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SPORT | Page 1

Al-Attiyah and Carrera overcome punctures to lead Oman Rally

Kenyan star Oketch claims historic 10th title as Qatar's Strongest Man

By Joey Aguilar
Doha



Christopher Oketch retained his crown for the 10th time as Qatar's Strongest Man. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

Multiple-time Qatar's Strongest Man champion Christopher Oketch repeated his dominance yesterday, overpowering 10 elite competitors from across the GCC to win the championship's first-ever GCC-wide edition at Aspire Park.

The Kenyan powerhouse, a familiar and formidable figure on Qatar's strength-sports scene, retained his crown for a remarkable 10th time in an action-packed weekend event, outclassing challengers from Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in front of a large and enthusiastic crowd.

The expanded GCC format raised the level of competition and intensity, but Oketch proved untouchable across a punishing series of strength and endurance challenges.

Contestants were pushed to their physical limits in events that included carrying loads of up to 350kg, lifting 140kg sandbags onto elevated platforms at speed, a 350kg tyre flip race, and a medley challenge weighing up to 125kg.

The championship culminated in the crowd-favourite truck pull, where athletes hauled a 15.5-tonne vehicle over a set distance.

Despite the increased regional competition, Oketch's experience and consistency set him apart. Known for his explosive power and disciplined preparation, he controlled the contest from the early rounds and sealed



victory in the final stage.

Oketch has always attributed his victory to hard work, discipline and unwavering focus, consistently emphasising that true strength goes beyond physical power and is rooted in determination, patience and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

A long-time advocate of fitness and active living, Oketch has often used his platform to promote health awareness, inspiring both aspiring athletes and the wider public to embrace sport as part of daily life.

Organised by Aspire Zone Foundation (AZF), the championship has grown into one of Qatar's flagship strength-sport events. By opening the competition to GCC athletes for the first time, AZF further elevated its regional profile and competitive standards.

Ahmed Mohammed al-Hassan, Events and Venues director at AZF, said in a statement: "The Qatar's Strongest Man Championship represents one of the distinctive sports platforms that reflects Aspire Zone Foundation's commitment to delivering integrated sporting events that combine competitive excellence with an engaging community experience, while reinforcing Aspire Park's position as a leading sports and lifestyle destination." To Page 12



As winter cools Qatar, residents are swapping cafés for the desert, flocking to Sealine and the Inland Sea to explore dunes, beaches, and campfire gatherings. Day trips, sandboarding, and beach picnics are bringing colleagues, families, and newcomers closer to nature and each other. **PICTURE:** JTA Page 12

Qatar's active role in enhancing global peace and security highlighted at WEF

Doha 'has become a leading international platform for dialogue'

QNA
Davos



HE Dr Hind bint Abdulrahman al-Muftah participates in a dialogue session at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar in Geneva Dr Hind bint Abdulrahman al-Muftah yesterday took part in a panel discussion on shaping international relations through dialogue, which was held as part of the activities in the World Economic Forum (WEF) 2026 in Davos.

During the session, Her Excellency noted that the multilateral system was facing unprecedented challenges, marked by intensified competition among major powers and the growing politicisation of multilateral action, in addition to eroding trust in international institutions, particularly in contexts of protracted conflicts and crises.

This has contributed to a state of relative paralysis in the international system's ability to respond swiftly and effectively to emerging and prolonged crises, she said.

Her Excellency mentioned the launch of third edition of the Global Co-operation Barometer 2026, which measures levels of international co-operation across five main areas: trade and capital, innovation and technology, climate and natural capital, health and well-being, and peace and security. She noted that the report underscored that addressing major global challenges cannot be achieved through unilateral efforts by states, but rather requires renewed international engagement and the establishment of flexible and well-defined frameworks for co-operation.

Her Excellency pointed out that Qatar plays an active role in supporting global efforts to enhance international peace and security, achieve sustainable development, protect human rights, provide humanitarian assistance, and contribute to peacekeeping operations.

She noted Doha has become a leading international platform for dialogue by hosting conferences, meetings, and workshops dedicated to mediation, peacebuilding, development, and the promotion of a culture of peace.

International conflicts were no longer merely sporadic military confrontations, but have become a central driver in reshaping the global political and economic order, with repercussions for economic systems, technological competition, cyberspace, and energy and food security, she stressed. This reality reflects a more complex international landscape characterised by multidimensional competition and shifting alliance maps, she added.

Despite the approach of 2030, now only four years away, collective progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals remains faltering she said adding this requires strengthening a multilateral approach that improves integration between humanitarian action, development, and peacebuilding, enhancing coherence and collective impact, particularly for the most vulnerable groups affected by conflicts and humanitarian emergencies.

Her Excellency affirmed that the United Nations still possesses strong and effective tools to preserve and strengthen regional and international co-operation if they are employed strategically and comprehensively. She noted that this includes investing in preventive diplomacy and mediation, supporting political solutions before crises escalate, backing peace-building efforts, protecting and promoting human rights, and expanding co-ordination with regional organisations and civil society.

She added that even amid fragmentation and polarisation, the United Nations can play a decisive role in sustaining and reinvigorating global engagement through political leadership, practical co-operation, and advancing institutional reform.

She further noted that through inclusive dialogue, results-oriented action, preventive diplomacy, effective communication, and continuous renewal, the United Nations can help bridge gaps and maintain constructive regional and global co-operation in an international environment increasingly marked by uncertainty.

Guided by Qatar's firm belief in the importance of establishing a strong strategic partnership with the United Nations, she stressed Qatar's active role in supporting international efforts to enhance global peace and security and achieve sustainable development.

Her Excellency stressed that strengthening regional and global co-operation requires sustained and co-ordinated action across several interconnected tracks, particularly in light of mounting pressures on trust in multilateralism and the growing global challenges. She underlined the importance of reforming global governance and restoring the credibility of international institutions by modernising decision-making mechanisms, especially within the Security Council, to make them more representative, inclusive, and equitable. To Page 2

QU professor emphasises ethical use of AI in academic practices

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

As artificial intelligence (AI) transforms the academic landscape, opening new opportunities in education and research, a Qatar University (QU) professor has emphasised the necessity of ethical use of AI in all areas of academic life.

Prof Sumaya al-Maadeed, professor of Computer Engineering at the College of Engineering, QU, notes that like all industrial revolutions, AI also brings significant challenges that students, researchers, and faculty must navigate responsibly and ethically to ensure fair and constructive use of these technologies.

Prof al-Maadeed emphasises that AI should be used responsibly, with clear ethical guidelines to ensure fairness, transparency, and academic integrity.

While generative AI can assist with writing, grading, and research, concerns include bias, inaccurate citations, data privacy, and misuse in assignments.

She stresses that AI should support human roles, remain under human supervision, and be applied in ways that align with core academic values and serve the public good.

In an article in the university magazine Prof al-Maadeed highlights AI as a valuable tool but at the same time questions its impact on various aspects.

"These concerns highlight the need for clear ethical guidelines within universities that define responsible and fair use of AI. Ultimately, the responsibility lies with the user to uphold ethical standards when engaging with AI tools. One of the known drawbacks of AI is its potential bias, as it is trained on limited datasets that may favour particular perspectives," explained Prof al-Maadeed.

The professor notes that users must remain vigilant, critically evaluating AI-generated content to ensure it is fair, transparent, and free from discrimination — especially in matters concerning religion, personal rights, or national interests.

"Generative AI should be treated as a supportive tool — not a decision-maker. Universities must promote its use in a safe and ethical manner, always under human supervision aligned with core academic values"

"Another concern is the inaccuracy of citations generated by AI, which can lead to misinformation. AI use must also comply with data privacy regulations. Users should be cautious about sharing sensitive data online to avoid breaches. Institutions must implement robust security measures to protect confidential information," she pointed out.

According to Prof al- Maadeed, in academia, AI can assist faculty and administrators with tasks such as grading and evaluating research submissions — provided it is done transparently and under strict criteria. "AI is increasingly integrated into university education. In addition to AI courses offered to computer science and engineering students, it is now available as an elective for medical students. Researchers are actively leading projects that apply AI in impactful ways, such as cancer detection and early diagnosis of learning difficulties. These projects rely on reliable datasets to train AI models, ensuring the accuracy and credibility of AI-generated outputs, with benefits extending to the wider community," she highlighted.

The professor stressed that it is important to make sure that AI should not replace human roles in academic life, but rather enhance research and decision making processes.

"Generative AI should be treated as a supportive tool — not a decision-maker. Universities must promote its use in a safe and ethical manner, always under human supervision aligned with core academic values. We must continue to develop frameworks that ensure AI serves the public good with a commitment to ethical research," added Prof al-Maadeed.

QATAR

Minister of state for interior affairs meets Colombia's defence minister

HE the Minister of State for Interior Affairs, Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Faisal bin Mohammed al-Thani, met yesterday with Minister of National Defence of the Republic of Colombia, Pedro Arnulfo Sanchez. Discussions during the meeting dealt with a host of topics of mutual interest, in addition to areas of co-operation and means to develop and bolster them. (*QNA*)



Cairo book fair pivotal moment in cultural ties: envoy

QNA
Cairo

Qatar's participation in the 57th Cairo International Book Fair represents a pivotal moment in the trajectory of cultural co-operation between Qatar and Egypt, according to the ambassador of the State of Qatar to Egypt. Sheikh Jassim bin Abdulrahman al-Thani said the involvement in the event, which kicked off earlier this week, comes as part of preparations for the Qatari-Egyptian Cultural Year, especially with Qatar being chosen as the guest of honour for the 2027 edition of the fair.

Sheikh Jassim gave the remarks during a visit to the Qatari pavilion, alongside Egyptian Minister of Culture Dr Ahmed Fouad Hanno. The tour included an overview of the pavilion's publications and cultural and knowledge-based materials, reflecting Qatar's active cultural presence at international forums and its role in supporting books, publishing, and fostering Arab cultural dialogue.



The ambassador expressed his happiness with Qatar's participation in this major international cultural event, praising the fair's extensive organisational efforts and its rich intellectual and cultural content, which reflect Egypt's historical role in promoting Arab cultural activity.

He also stressed Qatar's commitment to presenting a distinguished cultural presence that showcases the diversity and richness of Qatari culture, highlighting its intellectual and creative contributions and enhancing Arab cultural dialogue while supporting the presence of Arab culture in international forums.

For his part, Dr Hanno said that cultural relations between Egypt and Qatar form a key pillar in strengthening ties between the two peoples. He highlighted the importance of deepening these relations in the coming period through expanded areas of joint co-operation and the implementation of cultural programmes and events that reflect the historical and civilizational bonds between the two countries, while contributing to the promotion of Arab cultural dialogue.

Qatar's active role in in enhancing global peace highlighted

From Page 1

She added that this also requires enhancing transparency and accountability within the multilateral system, and engaging developing countries as genuine partners in shaping global priorities and decisions, rather than merely as stakeholders.
Her Excellency further emphasised the need to prioritise preventive diplomacy and mediation as cost-effective and politically sustainable tools for achieving peace, while increasing investment in early-warning systems, conflict analysis, and preventive measures, and maintaining sustained support for mediation efforts at both regional and local levels.
She stressed that promoting political solutions that take into account the cultural, social, and political specificities of each region is essential to ensuring long-term legitimacy and stability.
Her Excellency highlighted the importance of strengthening co-operation in addressing cross-border challenges such as climate change, pandemics, food and water insecurity, migration, and displacement, noting that making tangible progress on these issues is fundamental to restoring public trust in multilateral action, given their direct and lasting impact on people's daily lives and long-term well-being.
She underscored the importance of systematically enhancing the role of women in dialogue, mediation, and peace-building, noting that accumulated experience demonstrates that meaningful participation by women leads to more sustainable peace agreements, greater social cohesion, and faster, more inclusive post-conflict recovery.
She affirmed that advancing gender equality in peace processes is a strategic necessity and also emphasised that empowering civil society and youth is a cornerstone of sustainable peace and co-operation, explaining that supporting cross-border initiatives in education, technology, peace-building, and social cohesion helps counter hate speech, polarisation, and disinformation, while simultaneously fostering a culture of dialogue, innovation, and shared responsibility across generations. **(QNA)**

Qatar Charity supports education in Gambia with school bag distribution

As part of its efforts to strengthen the education sector and with the generous support of donors in Qatar, Qatar Charity (QC) delivered 500 school bags to The Gambia's Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MOBSE) at an official ceremony.

The event was attended by Habibatou Drammeh, Minister of Basic and Secondary Education, along with senior officials and education representatives. This initiative underscores Qatar Charity's commitment to expanding access to quality education and reducing the financial burden on families by providing school bags with essential materials. The support helps students stay focused on their studies, particularly in underserved communities.

In a press statement, Drammeh expressed her deep appreciation to Qatar Charity and its partners, describing the initiative as a testament to the strong and fruitful partnership in supporting education in The Gambia. The minister emphasised that investing in children's education remains the most effective path to building a brighter and more prosperous future for the country, calling for continued international co-operation and solidarity to advance this vital sector.



Momodou Jeng, director of Curriculum, Research, Evaluation and Development at MoBSE, lauded the support, describing it as a "timely intervention" that directly alleviates pressure on families, improves school enrolment, and strengthens academic performance, especially in marginalised areas.

Mustafa Essatte, country director of Qatar Charity's The Gambia Branch, said the initiative reflects the organisation's commitment to expanding access to quality education, strengthening literacy and numeracy skills, supporting girls' education, and integrating Arabic and Qur'anic schools into the national education system.

He added that the project is implemented under the co-operation agreement signed with the Ministry of Education in May 2023, noting Qatar Charity's ongoing efforts to mobilise donor support for sustainable, high-impact educational programmes.

This intervention builds on the distribution inaugurated by Adama Barrow, President of the Republic of The Gambia, strengthening Qatar Charity's educational support efforts. In December, President Barrow participated in the distribution of 1,950 school bags to Qatar Charity–sponsored orphans during the rollout of the Economic Support Project, in the presence of Jassim Abdullah Jassim, adviser to Qatar Charity's CEO, Abdullah al-Kuwari, Second Secretary at the embassy of the State of Qatar, and senior officials and partners.

Qatar partakes in WTO ministerial meeting in Davos

QNA
Davos



Qatar took part in the informal ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) held in Davos, Switzerland, on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum. Qatar was represented by HE the Minister of State for Foreign Trade Affairs, Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al-Sayed. The meeting was chaired by President of the Swiss Confederation, Guy Parmelin, and attended by Director-General of the WTO, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, along with trade and economy ministers from member states.

Discussions focused on enhancing the multilateral trading system and strengthening co-operation among WTO members. Ministers also explored ways to integrate cooperative initiatives between groups of countries, including the Investment Facilitation for Development initiative. Other topics included the potential extension of the suspension of customs duties on e-commerce and advancing negotiations on key WTO files.

The meeting also addressed the WTO's role in the global economy amid current challenges, including the most-favoured-nation principle, dispute settlement mechanisms, industrial policy impacts, national security considerations, and the intersection of trade with development and environmental protection. Ministers exchanged views ahead of the 14th WTO Ministerial Conference scheduled in Yaounde, Cameroon.

The session concluded with general findings aimed at achieving tangible progress on global trade priorities in preparation for upcoming ministerial commitments.

QatarDebate hosts high-level global talk on athletes, investment, sport

QNA
Davos



QatarDebate Center organised a high-level international dialogue session on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2026 in Davos, Switzerland, bringing together a distinguished group of global leaders from the fields of sports, investment, media, and policymaking.

Titled 'The New Global Game Rules Series: Athletes, Investment, and the Future of Sport', the session explored the strategic transformation of the global sports sector as it evolves from a traditional competitive arena into an influential economic sector closely linked to investment, governance, media, and the development of nations' soft power. Discussions highlighted the growing role of athletes as active partners in the global economy.

