the Met's duty to keep London safe," Interior Minister Shabana Mahmood said.

Met assistant commissioner Rachel Williams said the report was part of the force's push to be "open and transparent about past vetting and recruitment practices" that in some cases led to "unsuitable people" joining the force.

Cold evening in Srinagar



Shikara riders warm themselves around a fire on the banks of Dal Lake on a cold evening in Srinagar, India, yesterday.

Islam – a comprehensive way of life

To understand the essence of Islam is to understand the very essence of humanity. More than a religion, Islam is a complete and comprehensive way of life leading to a balanced way of living. Islam brings civilisation and happiness to man. Islamic principles and teachings can provide realistic, fair and objective solutions to the prevention of individual, familial, social and international problems which are threatening the existence of human communities throughout the world.

A spiritual belief that does not deal with social behaviour, economic relations and international organisations is as erroneous as the social doctrine that does not consider spiritual belief, morality and behaviour. Such social doctrines are abortive attempts, incapable of total human guidance or of achieving any coherence or accord among human beings.

Both the individual and the society are in dire need of a belief that accommodates and directs all their vital activities towards construction and growth. When the individual and society adopt such a belief and apply it to life, humanity can accomplish seemingly miraculous achievements which can only occur when man unites himself with the Eternal Power that channels his personality -potential in the right direction.

History has shown that Islam is unique in its ability to provide guidance for the entire range of human activity. It does not separate spiritual and secular life as unrelated entities.

Islam integrates all domains of human life, just like the different systems in the human body integrate to provide a complete human being. If one system does not work properly, it has got to affect the whole body. Likewise, Islam proposes systems of laws that integrate all parts of human society to bring happiness and peace to all its members.

There is no other way or system that urges the active worship of Allah in its general and most comprehensive sense other than Islam. For example, Islam teaches that Muslims should fast for a month every year (i.e. Ramadan) in order to acquire piety and self-discipline and to develop awareness of the needs and problems of others who are starving or are in desperate need of food. Such



an awareness of the needs of others is not enough on its own. Therefore, Zakat (obligatory charity) is prescribed to be distributed among the segments of society that are in need of individual and communal assistance.

A very important universal concept in Islam is "Ummah" (Nation). Ummah transcends all limitations implied by the term 'nation' by encompassing all people regardless of race, colour, or sex. Allah emphasised this great Islamic principle in the verse (which means);

"Mankind was [of] one religion [before their deviation]; then Allah sent the prophets as bringers of good tidings and warners and sent down with them the Scripture in truth to judge between the people concerning that in which they differed. And none differed over it

[i.e. Scripture] except those who were given it - after the clear proofs came to them - out of jealous animosity among themselves. And Allah guided those who believed to the truth concerning that over which they had differed, by His permission. And Allah guides whom He wills to a straight path." [Qur'an 2:13]

Moreover, Islam has a unique understanding for the concept of Ummah. Ummah is the field for knowledge, ethics, government and positivism. Ummah in Islam is a system in which people integrate, even if they belong to different belief systems. It is a system of universal justice and peace that accommodates everyone who believes in freedom of thinking and in calling people to the truth - whether they are individuals or communities.

Indeed, Ummah in Islam is an apparatus which is more advanced than that developed by the West, the UN, or those apparatuses established by the American-European block merely to bring about a "new world order," but which in reality often are geared only to maintain Western control over Third World human and material resources.

The Prophet Muhammad, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, proposed a constitution for the city of Madinah during the first days of his emigration from Makkah. He, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, included the rights of both Jews and Christians, thereby safeguarding their freedom and beliefs. History has never known a constitution that represented minorities as this constitution of the Islamic state did. Ummah as an

Islamic concept will, Allah willing, bring the advent of universal peace as well as an internal social system. Ummah is the field-ground for civilisation to take place. Such an Ummah can be integrated and united, if it derives its doctrines, constitutions, morals, values and the whole perspective of life from the same united source: belief in the only true Allah. This is known as the concept of Tawheed (Monotheism).

The need for Islam emerges from the humanity's search for a constitution that provides guidance and satisfaction in all spheres of life. It is a code of life that is not limited to partial needs, but rather a way of life that penetrates all barriers to interact with people's needs in this life and beyond. It is a way of life where there is no discrimination between what is sacred and what is secular.

Islam is unique among the religions and civilisations the world has known. In contrast to the other religions of the world, Islam defines religion itself as the very business of life, the very matter of space-time, the very process of history, and the gift of Allah. Therefore, all these work together to constitute them.

Islam is a divine guidance wherein humans of all nations, colours and tongues feel linked to a Supreme Power and Justice. Its teachings are kept intact and authentic. It is the only way to happiness, dignity, and universal peace. Islam is so unique in its method for solving the problems of humanity. I can say with confidence that the twenty first century will be the century of Islam. The everlasting miracle of Islam, THE QUR'AN, is a standing challenge to the intellect of all peoples at all times. In Islam's four abiding principles - equality, tolerance, promotion of science, and solution to the world's problems - its universality asserts itself. It calls to all mankind, if only mankind will listen.

"Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an? If it had been from [any] other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction." [Qur'an 4:2]

 islamweb.net
English

Islam's distinctive features

The world is not only densely populated but it is also saturated with different religions in various concepts. Everyone claims that he has a message to rescue the world and that he is the only one who is on the right path - each one asserting as if everybody owns the franchise to the truth!

Faced with such a fact, it is imperative upon us, as Muslims, to know the features of our religion. This is for us to determine our position, as well as, to properly conduct and guard ourselves against the other ones that may either be of divine roots such as Christianity and Judaism or of human origin like Buddhism and Hinduism. Otherwise, we will succumb to a plethora of religions.

