





# Al Noor Center for Blind unveils Braille mural in downtown Doha

QNA  
Doha

Al Noor Center for the Blind, one of the centres affiliated with the Qatar Foundation for Social Work, has unveiled an interactive Braille mural in M7 Square in the Msheireb area, coinciding with the 'Akhlaquna-Thank You Campaign' Initiative.

The event comes as part of the centre's efforts to raise community awareness about Braille, promote inclusion, and provide a direct, interactive experience that contributes to bringing together members of society and people with visual impairments.

The interactive mural allows visitors to write the word 'Thank You' and their names in Braille on a dedicated board, accompanied by a message of solidarity expressing support and appreciation for people with visual impairments. This provides a firsthand experience that introduces the public to the basics of reading and writing in Braille.

The mural aims to raise awareness about Braille in a practical and interactive way, encouraging visitors to engage directly with Braille rather than simply viewing it. It also seeks to strengthen the community's connection to literacy for the blind and to introduce the interactive mechanisms used by visually impaired individuals in their daily lives.

Meshaal Abdullah al-Nuaimi, Executive Director of Al Noor Center for the Blind, emphasised that the Braille mural is a unique awareness initiative that allows the public to experience Braille firsthand, thus contributing to



raising awareness of its importance and its role in empowering visually impaired individuals and enhancing their independence and social participation.

He noted that holding the event in M7 Square in Msheireb reflects the centre's commitment to being present in cultural and community spaces and reaching diverse segments of society through interactive awareness initiatives that are both simple and profound. For her part, Acting Director of the Community Awareness Department, Munira Ayed al-Athba ex-

plained that the mural is part of the department's efforts to provide awareness through advanced and diverse methods based on direct experience, thus contributing to solidifying the concepts related to Braille for visitors.

She noted that the event aims to introduce the public to Braille and how to use it, in addition to promoting direct human interaction with the experiences of visually impaired individuals, emphasising that this type of initiative contributes to building a more inclusive community awareness.

## Doha Institute for Graduate Studies holds workshop with APSA

The Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, in co-operation with the American Political Science Association (APSA), organised a four-day workshop entitled 'Engaged Research in the Middle East and North Africa'. The programme convened 20 advanced doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows, and early-career PhD-holding practitioners from across the Mena region, who are undertaking research that consciously employs participatory and engaged research methodologies in the region.

The programme aimed to build on growing interest in the methodological, practical, and ethical questions that arise from the use of political science research in non-academic or academic-adjacent contexts and support political science graduate students and practitioners in applied research settings, lead by Lara Khattab (Doha Institute), Stacey Philbrick Yadav (Hobart and William Smith), Sarah E Parkinson (Johns Hopkins University), and Ammar Shamaileh (Doha Institute).

Sessions combined thematic seminars, facilitated discussions with experts, panels, and collaborative group exercises to equip participants with methodological tools and a shared professional vocabulary that render applied and engaged research legible, rigorous, and relevant in academic and policy environments.

Topics included, among others, research and human rights advocacy, research collaboration for track II diplomacy, negotiating ethical challenges in participatory research, and data reliability for applied research. The workshop was organised through APSA's Middle East and North Africa (Mena) programme, a multi-year effort funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York to support political science research and networking among early-career scholars across the Arab Mena region. (QNA)



## Al Jazeera Media Institute to host podcast training workshop in Feb

Al Jazeera Media Institute will launch at its headquarters the latest of its training programmes, titled "Producing podcast short audio stories", on February 15, from 6pm-9pm, led by trainer Amal al-Arissi. The importance of this workshop stems from the growing popularity of podcasts as a digital media platform and from the role of short audio stories in attracting listeners and delivering concise, impactful content in a short time.

The workshop encompasses an introduction to the podcast world and the characteristics of short audio stories, developing and writing ideas in a concise narrative style, and the basics of recording and simple audio processing, with an intentional focus on voice performance skills such as breathing, tone, and expression.

By the end of the workshop, participants will be able to write an engaging short narrative script for a podcast episode, record and process audio to produce a well-crafted short episode. Participants will receive a certificate of participation from Al Jazeera Media Institute at the end of the workshop. Participation is open to everyone who has basic knowledge of audio recording applications.

## From the archives



A selected image from the archive of the Public Relations Department of the Ministry of Interior, showing part of the work of the operations room while receiving and following up on reports in the 1980s.

# High prevalence of Vitamin D deficiency among young adults in Qatar, reveals study

By A Staff Reporter  
Doha

## Research report, published in Qatar Medical Journal, says considerable numbers of adolescents suffer from Vitamin D deficiency in the country

A recent medical study has revealed that Vitamin D deficiency is considered one of the most prominent health challenges facing children and adolescents in Qatar, with adolescents, particularly girls, bearing the greatest burden of this problem.

The study, published in *Qatar Medical Journal* issued by Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press, showed that Vitamin D deficiency is no longer an individual issue linked to simple behaviour.

Rather, it is a multifactorial public health concern influenced by age-related and biological factors, lifestyle patterns, and cultural and social factors, despite Qatar's abundant sunshine year-round. The study, titled 'Prevalence and selected predictors of Vitamin D deficiency among children and adolescents attending primary health care centres: A cross-sectional record-based study, Qatar' was based on a comprehensive analysis of around 49,000 electronic medical records of children and adolescents under the age of 18 years who visited Primary Health Care Corporation centres over a full year.

The study's findings showed that the rates of severe Vitamin D deficiency were relatively low among infants and young children, but increased sharply and alarmingly with age. The prevalence of severe deficiency was 3.8% among infants under one year of age and 13.4% among

children aged between one and four years, reflecting relatively successful early-care and nutrition programmes during the first stages of life.

However, the image changed dramatically among older age groups. The data indicated that about 14% of adolescents aged 10-17 years suffer from severe vitamin D deficiency, defined as a blood Vitamin D level of less than 10 nano-grams per millilitre.

The study also revealed notable gender differences, showing that girls are more susceptible to severe Vitamin D deficiency than boys. The prevalence of severe deficiency reached 53.4% among girls, compared to 15.3% among boys. This disparity reflects the influence of several factors, including the nature of daily activities, levels of exposure to sunlight, as well as certain cultural and social practices that may limit outdoor activity among girls.

Ethnic background also played a pivotal role in determining Vitamin D levels. The study found that children of South Asian origin face a significantly higher risk of severe Vitamin D deficiency compared to their peers from other regions.

The researchers attributed this to differences in dietary patterns, skin pigmentation, and genetic factors, as well as families' lifestyles and work conditions, all of which

directly affect children's health.

Using multivariable logistic regression analysis, the researchers identified age, gender, nationality, and obesity as the main predictors of severe Vitamin D deficiency. The results showed that adolescents are 17 times more likely to suffer from severe deficiency compared to children under the age of five, clearly indicating that adolescence represents a critical turning point in Vitamin D status.

The risk among females was found to be 24 times higher than among males, while children of South Asian origin were 5.7 times more likely to develop severe Vitamin D deficiency. The study also demonstrated that overweight and obesity significantly increase the likelihood of Vitamin D deficiency.

Despite the abundance of sunlight in Qatar, the study pointed out that modern lifestyle factors play a major role in maintaining low Vitamin D levels. These include limited engagement in outdoor activities, increasing reliance on indoor lifestyles, certain cultural practices, unbalanced dietary habits, and rising rates of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents.

The study further stressed that these combined factors contribute to the worsening of the problem, particularly among older age groups.

## Hour and Hour programme holds 'Tourist Destinations' event

The Hour and Hour programme launched the "Tourist Destinations" event as part of the Qatar Heritage Festival, with the support of Qatar Museums and Ain Mohammed Village, and in co-operation with the Youth Department of Al Sailiya Sports Club.

The event was held at the Ain Mohammed archaeological site to highlight the richness and diversity of the Qatari experience in culture, heritage, nature, and authentic hospitality. The Hour and Hour programme organised this event for the third time to enhance Qatar's position as a leading tourist destination regionally and globally.

Hour and Hour chief executive Tamani al-Yafai expressed her delight in organising this event, which was aimed at senior citizens. The first edition, held in August last year, targeted primary and preparatory school students and people with special needs, while the second, held in November, targeted secondary and university students.

Al-Yafai stated that the third edition of the event was particularly significant, as it reflected Qatari heritage and authenticity, especially given its location in the

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ancient village of Ain Mohammed, a testament to the richness of Qatari traditions.

She added that the Hour and Hour programme's "Tourist Destinations" event featured a comprehensive interactive programme that combined numerous educational activities to introduce senior citizens to the most prominent tourist, cultural, and historical landmarks in Qatar.

Al-Yafai noted that the programme aims to support the tourism economy by stimulating domestic tourism and attracting visitors, in addition to strengthen-



'Tourist Destinations' was launched as part of the Qatar Heritage Festival.

ing partnerships with the private sector, cultural and tourism institutions and sport to develop local tourism content.

"At the 'Hour and Hour' programme, we strive to create a unique space that combines enjoyment and benefit, strengthening

the sense of belonging and pride in national identity, while highlighting the rich tourism potential of our country," al-Yafai said.

Ain Mohammed Village director Mohammed Hassan al-Nuaimi highlighted the importance of this event and the efforts of the Hour

and Hour programme in organising it. He emphasised the programme's commitment to bringing senior citizens together and introducing them to the various aspects of the event, which aimed to promote the village and stimulate domestic tourism.

# From clinic to canvas: Meet the doctor who paints life through art

By Amjad Vanimal  
Doha

At Art Factory Lusail, Fox Hills, a quiet exhibition space is currently drawing visitors into a world of unspoken emotions, fleeting moments and deeply personal reflections.

The reason is 'Soul in Strokes', the latest solo exhibition by Dr Sreekumar Padmanabhan, a medical professional whose paintbrush has become as powerful a tool of healing as his stethoscope.

The week-long exhibition, which kicked off on January 2, features a compelling series of realistic oil and acrylic works that explore everyday life, human expressions and the subtle emotions often overlooked in modern routines. "From the name 'Soul in Strokes', I wanted to capture emotions, the very essence of the soul, through my brush," Dr Padmanabhan explains. "In our busy lives, we forget to appreciate the beauty in small moments. These paintings give those moments a space to be seen."

Each artwork is accompanied by a short narrative that describes what inspired its creation, encouraging visitors not only to observe but also to reflect. The result is an immersive viewing experience where art becomes conversation between the canvas and the viewer, and often within the



'Soul in Strokes' exhibition at Art Factory Lusail, Fox Hills.

viewer's own memories.

Dr Padmanabhan has spent more than 18 years in Qatar, building a medical career rooted in discipline, service and continuous learning. He arrived in Doha in 2007 after a decade of medical practice in the UAE and currently serves as a doctor in the government sector. His professional journey includes advanced qualifications such as MRCP and specialised diplomas in Occupational Health, Diving Medicine and Lifestyle Medicine. He also conducts multiple training programmes at the Hamad International Training Centre.

Yet, alongside this structured medical path runs a parallel life shaped by creativity.

"I paint whenever I get free

time. It is not something I have to plan; it just happens," he says. "Painting keeps me grounded."

What makes Soul in Strokes especially distinctive is the way it mirrors Dr Padmanabhan's multicultural life journey. His Indian roots, professional life in Qatar, interactions across the Middle East and travels abroad all quietly surface through the faces, settings and emotions portrayed in his paintings.

Being self-taught, his artistic evolution has been shaped by observation, curiosity and constant experimentation.

"I learn by watching people, their expressions, their silences, their stories," he shares. "I hope people can see my growth through my paintings."

His works often focus on people, not as posed subjects, but as carriers of stories, emotions and lived realities. Viewers frequently find themselves emotionally drawn to his canvases, connecting the scenes to their own personal experiences.

"Art is not just about technique," he reflects. "It is about making people feel something."

A member of the Katara Fine Arts Society, Dr Padmanabhan has participated in nearly 60 exhibitions in Qatar, including about 15 solo shows and more than 17 group exhibitions at Katara alone. He is also a familiar face as a jury member for children's art competitions, quietly nurturing young creative talent.

Despite this extensive artistic



Dr Padmanabhan's works often focus on people, not as posed subjects, but as carriers of stories, emotions and lived realities.



Dr Padmanabhan's artistic evolution has been shaped by observation, curiosity and constant experimentation. **PICTURE:** Rafeeq Nhamanghat

footprint, he remains humble, introducing himself first as a doctor, and letting his paintings speak for him.

For him, artistic success is not measured in sales, but in emotional connection. "When someone stands in front of a painting and sees their own story in it, that is my real reward," he says.

#### A cultural connector

Living in Qatar has further shaped his belief in multicultural harmony. He speaks warmly of

working alongside colleagues from across the world and of the natural closeness that grows within Qatar's compact and diverse society.

He is currently also part of the Katara group exhibition 'From Qatar', which brings together artists of different nationalities, reflecting the country's cultural mosaic.

At the heart of his philosophy lies the Indian principle Atithi Devo Bhava (The guest is God), a value that influences both his medical practice and his artistic interactions.

"As a doctor, I always ask myself how I would like to be treated if I were the patient. That is how I treat people," he says.

While realism remains the foundation of his work, Dr Padmanabhan plans to explore simplified styles, mixed media, story-driven compositions and larger-format works in future exhibitions – signalling a new creative chapter ahead. In his world, healing does not end in the clinic. It continues – quietly and beautifully – on canvas.

## MES organises moral, spiritual guidance session for students



MES Indian School's department of Arabic and Islamic studies recently organised a motivational session, titled "Moral and Spiritual Guidance and Its Implications" for students of classes VII-XII at the KG Hall.

The session, which aims to foster ethical values and inner growth among students, was attended by some 260 participants and featured two distinguished speakers.

Dr Sulaiman Melpathur, an eminent motivational speaker from India known for his impactful sessions on character-building and youth empowerment, addressed the students with compelling

messages on the importance of nurturing moral values in the formative years.

Dr Sulaiman Melpathur's thought-provoking speech emphasised the role of spiritual grounding in building resilience, purpose, and compassion in a fast-changing world.

Joining him was Wafi Shihad, an alumnus of MES Indian School and a youth mentor, who shared his inspiring journey from being a student of the school to becoming a positive influence on the youth community. Usman Mayyari, head of the department of Arabic and Islamic studies, co-ordinated the event.