Chairman of Qatar Sports Investments, Chairman of beIN Media Group, and President and CEO of Paris Saint-Germain Football Club (PSG), Nasser bin Ghanim al-Khelaifi, affirmed that sport has become an integral part of the global economy. He noted that investment in the sector is no longer limited to athletic competition, but now encompasses an integrated ecosystem that includes media, innovation, and brand building. He stressed that true success is driven by a long-term vision and sustainable governance.

NBA Hall of Famer and global basketball star Tracy McGrady underscored the importance of empowering athletes beyond the field of play, describing investment, entrepreneurship, and the development of sustainable ventures as essential tools to ensure their continued impact after the end of their professional careers.

Olympic medallist and world number one in beach volleyball, Cherif Younousse, pointed out that elite athletic performance forms the foundation of investor confidence, emphasising the need to build a professional environment that preserves sporting values while supporting competitiveness at the global level.

For his part, Global Sports Executive & Advisor, David Moreno Jr, stated that the future of sport is increasingly tied to regulatory and investment frameworks, stressing the importance of aligning the sports industry with legislation, governance standards, and a deep understanding of global markets.

Director of Programs and Head of Strategic Partnerships at QatarDebate Center, Abdulrahman al-Subaie highlighted that the centre's participation reflects its belief that dialogue is no longer merely a platform for discussion, but a strategic pillar for understanding global transformations and shaping more inclusive and sustainable policies. He noted that linking sport, investment, and decision-making opens new horizons for building international partnerships based on cross-sector integration.

This participation reaffirms QatarDebate Center's commitment to actively contributing to cross-sector global dialogues and to strengthening the role of dialogue as a strategic tool for building more sustainable global partnerships.

Katara organises seminar on AI's role in medicine and healthcare

Katara Cultural Village, in co-operation with the Business Forum and as part of the 27th Katara Tech Forum activities, organised a specialised seminar titled 'Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Medicine'.

The seminar featured Dr Mustafa Gerek, a specialist in otolaryngology and head and neck surgery, and Dr Fawzyia Abdullah, a specialist in dentistry. The session was moderated by writer and media professional Issa bin Mohamed al-Ishaq and attended by a distinguished group of academics, physicians, experts, and enthusiasts of modern healthcare technologies.



Hosted at the Katara Library for Arabic Novels in Building 48, the seminar addressed the expanding role of AI in driving transformative changes within healthcare systems. The discussion focused particularly on advancements in medical diagnosis, clinical decision support, resource optimisation, and the enhancement of patient-centred care.

Participants also emphasised the need to build an integrated digital health ecosystem, rooted in collaboration among healthcare providers, academic and research institutions, technology developers, and regulatory bodies, to support a smarter, more sustainable future for healthcare.

Professor Gerek highlighted leading applications of AI in medical imaging, noting that deep learning algorithms enable highly accurate analysis of radiological images, which supports early disease detection and reduces the risk of human error – especially in critical specialities like oncology, cardiology, neurology, and emergency medicine.

He also underscored the importance of AI-based clinical decision support systems in integrating diverse health data and providing real-time, evidence-based recommendations, thus enhancing patient safety, standardising quality of care, and enabling rapid, effective interventions in complex clinical environments.

Similarly, Dr Abdullah stressed that no matter how advanced AI becomes, it cannot replace physicians.

Medicine, she explained, is not merely a matter of equations or data analysis but a fundamentally human practice grounded in understanding, experience, ethical judgment, and direct patient interaction. AI, she argued, remains a supportive tool that enhances diagnosis, accelerates access to information, and reduces error rates, but lacks the capacity for comprehensive clinical judgment that considers individual differences and the patient's psychological and social context.

She stressed that the ultimate responsibility for clinical decisions rests with the physician, who is best equipped to interpret AI outputs in the context of the patient's overall health, balance benefits and risks, and make appropriate ethical choices – especially in complex or critical cases.

She also noted that trust between doctor and patient, as well as the ability to empathise, explain treatment options, and provide reassurance, are irreplaceable elements that digital technologies cannot replicate. In conclusion, the seminar affirmed that the future of healthcare lies not in replacing physicians but in fostering an intelligent partnership between doctors and AI.

This synergy, where technological precision is combined with human expertise, empowers physicians, elevates the quality of care, and ensures that healthcare remains safe, effective, and deeply humane.

MES athletes strike gold in multiple competitions





Demonstrating exceptional talent and determination, MES Grade V student Zainab Maryam and Grade X student Kevin Joseph clinched gold medals in 2km and 5km race respectively at the Media One Doha Run, held at Al Bidda Park.

Adding to the school's glory, Noor Khan of Grade V secured the gold medal in the SFA Resolution Run, which took place at Muntaza Park.

Further elevating the school's sporting achievements, MES students delivered commendable performances at the Ooredoo Doha Marathon held on January 16. The global event was hosted by Ooredoo, Qatar's leading telecommunications provider.

The marathon, internationally recognised and honoured with the prestigious World Athletics Gold Label, witnessed participation from elite athletes and young talents.

Noor Khan in U-13 category and Kevin Joseph in U-16 category secured third position in 5km race, while Zainab Maryam (Grade V) achieved an impressive seventh position, competing against a strong field of runners. The outstanding accomplishments of the students have been appreciated by school principal Dr Hameeda Kadar.



Community volunteers take part in cleanup drive at Qatar's dunes, beaches

By Joey Aguilar
Doha





Hundreds of volunteers recently joined Doha Environmental Actions Project (Deap) Qatar Conservation in a series of cleanup drives across the country, targeting some of Qatar's most iconic natural sites, including the rare singing dunes in Mesaieed and the scenic beaches of Zekreet.

In Mesaieed, around 50 volunteers, in collaboration with the Deloitte team in Qatar, friends and family, removed approximately 130kg of trash from the dunes. Participants not only cleared waste but also learned about the ecological and scientific significance of the dunes, gaining firsthand insight into the delicate desert ecosystem.

Deap Qatar cited the global rarity of singing dunes, noting that only a few places worldwide feature this natural wonder, highlighting the importance of keeping them clean.

Deap Qatar thanked Qatar Museums, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, and other supporting partners for enabling the initiative.

Meanwhile, in Zekreet, volunteers from Queens International School took part in a beach cleanup, collecting litter as they explored one of Qatar's most picturesque destinations. Zekreet is renowned for its dramatic rock formations, open beaches frequented by kite surfers, public art displays, and diverse natural landscapes, making it both a recreational hotspot and a conservation priority. The focus on youth engagement continued at the singing dunes, where 97 students, along with teachers and staff from Doha English Speaking School, participated in a separate cleanup, removing 90kg of trash as part of the school's Green Week activities. The programme aims to instil environmental awareness and encourage sustainable practices among students.

Deap Qatar Conservation said the combined efforts across desert and coastal sites demonstrate growing public commitment to environmental stewardship. The organisation stressed that community-led initiatives are essential in protecting Qatar's unique natural heritage, from rare geological formations to fragile coastal ecosystems, ensuring these landscapes are preserved for future generations.



MES student shines at Qatar National Day art competition



Sohan Sandeep of Grade 6 from MES Indian School emerged as the first prize winner of a recently held inter-school art competition at Spectra Global School, in conjunction with Qatar National Day.

The event, which brought together young artistic talents from several schools across Qatar, was organised to nurture creativity and provide a platform for students to express their appreciation and love for the nation through art.

Sandeep impressed the judges with his exceptional creativity, originality, and thoughtful interpretation of the competition's theme, 'Qatar in Our Hearts'.

The theme inspired participants to creatively depict Qatar's rich heritage, culture, and national pride through imaginative and visually compelling artworks.

The event also featured the participation and impressive artistic displays of students.

Sandeep was accompanied by his art teacher, Suresh, whose guidance and encouragement were vital in nurturing the student's abilities. The school principal commended the winner's effort and appreciated the art teacher's dedication.

BPS promotes creativity at 'Inkspire'





Birla Public School (BPS) formally launched "Inkspire", a week-long mega art activity, on January 18, marking the beginning of a vibrant creative journey through colours and artistic expression.

The programme was inaugurated by the principal, Anand Nair, in the presence of vice principals Radhika Rele and Edna Fernandez and HMs.

To commemorate the official opening, the dignitaries added the first inspiring strokes to a collective canvas, symbolising the school's steadfast commitment to creativity, teamwork, and artistic expression. The initiative, designed for Middle School students, provided a vibrant platform to explore creativity and collaboration.

Students enthusiastically expressed their ideas through diverse art forms such as versification, origami, caption writing, and stencil art, while thoughtfully engaging with themes including bullying, parental bonding, world peace, unity in diversity, environmental protection, and more.

Welcoming the guests and participating students, head of the Art Department Siju Thomas highlighted the importance of artistic exploration in fostering holistic development. The programme was efficiently co-ordinated by art teachers Sreejith C K and Regint Varghese.

'Inkspire' will continue through the week, engaging Middle School students in a shared artistic experience.

BPS celebrates 'Tamil Day'





Birla Public School (BPS) celebrated 'Tamil Day' with great enthusiasm on January 14 through a special assembly presented by the students of Grades I and II.

The assembly highlighted the significance of the Pongal festival, the Tamil language, and the rich culture and traditions of Tamil Nadu.

The programme began with a Tamil prayer song, followed by the school's vision, mission, and objectives. This was complemented by the Arabic Word of the Day, a motivational thought, Discover India, and a Tamil birthday song for students celebrating their birthdays.

The young learners displayed their talents through engaging speeches on the traditional festival of Pongal, melodious songs, poem recitations, and a graceful folk dance performance, all dressed as renowned Tamil poets.

The event was graced by vice-principal Edna Fernandez, and headmistress Josephine Fernandes. In their addresses, they emphasised the importance of the Tamil language and the cultural significance of Indian festivals.

BPS continues to foster awareness and appreciation of languages, culture, and festivals among its students, nurturing respect for India's diverse heritage.

DPS-MIS presents positive values at ministry's 'Ba'adi' campaign



As part of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE)'s "Ba'adi" campaign for promoting positive behaviour among students and parents, an event was held at the ministry premises on January 11 to mark the round-up of annual initiatives implemented by schools.

DPS-Modern Indian School (DPS-MIS) was one of three schools from Qatar invited to present its initiatives and best practices aligned with the objectives of the "Ba'adi" campaign.

The school's presentation reflected a structured, consistent, and inclusive approach to fostering ethical values, positive conduct, and student well-being through active student participation and meaningful parent engagement, thereby reinforcing the school's vision of moulding well-disciplined global citizens.



The initiatives presented by DPS-Modern Indian School were appreciated for their thoughtful planning, effective implementation, and alignment with the ministry's vision of building a positive, value-driven school culture.

The school leadership has appreciated the MoEHE officials for this recognition.

COMMUNITY/REGION/ARAB WORLD

DPS-MIS organises Grade 11 orientation





DPS-Modern Indian School (DPS-MIS) hosted the "Orientation Programme for Admission to Grade XI" on January 21, designed to guide students and parents through the pivotal process of stream selection.

The programme offered insights into subject options, curriculum structure, academic pathways, eligibility criteria, career avenues, CBSE procedures, skill-based subjects, and global higher education options, enabling students to make well-informed choices.

Addressing the gathering, principal Asna Nafees emphasised the need for informed decision-making, alignment of subject choices with aptitude and effort, and awareness of the academic rigour of the CBSE curriculum in Grades XI and XII.

The programme featured video messages from DPS-MIS alumni, sharing reflections on their academic journeys.

Winter clothing distributed to workers



The Center for Indian Community (CIC), Rayyan Zone, distributed winter jackets to low-income workers of various nationalities who are working on farms and in other jobs in remote desert areas. More than 200 deserving workers employed in desert regions such as Karana, Munkhar, and Jeryan received the jackets at their respective workplaces, with the support of For Our Brothers Team. The distribution drive was led by CIC Rayyan Zone volunteers Siddique Vengara, Tahir T K, Fahad E K, Rafeeq P C, and Subhan Babu.

QTS holds grand 'Pongal' celebration





Indian community organisation Qatar Tamizhar Sangam (QTS) successfully organised a grand Pongal celebration on January 16 at the DPS-Modern Indian School grounds and auditorium, witnessing the participation of over 2,000 people.

The vibrant festivities showcased the richness of Tamil culture and traditions, fostering a strong sense of unity and festive spirit among the Tamil community in Qatar. The celebrations included a variety of traditional sports and games, including uriadi, pallankuzhi, tug-of-war, gilli, bambaram, sack race, musical chairs, and several other indigenous games. A Kolam (Rangoli) competition exclusively for women added colour and cultural elegance to the event. Members of QTS set up food stalls. The morning session was graced by Vaibhav Tandale, Counsellor (Head of Chancery and Consular), Indian embassy; Manikandan, president of ICC; P N Baburajan, Outreach Qatar Advisory chairman; along with several community leaders and distinguished dignitaries. A highlight of the celebration was the traditional Pongal lunch.

The celebrations culminated in a grand cultural programme in the evening at the DPS-Modern Indian School auditorium, featuring captivating performances that showcased the artistic talents and cultural depth of the community. Prizes were given to the winners of various competitions.

Indian ambassador Vipul attended the evening programme as the chief guest. He commended the organisers for the cultural vibrancy of the event and appreciated the strong sense of unity and community bonding reflected in the celebrations. As part of its Silver Jubilee celebrations, QTS honoured founder members who completed 25 years of membership and past presidents. The event also witnessed the release of Tamil textbooks provided free of cost by the Government of Tamil Nadu to Tamil students in Qatar.

Expatriate forum holds family gathering



With a demand to ensure voting rights for Indian citizens residing abroad, the Qatar Incas Pathanamthitta District Committee submitted a memorandum to UDF Convener and Attingal Member of Parliament, Adv Adoor Prakash, during a family gathering organised in Qatar on January 17.

The memorandum appealed for Indian citizens living overseas be given the opportunity to vote in Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections by officially designating Indian embassies in their respective countries of residence as authorised polling centres.

The committee stated that such a measure would enable Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) to actively participate in the country's democratic process.

The memorandum also highlighted the importance of including overseas Indian citizens in the SIR (Special Intensive Revision) electoral rolls. Taking into account the practical difficulties expatriates face in completing the required procedures within the existing time limits, the committee called on the Parliament to extend the deadline for submitting Form 6A for expatriate Indians worldwide. The committee & office-bearers informed that Adoor Prakash, assured them that he would raise the issue in Parliament and intervene to ensure appropriate follow-up action.

Prakash also presented a memento on behalf of the district committee to Incas Qatar Pathanamthitta District Committee patron Kuruvilla George and his family, who are returning to India after completing 45 years of expatriate life.

President Ronsy Mathai, general secretary Jithin Jose Madappallil, central committee treasurer Jees Joseph, advisory board chairman Renju Sam Ninan, and treasurer Jetty George also addressed the gathering.

Record-breaking musician honoured



Pt Santosh Kulkarni, from India, recently set new records in the Indian Book of Records and the Asian Book of Records by playing continuously at a tabla for over four hours in Qatar. He has been a guru for over 500 students in Qatar for the last 14 years. His morning batch disciples recently felicitated him as a token of appreciation.

Unicef says brought children's art supplies into Gaza for first time in two years

AFP
Jerusalem

The UN children's agency (Unicef) said yesterday that it was able to bring recreational supplies including notebooks, crayons and art materials into the war-scarred Gaza Strip for the first time in more than two years.

Since the start of the war sparked by Hamas' October 2023 storming of Israel, humanitarian organisations have repeatedly denounced major difficulties bringing equipment and supplies into the Palestinian territory, blaming Israeli restrictions.

Israel rejects those accusations, saying it oversees the entry of goods into Gaza to ensure its security.

Unicef's announcement comes after the United States announced in mid-January the launch of phase two of President Donald Trump's Gaza peace plan, against the backdrop of a fragile ceasefire in effect since October 2025.

"Since Thursday 15 January, 5,168 recreational kits have entered the Strip, supporting more than 375,000 children - including 1,000 children with disabilities," Unicef said in a statement.

Cogat, the Israeli defence ministry body overseeing civilian affairs in the Palestinian territories, said it was not in a position to comment immediately.

