

Qatar, Japan reaffirm partnership in joint statement at Doha talks

Qatar and Japan have issued a joint statement following the third Qatar-Japan Strategic Dialogue, held in Doha yesterday. The statement reads as follows: “HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani and Minister of Foreign Affairs Toshimitsu Motegi co-chaired the Third Qatar-Japan Strategic Dialogue on January 13, 2026, in Doha, Qatar.

“The Qatar-Japan Strategic Dialogue is a testament to the strong partnership between the two countries, further reinforced by the announcement of a broader Strategic Partnership in 2023. Both ministers commended the strength of bilateral relations and reaffirmed their shared commitment to further deepening the Qatari-Japanese partnership. They also reviewed the

progress achieved since the Second Strategic Dialogue held in 2023.

“Prime Minister al-Thani and Foreign Minister Motegi discussed ways to advance bilateral co-operation, particularly in the fields of global and regional stability, defence, energy, economic and technological co-operation, and cultural and educational exchange.

The ministers exchanged views on global and regional developments, including developments in the Middle East, Israel-Palestine, Iran, and Syria, as well as East Asian affairs.

“They underscored the importance of diplomacy, dialogue, and multilateral engagement in promoting peace and stability.

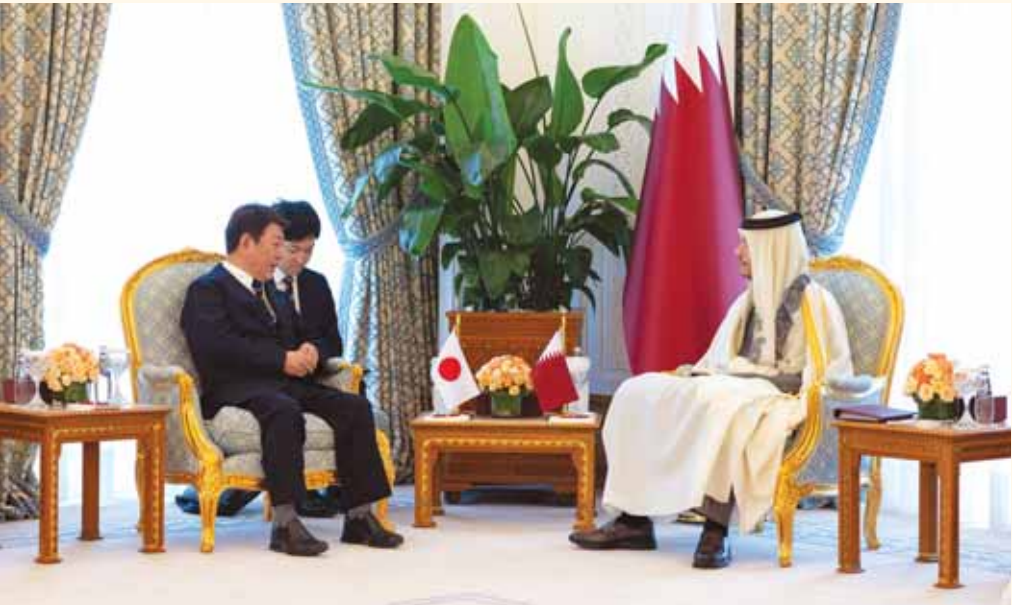
Both sides reaffirmed the importance of strengthening economic and energy co-operation, emphasising energy security, stable sup-

ply, and collaboration in technology and innovation. They highlighted the role of trade, investment, and co-operation in advanced industries in supporting economic growth and diversification in both countries.

“The two countries reiterated their commitment to defence and security co-operation, including co-operation on maritime security and freedom of navigation, in line with shared interests in regional stability.

“The two ministers emphasised the strength of Qatar-Japan relations and the opportunities to further deepen mutually beneficial co-operation. Relevant working groups will continue to convene in 2026 to advance these objectives, with outcomes to be presented at the Fourth Qatar-Japan Strategic Dialogue to be held in Tokyo.” (QNA)

PM meets Japanese FM



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met yesterday with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan Toshimitsu Motegi, who is visiting the country. They discussed co-operation relations between the two countries and ways to support and enhance them, as well as the topics on the agenda of the third Qatari-Japanese strategic dialogue held in Doha, in addition to several topics of mutual interest. HE the Prime Minister affirmed that the third Qatari-Japanese strategic dialogue is an important milestone in the close and growing relations between the two sides, which are based on respect, trust, co-operation, friendship and mutual interests. He further noted that commercial, economic and investment interests have formed the backbone of the strong relations between Qatar and Japan, praising in this context the distinguished role of Japanese companies in the development process in Qatar. (QNA)

MoFA spokesperson meets Japanese foreign ministry’s press secretary



HE Adviser to the Prime Minister and Spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) Dr Majed bin Mohammed al-Ansari met yesterday with Press Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan Kitamura Toshihiro, who is currently visiting the country. The meeting discussed bilateral co-operation relations, ways to support and develop them, and the exchange of expertise in the media field. (QNA)

Qatar envoy joins diplomatic talks with Lebanon’s PM, Quintet envoys



Ambassador of Qatar to Lebanon Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani has taken part in a meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister Dr Nawaf Salam alongside ambassadors representing the Quintet Committee. The talks focused on the latest political and security developments in Lebanon and the wider region. The Quintet Committee brings together a group of key international partners involved in diplomatic efforts aimed at supporting stability and political dialogue in Lebanon. (QNA)

Qatar supports multilateral efforts in promoting peace, development

QNA
Doha

HE Deputy Speaker of the Shura Council Dr Hamda bint Hassan al-Sulaiti, who is also member of the Executive Committee of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and Vice-President of the Committee representing the Arab Group within the Union, affirmed that Qatar’s hosting of the 298th session of the IPU Executive Committee comes within its firm approach, under the leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to support multilateral work, enhance international dialogue, and consolidate the role of parliamentary institutions as effective partners in achieving peace, supporting development, and addressing shared challenges at the regional and international levels.

In her opening address at the meeting held yesterday in Doha, HE Dr al-Sulaiti commended the pivotal role played by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, particularly the Executive Committee, in steering the Union’s work, developing its mechanisms, and enhancing its effectiveness in a manner that responds to the aspirations of national parliaments and keeps pace with the rapid transformations taking place in the world.

For her part, President of the IPU Dr Tulia Ackson and Chair of the Executive Committee, said that the committee serves as an advisory body that submits its recommen-



mittees, in guiding international parliamentary work, contributing to addressing regional and global challenges, and promoting peace and development, based on its vision grounded in dialogue and constructive cooperation.

On the sidelines of the meeting, members of the Executive Committee visited the Shura Council building, where they met with a number of members of the Council.

They also toured an exhibition featuring a collection of artifacts and documents that chronicle the Council’s journey since its establishment and highlight key milestones in its development and institutional role.

Over the course of two days, the meeting will discuss a range of topics on its agenda, foremost among them an assessment of the implementation of the Union’s current strategy, consideration of the general directions of the upcoming five-year strategy, and several organisational and parliamentary issues related to enhancing the Union’s role and the effectiveness of its mechanisms.

The participants will also continue deliberations on amendments to the statutes and a review of the rules governing the voting mechanism on the emergency item at the General Assembly, in a manner that contributes to developing the Union’s working mechanisms and expanding its international impact as a global platform that promotes human rights, peace, and sustainable development.

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Increasing number of patients benefit from HMC's specialist sarcopenia clinic

A total of 641 older adults have been treated at the specialist Sarcopenia Clinic of Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) since its opening in 2023, with new patient registrations increasing by 83% in 2025 compared to 2024, highlighting the growing need for specialist care that supports healthy ageing.

The Sarcopenia Clinic provides comprehensive care for patients with sarcopenia, a condition that causes age-related loss of muscle strength and physical function.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recognises sarcopenia as a major health issue linked to falls, disability, hospital admission and loss of independence among older adults.

The clinic supports healthy ageing through early identification, thorough assessment and evidence-based treatment approaches. It aligns with national health priorities and WHO Healthy



Ageing principles, with a strong focus on prevention and maintaining daily function.

Care is delivered through a multidisciplinary team that includes geriatric doctors, physiotherapists, dietitians and nursing staff. Together, the team provides personalised care plans based on each patient's needs, goals and physical ability.

Patients through the treatment are benefitted from early detection of sarcopenia and pre-sarcopenia; comprehensive geriatric assessment and frailty-focused care; bioelectrical impedance analysis (BIA) to measure muscle mass; personalised strength and functional exercise programmes; tar-

geted nutrition advice and regular reassessment and follow-up

Clinical results show clear improvements in muscle strength, balance, walking speed and overall mobility after treatment. Beyond physical improvements, many patients report feeling more confident, more active and better able to manage daily activities. Patients who were previously at high risk of falls have shown safer movement and improved independence.

Patient and caregiver feedback has been very positive, highlighting the clinic's supportive approach, clear guidance and practical education on muscle health.

Qatar, Japan boost strategic partnership

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Both countries reaffirmed their unwavering commitment to resolving disputes through dialogue and peaceful means while conducting an extensive review of the latest regional and international developments.

In a separate bilateral meeting held on the same day, HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani and Moteqi engaged in detailed discussions on ways to support and enhance the robust co-operation between their countries. The talks covered the comprehensive agenda items of the strategic dialogue, along with several other matters of mutual interest to both nations.

HE Sheikh Mohammed emphasised that the third Qatari-Japanese Strategic Dialogue represents an important milestone in the close and growing relations between the two sides, which are firmly grounded in respect, trust, co-operation, friendship, and mutual interests.

He further noted that commercial, economic, and investment interests have formed the backbone of the strong relations between Qatar and Japan, praising the distinguished role of Japanese companies in Qatar's development process.

Following the dialogue, the two nations issued a joint statement highlighting key areas of collaboration and shared vision. The statement noted that the Qatar-Japan Strategic Dialogue serves as a testament to the strong partnership between the two countries, further reinforced by the announcement of a broader Strategic Partnership in 2023. Both ministers commended the strength of bilateral relations and reviewed the substantial progress achieved since the Second Strategic Dialogue held in 2023.

Both sides underscored the critical importance of strengthening economic and energy cooperation, with particular emphasis on energy security, stable supply, and enhanced collaboration in technology and innovation. They high-

lighted how trade, investment, and co-operation in advanced industries support economic growth and diversification in both countries.

The two countries also reiterated their commitment to defence and security co-operation, including collaboration on maritime security and freedom of navigation, aligned with shared interests in maintaining regional stability.

The ministers exchanged comprehensive views on global and regional developments, including the evolving situations in the Middle East, Israel-Palestine, Iran, Syria, and East Asian affairs, emphasising the vital importance of diplomacy, dialogue, and multilateral engagement in promoting lasting peace and stability.

Relevant working groups will continue to convene throughout 2026 to advance these objectives, with outcomes to be presented at the Fourth Qatar-Japan Strategic Dialogue scheduled to be held in Tokyo.

Consulting HAUS Guides Snoonu Through \$245M Acquisition, Marking Qatar's First Billion-Riyal Tech Exit

Consulting HAUS served as the exclusive sell-side advisor to Snoonu in its landmark acquisition by Jahez Group. By guiding Snoonu through negotiations and positioning the company at more than a billion-riyal valuation, Consulting HAUS played a pivotal role in securing favorable terms and ensuring the transaction reflected Snoonu's growth trajectory. From business planning to deal structuring, diligence and negotiation support, the firm acted to safeguard the interests of Snoonu's shareholders. It also underscored the importance of professional expertise in cross-border GCC transactions and marked a milestone for Qatar's tech ecosystem.

"We are proud to have served as Snoonu's exclusive advisor in this landmark transaction, which underscores the critical role of professional advisory in enabling successful cross-border deals across the GCC. By guiding Snoonu through this acquisition, we have highlighted Qatar's emergence as a hub for tech innovation which will act as a benchmark and provide motivation for other Qatari tech companies moving forward," said Laith Dajani - Managing Partner of Consulting HAUS.

Consulting HAUS began its mandate nearly a year ahead of the transaction's close, laying the groundwork for Snoonu's successful exit. The firm's initial phase centered on developing a robust business plan and ensuring operational readiness, establishing a structured process designed to minimize negotiation friction and safeguard value. Building on this foundation, Consulting HAUS took the lead in transaction execution, working seamlessly with buy-side consultants, legal counsel, and auditors. Throughout the engagement, the firm was instrumental in managing stakeholder expectations, maintaining alignment



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Laith Dajani
Managing Partner
Consulting HAUS.

across all parties, and driving a disciplined project-management framework. This comprehensive approach proved pivotal in delivering value and ensuring the transaction was executed with precision, transparency, and strategic foresight.

Reflecting on the firm's advisory role in the transaction, Hamad Al Hajri - CEO of Snoonu said, "We value Consulting-HAUS's expertise and professionalism which was one of the supporting factors in getting the deal over the line and overcoming the challenges along the way. Our landmark agreement with Saudi Arabia's Jahez Group brings new investment, valuing Snoonu at over QAR 1 billion – one of the largest private infusions in the nation's history, and undoubtedly the largest in its tech sector. From the heart of Doha, we are

Qatar engaged in de-escalating US-Iran tensions

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The complexities on the table call for progress towards the second phase, and Israel must answer why implementation is being delayed," he added. Dr al-Ansari made it clear that mediators are in daily contact to advance the political process and move towards the second phase of the ceasefire agreement. He described the humanitarian disaster in Gaza as not a weather event, but a man-made catastrophe created by the Israeli occupation, which continues efforts to prolong the disaster on the largest possible scale and inflict maximum harm on Palestinians. When asked what was hindering progress towards the second phase and why Israel

wasn't implementing it, he said Israel must answer these questions. He explained that Israel is creating obstacles and complications, asserting that Israel doesn't want to reach the second phase in any way. He emphasised that Israel is obstructing progress that would end the crisis, asking why Israel doesn't open the Rafah crossing. Dr al-Ansari stressed that humanitarian aid and ending the catastrophe should not be linked to ceasefire implementation and the second phase. He indicated that after Israeli prisoners and bodies were returned to their families, Israel is now creating obstacles to further advance the agreement and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Q-PEC Marks 16 Years of Excellence with Grand Annual Celebration



Qatar Power Engineering and Contracting (Q-PEC) proudly celebrated its 16th anniversary with a grand annual day event, bringing together employees, clients, and partners to commemorate over a decade and a half of growth, resilience, and shared success.

The milestone celebration was attended by nearly 200 employees, many of whom took to the stage to receive awards across various categories in recognition of their outstanding performance, dedication, and long-standing service. The event highlighted Q-PEC's strong people-centric culture and its commitment to acknowledging excellence at every level of the organization.