Islam has specific features, which distinguishes it from the rest. By understanding these features, we will hopefully realise its merits and Allah's (God's) kindness as He guides and immerses us towards Islam. Here are some of these features:

1. Islam is a divine religion

Allah Says (what means): "And indeed, (O Muhammad), you receive the Qur'an from one Wise and Knowing." [Qur'an: 27:6] "Alif - Lam - Meem. (This is) the revelation of the Book about which there is no doubt from the Lord of the worlds." [Qur'an: 32:1-2].

So Islam, by this feature, is essentially distinguished from the other laws and ideologies whose source is the human mind as opposed to Islam's which is divine ("Godly"). This great difference should not be ignored nor taken for granted.

While Islam is considered a divine revelation, it should be:

A. Perfect and devoid of insufficiency, ignorance and caprice because it comes from Allah the Almighty, Whose perfection is complete and Who is infallible. Therefore, if the effect of Allah's perfection is shown in His revealed commands, they should also be perfect.

B. Suitable, convenient and sufficient. This revelation is from the Creator Who knows what may benefit or harm His creatures. Allah Says (what means): "Does He Who created not know, while He is the Subtle, the Acquainted?" [Qur'an: 67:14].

C. Highly respected and dignified by believers regardless of one's social status and earthly power because such positions and influence cannot take them away from the submission to Almighty Allah.

2. Islam is comprehensive

Islam unlike human principles and ordered set of ideas is a comprehensive system for all life affairs and human behaviour, as each aspect caters to its own field. So there are no spaces in human life which are apart from his religion and belief.

Muslims cannot do anything without a jurisprudential ruling either by obligation, prohibition, legalisation, recommendation or abhorrence. Therefore, everything in a Muslim's life submits to and are gauged against these five jurisprudential rulings, such that whatever comes to one's mind always has a jurisprudential verdict in Islam.

The comprehensiveness of this religious jurisprudential ruling is clear because:

A. Islam includes the Jurisprudence of belief, such as faith in Allah and faith in the Last Day and Judgement.

B. It includes the Jurisprudence of morality, such as honesty and forbidden lie.

C. It includes the jurisprudential ruling of man's relationship with his Lord, such as prayer and fasting.

D. It includes the regulations of man's relationship with each other, such as the jurisprudential ruling of the family including the manner of dealing with them.

The effect of this comprehensiveness is reflected in a Muslim's life because he is always in touch with Allah in all his undertakings. He is connected with Allah in his worship, his relationship with others and his children, his eating, his companionship with his wife, his livelihood and many others of such respect, affirming that this religion concludes and evaluates all these things.

3. It is general

Another one of Islam's excellent aspects is its generality or applicability to all human beings. It was not sent solely to a specific group or special race. Almighty Allah Says (what means): "And We have not sent you except comprehensively to mankind as a bringer of good tidings and a warner..." [Qur'an: 34:28]. "Say, (O Muhammad), 'O mankind! Indeed I am the Messenger of Allah to you all!'" [Qur'an: 7:158]

Its suitability at any given time and place is permanent and unchangeable. Unlike the previous divine laws that catered only to a specific period and to a specific group or race.

Almighty Allah has provided Islamic messages with continuous characteristics and fulfillment of human needs till the Day of Judgment, demonstrating in effect one of Almighty Allah's wisdoms.

The Almighty Allah Says (what means): "This day I have perfected for you your religion, and completed My favour upon you, and have approved for you Islam as religion." [Qur'an: 5:3]

4. Islam sets up rewards as well as punishment for our deeds

The jurisprudential rulings of Islam are not just abstract pieces of advice or instructions that have no bearing for reward or punishment. On the contrary, it offers good reward for the obedient ones and punishment for the transgressors and violators of its law. Moreover, there are inherent degrees of reward and punishment in it. It is common knowledge that the punishment and rewards are meted out in the Last Day of Judgement but in some cases, the earthly penalty shares in the Day of Judgement's penalty by applying punishment to the people who violate the jurisprudential rulings of Islam in such cases as murder, theft and adultery.

This special feature of punishment and reward for deeds obliges Muslims to submit wilfully, whether secret or open, to the jurisprudential rulings of Islam. Muslims obey this for fear of Almighty Allah's punishment because even if one could escape from his sins in this life, the reality that everyone will be brought before Allah on the Day of Judgment for a fair and decent trial will always hold true in the end.

Therefore, Muslims avoid the forbidden deeds not only because of respect to and shame from Allah, but also out of fear for Allah's punishment on the Day of Judgment. Allah Says (what means): "The Day every soul will find what it has done of good present (before it) and what it has done of evil, it will wish between itself and

that (evil) was a great distance..." [Qur'an: 3:30].

So Muslims may escape from people that they have wronged while in this life, but they will always be held accountable for it causing them to fear Allah's punishment on the Day of Judgment.

5. It is ideal and practical

Islam homes and gears people for perfection, granting their needs, not ignoring them. This Islamic feature promotes mankind with due consciousness of his nature, reality, interest and desire.

In general, there is moderation more than exaggeration or excessiveness, but it still gives and satisfies each one with his needs.

This is best exemplified when Islam orders Muslims to pay charity or Zakat ("poor due") and at the same time it cautions man against his human instinct of cherishing money to the point of getting enslaved to it.

Almighty Allah Says (what means): "And (they are) those who, when they spend, do so not excessively or sparingly but are ever, between that, (justly) moderate." [Qur'an: 25:67]. "And let not your hand be tied (like a miser) to your neck nor stretch it forth to its utmost reach (like a spendthrift)". [Qur'an: 17:29] For instance, it is forbidden to follow one's desire by eating prohibited things or having illegal sexual intercourse. On the other hand, it is also forbidden to torture oneself by barring this natural need by fulfilling them in an allowed manner. So moderation must be there all the time.