### MES students visit special needs centre

MES Indian School, in an effort to foster empathy, inclusion, and awareness among young learners, organised an educational visit to the Doha International Centre for Special Needs recently as a part of its Disability Awareness Programme.

Led by junior section counsellor Fashna Abdul Samad, the initiative aims to sensitise Class IV students to the challenges and strengths of individuals with disabilities and to promote respect, understanding, and acceptance.

The session began with an engaging presentation by Dilna, speech and language pathologist from the centre, who introduced



the students to different types of disabilities and discussed the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment for people with special needs. A key highlight of the programme was an address by Dr

Hala, consultant in the affairs of people with disabilities and general manager of the centre.

In her message, Dr Hala emphasised the importance of cultivating empathy and acceptance among the younger generation.

## Kodaca marks 19th anniversary

The Kottayam District Arts and Cultural Association (Kodaca), a leading cultural organisation in Qatar, conducted its 19th anniversary celebration 'Ormachepu' at the Indian Cultural Centre's Ashoka Hall recently in front of a large crowd comprising families and invited guests. Kodaca, an organisation formed in Qatar by residents of the Kottayam district, aims to encourage and fuel the socio-cultural development of its members and to extend support to the needy in Kottayam and in Qatar.

The ceremony was presided over by Kodaca president Muhammad Ziyad, and was inaugurated by the first secretary of the Indian embassy in Qatar, Harish Pandey. ICC president Manikandan, ISC president E P Abdul Rahman, Indian Community Benevolent Forum vice-president Rasheed Ahmed and Jopachan Thekkekkoot, attended the event. General secretary Dr George Joseph welcomed representatives of various cultural organisations and the vote of thanks was delivered by the cultural secretary, Manju. As part of the anniversary celebration, many



artistic programmes were staged. A special programme, titled 'Ormachepu', brought together the beauty, music and memories of 1970s Malayalam cinema. The programmes were organised under the leadership

of the president and his team, comprising programme co-ordinator Saheer Abdul Karim, secretary Abdul Karim Lebba, Simi Chandran, Ranju Anup, Neethu Thampam, Manju Manoj and other Kodaca members.

### BPS alumna wins UMB Miss India title

Birla Public School (BPS), Doha, congratulated alumna Aditi Gorle (**pictured**) of Class of 2020-21, for winning the prestigious UMB Miss India Title 2025, a national recognition honouring excellence, confidence, leadership, and poise among women across India. According to BPS principal, Dr Anand R Nair, Aditi Gorle's remarkable accomplishment reflects her exceptional determination, grace and

perseverance. Her inspiring journey – from the classrooms of Birla Public School to the national spotlight – stands as a shining example of the school's commitment to fostering confident, holistic individuals who excel beyond academic boundaries. The management, faculty, and students at Birla Public School have congratulated Aditi Gorle and wished her continued success in all her future endeavours.



### SMCA holds blood donation, medical camp



The Syro Malabar Cultural Association (SMCA) organised a blood donation camp recently at their premises with the participation of a large number of donors. The organisation also arranged a free medical camp in association with American Hospital Doha where people were tested for various lifestyle diseases and other ailments. Organisers said that it was the first such drive of the association in 2026 and it will be followed by more such initiatives in the coming months.



## Aftermath of Gaza strikes



Palestinian children stand near a crater in the Bureij camp in the central Gaza Strip, yesterday, following Israeli attacks. Gaza's civil defence agency said Israeli attacks in the Palestinian territory killed at least 13 people, including five children, despite a ceasefire that has largely halted the fighting.



Palestinian men re-erect a tent shelter, the day after the Israeli military shelled a tented camp housing displaced families, in the Al-Shati refugee camp, in Gaza City, yesterday.

# Diplomat tipped for Trump's Gaza peace board meets officials

AFP  
Jerusalem

The man expected to represent the US-backed Board of Peace in Gaza, Bulgarian politician and diplomat Nickolay Mladenov, has in recent days already held meetings with Israeli and Palestinian officials.

Mladenov has experience in the region, having served as the UN envoy for the Middle East peace process from early 2015 until the end of 2020.

Media reports say he is expected to be the representative on the ground for the board, which is to be created as part of the Gaza ceasefire agreement brokered last year by US President Donald Trump.

Trump himself is set to chair the board.

US media outlet Axios reported that the US president is expected to announce the board's membership next week and that it would include around 15 world leaders.

"Among the countries expected to join the board are the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt and Türkiye," it reported.

Shortly after meeting Israeli President Isaac Herzog on Thursday, Mladenov held talks with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem.



File photo of Nickolay Mladenov.

Yesterday, Mladenov visited the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah, seat of the Palestinian Authority, to meet Palestinian vice president Hussein al-Sheikh.

In a statement on X, Sheikh said that the discussion focused on "the situation in the Gaza Strip, means of transitioning to the second phase," of the fragile ceasefire that took effect between Israel and Hamas in October, and implementing Trump's plan.

Under the 20-point programme, Gaza is to be governed by a transitional and technocratic Palestinian committee, under the oversight and supervision of the Board of Peace.

During the second stage of the ceasefire, Israel is supposed to gradually withdraw from its positions in Gaza, while Hamas is supposed to lay down its weapons.

An international stabilisation force is also to be deployed.

The US and regional mediators are keen to move to the second phase, but progress has stalled, with each side accusing the other of violations.

Gaza's civil defence agency — which operates as a rescue force under Hamas authority — said Israeli attacks in the territory on Thursday killed at least 13 people, including five children.

The Israeli military said it "precisely struck Hamas fighters" in response to a "failed projectile" launch.

Writing for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in October, Mladenov said that "sustained US engagement will be essential, alongside the willingness of European and regional partners to contribute both funds and troops."

Mladenov was Bulgaria's defence minister and then foreign minister from 2010 until 2013, before serving as the UN's special representative for Iraq.

"He does not view diplomacy as mere bargaining. He knows that setting a goal and having the will to achieve it is just as important," said Vessela Tcherneva of the European Council on Foreign Relations who previously worked as Mladenov's spokesperson.

A senior diplomat in the region told AFP that Mladenov had channels open with a range of actors, including both Israelis and Palestinians.

"What we're really hoping for here is basically a miracle: that he finds the one thing that finally shifts the whole thing."

## Lebanon FM urges Iran to find 'new approach' on Hezbollah arms

AFP  
Beirut

Lebanese Foreign Minister Youssef Raggi yesterday urged his visiting Iranian counterpart to find a "new approach" to the thorny issue of disarming the Hezbollah fighter group.

Lebanon is under heavy US pressure to disarm Hezbollah, which was heavily weakened in more than a year of hostilities with Israel that largely ended with a November 2024 ceasefire, but Iran and the group have expressed opposition to the move.

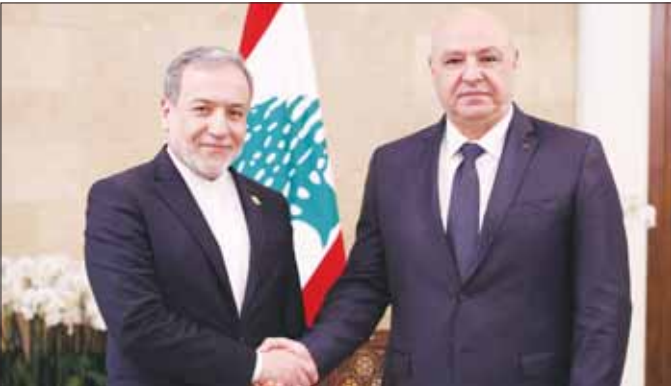
"The defence of Lebanon is the sole responsibility of the Lebanese state", which must have a monopoly on weapons, Raggi told Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, a Lebanese foreign ministry statement said.

Raggi called on Iran to engage in talks with Lebanon to find "a new approach to the issue of Hezbollah's weapons, drawing on Iran's relationship with the party, so that these weapons do not become a pretext for weakening Lebanon".

He asked Araghchi "whether Tehran would accept the presence of an illegal armed organisation on its own territory".

Last month, Raggi declined an invitation to visit Iran and proposed meeting in a neutral third country.

Lebanon's army said on Thursday that it had completed the first phase of disarming Hezbollah, doing so in the south



Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi shakes hands with Lebanese President Joseph Aoun at the presidential palace in Baabda, Lebanon, in this handout image released yesterday.

Lebanon area near the border with Israel, which called the efforts "far from sufficient".

Araghchi also met President Joseph Aoun yesterday and was set to hold talks with several other senior officials.

After arriving on Thursday, he visited the mausoleum of former Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who was killed in a massive Israeli air strike on south Beirut in September 2024.

## Berlin plans to host Sudan aid conference

AFP  
Berlin

Germany plans to host a Sudan aid conference in the spring to raise emergency relief funds for the war-torn country, the foreign ministry said yesterday.

Brutal fighting between Sudanese government forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces

(RSF) has devastated the country, with reports of atrocities, starvation and mass killings. "Today, the world commemorates a sad date: 1,000 days of war in Sudan," a foreign ministry spokeswoman said. "Far too many people continue to suffer and die there, victims of hunger, thirst, displacement and rape."

The conference would be held around the anniversary of the 2023 outbreak of the civil war in April, the spokeswoman said.

# Syria army issues warning as fighters refuse to evacuate

AFP  
Aleppo

Syria's army said it would renew strikes on a Kurdish district of Aleppo yesterday after fighters from the minority refused to leave, as a fragile ceasefire deal to halt days of fighting faltered.

The government and Kurdish forces have traded blame over who started the violence in Syria's second city on Tuesday as they struggle to implement a deal to merge the Kurds' de facto autonomous administration and military into the country's new government.

At least 21 people have been killed and tens of thousands have fled the worst clashes in Aleppo since Syria's new authorities took power, with the fighting presenting yet another challenge for a country struggling to forge a new path since the ousting of longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad a



Residents of Ashrafieh neighbourhood queue to receive aid after days of clashes, in Aleppo, Syria, yesterday.

year ago. Early yesterday, Syrian authorities announced a truce with Kurdish forces linked to the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and said fighters and their light weapons would be sent to Kurdish areas further east.

But Kurdish fighters rejected any "surrender" and said they would stay and defend their districts. Later yesterday, Syria's

army warned it would renew strikes on the Kurdish-majority district of Sheikh Maqsud and urged residents to evacuate, publishing maps of what it said were military targets and urging Kurdish fighters to lay down their weapons.

An AFP correspondent saw residents laden with belongings fleeing before a two-hour humanitarian corridor closed at

6:00pm (1500 GMT). The Kurds then said in a statement the neighbourhood was coming "under intense and heavy shelling".

State television accused the Kurds of launching drones on residential areas of Aleppo.

Turkiye's Defence Minister Yasar Guler welcomed the government operation, saying "we view Syria's security as our own security and that we support Syria's fight against terrorist organisations".

Sheikh Maqsud and Ashrafiyeh have remained under the control of Kurdish units linked to the SDF, despite Kurdish fighters agreeing to withdraw from the areas in April. The SDF controls swathes of Syria's oil-rich north and northeast, and was key to the defeat of the Islamic State group in 2019. But Ankara views their main component as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which earlier this year agreed to end its four-decade armed struggle against Turkiye.

## Iran shuts off Internet amid protests in cities

Reuters  
Dubai

Iran was largely cut off from the outside world yesterday after authorities blacked out the Internet to curb growing unrest, and video showed buildings aflame in anti-government protests raging in cities across the country.

Rights groups have already documented dozens of deaths of protesters in nearly two weeks and, with Iranian state TV showing clashes and fires, the semi-official Tasnim news agency reported that several police officers had been killed overnight. In a televised address, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei vowed not to back down, accusing demonstrators of acting on behalf of emigre opposition groups and the US, and a public prosecutor threatened death sentences. Iran's Ministry of Information and Communications Technology said the decision to shut down the Internet was made "by the competent security authorities under the prevailing circumstances of the country." The

protests pose the biggest internal challenge in at least three years to Iran's rulers amid a dire economic situation and after last year's war with Israel and the US.

While the initial protests focused on the economy, with the rial currency losing half its value against the dollar last year and inflation topping 40% in December, they have morphed to include slogans aimed directly at the authorities.

Iranian rights group HRANA said yesterday it had documented the deaths of at least 62 people, including 14 security personnel and 48 protesters, since demonstrations began on December 28.

The Internet blackout has sharply reduced the amount of information flowing out of the country. Phone calls to Iran were not getting through. At least 17 flights between Dubai and Iran were cancelled, Dubai Airport's website showed.

Images published by state television overnight showed what it said were burning buses, cars and motorbikes as well as fires at underground railway stations and banks.

# Gambia govt intercepts 780 migrants

AFP  
Banjul

Authorities have intercepted more than 780 migrants attempting to use The Gambia as a launchpad to Europe, the interior ministry said yesterday, days after a capsized migrant boat off the coast killed more than 30 people.

Tens of thousands of people, most of them young, have tried to reach Europe from west Africa in recent years, mainly via the Spanish Canary Islands, on overcrowded and often dilapidated boats.

“We conducted three operations, which led to the interception of 782 would-be migrants across different locations in the country,” said Siman Lowe, spokesman for the Gambia Immigration Department.

He said the operation began on January 3 after at least 31 people were killed when an overloaded migrant boat capsized overnight on New Year’s Eve.

Migrant boats have recently been forced to leave from further south in west Africa, notably from The Gambia and Guinea, after Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco increased maritime patrols.

“The Gambia has observed with deep concern, the rapid increase in the number of people attempting to travel to Europe by sea using The Gambia as a launch path,” the interior ministry said in a statement.

The situation, it added, had prompted “the activation of special operation teams to decisively respond”.

Among those intercepted were 233 people from Senegal, 197 from The Gambia, 176 from Guinea and 148 from Mali.

A number of migrant boat accidents linked to The Gambia occurred towards the end of 2025.

The boat that capsized overnight December 31 to January 1 was last heard from in a distress call near the country’s North Bank region.

A boat with more than 200 people on board, which on December 5 left the northern village of Jinack, also in the North Bank region, remains unaccounted for, according to the Ebrima Migrant Situation Foundation.

And a vessel with more than 190 migrants which departed from Jinack on November 17 has been confirmed to have sunk after weeks of failed tracing, the same foundation said.