The occasion was graced by Chairman Mr. Yousuf Mohammed Al Jaida, who addressed the gathering and expressed his heartfelt appreciation to all employees for their hard work, loyalty, and commitment over the years. He also thanked Q-PEC's valued



clients for their continued trust and confidence in the company, reaffirming his promise to build even stronger and more enduring relationships in the years ahead. As part of the celebrations, the Chairman distributed bonuses and awards among all employees, reinforcing the company's tradition of sharing success with its people.

Sharing his experience, a long-serving employee said, "I have been with the company for 15 years and have received appreciation awards and

bonuses every year. I truly believe that when you have dreams, Q-PEC is the best place to work."

Speaking at the event, the CEO of QPEC extended his gratitude to the Chairman, saying, "Thank you for your trust, your faith, your guidance, and your leadership. Your trust has been the anchor in every storm." He also thanked the employees for their unwavering dedication and the clients and partners for their continued support, noting that the company's journey and achievements would not have been possible without their collaboration.

The celebration concluded with a lavish dinner for all attendees, providing an opportunity for employees, management, and clients to connect in a relaxed and festive atmosphere. The 16th Annual Day celebration stood as a memorable testament to QPEC's strong values, collaborative spirit, and optimistic vision for the future.



"We value Consulting-HAUS's expertise and professionalism which was one of the supporting factors in getting the deal over the line and overcoming the challenges along the way. Our landmark agreement with Saudi Arabia's Jahez Group brings new investment, valuing Snoonu at over QAR 1 billion – one of the largest private infusions in the nation's history, and undoubtedly the largest in its tech sector. From the heart of Doha, we are accelerating toward regional leadership while staying firmly rooted in Qatar's values, vision, and talent."

Hamad Al Hajri
CEO - Snoonu

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Backed by a partnership team with over 100 years of combined experience, Consulting HAUS is uniquely positioned to navigate the complexities of consulting and transaction advisory across the GCC. Its integrated model ensures that this depth of expertise is applied to every engagement, delivering clients the highest standards of service and strategic insight. The firm has established its many successes based on differentiating its operating model by integrating its various service lines to enable it to provide seamless turnkey solutions to its clients. Over the last 7 years, Consulting HAUS has delivered many landmark projects that have advanced economic development and diversification across the region.

Doha ‘deserves to be GCC tourism capital’

The Chairman of Qatar Tourism and Visit Qatar, HE Saad bin Ali al-Kharji, has affirmed that Doha’s winning of the title of GCC Tourism Capital did not come by chance, but rather as recognition by the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC)’s General Secretariat of the great efforts exerted by Qatar in developing the tourism sector in particular and the Gulf environment in general, making Doha today a preferred destination for Gulf families.

During a session on promoting Qatar as a tourist destination, which was held yesterday on the sidelines of the second day of the Government Communications Forum 2026, HE al-Kharji said that this designation calls for a commitment to designing a tourism experience that suits the GCC family, noting that Qatar Tourism has made significant efforts in this regard, especially as tourism in the country is family-oriented by nature.

He pointed out that Qatar is among the safest countries in the world in terms of security and safety, noting that 35% of visitors to Qatar in 2025 came from Gulf countries, and that there are more than 400 weekly flights from Gulf cities to Qatar.

HE al-Kharji noted that the family-oriented seasons and events offered in Qatar reflect the level of development the country has achieved, with high quality

that everyone can enjoy at competitive and attractive prices.

He added that last year recorded the highest hotel occupancy rate, at 71%.

HE al-Kharji said that tourism competition among GCC capitals is healthy and beneficial for all, in light of the growing demand witnessed by this sector, whose great importance is now widely recognised.

He added that, in just two years, Qatar’s events were not limited to Doha alone but extended beyond it, allowing GCC tourists to visit the capital and surrounding areas with ease.

HE al-Kharji stressed the importance of preserving Qatar’s cultural uniqueness and identity, noting that the upcoming Ramadan season will focus on Qatari identity more than any previous year, while maintaining the well-known sense of authenticity.

In this regard, the official affirmed that urban development in Qatar has not overlooked old areas and traditional markets, such as Souq Waqif, alongside modern projects that carry an authentic Qatari cultural character.

HE al-Kharji highlighted the importance of showcasing Qatari identity at tourist destinations and highlighting genuine Qatari hospitality, which he described as one of Qatar’s greatest strengths.

In a related context, the Qa-



tar Tourism chairman noted that within a single year, co-operation took place with around 700 influencers of various nationalities, resulting in the production of more than 9,000 pieces of content in different languages, including influencers residing in Doha from the Indian and Filipino communities and many other nationalities.

He added that some influencers voluntarily publish tourism content about Qatar without any direction from Qatar Tourism.

HE al-Kharji also spoke about the Akl Awal Festival, which will be held this year in its third edition, offering everyone the experience of dining at restaurants characterised by traditional ambience and local authenticity, and representing a major opportunity for families.

He pointed out that there is co-operation with the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs to hold seminars and host religious scholars and figures within an educa-

tional religious programme.

The official added that, for the first time Qatar, sports events will be held during the holy month of Ramadan, describing this as a new challenge that will be turned into an opportunity, especially as organising events during the month will be distinctive and family-oriented, opening wide prospects for family tourism.

He highlighted that Qatar Tourism serves as the country’s main marketing arm at the domestic, regional, and international levels, noting that communication with all government entities is ongoing, as the goal is to project the success of every institution in the country externally and highlight Qatar’s progress in all fields, thereby enhancing its international image as a modern state based on solid principles and laws that enable life with dignity and freedom.

HE al-Kharji stressed the importance of co-operation among

state institutions in highlighting events and providing the necessary support.

He referred to Qatar Calendar, which brought together all government entities on a single platform, with information published through applications such as Visit Qatar and the website, as well as printing event calendars and distributing them to government entities.

Regarding regional and international marketing campaigns, HE al-Kharji noted the documentation of partnerships with tourism companies and media institutions through more than 50 global partnerships, including media organisations in the UK and the US, with the publication of articles and co-ordinated radio and television programmes based on real stories.

He also spoke about the UFC championship held in Qatar, which showed a 6% increase in visitor numbers from the US and a 19% increase from the UK, as a result of media engagement and partnerships with institutions such as Newsweek and News UK, enhancing Qatar’s image at the global level.

In the field of digital transformation, HE al-Kharji said that tourism is one of the main sectors within the state’s strategy, reflecting its great importance.

A digital transformation office has been established, he said,

within Qatar Tourism, in direct co-ordination with the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.

Several applications have been enhanced, including strengthening the smart tourism guide to support visitor experiences and linking the digital environment with tourism programmes, as well as integrating applications related to hospitals and restaurants to provide a fast and distinctive user experience.

HE al-Kharji emphasised the importance of the human element in achieving a comprehensive digital transformation system.

He said that co-ordination has taken place with major digital transformation companies to facilitate the tourism experience for visitors through applications, and stressed the importance of leveraging the Visit Qatar Pass user base, which includes around 4mn active users, to improve the experience based on visitors’ previous experiences in Qatar and continuously develop tourism services.

HE al-Kharji affirmed that tourists who visit the country are ambassadors of Qatar, and that it is important to convey the right message through them and seize opportunities to follow up on visitors’ opinions and recommendations, enhancing Qatar’s tourism reputation and developing the visitor experience. – QNA

Government Communications Forum discusses role of sports as a tool to strengthen society

On the second day of the third Government Communications Forum, a panel session discussed the role of sport as a unifying narrative that helps inspire individuals and institutions and reinforces shared values within society.

The panel examined how sporting values, national identity, and emotional attachment to sport can be leveraged to build influential narratives that transform audience engagement from mere spectatorship into active and meaningful community participation.

In this context, participants viewed sport as an effective tool for strengthening national belonging and entrenching values of co-operation, discipline, and teamwork, noting its ability to unite different segments of society around common goals, thereby positively reflecting on social cohesion.

They also agreed on the importance of government communication in highlighting the social and human dimensions of

sport and shedding light on initiatives and programmes that make it a platform for promoting civic participation and encouraging the public to engage positively with national issues.

The director of the Sports Sector at Qatar Olympic Committee, Sheikh Khalifa bin Khalid al-Thani, affirmed that the committee plays a pivotal role in organising and managing sporting events in the country through its supervision of various sports federations in Qatar and the organisation of the annual sports calendar.

He said that the committee established some two years ago a specialised department for sporting events, tasked with organising events in co-operation with the relevant federations.

Sheikh Khalifa noted that the current sports calendar includes 83 sporting events throughout the year, reflecting Qatar’s status as a leading destination for hosting major events.

The official said that preparing sporting events requires long-term efforts extending for months and sometimes years, and stressed that communication is a key element in the success of events, whether with international, continental, and Gulf federations, or through co-ordination with relevant entities within the country.

The chief executive of the Local Organising Committee for Football Events, Jassim Abdulaziz al-Jassim, said that the success of hosting tournaments is based on the integration of communication and co-ordination systems among various entities, in a way that reflects a positive image of the country and enhances its global standing.

He praised the role played by communication and media bodies, such as the Government Communications Office, the International Media Office, and media institutions, explaining that media co-ordi-



nation helped highlight the organisational successes of the tournaments, including the FIFA U-17 World Cup and the Arab Cup.

Al-Jassim noted that Qatar has successfully hosted several tournaments simultaneously, reflecting the country’s capacity for integrated organisation with the participation of all sectors, including security, airports, and border crossings.

He added that sporting tournaments have brought about a positive social transformation, through higher rates of family attendance and female participation, increased involvement of children and youth, and the enhanced status of national team stars as socially influential role models.

Senior Ooredoo Qatar director of marketing communications Sabah Rabiah al-Kuwari noted that the Doha Marathon represents a prominent model of community sporting events.

It began, he said, as a simple event, with the number of participants this year rising to more than 20,000 people from over 160 nationalities, including 2,200 participants from outside the country.

Al-Kuwari added that the marathon supports the national sports agenda and enhances community participation by engaging all segments of society, including people with autism, with a dedicated race allocated for them this year, reflecting a firm belief in the importance of social inclusion. – QNA

Forum highlights growing role of women in leadership and storytelling

The third Government Communications Forum in Doha has placed a spotlight on the expanding role of women in leading the communications sector, their influence in shaping narratives, engaging audiences, and redefining flexible and inclusive leadership.

During a panel discussion, participants shared insights and examples from various sectors, exploring how female leaders are driving tangible change, shaping institutional strategies, and guiding the future of communication.

Head of the Government Communications Office’s Semi-Governmental Entities Department, Maryam Mohammed al-Mannai, highlighted Qatar’s progress in supporting women, particularly in leadership roles, and attributed this to the sus-



tained support of the country’s top leadership and institutional authorities.

She noted a significant shift in women’s participation in government and semi-government entities in recent years and emphasised the need for practical initiatives – such as advanced human resources (HR) policies and a stimulating work environment – to continue promoting gender balance and empowerment.

Al-Mannai added that empowering female leaders requires focused training and capacity-building to enhance leadership skills and prepare women for senior roles, while showcasing success stories as inspiring models across sectors.

She emphasised that the Government Communications Office actively highlights women’s achievements in fields such as health, sports, and strategic communication, and noted that

Qatari women have proven their competence across all sectors.

Senior Visit Qatar media and communications manager Dr Buthaina al-Janahi stressed that crafting Qatar’s national narrative demands deep intellectual and cultural understanding.

She noted that effective storytelling goes beyond merely presenting information, highlighting instead the stories, memories, and values that shape public perception of Qatar.

Dr al-Janahi emphasised that national narratives are key to building and refining institutional identities, particularly when communicating with priority local and international stakeholders, and that delivering messages effectively requires diverse tools and methods to suit the target audience.

She also highlighted the rapidly evolving communications landscape, marked by high intellectual competition and digital transformation, urging practitioners to adopt innovative approaches and remain flexible in responding to new trends, rather than relying solely on traditional media.

Anne Sobel, a writer and creative professional at the US-based streaming platform Netflix, shared her experience in media and entertainment, stressing

the importance of maintaining a unique perspective.

“Success comes from believing in yourself and your personal experiences,” she said, noting that an individual’s viewpoint stems from a combination of values, beliefs, passions, interests, and life experiences.

Sobel added that women’s life experiences provide a distinct perspective that can enrich creative content, encouraging them to leverage their personal journeys as a source of inspiration and innovation.

The forum underscored the growing impact of women in shaping communication strategies, influencing public engagement, and leading the sector toward more inclusive, innovative, and culturally resonant approaches. – QNA

QSTP partners with Merck to launch FemTech Accelerator

The Qatar Science and Technology Park (QSTP), a member of Qatar Foundation (QF), in partnership with leading science and technology company Merck, has launched the QSTP x Merck FemTech Accelerator.

The dedicated programme will support deep-tech, impact-driven FemTech startups that tackle critical unmet needs in women’s health and advance outcomes for women across the Mena (Middle East and North Africa) region.

The programme will identify and support up to 30 leading FemTech startups developing breakthrough solutions across key women’s health domains, focusing on innovations powered by artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and materials science.

The initiative is designed to generate and track measurable impact at scale, aligned with the QF’s mission to improve women’s health outcomes across the region.

Through a multi-country approach, the QSTP x Merck FemTech Accelerator will enable deep-tech startups to be piloted,

validated, and adopted across multiple markets, addressing women’s health challenges at both regional and global levels.

Leveraging the QSTP’s innovation ecosystem and Merck’s global scientific and healthcare expertise, selected startups will benefit from curated mentorship, exposure to regional healthcare stakeholders, and opportunities to explore collaboration within Qatar’s health and research landscape.

The accelerator will also facilitate engagement with relevant national institutions and ecosystem partners.

Aligned with the QF’s innovation and healthcare priorities, the accelerator aims to position the country as a regional and global hub for women’s health innovation, while addressing the urgent need for greater investment, research, and commercialisation in FemTech, one of the fastest-growing and most impactful sectors in global health technology.

“At the QSTP, we believe that meaningful innovation is inclusive,” said QSTP

president Rama Chakaki. “This accelerator is designed to support high-potential startups and generate measurable, scalable impact on women’s health across multiple markets.”

“Leveraging Qatar’s growing innovation ecosystem alongside Merck’s global scientific leadership, we are creating pathways for FemTech solutions to be piloted, validated, and adopted at regional and global scale,” she added.

“Women’s health remains one of the most under-addressed areas in healthcare innovation globally,” said Merck (Gulf) general manager Ahmed Aboelfadl. “Through this partnership with the QSTP, Merck is proud to support the growth of FemTech companies developing science- and technology-led solutions that can meaningfully improve health outcomes for women.”

“By combining global scientific expertise with regional collaboration, this initiative will help accelerate innovation, enable real-world impact, and strengthen the



QSTP president Rama Chakaki and Merck (Gulf) general manager Ahmed Aboelfadl.



ecosystem for women’s health across Qatar and the wider Mena region,” he added.