Three people came to the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, and they asked about his daily programme and worship. Upon hearing it, they thought his worship was not enough for them. One of them said, "I will never sleep at night" (i.e. spend it solely in worshipping Allah). The other one said: "I will never get married" (so that he can spend his life solely worshipping Allah). The third one said: "I will never eat meat" (to deprive himself of the pleasure to be derived from it, perhaps that it would please Allah).

When Prophet Muhammad, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, heard them, he denied their deeds and said: "But I fast, break my fast, sleep and wake up (part of night for worshipping) and marry women - the one who refuses my Sunnah (recommended deeds) is not one of my followers."

Also, the jurisprudential ruling of Islam is practical. It has nothing impossible or hard to do because it is not abstract ideals but rather one that takes care of man's desires needs and the reality of his life. In this respect, Islam nurtures moulds, guides and polishes man without necessarily forgetting and renouncing his earthly whims and caprices.

Almighty Allah Says (what means): "And eat of what Allah has provided for you [which is] lawful and good. And fear Allah, in whom you are believers." [Qur'an: 5:88]. Also: "... Eat and drink but be not excessive..." [Qur'an: 7:31]. And: "O you who have believed, do not prohibit the good things which Allah has made lawful to you and do not transgress..." [Qur'an: 5:87].

We all know that Islam is the truth, but until and unless we realise all its merits, coupled of course with God's guidance and enlightenment, we will never be sure if we will always live with or die for it, considering the proliferation of various other religions around us.

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

Ascension of the Prophet

The ascension of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, to the heavens with his body and soul on the night of Israa' (Night Journey) and Miraaj (Ascension to Heaven), was authentically established. It was a special honour bestowed by Allah particularly on His Messenger, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam. Ibn Uthaymeen, may Allah have mercy upon him, wrote:

"The ascension of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, to the heaven was one of the special honours conferred particularly on him, and none of the past Prophets of Allah was granted such an honour, and it will not be bestowed upon anyone else after him, except the soul of the believer. Once extracted from the body, the angels wrap the believer's soul in a shroud that smells of musk and ascend up to the heavens. As for the angels, it is a totally different story. The honour of the ascension to heaven was peculiar to the Prophet. Allah has honoured him with perfect honour over all those who were before him."

"He, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, ascended up to the seventh heaven until he reached the place where the sound of the scratching of Pens, which record the Divine Decree, could be heard. He reached Sidrat Al-Muntaha (i.e. lotus-tree of the utmost boundary, beyond which none can pass), the farthest anyone ascending from the earth to the heaven could reach; we know of no other human being to have reached such a place other than the Prophet."

"This was a special honour bestowed on the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, in particular, and it was not granted to any other Prophet of Allah. It is one of the great signs indicating the perfect and infinite power of Allah, and it emphasises the great signs shown to the Prophet during this journey..." [Excerpted with slight modifications]

Among the reported scenes shown to the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, during his ascension to heaven are those of Paradise and Hellfire. Huthayfah ibn al-Yamaan, may Allah be pleased with him said: "The Messenger of Allah, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, was brought a riding beast with a long back - stretching out like this - one stride of it is as far as his vision. So, the two of them (the Prophet and the angel Jibreel [Gabriel]) remained upon the back of Al-Buraaq until they saw Paradise and Hellfire and all which has been prepared for the Hereafter, then they returned back to where they began." [At-Tirmithi graded it hasan saheeh (good or sound)]

Moreover, the Hadith reported about the incident of Al-Israa' wa Al-Miraaj reads, "... until he (Jibreel) took me to Sidrat Al-Muntaha, which was shrouded in colours, indescribable. Then I was admitted into Paradise, where I found small tents (made) of pearls, and its earth was of musk." [Al-Bukhari and Muslim]

Distinguishing the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, with the special honour of the ascension to heaven indicates his refined status and elevated rank; he, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, is the best of mankind.

Allah knows best.

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

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GULF TIMES

Trump's Venezuela oil adventure revives 'petrodollar' debate

There were likely many motives behind America's capture and arrest of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro earlier this week, but one little-discussed factor could be the White House's concerns about the waning global prominence of the "petrodollar."

Venezuela's oil output is currently modest at barely 1mn barrels per day, but its reported reserves of around 300bn barrels - 17% of the global stock - are the world's largest. President Donald Trump has made it clear that the US is interested in tapping this enormous potential, stating that he plans to have US energy majors revitalise the Latin American country's flailing oil industry.

Keeping all this future production within the US orbit could impact more than just energy markets, however, as it would create a lot more petrodollars - a tool that has long helped the US maintain its dominance in the global financial system.

The term "petrodollar" was coined in the mid-1970s when the US and Saudi Arabia agreed that global oil sales would be denominated in dollars, creating a new source of demand for the greenback and cementing US strategic, economic, and political power.

The period between 2002 and mid-2008 - when oil almost reached \$150 a barrel - potentially marked the peak of the petrodollar's powers. At that time, the US was the world's largest importer of crude, enabling oil-producing countries to amass huge trade surpluses, much of which was recycled back into the vast US Treasury market. This put downward pressure on US and therefore, global, bond yields and interest rates.

The period between 2002 and mid-2008 - when oil almost reached \$150 a barrel - potentially marked the peak of the petrodollar's powers

Fast forward to 2026, and the environment looks very different. Thanks to the shale oil revolution, the US is now the world's largest oil producer and has been a net exporter since 2021. Meanwhile, many producer nations now use their oil-driven trade surpluses to plug their own widening domestic budget deficits.