# Russia joins Chinese warships for drills off SA

AFP  
Simon’s Town

A Russian warship arrived off South Africa’s main naval base yesterday to join Chinese and Iranian vessels for military exercises that risk further damaging Pretoria’s relations with Washington.

The exercises draw together several nations feuding with the US administration and come at a time of heightened tensions following Washington’s raid on Venezuela.

A Chinese destroyer and replenishment ship, as well as an Iranian forward base vessel, sailed into South African waters earlier this week ahead of the week-long manoeuvres due to kick off at the weekend.

AFP journalists near the Simon’s Town base saw the Russian-flagged corvette vessel pull into False Bay.

The China-led “Will for Peace 2026” drill involves navies from the 11-nation Brics group of emerging nations, which US President Donald Trump has labelled “anti-American”.

The United Arab Emirates was also expected to send ships, South Africa’s Deputy Defence Minister Bantu Holomisa told Newzroom Afrika television late Thursday. Fellow Brics nations Indonesia, Ethiopia and Brazil will send observers, he said.

The remaining members of the grouping are India, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The exercise will allow the navies “to exchange best practices



A Russian vessel arrives at the Simon’s Town Naval base as part of the Brics Plus countries which include China, Russia and Iran for joint naval exercises in Cape Town, South Africa, yesterday.

and improve joint operational capabilities, which contributes to the safety of shipping routes and overall regional maritime stability”, South Africa’s defence force said.

Asked about the timing of the drill, Holomisa said: “This exercise was planned long before these tensions we are witnessing today.”

They were initially scheduled for November 2025 but postponed because they clashed with the G20 summit in Johannesburg.

At odds with South Africa over a range of international issues, the US boycotted the summit.

It also expelled the South African ambassador last year and imposed 30% trade tariffs.

Washington this week seized a Russian-flagged oil tanker it said was part of a shadow fleet carrying oil for countries such as Venezuela, Russia and Iran.

It has threatened action against Iran should protesters be killed in mounting demonstrations sparked by anger over the rising cost of living.

The joint drills have “nothing to do with Venezuela whatsoever”, a South African defence ministry spokesman said.

“Let us not press panic buttons because the USA has got a problem with countries,” Holomisa said. “Those are not our enemies.”

“Let’s focus on co-operating with the Brics countries and make sure that our seas, especially the Indian Ocean and Atlantic, they are safe,” he said.

Priyal Singh, senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies, said that “Washington has clearly been attempting to put Pretoria in its bad book since the beginning of the current Trump administration”. “The optics

surrounding the upcoming naval exercise will likely be used by policymakers in Washington as another prime example of why its bilateral relations with South Africa should be reviewed,” he said.

A handful of Ukrainians protested as the Russian vessel arrived, criticising South Africa – which claims to be non-aligned in Russia’s war on Ukraine – for hosting the Russian navy.

“They destroyed my city, Kherson, they’re wiping it out,” said Kateryna Fedkina.

“We’re just asking South Africa to not co-operate militarily with Russia because Russia is an aggressive state,” she said.

Adding to the criticism, South Africa’s Democratic Alliance party said it was misleading to claim the drills were part of Brics co-operation as alliance heavyweights Brazil and India were absent.

# Ghana’s Highlife finds its rhythm on Unesco world stage

AFP  
Accra

On a humid Tuesday night in Accra, Zen Garden is alive with sound, movement and memory as Highlife melodies spill into the open air, drawing families, friends and office workers who sway long past midnight as if the weekend has come early.

Under soft lights, the four young men of the Kwan Pa band strike layered guitar lines and lilting rhythms, their live performance pulling cheers and applause from a crowd visibly elated, white handkerchiefs twirling above heads as revellers dance, sing along and clink glasses between bites of food.

“It’s like therapy,” one patron said, laughing as couples glide across the floor and strangers dance together, united by a sound that has shaped Ghanaian life for generations.

That charged ambience has taken on new meaning after Ghana’s famed Highlife music was inscribed recently on Unesco’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list, a major international recognition of one of west Africa’s most influential musical traditions.

Unesco announced the decision on December 10, describing Highlife as a “monumental expression of Ghana’s musical genius, culture,

and global influence”, honouring generations who have preserved and adapted the genre since the early 20th century. For Asah Nkansah, leader of the Kwan Pa band – whose name means “the right path” – the timing is symbolic.

“This news is just great,” Nkansah said. “If you trace the origin of Highlife music, we can trace it to September 1925. And so, this year, 2025, we are celebrating 100 years of Ghanaian Highlife music.”

At Zen Garden, that century-old tradition feels anything but distant. The band’s palm-wine-infused Highlife sets prompt spontaneous dancing, with patrons singing lyrics from memory and cheering solos deep into the night.

“Highlife talks about almost everything, passion, love, social and everything,” Nkansah said. “Highlife Music naturally has what we call content... it is not music for music’s sake.”

Unesco’s listing places Highlife among the world’s protected cultural treasures, a move expected to boost Ghana’s cultural standing and encourage investment in music preservation, tourism and the creative arts.

Highlife’s layered guitars, horn sections and storytelling have shaped national identity for more than a century, popularised by legends such as ET Mensah, Nana Ampadu, Paapa Yankson, AB Crentsil, Osibisa, Amakye Dede and Kojo Antwi, and influencing later move-

ments including hiplife and Afrobeats.

For fans like Selina Doade, the appeal is deeply personal. “Highlife music, for me as a Ghanaian, it tells our story. It touches on every aspect of our society,” she said. “When you are down, when you are happy, when you need inspiration, Highlife music talks to you.”

Band leader Nkansah believes younger audiences can be won over through creativity.

“We need to make a conscious effort to make them love our sound,” he said.

“We will pick the songs the young ones love... then we bring the same melody onto our rhythms... by so doing, we are giving them the taste of Highlife.”

He rejects claims the genre is fading. “Highlife is not dying, in my opinion,” Nkansah said.

“There will be some highs and lows... I think we are rising.”

At a national level, Unesco officials see Highlife as a living heritage rather than a relic.

“It’s a reflection of the way of life of we Ghanaians,” said professor Osman Damba Tahidu, secretary-general of the Ghana Commission for Unesco. “It is not just a museum relic, but a living product.”

“When it comes to sports, it goes with Highlife. When it comes to funerals, it goes with Highlife... even food and festivals, it goes with Highlife,” said Tahidu.

AFP  
Mogadishu

China’s top diplomat Wang Yi skipped what would have been a historic visit to Somalia yesterday, instead proceeding straight to Tanzania on his tour of African countries.

The visit would have been the first by a Chinese foreign minister to Somalia since the state collapsed in 1991, and was planned at a high-profile moment just after Israel recognised the breakaway region of Somaliland.

“The visit of the Chinese government delegation to Somalia today was delayed due to technical issues. The Chinese government will issue a formal statement about this matter,” an official at the Somali presidential palace said on condition of anonymity.

Wang instead flew directly to the next stop on his itinerary, Tanzania, and was due to meet President Samia Suluhu Hassan in Dar es Salaam. China

has invested heavily in Tanzania in recent years, particularly in the country’s low-tax special economic zones, where 343 Chinese-funded projects worth \$3.1bn were registered in 2025 alone, the foreign ministry said in a statement.

The visit also came as Tanzania’s relations with the West have been marred by criticism of the bloody crackdown on election protesters last year.

“The visit aims to further strengthen and deepen the strategic relations and co-operation,” Tanzania’s foreign ministry said in a statement.

Wang was in Ethiopia on Thursday to meet Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the head of the African Union, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf.

A joint statement by Wang and the African Union criticised the Israeli recognition of Somaliland.

After Tanzania, Wang is due in Lesotho, which has seen its relations with Washington strained after being hit by punishing US tariffs.

# Rwandan camp helps former fighters rebuild their lives

AFP  
Ruhengeri

As his comrades died of starvation and thirst around him, Mbale Hafashimana Amos finally decided to flee the Congolese bush for a country he had always been told would butcher him on arrival.

Mbale was part of a militia in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo called the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), initially formed by those who fled across the border after committing the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

But the FDLR has been pushed to the brink of annihilation in 2025 as the M23, seized large parts of the region.

By April, “M23 pushed us to a place where we couldn’t get anything to eat,” said Mbale, 37.

“I saw over 150 soldiers die of starvation and dehydration. It was horrifying. This is a story I will tell anyone I meet for the rest of my days.”

But Rwanda has also earned praise for welcoming and rehabilitating FDLR members who surrender. They are all ethnic Hutus, and include recent recruits as well



Cyprien Mudeyi, manager of the demobilisation centre for the Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission, speaks with former soldiers of Rwandan origin who previously fought in armed groups in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo during a counselling session at the Mutobo Demobilisation and Reintegration Resource Center in Ruhengeri.

as those who directly participated in the 1994 genocide, in which around 800,000 people, mostly ethnic Tutsis, were slaughtered.

When Mbale surrendered last year, he expected to be shot. Instead, he found himself in a rehabilitation camp back in Rwanda.

Rwanda is no paradise. A quarter of the population still lives in poverty, albeit down from 40% a decade ago, according to the

World Bank. But few deny Rwanda has made a genuine effort to heal the ethnic divisions between Hutus and Tutsis that led to the genocide.

The government gave AFP access to its rehabilitation camp at Mutobo to show off the work it does.

Set among lush mountainous vegetation, it has seen tens of thousands of Hutu fighters and

their families pass through since it was established in 1997.

New arrivals are first given a three-week “cooling off” period, said Cyprien Mudeyi, a retired army major who runs the camp.

“They are very fearful because of the ideology they have been given. Progressively the fear is removed,” he said.

AFP watched around 200 “beneficiaries”, as they are known,



A former soldier of Rwandan origin who previously fought in armed groups in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo gathers with family members at the Mutobo Demobilisation and Reintegration Resource Center in Ruhengeri, Rwanda.

sharing frank experiences with visiting peace studies students from Zambia, and singing songs with words like: “There’s a secret behind the security in my country Rwanda, which has baffled the world”.

The arrivals spend around three months in the camp, receiving history lessons, psychological support, and training in professions like plumbing, tailoring and hair-dressing.

Reaching out to the enemy was terrifying, said Nzayisenga Evariste, 33, a former FDLR corporal who arrived in September.

“They told us Rwanda is a country of Tutsis, where Hutus have no voice at all,” he told AFP.

“What we were told about Rwanda was all lies.”

The transition back to Rwanda is not always easy.

Many come home to find ancestral lands occupied by others,

leading to violent confrontations. Others carry deep trauma into their new lives.

“I personally didn’t face any re-integration challenges, but many fellow FDLR ex-combatants have had it rough,” said Nzeyimana Wenceslas, 60, who fled the Congolese jungle in 2011.

He knows he was lucky. The training and support he received at Mutobo allowed him to set up a successful security firm which he said employed ex-fighters, and eventually his own farm.

“At one point I had more than 70 livestock,” he told AFP.

“It fills me with pride that I am not a burden to my country.”

Back at the camp, Mbale – who was six at the time of the genocide – hopes hard work can similarly help him build a new life from the ruins of a violent past.

“I will try to catch up, because we were left far behind,” he said.



# Minnesota to open own probe into ICE shooting

Reuters  
Minneapolis

Minnesota authorities said yesterday that they were opening their own probe into a US immigration officer's fatal shooting of a 37-year-old woman in her car, after some state and local officials criticised the federal government for refusing to co-operate.

Mary Moriarty, the top prosecutor for Minneapolis's Hennepin County, and the state's Democratic attorney-general, Keith Ellison, said at a press conference that they would collect evidence from Wednesday's shooting, including witness videos and statements.

The announcement came one day after the state's lead investigative agency, the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA), said the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had reversed its initial co-operation and blocked the BCA from scene evidence, witness interviews and other material.

Moriarty, a Democrat, said she had concerns that without the involvement of the BCA, her office might not receive enough evidence to decide whether state charges against the officer might be warranted.

The decision could set up separate, parallel probes into the shooting.

The FBI, for instance, has taken possession of the woman's car for forensic analysis, Moriarty said.

US officials, including Vice-President J D Vance, have dismissed the idea that a federal officer could face state criminal charges, though there is some precedent for such cases.

However, Moriarty was unequivocal yesterday.

"To be sure, there are complex legal issues involved when a federal law enforcement officer is involved. But the law is clear: we do have jurisdiction to make this decision," she said.

The announcement underscored the extent to which Republican President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown in mostly Democratic-run cities – despite the opposition of their mayors – has severely frayed the trust between local and federal officials.

Earlier in the day, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey accused the Trump administration of trying to predetermine the investigation's outcome by cutting out state authorities.

"This is a time to follow the law," Frey, a Democrat, said. "This is not



Federal agents detain a protester near the Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building in Minneapolis. - AFP

a time to hide from the facts."

Trump administration officials have defended the shooting as self-defence and accused the woman, Renee Good, a US citizen and mother of three, of deliberately aiming her car at the officer in an act of "domestic terrorism" – a narrative described by Frey as "garbage".

Meanwhile, in Portland, Oregon, on Thursday afternoon, a US Border Patrol agent shot and wounded a man and woman in their car after an attempted vehicle stop.

As in Minnesota, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a statement that the driver "weaponised" the car in an effort to run over the agent, who fired in self-defence.

Portland Mayor Keith Wilson, echoing Frey, said that he could not be sure the government's account was grounded in fact until an independent investigation took place.

"There was a time when we could take them at their word," Wilson, a Democrat, said of federal officials. "That time is long past."

Oregon Attorney-General Dan Rayfield told CNN yesterday morning that there is co-operation between federal and state investigators so far but that it was too

early to draw any conclusions.

The two shootings have drawn thousands of protesters in Minneapolis, Portland and other US cities, with more demonstrations expected over the weekend.

In Minnesota, Democratic Governor Tim Walz has put the state's National Guard on alert.

In both cases, Democratic mayors and governors have called on the Trump administration to pull federal officers out, arguing that their presence is sowing chaos and needlessly creating tensions on the streets.

The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officer who shot Good was one of more than 2,000 federal personnel whom the Trump administration has ordered deployed to Minneapolis in what DHS described as the "largest operation" in its history.

He was identified as Jonathan Ross, based on comments by federal officials that the officer had previously been dragged by a migrant's car during an attempted arrest last summer, suffering serious lacerations.

The details matched those reflected in the court records of a case in Bloomington, Minnesota, in June 2025, in which a man was eventually convicted of assaulting Ross.