The programme will feature an intensive two-week immersion in Doha, where selected founders will engage with stakeholders from Qatar’s healthcare ecosystem, including clinicians, regulators, investors, and innovation leaders, to validate market opportunities and prepare for commercialisation.

Following the initial programme phase, top-performing startups will be invited to pursue pilot projects within Qatar and the wider Mena region, enabling real-world testing, clinical validation, and clear path-

ways to scale in priority regional markets.

This initiative reflects the QSTP and Merck’s long-standing commitment to fostering transformative deep tech innovation that enhances women’s quality of life, economic diversification, and global competitiveness.

Applications for the QSTP x Merck FemTech Accelerator are now open (<https://qstp.qa/programs/femtech/>). Delivery of the initiative will be supported by healthcare and innovation ecosystem stakeholders, while C3 – Companies Creating Change will support in programme delivery.

Minister launches 2025 report on state of Qatar environment

HE the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Dr Abdullah bin Abdulaziz bin Turki al-Subaie launched yesterday the *State of the Environment Report for the State of Qatar 2025*.

The report dealt with the current environmental conditions in Qatar, highlighting key challenges and achievements, as well as environmental priorities for the coming period.

In a statement on this occasion, HE Dr al-Subaie affirmed that the report's release is part of the institutional efforts to develop the environmental framework in the country and provide a database and accurate indicators that contribute to supporting the formulation of environmental policies on clear scientific foundations.

He noted the report's alignment

with Qatar National Vision 2030 and its support for national directions in the areas of environmental protection and achieving sustainable development.

The minister emphasised the importance of this report as a supportive tool for decision-makers, helping to guide environmental policies and update relevant national plans.

HE Dr al-Subaie also highlighted its role in enhancing co-ordination among stakeholders, stressing that it represents a national scientific reference that supports the preparation of national reports related to environmental commitments at the regional and international levels.

He added that the report is the culmination of efforts by many experts, researchers, specialists, and

academics, totalling nearly 80 participants.

The preparation, analysis, and review phases took approximately one year.

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC) undersecretary, HE Engineer Abdulaziz bin Ahmed bin Abdullah al-Mahmoud, said that the report provides a comprehensive overview of the country's environment.

This is achieved, he said, through the collection and analysis of environmental data and indicators related to various environmental components.

HE al-Mahmoud noted its role in monitoring the state of the environment and related issues within a systematic framework that allows for an understanding of current conditions and changes that



have occurred between 2021 and 2024.

He said the report contributes to standardising work frameworks among relevant departments, organising monitoring and follow-up processes, and linking the results to the MoECC's existing programmes and implementation plans.

HE al-Mahmoud added that the updated environmental information in the report supports improved internal co-ordination mechanisms and helps in monitoring the implementation of environmental responsibilities for each entity, according to clearly defined roles.

The director of the MoECC's Technical Office and general supervisor of the report's preparation, Engineer Hussein Saad al-Kubaisi, said that this edition is an

extension of the *State of the Environment Report 2021*.

He explained that it provides an updated assessment based on accurate environmental data covering the period from 2020 to 2024, as well as the most significant developments at the national, regional, and global levels.

The report, al-Kubaisi added, comprises nine main sections covering the country's key environmental areas: biodiversity, the air environment and climate change, the marine environment, water resources, land resources, waste management and the circular economy, as well as environment and development, environmental policies and governance, and future visions and prospects.

The official noted that the report was prepared in collaboration

with Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU), Qatar University, and Earthna Centre, with the participation of a select group of national experts and scientists.

It followed the methodology adopted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)'s Development Programme on Environmental Impact Assessment (DPSIR), which allows for a comprehensive analysis encompassing driving forces, environmental pressures, the current situation, impacts, and responses.

Al-Kubaisi added that the preparation phases saw broad participation from relevant stakeholders.

The MoECC organised an extensive workshop last September, which was attended by representatives from 25 departments from 13 national entities. – **QNA**



Ahlibank opens new branch at Doha Oasis

Ahlibank has announced the official opening of its new branch at Doha Oasis, marking a strategic step in the bank's ongoing efforts to enhance accessibility, elevate customer experience, and strengthen its presence within key lifestyle and commercial hubs across Qatar.

The opening of Ahlibank's branch at Doha Oasis is part of the strategic partnership between Ahlibank and Doha Oasis, a landmark destination that brings together retail, hospitality, entertainment, and business under one integrated development.

Strategically located within Doha Oasis, the branch has been designed to offer a modern and welcoming banking environment, providing customers with seamless access to a comprehensive range of banking products and services.

"The opening of our Doha Oasis branch reflects Ahlibank's strategic focus on expanding its presence in carefully selected destinations that combine commercial significance with lifestyle relevance," said Ahlibank chief executive Hassan Ahmed AlEfrangi. "This step also forms part of the strategic partnership between two leading Qatari institutions, aimed at delivering an exceptional and integrated banking experience."

"By combining Ahlibank's advanced financial solutions with the premium lifestyle offerings of Doha Oasis, the partnership created added value and introduces a more seamless, customer-centric experience tailored to the evolving needs of Qatar's market," he added.

"The opening of Ahlibank's branch at Doha Oasis reflects the bank's long-term strategic vision to build value-driven partnerships that extend beyond traditional banking," said Ahlibank chairman Sheikh Faisal bin AbdulAziz bin Jassem al-Thani.

"This milestone underscores our commitment to supporting integrated developments that combine economic vitality, modern lifestyles, and community engagement," he said. "Through such initiatives, Ahlibank continues to play an active role in advancing sustainable growth, enhancing the quality of financial services, and contributing to the broader development objectives of the state of Qatar."

"The addition of Ahlibank to Doha Oasis represents an important enhancement to the destination's integrated services offering," said Doha Oasis chairman Victor Agha. "This partnership aligns with our vision to create a comprehensive ecosystem that brings together lifestyle, business, and essential services, further reinforcing Doha Oasis as a premier destination in Qatar."

Qatar to host joint tactical exercise of GCC security agencies

Under the patronage of HE the Minister of Interior and Commander of the Internal Security Force (Lekhwiya) Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Qatar is set to host the joint tactical exercise of the security agencies of the Gulf Co-operation Council (Arabian Gulf Security 4) from January 25-February 4.

Participating in this drill are security apparatuses and forces from the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states, along with professional security units from the US, with the objective of sharing expertise and experiences in dealing with various incidents and scenarios.

The organisation of this drill is part of the

efforts marshalled to enhance the GCC security co-operation system, elevate readiness, and strengthen joint co-ordination to keep pace with the evolving nature of security challenges, in addition to bolstering the effective and rapid response capabilities to emergency crises and incidents based on the best approved practices and criteria.

The exercise broadly comprises joint training programmes simulating an array of realistic scenarios, offering a test for operational measures and plans, enhancing the efficiency of field co-ordination and integrated roles among the participating units and forces, supporting the exchange of expertise, and reinforcing readiness to genuinely and profes-

sionally handle a wide diversity of cases and circumstances.

The drill's supreme organising committee has accomplished the arrangements in terms of essential organisation, training, and logistics for the participating forces, thereby conducting the exercise's events across several sites in accordance with the highest security, safety, and efficiency standards.

These primed preparations will ensure the integration of the training components to be further adapted to the set objectives, thereby contributing to strengthening readiness and developing co-ordination and collaboration capabilities among the participating forces. – **QNA**

QM and GU-Q launch first season of Lusail Museum Conversations

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

Qatar Museums (QM), in collaboration with Georgetown University in Qatar (GU-Q), has launched the Lusail Museum Conversations Season 1, with the inaugural session taking place yesterday at the GU-Q library.

Season 1 of the Lusail Museum Conversations, an ongoing series of public lectures and events, is titled "The Late Ottoman World: At the Roots of the Modern Middle East", and runs from January to April.

The first session of the season, "Princes, Patrons, and Painters: The Ottoman Palace and the Challenge of Modernity", was presented by Prof Edhem Eldem, historian and Sakıp Sabancı visiting professor at Columbia University's Department of History.

Welcoming the gathering, GU-Q dean Safwan Masri said that the lecture series is a preview of many more activities to come.

"This series is designed as a space for serious scholarship and public dialogue, and it invites us to look carefully at moments of transition to understand how society responds when inherited structures no longer suffice and new



possibilities begin to emerge," he said.

"Lusail Museum Conversations is also something more," Masri added. "It is an early expression of the vision behind Lusail Museum, Qatar Museum's forthcoming landmark institution."

Lusail Institute director Dr Alain Fouad George stated that Lusail Museum aims to reframe its rich art collections, especially the orientalist collections, and to use them as an entry point.

"It is an entry point that allows us to examine the world behind the image, the multiple histories, the encounters, and the power relations," he said.

"Behind the formation of the museum is an intellectual foundation," Dr George continued. "And this is where the institute comes in because this museum deals with issues that are not only historical, but also sensitive."



A collage of the paintings from the Ottoman era.

Left: Prof Edhem Eldem at the event. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

"They are sometimes contentious, always complex, more so than in most other art museums," he added. "And we also want to make history come alive in new ways."

In his lecture Prof Eldem spoke about the Ottoman hierarchy and their idea of modernity.

"Westernisation and modernity, for the Ottomans, are alike and the same thing," he said.

"I know this is politically incorrect to say today, and we know that there are alternative modernities, but I can guarantee you that for the Ottoman elite in the 19th century, modernity was lodged in western forms, western norms, western models and western information," Prof Eldem highlighted.

He explored the paintings of the last Ottoman caliph, Abdülmejid, examining how he used his own art to project a self-image of modernity and respon-

sibility following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908.

Through the lens of palace culture and visual production, his practice sheds light on the paradoxes of Ottoman modernisation and the often-overlooked role of imperial figures in shaping cultural narratives.

The inaugural season of the Lusail Museums Conversations brings together five lectures and a film screening, each delving into key aspects of the late Ottoman world.

From exploring the intersections of art, authority, and reform, to questions of identity and cultural exchange, the talks examine how pivotal figures and events shaped the cultural and artistic landscapes of the 19th century Middle East.

The next session in the season takes place on January 27 at the GU-Q.

Locally bred falcons excel at speeding in Marmi 2026

The local Al Da'wa Championship competitions kicked off yesterday as part of the 17th Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2026).

Hamad Saleh al-Masoud, head of the local Da'wa Championship at the Marmi Festival, said that the event measures the speed of falcons flying from the starting point to the finish line over a distance of 400m.

He stressed that the launch of the championship demonstrated the intensity of competition among participants, with very close timing results and differences sometimes measured in fractions of a second, reflecting the high level of training and preparedness.

Al-Masoud added that the Marmi Festival places local production at the heart of its priorities, out of conviction that supporting falconers and encouraging them to focus on breeding and producing falcons locally is a fundamental pillar in preserving falconry as a deeply rooted cultural heritage.

He explained that introducing and developing championships dedicated to



local production reflects the festival's commitment to highlighting the quality of locally bred falcons and their ability to compete across various categories.

This step, he noted, contributes to developing falconers' expertise, enhancing sustainability, and creating a competitive environment that raises participation levels year after year.

Al-Masoud lauded the advanced level of local production, highlighting its strong ability to compete in the Al Da'wa Championship and achieve remarkable timings that were often comparable to – and sometimes even better than – those of other falcons.

This, he said, reflects the significant



progress achieved by local production and its readiness to compete in various championships.

Accordingly, participating falconers praised the Marmi Festival's focus on allocating special rounds for local production, stressing that this step enhances Qatar's falcon production across various types, which they affirmed is no less distinguished or powerful than others.

The Group Twelve competitions in the Haddad Al Tahadi Championship were held in the evening.

Only two falcons from this group qualified for the final – Team al-Majd and



Shaiban Hassan al-Kuwari – raising the total number of qualified falcons to 19.

Marmi Festival chairman Muteb Mubarak al-Qahtani and his deputy Abdulwahab Umair al-Nuaimi crowned the winners and qualifiers at the festival venue.

Shawi al-Kaabi, head of Haddad Al Tahadi Committee at the Marmi Festival, said that the Peregrine falcons are currently in strong form and striving to reclaim dominance.



Participants in the Haddad Al Tahadi Championship expressed their appreciation for the role of the Marmi Festival in preserving the heritage of falconry in Qatar.

The local Al Da'wa Championship continues this morning with more categories, while the evening will witness the competitions of Group Thirteen in the Haddad Al Tahadi Championship.



Qatar Airways Group reinforces support for Qatar Cancer Society

Qatar Airways Group employees in Doha and outstations came together for the annual “Think Pink” legacy campaign for Breast Cancer Awareness Month, focused on education, wellbeing and meaningful community contribution.

Now in its 10th year, this year’s efforts brought employees closer to the cause through awareness sessions, health-focused workshops, and a charity bazaar that spanned multiple locations.

Employees’ contributions helped the Group reach a total of QR851,362 and the proceeds were formally handed over to the Qatar Cancer Society (QCS) for the treatment and welfare of patients.

Qatar University hosts 10th Meeting of Student Advisory Councils in GCC

Qatar University (QU) hosted the 10th Meeting of the Student Advisory Councils in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries, with representatives from student councils at universities across the GCC in attendance.

The meeting aims to strengthen Gulf student dialogue, promote the values of citizenship and teamwork, and support joint student initiatives that contribute positively to university communities in the region.

The meeting is part of a series of regular gatherings that aim to advance student engagement in GCC countries and enhance co-operation among Gulf youth on academic, social, and developmental issues, thereby supporting the ongoing development of higher education and youth initiatives across the region.

The programme featured interactive discussion sessions focused on student-led solutions and initiatives, as well as internal meetings for each student council.

Participants reviewed successful models in student leadership, volunteer work, and community initiatives, voted on the most impactful proposals, and developed a set of recommendations aimed at enhancing the performance and effectiveness of student councils.

Amal Mohammed al-Suwaidi, senior specialist at QU’s Student Representative Board, said: “The GCC Student Advisory Councils meeting represents a valuable platform for strengthening collaboration and communication among students, while reinforcing the concept of joint student engagement at the regional level.”

“Such gatherings play an im-



portant role in exchanging expertise and highlighting successful experiences in student leadership, volunteerism, and community initiatives,” she said.

Al-Suwaidi added that the meeting opens new avenues for constructive engagement among students, fosters a sense of belonging and teamwork, and supports initiatives that serve student interests.

This, she added, contributes to

the institutional development of student councils and prepares a responsible generation capable of active participation in sustainable development.

Mohammed Hashem al-Sayed, president of the Student Representative Board, highlighted the importance of participation.

“The meeting provides a valuable opportunity to connect with peers from GCC universities, exchange ideas and experiences



The meeting is part of a series of regular gatherings that seek to advance student engagement in GCC countries, with a programme that featured interactive discussion sessions focused on student-led solutions and initiatives.