Moreover, the rise of China's economic power and new geopolitical rifts have reduced the percentage of the global oil trade denominated in dollars. There are no official figures, but it is estimated that as much as 20% of the world's crude trade is now priced in currencies other than the dollar, such as the euro or Chinese yuan.

The link between the dollar and oil has also shifted. Analysts at JP Morgan estimate that during the 2005-2013 period, a 1% appreciation of the US trade-weighted dollar reduced the price of Brent crude by about 3%. In the 2014-2022 period, a 1% rise in the dollar reduced the price of Brent by just 0.2%. And last year, the dollar and oil both fell, rather than moving in opposite directions.

So whether one is looking at oil producers' official holdings of Treasuries or oil revenues as a share of global capital flows, it is clear that the power of the petrodollar is on the decline.

This mirrors the dollar's slow but steady decline in global status over the past few decades. The greenback's share of foreign currency reserves is currently the lowest in 25 years, and while it remains the preeminent currency of global trade, that position is starting to fray also.

The Trump administration is pushing back, however. While the White House may want the dollar's exchange rate to be lower, it is keen to maintain its dominance in global markets - and the recent events in Venezuela could be part of this wider effort. It is promoting dollar-pegged "stablecoins" to strengthen the dollar's role in digital payments and global finance more broadly. It has also threatened to impose tariffs on countries seeking to develop alternatives to the dollar, most notably the Brics group of developing nations.

"The dollar is still the key currency in the oil market, and the US is trying to preserve this," says Hung Tran, nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.

Richard Werner, professor of banking and economics at the University of Winchester, agrees that Washington's actions in Venezuela are likely aimed at bolstering the petrodollar system.

Ultimately though, he believes these extreme actions could be seen as a sign of "desperation" that could accelerate the decline of the petrodollar if Brics nations and others in the "Global South" balk at Washington's use of military force to maintain currency dominance. That, of course, remains to be seen. — **Reuters**



Venezuela's oil and mining sectors: large potential, weak infrastructure

Venezuela has the world's largest estimated oil reserves but its crude output remains at a fraction of capacity due to decades of mismanagement, lack of investment and sanctions, official data shows.

Venezuela holds about 17% of global reserves or 303bn barrels, ahead of Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) leader Saudi Arabia, according to the London-based Energy Institute. Its reserves are made up mostly of heavy oil in the Orinoco region of central Venezuela, making its crude expensive to produce, but technically relatively simple, according to the US government's energy department.

In 2019, Maduro and Delcy Rodriguez, who was then the country's vice president and is now acting president, announced a five-year mining plan aimed at boosting mineral extraction as an alternative to oil production. The year prior, Venezuela's government released data on mineral deposits that used key mining industry terms interchangeably, including reserve and resource, making it difficult to ascertain whether Caracas knew its full mining potential.

A reserve is an estimate of the volume of a mineral that can be economically produced. A resource is the volume of a mineral estimated in an entire region, whether or not it can be economically produced.

The 2018 report, which was billed as a "minerals catalog" for potential investors and published on Venezuela's mining ministry website, estimated coal reserves of roughly 3bn metric tonnes and 407,885 metric tonnes of nickel reserves.

That same report estimated a gold resource of 644 metric tonnes, an iron ore resource of 14,68bn metric tonnes - while acknowledging much of that was a speculative estimate - and a bauxite resource of 321.5mn metric tonnes.

In 2021, Venezuela's government published a map of mineral reserves based on data compiled in 2009. That map showed reserves of antimony, copper, nickel, coltan,

molybdenum, magnesium, silver, zinc, titanium, tungsten and uranium, but did not list volumes. The country does not appear to have sizeable reserves of rare earths, a grouping of 17 minor metals used to make magnets that turn power into motion. Rare earths are a subset of critical minerals.

Production

Venezuela was a founding member of Opec with Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Its struggles with electricity production have repeatedly hampered mining and oil operations. The country was producing as much as 3.5mn barrels per day of crude in the 1970s, which at the time represented over 7% of global oil output. Production fell below

would be very strongly involved in Venezuela's oil sector. The operational status of the mines tied to Maduro's five-year plan is not clear. However, Maduro's National Council for Productive Economy last month said national production of gold, coal and iron ore grew in the first three quarters of 2025, without providing figures.

Venezuela nationalised its gold sector in 2011. The government also controls iron and steel maker CVG. Reuters reported last October that Venezuela had restarted coal production and aimed to export more than 10mn metric tonnes of the mineral in 2025. It is not clear whether the government hit that target. In 2019, the US Geological Survey estimated that Venezuela produced 100,000 metric tonnes

Petroleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA). During the 1990s, Venezuela took steps to open the sector to foreign investment. Following the election of Hugo Chavez in 1999, Venezuela mandated majority PDVSA ownership of all oil projects. Exxon and Conoco departed Venezuela in the 2000s and their assets were expropriated.

PDVSA set up ventures in the hope of boosting production, including with Chevron, China National Petroleum Corporation, ENI, Total and Russia's Rosneft. Maduro threatened in 2023 to license mines in a region subject to ownership dispute with neighbouring Guyana. Maduro's government since at least 2016 had supported artisanal gold mining in the Venezuelan Amazon to bring in revenue.

Exports, refining

The United States used to be the main buyer of Venezuelan oil but since the introduction of sanctions, China has become the main destination in the last decade. Venezuela owes about \$10bn to China after China became the largest lender under late President Hugo Chavez. Venezuela repays loans with crude transported in three very large crude carriers previously owned by Venezuela and China.

Two of those supertankers were approaching Venezuela in December when Trump announced a blockade of all tankers going in and out of the country. About a dozen oil tankers loaded with Venezuelan crude and fuel have left the country's waters since the start of the year in apparent defiance of the US government's blockade on exports, according to documents seen by Reuters and industry sources including monitoring service TankerTrackers.com.

