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SPORT | Page 1

Vanderveen
stars as HH The
Father Amir's
Prix nears finale



Team Chunkz celebrates on stage after winning the 2026 Match for Hope charity football game in a dramatic, high-scoring finish. **PICTURE:** Noushad Thekkayil

Match for Hope 2026 raises over QR45mn

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

As Match for Hope 2026 drew a packed crowd and raised QR45,294,142 (\$12,409,354) for the Education Above All (EAA) Foundation, continuing the global charity initiative's legacy of combining sport and entertainment to support disadvantaged youth.

The football match opened with a high-energy live performance by The Chainsmokers, immediately setting the tone for a night to remember. At halftime, The Jonas Brothers took the stage, delivering a lively show that left fans on their feet and buzzing on social media. Posts across platforms lauded the performances, with one fan posting: "Chainsmokers and Jonas Brothers back-to-back? Unreal! Best halftime show ever!"

Organised by QLife, the cultural initiative under Qatar's International Media Office, in collaboration with EAA Foundation and the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, the event has raised over \$19.5mn so far to support out-of-school children and disadvantaged youth in countries including Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, Pakistan, Mali, and Tanzania.

Yesterday's match saw the highly anticipated final showdown between Team Chunkz and Team AboFlah, with both captains returning to lead their squads in front of thousands of spectators. Team Chunkz won the match in a dramatic, high-scoring finish, 8-7, delighting fans and adding to the event's memorable moments as football legends and creators united for charity.

The star-studded lineup included KSI, Sharky, Billy Wriggle, Danny Aarons, Angry Ginge, Harry Piner, Amr Nas-

souhy, Luva de Pedreiro, Marlon, Fanum, Eden Hazard, Thierry Henry, Marcelo Vieira da Silva Junior, and Diego Costa. Fans online celebrated the blend of football legends and internet stars.

Since its inaugural edition in 2014, Match for Hope has grown into a global phenomenon. The first edition drew over 34,000 spectators at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium and more than 22.5mn live viewers worldwide. Last year, the event reached 25.4mn viewers, with social media content amassing over 1.2bn views, extending the reach of the charitable mission far beyond Qatar.

Fans took to Instagram and Twitter throughout the day, sharing videos, highlights, and heartfelt messages. One fan wrote: "This isn't just a game, it's giving kids hope. Proud to be part of this! #MatchForHope2026". Another tweeted: "The atmosphere at Ahmad bin Ali was insane! Best charity event ever".

Doha all set to host region's largest tech event tomorrow

- Web Summit Qatar 2026 to host around 30,000 participants
- The sold-out event will see more than 1,600 startups, over 800 investors, and more than 400 speakers in attendance over four days at DECC

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

The 3rd edition of Web Summit Qatar is set to open tomorrow, February 1, at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre (DECC), with an Opening Night showcasing the scale of the region's largest tech event and, on day 2, highlighting thought leadership led by Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser and HE Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani.

While the opening night sets the tone socially, the intellectual core of the summit comes into sharp focus on February 2, the second day of the conference, when Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development (QF), takes the centre stage at 10am.

Her Highness will deliver a keynote titled 'Human first: Re-centering ethics in the age of artificial intelligence!' The address will examine the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and its deep implications for societies worldwide, stressing the centrality of human values, ethics, and accountability in technological development. Her Highness is expected to highlight the need for responsible, human-centred leadership that anticipates long-term societal impact rather than reacting to technological change after the fact.

The session is anticipated to



be one of the defining moments of Web Summit Qatar 2026, positioning ethical leadership as a cornerstone of innovation at a time when AI is reshaping economies, governance, and everyday life. On the same day, from 11.35am-12.05pm, the centre stage will host another major highlight featuring HE Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Chairperson of Qatar Museums. She will speak on 'Investing in culture: Museums, creative industries and the knowledge economy', joined by Michael Govan, CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The session will bring together two global cultural leaders to explore how museums and cultural institutions function as engines of creative industries and catalysts for a knowledge-based economy. Centred on Qatar's cultural strategy, the discussion will examine how investment in culture drives education, social progress, and sustainable economic development, while integrating local creative ecosystems into global networks of exchange.

The Permanent Web Summit Organising Committee also confirmed the participation of senior Qatari leadership throughout the programme, particularly HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani, along with ministers, heads of national institutions, and leading executives from across government, media, research, and investment sectors.