The DHS has declined to confirm the officer's name.

Bystander videos of the shooting appear to show Good turning her wheels away from the officer as she drives forward, while he fires three shots while jumping backward from the front of the car.

The final two shots appear to be aimed through the driver's side window, after the car's front bumper has already passed by the officer's legs.

Since the killing, Trump administration officials have doubled down on the government's version of events.

Trump said on social media that the car "ran over" the officer, while Vance on Thursday accused Good of "attacking" agents and praised the officer for his actions.

Good's partner, Becca Good, who was with her at the scene of the shooting on Wednesday, issued a statement to Minnesota Public Radio yesterday in which she said the two had "stopped to support our neighbours".

"We had whistles," she wrote. "They had guns."

## Trump administration creating new DOJ division to tackle fraud

Reuters  
Washington

President Donald Trump's administration said on Thursday that it was creating a new division at the US Department of Justice (DOJ) to combat what the White House called "rampant" fraud across the country.

Rights advocates and critics have said the Trump administration has used fraud allegations as an excuse to target immigrants and political opponents.

They have also dismissed Trump's ability to tackle fraud, citing pardons from Trump to those who have faced fraud convictions in the past.

"To combat the rampant and pervasive problem of fraud in the United States, the DOJ's new division for national fraud enforcement will enforce the federal criminal and civil laws against fraud targeting federal government programmes, federally funded benefits, businesses, nonprofits and private citizens nationwide," the White House said in a statement.

In recent weeks, the Trump administration has singled out Minnesota, alleging rampant fraud is being committed by immigrants in the welfare system and social-service programmes.

Trump administration officials have frequently and sharply attacked the state's Somali commu-

nity, the largest in the country.

Rights and immigration advocates say Trump has exaggerated isolated examples and used those to engage in what they called federal overreach.

The assistant attorney-general for the new Justice Department division will be responsible for leading the department's efforts to investigate, prosecute and remedy fraud affecting the federal government, federally funded programmes and private citizens, the White House said.

The White House said the official will advise the US attorney-general and deputy attorney-general "on issues involving significant, high-impact fraud investigations and prosecutions and related policy matters".

Earlier this week, the Trump administration said it would freeze more than \$10bn in federal childcare and family assistance funds to California, Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota and New York, citing what the administration called fraud concerns.

The states later sued the Trump administration.

The administration has threatened federal funding cuts to organisations and states over a number of issues ranging from alleged fraud in programmes in states governed by Democrats to diversity initiatives and pro-Palestinian university protests against US ally Israel's assault on Gaza.

## Mangione, accused of killing health insurance chief, fights death penalty charge

Luigi Mangione, accused of gunning down a health insurance executive, was in federal court yesterday in a hearing over whether he should face the possibility of the death penalty if convicted.

Mangione, 27, is accused of fatally shooting Brian Thompson, who was chief executive of UnitedHealth Group's health insurance unit, on a sidewalk in Midtown Manhattan in December 2024.

Public officials condemned the assassination, but Mangione became something of a folk hero to some critics of steep US health-care costs and insurer practices.

Mangione, dressed in prison garb for yesterday's hearing, was escorted by law enforcement into a courtroom packed with observers.

He previously pleaded not guilty to federal murder, stalking and weapons charges and has been behind bars while awaiting trial.

At the hearing before US District Judge Margaret Garnett in Manhattan, Mangione's lawyers argued that a charge of murder with a firearm – the only one that carries the possibility of the death penalty – should be dismissed because prosecutors did not meet the legal requirements for such a charge.

Garnett is separately weighing Mangione's bid to throw out the indictment altogether and bar prosecutors from seeking the death penalty because they allegedly violated his constitutional rights.

New York's death penalty was declared unconstitutional in 2004, but the ban applies in state, not federal cases.

Mangione also faces state-level criminal charges, including murder, and could be sentenced to life in prison if convicted.

No trial date has been set in either case. - Reuters

## Space crew to return early due to medical issue

AFP  
Washington

Nasa crewmembers at the International Space Station (ISS) will return to Earth within days after an astronaut suffered a health issue, the US space agency said on Thursday, the first such medical evacuation in the orbital lab's history.

Officials did not provide details of the medical event but said the unidentified crewmember is stable.

They said it did not result from any kind of injury onboard or from ISS operations.

Nasa chief medical officer James Polk said "lingering risk" and a "lingering question as to what that diagnosis is" led to the decision to return early.

Officials insisted it was not an emergency evacuation.

The four astronauts on Nasa-SpaceX Crew 11 – US members Mike Fincke and Zena Cardman along with Japan's Kimiya Yui and Russia's Oleg Platonov – would return within the coming days to one of the routine splashdown sites.

Amit Kshatriya, a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) associate administrator, said it was the "first time we've done a controlled medical evacuation from the vehicle. So that is unusual".

He said the crew deployed their "onboarding training" to "manage unexpected medical situations".

"Yesterday was a textbook ex-

ample of that training in action. Once the situation on the station stabilised, careful deliberations led us to the decision to return Crew 11... while ensuring minimal operational impact to ongoing work aboard."

The four astronauts set to return have been on their mission since August 1.

Such journeys generally last approximately six months, and this crew was already due to return in the coming weeks.

Officials indicated it was possible the next US mission could depart to the ISS earlier than scheduled, but did not provide specifics.

Chris Williams, who launched on a Russian mission to the station, will stay onboard to maintain US presence.

Russians Sergey Kud-Sverchkov and Sergei Mikaev are also there.

Nasa had previously said it was postponing a spacewalk planned for Thursday due to the medical issue.

Astronauts Fincke and Cardman were to carry out the approximately 6.5-hour spacewalk to perform power upgrade work.

Continuously inhabited since 2000, the ISS functions as a testbed for research that supports deeper space exploration – including eventual missions to Mars.

The ISS is set to be decommissioned after 2030, with its orbit gradually lowered until it breaks up in the atmosphere over a remote part of the Pacific Ocean called Point Nemo, a spacecraft graveyard.

## Nato 'far from being in a crisis' over Greenland

The head of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato)'s forces in Europe, US General Alexus Grynke, said yesterday that the military alliance was far from being in "a crisis" following President Donald Trump's threats to bring Greenland under US control.

"There's been no impact on my work at the military level up to this point... I would just say that we're ready to defend every inch of alliance territory still today," Grynke told reporters during a visit to Finland. "So I see us as far from

being in a crisis right now."

Grynke's comments followed Trump repeatedly stating that he wants US control of the autonomous Danish territory.

Trump has not ruled out the use of military force to acquire the strategically located Arctic island with a population of 57,000.

In an interview with the *New York Times* published on Thursday, Trump was asked if his priority was preserving the Nato military alliance or acquiring Greenland, and he told the newspaper: "It may be a choice."

## Dancing isn't enough: industry pushes for practical robots

By Glenn Chapman  
AFP

Humanoid robots danced, somersaulted, dealt blackjack and played ping-pong at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) this week, but some in the industry are impatient for them to become more useful, not just a promise of things to come.

As robots take their usual spotlight at the annual CES gadget fest, insiders caution that making them truly like humans will take several more years and require lots of training.

To become autonomous, humanoid robots need artificial intelligence (AI) that translates what is seen and heard into actions, which is beyond the scope of today's large language models that power tools like ChatGPT.

Training a large language model relies on massive amounts of data – mainly vacuumed up from the Internet – that is of little use when it comes to human-like robots seeking to be useful in the kitchen or on a factory floor.

"If you want (robots) to learn embodied things, you have to put them inside a body," said Henny Admoni, an associate professor at the robotics institute at Carnegie Mellon University.

Humanoid Guide founder Christian Rokseth, who specialises in the technology, likened the situation to locking a child in a room and ex-



The Beatbot RoboTurtle 'Turtini' prototype swimming turtle robot for monitoring water quality, studying wildlife and assisting disaster response is demonstrated during the annual Consumer Electronics Show. - AFP

pecting it to learn about the world.

Even if the pace of development accelerated last year, particularly on the hardware side, he expressed a degree of impatience about innovation.

"They've shown robots dancing and doing kung fu; now show us that they can be productive," Rokseth said.

EngineAI founder Evan Yao told AFP that the Shenzhen-based company is working with tech titans such as Amazon and Meta to give its creations AI brains.

"We are trying to simulate humans, but the

robots will never become human," he told AFP as one of his robots kicked in his direction. "Because a human is emotional and much more."

Nearby, Yiran Sui was part of a Robotera team whose humanoid robot, developed for researchers, is training to complete the Beijing marathon a few months from now.

According to the Consumer Technology Association that runs the CES, the robotics industry is showing dynamism and potential.

It projects the global market will hit \$179bn by 2030.

The bulk of that growth is expected in factories, warehouses and other business operations, where robots – not necessarily humanoid ones – work in controlled environments.

However, for Artem Sokolov, founder of the Humanoid robotics startup based in London, humans work in factories so robots copying their bodies can thrive there too.

Given the training limitations, industry trackers advise caution when it comes to companies claiming to have humanoid robots that can operate without flesh-and-blood managers overseeing them.

"There has been a ton of new companies claiming that they are developing autonomous humanoid robots," Admoni told AFP.

However, "these systems tend to be teleoperated; you have a person in a suit or using controllers and every movement of that person is then translated into the robot".

The United States said yesterday that it seized another tanker that tried to break an American naval blockade aimed at preventing sanctioned vessels from going to or departing Venezuela, the fifth ship apprehended in recent weeks.

Washington has deployed a huge naval force in the Caribbean, striking alleged drug-trafficking boats, seizing tankers and carrying out a stunning operation to capture Venezuela's leftist leader.

The latest vessel seized was the Olina, which US Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said was "another 'ghost fleet' tanker ship suspected of carrying

## US says it has seized another tanker in Caribbean

embargoed oil" that "departed Venezuela attempting to evade US forces".

"The ghost fleets will not outrun justice. They will not hide under false claims of nationality," Noem wrote on X, saying the Coast Guard carried out the seizure.

The Olina, which according to public shipping database Equasis was falsely flying the flag of Timor Leste, previously sailed from Venezuela and had returned to the region, said an industry source with direct knowledge of the matter.

US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), which is responsible for American

forces in the region, said US Marines and Navy personnel also took part in the operation, launching from the USS Gerald R Ford, the world's largest aircraft carrier.

"Once again, our joint interagency forces sent a clear message this morning: 'There is no safe haven for criminals,'" SOUTHCOM said in a post on X that included a video clip showing US forces roping down from a helicopter and taking control of the ship.

President Donald Trump said last month that he had ordered a "blockade" of sanctioned oil vessels heading to and

from Venezuela, and American forces have taken control of five ships since then, including three this week.

The US imposed sanctions on the Olina in January last year, when it was named the Minerva M, for what Washington said was it being part of the so-called shadow fleet of ships that sail with little regulation or known insurance.

The M Sophia, another of the tankers that was part of a flotilla of a dozen vessels that left Venezuela earlier this month, was seized by US forces earlier this week.

Three vessels - Skylyn, Min Hang and

Merope - all fully loaded and part of the same flotilla that left last week, sailed back to Venezuelan waters on Thursday, according to the industry source.

Seven additional tankers from that flotilla, also fully loaded, were set to return to Venezuelan waters this weekend, a source said.

All of the oil on board these 10 tankers is owned by Venezuelan state producer PDVSA, the person added.

PDVSA did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

It was unclear whether Washington would take action on the other tankers sailing towards Venezuela. - **AFP/Reuters**

# Trump says he called off new attack after Venezuela prisoner release

AFP/Reuters  
Caracas/Washington

US President Donald Trump said yesterday that he called off a second wave of attacks on Venezuela after the government, whose leftist president was removed by Washington, began releasing prisoners.

"This is a very important and smart gesture. The U.S.A. and Venezuela are working well together, especially as it pertains to rebuilding, in a much bigger, better, and more modern form, their oil and gas infrastructure," Trump wrote on Truth Social. "Because of this co-operation, I have canceled the previously expected second Wave of Attacks, which looks like it will not be needed, however, all ships will stay in place for safety and security purpose."

He made the comments as he prepared to meet major oil corporations that he said will invest at least \$100bn in Venezuela, which has the world's largest oil reserves.

Trump was implicitly making clear that he is ready again to use force to get his way in Venezuela, which he has vowed to force to enrich the United States, especially oil companies.

"Venezuela is releasing large numbers of political prisoners as a sign of 'Seeking Peace'" Trump wrote.

The United States also announced yesterday that it had seized another tanker near Venezuela as it enforces an embargo on its oil, which makes Washington the undisputed power on its key export (**see accompanying report above**).

Venezuela began releasing prisoners on Thursday in the first such gesture since US forces removed and detained President Nicolas Maduro in a deadly January 3 raid, with his deputy Delcy Rodriguez taking over.

Former Venezuelan opposition candidate Enrique Marquez - who opposed Maduro in the contested 2024 presidential election - was among those released on Thursday.

"It's all over now," Marquez said in a video taken by a local journalist of him and his wife, accompanied by another released opposition member, Biagio Pilieri.

The White House quickly took credit for winning the prisoners' freedom.

Trump had earlier played down democracy as a motivating factor for the attack, despite years of the United States saying that Maduro was illegitimate elections were filled with fraud.

However, Trump said he would meet next week with Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, whom he earlier brushed aside as a "very nice woman" who lacked the "respect" to lead Venezuela.

"I understand she's coming in next week sometime, and I look forward to saying hello to her," Trump told Fox News host Sean Hannity in an interview.

Trump had earlier voiced jealousy that Machado won the latest Nobel Peace Prize and said he deserved it.

She responded by dedicating it to him.

Interim leader Rodriguez's brother, parliament speaker Jorge Rodriguez, said that "a large number of Venezuelan and foreign nationals" were being immediately freed for the sake of "peaceful coexistence".

Renowned Spanish-Venezuelan activist Rocio San Miguel was among five Spanish citizens freed, according to Spain's foreign ministry.

She was imprisoned since February 2024 over a purported plot to assassinate Maduro, which she denied.

On Tuesday, Trump had told Republican lawmakers that Rodriguez's administration was closing a "torture chamber" in Caracas but gave no further details.