Phase two of Trump's peace plan aims at paving the way for Gaza's reconstruction including the gradual restoration of public services, but does not include specifics about the school system which has been largely paralysed for more than two years.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos on Thursday, US officials presented their vision for a "New Gaza" that would turn the shattered Palestinian territory into a glitzy resort of skyscrapers by the sea, saying the transformation could emerge in three years.

The issue of education was not mentioned among priorities for "the next 100 days".

Unicef official Ted Chaiban, who visited Gaza this week, called for the authorisation to bring all other educational and early childhood development supplies into the territory.

Quoted in the Unicef statement, he said these would provide children "with the most basic materials they need to be able to learn".

Humanitarian officials have said they have not obtained authorisation from Israel to bring in school supplies.

AFP correspondents in the Gaza Strip say they have seen school supplies sold on the private market at exorbitant prices.

West Bank education centre 'could close in days due to Israeli seizure threat'

Reuters
Geneva

A training centre for hundreds of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank could be closed within days by Israeli authorities, jeopardising the education of students, the UN Palestinian refugee agency said yesterday.

The Kalandia Training Centre, which teaches 350 young male students from across the West Bank skills such as plumbing and vehicle maintenance, could be shut, as the land it sits on is at risk of expropriation by Israeli authorities, UNRWA said.

"If the centre were to be forcibly closed - and we do fear that this could happen within days - there is no educational alternative for these students. So you're depriving a large cohort of Palestine Refugees of economic opportunities," Jonathan Fowler, UNRWA's spokesperson, told reporters in Geneva speaking via video link from Amman, Jordan.

"The right to education would be under attack there... The international community needs to wake up," he added. A spokesperson for the Israeli government accused UNRWA of having links to the Hamas group, a charge the agency denies.

UNRWA has functioned for decades as the main international agency providing for the welfare of millions of Palestinian descendants of those who fled or were driven from homes during the war around Israel's founding.

Israel accuses UNRWA of bias, and Israel's parliament passed a law in October 2024 banning the agency from operating in the country and prohibiting officials from having contact with it.

Israel demolished structures inside the agency's East Jerusalem compound on Tuesday, a site it seized last year. The agency's chief Philippe Lazzarini said the demolition was the latest in a series of Israeli actions against UNRWA, including a raid on a medical clinic this month and a plan to cut power and water to UNRWA facilities in the coming weeks.

Palestinian support gathering in Netherlands



Professors and honorary doctors take part in a procession for Maastricht University's 50th anniversary as Palestinian flags flutter in background as part of demonstration in solidarity with Palestinians, in Maastricht, yesterday.

UN rights council decries crackdown in Iran, deepens scrutiny

AFP
Geneva

The UN Human Rights Council decided yesterday to deepen its scrutiny of Iran over its crackdown on protests that left thousands dead, including children, amid demands it end its "brutal repression".

The 47-member body voiced alarm about "the unprecedented scale of the violent crackdown on peaceful protests by security forces" in Iran.

With 25 votes in favour, seven opposed and the rest abstaining, it decided to extend and broaden the mandate of independent investigators gathering evidence towards ensuring accountability for rights violations in the country.

"A climate of fear and systematic impunity cannot be tolerated," Iceland's ambassador Einar Gunnarsson said as he presented the text to the council before the vote. "Victims and survivors deserve truth, justice and accountability."

Stressing the need for "accountability", the adopted text extends the mandate of a special rapporteur on Iran for another year. It also extended for two years the work of a separate fact-finding mission set up in November 2022, following Iran's crackdown on a wave of protests sparked by the death in custody of an Iranian Kurdish woman named Mahsa Amini.

The resolution empowers the investigative body to probe "allegations of recent and ongoing serious human rights violations and abuses, and crimes perpetrated in relation to the protests".

The vote came at the end of an urgent session of the rights council, requested by Britain, Germany, Iceland, Moldova and North Macedonia, but harshly criticised by Iran. -

In his opening remarks to the council, UN rights chief Volker Turk described how security forces used "live ammunition" against protesters, decrying that "thousands" had been killed, including children.

"I call on the Iranian authorities to reconsider, to pull back, and to end their brutal repression, including summary trials and disproportionate sentences," he said. "I call for the immediate release of all those arbitrarily detained by the Iranian authorities, and I call for a complete moratorium on the death penalty."

His comments were broadly echoed during the rights council special session.

"There must be accountability for the dire events of the past weeks, and justice must be done for all those who were killed, injured or detained only for exercising their human rights and for voicing legitimate demands," the European Union representative Michele Cervone d'Urso told the gathering.

Iranian ambassador Ali Bahreini however slammed yesterday's meeting as "posturing" and "a pressure tool against Iran". His colleague Somayeh Karimdoost described the resolution as "a thoroughly unbalanced biased and politically motivated text".

A number of countries also came to Iran's defence, accusing the council of being "politicised" and showing "double standards".

Firefighting operation



Helicopters fight a fire near Cape Town Film Studios in South Africa, yesterday.

Uganda detains 2,000 opposition supporters, kills 30 after disputed election: army chief

Reuters
Nairobi

Uganda's military chief said yesterday that authorities had detained 2,000 opposition supporters, killed 30, and were hunting for more following a disputed presidential election in which his father, Yoweri Museveni, won a seventh term.

The elder Museveni, 81, has led the East African nation for nearly four decades. He was declared to have resoundingly defeated Bobi Wine, leader of the opposition National Unity Platform (NUP), in the January 15 vote, held during an Internet blackout.

Wine, a former musician whose legal name is Robert Kyagulanyi, rejected the result, alleging widespread irregularities including ballot stuffing, and went into hiding.

In a series of overnight social media posts, military chief Muhoozi Kainerugaba, Museveni's son, gave the first details of the arrests and killings of NUP supporters, describing them as hooligans and terrorists.

"So far we have killed 30 NUP terrorists," Kainerugaba said on X, without explaining the circumstances of the deaths. "Most NUP terrorist leaders are in hiding. We shall get them all," he said in another post.

The government has accused Wine's supporters of violence during the election while the opposition says its members were attacked by security forces. Reuters has not been able to authenticate the allegations.

A police spokesperson declined to give any further comment on the situation.

Military spokesperson Chris Magezi could not be reached for comment.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed concern on Thursday over the arrests and violence involving opposition figures and supporters.

"He (the Secretary General) notes the importance of restraint by all actors and respect for the rule of law and Uganda's international human rights obligations," his spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

Wine has alleged that hundreds of his supporters have been illegally detained in recent months for their political affiliation, and accused authorities of intimidation. Uganda's opposition parties and rights activists say some of those arrested are held in unofficial detention centres where some are tortured.



File photo of Muhoozi Kainerugaba.

The crackdown intensified with the detention of Muwanga Kivumbi, a lawmaker and Wine's deputy in the NUP, on Thursday. Two other senior NUP figures have been reported missing for days.

Yesterday, Kivumbi appeared in court in Butambala to be charged with terrorism. He was remanded in custody until February 3, the rights group Agora Discourse said in a post on X. It did not say how Kivumbi had pleaded and the identity of his lawyer was unclear.

Wine, 43, has said he fled his residence after a raid by security personnel shortly after the election.

Museveni is widely believed to be grooming Kainerugaba, who has expressed presidential ambitions, as his successor.

Supporters gather as firebrand SA politician Malema awaits sentence

Reuters
East London

Thousands of supporters of South African opposition politician Julius Malema gathered outside a court yesterday as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party leader awaited sentencing for firing a rifle in the air at a rally in 2018.

A prison sentence exceeding 12 months, upheld through all appeals, would disqualify Malema from parliament — a blow to the EFF, which is popular among young South Africans critical of government efforts to address racial inequalities that have persisted since the end of white minority rule.

He faces a possible prison sentence of up to 15 years, but could be given a more lenient sentence, such as community service, if the court thinks there are mitigating factors.

The 44-year-old politician was convicted in October of charges including unlawful possession of a firearm and discharging a weapon in a public place. He had pleaded not guilty, arguing the gun was a toy.

It was unclear whether the sentencing would happen soon but supporters outside the East London Magistrate's Court held aloft placards reading "We stand with Julius Malema," many wearing the EFF's trademark red berets.



South African opposition politician Julius Malema, Economic Freedom Fighters leader, appears at court for a pre-sentencing hearing after being convicted of charges including unlawful possession of a firearm and discharging a weapon in public, in East London, South Africa, yesterday.

The far-left EFF — the fourth-biggest party in parliament, with 10% of seats — advocates nationalising mines and seizing land from white farmers.

Independent political analyst Melanie Verwoerd said the EFF would struggle without him, citing opinion polls that show people strongly associate the party with Malema, one of South Africa's most prominent politicians.

Malema featured in a tense White House meeting last year, when US President Donald Trump confronted South African President Cyril Ramaphosa with explosive false claims of mass killings of white South Africans.

Trump played Ramaphosa a video of Malema singing the liberation chant "Kill the Boer" and suggested he should be arrested.

Afrikaner lobby group Afriforum, which pushed for charges against Malema over the 2018 firearm incident, argues the chant is an explicit call to murder Afrikaners, descendants of predominantly Dutch settlers.

South Africa's courts have ruled against attempts to have it designated as hate speech, on the basis that it is a liberation struggle song, not a literal incitement to violence.



Economic Freedom Fighters supporters arrive ahead of South African opposition politician Julius Malema's appearance at court for a pre-sentencing hearing after being convicted of charges including unlawful possession of a firearm and discharging a weapon in public, in East London, yesterday.

Seven miners shot dead in Nigeria's restive Plateau, says official

Reuters
Abuja

Seven people were shot dead in an overnight attack at a mining site in Nigeria's central Plateau state, a local youth group and a state official said yesterday.

Plateau is one of several ethnically and religiously diverse hinterland states known as the Middle Belt, where communal conflict has claimed hundreds of lives in recent years.

The violence is often cast as ethno-religious conflict between nomadic herders and farmers.

The Berom Youth Moulders-Association (BYM) said the victims, aged 15-28, had been killed late Wednesday in what it described as part of a pattern of co-ordinated attacks on Berom communities. Reuters could not independently confirm waho was behind the assault.

Emmanuel Solomon, a senior aide to the Plateau governor, confirmed seven people had been killed in the attack.

Plateau police did not immediately comment, but a spokesperson for Operation Safe Haven, the military task force in the state, said troops had found seven bodies and spent cartridges at the scene, adding that the victims were miners who had remained at the site despite a ban on night-time mining.

US President Donald Trump has said Nigerian Christians are being persecuted and killed in record numbers, and launched an airstrike a month ago against alleged perpetrators.

The Nigerian government denies that there is systematic persecution of Christians but says it is tackling militants and other violent groups that have attacked civilians of different religious communities, often for ransom.

Ivory Coast's Ouattara makes brother deputy PM in reshuffle

AFP
Abidjan

Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara announced a government reshuffle yesterday in which most ministers retained their posts and his brother, the current defence minister, also became deputy premier.

The reshuffle follows a general election in December in which Ouattara's ruling RHDP party won nearly 80% of the seats in parliament — and three months after Ouattara was re-elected for a fourth term with nearly 90% of the vote. Prime Minister Robert Beugre Mambe remains in post.

Ouattara's brother, Tene Birahima Ouattara, keeps the influential defence portfolio and takes on the newly created position of deputy PM, said the president's office. Former premier Patrick Achi becomes speaker of parliament, while 84-year-old Vice-President Tiemoko Meyliet Kone keeps his post.

A notable departure is that of agriculture minister Kobenan Kouassi Adjoumani, who has been in office since 2011.

Europeans among 150 IS detainees transferred from Syria to Iraq

AFP
Raqa

Europeans were among 150 senior Islamic State group detainees transferred this week by the US military from Kurdish custody in Syria to Iraq, whose premier urged EU countries to repatriate their nationals.

They were among an estimated 7,000 militants due to be moved across the border to Iraq as the Kurdish-led force that has held them for years relinquishes swathes of territory to the advancing Syrian army.

In 2014, IS swept across Syria and Iraq, committing massacres and forcing women and girls into physical slavery, but backed by a US-led coalition, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) ultimately defeated the militants in Syria five years later. This month, the United States said the purpose of its alliance with the Kurds had largely expired, as Syria's new authorities pressed an offensive to take back territory long held by the SDF, which agreed to withdraw from swathes of territory in the north and east.

The EU said yesterday that alleged breakouts by detained IS foreign fighters in Syria were of "paramount concern" and was monitoring the transfer of prisoners to Iraq, "including foreign terrorist fighters".

An Iraqi security official said the 150 detainees, which the US military transferred to Iraq on Wednesday, were "all leaders of the Islamic State group, and some of the most notorious criminals," and included "Europeans, Asians, Arabs and Iraqis".

Another Iraqi security source said the group included "85 Iraqis and 65 others of various nationalities, including Europeans, Sudanese, Somalis, and people from the Caucasus region".



A member of the Syrian security forces stands guard outside Al-Aqtan prison, where some Islamic State detainees are held, in Raqqa, yesterday.

They "all participated in IS operations in Iraq," including the 2014 offensive that saw the militant group seize large areas of Iraq and neighbouring Syria "are all at the level of leaders", he said.

They are now held at a prison in Baghdad. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said that "non-Iraqi terrorists will be in Iraq temporarily".

In a telephone call yesterday with French President Emmanuel Macron, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed S al-Sudani urged European countries to take back and prosecute their nationals.

The SDF jailed thousands of suspected militants and detained tens of thousands of their relatives in camps as it pushed out IS. The militant group's onslaught came during the peak of Syria's civil war, which was sparked by longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad's crackdown on pro-democracy protests.

After toppling Assad just over a year ago, President Ahmed al-Sharaa is now seeking to consolidate the government's control over all of Syria.

Despite repeated Kurdish and US appeals, foreign governments have generally avoided repatriating their nationals, fearing security threats and political backlash.

US President Donald Trump told the New York Post on Tuesday that he had helped stop a prison break of European militants in Syria, a day after the army accused the SDF of releasing IS detainees from the Shadadi prison.The Kurds said they lost control of the facility after an attack by Damascus. Syrian authorities later said they had arrested "81 of the fugitives".

In north Syria's Raqa province, an AFP correspondent saw Kurdish forces who formerly controlled the Al-Aqtan prison housing IS detainees being bussed out yesterday under a deal with the government.

WORLD

‘Canada doesn’t live because of US’: Carney

AFP/Reuters
Montreal/Davos



Carney: Canada thrives because we are Canadian.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney hit back on Thursday at President Donald Trump’s claim at the World Economic Forum (WEF) that “Canada lives because of the United States”.

“Canada doesn’t live because of the United States. Canada thrives because we are Canadian,” Carney responded in a national address in Quebec City ahead of a new legislative session, even as he acknowledged the “remarkable partnership” between the two nations.

Trump appeared to shoot back later in the day on his Truth Social platform, withdrawing an invitation for Canada to join the “Board of Peace” – his self-styled billion-dollar body for resolving global conflict.

A government source told AFP on Monday that Canada will not pay to be on the board, although Carney had indicated he would accept an invitation to join.

The rhetorical back-and-forth between the two leaders underscores growing tensions between the allied nations.

Carney’s speech on Thursday followed his remarks at the forum of political and financial elites in Davos, Switzerland, where he won a standing ovation for his frank assessment of a “rupture” in the US-led, rules-based global order.

That speech on Tuesday, which made world headlines, was widely viewed as a reference to Trump’s disruptive influence on international affairs, although he was not mentioned by name.

Carney told Davos that middle powers like Canada who had prospered through the era of an “American hegemon” needed to realise that a new reality had set in, and that “compliance” would not shelter them from major power aggression.

Trump took umbrage, and taunted Carney during his own speech a day later.

“I watched your prime minister yesterday. He wasn’t so grateful,” the US president said on Wednesday. “Canada lives because of the United States. Remember that, Mark, the next time you make your statements.”

In Carney’s speech on Thursday, aimed at a domestic audience, he said that Canada should serve as a model in an era of “democratic decline”.