Running from February 1-4, Web Summit Qatar 2026 will bring together policymakers, global tech leaders, cultural visionaries, investors, and startups, with the opening night offering an early glimpse of the show floor, global partners, and the networking-driven ethos that defines the event. **To Page 3**

Trump nominates Kevin Warsh to head the US Federal Reserve

US President Donald Trump announced yesterday his nomination of former member of Federal Reserve, **Kevin Warsh** to head the US central bank. Trump's announcement ends the search for a successor to current Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell, whom the president has repeatedly criticised for what he considers a slow pace of interest rate cuts. "I have known Kevin for a long time, and I have no doubt that he will be



one of the greatest Fed Chairs, and perhaps the best ever," Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform, adding, "Above all, he is the right person, and he will never let you down." With Warsh's selection, the president concludes a race that narrowed down to four candidates: Kevin Warsh, Federal Reserve Governor Christopher Waller, Rick Rieder of BlackRock, and Kevin Hassett, Trump's chief economic advisor. **(QNA) Business Page 4**

Gaza's Rafah crossing with Egypt to reopen on Monday



A satellite image shows trucks amassed at the Rafah border crossing, between Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

The head of the Palestinian National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG) Ali Shaath yesterday announced that the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and Gaza will reopen on Monday. In a post on his social media account, Shaath stated he is officially announcing the reopening of the Rafah crossing after the completion of the necessary arrangements between the relevant parties for its operation in both directions, starting on Monday. He explained that tomorrow will be a trial day for testing the crossing's

operational procedures. Earlier yesterday, the Israeli occupation authorities officially announced the partial reopening of the Rafah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt on Sunday, provided that travellers and those returning undergo Israeli security checks, after nearly 20 months of complete closure. They stated that travel from the Gaza Strip will be fully co-ordinated with Egypt and subject to Israeli security approval, and that return to Gaza will be limited to those who left the Strip during the war. **(QNA)**

Academic highlights multilingualism as an investment in children

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

Multilingualism is an investment immensely in the teaching and learning process, an internationally acclaimed academic and behaviourist has highlighted. Speaking at the recently concluded International Day of Education activities organised by Qatar Foundation (QF), Prof Roberto Fillippi, professor of psychology at UCL Institute of Education, UK, said that several researches support his theory. Prof Fillippi is an expert in

cognitive psychology and multilingualism and director of the Multilingual and Cognition Lab at UCL. "Multilingualism is an investment in learning. It is an investment in identity and belonging, it is an investment in the future, an opportunity for the future for the children. And the key point to take home, for leaders, is to make language an asset in the strategy, not a deficit in the policy. For teachers, they need to plan for bilingualism, not just hope for it," explained Prof Fillippi.

Prof Fillippi appreciated the initiatives of QF in following a strong multilingual policy and bilingual identity based education by pro-

moting Arabic language, national identity, culture, ethics, and innovation. He said while attending the World Innovation Summit for Education last year in Qatar, he had learned more about the diverse learning strategies in Qatar and was quite impressed by them.

The academic said that researchers need to work a little bit more, collaborate more with educators and with policymakers. "Sometimes researchers, live in their own environment, they do their own research. And policymakers, of course, would need to listen to what we say, to what we find, to fund what is fundable, But making decisions on real scientific

evidence, I think is quite crucial for the future of multilingual education," he continued.

"Children raised in multilingual environments often show more efficient attention control. This is linked to the early maturation of brain areas involved in decision-making and reasoning and skills that are crucial for education. Multilingualism is not the exception, it is the norm," he highlighted.

At the same time, the expert noted that bilingualism can be challenging for some parents because they don't know how to communicate with their children in different languages. "Maybe

they are concerned that two or more languages can confuse the brain of those children," he noted.

He highlighted that there is no evidence that multilingualism is detrimental to linguistic or cognitive development. "On the contra-

ry, there are some kind of benefits of raising children with multilingualism. The benefits can be not only linguistic but also non-linguistic in areas of the brain related to attention and control, which is crucial for learning. There is also some evidence, especially when we grow older, that multilingualism can protect the brain from the negative effects of ageing," he added.

He pointed out that children from dual language schools have higher working memory skills, more efficient attention control, and higher musical skills, and that these skills are crucial for literacy, reading, and math development.