Venezuelan rights non-governmental or-



People react to the news that some of the prisoners at the Rodeo jail in Guatire, Venezuela, will be released, hoping that their relatives are among them, after the president of the Venezuelan National Assembly, Jorge Rodriguez, announced that a significant number of foreign and Venezuelan prisoners will be freed. - **Reuters**

ganisation Foro Penal estimates more than 800 political prisoners are in the country's jails.

Maduro was seized in a raid accompanied by airstrikes, operations that left 100 people dead, according to Caracas.

US forces took Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores to New York to face trial on drugs charges.

Trump said the US would "run" the Caribbean country for a transitional period and tap into its oil reserves for years.

Delcy Rodriguez insisted on Thursday that her country was "not subordinate or subjugated".

"Nobody surrendered. There was fighting for the homeland" when the US forces attacked, she said during a ceremony for the Venezuelans killed.

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

On the streets of Caracas, opinions were mixed.

"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.

## World food prices dip in December but still up in 2025: FAO

World food prices declined for a fourth consecutive month in December, mostly pressured by dairy, meat and vegetable oil prices, marking the lowest average since January 2025, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) said yesterday.

The FAO Food Price Index, which tracks a basket of globally traded food commodities, averaged 124.3 points in December, down from 125.1 in November and

2.3% lower than a year earlier.

For the full 2025 year, the index averaged 127.2 points, up 4.3% from 2024, as higher world prices for vegetable oils and dairy products outweighed declines in cereal and sugar quotations.

The dairy index declined by 4.4% in December, driven by a steep drop in butter prices following increased cream availability in Europe.

However, for 2025 as a whole, dairy prices averaged 13.2% above 2024, reflecting strong import de-

mand and limited exportable supplies earlier in the year.

Meat prices dipped 1.3% last month, led by falls in bovine and poultry categories, but the full-year index remained 5.1% above the previous year's value, supported by strong global demand and uncertainty linked to animal diseases and geopolitical tensions, the FAO said.

Vegetable oil prices eased 0.2% in December to a six-month low, as weaker soy, rapeseed and sun-

flower oil quotations offset gains in palm oil.

For the whole of 2025, the vegetable oil index averaged 171% higher than in 2024, reaching a three-year high amid tight global supplies.

The FAO Cereal Price Index rose 1.7% in December with wheat supported by renewed concerns over Black Sea export flows, and maize buoyed by strong ethanol production in both Brazil and the United States.

For the whole of 2025, the cereal index averaged 4.9% below its 2024 level, its third consecutive annual decline and the lowest annual average since 2020.

Sugar prices rose 2.4% in December after three consecutive monthly declines, mainly due to lower production in Brazil's southern regions.

The sugar index reached a five-year low for 2025, down 17% from 2024, as global supplies remained plentiful. - **Reuters**

## 'War is back in vogue,' Pope Leo says in speech to diplomats

AFP/Reuters  
Vatican City

Pope Leo XIV warned yesterday that war was "back in vogue" and highlighted the "ambition of belligerents", as his own country the United States flexes its military muscles.

In a New Year's message to 184 diplomats accredited to the Vatican, his first since becoming head of the world's 1.4bn Catholics last May, Leo lamented the weakness of multilateralism, saying that dialogue is being replaced by a "diplomacy based on force".

He did not name the US but said rising tensions in the Caribbean and Pacific are "cause for serious concern", particularly in Venezuela - where US forces recently seized the president.

Referring to the capture by US forces of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro on the orders of President Donald Trump last weekend, the Pope called for world governments to "respect the will" of the Venezuelan people going forward.

Nations must "safeguard the human and civil rights" of Venezuelans, Leo added.

His comments were part of an address that is sometimes called the Pope's "state of the world" speech.

It was the first given by Leo, who was elected following the death of Pope Francis.

Both the US and Venezuelan ambassadors to the Holy See were among those present for the event.

The Pope was speaking just hours after US President Donald Trump said that land operations against drug cartels were on the way following maritime attacks in the east-



This photo taken and issued by the Vatican shows Pope Leo XIV arriving for the meeting with members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See. - **AFP**

ern Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea.

Leo issued an appeal "to respect the will of the Venezuelan people, and to safeguard the human and civil rights of all", following Trump's suggestion the US could effectively control Venezuela - and its vast oil reserves - for years.

The Pope's address rounded up a year of increasing global tension, from the Russia-Ukraine war to US strikes in several countries, and rising fears in Europe of a possible US takeover of Greenland.

The Pope warned that the principle established after World War II by which countries cannot use force to violate the borders of others "has been completely undermined".

Diplomacy based on dialogue "is being replaced by a diplomacy based on force, by either individuals or groups of allies".

"War is back in vogue and a zeal for war is spreading," he said.

The Pope said that peace is being "sought through weapons as a condition for asserting one's own dominion".

"This gravely threatens the rule of law, which is the foundation of all peaceful civil coexistence," he said.

The Chicago-born Pontiff said that adhering to international law is "a commitment that states have made", and it "must always prevail over the ambitions of belligerents".

The destruction of hospitals, energy infrastructure, homes and places essential to daily life is "a serious violation" of international humanitarian law, he said.

Leo urged the international community to remember that protecting human dignity and the sanctity of life "always counts for more

than any mere national interest", he said.

The Pontiff pointed to the "weakness of multilateralism" as "a particular cause for concern".

He said its purpose is to provide a place where people could meet and talk, modelled on the ancient Roman Forum or medieval town square.

However, it is difficult to talk "when words lose their connection to reality, and reality itself becomes debatable and ultimately incommunicable".

"Rediscovering the meaning of words is perhaps one of the primary challenges of our time," he said.

Leo also warned of the "danger of returning to the race of producing ever more sophisticated new weapons", particularly those that use artificial intelligence (AI).

Recalling ongoing conflicts around the world, the Pope repeated his support for a two-state solution in the Middle East, and lamented rising violence in the occupied West Bank.

"Sadly, there has been an increase in violence in the West Bank against the Palestinian civilian population, which has the right to live in peace in its own land," he said.

Leo, formerly the US Cardinal Robert Prevost, served as a missionary in Peru for decades before becoming pope.

He has previously criticised some of Trump's policies, in particular on immigration, but did not mention the US president by name in yesterday's speech.

Leo had shown a more muted, diplomatic tone in the first eight months of his papacy compared to his predecessor Francis, who often grabbed headlines with off-the-cuff comments.

## Experts say oceans 'soaked up' record heat levels in 2025

AFP  
Brest, France

The world's oceans absorbed a record amount of heat in 2025, an international team of scientists said yesterday, further priming conditions for sea level rise, violent storms, and coral death.

The heat that has accumulated in the oceans last year increased by approximately 23 zettajoules - an amount equivalent to nearly four decades of global primary energy consumption.

This finding - published in the journal *Advances in Atmospheric Sciences* - was the highest reading of any year since modern record keeping began in the early 1950s, researchers said.

To derive these calculations, more than 50 scientists from 31 research institutions used multiple sources including a thousands-strong fleet of floating robots that track ocean changes to depths of 2,000m.

Peering into the depths, rather than fluctuations at the surface, provides a better indicator of how oceans are responding to "sustained pressure" from humanity's emissions, said study co-author Karina von Schuckmann.

"The picture is clear: results for 2025 confirm that the ocean continues to warm," von Schuckmann, an oceanographer from French research institute Mercator Ocean International, told AFP.

Oceans are a key regulator of Earth's climate because they soak up 90% of the excess heat in the atmosphere caused by humanity's release of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide.

All that additional energy has a powerful knock-on effect.

Warmer oceans increase moisture in the atmosphere, providing fuel for tropical cyclones and destructive rainfall.

Hotter seas also directly contribute to sea level rise - water expands when it warms up - and make conditions unbearable for tropical reefs, whose corals perish during prolonged marine heatwaves.

"As long as the Earth continues to accumulate heat, ocean heat content will keep rising, sea level will rise and new records will be set," said von Schuckmann.

Ocean warming is not uniform, with some areas warming faster than others.

The tropical oceans, the South Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the northern Indian Ocean, and the Southern Ocean were among waters that absorbed record amounts of heat in 2025.

This occurred even as average sea surface temperatures decreased slightly in 2025 - yet still remained the third-highest value ever measured.

This decrease is explained by the shift from a powerful, warming El Nino event in 2023-2024 to La Nina-type conditions generally associated with a temporary cooling of the ocean surface.

In the long term, the rate of ocean warming is accelerating due to a sustained increase in greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere caused mainly by burning fossil fuels.

As long as global warming is not addressed and the amount of heat trapped in the atmosphere keeps rising, oceans will keep breaking records, the researchers said.

"The greatest uncertainty in the climate system is no longer the physics, but the choices humanity makes," said von Schuckmann. "Rapid emission reductions can still limit future impacts and help safeguard a climate in which societies and ecosystems can thrive."

POLITICS

Japan PM considering snap election in February: media

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi is considering calling a snap parliamentary election in the first half of February, the *Yomiuri* newspaper reported citing sources. The move would allow Takaichi, Japan's first female prime minister, to take advantage of the strong approval ratings she has enjoyed since taking office in October. Her tough stance on China has appealed to right-wing voters but has sparked a major diplomatic dispute with Japan's powerful Asian neighbour. Both February 8 and February 15 are being considered as election dates, the *Yomiuri* said. Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party is in coalition with the right-wing Ishin party. -Reuters

LAW AND ORDER

Japanese man arrested under 1889 law after deadly 'duel'

Japanese authorities applied an 1889 anti-duelling law to arrest a man over a fight that resulted in his opponent's death in Tokyo's entertainment district, police said yesterday. The face-off took place on a street in September in the Kabukicho area of the capital after the suspect "and the dead man agreed to fight each other", police spokesman Mitsuhiro Hirota said. Tokyo police on Wednesday arrested Fuzuki Asari, 26, unemployed, on suspicion of having "conspired with someone else" to have a duel and causing injury resulting in the death of his 30-year-old adversary, Hirota said. It was not specified whether any weapons were involved in the fight. -AFP

DECISION

North Korea's Kim pledges to 'unconditionally support' Putin

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has pledged to "unconditionally support" all of Russian President Vladimir Putin's policies and decisions, Pyongyang's media said. North Korea has dispatched thousands of troops to fight for Russia, according to South Korean and Western intelligence agencies, as Moscow presses ahead with its invasion of Ukraine. In a letter shared by the North's state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), Kim said he felt "true comradely relations" from Putin and regarded their ties as the "most precious ones". "Close cooperation" between the two countries "will continue in various spheres in the future", Kim wrote. -AFP

TREND

Taiwan becomes 'super-aged society' in 2025, data shows

Taiwan has become a "super-aged society" for the first time, with 20% of its shrinking population aged 65 or older in 2025, government data showed yesterday. The island of more than 23mn people faces a looming demographic challenge, with its population falling overall as well as ageing. There were 4,673,155 people aged 65 or older in Taiwan in 2025, or 20.06% of the population, according to the interior ministry. That means it met the World Health Organisation's criteria for a super-aged society, with one in every five citizens aged 65 or more. The number of people aged 0-14 accounted for 11.51% of the population. -AFP

South Korea's former president Yoon faces possible death penalty over martial law bid

Reuters  
Seoul

A South Korean court trying former president Yoon Suk-yeol on revolt charges put off a sentencing request till next week after a marathon session yesterday, in a case that could give him the death penalty over his failed martial law bid in 2024.

Yoon, who is accused of mas-terminding a revolt, could face the death penalty or life in prison under South Korean law if found guilty. South Korea has not executed a death-row inmate since 1997, although it has not abolished the death penalty.

A special prosecutor had been expected to make their request for a sentence to the Seoul Central District Court for Yoon and seven other defendants yesterday but the court decided to resume proceedings on January 13 after more than 12 hours of arguments.

Prosecutors have alleged that Yoon and then-defence minister, Kim Yong-hyun, began devising a scheme as far back as October 2023 to suspend parliament and assume legislative powers.

Prosecutors accuse Yoon of seeking to brand his political opponents - including then-opposition leader Lee Jae Myung - as "anti-state forces" and to detain them.

They have said Yoon and Kim also tried to manufacture a pretext for martial law by escalating tensions with North Korea through a covert drone operation.

While the botched bid to impose martial law lasted only about six

hours, it sent shockwaves through South Korea, which is Asia's fourth-largest economy, a key US security ally and was long considered one of Asia's most resilient democracies.

Yoon, 65, has denied the charges. The conservative former career prosecutor has argued he had the powers as president to declare martial law and that his action was aimed at sounding the alarm over opposition parties' obstruction of government.

Dressed in a dark suit and white shirt and appearing noticeably thinner than at the start of the trial in February, Yoon sat with the seven other defendants including Kim and legal counsel.

The session opened earlier than usual for the defence arguments, followed by the prosecutors' final arguments and sentencing requests relating to each of the defendants.

But by late yesterday evening, defence lawyers were still hours away from finishing their arguments, prompting the court to set a new session for January 13. In South Korea, the court rules whether to convict a defendant and sets the sentence. The court is expected to rule in February, capping more than a year of political upheaval following Yoon's martial law declaration on December 3, 2024, which was revoked within hours after lawmakers scaled fences to break through a security cordon around the National Assembly to vote.

Yoon was later impeached and removed from office by the Constitutional Court and a snap presidential election in June last year brought liberal-leaning Lee Jae Myung to power.



An aerial view of the collapsed landfill in Binaliw, Cebu City, Philippines, yesterday.

Two dead, dozens missing after Philippine dump site collapse

AFP  
Cebu, Philippines

Rescue workers yesterday searched for dozens of people buried under a mountain of garbage that collapsed at a landfill in the central Philippines, killing at least two.

About 50 sanitation workers were buried when the towering pile of refuse toppled onto them at Binaliw Landfill, a privately operated facility in Cebu City, on Thursday.

"There are signs of life," Cebu mayor Nestor Archival told a news briefing yesterday, adding that hundreds of rescuers already on site would be joined by "another 500" for search efforts he expected to last through to tomorrow.

Rita Cogay, who operates a compactor at the site, said she had stepped outside to get a drink of water just moments before the building where she had been in was crushed.

"I thought a helicopter had crashed. But when I turned, it was the garbage and the building coming down. I ran to safety," the 49-year-old said. Cogay said she watched as a co-worker who had been "calling out to me" from the wreckage was pulled free.

Rescuers were limited in what equipment they could use because any sparks threatened to ignite methane gas emitted by the landfill, Archival said.