“Canada can’t solve all the world’s problems, but we can show that another way is possible, that the arc of history isn’t destined to be warped towards authoritarianism and exclusion,” the prime minister said.

While Carney has not been shy of criticising Trump since he took office nine months ago, he heads a country that remains heavily reliant on trade with the United States, the destination for more than three quarters of Canadian exports.

Key Canadian sectors like auto, aluminium and steel have been hit hard by Trump’s global sectoral tariffs but the impacts of the levies have been muted by the president’s broad adherence to an existing North American free trade agreement.

Negotiations on revising that deal are set for the start of this year and Trump has repeatedly insisted the United States doesn’t need access to any Canadian products – which would have sweeping consequences for its northern neighbour.

Trump has also repeatedly threatened to annex Canada, and this week posted an image on social media of a map with Canada – as well as Greenland and Venezuela – covered by the American flag.

On Thursday, Carney said that Canada was not under any “illusions” about the precarious state of global relations: “The world is more divided. Former alliances are being redefined and, in some cases, broken.”

Citing his government’s plans to ramp up defence spending, Carney said “we must defend our sovereignty (and) secure our borders”.

Canada, he further said, has a mandate “to be a beacon, an example to a world that’s at sea”.

Yesterday finance leaders pushed back on Carney’s narrative that a new order, driven by major power coercion, was taking shape.

“I’m not exactly on the same page as Mark,” European Central Bank president Christine Lagarde told the WEF in Davos, just days after Carney’s appearance. “I’m not sure that we should be talking about rupture.”

“I think we should be talking about alternatives. We should be identifying, much more so than we have probably in the past, the weaknesses, the sore points, the dependencies, the autonomy,” she said.

World Trade Organisation chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said that uncertainty was unlikely to remain as high as this month, when Trump threatened to take over Greenland from North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) ally Denmark.

However, the old order was also not going to return, uncertainty would linger and countries must invest in their own resilience, she said.

“I don’t think we’ll go back to where we were. But they will not be as bad and maybe we’ll have a slightly better, steady state for the future,” Okonjo-Iweala said. “If I was running a country, I’d be trying to strengthen myself and my region, and I’d be looking at my region and then building resilience.”

Kristalina Georgieva, the International Monetary Fund’s director, argued that change was natural and has been happening for years, and it was time to embrace this because shocks would keep happening.

“We are not in Kansas, anymore,” she said, referencing a line in the *Wizard of Oz*, meaning that the comforts of familiar surroundings were gone for good.

US officially withdraws from the WHO

The United States officially left the World Health Organisation (WHO) on Thursday after a year of warnings that doing so would hurt public health in the US and globally, saying that its decision reflected failures in the UN health agency’s management of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.

President Donald Trump gave notice that the US would quit the organisation on the first day of his presidency in 2025, via an executive order.

According to a press release from the US Health and State Departments, the US will only work with the WHO in a limited fashion in order to effectuate the withdrawal.

“We have no plans to participate as an observer, and we have no plans of rejoining,” a senior government health official said.

The US said it plans to work directly with other countries – rather than through an international organisation – on disease surveillance and other public health priorities.

Under US law, it was supposed to give one-year notice and pay all outstanding fees – around $260mn – before departing.

However, a US State Department official disputed that the statute contains a condition that any payment needs to be made before withdrawal.

“The American people have paid more than enough,” a State Department spokesperson said in an e-mail earlier on Thursday.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) said in a document released on Thursday that the government had ended its funding contributions to the agency.

Trump had exercised his authority to pause the future transfer of any US government resources to the WHO because the organisation had cost the US trillions of dollars, the HHS spokesperson said.

The US flag had been removed from outside the WHO headquarters in Geneva on Thursday, according to witnesses.

In recent weeks, the US has moved to exit a number of other United Nations organisations, and some fear that Trump’s recently launched Board of Peace could undermine the UN as a whole.

Several WHO critics have also proposed setting up a new agency to replace the organisation, although a proposal document reviewed by the Trump administration last year instead suggested the US push for reforms and American leadership at the WHO.

Over the last year, many global health experts have urged a rethink, including most recently WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The WHO also said the US has not yet paid the fees it owes for 2024 and 2025.

Member states are set to discuss the US departure and how it will be handled at the WHO’s executive board in February, a WHO spokesperson said.

“This is a clear violation of US law,” said Lawrence Gostin, founding director of the O’Neill Institute for Global Health Law at Georgetown University in Washington, a close observer of the WHO. “But Trump is highly likely to get away with it.”

Bill Gates – chair of the Gates Foundation, a major funder of global health initiatives and some of the WHO’s work – told Reuters at Davos that he did not expect the US to reconsider in the short term.

Gates said he would still advocate for the US to rejoin: “The world needs the World Health Organisation.” – ***Reuters***

Trump attributes new bruise on his hand to aspirin consumption



These pictures taken on Thursday show Trump’s bruised hand and him looking at it, as he attended a charter announcement for his Board of Peace initiative alongside the 56th annual World Economic Forum, in Davos. ***– Reuters***

Photographs of fresh bruising on US President Donald Trump’s hand raised eyebrows on Thursday, but the 79-year-old US president dismissed renewed speculation over his health, saying he had simply hit a table.

Trump has been seen with frequent bruising on his right hand since returning to the White House last year, often concealing it with bandages and makeup.

He has blamed the noticeable bruise on his left hand to his high intake of aspirin.

The bruise appeared after he bumped a table at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One as he returned to the US.

His aspirin dosage makes him bruise easily, Trump said.

“They say take aspirin if you like your heart, but don’t take aspirin if you don’t want to have a little bruising. I take the big aspirin,” Trump said. “The doctor said, ‘You don’t have to take that, sir. You’re very healthy.’ I said, ‘I’m not taking any chances?”

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a statement that Trump hit his hand on the corner of the signing table during his Board of Peace announcement.

Four doctors, two surgeons and two internists, who spoke to Reuters agreed that it was possible that aspirin contributed to the bruising.

Trump said in a *Wall Street Journal* interview this month that he takes a larger daily dose of aspirin than his doctors recommend because he wants “nice, thin blood pouring through my heart”.

Last summer, Leavitt told reporters the hand bruising was from shaking so many hands.

Trump, 79, is the second-oldest person to ever hold the presidency, following his Democratic predecessor Joe Biden, who dropped his 2024 re-election bid amid questions about his fitness for the job and left office a year ago at 82.

Speculation has swirled about Trump’s fitness given his age – the hand bruising, swelling in his legs, and several apparent moments of dozing off during public events.

The administration disclosed last summer that Trump’s leg swelling had been diagnosed as a symptom of chronic venous insufficiency – a common condition in which faulty vein valves allow blood to pool, causing swelling, cramping and skin changes.

It can be managed with medication or targeted procedures.

An unannounced hospital visit last year added to suspicions of secrecy around his health.

Weeks afterward, Trump’s doctor said MRI imaging had shown the president to be in “excellent” cardiovascular health. – ***AFP/Reuters***

Former Canadian Olympian turned drug lord arrested, says FBI chief

Reuters/AFP
Los Angeles


This picture taken in 2002 shows Ryan Wedding of Canada during his practice run for the men’s parallel giant slalom at the Salt Lake 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Park City. ***– Reuters***

Ryan Wedding, a Canadian former Olympic snowboarder suspected of becoming a cocaine smuggling kingpin, has been arrested and is being brought to the US to face charges, US officials said yesterday.

US Attorney-General Pam Bondi and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Kash Patel confirmed the arrest in separate posts on X.

Wedding, 44, has been on the FBI’s “Ten Most Wanted Fugitives” list, and the US State Department recently offered a $15mn reward for information leading to his capture.

He allegedly ran a transnational drug trafficking network responsible for transporting hundreds of kilogrammes of cocaine from Colombia through Mexico to the US and Canada.

Patel, in a post on X, said that Wedding – whose aliases include “El Jefe”, “Giant” and “Public Enemy” – was taken into custody in Mexico on Thursday night and is being transported to the United States “to face justice”.

“Wedding is believed to have been hiding in Mexico for over a decade – and has been wanted on charges for cocaine trafficking and murder since 2024,” Patel said.

“This is a huge day for a safer North America, and the world,” he added.

US and Canadian officials described Wedding in November as a “narco-trafficker” on par with notorious drug lords like Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman and Pablo Escobar.

Bondi said at that time that Wedding worked closely with Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel controlling an operation responsible for generating more than $1bn a year in illegal drug proceeds.

Wedding, who competed for Canada at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah, has been charged with overseeing a criminal enterprise and various drug trafficking charges, according to the US Department of Justice.

Wedding was also accused of ordering several drug-related murders, including that of a US federal witness in Colombia in January last year before he could testify against him, the Justice Department previously said.

Seven people allegedly connected to Wedding’s cocaine smuggling operation were arrested in Canada in November, including his lawyer, and the United States is seeking their extradition.

Young US chess grandmaster ‘died after cardiac issue’

American chess grandmaster Daniel Naroditsky died last year after suffering an abnormal heartbeat and had multiple drugs in his system at the time, according to a toxicology report that ruled his death an accident.

Naroditsky, 29, a chess star and streamer credited with helping expand the game’s audience, was found dead at his home in Charlotte, North Carolina in October.

Police said at the time that his death was being investigated as a potential overdose or suicide.

The report from the North Carolina medical examiner’s office says Naroditsky died from “probable cardiac arrhythmia” caused by an inflammatory disease impacting the organs.

He had methamphetamine, amphetamine and the plant-based supplement kratom in his system, according to the report, which lists the drugs as contributing factors in his death.

The report says the drug concentrations in Naroditsky’s system were at “levels considered non-toxic/non-lethal”.

Friends reported that Naroditsky “appeared to exhibit concerning altered mental status while streaming online” days before his death, according to the report.

In the weeks before, Naroditsky had been weighed down by cheating allegations made by ex-world champion Vladimir Kramnik.

Naroditsky denied the allegations, which were not proven. – ***AFP***

TikTok establishes joint venture to end US ban threat

TikTok has announced that it has established a majority American-owned joint venture to operate its US business, allowing the company to avoid a ban over its Chinese ownership.

The video-sharing app is a global digital entertainment powerhouse but its mass appeal and links to China have raised concerns over privacy and national security.

The TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC will serve more than 200mn users and 7.5mn businesses while implementing strict safeguards for data protection and content moderation, the company said.

The new structure responds to a law passed under US President Donald Trump’s predecessor Joe Biden that forced Chinese-owned ByteDance to sell TikTok’s US operations or face a ban in its biggest market.

Trump welcomed and claimed credit for the deal, but also thanked Chinese President Xi Jinping for approving it.

“I am so happy to have helped in saving TikTok!” Trump said in a post on Truth Social late on Thursday. “It will now be owned by a group of Great American Patriots and Investors, the Biggest in the World, and will be an important Voice.”

“I would also like to thank President Xi, of China, for working with us and, ultimately, approving the Deal,” he added.

ByteDance retains a 19.9% stake in the joint venture – keeping its ownership below the 20% threshold stipulated by the law.

Three investors – Silver Lake, Oracle and Abu Dhabi-based artificial intelligence (AI) investment fund MGX – each hold 15% stakes.

Oracle’s executive chairman Larry Ellison is a longtime Trump ally.

Other investors include Dell Family Office, affiliates of Susquehanna International Group and General Atlantic.

The joint venture will retain decision-making authority over trust and safety policies and content moderation for US users.

However, TikTok’s global entities will manage international product integration and commercial activities including e-commerce and advertising.

Under the arrangement, US user data will be stored in Oracle’s secure cloud environment, with cybersecurity audited by third-party experts and adhering to federal standards, TikTok said.

Jasmine Enberg, co-chief executive of Scalable, a media company focused on the creator economy, said that TikTok users would be relieved by the deal but that there were “still big questions about how this will all play out”.

“Behind the scenes, TikTok is likely working hard to assure advertisers it will remain business as normal,” she told AFP. “While the need for users to download a new app seems unlikely, brand partners will want to know that their TikTok strategies won’t be disrupted.”

The joint venture will be governed by a seven-member, majority-American board including TikTok chief executive Shou Chew and executives from investment firms.

TikTok executive Adam Presser was appointed chief executive of the new entity, with Will Farrell serving as chief security officer.

The 2024 law came as US policymakers, including Trump in his first presidency, warned that China could use TikTok to mine Americans’ data or exert influence through its algorithm.

However, Trump, crediting the app for his appeal with young voters, delayed enforcement through successive executive orders, most recently extending the deadline to January 22.

The deal largely confirms an outline announced to staff by Chew last month. – ***AFP***

UN rights chief slams 'routine abuse' of migrants in US

The United Nations rights chief has voiced astonishment at the "now-routine abuse" of migrants by US authorities, urging Washington to end practices "tearing apart families".

Volker Turk called on the United States to ensure migration policies and enforcement practices respect human dignity and due process and slammed the "dehumanising portrayal and harmful treatment of migrants and refugees".

"I am astounded by the now-routine abuse and denigration of migrants and refugees," he said in a statement. "Where is the concern for their dignity, and our common humanity?"

Thousands of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have been deployed to Democratic-led Minneapolis, as the Republican administration of President Donald Trump presses its campaign to deport what it says are millions of illegal immigrants across the country.

On Thursday, Democrats and local officials in Minneapolis expressed outrage at the detention of a five-year-old boy in the massive immigration crackdown.

Minneapolis has been rocked by tense protests since federal agents shot and killed US citizen Renee Good there on January 7, even as Trump and his officials quickly defended the agent's actions as legitimate self-defence.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights deplored the use of large-scale enforcement operations by US immigration and other agents who he said were repeatedly using apparently unnecessary or disproportionate force.

"Under international law, the intentional use of lethal force is only permissible as a measure of last resort against an individual representing an imminent threat to life," Turk stressed.

He warned that numerous US migration policies were resulting in arbitrary and unlawful arrests and detentions, as well as flawed removal decisions.

"Individuals are being surveilled and detained, sometimes violently, including at hospitals, churches, mosques, courthouses, markets, schools, and even within their own homes, often solely on mere suspicion of being undocumented migrants," Turk said. "Those who dare to speak up or protest peacefully against heavy-handed immigration raids are vilified and threatened by officials, and on occasion subjected to arbitrary violence themselves."

He said many arrests, detentions, and expulsions occur without efforts to assess and maintain family unity, exposing especially children to risks of severe and long-term harm.

"I call on the administration to end practices that are tearing apart families," he said.

Turk acknowledged that "states have the authority to establish their national migration policies", but "this needs to be carried out in full accordance with the law".

He also expressed deep concern about the dehumanising narratives frequently used to describe migrants and refugees, especially in the United States that had been shaped so "profoundly by the contributions of migrants".

"Demonising migrants and refugees collectively as criminals, threats, or burdens on society – based on their origin, nationality or migration status – is inhuman, wrong, and it goes against the very fabric and foundations of the nation."

Turk urged "leaders at all levels in the US to halt the use of scapegoating tactics that seek to distract and divide, and which increase the exposure of migrants and refugees to xenophobic hostility and abuse".

The UN rights chief also called for an "independent and transparent investigation" into deaths in ICE custody.

At least 30 such deaths were reported last year, and a further six have been reported so far this year, he pointed out. – ***AFP***

Peru leader claims win as extortion cases drop

Peru has announced a significant drop in extortion cases in the last months of 2025, after interim president Jose Jeri took over and vowed to wage "war" on gangs.

Over the past two years, the South American country has battled an unprecedented extortion wave, which has seen entire neighbourhoods held to ransom by criminal gangs.

Dozens of bus drivers, musicians and other professionals have been killed for refusing to pay protection money.

The violence sparked massive protests last year and led to the impeachment of former president Dina Boluarte in October.

Boluarte was replaced by former parliament speaker Jeri, who has made crime the focus of a short interim presidency ending in July.

Jeri is constitutionally barred from running in the April election to pick Boluarte's successor.

He has drawn comparisons to El Salvador's gang-busting President Nayib Bukele, who has been criticised by rights groups over alleged abuses but drawn broad praise at home for making his country safer.