Trump told Fox News that China would get the oil without elaborating. Russia has also loaned Venezuela billions of dollars but the exact amount is not clear. PDVSA also owns significant refining capacity outside the country, including CITGO in the United States, but creditors are battling to gain control of it through longstanding legal cases in US courts. — **Reuters**

Venezuela nationalised its oil industry in the 1970s, creating Petroleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA). During the 1990s, Venezuela took steps to open the sector to foreign investment

2mn bpd during the 2010s and averaged some 1.1mn bpd last year or just 1% of global production. That was roughly the same production as the US state of North Dakota.

"If developments ultimately lead to a genuine regime change, this could even result in more oil on the market over time. However, it will take time for production to recover fully," said Arne Lohmann Rasmussen from Global Risk Management.

If regime change is successful, Venezuela's exports could grow as sanctions are lifted and foreign investment returns, said MST Marquee analyst Saul Kavonic.

"History shows that forced regime change rarely stabilises oil supply quickly, with Libya and Iraq offering clear and sobering precedents," said Jorge Leon, head of geopolitical analysis at Rystad Energy.

Trump told Fox News on Saturday the United States

of coal from 731mn metric tonnes of reserves.

Much of the country's production of minerals, including nickel, bauxite, iron ore, and gold, has fallen alongside oil in the past decade. The latest available data on Venezuelan bauxite from the USGS, for 2021, put production at 250,000 metric tonnes, down from 550,000 tonnes in 2017, while iron ore output was 1.41mn tonnes on an iron content basis, and gold production was 480kg.

Output of alumina, the substance refined from bauxite that is used to make aluminium metal, was estimated by the USGS to be 80,000tonnes in 2021, having dwindled from 240,000 tonnes four years earlier. Aluminium production was estimated at just 20,000 tonnes, down from 144,000 tonnes in 2017.

Venezuela nationalised its oil industry in the 1970s, creating



An oil tanker is seen on Lake Maracaibo in Venezuela's western state of Zulia in this file picture. — **Reuters**

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A drone view shows a flooded area as members of the military take part in an operation to evacuate residents after severe rain caused flooding, in Fier, Albania, yesterday. (Reuters)

Albanian floods turn deadly as downpours force more evacuations

AFP
Tirana, Albania

The body of a man was pulled from floodwaters in Albania yesterday, police said, as swollen rivers in the country's south forced more evacuations following days of heavy snow and torrential rain across the Balkans.

The man's death is one of at least eight weather-related deaths across Europe as a cold snap sweeps large parts of the continent, cancelling hundreds of flights amid snow, ice and high winds.

Albanian police said the body of a 54-year-old man was found in an irrigation canal after he was swept away in the port city of Durres, where hundreds were evacuated.

Although recovery efforts were under way in parts of the city, some outlying areas remained at risk as a nearby river overflowed, forcing another 500 people to

evacuate on Thursday morning. Further south, an evacuation order was also issued for parts of the village of Novoseala as the nearby Vjosë River burst its banks. It was unclear how many residents were affected.

Downpours had also triggered landslides and blocked roads in several parts of the country, police said.

Flooding has also forced evacuations in parts of nearby Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro.

Some towns in western Serbia have been without power for several days after a snowstorm downed trees, knocking out the electricity supply.

The heavy snow also left one woman dead in Sarajevo earlier this week, after she was struck by a falling tree in the Bosnian capital.

Warnings for icy conditions and further snow remain in place across several Balkan countries.

AFP
Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron warned yesterday the United States was "gradually turning away" from some of its allies and "breaking free from international rules", offering some of his strongest criticism yet of Washington's policies under Donald Trump.

Macron delivered his annual speech to French ambassadors as European powers were scrambling to come up with a coordinated response to Washington's capture of Venezuela's leader Nicolas Maduro and the US president's designs on Greenland.

"The United States is an established power, but one that is gradually turning away from some of its allies and breaking free from international rules that it was still promoting recently," Macron told ambassadors at the Elysee Palace.

"We are living in a world of great powers with a real temptation to divide up the world," he said, rejecting what he described as a "new colonialism and new imperialism".

While he criticised both China's "increasingly uninhibited commercial aggressiveness" and Russia as a "destabilising power" whose nearly four-year war in Ukraine has no end in sight, his remarks about the United States stood out the most.

Macron however stopped short of calling for a break with



France's President Emmanuel Macron gestures as he delivers a speech to French ambassadors during the Ambassadors' Conference at the Elysee Palace in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

Washington, after US envoys earlier this week took part in a key US summit to discuss security guarantees to uphold any potential ceasefire to end Russia's war against Ukraine.

'Here to act'

Macron urged his diplomats not to be "spectators of things coming undone".

"It's the opposite! We're not here to comment. We're here to act!" he said.

Macron spoke after US special forces snatched Maduro and his wife from Venezuela on Saturday and whisked them to New York, sparking condemnation that the United States was undermining international law.

Trump then set off alarm bells in Europe by repeating his insist-

ence that he wants to take control of Greenland, an autonomous Danish territory.

The US president has repeatedly refused to rule out the use of force to seize the strategic Arctic island, prompting shock and anger from Denmark and other long-standing European allies.

Copenhagen has warned that any attack would spell the end of the Nato alliance.

"Reinvest fully in the UN" Macron did acknowledge that "multilateral institutions are functioning less and less effectively".

But the French leader insisted that "global governance" was key at a time when "every day people wonder whether Greenland is going to be invaded" and whether "Canada will face the threat of

becoming the 51st state".

He said it was the right moment to "reinvest fully in the United Nations, as we note its largest shareholder no longer believes in it".