Prof Roberto Fillippi

**Minister meets Thailand's NSC secretary-general**

HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi met yesterday with Thailand's National Security Council (NSC) secretary-general Chatcai Bangchuad. During the meeting, they discussed the co-operation relations between the two countries and ways to support and develop them, and the latest developments in the Southeast Asian region, and strengthened co-operation to support regional and international security and stability, in addition to a number of topics of common interest. - QNA

Adviser to the PM meets Panamanian officials

HE the Adviser to the Prime Minister and the Official Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Majed bin Mohammed al-Ansari met separately in Panama with Minister of Foreign Affairs Javier Martinez-Acha, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Carlos Hoyos, and Minister of Maritime Affairs Luis Alberto Roquebert.

The meetings dealt with discussing bilateral co-operation between the two countries and the means to enhance it, latest developments in the region, in addition to several issues of joint interest.

Dr al-Ansari also met with Organisation of American States (OAS) secretary-general Albert Ramdin.

During the meetings, the two



sides discussed ways to enhance co-operation between Qatar and the OAS, in addition to a number of regional issues, with particular focus on developments in Latin America. - QNA

TRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF GEORGIA**MoFA's Dr al-Hammadi meets Georgian foreign minister**

HE the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) Dr Ahmed bin Hassan al-Hammadi met with Georgia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Maka Bochorishvili during the former's visit to Georgia.

During the meeting, they discussed the co-operation relations between the two countries, in addition to several topics of mutual interest. - QNA

Qatar, Georgia hold round of political consultations

The 4th round of political consultations between the foreign ministries of Qatar and Georgia was held yesterday in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. The Qatari side was headed by HE the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Ahmed bin Hassan al-Hammadi, while the Georgian side was headed by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Kvtisashvili.

During the round of consultations, they discussed the co-operation relations between the two countries and ways to support and strengthen them.

The round of consultations was attended by Qatar's



ambassador to Georgia Ali bin Yousef al-Mulla, the director of the European Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fahad bin Mohammed Kafoud, and the accompanying delegation. - QNA

Canada's governor-general meets Qatar's ambassador

Canada's Governor-General Mary Simon has met with Qatar's ambassador to Canada Tariq Ali Faraj al-Ansari. During the meeting, they discussed the co-operation relations between the two countries. - QNA

Ministry to host Kazakh Cultural Week next month

The Ministry of Culture (MoC) has announced that it will host the Kazakh Cultural Week, scheduled to take place on February 4-7 at Darb Al Saai in Umm Salal.

The initiative forms part of broader efforts to advance cultural diplomacy and strengthen channels of cultural exchange between Qatar and Kazakhstan.

The Kazakh Cultural Week programme features a range of activities showcasing the diversity of Kazakh culture, including traditional fashion displays, musical performances, handicraft exhibitions, visual arts presentations, and culinary experiences.

The current season builds on a series of successful cultural initiatives in recent years.

Following the Kazakh Cultural Week, Qatar will host the Russian Cultural Week.

Qatar previously hosted cultural weeks for Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan in 2024, followed by Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran last year. - QNA

iHeartMedia announced as official podcast partner at Web Summit Qatar 2026

QNA

The Government Communications Office (GCO) has announced that iHeartMedia, the world's biggest podcast publisher, will be the official podcast partner for the Web Summit Qatar 2026.

The summit is set to take place on February 1-4 at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre (DECC).

The 3rd Web Summit Qatar is set to bring together more than 30,000 tech-

nology and business leaders, founders, world-leading investors, media and more than 1,600 startups.

The summit will see a host of iHeartMedia's most prominent podcasters, producers, and executives participate in a range of events that will include educational sessions, live podcast recordings and centre-stage content like fireside chats, panel discussions and Q&A sessions.

"Welcoming iHeartMedia and its globally recognised podcast talent to Web Summit Qatar 2026 reflects our broader ambition to strengthen our creative

economy and to support the growth of creative and digital industries as engines of sustainable development," said GCO director Sheikh Jassim bin Mansour bin Jabor al-Thani.

"This partnership creates opportunities for knowledge exchange and new forms of digital expression that empower local talent and creators to strengthen Qatar's position as a hub for global media, content creation and innovation," he added.