In the fourth quarter of 2025, reported cases of extortion in Peru fell by 21% compared to the same period in 2024, dropping from 6,800 cases to 5,400, the authorities announced at an event at the presidential palace presided by Jeri.

The results from the first weeks of 2026 showed an even more significant fall.

The full-year figures for 2025 failed to reflect the decline, however, with total reported extortion cases increasing by 19% to 26,585 cases.

Jeri, a 39-year-old lawyer, imposed a state of emergency and deployed the military to the streets of Lima and the neighbouring port city of Callao, the areas most affected by criminal gangs.

He also personally led police anti-gang raids and supervised officers transporting prisoners in shackles.

"What the government said about winning the war, today we are showing that it will be so," he said on Thursday. – ***AFP***

Police arrest fourth suspect in deadly Chile wildfires

Chilean authorities have announced the arrest of a fourth person suspected of causing deadly wildfires that have ravaged the south of the country.

The massive fires in recent days have killed at least 21 people and affected some 20,000 others.

Firefighters were still battling 19 fires on Thursday in the regions of Araucania, Nuble and Biobio.

Although no charges have been filed against the four suspects, regional prosecutor Marcela Cartagena alleged the latest person arrested was suspected of "causing what are, as of today, 20 deaths" in Biobio.

The other fatality in the wildfires was in the neighbouring Nuble region.

Earlier, a man was arrested as he was lighting a fire in a forested area of Punta de Parra, a town of about 3,000 residents surrounded by eucalyptus forests, police said.

Two other people were arrested earlier in the week: one in Biobio on Monday, who was released shortly thereafter, and the other in Araucania on Wednesday.

In February 2024, several fires broke out simultaneously near the city of Vina del Mar, northwest of Santiago, resulting in 138 deaths.

Investigations later found some of those blazes had also been deliberately started. – ***AFP***

Minnesotans begin economic strike against surge in immigration agents

Reuters/AFP
Minneapolis

Scores of businesses across Minnesota were closing up for the day yesterday in what religious leaders and labour unions describe as a general strike to protest US President Donald Trump's deployment of thousands of immigration enforcement officers on the streets of Minneapolis.

"ICE OUT!" was the message of flyers posted on businesses' doors, referring to the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency yesterday, a frigid day in snowy Minneapolis with temperatures well below freezing. "NO WORK. NO SCHOOL. NO SHOPPING."

Across the state, bars, restaurants, museums, shops and other local businesses were shuttering for the day.

Many workers in Minneapolis planned to join a march in the afternoon, intended by organisers to be the largest display of opposition yet to the federal government's surge, which Mayor Jacob Frey and other Democrats have likened to an invasion.

Miguel Hernandez, a community organiser who closed his business, Lito's Bakery in Minneapolis for the day, put on four layers, wool socks and a parka before heading out to protest.

"If this were any other time, no one would've gone out," he said, bracing for the weather. "For us, it's a message of solidarity with our community, that we see the pain and misery that's going on in the streets, and it's a message to our politicians that they have to do more than grandstand on the news."

No school districts were shutting down, but schools in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St Paul offered remote-learning options, the *Minnesota Star Tribune* reported.

Trump, a Republican, launched the Minnesota crackdown in response to fraud allegations against some members of the state's large community of people of Somali origin.

He has called Somali immigrants "garbage" and said they are to be removed from the country as part of his effort to expel more immigrants, including some admitted into the country to seek asylum and other lawful residents, than any of his predecessors.

Minnesota residents have responded with anger, making noise in the streets day and night with whistles and musical instruments.

Some agents and protesters have yelled obscenities at each other, and agents have deployed tear gas and flash-bang grenades to scatter crowds.

The Trump administration says some protesters have harassed agents and obstructed their work.

Senior Trump administration officials have gone to Minneapolis to defend the ICE, with Vice-President J D Vance telling reporters during his Thursday visit that the administration is "doing everything we can to lower the temperature".

The numerous Fortune 500 companies that call Minnesota home – mostly based in the Minneapolis area – have refrained from public statements about the immigration raids.

Meanwhile, US federal officials struggled to quell growing outrage over the detention of a five-year-old boy in the immigration crackdown.

The superintendent of Columbia Heights Public Schools, where Liam Conejo Ramos was a pre-school student, said the child and his Ecuadoran father, Adrian Conejo Arias – both asylum-seekers – were taken from their driveway as they arrived home.



This picture shows ICE agents next to a boy, who a witness identified as Liam Conejo Ramos, the five-year-old that school officials said was detained in Minneapolis. – ***Reuters***



Right: A woman sits inside a vehicle surrounded by federal agents in Minneapolis. – ***Reuters***



A sticker is partially torn off a storefront window of a closed business as civic leaders and labour unions launch a day of action and a general strike to oppose the US government's surge in immigration enforcement agents in Minneapolis. – ***Reuters***

Ramos was then used as "bait" by officers to knock on the door of his home to draw out those inside, Zena Stenvik added.

In defiant comments on Thursday, Vice-President Vance confirmed Ramos was among those detained, but argued that agents were protecting him after his father "ran" from officers.

"What are they supposed to do? Are they supposed to let a five-year-old child freeze to death?" he said.

Democratic congressman Joaquin Castro, whose constituency includes a San Antonio ICE detention centre to which it was thought Ramos was taken, rejected Vance's explanation.

"My staff and I have been trying to figure out his whereabouts, make sure he's safe, and also to demand his release by ICE," he wrote on X.

ICE commander Marcos Charles said yesterday that "my officers did everything they could to reunite him with his family" and alleged that Ramos' family refused to open the door to him after his father left him and ran.

Ramos and his father were at a "family residential centre pending their immigration proceedings", he added after alleging that they entered the United States illegally and were "deportable".

Former US vice-president Kamala Harris has said that she is "outraged" by Ramos's detention and called him "just a baby".

Ramos is one of at least four children detained in the same Minneapolis school district this month, local administrators said.

Minneapolis has been rocked by increasingly tense protests since federal agents shot and killed US citizen Renee Good on January 7.

Three activists were charged with disrupting a Sunday church service with a protest accusing a pastor of working for the ICE.

The officer who fired the shots that killed Good, Jonathan Ross, has neither been suspended nor charged.

Long-awaited first snowfall brings relief to water-scarce Kabul



A man rides a bicycle along a road during snowfall in the green zone area of Kabul. – ***AFP***

By Aysha Safi
AFP

Children sliding around on plastic bags, boys engaging in lively snowball fights, and families taking selfies on white-covered streets: residents of Kabul rejoiced yesterday at the long-awaited first snowfall of the winter.

Snow usually comes to the Afghan capital in December, but its 6mn inhabitants are increasingly feeling the effects of climate change, which has brought rising temperatures and water shortages that have disrupted daily life.

"In recent years, snow in Kabul has felt like nothing less than a blessing," 22-year-old Rukhsar Adel told AFP.

She and her family eagerly checked the weather forecast the night before and felt "happy and relieved" when white flakes started to fall on Thursday morning.

Kabul may run out of ground water by as early as 2030 due to climate change and rapid urbanisation, studies show.

A United Nations projection also indicates that nearly half of Kabul's boreholes – the primary source of drinking water for residents – are already dry.

"More than half of the winter had already passed without snowfall. People became worried and even prayed for snow," Adel said.

"We all need water, and there is a lack of water in Kabul," said 32-year-old Hekmatullah Ahady, adding that a 100m (330') well at his house dried up last year.

He said he hoped the snow would help to replenish water levels and make it easier for his family to get water.

Plus, he said, seeing the city blanketed in white was "so nice", even though his commute to work took longer.

Severe storms and heavy rains have killed at least 16 people, including children, across Afghanistan in the last three days, officials have said, though there have been no reported casualties in Kabul.

Heavy snow both in the provinces and the capital has caused traffic accidents, with rescue teams mobilised all night to give assistance, according to the National Disaster Management Authority.

In a change from Kabul's traffic-clogged streets, people enjoyed a rare dose of quiet as some drivers left their cars unused.

Boys took full advantage, hurling snowballs at each other along roadsides and in alleys, while small crowds gathered at street stalls to buy warm soup or coffee.

Bid to rein in Trump's Venezuela war powers fails in US House

Reuters
Washington

US House of Representatives Republicans narrowly defeated a resolution on Thursday that would have barred President Donald Trump from further military action in Venezuela without the authorisation of Congress, days after a similar measure failed in the Senate.

The House voted 215 to 215, a tie that defeated the resolution which "directs the president to remove United States Armed Forces from Venezuela, unless explicitly authorised by a declaration of war or specific statutory authorisation for use of military force".

The vote was largely along party lines in the narrowly divided chamber, where Trump's Republicans have a 218 to 213 majority.

Every Republican except Don Bacon of Nebraska and Thomas Massie of Kentucky voted against the resolution.

Every Democrat voted in favour.

House leaders held the vote open until Republican Representative Wesley Hunt of Texas could return to the Capitol building to cast the decisive no vote.

California Republican Tom McClintock did not vote.

The close vote reflected concern in Congress, including from a handful of Republicans, over Trump's foreign policy.

There is growing support for the argument that Congress, not the president, should have the power to send US troops to war, as spelled out in the US Constitution.

Opponents of the resolution had argued that it was unnecessary because the US does not currently have troops on the ground in Venezuela.

"We do not have anybody there in Venezuela fighting," Republican Representative Brian Mast of Florida said in the debate before the vote.

Republicans also accused Democrats of introducing the legislation only as an attack on Trump.

"It's about spite," Mast, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said. "You will condemn him no matter what he does."

Backers disagreed, saying that they wanted to keep Trump from pulling the US into another "forever war" after decades fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"The American people want us to lower their cost of living, not enable war," said Representative Gregory Meeks of New York, the top Democrat on the foreign affairs panel.

US forces swept into Caracas on January 3 and captured Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro.

A large flotilla of US ships is blockading Venezuela, and has spent months firing on boats allegedly carrying drugs in the southern Caribbean and Pacific.

Some Democrats also denounced Trump for leaving most of Maduro's government in place in Caracas and failing to present a plan for Venezuela after his removal.

"The machinery of repression was left in place and the Democratic hopes of Venezuelans are being left behind," said Democrat Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida.

Recent votes on war powers have been very close, with the measure failing in the Senate last week only because Vice-President J D Vance came to the Capitol to break a tie.

"If the president is contemplating further military action, then he has a moral and constitutional obligation to come here and get our approval," said Representative Jim McGovern of Massachusetts, a lead sponsor of the House resolution.

The Trump administration argues that Maduro's capture was a very limited judicial operation to bring him to trial in the US on drug charges, not a military operation.

WORLD

CONTROVERSY

China rejects UN experts' Xinjiang labour concerns

China yesterday defended its human rights record after UN experts said alleged forced labour involving Uyghurs and Tibetans in the Xinjiang region might amount to "enslavement". The experts said there was pattern of alleged forced labour affecting Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz minority groups in Xinjiang and across multiple provinces. Such forced labour is enabled through a poverty alleviation programme which coerces Uyghurs and members of other minority groups into jobs in Xinjiang and other regions, they said. The experts' concerns are "completely fabricated" and groundless, a spokesperson for China's foreign ministry, said. — **AFP**

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Taiwan offers talks with Ukraine on weapons sanctions-busting

Taiwan President Lai Ching-te yesterday offered talks with Ukraine to crack down on sanctions-busting after Ukrainian President Zelensky name-checked the island as a source of illicit missile components. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Taiwan has successively updated export controls to stop high-tech goods being used for military purposes. Zelensky said Russia would not be able to produce missiles without "critical components sourced from China, Europe, the US, and Taiwan". Lai said Taiwan has long worked with global partners to "staunchly support Ukraine through humanitarian aid and co-ordinated sanctions". — **AFP**

DECISION

Malaysia lifts suspension on Musk's Grok chatbot

Malaysia yesterday said it had restored access to Elon Musk's Grok chatbot after the AI tool was blocked nearly two weeks ago over concerns about AI-generated sexualised deepfakes. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) suspended the service on X and xAI on January 11 and appointed solicitors to commence "legal proceedings", without specifying what that would entail. But it said in a statement yesterday: "The temporary access restriction on the use of the Grok application on the X platform has been lifted." — **Reuters**

TRAGEDY

Remaining bodies found of 10 killed in Indonesia plane crash

Rescuers have found the bodies of all 10 people who were on board a chartered plane that crashed into a mountain in Indonesia at the weekend. The turboprop plane, chartered by the fisheries ministry, was carrying seven crew and three civil servants, when it lost contact with air traffic control last Saturday. The aircraft crashed into Mount Bulusaraung on the island of Sulawesi. Eight bodies were recovered earlier this week as rescuers combed the mountain's steep slopes. The bodies of the two remaining missing people were found yesterday and would be recovered, said local rescue official Andi Sultan. — **AFP**

Xi assures Brazil's Lula of China support in 'turbulent' times

Reuters
Beijing/Sao Paulo

Chinese leader Xi Jinping assured his Brazilian counterpart yesterday that China would stand by Latin America's biggest economy and the Global South, and called for both nations to maintain the role of the United Nations, state news agency Xinhua said.

Xi's comments in a telephone call with President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva followed the latter's criticism of the US attack on Venezuela in an opinion piece in the *New York Times* this week.

Xi said China and Brazil should safeguard the shared interests of the Global South and jointly maintain the role of the United Nations in the "current turbulent international situation", the agency said.

Lula's office confirmed the 45-minute call, saying that both leaders "reiterated their commitment to strengthening the United Nations as a path to safeguarding peace and stability in the world".

The US three weeks ago seized Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro to be prosecuted on narcotics charges. Since then, US President Donald Trump has proposed a Board of Peace that some fear may be intended to rival the UN.

The US action in Venezuela stoked worries among Latin American countries about the risk of similar interventions by force on their turf, and prompted criticism from the United Nations.

UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres told Britain's BBC that the US was putting the founding principles of the United Nations, including the equality of member states, at risk.

In his January 18 piece, Lula wrote that the future of Venezuela and any other country must remain in the hands of its people.

"In more than 200 years of independent history, this is the first time that South America has come under direct military attack by the US, though American forces previously intervened in the region," he said.

"It is crucial that the leaders of the major powers understand that a world of permanent hostility is not viable. However strong those powers may be, they cannot rely simply on fear and coercion."

Trump's threat to use force to acquire Greenland, an autonomous Danish territory, has also opened a rift with security allies across the Atlantic.

US bombings and the capture of Maduro challenge China's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean, where Xi has promised new credit lines and infrastructure investment.

"China is willing to remain a good friend and partner to Latin American and Caribbean countries," Xi told Lula.

He said a 2024 strategic partnership to align China's Belt and Road Initiative with Brazil's plans on farming, infrastructure and the energy transition exemplifies solidarity and co-operation among Global South countries.



Chinese Coast Guard personnel assisting a rescued Filipino crew member of a capsized cargo ship near the contested Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

China, Philippines go to aid of sinking ship near disputed shoal

Reuters
Beijing

China and the Philippines yesterday said they launched rescue operations after receiving reports of a sinking cargo ship near the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea that was carrying 21 Philippine crew members.

Scarborough Shoal is one of Asia's most contested maritime features and a frequent flashpoint in disputes, particularly between China and the Philippines, over sovereignty and fishing rights. The Chinese military said 17 crew members were rescued and two of them later died, after a report around 1.30am yesterday (1730 that a foreign cargo vessel had capsized in waters near the shoal. It dispatched aircraft to conduct searches and the Chinese Coast Guard sent two vessels for rescue efforts.

One person was receiving emergency medical treatment, it said, adding that China's maritime authorities were organising additional rescue forces to head to the area.

The Philippine Coast Guard said it deployed two vessels and two aircraft to rescue the Philippine crew from a Singaporean-flagged cargo vessel loaded with iron ore that was en route to the southern Chinese city of Yangjiang.

"The PCG Command Center acquired information from the Hong Kong Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre that 10 of the 21 Filipino crew members were rescued by a passing China Coast Guard vessel," it said.

The Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore confirmed that the bulk carrier, "Devon Bay", had sunk in the South China Sea while en route to Yangjiang.

"As the vessel's flag state, MPA is in contact with the ship owner and relevant search and rescue authorities, and is providing support as required," it said, adding that it will investigate the incident. Underlining the Scarborough Shoal's disputed status, China's military said on Tuesday it had organised naval and air force units to repel a Philippine government aircraft that it accused of "illegally intruding" into airspace over the atoll.

Both China and the Philippines claim the Scarborough Shoal, but sovereignty remains unresolved. China took control in 2012 after a standoff and has since stationed its coast guard and fishing vessels there.

Japan PM Takaichi dissolves parliament for snap election

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi dissolved parliament yesterday ahead of a snap election on February 8, counting on her cabinet's high poll numbers to steer her otherwise unpopular ruling party to victory.

The country's first woman premier announced her intentions on Monday, seeking public backing for measures to shield households from rising living costs and increase spending on defence.

The speaker of parliament yesterday read out a letter, officially dissolving the lower house as lawmakers shouted the traditional rallying cry of "banzai".

The ruling coalition of Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Japan Innovation Party (JIP) has only a slim majority in the powerful lower chamber.

But Takaichi is hoping widespread support for her cabinet will help deliver her a stronger mandate even though the LDP itself is battling low approval ratings and a string of scandals. - **Reuter**s

Bangladesh poll campaign



Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chairman Tarique Rahman (third left) waves to supporters during a rally as he begins campaigning ahead of the upcoming national election, in Sylhet. Bangladesh began official campaigning on January 22 for hugely anticipated general elections next month, the first since the 2024 uprising ended the autocratic rule of Sheikh Hasina.

To Lam wins new term as Vietnam's leader

Reuters
Hanoi

Vietnam's top leader To Lam was unanimously reappointed yesterday as head of the ruling Communist Party for the next five years by its central committee, as he pledged reforms to turbocharge growth in the export-reliant nation.

In a largely expected decision, 68-year-old Lam was re-elected to the most powerful job in the one-party state by all 180 members of a newly-formed committee at the end of a congress held every five years to set key targets and make leadership decisions, the party said.

Viewed as a bold reformist, Lam told the congress he wants more reforms - including within the party which has ruled Vietnam unopposed for decades - to foster a system based on "integrity, talent, courage, and competence".

Earlier this week, addressing congress delegates in a red-carpeted conference hall under a towering statue of party founder Ho Chi Minh, Lam promised annual growth above 10% through the decade, a goal adopted in a party resolution yesterday.

Echoing other investors and diplomats, Craig Martin, chairman of Dynam Capital, which manages a Vietnam-based fund, called the target "quite ambitious", but praised Lam's business-friendly approach.

The World Bank forecasts an average 6.5% yearly expansion this year and next. Vietnam's benchmark stock market index rose nearly 40% last year and is up 5.5% so far this year, though it fell 0.6% yesterday.

Rescuers dig for six missing in New Zealand landslide

AFP
Mount Maunganui, New Zealand

Rescuers dug into deep mud searching for at least six missing people yesterday after a landslide from an extinct volcano crashed into a popular campsite in northern New Zealand.

Police said a 15-year-old was the youngest person unaccounted for after a chunk of Mount Maunganui ploughed into holidaymakers on Thursday, smashing a shower block, camper vans and caravans.

Battered vehicles were carted away after being pulled out of the mud. Voices could be heard calling for help from beneath the rubble just after the mudslide, which struck the tourist spot following heavy rain that lashed a large swathe of New Zealand's North Island.

But nothing has been heard since then, witnesses and emergency officials say.

A team of search and rescue personnel, contractors with mechanical excavators, and police sniffer dogs worked through the night and into the following day in search of possible survivors.

At one point in the search, diggers called a halt to their work. A police photographer was called in, and a hearse was later seen leaving the scene.

Emergency services officials declined to discuss the recovery of any bodies, saying it would be insensitive to families.

About two dozen family members watched the excavations from across the road.

"We have six people that we know aren't accounted for," assistant police commissioner Tim Anderson told reporters at the scene.

Officers were trying to confirm the whereabouts of three other campers believed to have left the campsite, he said.

Asked if there were any signs of life, Anderson said: "Not as of today but we live in hope."

New Zealand authorities are facing questions over why people were not evacuated following reports of a landslip at the campsite earlier in the day.

"We've heard there was possibly a small slip where people did move away from from the site," local Tauranga mayor Mahe Drysdale said. Those questions will be answered."

A man hiking in the area an hour before the landslide, Colin McGonagle, said he had noticed water seeping out of the mountainside.

"You could see the water, it was like a wall of mud trying to break through," he told reporters.



An aerial image of a property in Te Araroa affected by a storm that damaged parts of the North Island, New Zealand.

India 'seeks to boost manufacturing, hit $1.3tn in exports'

Reuters
New Delhi

India will seek to triple the nation's exports by 2035 by boosting manufacturing through structural changes rather than with hefty spending, according to two government officials.

In Prime Minister Narendra Modi's third such attempt, the country is prioritising manufacturing in 15 sectors, including high-end semiconductors, metals and the labour-intensive leather industry, aiming to lift India's growth and boost annual goods exports to $1.3tn, they said.

Modi's government has twice failed to double the share of manufacturing to 25% of gross domestic product - with a "Make in India" campaign in 2014 and a $23bn package of incentives in 2020.

"In past years, several government initiatives to boost manufacturing growth have led to modest, incremental progress at best. What is needed is a bold, focused and cohesive strategy to drive transformative change," according to a government official involved in drafting the policy. The government will spend about Rs100bn ($1bn) to build infrastructure for about 30 manufacturing hubs across the targeted sectors while providing grants of $218mn for advanced areas such as chips and energy storage, said the officials, who asked not to be named because they were not authorised to speak to media.

The finance ministry and government think-tank Niti Aayog, which is tasked with preparing the policy, did not respond to requests for comment.

Funding this time is modest as the plan focuses on easing regulatory and compliance burdens, the biggest impediment to Indian manufacturing, rather than doling out subsidies, the officials said.

Financial support to industries will be decided case by case with recommendations from a new government panel to administrative departments, replacing the pre-budget fiscal packages of earlier schemes, they said.

India's central bank 'proposes linking Brics' digital currencies'

Reuters
Mumbai/New Delhi

India's central bank has proposed that Brics countries link their official digital currencies to make cross-border trade and tourism payments easier, two sources said, which could reduce reliance on the US dollar as geopolitical tensions rise.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has recommended to the government that a proposal connecting the central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) be included on the agenda for the 2026 Brics summit, the sources said. They requested anonymity because they were not authorised to speak publicly.

India will host the summit, which will be held later this year. If the recommendation is accepted, a proposal to link the digital currencies of Brics members would be put forward for the first time. The Brics organisation includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, among others.

The initiative could irritate the US, which has warned against any moves to bypass the dollar.

US President Donald Trump has previously said the Brics alliance is "anti-American" and he threatened to impose tariffs on its members.

The RBI, India's central government and the central bank of Brazil did not respond to e-mails seeking comment. The People's Bank of China said it had no information to share on the subject in response to a request for comment; the South African and Russian central banks declined to comment.

The RBI's proposal to link Brics' CBDCs for cross-border trade finance and tourism has not been previously reported.

The RBI's proposal builds on a 2025 declaration at a Brics summit in Rio de Janeiro, which pushed for interoperability between members' payment systems to make cross-border transactions more efficient.

The RBI has publicly expressed interest in linking India's digital rupee with other nations' CBDCs to expedite cross-border transactions and bolster its currency's global usage. It has, however, said its efforts to promote the rupee's global use are not aimed at promoting de-dollarisation.

While none of the Brics members have fully launched their digital currencies, all five main members have been running pilot projects.

India's digital currency - called the e-rupee - has attracted a total of 7mn retail users since its launch in December 2022, while China has pledged to boost the international use of the digital yuan.

The RBI has encouraged the adoption of the e-rupee by enabling offline payments, providing programmability for government subsidy transfers and by allowing fintech firms to offer digital currency wallets.

For the Brics digital currency linkages to be successful, elements like interoperable technology, governance rules and ways to settle imbalanced trade volumes would be among the discussion topics, one of the sources said.

The source cautioned that hesitation among members to adopt technological platforms from other countries could delay work on the proposal and concrete progress would require consensus on tech and regulation.

Srinagar receives season's first snowfall



A car covered in snow drives along a road during winter's first snowfall in Srinagar, India, yesterday.

India, EU likely to conclude trade talks on Tuesday

Reuters
New Delhi

India and the European Union (EU) are expected to announce the conclusion of protracted negotiations for a free trade pact on Tuesday, two Indian and EU government sources said.

The deal will open the way for reduced tariffs on European cars and spirits and an expanded market for Indian electronics, textiles and chemicals.

An announcement could follow Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting with European Council president Antonio Costa and European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, who will co-chair an India-EU summit during their visit to India from January 25-28, one of the Indian government sources said.

An EU official said the bloc aimed to "conclude negotiations on the free trade agreement" during the summit, before both sides move through internal procedures toward signing.

The two sides also expected to sign a security and defence pact - Europe's third in Asia after deals with South Korea and Japan - along with a mobility agreement covering high-skilled workers and students, the official said.

If finalised and ratified by the European Parliament, a process that could take at least a year, the trade pact would boost Indian exports such as textiles and jewellery, the Indian official said. Negotiations were relaunched in 2022 after a nine-year pause, gaining traction last year amid rising trade tensions.

In August, President Donald Trump doubled tariffs on Indian imports to as much as 50%, among the highest in the world.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos on Tuesday, von der Leyen said the European Union was close to concluding the agreement but acknowledged that additional work remains.

It follows a recent EU deal with South American bloc Mercosur and other trade agreements. India has also sealed pacts with partners including Britain, New Zealand and Oman.

Heathrow's new scanners end dreaded rummage for liquids and laptops

Passengers will no longer be forced to dig around in their hand luggage to extract shampoos, water bottles and laptops when travelling through security at Heathrow thanks to new specialist scanners. Heathrow yesterday said that all security lanes across its four terminals were now operating the CT security scanners, which it said made it the largest airport in the world to fully roll out this technology. Queues permitting, travellers will be able to get through security without needing to decant their liquid containers into small plastic bags, or take out their tablets as they can all now be checked via the high-resolution 3D imaging used by the scanners. Many airports globally are bringing in the machines to speed up security. Depending on each country's regulations, the machines mean passengers are able to carry containers of up to 2 litres through security, ending a 20-year-old rule on 100ml bottles. - Reuters

US stars attend film premiere in London



US actor Jason Momoa (left) poses with US actor Dave Bautista (centre) and Puerto Rican director Angel Manuel Soto on the red carpet upon arrival to attend the UK special screening of the action comedy *The Wrecking Crew*, in central London.

UK pauses Hillsborough transparency law

Reuters
London

The British government has cancelled a vote on a proposed "Hillsborough Law" aimed at ensuring transparency from public officials after campaigners raised concerns that intelligence officers may be shielded from scrutiny under the proposals. The bill is named after the Hillsborough soccer stadium in Sheffield where there was a deadly crush in 1989, which police incorrectly blamed on fans before later inquests and an inquiry found instead that the police themselves were to blame.

The proposed law imposes a duty on public authorities and public officials to act with "candour, transparency and frankness" and requires them to act accordingly when complying with inquiries and investigations.

But the government had planned an amendment to allow intelligence officers to be exempted from this duty if their bosses deemed there was a national security risk. Campaign groups and some Labour lawmakers and mayors raised concerns that this would give an overly broad opt-out for security services and undermine the spirit of the bill.

The security services had been criticised for failing to stop a suicide attack at a pop concert in Manchester that killed 22 people in 2017. After the furore, the government cancelled a final debate and vote on the bill in the lower House of Commons, which had been scheduled for yesterday. Prime Minister Keir Starmer said he wanted to get the bill right for families that had been let down without jeopardising national security.

Finance minister to accompany Starmer on China visit

Reuters
London

British Finance Minister Rachel Reeves will accompany Prime Minister Keir Starmer on his trip to China next week, underscoring UK efforts to strengthen ties with the world's second-largest economy at a time of strained transatlantic relations.

Among the goods Britain hopes to sell to China are financial services products such as pensions, insurance and wealth management services, luxury cars and clothing, and spirits

While China has been prevented from investing in certain parts of the British economy, such as nuclear plants and core mobile networks, it has invested in renewable energy systems, infrastructure and real estate.

Reeves will join Starmer and business leaders on the trip next week, the first by a British prime minister to China since 2018, three sources familiar with the visit said.

Along with Business Secretary Peter Kyle, who will also be on the trip, Reeves will have separate itineraries from the prime minister, one of the sources said. Their presence on the visit has not previously been reported.

The treasury and the department for business and Trade declined to comment.

Starmer's trip comes after Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney visited Beijing last week and hailed improving ties with China as well as the leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The decision to send the two most senior figures in the government, and the business secretary, shows the importance the British government is placing on the visit, which takes place amid tensions between Britain and its traditional closest ally, the US, over President Donald Trump's unpredictable approach to trade and defence.

Britain wants closer economic and trade ties with China to help boost its economy after Starmer pledged to improve living standards through investment in public services and the economy. But the strategy has drawn fierce criticism from some British and US politicians.

Starmer's government recently approved China's contested plans to build a mega-embassy in the heart of London, rejecting objections from some politicians who said the new building would make it easier for China to conduct spying operations.

Some UK and Chinese officials had said the visit to China was conditional on the embassy being approved.

China was Britain's fourth-largest trading partner with trade totalling around £100bn in the 12 months to the end of the second quarter in 2025, according to government data.

Among those travelling with Starmer to China as part of the business delegation will be Brendan Nelson, the chairman of HSBC, Europe's biggest bank, another source familiar with the plans said. HSBC declined to comment.

A revamped UK-China CEO Council is also set to be unveiled next week, with representatives from companies including AstraZeneca, HSBC and Jaguar Land Rover expected to participate, Reuters reported this week. But the visit comes at a sensitive moment for relations between European leaders and the US because of Trump's claims that Washington needs to take control of Greenland because China poses a threat in the Arctic.

In a speech at Davos, Trump made clear his disdain for European leaders, their immigration policies, regulations and their unwillingness to give him Greenland, which he insists America must own for its security.

Starmer laid the foundations for his trip last month when he said Britain needed to take a "more sophisticated" approach to its relationship with China, saying bilateral ties had "blown hot and cold" for years.

COMMENT

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GULF TIMES

Spain's high-speed train crash: What went wrong?

Last Sunday's train collision and derailment in southern Spain killed at least 39 people and left 122 injured, with officials highlighting the "tremendously strange" nature of the accident on a straight stretch of railway.

The accident happened at 7:45pm (1845 GMT) near the town of Adamuz in the province of Cordoba, about 360km south of the capital Madrid. It involved two high-speed trains, one operated by the private consortium Iryo and the other by Alvia, run by Spain's public railway company Renfe.

The last two out of eight carriages of the trademark-red Iryo train going from Malaga to Madrid derailed on a straight stretch of railway and hit the oncoming Alvia, causing the latter's first two carriages to derail and fall down an up to 5m (16.4 ft) embankment.

There was a 20-second interval between the first derailment and the impact, too short to activate the automatic braking system, according to Renfe chief Alvaro Fernández Heredia, who also said human error was practically ruled out. "It must have been some kind of failure in the rolling stock or the infrastructure, and that will take time" to investigate, he said.

Officials said the Alvia had apparently hit the derailed carriages or undercarriage debris of the Iryo. The 27-year-old driver of the Alvia train died in the crash, the Renfe chief said.

The Iryo train was carrying around 300 people and had just left the historic city of Cordoba. Its speed at the moment of the accident was 110kph, well below the maximum limit of 250kph on that stretch.

Officials highlighted the "tremendously strange" nature of the accident on a straight stretch of railway

The oncoming train, carrying 187 people, was travelling at a speed of 205kph, Renfe said.