The recovery of the body of a 25-year-old engineer brought the confirmed death toll to two, the mayor said in an early evening

post on his Facebook page, adding 36 remained missing.

At least 12 employees have been pulled alive from the garbage and hospitalised.

Jason Morata, a city assistant public information officer, said the trash mountain "must be four storeys high".

Aerial photos released by police showed what appeared to be multiple structures crushed under the weight of the garbage.

Morata said the buildings had housed "company offices, HR, admin, maintenance staff" for a private firm that ran the site.

"We're considering several factors. If you remember, Cebu was struck by two typhoons in the latter part of 2025... and also an earthquake," he said. Morata added that information

was emerging in a trickle because there was "no signal" at the dump site.

The landfill "processes 1,000 tonnes of municipal solid waste daily", according to the website of operator Prime Integrated Waste Solutions.

Calls to the company went unanswered yesterday. "We don't know what caused the collapse. It wasn't raining at all," said Marge Parcotello, a civilian staff member of the police department in Consolacion, a town that shares a common boundary with the dump site. "Many of the victims are from Consolacion," she said. More than 200 people were killed in July 2000 when an avalanche of garbage consumed a Manila shanty town populated by several thousand scavengers.

Some whales restrand at New Zealand's Farewell Spit, six die

Reuters  
Auckland

Fifteen whales restrand and six have died after a mass stranding at Farewell Spit on the coast of New Zealand's South Island, conservation group Project Jonah said yesterday, as volunteers prepared to attempt to refloat them. On Thursday, 55 whales were stranded in two locations in Farewell Spit, a 26km sandbar at the northern tip of the South Island. Most of them were refloated.

Project Jonah, in a statement on Facebook, said teams had been checking beaches across Golden Bay, where Farewell Spit is located, for other stranded whales and are working to keep the surviving animals cool and comfortable until the afternoon high tide. "These whales have restrand along the high-tide line, which adds to the complexity of the refloat," Project Jonah said in an update.



People try to rescue a pod of whales stranded on the shore at Farewell Spit, in Golden Bay, New Zealand.

US to provide \$45mn help to Cambodia, Thailand

Reuters  
Washington

The US will provide \$45mn in assistance to Cambodia and Thailand, the senior US diplomat for East Asia said yesterday during a visit to the region, to help solidify President Donald Trump's peace-making efforts between the two.

"The US will continue to support the Cambodian and Thai governments as they implement the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords and pave the way for a return to peace, prosperity, and stability for their people and the region," Michael DeSombre, the US assistant secretary for East Asia, said in a statement.

A senior state department official said DeSombre would meet senior Thai and Cambodian officials in Bangkok and Phnom Penh

today to discuss implementation of the peace accords "and broader efforts to promote our shared interests in a safer, stronger and more prosperous Indo-Pacific."

DeSombre said the US, which has slashed its global foreign assistance programmes under Trump, would provide \$15mn for border stabilisation to help communities recover and to support people displaced by the recent conflict, and \$10mn for demining and clearing of unexploded ordnance. The US would also provide \$20mn for initiatives that will help Cambodia and Thailand combat scam operations and drug trafficking, and other programmes, DeSombre said.

The Trump administration has made combating the so-called scam centres based in Southeast Asia a priority, as US citizens have been targeted by their financial fraud operations.

Vietnam shrugs off Trump tariffs as US exports surge

AFP  
Ho Chi Minh City

Over the whine of buzzsaws and the steady whir of sanders, hundreds of Vietnamese workers in a factory outside Ho Chi Minh City hustle to fill orders for high-end furniture.

It will adorn luxury hotels and residences across the Middle East, Europe and the US, where the Vietnam-based Jonathan Charles furniture company has largely shrugged off US President Donald Trump's tariffs.

The US orders that account for more than half of the firm's business

remained steady in 2025, its CEO said this week, validating an earlier prediction his operation would weather the tariffs.

"My initial reaction was panic for one hour," chief executive Jonathan Sower said of the 20% across-the-board tariffs announced by Washington in July.

"But after thinking about it for a while, I realised it's a level playing field. All my competitors are in Asia," he said in November.

"Just adding 20% tariffs on Vietnamese products doesn't mean America can make it cheaper than Vietnam. America will be double the price or triple the price to make what we make."

Vietnam has proved surprisingly resilient in spite of US levies many feared would crush its export-oriented growth model.

It saw a 28% surge in exports to the US last year while its trade surplus swelled to \$134bn, according to official figures released this week.

Its economy grew at 8%, beating analyst expectations and likely outpacing the rest of Asia, according to HSBC.

"Although Vietnam was widely expected to be one of the economies with high tariff risks, its trade was not disrupted, but ballooned to a record high instead," the bank's Asean economist Yun Liu said in a note to clients. "Despite facing a

20% headline tariff from the US, Vietnam captured even more market share for certain goods, such as footwear, textiles and consumer electronics." Not all Vietnamese manufacturers have been left unscathed. Lower-end producers with smaller margins in particular have suffered, with some announcing lay-offs or scaling back operations.

Thanh Cong Group, which supplies major clothing brands such as Adidas and Lacoste, said its shipments to the US had dipped last year, although it would not say by how much.

But producers of electronics, a sector in which foreign multinationals such as Samsung and Apple

dominate the market, have seen a surge in US shipments, according to Liu and other analysts.

Seafood and agricultural suppliers also saw modest export growth despite tariff uncertainty, according to official figures.

Coffee sellers Eatu Cafe said they had seen a surge in US orders.

"There was a brief period of hesitation when Trump announced the 20% tariff," said the company's director Tran Dinh Trong.

But US orders soon picked back up, he said, adding "our cooperative is optimistic and seeing positive signs to export to the US".

Vietnam emerged as a major winner from Trump's first trade war in

2018, receiving a flood of investment from Chinese manufacturers seeking to avoid US tariffs.

But the widening trade surplus with Washington put Hanoi in Trump's crosshairs when he re-entered the White House in 2025.

His "Liberation Day" announcement of 46% tariffs on Vietnamese imports shocked the country in April, even though they were later negotiated down to 20% for most goods. The Trump administration has said products illegally transshipped from China via a third country will face a 40% levy, although it has yet to define transshipment and negotiations on a final US-Vietnam trade deal are ongoing.

# US, India dispute cause of stalled trade pact

Reuters  
New Delhi

India's trade pact with the US stalled last year because Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not make a telephone call to President Donald Trump ahead of a deal, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick said yesterday, giving an account of events that New Delhi has

denied. Trade talks between India and the US fell apart and Trump then doubled tariffs on Indian goods in August to 50%, the world's highest rate, including a levy of 25% in retaliation for India's purchases of Russian oil.

"It's all set up and you have got to have Modi call the president. And they were uncomfortable doing it," Lutnick said in an interview on the All-In podcast, a US show by four

venture capitalists that focuses on business and technology. "So Modi didn't call."

Responding to Lutnick's remarks, India's foreign ministry said the "characterisation of these discussions in the reported remarks is not accurate."

The two nations have been close to a deal on several occasions since the agreement to negotiate in February last year, Indian foreign min-

istry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal told reporters at a media briefing yesterday.

"Incidentally, the prime minister and President Trump have also spoken on phone on eight occasions during 2025, covering different aspects of our wide-ranging partnership," Lutnick's comments came after Trump stepped up the pressure for talks with a warning this week that tariffs could rise fur-

ther unless India curbs its Russian oil imports. The failure to reach a deal has pushed the Indian rupee to a record low and spooked investors waiting for progress in two-way negotiations. India is still seeking a tariff rate between Washington's offers to Britain and Vietnam that had formerly been agreed but the offer has expired, Lutnick added.

India's trade ministry did not respond to an e-mailed request for

comment on Lutnick's remarks. New Delhi and Washington were very close to a trade deal last year but a communication breakdown led to the collapse of any potential pact, Reuters reported.

It cited an Indian government official involved in the talks as saying that Modi could not have called Trump, for fear that a one-sided conversation would put him on the spot.

# RBI 'considering fresh steps to help exporters hit by US tariffs'

Reuters  
New Delhi

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is exploring alternative measures to support exporters facing challenges due to US tariffs. This comes after a loan repayment moratorium introduced last year saw limited interest, according to two informed sources.

Various labour-intensive sectors - including textiles, jewellery, leather goods, and chemicals - have been severely impacted by US tariffs on Indian imports, which reached a combined 50% in August 2025. This included a 25% levy imposed due to New Delhi's purchases of Russian oil. Earlier this week, US President Donald Trump warned that tariffs could rise further unless India curbs its Russian oil imports, escalating the pressure as trade talks between the two countries drag on.

After the US imposed its tariffs last year, the Reserve Bank of India and the government rolled out relief measures. In November the RBI offered exporters with US exposure the right to defer repayment of term loans due between September 1 and December 31, but fewer than a fifth of eligible exporters applied, prompting the central bank to think of other ways to help exporters, a source aware of its thinking said.

The RBI is weighing whether to

loosen the eligibility criteria for the loan moratorium or allow for fresh lending at subsidised interest rates, the source said.

Banks were required to show proof of revenue loss, which many firms could not do by December, according to a senior public sector banker who also said very few exporters had applied for the moratorium on payments.

In talks with the government, bankers have said cash subsidies that help reduce the impact of business losses or squeezed export margins may be more helpful than loan relief, the banker said.

The sources declined to be identified as they are not authorised to speak to the media. The central bank and bankers are also in conversation with export agencies to assess the flow of orders in the new year before finalising new relief measures, the two sources said. India's exports to the US remained resilient until November as many exporters had locked in orders prior to the tariffs being imposed while others offered to ship goods at lower margins to avoid losing all revenue. January orders are moderating or producing thinner margins, raising concern that existing relief measures may not offset weak demand, at least four exporters across the textiles, chemicals and engineering goods industries said.

## Rally against ED action in Kolkata



Trinamool Congress (TMC) party's chairperson and chief minister of West Bengal state Mamata Banerjee (centre) take part in a rally against the raids conducted by the enforcement directorate (ED) in Kolkata, India, yesterday.

# Reliance in talks for US permit to buy Venezuelan oil

Reuters  
New Delhi/Houston

India's Reliance Industries is seeking approval from the US to resume purchases of Venezuelan crude, two sources familiar with the matter said yesterday, as the private refiner looks to secure oil amid Western pressure on India to cut Russian oil purchases.

Reliance's representatives are in discussions with the US state and treasury departments to obtain the authorisation, the sources said, as Washington and Caracas progress in negotiations to ship 50mn barrels of oil in the aftermath

of the US capture of President Nicolas Maduro.

The Indian conglomerate had received licences from Washington in past years to import crude from US-sanctioned Venezuela for its refining complex, the world's largest.

Venezuela's oil company PDVSA delivered Reliance four crude cargoes or some 63,000 barrels per day in the first four months of 2025 under those authorisations, according to PDVSA's internal records. Washington suspended most licences to PDVSA's business partners between March and April and threatened Venezuela's oil buyers with tariffs as it increased pressure on Maduro.

Reliance's last cargo of Venezuelan oil arrived

in India in May 2025. Reliance said on Thursday that it would consider resuming purchases of Venezuelan crude if sales to non-US buyers are permitted under US regulations.

The company and the US treasury department did not immediately respond to emails requesting comment on Reliance seeking approval to resume purchases.

Chevron, Vitol, Trafigura and other oil companies are vying for licences and control over Venezuelan oil exports.

US President Donald Trump met with oil executives at the White House yesterday. The South American producer has millions of barrels of crude stuck in onshore tanks and vessels.

## Six on trial in UK charged with PKK membership

Six Kurdish people went on trial in Britain yesterday charged with membership of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a militant group banned in its home country Turkey as well as Britain and elsewhere.

Prosecutors say the defendants, aged between 24 and 63, belonged to or professed to belong to the PKK, which was proscribed as a terrorist organisation in Britain in 2001. They were charged in December 2024 after a police raid on a Kurdish Community Centre in north London the previous month, with some of the defendants also charged with arranging or addressing meetings in support of the PKK in 2023 and 2024. The PKK announced last year that it would disarm and disband, and symbolically burned weapons, but it remains widely banned, including in the European Union and the US.

## Actress launches new baby care range



Bollywood actress Alia Bhatt poses during the launch of her brand Ed-a-Mamma's new baby care range, in Mumbai, yesterday.

## Afghan teenager denies UK life-endangerment charge

AFP  
London

An Afghan teenager appeared in a UK court and denied endangering dozens of lives by piloting a small boat of migrants across the Channel from France earlier this week.

Aman Naseri, 18, pleaded "not guilty" at a magistrates' court in southeastern Margate, and said he was "forced" to pilot the vessel across the busy waterway between Britain and France.

The court appearance came two days after he allegedly landed on UK shores following the first successful migrant small boat Channel crossing of 2026.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) - which decides whether to prosecute cases in England and Wales - said Naseri was charged under the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act, which only came into force Monday.

Prosecutors told the court

that 46 people were on the boat with Naseri.

He is the first person to be charged using the new legislation with the crime of endangering life during a small boat crossing arriving in the UK without valid entry clearance, it noted.

Anyone convicted of this offence faces up to six years behind bars. A small number of migrants have previously been prosecuted for piloting small boats using other UK laws.

Wearing a black coat in court, the 18-year-old followed proceedings through a Dari interpreter and spoke only to confirm his name and date of birth during a short hearing.

He was remanded into custody to appear at Canterbury Crown Court on February 9.

The UK's centre-left Labour government is under intense pressure to stem the arrivals each year of tens of thousands of migrants aboard small boats from France.



Hardeep Singh Brar, president and CEO, BMW Group India, poses beside a Mini convertible at a BMW showroom in Mumbai, India.

# BMW plans 10 models for Indian market

Reuters  
New Delhi

As part of a strategic push to grow its presence in India's emerging luxury market, BMW has announced plans to launch 10 new models and 17 product upgrades this year.

In 2025, the automaker achieved record-breaking sales of 18,001 vehicles in India, a 14% increase that narrowed the gap with market leader Mercedes-Benz. Despite this growth, premium models continue to represent just 1% of India's total annual car market, which exceeds 4.3mn units.

BMW Group India chief executive Hardeep Brar said the automaker plans to tackle this limited market penetration by launching more models while cutting manufacturing costs through increased local sourcing.