The White House on Wednesday flagged Washington's exit from 66 global organisations and treaties - roughly half affiliated with the UN - it identified as "contrary to the interests of the United States".

Macron said Europe must protect its interests and urged the "consolidation" of European regulation of the technology sector, a source of frequent tensions between Brussels and Washington.

He also stressed the importance of safeguarding academic independence and hailed "the possibility of having a controlled information space where opinions can be exchanged completely freely, but where choices are not made by the algorithms of a few".

Brussels has adopted a powerful legal arsenal aimed at reigning in tech giants - namely through its Digital Markets Act (DMA), which covers competition, and the Digital Services Act (DSA) on content moderation.

Washington has denounced the tech rules as an attempt to "coerce" American social media platforms into censoring viewpoints they oppose.

"The DSA and DMA are two regulations that must be defended," Macron said.

Heavy wind, rain, snow to batter Europe

AFP
London

Europe was set to be buffeted by weather ranging from severe winds to snow and freezing temperatures with the arrival of Storm Goretta yesterday, with forecasters issuing warnings from Britain to Germany.

Britain's Met Office issued a "rare" red wind warning for the Isles of Scilly and Cornwall in southwestern England between 1600 GMT and 2300 GMT - its highest level of alert.

"Exceptionally strong winds" of up to 160kph (100mph) were expected, it said, warning that "very large waves will bring dangerous conditions to coastal areas". It also issued an amber snow warning in Wales, the Midlands and parts of northern England, predicting snow of up to 30cm (11 inches) in some areas.

The UK's National Rail has said train services will be impacted over the next two days, and called on people to avoid travel unless necessary.

No disruptions to air travel from London had yet been announced.

Schools closed, travel disruption

France was also bracing for Goretta, which will bring gusts of up to 160kph in the northern Manche department.

Schools there will remain closed today, and weather alerts have been issued in 30 other northwestern regions. "Take



This aerial photograph shows lorry-trucks stuck in traffic jam on the A1 highway near Izel-les-Equerchin, northern France. (AFP)

shelter and do not use your vehicle," the Manche prefecture warned on X, urging residents to prepare emergency lighting and a drinking water supply.

In Germany, heavy snow and winds in the north were set to affect schools, hospitals and transport links. Up to 15cm of snow (six inches) could fall in the north, and there was a risk of icy conditions in the south, according to the German Weather Service (DWD).

Temperatures this weekend could plunge to as low as -20C in certain areas, DWD meteorologist Andreas Walter told AFP.

Some areas have announced schools will shut today, including in the northern cities of Hamburg and Bremen.

In Hamburg, the weather had already caused delays and cancellations on the public transport network yesterday.

The national rail company

Deutsche Bahn warned of significant delays in the coming days and has mobilised more than 14,000 employees to clear snow from tracks and platforms.

'Consequence of climate change'

The DWD says that the storm is expected to last until Saturday, with snowfall stopping on Monday. Walter said the storm was an exception when compared to the last few years of milder winters, which were a "consequence of climate change".

"It's still possible to have a cold month with snow, even as temperatures rise due to climate change, but such events will become rarer in the future," he said.

The Norwegian Meteorological Institute meanwhile said there was only one region in Norway with temperatures above freezing on Thursday: the Arctic archipelago Svalbard.

Trade has risen since then and cultural ties have grown, with popular Pakistani singers performing in Dhaka, while Bangladeshi patients are travelling to Pakistan for medical care.

Relations between Bangladesh and Hasina's old ally India turned frosty after her ouster, while ties with Pakistan have warmed.

Cargo ships resumed sailing from Karachi to Bangladesh's key port of Chittagong in November 2024.

Trade has risen since then and cultural ties have grown, with popular Pakistani singers performing in Dhaka, while Bangladeshi patients are travelling to Pakistan for medical care.

Hundreds of French farmers protested in Paris yesterday after rolling into the capital on tractors, angry at a planned EU trade deal with South American bloc Mercosur they fear will create unfair competition. Dozens of tractors arrived before dawn and drove through Paris, some pausing at the Eiffel Tower and others at the Arc de Triomphe, in a protest organised by the Rural Confederation union.

"We said we'd come up to Paris - here we are," said Ludovic Ducloux, co-leader of one of the union's chapters.

One of the tractors bore the message "No to Mercosur", referring to the deal with the bloc comprising Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay.

The deal would create one of the world's biggest free-trade areas and help the 27-nation European Union export more vehicles,

machinery, wines and spirits to Latin America. EU member states

are expected to vote to give the text the final go-ahead on Friday, paving the way for a formal

signature next week. Farmers

fear being undercut by a flow of

cheaper goods from agricultural giant Brazil and its neighbours.

"We're not here to cause trouble," Damien Cornier, a 49-year-old

farmer from the northwest Eure

region, told AFP. "We just want to work and make a living from our profession."

Tractors blocked

Surrounded by police, farmers demonstrated in front of French parliament's lower house, heckling the National Assembly President Yael Braun-Pivet when she came out to meet with them. She and the head of the upper-house Senate, Gerard

Bangladesh and Pakistan - geographically divided by more than 1,500 kilometres (930 miles) by India - were once one nation. They split after a bitter war in 1971.

"The resumption of direct flights will significantly improve connectivity between Bangladesh and Pakistan, supporting business travel, tourism, and family reunions," Biman Bangladesh Airlines said in a statement.

Travellers between Bangladesh and Pakistan must currently use connecting flights through Gulf hubs such as Dubai and Doha.

Bangladesh has been in politi-

Direct Bangladesh-Pakistan flights to resume after 14 years

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh and Pakistan are to resume direct flights after more than a decade, Dhaka's national airline said yesterday, as ties warm and regional power balances shift.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines is scheduled to fly its first Dhaka-Karachi flight on January 29 and will be operated twice weekly, the first regular flights since 2012.