The derailed Alvia carriages had 37 people in the first and 16 in the second. Most of the dead and injured came from the first two Alvia carriages. Transport Minister Oscar Puente said that the Iryo was less than four years old and that the railway track had been completely renovated last May with an investment of 700mn euros ($813.5mn). Iryo said the train was last inspected on January 15.

Puente called the accident "tremendously strange" and said that had it not been for the oncoming train, the derailment would have likely caused no deaths. Jose Trigueros, president of the Association of Road Engineers, said his preliminary analysis of images and information released by the authorities suggested "failure of the undercarriage of the back units" of the Iryo train.

Train drivers union SEMAF had warned state-owned rail infrastructure administrator ADIF in a letter last August of severe wear and tear to the railway track where the two trains collided, according to a copy of the letter seen by Reuters, saying potholes, bumps, and imbalances in overhead power lines were causing frequent breakdowns and damaging the trains.

ADIF did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

According to a Reuters review of alerts on ADIF's X account, it has previously reported problems with infrastructure at Adamuz, from signalling failures to issues with overhead power lines, that caused delays to high-speed trains between Madrid and Andalusia 10 times since 2022. The government was criticised last year for a series of delays on the network, caused by power outages and the theft of copper cables from the lines. The network is vulnerable to cable thefts as it crosses large swathes of empty countryside.

Spain's high-speed railway network, with 3,622km of tracks, is the largest in Europe and the second-biggest in the world after China, according to ADIF. Spain opened up its high-speed rail network to private competition in 2020 in a bid to offer low-cost alternatives to Renfe's AVE trains.

Iryo is a joint venture between Italian state railway operator Ferrovie dello Stato, airline Air Nostrum and Spanish infrastructure investment fund Globalvia. It began operating in November 2022, starting with the Madrid-Barcelona route and expanding to other major cities.

The Iryo ETR1000 train is manufactured by the partnership of Hitachi Rail-Bombardier in Europe for Ferrovie's unit Trenitalia. Renfe's Alvia trains are manufactured by local makers CAF and Talgo. — **Reuters**

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Greenlandic flags are seen in the foreground as a pedestrian walks along a snowy street in Nuuk, Greenland.

Greenland galvanises Europe to confront new US reality

By Mark John and **Samia Nakhoul**
Reuters

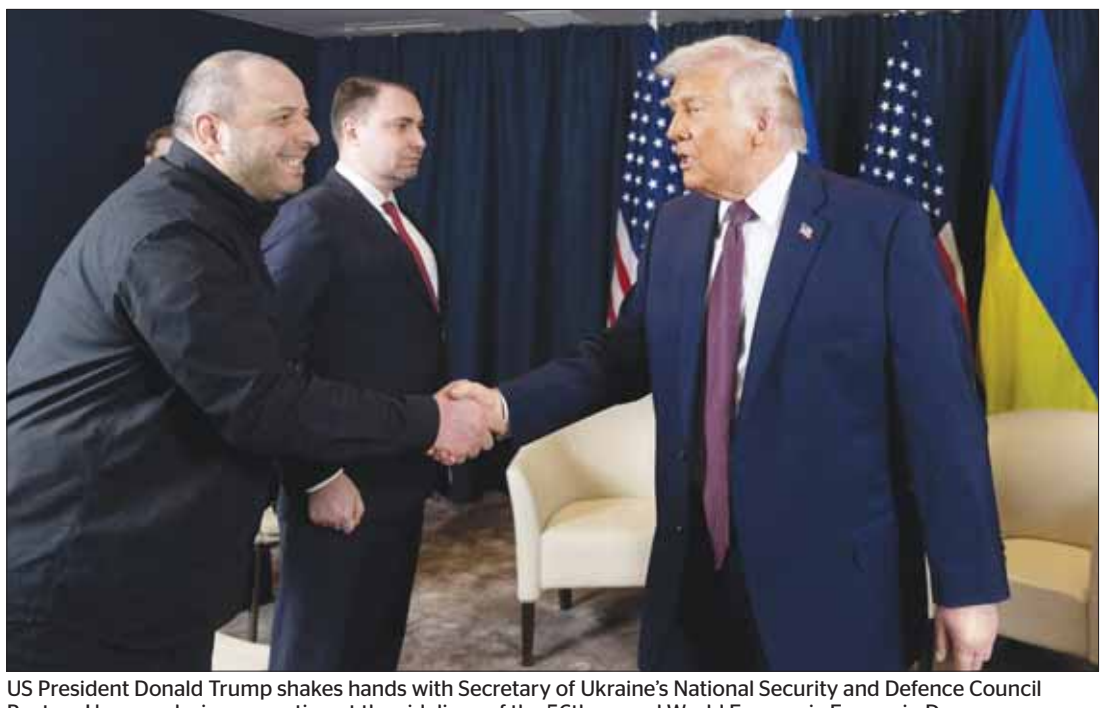
Europe may have rallied to see off President Donald Trump over Greenland, but its leaders recognise the confrontation is unlikely to be the last in dealings with his increasingly strident version of the United States.

The stakes could hardly be higher, given the $2tn trading relationship between the European Union and the US and the dominant role Washington continues to play in the Nato alliance and in support of Ukraine against Russia. This week, in the space of a few hours at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Trump first ruled out taking Greenland by force and then removed the threat of new tariffs on eight European states standing in his way - hailing instead a vague deal for the Arctic island with Nato chief Mark Rutte.

European leaders believe Trump backed down in part because - in contrast to their more accommodating stance in last year's tariff negotiations - this time they made it clear he was crossing a red line by asserting that Greenland's status as an autonomous territory of Denmark was non-negotiable.

"All this shows that you cannot let the Americans trample all over the Europeans," said a European Union official, who requested anonymity to speak candidly about US ties.

"We did the right thing to push back, to be firm in what we said, but it is not over. My sense is that we will be tested constantly on issues like this," the official told Reuters. While Europe may have learned the value of standing up to Trump, the challenge is ensuring it is less exposed next time. "It's a hard route, and it's going to take time," said Rosa Balfour, director at Carnegie Europe, adding that Europe had "far more leverage than it has dared to use".



US President Donald Trump shakes hands with Secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council Rustem Umerov during a meeting at the sidelines of the 56th annual World Economic Forum, in Davos.

EUROPE NOT SEEKING A SPLIT

An emergency summit of Europe's leaders on Thursday called for last year's EU-US trade deal to be put back on track after lawmakers suspended its ratification in protest over Greenland.

"Despite all the frustration and anger of recent months, let us not be too quick to write off the transatlantic partnership," German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said in Davos beforehand.

While seeking to stabilise the partnership, Europe is also taking steps aimed at "de-risking" it given the open antipathy from Trump, whose new national security strategy accuses the continent of freeloading on defence and demands it open its markets to US companies.

Europe is only too aware of how long it can take to get agreement among 27 nations with different histories, politics and economies, which was highlighted in taunts this week by US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent.

Two EU officials said the Greenland row has accelerated discussions on how the approach taken on Ukraine - in which countries offer security guarantees on a voluntary basis and no one has a right of veto - can be extended.

"We should do more with coalitions of the willing and leave it open for others to follow if they want," said one, adding that joint efforts to boost Europe's development of artificial intelligence technology could be one example.

Coalitions such as the "E3" group comprising France, Germany and Britain focusing on security matters also allow non-EU states to take part, which speaks to others on the rough end of Trump policies.

"The middle powers must act together, because if we're not at the table, we're on the menu," Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney said in a Davos speech to warm applause.

Another route is using the leeway afforded by EU law.

In December, EU states used an emergency provision to indefinitely immobilise hundreds of billions of dollars of Russian assets. That removed the risk of a pro-Moscow country like Hungary blocking the roll-over of the measure at some point and forcing the EU to return the money.

NEW EUROPEAN DOCTRINE

Europe also plans to toughen up on economic policy. Next month it will kickstart legislation that will include "Made in Europe" requirements on strategic sectors and strengthening conditionality clauses for any foreign direct investment in the EU. "Some provisions were originally conceived to reduce reliance on China but in reality they will help us to de-risk from other markets," European Commissioner for Prosperity and Industrial Strategy Stephane Sejourne told Reuters.

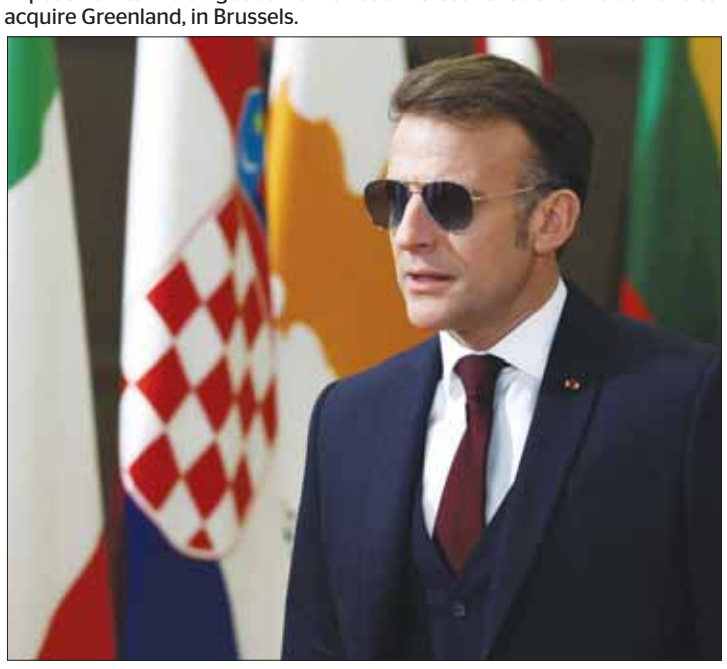
"This will totally change the European doctrine on those sectors," Sejourne added.

Unlike Canada, there is no plan in Europe to pivot more towards China to compensate for transatlantic strains. But the bloc is actively pursuing others in a diversification drive.

While the impact of higher US tariffs on European goods is not clear - in fact Europe's trade surplus with the US initially rose over the course of 2025 as companies front-loaded exports ahead of the new levies - recent data shows that German companies nearly halved investments there last year.



President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Antonio Costa hold a press conference after attending a special summit of European Union leaders to discuss transatlantic relations following US President Donald Trump's threats to impose new tariffs on goods from a list of EU countries over his demand to acquire Greenland, in Brussels.



French President Emmanuel Macron arrives for a special summit of European Union leaders to discuss transatlantic relations following US President Donald Trump's threats to impose new tariffs on goods from a list of EU countries over his demand to acquire Greenland, in Brussels.

After the signing of the EU-Mercosur pact this month - the largest in EU history - European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said it is now "on the cusp" of a deal with India.

However, nobody is saying Europe can redress the imbalance with the US overnight, particularly on security.

Despite European commitments to a defence spending surge and even calls for an EU army, analysts say it will be years before its military might is up to tasks which now include bolstering Arctic security. The question is whether the past few weeks provide a catalyst for Europe to start reducing its US dependencies. "All this is not surprising," Swedish deputy Prime Minister Ebba Busch said of Trump's showing in Davos. "The EU needs to toughen up," she told Reuters.

Outrage after Trump says that Nato troops 'avoided' Afghan front line

Reuters/AFP
London

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has denounced as "insulting" Donald Trump's claim that British troops avoided the front line in Afghanistan, amid widespread anger at the US president's remarks.

In an interview with Fox News aired on Thursday, Trump appeared unaware that 457 British soldiers were among North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) troops who died during the conflict in the South Asian country following the September 11 attacks on the United States.

"They'll say they sent some troops to Afghanistan," Trump told the US outlet, referring to Nato allies.

"And they did, they stayed a little back, a little off the front lines," he added, triggering outrage across the political divide in the UK.

Trump also repeated his suggestion that Nato would not come to the aid of the United States if asked to do so.

In fact, following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the UK and a number of other allies joined the US from 2001 in Afghanistan after it invoked Nato's collective security clause for the first and only time.

Troops from other Nato ally countries including Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Denmark and others also died.

"Let me start by paying tribute to 457 of our armed services who lost their lives in Afghanistan," Starmer said in a video clip from Downing Street. "There are many also who were injured, some with life-changing injuries, and so I consider President Trump's remarks to be insulting and frankly, appalling, and I'm not surprised they've caused such hurt to the loved ones of those who were killed or injured."

He said that if he had misspoken in such a way, he "would certainly apologise".

Poland's Defence Minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz said he expected respect for Polish veterans "who have proven how much they serve this country and our commitments to allies".

Poland lost 43 soldiers in the conflict in Afghanistan.

"We expect an apology for this statement," Roman Polko, a retired Polish general and former special forces commander who served in Afghanistan and Iraq, told Reuters in an interview.

Trump has "crossed a red line", he added. "We paid with blood for this alliance. We truly sacrificed our own lives."



A picture taken in 2010 shows a wall bearing the names of British military personnel who have died in Afghanistan since 2001, at the British Cemetery in Kabul. – ***AFP***

Trump's comments were "ignorant", said Rasmus Jarlov, an opposition Conservative Party member of Denmark's parliament.

The UK defence minister, John Healey, posted on X that the British troops who died were "heroes who gave their lives in service of our nation".

The armed forces minister, Al Carns, who served five tours in Afghanistan, said that Trump's comments were "utterly ridiculous".

"We shed blood, sweat and tears together. Not everybody came home," he said in a video posted on X.

Stuart Tootle, a retired British colonel who commanded the first British battle group sent to Helmand, Afghanistan's largest province, in 2006, said Trump should apologise.

He also said that while he had "some sympathy" for Trump's criticism of what he described as under-investment in Nato by Britain and other Western European nations, he had none for the president's "really unfortunate, inaccurate and totally unjustified" remarks.

Even Richard Moore, the former head of Britain's MI6 intelligence service, weighed in, saying that he, like many MI6 officers, had operated in dangerous environments with "brave and highly esteemed" US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) counterparts and had been proud to do so with Britain's closest ally.

The care minister, Stephen Kinnock, said that he expected Starmer would bring the issue up with Trump.

The leader of the opposition Conservatives, Kemi Badenoch, said Trump's comments were "complete nonsense" which could weaken the Nato alliance.

Even Nigel Farage, leader of the anti-immigration Reform UK party, and a long-time Trump supporter, rebuked the American leader.

"Donald Trump is wrong," he said on X. "For 20 years our armed forces fought bravely alongside America's in Afghanistan."

Lucy Aldridge, whose son William died aged 18 in Afghanistan, told *The Mirror* newspaper that Trump's remarks were "extremely upsetting".

Mark Atkinson, director-general of the veterans' charity, The Royal British Legion, said the service and sacrifice of British troops in Afghanistan "cannot be called into question".

He noted that "457 British personnel lost their lives in Afghanistan and thousands more and their families now live with the lifelong physical and mental impact from service in that conflict".

According to official UK figures, 405 of the 457 British casualties who died in Afghanistan were killed in hostile military action.

The US reportedly lost more than 2,400 soldiers.

More than 150 Canadians were also killed along with 90 French service personnel, while Denmark – which has been under heavy pressure from Trump to sell its semi-autonomous region of Greenland to the US – lost 44 troops, one of Nato's highest per-capita death rates.

More than 150,000 UK armed forces personnel served in Afghanistan between September 2001 and August 2021, the ministry of defence said, making the UK the second-largest contributor to the US-led force there.

Prosecutors dismiss case against Julio Iglesias

Spanish prosecutors have shelved an abuse and human trafficking complaint against veteran singer Julio Iglesias, saying that Spain's courts had no jurisdiction in the case.

Two women – a domestic worker and a physiotherapist – alleged that they had suffered various forms of abuse while working at Iglesias's properties in the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas in 2021.

The allegations dominated headlines in Spain after being aired last week in a joint investigation by Spanish newspaper *elDiario.es* and US television network Univision.

Rights group Women's Link Worldwide had filed the complaint on January 5 on behalf of the two women.