Qatar ‘plays active role in peaceful settlement of conflicts’

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) president Dr Tulia Ackson has praised the active and prominent role played by Qatar in resolving conflicts through peaceful means and supporting development efforts at both the regional and international levels, which has earned it a distinguished standing and made it a global hub for dialogue and the examination of international issues of concern to humanity, in a multidimensional world facing intertwined crises and conflicts.

In an interview with the Qatar News Agency (QNA), Dr Ackson noted that Doha’s hosting of the 298th session of the Executive Committee of the Inter-Parliamentary Union reflects Qatar’s growing stature and the international confidence it enjoys as a global centre for peaceful conflict resolution, particularly amid a multidimensional world facing complex crises and conflicts.

Regarding Qatar’s role in supporting development and assisting least developed countries, the IPU president affirmed that Qatar constitutes an inclusive international platform that enables countries to meet and discuss issues of peace, security, development, and social development.

She pointed to Doha’s hosting of a number of major international forums, including the Doha Forum, as a reflection and embodiment of its pivotal role in these vital areas.

Dr Ackson noted that the IPU leadership, represented by the Executive Committee, is meeting in Doha to discuss pressing global issues, foremost among them peace and security and human rights.

She emphasised that the Doha meeting holds particular importance as it paves the way for decisions on the topics to be included on the agenda of the IPU General Assembly, scheduled to be held in April, adding that human rights issues will be among the main themes of the Union’s work during the current year.

Dr Ackson pointed out that the IPU, as the global organisation of parliamentarians and representatives of peoples, addresses issues related to climate, sustainable development, and social development, in addition to peace and security.

In response to a question, she said that the role of parliaments and parliamentarians was not limited to advising governments, but also extended to overseeing their performance, underscor-



Inter-Parliamentary Union president Dr Tulia Ackson.

ing the importance of empowering parliaments to discuss global developments and international conflicts, an opportunity for which Qatar has provided an appropriate platform for dialogue and consultation.

The IPU president expressed her deep appreciation for Qatar’s support of the Union and its various activities, as well as for the close co-operation with the Shura Council and its commitment to the IPU and other relevant international organisations.

In this regard, she said that the IPU has received significant bilateral support from Qatar, which has contributed to the implementation of its strategy for the 2023-26 period, and noted that the new strategy for the 2027-31 period is currently under preparation.

Regarding her expectations for the outcomes of the Doha meeting, Dr Ackson said that the meeting will work to shape the topics to be discussed at the upcoming General Assembly, in addition to issues related to the Union’s Middle East Committee, in light of Qatar’s prominent role in supporting peace efforts in the region.

She also affirmed that the IPU seeks to enhance its effectiveness by discussing these issues and developing mechanisms for multilateral joint action, including the formation of specialised committees and working groups, such as the task force on the war in Ukraine and the Middle East Committee, alongside other committees concerned with various international conflicts.

The IPU president cautioned that the world is currently witnessing more than 100 conflicts, and added that Qatar plays a pivotal role in addressing many of them.

She cited Doha’s hosting of meetings that brought together leaders of African countries, including the presidents of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to discuss the issues facing their countries and to resolve disputes between them. – QNA



QC team visits Pakistan to support orphans and vulnerable families

A high-level delegation from Qatar Charity, comprising donors and sponsors, recently visited Pakistan to review the living conditions of sponsored orphans and vulnerable families and to assess their needs.

The visit highlights Qatar Charity’s continued commitment to improving the well-being of orphaned children and supporting underprivileged communities across several countries, including Pakistan.

During their visit to Rawalpindi District in Punjab, the delegation distributed winterisation and personal hygiene kits to orphaned children and needy families.

The winterisation kits included items like cotton mattresses, warm shawls, socks, caps, and gloves, while the hygiene kits contained essential items such as towels, toothbrushes, toothpaste, soaps, and mosquito nets.

The delegation also visited orphan families at their homes, interacting with children and car-



egivers and observing their living conditions.

A special gathering was organised for 50 orphans sponsored by Qatar Charity, where the children participated in drawing, painting, sports, and other activities.

The children presented handmade artwork to the sponsors as expressions of gratitude, while the

mothers showcased handcrafted items that reflected their skills and resilience.

The delegation expressed their positive impressions, emphasising that the visit was a unique humanitarian experience that left a profound impact on them.

They urged donors in Qatar to continue supporting vulnerable

families in Pakistan, stressing that even small contributions can make a significant difference in the lives of an entire family.

They also noted that spending time with orphaned children was a source of pride and joy, and that such initiatives embody the values of compassion and solidarity that define Qatar Charity’s mission.

Eleven-year-old orphan Aiman Ali shared her joy, saying: “My dream came true. Today I met angels whom I had only read about in books.”

Beneficiary Shameem Akhtar, a widow supporting five children, expressed her gratitude, noting that the assistance helped her meet essential winter and household needs that were otherwise beyond her means.

Over the past three years, Qatar Charity has distributed 1,560 winterisation kits to vulnerable families across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, reflecting its sustained humanitarian engagement in Pakistan.

Through such initiatives, Qatar Charity continues to bring hope, dignity, and relief to orphaned children and vulnerable communities, reinforcing its mission of compassion, solidarity, and sustainable humanitarian support.

Attempt to smuggle 1.84kg of shabu foiled

The Department of Anti-Smuggling and Harmful Trade Practices at the General Authority of Customs (GAC) foiled an attempt to smuggle 1.84kg of the narcotic substance methamphetamine (shabu).

The department stated that the seizure followed the customs inspector’s suspicion of one of the shipments arriving at Hamad Port, prompting it to undergo thorough inspection procedures.

These included reviewing the details and attachments of the customs declaration and examining the shipment using specialised screening equipment.

The inspection operations resulted in the discovery of the narcotic “shabu” concealed inside cavities within audio speakers.

The total weight of the seized substances amounted to 1.84kg.



DECISION

Microsoft says will foot AI's massive power bill

Microsoft yesterday said it will shoulder the full electricity costs of its US data centres to prevent American households from facing higher power bills driven by surging AI energy demand. US President Donald Trump first announced the initiative late Monday on Truth Social, saying his administration had been working with technology companies to ensure they "pay their own way" for power consumption. "I never want Americans to pay higher electricity bills because of data centres," Trump wrote. Ahead of midterm elections in November, the increase in electricity bills has become a hot-button issue across the country.

OPINION

Credit card rate cap 'should be looked into by US Congress'

US House Speaker Mike Johnson yesterday said Congress should explore President Donald Trump's idea of imposing a cap on credit card interest rates but warned of the possibility of "negative secondary effects". Johnson, a Republican, told reporters that the House of Representatives "ought to think about, investigate" Trump's proposal that was floated on Friday. But he added: "Are there unintended consequences" that could trigger "negative secondary effects". Trump said he wanted a one-year cap on credit card interest rates at 10% beginning on January 20, the one-year anniversary of the start of his second term as president.

VERDICT

Ex-US navy sailor jailed for selling military secrets to China

A federal judge sentenced a former US Navy sailor to more than 16 years in prison for selling military secrets to China in return for \$12,000, the US justice department said. Jinchao Wei, a machinist's mate on the amphibious assault ship USS Essex, sent photographs and videos of US Navy vessels, ship movement information, technical manuals and weapons capabilities to a Chinese intelligence officer between 2022 and 2023, according to US officials. He was arrested in August 2023 and found guilty on espionage charges by a federal jury in California last August. A judge sentenced him to 200 months in prison.

ALLEGATION

Colombia minister claims phone hacked with Pegasus

A minister in Colombian President Gustavo Petro's cabinet said his phone was hacked with Pegasus spyware, linking it to his investigation into suspected collusion between senior officials and left-wing guerrillas. Justice Minister Andres Idarraga told Colombia's W radio that his phone was tapped using the Israeli spyware between August and November 2025. At the time, he said, he was investigating links between high-ranking members of the military and dissident members of the defunct FARC rebel army that opposed a 2016 peace deal with the state. Idarraga said the spying targeted him and his family and had been ordered "from within the defence ministry".

Republicans seek Clinton contempt charge in Epstein probe

AFP
Washington, US

Republicans yesterday moved to hold former US president Bill Clinton in criminal contempt after he skipped a subpoenaed deposition in the congressional investigation into sex offender Jeffrey Epstein - marking a sharp escalation in a politically charged inquiry.

The Republican-led House Oversight Committee said it would begin contempt proceedings next week after the 79-year-old Democrat did not show up for closed-door testimony scheduled for yesterday morning.

The panel is also threatening similar action against former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, who is due to testify today but is also expected to be a no-show.

The pressure comes as President Donald Trump faces mounting calls for transparency, with the justice department angering his supporters - many of whom believe Epstein was murdered in a cover-up - by releasing only a sliver of case files nearly a month past the legal deadline.

"As a result of Bill Clinton not showing up for his lawful subpoena - which was voted unanimously

by the committee in a bipartisan manner - we will move next week... to hold former president Clinton in contempt of Congress," committee chairman James Comer told reporters.

In an eight-page letter to Comer, the Clintons said they did not plan to appear for the depositions, describing the moment as one requiring resistance "no matter the consequences."

Invoking contempt against a former president is rare and would represent a significant step by House Republicans.

Any contempt resolution would require approval by the full House before being referred to the justice department, which ultimately decides whether to prosecute.

Criminal contempt of Congress is a misdemeanour punishable by up to one year in prison and fines of up to \$100,000, though referrals are unevenly enforced.

The Oversight Committee is investigating Epstein's ties to powerful figures and how information about his crimes was handled by US authorities.

Epstein, once a friend and associate of Trump and other high-profile figures, was convicted of sex crimes and later jailed pending trial.

The financier died in a New York

jail cell in 2019 while awaiting trial, a death officially ruled a suicide but long the subject of conspiracy theories amplified by Trump's supporters.

The Clintons were subpoenaed in August alongside other current and former officials, including former FBI director James Comey.

Their depositions were initially scheduled for October, then delayed twice - once after Clinton said he needed to attend a funeral.

Clinton's spokesman Angel Urena has accused Comer of singling out the former president, saying his legal team offered the same terms accepted for other witnesses.

Hillary Clinton's office has questioned why she was subpoenaed at all, saying the committee had failed to explain the relevance of her testimony.

The dispute comes amid controversy over the Trump administration's handling of Epstein-related records.

Weeks after a legal deadline to release the Epstein files, the justice department has offered up only 1% of the total archive, angering Trump supporters who had expected sweeping disclosures.

Those documents included multiple photographs of Bill Clinton from the early 2000s.



A woman looks on as ICE agents block an intersection yesterday in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

US ends protection for Somalis amid escalating migrant crackdown

AFP
Minneapolis

The US yesterday said it would end a special protected status for Somalis, telling them they must leave the country by mid-March under an escalating crackdown on the community.

There is a large Somali community in Minnesota, the mid-western US state at the forefront of raids and searches by immigration officers, one of whom shot and killed a local woman last week, sparking protests.

In recent weeks Washington has lashed out at Somali immigrants, alleging large-scale public benefit fraud in Minnesota's Somali community, the largest in the country with around 80,000 members.

The department of homeland security said on X it was "ending Temporary Protected Status for Somalis in the US".

"Our message is clear. Go back to your own country, or we'll send you back ourselves," it said.

"Temporary Protected Status" (TPS) shields certain foreigners from deportation to disaster zones and allows them the right to work.

In November 2025, US President Donald Trump wrote on social media: "I am, as president of the US, hereby terminating, effective immediately, the Temporary Protected Status (TPS Programme) for Somalis in Minnesota."

The Republican president yesterday took to his Truth Social channel to attack Democrats who lead Minneapolis, its twin city of St. Paul, and Minnesota.

"Minnesota Democrats love the unrest that anarchists and professional agitators are causing because it gets the spotlight off of the \$19bn that was stolen by really bad and deranged people," Trump wrote.

Immigration and Customs En-

forcement (ICE) meanwhile has kept up its large-scale migrant sweeps across Minnesota, including the city of Detroit Lakes.

The Minneapolis police department said its overtime bill between January 8 and January 11 was \$2mn. That period marked the height of anti-ICE protests sparked by the dramatic killing, which was filmed and widely shared online.

Renee Nicole Good, 37, was shot dead in her car by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officer in Minneapolis last Wednesday.

Students have protested against the situation in Minnesota, including in the Minneapolis suburb of Maple Grove, local media reported.

The Trump administration in recent months has latched onto news of a large-scale public benefit fraud scandal to carry out immigration raids and harsher policies targeting Minnesota's Somali community.

Scott Adams, 'Dilbert' comic strip creator and Trump fan, dies at 68

"Dilbert" comic strip creator Scott Adams, a vocal supporter of President Donald Trump whose career flagged after a racist rant, died yesterday, his wife said. He was 68. Shelly Miles announced Adams' death in an online livestream in which she read a final message from the artist, whose strip lampooned life in the cubicle farms of corporate America, framed around its titular character, an engineer known for his glasses and perennially bent tie. Adams had posted on X about his decline from metastatic prostate cancer and made a direct appeal to Trump to get his healthcare provider, Kaiser Permanente of Northern California, to schedule treatment with the targeted radiotherapy drug Pluvicto. "On it," Trump responded in a November 2 social media post. Yesterday the Republican president noted the cartoonist's passing on Truth Social. "Sadly, the Great Influencer, Scott Adams, has passed away."



A displaced Palestinian woman sits near damaged tents, amid a windstorm, in Gaza City, yesterday.

Six dead as Gaza's displaced struggle in torrential rain

Reuters
Cairo/Gaza

A rainstorm swept across the Gaza Strip yesterday, flooding hundreds of tents, collapsing homes sheltering families displaced by two years of war and killing at least six people, local health officials said.

Medics said five people, including two women and a girl, died when homes collapsed near Gaza City's beach, while a one-year-old boy died of extreme cold in a tent in Deir Al-Balah in central Gaza.

Tents were torn from their stakes, some flying dozens of meters before crashing to the ground. Others lay crumpled in muddy pools as families scrambled to salvage what they could. Residents tried to re-secure remaining shelters, hammering in loosened pegs and stacking sandbags around the edges to keep

floodwaters from pouring inside.

"We didn't realise what was happening until the wall started collapsing - an eight-metre-high wall, a strong concrete wall. Because of the speed and force of the wind, the wall fell on top of us, onto three tents," said Bassel Hamuda, a displaced man in Gaza.

"The elderly man, 73 years old, was martyred. His son's wife was killed, and his son's daughter was killed," he said.

Three months since a ceasefire halted major combat, Israeli forces have ordered the near-total depopulation of nearly two thirds of Gaza, forcing its more than 2mn people into a narrow strip near the coast where most live either in makeshift tents or damaged buildings.

Dozens of relatives gathered at a hospital morgue yesterday for special prayers over bodies laid on medical stretchers before the funerals.

Trump's Iran tariff threat risks reopening China rift

Reuters
Beijing

US President Donald Trump's threat to slap a 25% tariff on countries that trade with Iran risks reopening old wounds with Beijing, Tehran's biggest trading partner.