"We are relaunching the Dhaka-Karachi route with two weekly flights," airline manager Borsa Islam told AFP yesterday.

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Bangladesh has been in politi-

cal turmoil since a student-led revolt overthrew Sheikh Hasina in August 2024, ending her autocratic 15-year rule.

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Greenland should hold talks with US without Denmark: opposition leader

Reuters
Copenhagen

Greenland should hold direct talks with the US government without Denmark, a Greenlandic opposition leader told Reuters, as the Arctic island weighs how to respond to President Donald Trump's renewed push to bring it under US control. Trump has recently stepped up threats to take over Greenland, reviving an idea he floated in 2019 during his first term in office. Greenland is strategically located between Europe and North America, making it a critical site for the US ballistic missile defence system. Its rich mineral resources also fit Washington's goal of reducing dependence on China. The island is an autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark. It has its



Pele Broberg, the leader of the Greenlandic political party Naleraq, uses a mobile phone as he attends an interview during a visit to Copenhagen. (Reuters)

Naleraq, the largest opposition party and the most prominent political voice for Greenland's independence.

"Because Denmark is antagonising both Greenland and the US with their mediation."

Naleraq, which strongly advocates a rapid move to full independence, doubled its seats to eight in last year's election, winning 25% of the vote in the nation of just 57,000.

Although excluded from the governing coalition, the party has

said it wants a defence agreement with Washington and could pursue a "free association" arrangement

- under which Greenland would

receive US support and protection

in exchange for military rights,

without becoming a US territory.

All Greenlandic parties want

independence but differ on how,

and when, to achieve it.

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"We're not here to cause trouble," Damien Cornier, a 49-year-old



The coastal lifestyle and heritage.



The architecture of the Old Palace a symbol of Qatari heritage.

QM curates engaging line-up of activities for all ages in Jan

Qatar Museums kicks off 2026 with a month of creativity, culture and community

Qatar Museums (QM) begins 2026 with a rich and varied January programme that blends creativity, learning, and community engagement across its museums and creative hubs. Designed for audiences of all ages, the month-long line-up spans hands-on workshops, thought-provoking lectures, film screenings, and family-friendly outdoor activities.

At M7, creativity takes centre stage through a series of practical workshops that invite participants to experiment with craft, design, and self-expression. The Turkish Mosaic Candle Holder Workshop today (January 9) offers a calming introduction to mosaic art, guiding participants step by step as they assemble colourful geometric designs on glass.

The Make Your Own Garangao Tote Bag workshop, scheduled to-morrow (January 10), introduces the punch needle technique in a festive edition inspired by local tradition. Those interested in design at a more conceptual level can join the four-day Design Your Interior Space programme running on selected dates throughout the month, which provides a structured, professional approach to

planning interior projects and creating digital mood boards.

Rounding out the programme, the Macrame and Colour Workshop on January 11 combines texture and painting, allowing participants to create personalised artworks on wooden bases in a relaxed, beginner-friendly environment.

The National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) offers an equally engaging slate of activities that focuses on memory, storytelling, and sustainability. From Me to NMoQ, held on Saturdays throughout January in collaboration with Qatari Post, invites visitors to take Polaroid photographs, write personal messages, and contribute to a growing collective postcard display celebrating connection and shared experience.

The Ancestral Registry workshop on January 10 and 14 centres on oral history, encouraging participants to document stories of grandparents and elders, and to reflect on everyday life, values, and customs in earlier generations of Qatar.

Textile and environmental themes come together in Fabricated Horizon, a hands-on sculpture workshop inspired by



Macrame and Colour.

the exhibition Countryside: A Place to Live, Not to Leave, in which participants explore heritage and sustainability through creative practice. Throughout the month, families can also enjoy film screenings of Hope and Turtle Odyssey, two engaging films that follow the journeys of sea turtles while raising awareness about marine conservation and environmental responsibility.

The International Children's Day at the Museum of Islamic Art on January 10 invites families



Design your Own Garangao Bag.

to explore the museum's outdoor spaces and engage with activities inspired by the iconic I M Pei building and exhibition.

Young aspiring designers can take part in Architects: Build Your Own Modern Monument on January 20, a hands-on workshop introducing children aged 8 to 12 to architectural thinking through creative model-making.

Older children can join Flowers of the Past on January 26-27, which combines a gallery tour with a practical workshop ex-



Design Your Interior Space.

ploring Islamic motifs found in historic pots and vases, culminating in the creation of functional cardboard designs for plants and flowers.

January also marks the launch of season one of Lusail Museum Conversations, a new public lecture series examining the Late Ottoman world through art, politics, and cultural exchange.

The opening lecture on January 13, delivered by historian Edhem Eldem, explores the paintings of the last Ottoman caliph, Abdulmejid II, and how art was used to project modernity and responsibility during a period of reform.

The second lecture, on January 27, turns to 19th-century Tunisia, examining how rulers reshaped political imagery, diplomacy, and architecture to position the country at the crossroads of Ottoman reform and emerging modern statehood.

Liwan Design Studios and Labs adds a strong cinematic and nar-

rative dimension to the month with workshops focused on visual storytelling, costume design, and sound.

Storyboarding = Storytelling, running from January 12-15, introduces participants to the power of storyboards as a visual blueprint for film production, led by Belgian filmmaker and visual artist Vincent Bal.

From Script to Stitch, held from January 14-18, examines how costume design shapes character and narrative, guided by costume designer Mohammed "Simba" Elmur. Sound takes the spotlight in The Craft of the Foley Artist from January 19 to 21, where participants learn to create and record sound effects under the guidance of Rome-based Foley artist Mauro Eusepi.