The prosecutor's office said in a filing seen by Reuters that the High Court was unable to try Iglesias as the alleged crimes were in the Dominican Republic and Bahamas, adding that prosecution could still be sought in those two countries.

In addition, the alleged victims were not Spanish and did not reside in Spain, it said, citing Supreme Court jurisprudence that limited the legal principle of universal jurisdiction.

Iglesias, 82, called the accusations "absolutely false", saying he had never "abused, coerced, or disrespected any woman". – ***AFP/Reuters***

France PM survives no-confidence vote over forced budget

AFP/Reuters
Paris

French Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu survived two no-confidence votes yesterday following his move to force his budget through parliament, in a symbolic victory with more such challenges expected.

On Tuesday Lecornu used a constitutional power to ram the income part of the 2026 state budget through parliament without a vote, after making concessions to gain the backing of the Socialists.

The key swing group showed their support yesterday by not supporting two no-confidence motions, filed by the hard-left and far-right.

A total of 269 lawmakers voted in favour of the no-confidence motion presented by the hard-left France Unbowed together with the Greens and Communists, whereas 288 votes were required to bring down the government.

Even fewer backed a second no-confidence motion, brought by the far-right.

Lecornu will likely be exposed to a series of other such no-confidence votes in coming weeks.

After his symbolic survival yesterday, the prime minister announced that he was officially ramming through the expense part of the 2026 state budget, causing the hard-left to declare that it was filing another no-confidence motion.

That one is to be examined on Tuesday, and also expected to be rejected.

"When debate no longer allows a conclusion, someone has to take responsibility," he told the National Assembly just ahead of the votes yesterday.

"Invoking the government's responsibility, in my view, should be neither an easy way out nor a shortcut. It is a tool of last resort," he added of the constitutional power used.

The move marked a rowback for Lecornu, who pledged last year to seek parliament's approval, in a bid to avoid the fate of his two predecessors who were ousted over budget negotiations.

However, on Monday, Lecornu conceded with "a certain degree of regret and a bit of bitterness" that he had to invoke the power to push the budget through.

Yesterday he reassured lawmakers that the constitutional power could only be used going forward "in the absolute and last resort" in order "to "preserve institutions".

Still, opponents remained outraged over the measure.


Left: Lecornu smiles after the second of the two votes on a no-confidence motion has been rejected. – ***AFP***

Leader of the far-right National Rally (RN), Marine Le Pen, denounced the prime minister's "betrayal" for having used the measure.

"Everything should have led you to resign," she added, pointing to the government's "powerlessness".

Le Pen said government opponents who supported Lecornu in the confidence vote would pay the price in future elections, including local elections in March and presidential elections in 2027.

"Don't think that no one is watching you. The French people see you, and they will make you pay for it at the ballot box," she told lawmakers ahead of the vote. "Not only for the (budgetary) bloodletting you are inflicting on them, but also for the humiliating process you are using."

The left also appeared divided, with the France Unbowed (LFI), Greens and Communist parties calling for Lecornu to be ousted while the Socialists sided with government.

Ahead of yesterday's vote, the Socialists signalled that the use of the measure was "the least bad solution" and the latest draft showed "progress" with concessions including an increase in a top-up benefit for the lowest-paid employees and the rollout of €1 meals for students.

Greens lawmaker Benjamin Lucas-Lundy warned the Socialists yesterday that a few concessions "do not make progress".

If Lecornu survives that second attempt to topple him, the budget bill must then be reviewed by the upper-house Senate before returning to the lower-house National Assembly for final adoption.

Lecornu will have to use the same constitutional power to force the whole bill into law, which will expose him to more no-confidence votes.

President Emmanuel Macron's government is having to circumvent parliament after months of negotiations failed to deliver a deficit-taming finance bill that would pass in a lower house where no party has a working majority.

In the hunt for a budget, Macron lost two governments and saw France plunged into turmoil rarely seen since the 1958 creation of the Fifth Republic, the current system of government.



The result of the second of the two votes on a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Lecornu is seen on a giant screen at the Assemblee Nationale, France's parliament lower house in Paris. – ***AFP***

Pakistani police arrest prominent rights activist

Pakistani police arrested a prominent rights activist and her husband yesterday as they were heading to a court hearing in Islamabad on "cyber-terrorism" charges, her family and a lawyers' association said.

Imaan Mazari, a 32-year-old lawyer and critic of Pakistan's military, faces a dozen charges but it was unclear if yesterday's detention was related to any of them.

Mazari and her husband, fellow lawyer Hadi Ali Chattha, were granted bail in a cybercrime case on Tuesday and the couple sought blanket bail to prevent arrest in any other cases so they could appear in subsequent proceedings.

Syed Wajid Ali Shah Gillani, president of the Islamabad High Court Bar Association, alleged in a video statement that police manhandled the couple before arresting them. – ***AFP***

France probes baby deaths after powdered milk recall

France's health minister is seeking sought to reassure consumers that all suspicious infant formula had been withdrawn, as an investigation began into the deaths of two babies who drank possibly contaminated powdered milk.

The infant formula industry has been rocked in recent weeks by several firms recalling batches that could be contaminated with cereulide, a toxin that can cause diarrhoea and vomiting.

The potentially contaminated milk has been "withdrawn" from the market, Health Minister Stephanie Rist said.

In particular, Nestle pulled batches of infant milk in several European countries on January 6.

French investigators are looking into the cause of death of two infants who allegedly consumed Nestle milk.

One was a two-week-old baby who died on January 8 in Bordeaux, southwest France, after drinking milk from the now-recalled batches, a prosecutor in the city said on Thursday.



This picture taken on 2018 shows the logo of French dairy group Lactalis on a building in Laval, western France. – ***AFP***

The second infant, aged just 27 days, died on December 23 in the western city of Angers, the local prosecutor said.

The mother contacted the authorities this week, saying that the baby had drunk Nestle milk from one of the lots removed from the market.

At this time, there was no established causal link between the formula and their deaths, according to French authorities.

Nestle told AFP yesterday that it would co-operate with the probes, adding there was "no evidence" at this stage linking its products to the infant deaths.

French group Lactalis on Wednesday also said it was recalling batches in France and other countries over worries they contained cereulide.

Lactalis did not name the supplier behind the tainted ingredient.

Outside France, countries concerned included Australia, Chile, China, Colombia, the Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Spain, Madagascar, Mexico, Uzbekistan, Peru, Georgia, Greece, Kuwait, the Czech Republic, and Taiwan, a Lactalis spokesperson told AFP.

Singapore authorities on Saturday recalled Dumex baby formula, a brand owned by French food giant Danone.

Danone said the authorities blocked just "a few pallets" of Dumex, indicating they were not yet on any store shelves.

Bulgaria's Radev steps down as president

Bulgaria's President Rumen Radev stepped down yesterday after the Constitutional Court approved his resignation, amid widespread speculation that he plans to launch his own political party to run in a looming parliamentary election.

Radev, 62, whose mandate had been due to expire next January, handed over his duties as head of state in a short ceremony to his vice-president, Iliana Iotova, who becomes the first female president of the EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) member state.

In Bulgaria, the president – elected by popular vote – is a mainly ceremonial role, though Radev has wielded considerable behind-the-scenes influence in a period of political instability that has seen seven parliamentary elections in just four years.

"This was my last day as president but my first day as a citizen who believes... that with joint efforts we can change Bulgaria, defend democracy, reaffirm the law and accelerate economic growth," Radev told reporters after the ceremony.

The former air force commander, who polls suggest is the most popular politician in the Black Sea nation, has not yet directly confirmed his intentions. – ***Reuters***

Kosovo arrests more than 100 for falsifying election results

AFP
Pristina

Prosecutors in Kosovo said yesterday that more than 100 election staff had been arrested over "falsification" of voting results in a direct attempt to "subvert" last month's national poll.

The crackdown comes after a full recount and a criminal investigation had been ordered into the Balkan nation's general election earlier this week after inaccuracies in the tallies were discovered.

"We are talking about an organisation and a direct intention to subvert the results and the will of the citizens," Prizren prosecutor Petrit Kryeziu told media.

Kryeziu said 109 election staff had been arrested over "falsification of election results", "intimidation", and "bribery", affecting around 70,000 votes.

Certification of preliminary results, which showed caretaker Prime Minister Albin Kurti had won over half the vote, has taken weeks after a partial recount began in earlier this month.

However, the country's Central Election Commission has ordered a full recount, with commission chair Kreshnik Radoniqi citing issues in the tallies for candidate MPs.

According to the electoral commission, a recount found party vote tallies appeared to be accurate to the initial count, but discovered discrepancies in the amounts distributed to individual MP candidates.

Since February last year, Kurti has remained in a caretaker position, after an earlier election left him without the parliamentary majority needed to form a government.

Deeply divided lawmakers eventually forced a second election in less than 12 months, leading to December's poll.

The recount remains ongoing, and adds a further delay to the formation of a new government, amid warnings that the country risks losing hundreds of millions of euros in international assistance funds without one.

QATAR

Marmi Festival set to end with falcon beauty contest at Katara

HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani crowned the winners of the 17th Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2026) yesterday, held in Sabkhat Marmi, Sealine. The awards ceremony followed the conclusion of the field competitions, including the final of the Haddad Al Tahadi Championship, which featured 27 qualified participants. At the start of the ceremony, HE Sheikh Joaan, patron of the Marmi Festival, honoured the festival sponsor, represented by Yousef Mohamed al-Nuaimi, director of the Shared Services Department at the Social and Sports Activities Support Fund (Daam). He then proceeded to crown the winners of the remaining field championships.

Muteb bin Mubarak al-Qahtani, chairman of the Marmi Festival, praised the patronage and unwavering support of HE Sheikh Joaan, congratulating all winners. He highlighted the festival's professionalism across all competitions and the achievements of promising young falconers. He also invited the public to attend the festival's closing event, the Mazayin (Falcon Beauty) Contest, at Katara today, noting that the competing falcons are among the rarest.

Abdulwahab bin Omair al-Nuaimi, deputy director of the Marmi Festival, confirmed the outstanding success of this year's edition and extended congratulations to all winners. Yousef Mohamed al-Nuaimi of Daam emphasised that the festival preserves Qatar's falconry heritage, aligning with Qatar National Vision 2030 and Unesco's recognition of falconry as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The Marmi Festival will officially close today with the Al Mazayin Contest at Katara Building No 12.



Visit Qatar lauded for hosting 'biggest and most inclusive' QIFF yet

By Shaima Sheriff
Staff Reporter

Visitors at the Qatar International Food Festival (QIFF) 2026 lauded Visit Qatar for delivering its 'biggest and most inclusive edition' yet, highlighting smooth organisation, family-friendly experiences, and a vibrant global atmosphere at Stadium 974.

Visitors attending the Qatar International Food Festival (QIFF) at Stadium 974 have expressed strong appreciation for Visit Qatar's organisation, describing this year's edition as one of the most memorable, inclusive, and well-executed events to date.

For many attendees like Kara and Anthony, who are visiting Qatar from the Philippines, the scale of the festival stood out immediately, with this edition marking a clear step forward.

"It's our first time attending QIFF at such a big venue. It's quite nice to see how much it has improved. This is definitely the biggest one so far, with lots of food selections and people from all walks of life."

Kevin and Elizabeth Arnold, also first-time attendees, who are from North Carolina and now residing in Doha, were equally impressed by the organisation and ease of movement across the venue. Elizabeth said: "The signage was remarkable, it allowed us to navigate easily and explore different areas without any confusion."

The couple also highlighted the international flavour of the festival, saying: "We found Taste of Home at Doug's North Carolina BBQ and Sylvia's," Kevin said. "It was exciting to experience familiar flavours while enjoying the atmosphere of such a large global event."

Local resident Mohamed Daki described QIFF as one of the year's standout events in Qatar. "There is a real variety of global kitchens," he said. "The Arab, Asian, and American concepts are attracting a lot of people, and the overall organisation has been very good."

For Noor, an Egyptian born and raised in Qatar, the welcoming atmosphere was immediately noticeable. "I just arrived, but already it feels amazing," she said. "People are happy, everything is well organised, and the experience is very enjoyable."

She also noted how QIFF brings international culinary concepts closer to the local audience. "It's exciting to see international booths here for the first time. It really adds to the experience."

Across all interviews, visitors consistently lauded Visit Qatar's ability to host large-scale international events that are inclusive, family-friendly, and enjoyable for people of all ages and backgrounds.



Elizabeth exploring the festival. **PICTURES:** Shaima Sheriff



Kara and Anthony at QIFF 2026.



Cooler weather draws residents to Inland Sea for outdoor adventures and team building

By Joey Aguilar
Doha



As cooler winter temperatures settle across Qatar, residents are venturing beyond the city to explore the Inland Sea, with Sealine trips rising as companies and community groups seek fresh outdoor alternatives to cafés and gatherings.

The seasonal drop in temperatures has transformed the desert landscape into an inviting destination, encouraging residents and visitors to explore the dunes and along the shores of Khor Al Adaid, a Unesco-recognised natural reserve where sand dunes meet the sea.

"Winter is when the Inland Sea truly comes alive. During summer, the heat limits activity, but now people are eager to be outdoors. We, as office employees, look for something different from indoor gatherings," Filipino expatriate Jam T, who was with her colleagues yesterday at Sealine, told *Gulf Times*.

Instead of meeting over coffee or dinner, many groups are opting for day trips or overnight desert camps that combine dune bashing, sandboarding, beach walks, and shared meals by the sea. Groups of campers say the experience encourages interaction, teamwork, and relaxation in a natural setting.

"Being out in the desert changes how people connect. When colleagues navigate dunes together or sit around a campfire, conversations flow more naturally. It's a very different dynamic compared to sitting in a restaurant," she pointed out.

Several expatriate community organisations have also embraced the trend, organising weekend trips that bring families and friends together. For many residents, especially newcomers, the Inland Sea offers a chance to experience a side of Qatar they have only seen in photographs.

"This is my first time coming here, and it's amazing," said an Indian expatriate, who joined a community-organised trip from Doha. "I've lived in Qatar for two years but never visited the Inland Sea. The weather makes it perfect, and the view of the dunes meeting the sea is something you don't forget."

First-time visitors Mark J, a participant in a corporate team-building trip, are often surprised by the scale and serenity of the area, saying: "I didn't expect it to be so peaceful. After a busy workweek, being here helps you reset. It also helps colleagues bond outside the office."

Tour operators note that demand is particularly strong for beginner-friendly trips, as many residents are exploring desert activities for the first time. Safety briefings, guided drives, and structured itineraries are helping to make the experience accessible to newcomers.

"We always have a mix of experienced desert drivers and first timers. The key is planning and safety. Once people feel secure, they relax and enjoy the adventure," said a tour operator staff.

The cooler weather also encouraged families to bring children along, turning the Inland Sea into a weekend getaway. Picnics, barbecues, and simple beach activities are becoming common sights, especially on Fridays and Saturdays.

Many residents who frequent the place say the appeal lies in the balance between adventure and tranquillity. "You can be active or just sit and enjoy the view. It's a reminder that Qatar has beautiful natural spaces beyond the city," says Ferge, a long-time Filipino expatriate.



The seasonal drop in temperatures transform the desert landscape into an inviting destination, encouraging residents and visitors to explore the dunes instead of meeting over coffee or dinner. **PICTURES:** JTA







Kenyan star Oketch claims historic 10th title as Qatar's Strongest Man

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Hamad Yousef al-Obaidly, director of Communication and Public Relations at AZF, said: "The strong public and media turnout reflects the growing interest in strength sports across the region and highlights the importance of such events in delivering Aspire's message of promoting sports participation and strengthening positive engagement with the community."

The Strongest Man event has become a major annual event on Qatar's sports calendar, drawing elite athletes, engaging fans, and supporting the foundation's goal of encouraging sports participation and healthy, active lifestyles.

The event delivered a full family-friendly experience, with AZF hosting a fan zone alongside the championship, featuring children's sports activities, food stalls, and local product outlets, turning Aspire Park into a lively hub for visitors of all ages.