Iran became a flashpoint in US-China ties during Trump's 2017-21 first term as president as Washington tightened sanctions on Tehran and put China's Huawei, accused of selling technology to the Islamic Republic, in its crosshairs.

The arrest of Meng Wenzhou, the daughter of Huawei's founder,

in Canada at Washington's request sparked retaliation and a hostage crisis, with bitter recriminations lingering for the remainder of Trump's first administration.

With Iran in his sights once again, the duty would see Chinese shipments to the US incurring levies exceeding 70%, higher than the effective 57.5% tariffs in place before Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping struck a deal in October to de-escalate their trade war.

It remains unclear which countries with Iranian business links Trump might target, and he has not named China.

The US president has also made offhand remarks that threatened to

upend US foreign policy without acting on them before.

"China will call (Trump's) bluff. I can assure you that Trump will not impose the extra 25% tariffs on China, and if he does, China will retaliate and he will be punished," said Wu Xinbo, dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, "just like in Meng Wenzhou's case."

Some Chinese experts questioned why Trump seemed intent on revisiting one of the most contentious foreign policy issues from his first term, despite having already made Beijing think twice about providing economic support to Tehran.

"China and Iran are not as close as in the public imagination," said a Beijing-based Chinese academic who advises the foreign ministry on Iran policy, and requested anonymity as they were not authorised to speak to media.

China has sharply reduced Iranian imports in recent years, according to Chinese customs data, with Chinese companies wary of being sanctioned by the US government. China bought just \$2.9bn of Iranian goods in the first 11 months of last year, the latest customs figures show, compared with a peak of \$21bn in 2018 during Trump's first presidency.

That said, Beijing moves around

80% of Iran's shipped oil through small independent refiners trading off the books to skirt US sanctions over the country's nuclear ambitions.

China's state-backed oil majors have not done any business with Iran since 2022. Some analysts say the independents' shipments means the total value of China's purchases remains in the tens of billions of dollars.

"China is just an excuse, a kind of disguise for the Trump administration, to impose new pressure (on) Iran," said Wang Jin at the Beijing Club for International Dialogue think tank.

When asked at yesterday's regu-

lar press conference on Trump's tariff threat, China's foreign ministry said that Beijing would "resolutely safeguard its legitimate rights and interests".

Still, Iran remains substantially bigger business for China than Venezuela, where Trump acted to curb Beijing's stake with a commando raid to capture President Nicolas Maduro to face drug charges in the US.

Analysts said Trump's renewed push to cut off Iran from global trade flows is likely to deepen scrutiny of Xi's flagship Belt and Road Initiative, where Iran is a strategic hub for the passage of Chinese goods to the Middle East.

Australian writers’ festival cancelled over barring of Palestinian author

AFP
Sydney

A leading Australian arts festival cancelled its annual writers’ event yesterday after sparking uproar by disinviting a Palestinian-Australian author while citing sensitivities over the Bondi Beach mass shooting.

Scores of participants, in-

cluding former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, boycotted the annual Adelaide Festival’s writers’ week over the board’s decision to exclude author and academic Randa Abdel-Fattah.

“Many authors have since announced they will no longer appear at Adelaide Writers’ Week 2026 and it is the Adelaide Festival’s position that the event can no longer go ahead as scheduled

for this year,” it said in a statement.

“This is a deeply regrettable outcome.”

Writers’ Week director Louise Adler joined the exodus yesterday, blaming the “extreme and repressive efforts of pro-Israel lobbyists”, and saying the board’s decision was taken despite her opposition.

“The arts have allegedly become ‘unsafe’ and artists are a

danger to the community’s psycho-social wellbeing,” she wrote in an open letter published by *The Guardian* newspaper.

“But let’s be clear, the routine invocation of ‘safety’ is code for ‘I don’t want to hear your opinion.’

“In this instance, it appears to apply only to a Palestinian invitee.”

Australia’s premier annual cultural event, which lures art-

ists from around the world, unleashed the storm last week when it told Abdel-Fattah it did not “wish to proceed” with her appearance.

The festival said yesterday it regretted the distress its decision had caused to the audience, artists, writers, corporate partners, the government and its own staff.

“We also apologise to Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah for how the de-

cision was represented and reiterate this is not about identity or dissent but rather a continuing rapid shift in the national discourse around the breadth of freedom of expression in our nation following Australia’s worst terror attack in history,” the festival said.

Abdel-Fattah has described the festival decision as a “blatant and shameless act of anti-Palestinian racism”.

Hong Kong trial of media tycoon concludes mitigation phase

Reuters
Hong Kong

Hong Kong’s high court wrapped up mitigation hearings yesterday for media tycoon and China critic Jimmy Lai, in a final step before the sentencing phase of a years-long national security trial that has drawn international scrutiny.

Lawyers for Lai and eight defendants, including senior former staffers of his pro-democracy *Apple Daily* newspaper, laid out the case for lighter sentences over two days, with a sentencing date to be announced later.

“There are a lot of legal issues, and important questions of law that need to be handled,” said Alex Lee, one of the panel of three judges.

Lai, 78, the founder of the now shuttered paper, was found guilty last month on two counts of conspiracy to collude with foreign forces under a China-imposed national security law, and a conspiracy to publish seditious materials.

Lai denied all the charges against him, saying in court he was a “political prisoner” facing persecution from Beijing.

His trial began in December 2023 and he has spent more than 1,800 days in solitary confinement.

Foreign diplomats from countries including Britain, the European Union and the US, attended yesterday’s hearing.

Lai’s judgment had found him guilty of colluding with individuals,

officials and politicians in various countries to seek the “downfall of the Chinese Communist Party”.

Hong Kong authorities say Lai has received a fair trial and the national security law has restored stability to the Asian financial hub after mass pro-democracy protests in 2019.

Erik Shum, the lawyer for Lam Man-chung, the paper’s former senior editor, said he should receive a lighter sentence for his “very limited role” in the conspiracy.

Those with less significant roles should get more lenient sentences, Shum added, citing the national security law and previous judgments, irrespective of whether the nature of the conspiracy was found to be “grave”. Lee, the judge, however, suggested that such offences could fall within the heaviest sentencing band, starting from 10 years to life, under certain articles of the national security law.

Marco Li, the lawyer for Chan Pui-man, the paper’s former associate publisher, said her limited responsibility in overseeing the print edition merited a starting point of 10 years if the court put her in the upper sentencing band.

Lai and his family did not submit any mitigation letters, his family said, but his worsening health has been a factor in an international push to free him.

US President Donald Trump asked China’s leader Xi Jinping to release Lai in an October meeting in South Korea, but still awaits a reply. The leaders are set to meet again in April.



Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi (right) shakes hands with South Korean President Lee Jae Myung during their joint news conference after their talk in Nara, western Japan, yesterday.

Japan, S Korea push for closer ties to counter regional tension

Reuters
Nara

Japan and South Korea aim to deepen security and economic ties to counter growing tension in East Asia, their leaders said yesterday, after a summit meeting in Japan.

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and South Korean President Lee Jae Myung discussed industrial supply chains, artificial intelligence, denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and cooperation with mutual ally, the US.

“The importance of Japan-South Korea relations, as well as cooperation among Japan, South Korea and the US, continues to grow,” Takaichi said in a joint announcement with Lee in her home region of Nara.

Lee said the leaders will also step up co-

operation to combat online scams that have targeted victims across borders.

The talks came a week after Lee met Chinese President Xi Jinping, amid strained ties between Tokyo and Beijing following remarks by Takaichi that Japan could deploy its forces if a Chinese attack on Taiwan posed an existential threat.

China regards Taiwan as part of its territory, a claim the democratically governed island rejects.

Earlier, Lee, who is set to spend two days in Japan, vowed not to intervene in its dispute with China, although the diplomatic standoff was not desirable for regional peace.

“The current international environment and trade order are unprecedentedly volatile,” he said, speaking alongside Takaichi. “It is an urgent task of our time to deepen bilateral re-

lations.” Despite a recent thaw, ties between Tokyo and Seoul have been strained by disputes over Japan’s colonial rule of the Korean peninsula, including the treatment of Korean women and labourers conscripted to support Japan’s wartime effort.

Takaichi added that she welcomed progress in efforts to identify human remains discovered at an abandoned coal mine in western Japan, where some 136 Koreans and 47 Japanese died in 1942, when the mine beneath the seabed collapsed and flooded.

South Korea says the remains of as many as 10,000 Korean forced labourers are still in Japan, which says it has identified about 3,000.

The leaders said they would continue their “shuttle diplomacy” effort, with Takaichi expected to travel next to South Korea for their third meeting, without giving a date.

North Korea’s Kim revamps private security detail: Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has replaced three top officials in charge of his personal security, Seoul said yesterday, a sign he may increasingly fear assassination plots. Seoul’s unification ministry - responsible for managing relations with Pyongyang - said three state agencies handling Kim’s security had new bosses. The reshuffle was spotted during a military parade in October, the ministry said. The changes at the Bodyguard Command in particular, which handles security measures against drone or electronic attacks, could be linked to Kim’s decision to send troops to aid Russia’s war in Ukraine, an expert said. “Change in the pattern of Kim’s security detail was detected from October 2024, when he deployed North Korean troops to Russia,” Hong Min, an analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification, said. “He could have judged there could be an assassination attempt against him involving Ukrainians amid heightened international spotlight due to the deployment,” he added.

Winter playground



People ride ice bicycles on a frozen lake in Beijing, China, yesterday.

Death penalty sought for S Korea’s ex-president

Reuters
Seoul

South Korea’s special prosecutor yesterday requested the death penalty for former president Yoon Suk-yeol on charges of masterminding a revolt over his brief imposition of martial law in December 2024.

The crime carries a tough punishment in South Korean law, extending up to the death penalty if found guilty, although South Korea has not carried out a death sentence in decades.

In closing arguments at the Seoul Central District Court, a prosecutor said investigators confirmed the existence of a scheme allegedly directed by Yoon and his former defence minister, Kim Yong-hyun, dating back to October 2023 designed to keep Yoon in power.

“Yoon... claims to have committed emergency martial law to protect liberal democracy, but his unconstitutional and illegal emergency martial law under-

mined the function of the National Assembly and the Election Commission... actually destroying the liberal democratic constitutional order,” the prosecutor said in final arguments.

Yoon, 65, has denied the charges. He has argued it was within his powers as president to declare martial law and that the action was aimed at sounding the alarm over opposition parties’ obstruction of government. The court is expected to rule on the case in February. The sentence prosecutors seek is not always upheld in South Korean courts.

In a previous court case in 1995-1996, when former South Korean presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo were accused of revolt, prosecutors sought the death penalty and life in prison for Chun and Roh respectively. The lower court handed down a death penalty for Chun and a 22-1/2-year jail term for Roh, before an appeals court revised sentencing to life in prison for Chun and a 17-year jail term for Roh.

Taiwan thanks Canada for its support ahead of Carney’s China trip

Reuters
Taipei

Taiwan President Lai Ching-te thanked Canada yesterday for its support during recent Chinese military drills and praised the deepening of ties between the two sides, shortly ahead of a visit to China by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney.

Canada, like most countries, has no official diplomatic ties with

Chinese-claimed Taiwan, but the economic and political exchanges between the two sides have increased as Beijing ratchets up military threats against the democratic island. Still, two lawmakers from Carney’s Liberal Party this week ended a visit early to Taiwan citing advice from the Canadian government and to “avoid confusion with Canada’s foreign policy” before Carney visits Beijing from today.

Meeting the three remaining

members of the delegation, from the opposition Conservative Party, Lai said that over the past three years, Taiwan and Canada have made substantive progress in areas such as trade and technology, including 2023’s signing of a landmark investment agreement.

“Bilateral relations continue to deepen and yield fruitful results,” Lai said at the presidential office in Taipei. He also expressed appreciation for the Canadian gov-

ernment’s public concern over last month’s Chinese war games around Taiwan.

“I would like to thank the Canadian government for soon releasing a statement expressing its concern and opposing any unilateral attempt to change the status quo,” he added.

“This once again demonstrated that maintaining the peaceful and stable status quo across the Taiwan Strait is not only in the interest of all parties, but also the interna-

tional consensus.” Canadian warships on occasion sail through the sensitive Taiwan Strait, to Beijing’s anger, which happened most recently last September.

Lai made no mention of Carney’s visit to China in front of media.

Melissa Lantsman, deputy co-leader of Canada’s Conservatives, told Lai that Taiwan was a trusted partner. “We are here with a clear and sincere purpose to say to Taiwan and the people of Taiwan that you have friends in Canada’s

parliament,” she said. Taiwan’s foreign ministry earlier yesterday played down the early departure of the two other lawmakers, saying the government will continue to further deepen exchanges and co-operation with Canada.

Carney will discuss trade and international security while in China, at a time when Canada faces uncertain relations with the US due to a trade war and annexation threats from President Donald Trump.

India accuses Pakistan of cross-border drone incursions in Kashmir

AFP/Reuters
New Delhi

India's army chief yesterday accused Pakistan of flying drones into Kashmir, where the two countries fought a four-day clash last year.

"They have been told that this is

unacceptable to us, and please put a stop to it," General Upendra Dwivedi told reporters in New Delhi in an annual briefing to the media ahead of Army Day tomorrow.

Heads of military operations of both countries spoke to each other earlier yesterday, he said.

India's army reported sighting multiple drones flying over Indian-

controlled border villages last week.

"These drones, I believe, were defensive drones, which want to come over (our territory) to see if any action is being planned against them," Dwivedi said.

There was no immediate response from Pakistan's army.

"We are fully alert along the Line of Control," Dwivedi added, refer-

ring to the heavily fortified de facto border.

Dwivedi said several low-flying drones entered Indian-controlled airspace with their lights switched on - as many as seven on Saturday, and another two or three on Sunday.

"It's possible they wanted to see if there were any gaps, laxity in our defence, any gaps through which

they could send terrorists," he added.

In an incident on Friday, a drone from Pakistan was suspected to have dropped two pistols, three ammunition magazines, 16 bullets and one grenade that were recovered following a search, a source said.

In the past, there have been re-

ports of civilian drone intrusions from Pakistan into Indian states along the border, with Indian security agencies telling local media that they had shot down drones that were seeking to drop light arms or drugs.

Pakistan has dismissed these accusations as baseless and misleading.

India's rice exports to top buyer Iran stall on protests and tariff worries

Indian suppliers are wary of new deals due to the risk of non-payment

Reuters
Mumbai/New Delhi

India's basmati rice exports to Iran have slowed to a near standstill amid the protests gripping the Gulf country, with suppliers wary of new deals due to the risk of non-payment and potential additional US tariffs, trade officials said.