For younger audiences, Dadu, Children's Museum of Qatar continues its popular Dadu Gardens activation every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday until April.



Agreement-signing with prominent partners and sponsors for Samla International Race 2026 yesterday at Al Sharq Village.

Samla International Race secures strategic partnerships ahead of January '26 edition

The Samla International Race has announced the signing of a series of strategic partnership agreements ahead of its upcoming edition, scheduled for January 24.

Sponsorship agreements were signed with several prominent partners and sponsors for this edition, including Katara Hospitality, Qatar Insurance Group, Defend-Alfardan, and Mazzraty, held yesterday at Al Sharq Village.

The ceremony also witnessed the signing of a partnership agreement between the Samla Race, Visit Qatar, and Asics, which will serve as the official sportswear partner of the race.

The agreement was signed in the presence of Azzam Abdulaziz al-Mannai, CEO of the Samla Race Organising Committee; Jassim al-Mahmoud, director of Public Relations and Communications

at Visit Qatar; and Seiji Hori, general manager of Asics Arabia.

Al-Mannai expressed his appreciation for this collaboration, saying that: "The continued support from Visit Qatar, alongside our sponsors and partners, provides strong momentum to further enhance organisational standards and deliver a world-class competitive experience for both participants and spectators."

In partnership with Visit Qatar, the upcoming edition of the Samla Race is expanding to the global stage, inviting elite male and female athletes from around the world to compete in a uniquely challenging test of strength and stamina across Qatar's diverse landscapes.

At Visit Qatar, we take pride in our strategic partnership with the Samla International Race, which represents the values of strength and endurance. Our support for this event aligns with our strategy to promote sports tourism and to highlight events that offer distinctive experiences for visitors and residents alike, while showcasing the natural and cultural assets

'Samla International Race evolves from local challenge into a global endurance platform'

By Shaima Sheriff
Doha

The Samla International Race, with its various partnerships, has developed from a well-known local challenge into a global endurance platform, according to Samla Race Organising Committee CEO Azzam Abdulaziz al-Mannai. Speaking to *Gulf Times* on the sidelines of the event yesterday at Al Sharq Village, he said that ahead of the endurance race scheduled for January 24, Samla International organisers forged a series of strategic alliances aimed at positioning Qatar as an emerging hub for elite multidisciplinary sport, marking a decisive step in the event's global expansion.

Al-Mannai said the agreements represent a milestone in Samla's journey toward international recognition, highlighting its ambition to move beyond its local roots and secure a place on the global sporting calendar. This year's edition will see more than 400 athletes competing across six demanding stages, all to be completed within a 12-hour cut-off. The race will unfold in southern Qatar's desert, starting from Sealine Beach and cutting through a range of challenging natural terrains.

"This year's race will be truly spectacular and it's a really special challenge," al-Mannai said. "Six



Azzam Abdulaziz al-Mannai.

PICTURE: Thajjudheen

stages, four disciplines, and 100km in 12 hours. Resilience and adaptability are just as important as endurance."

Launched in 2016, Samla has long been recognised as a proving ground for regional endurance athletes. However, organisers stressed that the event is now deliberately repositioning itself as an international race capable of attracting elite competitors and global attention.

"Samla has always been there for local athletes. However, we want Samla to expand internationally after almost a decade, beginning here in Qatar," al-Mannai said.

"Because it differs from many other endurance events, the race has enormous potential." He noted that Samla's distinct identity lies in its off-road format and the demanding climate and terrain of Qatar, which together create a rare test of physical and mental endurance. "The challenge takes place across varied environments, including sand dunes, open water, and difficult weather conditions," he said. "This makes it a very unique race and a genuine endurance test." Al-Mannai added that the involvement of international partners has played a key role in elevating the race's profile and professional standards, helping align it with globally recognised endurance events. Organisers also highlighted the wider impact of Samla International on Qatar's sports tourism sector and international image. With global brands, international athletes and local stakeholders involved, the race serves not only as a sporting challenge but also as a showcase of Qatar's diverse natural landscape. Al-Mannai encouraged both participants and spectators to be part of the experience. "I invite everyone who has registered to enjoy the race and wish them the very best," he said. "For those who could not register this year, come and enjoy the show and prepare yourselves for the next edition."

Years of Culture set to publish children's book with HBKU Press tie-up

QNA
Doha

The Years of Culture initiative is set to launch a new children's book under the title *The Mysterious Desert Delicacy*, at the Qatar International Food Festival (QIFF), which will take place during the period of Jan 14-24, 2026. The book was developed in collaboration with Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press (HBKU Press), and it is a creative legacy project of the Qatar-USA 2021 Year of Culture, celebrating cultural storytelling, environmental heritage, and culinary discovery.

Written by American author Allison Taylor and illustrated by Damon Guthrie, the book introduces young readers to Qatar's rare and



culturally treasured desert truffle (fagga) through a tale of adventure and friendship. The book intentionally combines education and cultural knowledge-sharing, featuring wildlife insights by ecologist Sara Abdul Majid and a truffle-inspired recipe by the former head of Alain Ducasse

restaurants in Doha, Chef Damien Leroux.

Developed as a legacy of the Qatar-USA 2021 Year of Culture, the book is a meaningful addition to the growing literary legacy of the Years of Culture programme, which celebrates cultural exchange between Qatar and its international partners. The Years of Culture initiative spearheads long-lasting cultural partnerships between Qatar and other nations.

It exists to promote respect and understanding among diverse cultures and serves as a catalyst for bringing people together, nurturing connections, encouraging dialogue, and deepening understanding. At its heart, Years of Culture celebrates the power of cultural exchange, which enriches Qatar's ties with partner countries beyond the dedicated year.