BMW sources roughly half of its components locally (including seats, engines, axles and tyres) for Indian-made vehicles. Brar is working to raise this proportion, although he has thus far declined to offer specific targets.

So far, the strategy appears to be working - at least as far as electric vehicles (EVs) are concerned. Local assembly of the iX1 model, which launched in 2025, allowed competitive pricing

against internal combustion engine-powered equivalents and fuelled 200% sales growth.

Now, EVs account for more than a fifth of BMW's Indian deliveries - up from 8% in 2024 - prompting the automaker to evaluate sourcing electric motors locally to further reduce production costs. Brar acknowledged these discussions remain at early stages.

Brar is also urging the government to maintain the current 5% tax rate on EVs, which compares favourably against the 40% and above for internal combustion engine vehicles.

While EV market penetration remains quite low in India, he

argues that premium buyers are driving the momentum. "Overall EV penetration in India is about 4% but for luxury it is 10%. Hence we need this long term strategy from the government, wherein the lower tax is maintained for a certain period of time till EVs can sustain on their own."

More than one-third of BMW's planned 2026 launches will arrive under the Mini brand as the automaker pursues growth momentum across multiple segments. The company delivered 17,271 BMW and 730 Mini vehicles in 2025, with long-wheelbase models proving particularly popular among Indian consumers, contributing 50% of sales.

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GULF TIMES

Smart glasses and AI advances find purpose among blind users

The actual use-value of smart glasses remains keenly debated – but less so among blind people, who are increasingly relying on the latest models to improve their lives. Does this restaurant serve fish? Does this bus go to my neighbourhood? None of the emerging leaders in the nascent smart glasses market designed their models to answer these questions with blind users in mind.

But several small startups – some exhibiting at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas earlier this month – are helping build a dedicated ecosystem out of existing products. For sighted people, smart glasses just tell them what they already see, noted Aaron Preece, editor-in-chief of *AccessWorld* magazine, published by the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB).

“But for blind people, it’s useful.”

Smartphone apps already serve people with blindness, “but you have to hold the device in the right direction,” said Preece, who is blind. “If it’s on your head, it’s definitely a lot more intuitive.”

According to the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, 43mn people worldwide are blind, while another 295mn have moderate to severe visual impairment. The most popular smart glasses are Meta’s AI glasses, which come in Ray-Ban or Oakley styles and can describe what’s in front of the user through voice commands.

Using the Be My Eyes app, users can even get a volunteer to describe the scene captured through the camera. California startup Agiga developed its EchoVision glasses with input from blind users, including music legend Stevie Wonder.

The most popular smart glasses are Meta’s AI glasses, which come in Ray-Ban or Oakley styles and can describe what’s in front of the user through voice commands

The company says its audio descriptions are richer and more comprehensive than existing products.

The glasses’ 110-degree camera angle captures 50 percent more than other smart glasses, said Agiga CEO Xiaoran Wang, reducing the need for users to turn their heads to capture a scene. Launch is planned for the first quarter of 2026 at \$599, not including an AI service subscription. This compares to Meta’s Ray-Ban starting price of \$299.

Is this too niche? Netherlands-based Envision recently launched a model in partnership with Hong Kong specialist Solos, priced at \$699 with one year’s access to its Ally software (\$10 monthly thereafter). CEO Karthik Mahadevan doubts a manufacturer focused exclusively on the blind and visually impaired can succeed, as “you cannot be both affordable and only serving a niche”. He prefers partnering with manufacturers to focus on software usable across multiple glass brands and welcomes upcoming models from Google, Samsung, and Lenovo. AI advances are expanding possibilities for people with low or no vision.

Startup HapWare recently developed the Aleye haptic bracelet, equipped with software that interprets an interlocutor’s attitude and mood in real time through connected glasses, then applies specific pressure patterns on the arm corresponding to different emotions.

“A high majority of communication is nonverbal, and for the blind community, it’s just simply inaccessible,” said HapWare CEO Jack Walters. Envision’s smart glasses offer a feature that, once activated, continuously describes the user’s surroundings without repeated prompting. The startup is also developing a detector that can spontaneously alert users to approaching objects or people in real time.

Envision uses multiple AI models, including OpenAI’s GPT-5, with regular updates to leverage the latest advances. But the company acknowledges “it’s still AI and it may not always be 100 percent right!”. “We don’t really recommend people use smart glasses as a primary navigation tool,” Mahadevan said, because even a small margin of error can “have serious consequences when detecting obstacles.”

Still, setting aside those use cases, “there are many others that present little risk” and prove useful, like taking photos, Preece said. “Even if it’s not quite accurate, I at least know vaguely what my picture is. So that’s pretty helpful.”

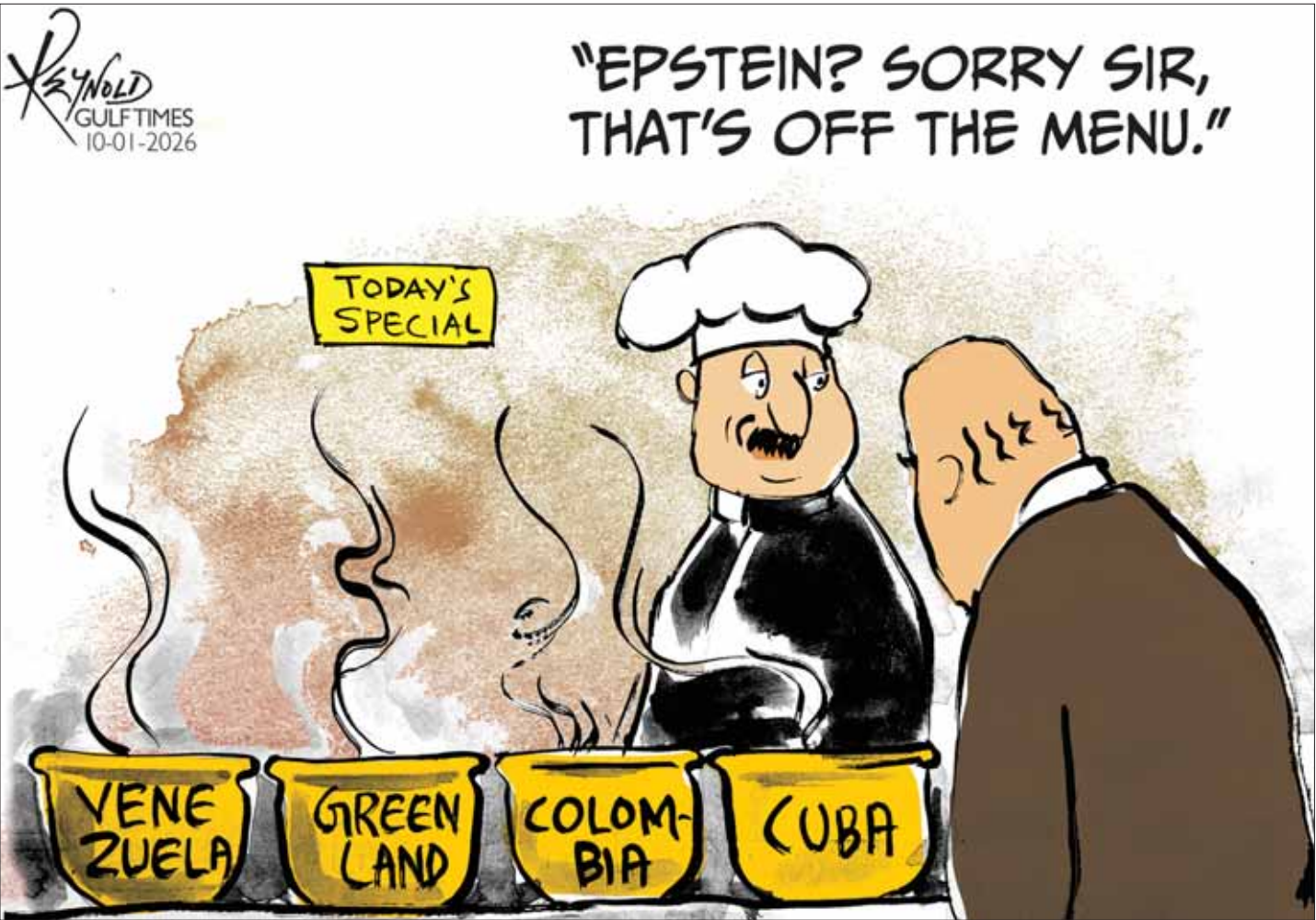
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Drugmakers brace for Europe pricing fight after Trump’s US price-cut deals

- Pricing deals with Trump added pressure to hike Europe prices
- Trump says other wealthy countries should pay more for drugs
- Politics could complicate co-operation on pricing

By Michael Erman and Maggie Fick  
New York/London

Global drugmakers face a battle in 2026 to secure higher prices for their prescription medicines in Europe after agreeing to cut US pricing last year under pressure from President Donald Trump. Tougher negotiations could lead drugmakers to delay launches of new medicines in parts of Europe, potentially limiting patient access to them, several industry investors, a lobbyist and a pharmaceutical executive said.

Tensions over drug pricing in Europe are expected to be a major topic at the JP Morgan Healthcare Conference in San Francisco that starts January 12, the premier annual event that pulls pharmaceutical executives and investors from around the world.

Trump touted the agreements at a series of White House events from September through December at which companies including Pfizer, Eli Lilly and AstraZeneca pledged to align US prices on new drugs more closely to what is paid in other developed nations. Trump has insisted other wealthy countries will pay more for medicines so that companies can cut prices in the United States. The US and Britain have also struck a deal under which Britain will receive tariff relief in

exchange for raising the net price it pays for new US medicines by 25%.

**Europe’s pricing dilemma**

Sebastian Guth, chief operating officer of Bayer’s pharmaceutical business and a board member of US industry lobby group PhRMA, said he believes leaders of European countries are open to revisiting pricing policies, particularly if it could secure earlier access to new medicines.

“If you look at innovative medicines that were launched and approved over the past 10 years, Americans have access to 80% of those while Europeans have access to less than 50%,” Guth said. “There’s structurally a very significant delay in Europe.”

European countries pay around one-third less than the US because they have national health systems that negotiate the prices of medicines with drugmakers and may delay purchasing them to get a better price. Marshall Gordon, senior research analyst for healthcare at ClearBridge Investments, said it may take time for pressure on Europe’s politicians to translate into higher prices.

“You can’t force the Europeans to just all of a sudden spend more,” said Gordon. “But (the deals) do actually give the companies negotiating power.”

Many drugmakers, including

AstraZeneca, Novartis and Sanofi, warned last year that Europe risks losing access to new medicines unless governments change how health systems assess and pay for them.

“We’ve already seen progress with the US-UK agreement announced late last year, and it’s encouraging to see the Trump administration continue this work with other nations to address foreign free-riding on US innovation,” said PhRMA spokesperson Sarah Ryan.

**Price concessions for tariff relief**

Fourteen major pharmaceutical companies last year struck deals with the Trump administration to cut prices for some medicines sold to Medicaid – the US health program for low-income Americans – and for cash-paying patients, and tie US launch prices for new drugs to prices paid in other wealthy countries.

In exchange for price concessions, the drugmakers received a three-year exemption from Trump’s threat of steep tariffs on their products. Shares of most drugmakers rose after the deals were announced, as investors downplayed the impact of the price cuts on a limited number of drugs and welcomed removal of the tariff threat.

Worst-case pricing fears are

“clearly not coming to pass,” said Linden Thomson, senior portfolio manager at Candriam Asset Management. Despite years of political noise, launch prices in the US are not coming down, Thomson said. Some new drugs and treatments are being priced “materially higher than even Wall Street” expects, she added, pointing to J&J’s Inlexzo which treats a type of bladder cancer and launched in September. The drug costs over \$1.5mn per treatment course.

Gareth Powell, head of healthcare investment at London-based Polar Capital, said companies could choose to launch some new drugs in the United States and delay selling them in Europe. “That could mean that – at least for a couple of years until the Trump presidency ends – these products just aren’t launched in Europe.”

A Washington lobbyist who works with drugmakers said European governments were unlikely to make major concessions to the US given current events, such as Trump’s latest push to “purchase” Greenland, which is part of Nato-member Denmark.

“It’s not like the Trump administration has done a bunch of stuff that has made the Europeans happy and willing to be nice to him,” the lobbyist said, asking not to be named. “He’s antagonising them.” – Reuters



US President Donald Trump with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in this file photo. Trump has insisted other wealthy countries will pay more for medicines so that companies can cut prices in the United States. (Reuters)

# EU countries override France to greenlight Mercosur trade deal

AFP/Reuters  
Brussels

The EU gave a long-delayed go ahead yesterday to a huge trade deal with South American bloc Mercosur championed by business groups but loathed by many European farmers – overriding opposition led by France.

A majority of the European Union's 27 nations backed the pact at an ambassadors' meeting in Brussels, diplomatic sources told AFP, paving the way for it to be inked in Paraguay next week.

More than 25 years in the making, supporters see the deal as crucial to boost exports, support the continent's ailing economy and foster diplomatic ties at a time of global uncertainty.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz hailed the agreement.

"The approval of the EU-Mercosur Agreement is a milestone in European trade policy and an important signal of our strategic sovereignty and capacity to act," the German leader said. "But 25 years of negotiations is too long. It's vital that the next free trade agreements are concluded swiftly."

However, the European Commission, which negotiated the text, failed to win over all of the bloc's member states.

Key power France, where politicians across the divide are up in arms against a deal attacked as an assault on the country's influential farming sector, led an ultimately unsuccessful push to sink it.

Ireland, Poland, Hungary and Austria also voted against the accord.

However, that was not enough to block it, after Italy, which had demanded and obtained a last-minute delay in December, threw its weight behind the pact.

The deal will create a vast market of more than 700mn people, making it one of the world's largest free trade areas.

Part of a broader push to diversify trade in the face of US tariffs, it will bring the 27-nation EU closer together with Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay, removing import tariffs on more than 90% of products.

This will save EU businesses €4bn (\$4.6bn) worth of duties per year and help exports of vehicles, machinery, wines and spirits to Latin America, according to the EU.

It will also help the bloc reduce its dependency on China for critical raw materials, said Agathe Demarais, of the European Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank.