"The proposed 25% levy under the Trump framework adds an additional challenge to the Indian basmati rice sector"

US President Donald Trump said on Monday that any country trading with Iran would face a 25% tariff on its commerce with the US, a move exporters say has made Indian suppliers even more reluctant to sign new contracts with Iranian buyers.

"The proposed 25% levy under the Trump framework adds an additional challenge to the Indian basmati rice sector," said Akshay Gupta, head of bulk exports at KRBL Ltd, a leading rice exporter.

India is Iran's largest rice supplier, with the staple accounting for nearly two-thirds of all Iranian imports from the country.

"We're worried about the payments for rice shipped in the last

two months," said a New Delhi-based exporter, who declined to be named.

"In some cases, buyers report they did not receive the full quantity; in others, they have fled the country because of the ongoing protests," the exporter said.

Importers have conveyed their inability to honour existing commitments and remit payments to India, creating heightened uncertainty for exporters, Dev Garg, vice-president of the Indian Rice Exporters Federation (IREF), said in a statement.

India's ministry of commerce and industry declined to comment.

Iran previously supplied foreign exchange to food importers at a subsidised rate, but it has now suspended that provision, effectively making imports much more expensive for buyers, said Vijay Setia, a top rice exporter.

India's exports to Iran, largely food items such as rice, fell to \$1.24bn in the 2024-25 fiscal year ending March from \$3.51bn in 2018-19, while imports declined to \$440mn from a peak of \$13.53bn in 2018-19, Indian government data showed. "Iran's currency has crashed, and exporters are worried whether shipments already sent will be cleared and whether buyers can pay," said Ajay Sahai, director general of the Federation of Indian Export Organisations.

Major Indian exports to Iran include basmati rice and pharmaceuticals, while imports consist mainly of fresh and dried fruits.

German chancellor in Bengaluru



German Chancellor Friedrich Merz visits engineering and technology company Bosch's facility in Bengaluru, India, yesterday.

India's smartphone security plan faces flak over privacy concerns

Reuters
Bengaluru

The Indian government's plan requiring smartphone makers to share source code as part of a raft of new security measures has drawn criticism from privacy advocates and technology experts over fears of heightened surveillance.

Companies including Apple and Samsung have privately protested the proposed package of security standards, which also includes a requirement to maintain phone logs on devices for a year, Reuters reported on Sunday, citing a review of confidential government and industry documents.

The proposal is part of Prime Minister Naren-

dra Modi's efforts to boost security of user data as online fraud and data breaches increase in the world's second-largest smartphone market, with nearly 750mn phones.

India's IT ministry has said "any legitimate concerns of the industry will be addressed with an open mind" and consultations were ongoing. It also refuted that it was considering seeking source code, without commenting on the government or industry documents.

The Internet Freedom Foundation, a privacy and free speech rights organisation, said it "strongly rejects any proposed regime that effectively grants the state access to confidential source code and embeds persistent controls into devices used daily by hundreds of millions of Indians".

"The proposals seek to micromanage how us-

ers interact with their own devices," IFF added in a statement. India's IT ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

The ministry called off a meeting scheduled yesterday with the tech giants to discuss their feedback and concerns about the proposal, according to three people with direct knowledge.

Seeking source code - the underlying programming instructions that make phones work - erodes trust and "is a massive step backwards from India's goal of improving the ease of doing business," said Akash Karmakar, a partner at Indian law firm Panag & Babu who specialises in technology law.

Last month, India revoked an order mandating a state-run cybersecurity app on phones following opposition from opposition parties and privacy advocacy groups.

Air India facing UK lawsuit over 2025 plane crash

Air India is facing a London lawsuit from the estates and relatives of some of the deceased over the June 2025 crash of a passenger jet which killed 260 people.

A personal injury lawsuit was filed at the high court by 11 claimants on December 18, according to court records. No further details were immediately available.

A Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner with 242 people on board, bound for London's Gatwick Airport, lost height seconds after taking off from the western city of Ahmedabad on June 12 and erupted in a fireball as it hit a medical college hostel.

There was one survivor among those on the plane, and the crash also killed 19 people on ground. Air India and lawyers representing the claimants did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Separately, the families of four passengers killed in the crash are suing Boeing in the US, alleging that the accident resulted from allegedly faulty fuel switches. - AFP

Scottish journalist honoured



Scottish journalist and broadcaster Jacqueline Weir (Jackie Bird) poses after being made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) by the Princess Royal at an investiture ceremony at Windsor Castle, Berkshire, Britain, yesterday.

Anti-minority hate speech in India 'rose 13% in 2025'

Reuters
Washington

Hate speech against minorities including Muslims and Christians in India rose by 13% in 2025, with most incidents occurring in states governed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, a Washington-based research group said yesterday. India Hate Lab documented 1,318 instances of what it called hate speech in 2025, up from 1,165 in 2024 and 668 in 2023, at events such as political rallies, religious processions, protest marches and cultural gatherings.

Of that number, 1,164 incidents occurred in states and union territories governed by the BJP, either directly or with coalition political parties, the group said.

The Indian embassy in Washington did not respond immediately to a request for comment.

Modi and his party deny being discriminatory and say their

policies, including food subsidy programmes and electrification drives, benefit all communities.

April recorded the highest monthly spike, 158 events, with nearly 100 occurring between April 22, after a deadly militant attack in Kashmir, and May 7, when four days of deadly fighting broke out between India and Pakistan.

Rights groups including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch say abuse of minorities has risen in India since Modi took office in 2014, pointing to a religion-based citizenship law the UN calls "fundamentally discriminatory," anti-conversion legislation that challenges freedom of belief, the 2019 removal of Kashmir's special status, and the demolition of Muslim-owned properties.

India Hate Lab, founded by US-based Kashmiri journalist Raqib Hameed Naik, is a project of the Center for the Study of Organised Hate, a non-profit Washington-based think-tank.

BBC to ask US court to dismiss Trump's \$10bn lawsuit

AFP
London

The BBC intends to ask a US federal court in Florida to dismiss a \$10bn lawsuit brought by President Donald Trump against the British broadcaster, according to newly-filed court documents.

Trump launched the lawsuit last year over a BBC documentary that edited his 2021 speech ahead of the US Capitol riot, when law-

makers were certifying Joe Biden's 2020 election win.

The programme spliced together two separate sections of Trump's speech on January 6, 2021, in a way that made it appear that he had explicitly urged supporters to attack the Capitol.

The US leader is seeking "damages in an amount not less than \$5,000,000,000" for each of two counts against the BBC, for alleged defamation and violation of the Florida Deceptive and Unfair Trade Practices Act.

But in papers filed in federal court in Miami on Monday, lawyers for the British broadcaster said they will "move to dismiss the complaint" due to the court lacking "personal jurisdiction".

They will argue Trump "will not be able to prove" that the documentary, which aired before the 2024 election but not in the US, "caused him any cognisable injury".

The court papers alleged he had claimed to suffer "only vague 'harm to his professional and oc-

cupational interests'" and that the American president could not "ultimately prove actual damages".

"He won re-election on November 5, 2024, after the documentary aired. He carried Florida by a commanding 13-point margin, improving over his 2020 and 2016 performances," the papers added.

Trump's lawsuit says the edited speech in the documentary was "fabricated" and accused the BBC of "a brazen attempt to interfere in and influence" the 2024 election

"to President Trump's detriment". It is the latest in a string of legal actions Trump has taken against media companies in recent years, several of which have led to multi-million-dollar settlements.

The BBC has denied the claims of legal defamation and unfair trade practices, though the broadcaster's chairman Samir Shah last year sent Trump a letter of apology.

Shah also told a UK parliamentary committee in November that the BBC should have acted sooner

to acknowledge its mistake after the error was disclosed in a memo, which was leaked to The Daily Telegraph newspaper.

The furore around the documentary led BBC director general, Tim Davie, and the organisation's top news executive, Deborah Tur-ness, to resign.

A BBC spokesperson said: "As we have made clear previously, we will be defending this case. We are not going to make further comment on ongoing legal proceedings."

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Obesity and diabetes:
Global health crisis and
economic impact

Widespread obesity across the world has become a significant public health issue over the past 50 years, with nearly 900mn adults today living with diabetes according to McKinsey Health Institute (MHI). Obesity is a substantial risk factor for at least 20 diseases or conditions that include diabetes, cardiovascular conditions, and brain health disorders. MHI estimates that obesity will be linked to \$2.76tn in lost gross domestic product in 2050 due to its effects on labour force participation and productivity.

Over the decades, the oil windfall has brought unprecedented prosperity and economic growth to the Gulf region, but the resultant luxury-driven passive lifestyle has taken its toll.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), diabetes is becoming the most common chronic and non-communicable disease. WHO representative in Qatar Dr Rayana Bou Haka, said in an interview with Qatar News Agency in November that the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which includes 22 countries - among them the Gulf Co-operation Council states - has the highest regional prevalence rate of diabetes at 17.6% among adults aged between 20 and 79 years.

In Qatar, the prevalence of diabetes is estimated at 17% of the population - twice the global average, according to the Diabetes Research Center (DRC) at the Qatar Biomedical Research Institute (QBRI), Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU).

A key driver of the development of pre-diabetes and type 2 diabetes is being overweight and obese, affecting over 70% of adults (with over 35% obese) and 20% of children, according to the DRC.

Qatar has set an ambitious target to achieve diabetes control by 2030, launching an aggressive prevention campaign, *Gulf Times* reported early this month.

As the country prepares to host the International Diabetes Federation World Diabetes Congress in 2027, Diabetes Qatar (previously known as

Qatar Diabetes Association) is intensifying efforts to identify at-risk individuals and reverse what has become one of the nation's most pressing public health challenges.

"Currently we are focusing on preventing diabetes among the population of the country. We are engaged in several activities to achieve this goal," said Dr Abdullah al-Hamaq, executive director of Diabetes Qatar, told *Gulf Times*.

The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) in November launched Qatar's National Action Plan on Obesity, Diabetes, and Modifiable Risk Factors for Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease (ASCVD), 2024-2030.

It sets forth an ambitious path to improve national health outcomes, aligning with Qatar National Vision 2030 and the National Health Strategy 2024-2030.

Globally, according to MHI, the discussion on obesity is now shifting from an intractable issue to a treatable medical condition, a change that is inspiring investment and innovation across industries, including healthcare, medtech, food, and retail.

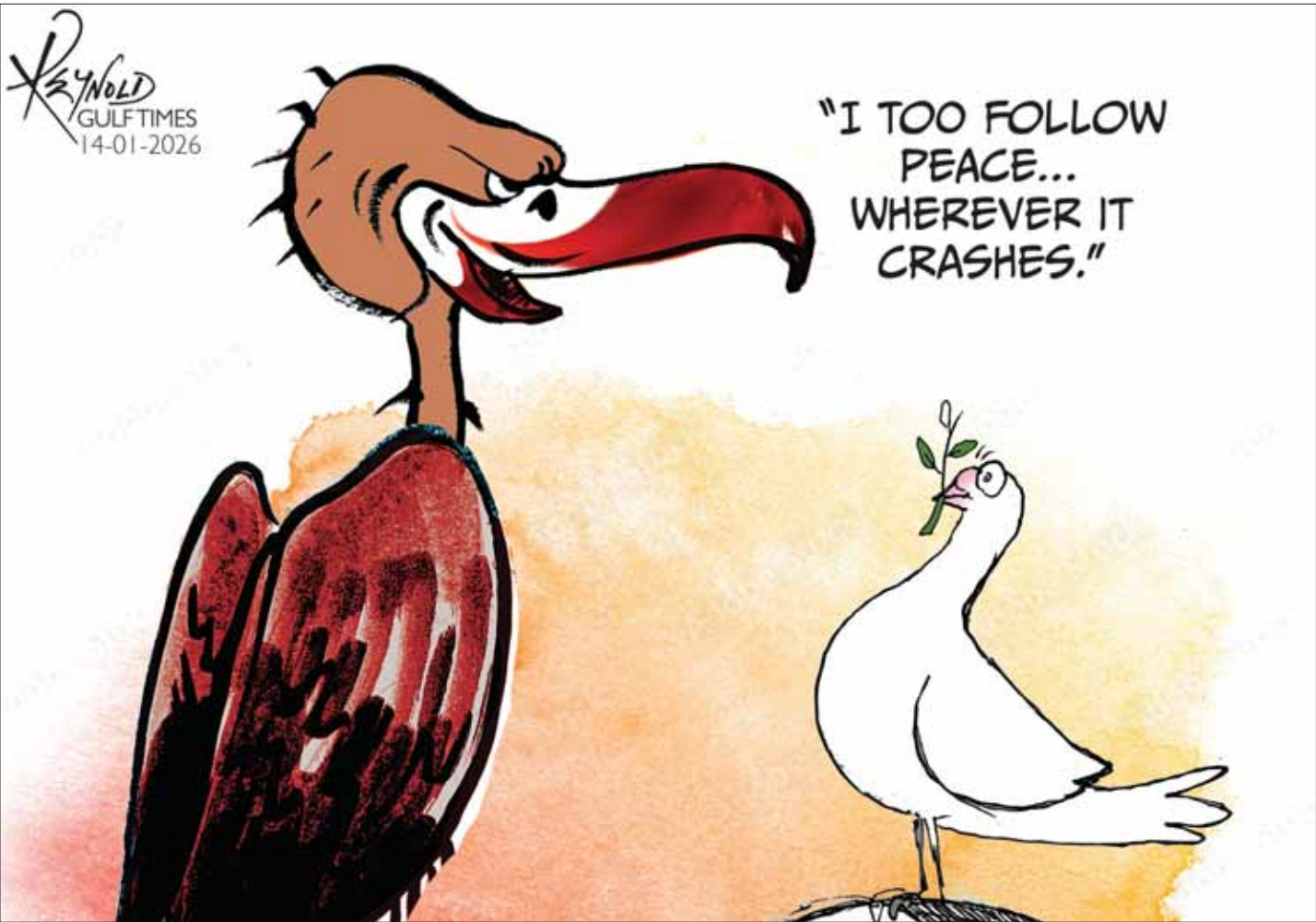
The society has two possible paths forward. It can react to obesity by emphasising medical treatment and weight management drugs, or it can also pursue a broader vision that prioritises prevention, societal shifts, and metabolic health for all.

MHI estimates that the health impact of taking the latter path could be three to four times that of the first path and lead to a \$5.65tn annual GDP uplift in 2050.

Global spending on diabetes treatment is estimated to surpass \$1tn annually by 2030.

According to the *European Medical Journal*, the wider economic burden of diabetes is far greater than previously recognised. Without accounting for informal care, diabetes is projected to cost the global economy more than \$10tn over three decades between 2020 and 2050. When unpaid caregiving by family and friends was included, the estimated burden rises dramatically to almost \$79tn.