"The conclusion of the EU-Mercosur trade deal is great news for Europe's global geopolitical and economic clout," she said, describing it one of the "best responses

to US tariffs, growing protectionism and trade tensions with China".

Germany, Spain and others were strongly in favour, believing that the deal will provide a welcome boost to their industries hampered by Chinese competition and tariffs in the United States.

However, France and other critics opposed it over concerns that their farmers would be undercut by a flow of cheaper goods, including meat, sugar, rice, honey and soybean, from agricultural giant Brazil and its neighbours.

Failure to sign off on the deal could have spelt the end of it: Brazil last month threatened to walk if the EU kicked the can down the road.

Over the past months, the commission has been at pains to reassure farmers and their backers that pros outweigh cons.

It stressed the accord is expected to boost EU agri-food exports to South America by 50%, in part by protecting more than 340 iconic European products – from Greek feta to French champagne – from local imitations.

It also laid out plans to set up a €6.3bn crisis fund and safeguards allowing for the suspension of preferential tariffs on agricultural products in case of a damaging surge in imports.

The latter were tightened further at the last minute by member states lowering the



Farmers feed a fire as they take part in a demonstration in Le Mans, western France, organised by French Farmers union FDSEA and JA Sarthe (Young Farmers Sarthe) to push French government to block the Mercosur trade deal. - AFP

threshold for action, in a late concession to Italy.

"It seems to me that the balance that has been created is a sustainable one, and I hope that the agreement will bring benefits in many areas, as I believe it will, and hopefully for everyone," Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni told journalists yesterday.

Still, French farmers rolled into Paris on tractors, their Belgian colleagues blocked

major roads across the country, and there are marches in Poland in a show of anger ahead of the text's approval.

"There is a lot of pain. There is a lot of anger," Judy Peeters, a representative for a Belgian young farmers group told AFP at a protest on a motorway south of Brussels.

The deal still needs approval from the European Parliament before it can definitively come into force.

# Storms spark travel mayhem, power cuts in north Europe

Reuters/AFP  
Paris/London/Berlin

Thousands of homes were blacked out, aircraft were grounded and train services disrupted as Storm Goretti hurled gale-force winds and heavy snow at northern Europe yesterday, compounding a week of freezing weather.

The storm slammed into Britain on Thursday before moving eastward into continental Europe.

More than 250 schools remained closed across Scotland, which has struggled through bad weather for much of the first week back after the Christmas break.

Gusts of up to 160kph lashed England and Wales with the Met Office forecasting agency warning of "very large waves" bringing "dangerous conditions to coastal areas".

It also issued an amber snow warning in Wales, central England and parts of northern England, predicting snow of up to 30cm (11") in some areas.

In snowbound Germany, the state railway called it one of the most severe weather events in recent years.

Around 380,000 households lost electricity in France, mainly in Normandy and Brittany, although by midday about 60,000 had been reconnected, and some 60,000 homes in Scotland and central

England suffered the same fate.

In the Netherlands, flights were cancelled as heavy snowfall was set to return after a one-day lull.

Winds of more than 150kph (93mph) were recorded overnight in France's northwestern Manche region, with a record 213kph in Barfleur, forcing the SNCF rail operator to suspend services between Paris and Normandy.

The French state energy company EDF said Storm Goretti had required two reactors to be taken offline at the Flamanville power station after a high-voltage line was disrupted, while roofs were torn off and trees uprooted.

Wholesale power prices rose across Western Europe.

In the English West Midlands, some rail services were suspended as thick snow blanketed the region, and residents were advised to stay home if possible.

"It's been quite a few years... you get a bit of this (snow) and everything seems to stop," said Wolverhampton resident David Goldstone, 86.

Pedestrians struggled with shopping trolleys and mounds of slush.

"We're just not used to it, are we?" said another local, Tracy Wilks, 53.

In northern Germany, state-owned Deutsche Bahn halted long-distance train services until further notice, citing one of the most severe winter weather



View of information boards without train departure and arrival indications, due to traffic disruptions, on a platform at the Saint-Lazare train station in Paris. - Reuters

events in many years.

"So far, we have been able to avoid situations where passengers are left stranded on the open track for long periods," a spokesperson told reporters at Berlin's central station, adding that crews were working to clear the tracks.

At Hamburg Airport, northern Germany's busiest air terminal, about 40 flights were cancelled, while a Bundesliga soccer fixture between Hamburg's St Pauli and RB Leipzig scheduled for today was postponed.

German carmaker Volkswagen closed its Wolfsburg plant early yesterday, while a second in Emden remained closed.

The Dutch airline KLM said it

cancelled 80 flights to and from Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport.

Schiphol had already cancelled hundreds of flights earlier this week because of freezing weather.

In Hungary, the military was called out to assist motorists trapped in heavy snow.

Western Balkan countries have seen widespread disruption since Sunday.

Some 600 schools were closed in Moldova until Monday and around 1,000 homes were without electricity in Romania.

On Thursday, one person was found dead in Albania, which has been hit by extensive flooding, while gales ripped off roofs in northeast Türkiye.

# Swiss prosecutors order owner of club in deadly blaze to be detained

Reuters/AFP  
Crans-Montana, Switzerland

Swiss prosecutors said yesterday that they had ordered one of the two owners of a ski resort club where a fire on New Year's Day killed 40 people to be detained due to flight risk, with local media saying that the order had been carried out.

Prosecutors are investigating the French owners on suspicion of crimes including homicide by negligence, while victims' families have filed legal complaints over the fire at "Le Constellation" in Crans-Montana in the Canton of Valais.

Shortly after Swiss newspaper 24 Heures reported that one of the couple, Jacques Moretti, has been remanded in custody, prosecutors said they had issued an order for him to be held.

The Valais police declined to comment.

Earlier, Jacques and Jessica



Attendees observe a moment in front of wreaths during the tribute ceremony in Martigny for the victims of the deadly fire that ripped through Le Constellation in Crans-Montana on New Year's Eve. - AFP

Moretti did not respond to reporters' questions as they entered the prosecutors' office in the town of Sion for a hearing.

Swiss authorities have designated yesterday as a national day of mourning.

The couple have expressed their

grief over the fire and said they would co-operate fully with the investigation.

More than half of those who died were teenagers and a further 116 people were injured, many of them seriously.

Several French and Italian citi-

zens were among the dead, and Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni called for stern punishment to be meted out to those responsible for the blaze.

Italian President Sergio Mattarella and French President Emmanuel Macron joined Swiss leaders, victims' families and firefighters at a ceremony yesterday in the town of Martigny, where a minute's silence was held to remember the victims.

Dozens of people also stood near the shuttered club in nearby Crans-Montana in silence, heads bowed under heavy snowfall.

Authorities placed hundreds of letters, teddy bears and bouquets of flowers for the fire victims beneath an igloo to protect them from snowfall.

Speaking at the Martigny ceremony, Swiss President Guy Parmelin said he hoped that those responsible for the fire would be brought to account "without delay or leniency".

That must also include relevant political authorities, said Mathias Reynard, head of the Valais government.

Speaking in Rome yesterday, Meloni pledged to help the families of the Italian victims find justice, and said she was weighing a ban in Italy on the use of sparklers indoors.

"What happened in Crans-Montana is the result of too many people not doing their job or thinking they were making easy money," she said. "Those responsible must be identified and prosecuted."

Witnesses and prosecutors have said the blaze appeared to have been started by the use of sparkling candles that set foam soundproofing on the basement ceiling alight.

Questions remain about oversight at the club, which the local mayor admitted this week had missed multiple safety checks.

Prosecutors said previously that the legal criteria to detain the club's

owners had so far not been met.

Twenty-one of the dead were from Switzerland, seven from France, and six from Italy.

A Swiss-French dual national and a French-British-Israeli national were also among the dead.

Nicolas Dobler, a 38-year-old volunteer fireman in the north-western Swiss canton of Jura, said he had come with three colleagues to light candles at the memorial at Crans-Montana.

"We came specifically today for the national day of mourning and also to really support our fellow firefighters who have truly experienced something horrible," he told AFP.

Olena, a 61-year-old Ukrainian refugee living in the nearby city of Sion below, said she had also come up the mountainside to take part in the day of mourning.

"I come from Ukraine, where people are also dying," she said. "This was terrifying. I wanted to come and honour the victims."



A serviceman walks past the Nimbus 2K high-speed aerial target drone by the Woot Tech aerospace company, during the Pakistan International Maritime Expo in Karachi, last year. - Reuters

## Pakistan 'nears \$1.5bn deal to supply weapons, jets to Sudan'

Pakistan is in the final phases of striking a \$1.5bn deal to supply weapons and jets to Sudan, a former top air force official and three sources said, promising a major boost for Sudan's army, battling the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Their conflict has stoked the world's worst humanitarian crisis for more than 2-1/2 years, drawing in myriad foreign interests, and threatening to fragment the strategic Red Sea country, a major gold producer.

The deal with Pakistan encompasses 10 Karakoram-8 light attack aircraft, more than 200 drones for scouting and kamikaze attacks, and advanced air defence systems, said two of the three sources with knowledge of the matter, who all sought anonymity.

It was a "done deal," said Aamir Masood, a retired Pakistani air marshal who continues to be briefed on air force matters.

Pakistan's military and its defence ministry did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

A spokesman for Sudan's army did not immediately respond to a message requesting comment.

Assistance from Pakistan, especially drones and jets, could help Sudan's army regain the air supremacy it had towards the start of its war with the RSF, which has increasingly used drones to gain territory, eroding the army's position.

The sources did not say how the deal was being funded.

The deal is another feather in the cap for Pakistan's growing defence sector, which has drawn growing

interest and investment, particularly since its jets were deployed in a conflict with India last year.

Last month, Islamabad struck a weapons deal worth more than \$4bn with the Libyan National Army, officials said, for one of the South Asian nation's largest arms sales, which includes JF-17 fighter jets and training aircraft.

Pakistan has also held talks with Bangladesh on a defence deal that could include the Super Mushshak training jets and JF-17s, as ties improve ties with Dhaka. - Reuters

Education ministry inspects facilities at Audio Education Complex

HE the Minister of Education and Higher Education, Lolwah bint Rashid bin Mohammed AlKhater, has paid an inspection visit to the Audio Education Complex. She was accompanied by Dr Hareb Mohamed al-Jabri, Assistant Undersecretary for Higher Education Affairs. The visit was attended by Dr Khaled al-Hurr, president of the Community College; Dr Salem Al-Nuaimi, president of University of Doha for Science and Technology; and Fatima al-Saadi, director of the Department of Special Education and Inclusive Education. This visit comes as part of the ministry's commitment to monitoring the conditions of students with hearing disabilities and strengthening pathways for their academic support. The visit aimed to gain first-hand insight into the reality of the educational process at the complex, identify students' needs, and discuss mechanisms for developing academic and rehabilitative support that would enable them to continue their education successfully in higher education institutions and



ensure fair and equal educational opportunities. During the tour, the delegation reviewed the educational programmes and services provided to students and discussed ways to enhance co-ordination between the Auditory Education Complex and higher education institutions, as well as developing flexible transition pathways that take into account students' needs and abilities and contribute to their academic and

social integration in subsequent stages of education. This visit is part of Ministry of Education and Higher Education's ongoing efforts to develop the inclusive education system and expand access to high-quality, sustainable education for all segments of society, in line with the pillars of Qatar National Vision 2030, particularly those related to human capital development and building a society based on justice and equal opportunities.



Excitement high at Marmi as falcons start to excel over homing pigeons

By A Staff Reporter  
Doha

Two falconers succeeded yesterday in catching the homing pigeons during the Hadd Al Tahadi Championship, as part of the activities of the 17th edition of the Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2026). The festival is held under the patronage of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani and is supported by the Social and Sports Activities Support Fund (Daam). It is taking place at Sabkhat Marmi in the Sealine Area and will continue until January 24. The competition between the peregrine falcons and the homing pigeons resulted in the falcons regaining their superiority over the pigeons in the third group. The two winners who qualified were Nasser Saeed al-Hawl al-Marri (third group) and Abdulrahman bin Mohsen al-Buqmi from Saudi Arabia (eighth group). Muteb Mubarak al-Qahtani, chairman of the Marmi Festival, crowned the first winner and qualifier during the evening session. He was joined by his deputy, Abdulwahab bin Omair al-Nuaimi, in crowning the second winner and qualifier of the evening session. Meanwhile, Shawi al-Kaabi, chairman of the Hadd Al Tahadi Committee, said that the third group, which had been postponed from the fourth day due to weather, witnessed extremely fierce competition. He noted that the pigeon of Abdullah Fakhro nearly escaped the talons of the falcons. Still, falconer Nasser Saeed al-Hawl al-Marri's falcon managed to make the catch, increasing the tally of the falcon owners. He added that the eighth group in the evening session also achieved the same outcome, with qualification. Al-Kaabi confirmed that the falcons were well-prepared and



highly alert for the hunt, as evidenced by their long pursuit. However, the homing pigeon's experience, evasive manoeuvres, light weight, and the intensive training it had undergone under Abdullah Fakhro enabled it at times to escape the falcons' talons. Abdullah Fakhro, owner of the homing pigeons, said that in the recent rounds, he presented an elite selection of pigeons that he had trained to a very high professional standard, which was evident on several days when all participating pigeons managed to survive. He stressed that the falcons, in turn, are trained professionally and to the highest level. He added that what has been

achieved represents a success for the Hadd Al Tahadi Championship itself and reflects the advanced level reached by the Marmi Festival competitions, as well as the major role the festival plays in highlighting this heritage, which every Qatari takes pride in. The two winning falconers who qualified in the Hadd Al Tahadi Championship expressed their great happiness with the achievement, confirming that they had prepared well for this difficult contest, especially given that Abdullah Fakhro selects elite homing pigeons. Al-Buqmi lauded the atmosphere of the Marmi Festival and the organising committee's performance in facilitating the



participation of falconers, overcoming obstacles, and providing everything needed by both falconers and visitors. In this regard, Mohamed bin Mubarak al-Ali, Chairman of Committees and official spokesperson for the Marmi Festival, said that the shooting championship will be held today for the junior category aged 14-18 and for amateurs. He noted that preparations will begin at 7am, with competitions starting an hour later at 8am, while the third category competitions for professionals will take place on January 17. Saturday evening will also witness the competitions of the Hadd Al Tahadi Championship for the ninth group.