For sure, all the ambitious health plans to keep diabetes and obesity under control seek to build healthier and active nations. Ultimately, it all boils down to the individuals to make their choices than medical professionals to intervene. Longer-term, monitoring daily food intake and incorporating regular physical activity is key to leading a healthier life.



2025: Qatar Charity's year
of continuous giving in Syria

Qatar Charity strengthened the scale of its humanitarian interventions in Syria in 2025, demonstrating its commitment to supporting the Syrian people and alleviating their suffering. These interventions included a comprehensive package of relief and development projects encompassing health, education, shelter, food, food security, livelihoods, protection, water and sanitation, social welfare, and economic empowerment. The total value of these interventions exceeded QR163mn, benefiting over 2mn people.

Qatar Charity continued to enhance the health response in Syria through a package of interventions combining primary healthcare, advanced services, and the medical supply chain. The number of beneficiaries reached 800,000 people, with a total value exceeding QR29mn.

This included supporting Bab Al-Hawa Surgical Hospital as a vital line of defence for emergency cases and preparing to open a specialised cancer treatment centre to bring services closer to patients and their families. Support was also provided to paediatric departments, new departments were equipped, and activities were conducted to screen for and treat malnutrition among children and mothers.

Essential and high-quality medicines and medical equipment were supplied to ensure the continuity of services and to strengthen the dialysis and blood bank systems.

Support was also provided to the ambulance system and primary healthcare centres, along with specialised surgical interventions (cardiac and ophthalmological) and care for people with disabilities, all within multi-impact projects. The most important projects completed

in 2025 included supporting Bab Al-Hawa Hospital and opening a cancer treatment centre in northern Syria.

A paediatric ward was also opened in northern Syria, and specialised medical equipment and medicines were provided, in addition to essential medicines for healthcare facilities, dialysis supplies, blood banks, and the paediatric ward at Al-Ra'i Hospital.

Support was also provided to primary healthcare centres, the ambulance system, and medical supplies, as well as treatment for malnutrition among children and mothers. Surgical interventions (cardiac and ophthalmological) and care for people with disabilities were also provided (within 68 projects).

Qatar Charity's interventions in the education sector focused on ensuring equitable and inclusive access to quality education for children, supporting formal and non-formal education. The number of beneficiaries reached 711,628, with a total value of nearly QR15mn.

This included providing school bags and stationery, supporting schools with operational expenses (water, electricity, internet, and routine maintenance), and supplying educational materials and paying the salaries of teaching and administrative staff. The renovation of 301 classrooms and the construction of 30 new classrooms in 20 schools in the Aleppo and Idlib governorates were completed, with co-ordination underway for the renovation of an additional 260 classrooms.

Textbooks for grades one through nine were printed, and 668,604 copies were delivered to the targeted schools and educational complexes. Furthermore, Qatar Charity supported needy university students in Turkiye by covering their tuition fees in co-ordination

with universities and relevant organisations.

Qatar Charity implemented various food security and livelihood interventions, including the distribution of food baskets and flour, support for bakeries, and free bread projects for the most vulnerable groups. These initiatives benefited 570,000 people, with a total value exceeding QR24mn.

The response also extended to Syrian refugees and the host community in Turkiye through the distribution of thousands of food baskets in several provinces. Strategically, Qatar Charity continued its wheat value chain support project for the sixth consecutive year by providing farmers with agricultural inputs in Aleppo and Idlib. This project, which will continue until mid-2026, includes marketing support and the provision of equipment for agricultural offices.

The livestock value chain project was also implemented through mobile veterinary services, feed distribution, and food processing activities. Families were supported with small grants to enhance food security and generate sustainable income through various breeding and production projects.

Qatar Charity's interventions in the shelter sector aimed to restore stability for affected families by repairing damaged homes and rehabilitating housing units and infrastructure, thus supporting safe return and promoting privacy and dignity. The work also included the rehabilitation of community facilities (such as mosques) to restore their social role.

In addition to rehabilitation, seasonal interventions were implemented to mitigate the effects of winter by distributing winter clothing to the most vulnerable families. These efforts are part of a humanitarian approach that addresses

economic burdens and rising construction costs, aiming to strengthen community resilience and improve living conditions in the near term.

In the protection sector, Qatar Charity focused on enhancing specialised services for the most vulnerable children and families in northwest Syria through a package of interventions encompassing individual protection, child protection, and support for orphanages. More than 59,000 people benefited from these initiatives, with a total value exceeding QR4mn.

Individual protection included in-kind assistance tailored to basic needs based on vulnerability criteria (the elderly, people with disabilities, and the most vulnerable families), with assessment and referral mechanisms implemented by mobile teams and in coordination with other stakeholders. Child-friendly spaces are also being established, and psychosocial support and case management are being provided in accordance with Unicef standards.

In addition to sponsoring orphans, Dar Al Mutaqeen and several other institutions were supported to meet basic needs and ensure a dignified and safe environment, while adhering to protection and documentation policies that preserve the dignity of beneficiaries.

Qatar Charity implemented water and sanitation interventions aimed at reducing the risk of waterborne diseases and improving access to safe drinking water. Activities included distributing 5,276 hygiene kits to more than 27,000 beneficiaries, with plans to distribute an additional 10,000 kits. Seven solar power systems were also constructed and installed at pumping stations to ensure the pumping of sterilised water to more than 125,000 people.



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We choose Denmark, says Greenland ahead of US talks

Reuters
Copenhagen

Greenland's prime minister said yesterday his nation would rather remain part of Denmark than become a territory of the United States, amid President Donald Trump's push to take control of the sprawling Arctic island.

The Danish and Greenlandic foreign ministers will meet US Vice-President J D Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio today after Trump recently stepped up threats to take over Greenland, an autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark.

But Greenland is not for sale and does not want to join the US, the island's Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen told a joint press conference in Copenhagen with Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen. "We face a geopolitical crisis, and if we have to choose between the US and Denmark here and now then we choose Denmark," Nielsen said. "We stand united in the Kingdom of Denmark."

'FOR US, IT'S HOME'

People in Greenland do not want to become Americans, and are feeling betrayed and bewildered by the rhetoric used about their island, cabinet minister Naaja Nathanielsen told reporters in London. "I think we should be able to have a say ourselves in the future of our lives. For others, this might be a piece of land, but for us, it's home," said Nathanielsen, whose portfolio includes business, energy and minerals.

While Denmark has ruled Greenland for centuries, the ter-



Greenland's Head of Government Jens-Frederik Nielsen (left) and Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen give a statement on the current situation at a press conference in the Mirror Hall at the Prime Minister's Office in Copenhagen yesterday. (AFP)

ritory has gradually been moving towards independence since 1979, a goal shared by all political parties elected to the island's parliament. But Nathanielsen said there was no rush towards claiming independence. "We are an American ally, but we do not see ourselves as becoming Americans. We are quite happy with being part of the Kingdom of Denmark," she said.

Trump has said Greenland is vital to US security and the United States must own it to prevent Russia or China occupying the strategically located and minerals-rich territory in the future. White House officials have been discussing various plans to bring Greenland under US control, including potential use of the US military and lump-sum payments to Greenlanders as part of a bid to convince them to secede

from Denmark. Danish Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen and his Greenlandic counterpart, Vivian Motzfeldt, had requested a meeting with Rubio after Trump's threats.

"US Vice-President J D Vance also wanted to participate in the meeting, and he will host the meeting, which will therefore be held at the White House," Rasmussen told reporters in Copenhagen earlier yesterday.

"Our reason for seeking the meeting we have now been given was to move this whole discussion... into a meeting room where we can look each other in the eye and talk about these things."

'THE HARDEST PART IS AHEAD'

Denmark's prime minister said it was difficult to stand up

to the US, a fellow Nato member and the country's most important ally for many decades. "But much suggests that the hardest part is now ahead of us," Frederiksen told reporters. Trump first floated the idea of a US takeover of Greenland in 2019 during his first term in office, although he faces opposition in Washington, including from within his own party.

Danish Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen said he would join a meeting with Nato Secretary-General Mark Rutte in Brussels on Monday next week to discuss Arctic security, along with Greenland's Motzfeldt.

Denmark planned a larger military presence in Greenland, with other Nato countries participating in exercises and training in 2026, the defence minister said.



Tractors parked in front of the National Assembly during a protest to demand "concrete and immediate action" from the government, which is struggling to deal with the anger of farmers in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

Furious farmers roll hundreds of tractors into Paris in fresh protests

AFP
Paris

More 350 tractors parked near the French parliament building yesterday after driving down the Champs-Elysees avenue, as farmers protested a litany of woes including the EU-Mercosur trade deal.

The protests reflect a deep sense of malaise afflicting France's agricultural sector, with the planned signing of an accord between the European Union and the Mercosur bloc seen as the last straw.

French farmers have complained about economic uncertainties and environmental rules, and have since December staged protests and set up roadblocks over the government's handling of a lumpy skin disease outbreak.

Arriving from towns around Paris and beyond, the protesters parked their tractors not far from the National Assembly in central Paris.

"We're at the end of our tether," said one of the activists, Guillaume Moret, 56.

"We haven't made any money from our farms for three years," said the head of the FNSEA union for the Paris region.

"The peasant revolt continues," read a banner unfurled in front of the legislature.

The FNSEA, France's leading agricultural union, and another union, Jeunes Agriculteurs, are demanding "concrete and immediate action" from the government.

Agriculture Minister Annie Genevard, who came out to meet the farmers, said Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu would make a new announcement later Tuesday.

The protesters also spoke with Yael Braun-Pivet, head of parliament's lower house.

No cows at agriculture show

The government last week already announced a planned 300-million-euro package to support the farmers, as well as other measures including an increase in the number of wolves that can be killed.

In a move highlighting the atmosphere, France's biggest agricultural show will this year feature no cows, for the first time since the event's creation in 1964.

Farmers, driven by health con-

cerns and a sense of solidarity with breeders affected by the lumpy skin disease outbreak, have refused to present their cattle at the fair in February.

The event's chairman, Jerome Despey, called the move a "blow to the show."

The first convoy of about 15 tractors rolled into the French capital shortly before 6:00am (0500 GMT). Joined by dozens of others, they drove down the Champs-Elysees honking their horns.

"We won't leave without measures that allow us to catch our breath a little," said protester Guillaume Moret.

Several days before the scheduled signing of the EU-Mercosur agreement in Paraguay on Saturday, the FNSEA union reiterated its opposition to the deal and also listed several national "priorities" to be defended yesterday.

The union is calling on the government to address a number of issues including wolf predation and the use of fertilisers.

Police said some 400 protesters had gathered near the parliament building. The FNSEA union put turnout at over 500 tractors and 800 farmers.

Dissatisfaction

Most of the European Union's 27 nations back the Mercosur trade deal, which supporters argue is crucial to boost exports, help the continent's ailing economy and foster diplomatic ties at a time of global uncertainty.

The deal, more than 25 years in the making, would create one of the world's largest free-trade areas, boosting commerce between the EU and the Mercosur bloc comprising Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay.

It would see the European Union export machinery, chemicals and pharmaceuticals with lowered tariffs applied.

But farmers in France and several other countries fear being undercut by an influx of cheap beef and other agricultural products from South America.

Thousands of farmers in France and Ireland staged protests over the weekend.

In France, politicians across the divide have also been up in arms against the deal, which they view as an assault on the country's influential farming sector.

France climate goals off track as emissions cuts slow again

AFP
Paris

France's cuts to greenhouse-gas emissions slowed for a second straight year in 2025 and remain well off track to meeting its climate goals, according to provisional government-commissioned estimates published yesterday.

The slowdown comes as government appetite for climate action flags and major economies struggle to make good on their pledges to reduce planet-warming pollution.

France's emissions were estimated to have declined 1.6% year-on-year, said Citepa, a non-profit organisation tasked by France's ecology ministry with tallying the country's greenhouse gas inventory.

The reduction of 5.8 million tonnes of CO2 equivalent was "far below the pace needed to reach 2030 targets", which would require cuts nearly three times larger, Citepa said.

"The decrease in emissions is confirmed for 2025. This is an encouraging sign but it is not enough," Monique Barbut, France's ecological transition minister, said in a press release.

She said all sectors needed to double their efforts to make cuts in greenhouse gases.

The result echoes a slowdown in neighbouring Germany, where emissions fell just 1.5% in 2025, the Agora Energiewende expert group said in its annual report last week.

Emissions in the United States meanwhile rose 2.4% last year, the Rhodium Group think tank said on Tuesday, spurred by demand for heating and electricity for the AI boom in the world's biggest economy.

France unveiled in December its updated pathway for achieving carbon neutrality by 2050.

To stay on track, greenhouse gas emissions need to fall 4.6% on average every year until 2030.

After France slashed its output by 3.9% in 2022 and 6.8% in 2023, the rate slowed sharply to 1.8% in 2024.

Citepa had earlier predicted a decline of just 0.8% in 2025 but said fresh data and updated methods of calculation had allowed a "more accurate" estimate for the full year.

Climate risk

Big polluting nations most responsible for climate change are under pressure to make faster and deeper cuts to the emissions driving record-breaking global temperatures and more extreme weather events.

Scientists say the last three



This photograph taken in Lanester, western France on May 31, 2025, shows smoke rising from a factory. France's emissions cuts slowed for a second straight year in 2025 and remain off track to meeting its pledged climate goals, according to a provisional government-commissioned forecast published yesterday. (AFP)

years have been the hottest globally on record.

France encouraged energy saving after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 but since then has faltered in decarbonising some of its most polluting industries.

While improvements were recorded in 2025 in heavy-emitting sectors such as industry, agriculture and transport, they remained virtually flat in energy and waste treatment, Citepa said.

The latest assessment highlighted the urgency for France to

phase out its use of fossil fuels, said Anne Bringault, a director at Climate Action Network France.

"It is high time to take seriously the climate risk but also the geopolitical risk of making us suffer from our dependence on fossil fuels, which are overwhelmingly imported," she told AFP.

The European Union has pledged to cut its net greenhouse gas emissions by 90% by 2040 compared to 1990 levels.

It achieved a 37% reduction by 2023.

Hungary to vote in April, with threat to Orban's rule

AFP
Budapest

Hungary will hold a general election on April 12, its president said yesterday, with the EU's longest serving current leader, Prime Minister Viktor Orban, facing an unprecedented challenge.

The nationalist - a close ally of the US under President Donald Trump, China, Russia, and a thorn in the EU's side - has been in power for 16 straight years.

But the party of former-government-insider-turned-critic Peter Magyar is seen ahead in opinion polls, against a backdrop of a stagnating economy, growing discontent with public services and some high-profile scandals shaking confidence in the government.

"Voting will take place on Sunday, April 12, 2026," President Tamás Sulyok said in a statement.

Campaigning is already underway, with Magyar crisscrossing the country to hold rallies, while Orban has also made high-profile visits to Washington and Moscow.

Aiming to win a fifth consecutive term, Orban pitches himself as a "safe choice", accusing the EU of fuelling the war in neighbouring Ukraine by supporting Kyiv's fight



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

against Russia's invasion.

He has also rolled out a slew of welfare measures in recent months benefiting first-time home buyers, mothers with at least two children and pensioners.

Magyar - a conservative - promises a system change, vowing to clamp down on what he says is widespread corruption, improve "failing" public services and unlock billions of euros in funds the EU has frozen over rule of law concerns.

Endorsed by right-wing leaders

A champion of "illiberal" democracy, Orban has been endorsed by other right-wing and far-right leaders, including Italy's Giorgia Meloni and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, who sent pre-recorded messages of support to the ruling party congress last weekend.

Fidesz delegate Eva Durko, a 78-year-old pensioner, warned "what we have managed to achieve... could come to an end."

"People have this idea that if someone has been in office for so long, it's time for a change. I just don't think they consider the dangers that this change could entail," she told AFP before the congress.

The governing Fidesz-KDNP coalition has won a two-thirds "supermajority" in the past four elections, enabling Orban to push major bills and constitutional changes through parliament.

Since his return to power in 2010, the 62-year-old has cemented his rule over the central European country of 9.5 million people with critics accusing him of tweaking the electoral and media environment to his advantage.

Opposition leader Magyar - a lawyer by training and a former Brussels-based diplomat - burst into prominence in early 2024, accusing the government of corruption and cronyism in the aftermath of a child abuse pardon scandal.

Despite facing intense smear campaigns, the 44-year-old's popularity has soared, but analysts say it is too early to predict who will win the race.

Dozens of mobsters from Italy's three mafias sentenced

AFP
Rome

Dozens of mafiosi from Italy's three main organised crime groups were sentenced for teaming up to traffic drugs and commit financial crimes in the country's richest region. The so-called "maxi-trial", which began in May, involved defendants linked to Calabria's 'Ndrangheta, Sicily's Cosa Nostra and the Camorra with roots around Naples - all accused of operating what prosecutors called a lucrative "consortium" in Lombardy. The court sentenced 62 defendants under a rapid summary trial procedure to up to 16 years in prison each and ruled that 45 more will face a full trial, Italian media reported. Dubbed "Hydra" in a reference to the mythological multi-headed monster, the trial is one of the biggest related to the dealings of Italy's organised crime groups far from their southern strongholds. The powerful 'Ndrangheta families, and to a lesser extent

the Cosa Nostra and Camorra, have succeeded in infiltrating the northern economy, whether through real estate holdings, control of construction projects, or investing in restaurants or other cash-heavy businesses. Milan prosecutors argued that the three groups agreed to work together in a rare alliance to commit a series of crimes from extortion and drug trafficking to money laundering and abuse of Italy's "superbonus" tax credit scheme for energy-efficient construction work. The judge agreed with the prosecutors' argument of an association "made up of members of the three groups," according to Italian news agency ANSA. In a series of 21 meetings in the Milan and Varese area during 2020 and 2021 documented during the trial, mafia members allegedly decided jointly on where to focus their efforts, including winning contracts for cleaning services or parking lots. "Without shooting, have you seen how everything has changed?" Giancarlo Vestiti told a colleague

in an intercepted phone call disclosed by prosecutors, as reported by local media. Vestiti, a defendant, represented the Camorra's Senese family, which is active in Rome. The trial has also disclosed ties between the Lombardy operations and the Sicilian clan of ex-boss Matteo Messina Dennaro, who died in 2023 after 30 years on the run. One of the defendants included Giuseppe Fidanzi, son of the Cosa Nostra boss Gaetano who died in 2013. The trial has taken place in a courtroom bunker at Milan's Opera prison where security had been tightened due to death threats against the prosecutors, whose police protection has been boosted. The case against the defendants has been rocky, with a preliminary investigation judge in 2023 rejecting most of the prosecution's requests for arrest warrants, finding its evidence of a triple mafia organisation scant. Italy's highest court eventually sided with prosecutors on appeal.



Amiri Medical Scholarships programme receives new batch of Palestinian doctors

Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) signed contracts with a new group of Palestinian doctors approved for His Highness the Amir's Scholarship Programme for postgraduate medical studies in Qatar and honoured the doctors who successfully completed their subspecialty programmes during 2025.

This initiative is part of Qatar's ongoing support for the Palestinian people and the product of constructive and collaborative efforts made by QRCS, Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC), Palestine's Ministry of Health (MoH), and Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS). Held at HMC's Itqan Clinical Simulation and Innovation Centre, the ceremony was attended by Dr Mohamed Johar al-Mohamed, QRCS board member; Abdullah Hamed al-Mulla, QRCS board member; Ahmed Abdul-Rahman al-Mulla, QRCS board member; Faisal Mohamed al-Emadi, QRCS secretary-general; Fayez Majed Abu al-Rub, Palestinian ambassador to Qatar; Ali al-Janahi, acting assistant managing director of HMC; Dr Abdullah Rashid al-Naimi, deputy chief Medical Officer for Medical Education at HMC; Dr Yousef al-Maslamani, medical director of Hamad General Hospital; Hussain Aman al-Ali, assistant secretary-



general for Volunteering and Local Development at QRCS; and Yousef Mohamed al-Awadi, chief ambassador of QRCS. The programme is a long-term strategic initiative launched by QRCS in 2003, with the generous support of His Highness the Father Amir, to embody the State of Qatar's vision of supporting the Palestinian people and building their capacity on a solid scientific and professional basis. It enables Palestinian doctors to complete their higher academic and clinical education in significant medical specialties, helping back Palestine's health care system, enhance its institutional capacity, and meet the shortage in qualified medical professionals. In a press statement, al-Emadi stated: "This programme provided Palestinian doctors with a valuable opportunity to engage with international medical expertise and acquire advanced

skills, amid limited local health care resources and infrastructure. The doctors returning from Qatar were a great added value for health care services, ensuring better humanitarian and living conditions for Palestinian patients. Palestinian MoH's hospitals in Gaza and the West Bank hire a select group of the programme graduates to run specialised medical departments". He said QRCS supported the returning doctors, particularly in Gaza, by creating a good work environment for them to practice their competencies, with high-tech medical equipment supplied for their departments. "Those doctors were among the medical professionals who continued to provide medical services during the recent war on Gaza," added al-Emadi. "Until today, they have been fulfilling their professional and national responsibility with utmost

dedication and heroic sacrifices." Dr al-Naimi said: "These generous scholarships represent a shining example of humanitarian support and investment in human capital. It reflects a genuine commitment to empowering Palestinian medical professionals, contributing to health care services for patients everywhere." He congratulated the scholarship winners and wished them successful training to prove their merits, pursue the journey of excellence and voluntary service, and strongly cherish the message of medicine and humanity. Abu al-Rub highlighted the total destruction of all aspects of life in Gaza, under an awfully brutal war, a severe blockade of life-saving humanitarian and medical aid, and a harshly cold winter. He pointed to the killing and injury of thousands of Palestinian medical professionals, almost failing health sector, shortage of medical supplies, and



increase number of injuries. The Palestinian ambassador to Doha described the initiative as a true lifeline for the Palestinian people, a strategic investment in the future of Palestine's health sector, and a boost to its resilience and recovery. He hopes the programme will be expanded to offer more scholarships, especially in such a critical situation, to ease the alarming shortage of specialised medical professionals and respond to the growing needs

of the Palestinian people. Throughout its lifetime, the programme covered 12 batches, with a total of 110 Palestinian doctors having pursued their specialised training in Qatar. Many of them have returned to their homeland to work at public and private-sector health institutions in the West Bank and Gaza, effectively helping localise medical services and improve the quality of health care provided for their people.

Al Nayla highlights shared sea traditions of Qatar and Australia

By Shaima Sherif
Doha

Qatar and Australia marked 10 years of diplomatic relations in Doha yesterday with the screening of a documentary at Msheireb Museums, highlighting their shared maritime heritage and the tradition of pearl diving. The public screening of *Al Nayla: A Journey to the Depths of the Sea and the Secrets of Extracting Oysters and Pearls from the Coasts of Australia* transported viewers into the world of courage, resilience, and centuries-old traditions.

The event, hosted in partnership with the Australian embassy in Doha and Qatar Television, took place at the Bin Jelmood House courtyard, underscoring the cultural links between the two nations. "We're really delighted to be celebrating the 10th anniversary of the opening of the Australian embassy here through this cultural activity," said Australian ambassador Shane Flanagan. "It's a wonderful way to mark our relationship, not just formally, but culturally."

The documentary traces the history of pearl diving along Western Australia's Kimberley coast, exploring cultivation methods, selection techniques, and the families whose lives have been shaped by the trade for generations. Flanagan noted the striking similarities with Qatar's own maritime past.

"Like Doha, this part of Australia has a deep heritage in pearling. The pearling industry played such an important role there, just as it did here, and this film allows us to really look at what we have in common," the envoy said. He lauded Qatar Television for producing what he called a "beautiful documentary," highlighting the dedication of presenter Mohamed al-Saad, who fully immersed himself in the experience.

"He actually dived for pearls off the coast of Australia. It's a very remote area, far from the coastline, with whales and other creatures around, so he was very brave. But he did a wonderful job telling the story with affection and respect," Flanagan said, noting that the human connection is what makes the film resonate across cultures.

"You really see the resilience of the divers. Those values — courage, patience and endurance — are something people here in Qatar understand deeply," he said.

Mohamed al-Youssef, Operations and Visitor Relations manager at Msheireb Museums, said the screening reflected the museum's mission to preserve heritage while fostering international understanding.

"Msheireb Museums is a cultural hub where visitors can explore Qatar's heritage and learn how traditions resonate internationally. *Al Nayla* showcases how pearl diving and oyster cultivation have been central to communities both in Qatar and Australia," al-Youssef said.

He drew parallels between the two regions,



Australian ambassador Shane Flanagan at the event yesterday. **PICTURES:** Thajudheen



Mohamed al-Youssef.

saying: "Our waters and our traditions are mirrored elsewhere, revealing shared practices and values that connect communities across continents."

Al-Youssef noted that the screening was part of the museum's ongoing efforts to create inclusive spaces for learning and cultural exchange, alongside initiatives ranging from science cafes in partnership with Sidra Medicine to literary events and embassy collaborations.

"We aim to create spaces where knowledge, culture and tradition intersect," he said, inviting visitors to engage with the museum beyond special events.

Meanwhile, Flanagan stressed the role of cultural collaboration in diplomacy, particularly in today's challenging global climate.

"We know that culture connects people. People-to-people links are incredibly important, and celebrating what unites us is more important than ever," he said.

He thanked Msheireb Museums for hosting the event and Qatar Television for their partnership, describing the collaboration as a bridge across distance.

"These kinds of events overcome the physical distance between our countries," Flanagan said. "They create bonds that are genuine and lasting."

Encouraging audiences to watch the documentary, he said: "When people see the film, they'll see the desert landscapes and understand just how vast Australia is. I would encourage Qatari audiences to think about visiting Australia someday. We'd love to welcome you."



Public screening of *Al Nayla: A Journey to the Depths of the Sea and the Secrets of Extracting Oysters and Pearls from the Coasts of Australia* at Bin Jelmood House courtyard.

Amber Exhibition kicks off at Katara

The sixth edition of the Katara International Amber Exhibition was launched yesterday at Hall 12, with participation from 13 countries through 82 exhibition booths. Katara Cultural Village general manager Prof Dr Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Sulaiti toured the exhibition, along with several ambassadors of different countries and other officials.

The exhibition's latest edition is seeing broad participation from a distinguished group of exhibitors and experts in amber from around the world, underscoring its status as a leading annual platform that brings together culture, heritage, and the economy.

The exhibition runs until January 16 and features a wide range of luxury products and artefacts crafted from rare amber. This year's edition takes a distinctive form, featuring a wide range of exhibits, including ancient Polish amber prayer beads, rare handicrafts, and unique items made from amber.

Khalid Abdulrahman al-Sayed, director of the Events and Cultural Affairs Department at Katara and the exhibition's general supervisor, stressed that the exhibition has become a key destination for amber enthusiasts and those interested in its heritage and craftsmanship. This aligns with Katara's mission to nurture human culture and celebrate its diversity.

He expressed pride in the exhibition's prestigious reputation and its growing popularity year after year. He hoped that this edition would further strengthen the exhibition's role as a bridge for cultural and economic communication across the Middle East.

Several participants expressed their appreciation for Katara's efforts in organising this event, which combines art and economics. Most exhibitors have previously participated in the exhibition and have unanimously agreed on the benefits of bringing together exhibitors and enthusiasts from around the world.

Fawaz al-Mulla of Dar Al-Mulla for Prayer Beads, the official sponsor of the exhibition, said that their participation includes a unique collection of ancient Polish prayer beads carved from a single stone, as well as various amber accessories. He praised the strong turnout on the first day of the exhibition and wished all participants success.

Mithaq al-Maliki, one of the participants in the sixth edition of the exhibition and supervisor of the "Dr Kahrab"



booth, said that the event has become a leading specialised platform bringing together elite exhibitors and experts from different countries, thanks to its professional organisation, high quality, and attention to detail.

He added that the exhibition reflects an honourable image of the cultural and heritage movement in Qatar, commending the role played by Katara's management in creating an ideal environment for both exhibitors and visitors, and in providing smooth procedures and precise organisation that contribute to the event's success.

Al-Maliki said the exhibition has become an essential annual fixture on the region's specialised exhibition calendar, making it an attractive destination for traders, amber enthusiasts, and those interested in its culture and heritage.

Meanwhile, Salah Mohamed, supervisor of the "Qatar Amber" booth, confirmed that the current edition of the exhibition is seeing remarkable growth in both the scale of participation and the quality of exhibits, noting that this edition is among the strongest since the exhibition's inception.

Theatre Affairs Centre to organise workshop

The Theatre Affairs Centre of the Ministry of Culture is organising a specialised training workshop on "Playwriting Using the Senses", aimed at trainee writers and those interested in the art of playwriting, it was announced.

The workshop will be held from January 17-27 at the Ministry of Culture building. Presented by theatre professor Alaa al-Jaber, the workshop aims to develop participants' skills in writing plays by employing the five senses as essential

tools for character development, plot formulation, and the creation of dramatic space. This approach contributes to producing more vibrant, profound, and impactful texts for the audience. The workshop also seeks to introduce trainees to modern methods of playwriting that focus on sensory experience as a starting point for creativity, moving away from traditional, ready-made formulas. The workshop includes an intensive training programme combining

theoretical and practical aspects. Participants will learn about contemporary playwriting concepts, techniques for evoking sensory memory, and how to transform feelings and impressions into dramatic scenes that can be brought to life on stage. The workshop also includes practical exercises, critical readings of selected texts, and open discussions that allow participants to exchange ideas and experiences and develop their texts under the direct supervision of the trainer.