Meanwhile, iHeartMedia chairman and chief executive Bob Pittman said that "at iHeart we believe in fostering

conversations that lead to creative and innovative ideas and solutions, and our partnership with the GCO continues to expand the boundaries of podcasting."

iHeartMedia is also set to launch during the summit a platform that will offer a host of its programming in Arabic, in a step that aims to bolster Arabic content on the global stage.

The Web Summit Qatar 2026 will also see the launch of a live studio that will record podcasts at the global event's site.

There will also be a dedicated space

for content creators, where podcast episodes will be recorded in both Arabic and English live at the summit.

The launch of the Arabic platform is also a significant milestone in the partnership between GCO and iHeartMedia, as it will boost Arabic audio content as well as the podcasting industry more broadly in Qatar and the region.

The GCO said that the lineup and schedule for the summit's programme, speakers, and sessions can be viewed by visiting <https://qatar.websummit.com/schedule/>

Qatar takes part in economic forum in Panama City

HE the Adviser to the Prime Minister and Official Spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) Dr Majed bin Mohammed al-Ansari took part in the 2026 Latin America and Caribbean International Economic Forum, organised by the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF) in Panama City.

Dr al-Ansari participated in a panel discussion on "From Energy to Innovation: Shaping a Shared Agenda between Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East for the Next Decade".

He affirmed that Qatar's openness toward Latin America and the Caribbean forms part of a strategic approach aimed at building diverse, balanced and sustainable partnerships that enhance regional and global resilience, particularly in light of the rapid transformations taking place in the international system.

Dr al-Ansari highlighted the shared principles underpinning co-operation between the two sides, foremost among them a commitment to multilateralism and respect for international law, the importance of dialogue and the peaceful settlement of disputes, as well as co-operation in the fields of energy and addressing climate change challenges.

He noted that economic and energy diversification represents a key pillar in strengthening eco-

nomic resilience, underscoring the role of liquefied natural gas (LNG) as a transitional energy source that supports global energy security while contributing to emissions reduction, alongside increased investment in clean energy and low-carbon technologies.

Dr al-Ansari also stressed the importance of aligning international partnerships with national development priorities to ensure sustainability and long-term impact.

He emphasised that the success of such partnerships depends on clear regulatory frameworks, enhanced governance and transparency, capacity building, and the translation of strategic visions into practical and implementable projects.

Concluding his remarks, Dr al-Ansari affirmed that Latin America and the Caribbean represent strategic partners for Qatar in shaping a future agenda focused on energy security, food and water security, and applied digital solutions, contributing to stability and shared growth over the coming decade.

On the sidelines of the forum, the official met with Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF) executive president Sergio Diaz-Granados, during which the two sides discussed ways to enhance co-operation between Qatar and the bank. - QNA



He emphasised that preserving Qatar's unique natural environmental heritage is a key priority, noting that sabkhas represent one of its most prominent components.

"The outcomes of this conference will align with the aspirations of both the State and the university, and the research presented will contribute to strengthening research-based higher education and engaging university students, at various stages of their academic journey, in research of local relevance and global significance," Prof Erbad said.

Prof Hamad al-Saad al-Kuwari, the director of the QU's Environmental Science Centre, emphasised that sabkhas are unique ecosystems that form under arid climatic conditions.

He noted that the most representative modern sabkhas are found around the Arabian Gulf, with Qatar hosting the best-preserved ones.

"This conference aims to advance research on sabkha ecosystems, emphasise their interdisciplinary significance, and raise awareness of the need for their conservation and protection," Prof al-Kuwari added.

He acknowledged the essential contribution of ExxonMobil, the sole sponsor, in enabling the successful organisation of the event.



Ceprotec, Amwaj Drinking Water host annual party for employees

The annual staff party, jointly organised by leading project supplies companies Ceprotec and Amwaj Drinking Water, was held at the ICC Ashoka Hall in a lively, celebratory atmosphere.

The event was marked by strong participation from employees and management, alongside a range of engaging entertainment programmes.

Staff members who demonstrated outstanding performance across various divisions were recognised during the ceremony, while cultural performances added colour and energy to the evening.

A special highlight of the celebration was the cake-cutting ceremony to mark the birthday of chief executive Jose Philip.

The gathering was attended by community leaders and invited guests, including Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) president Manikantan A P, ICC general secretary Abraham K Joseph, Indian Community Benevolent Forum (ICBF) president Shanawas Bava, Indian Sports Centre (ICS) president E P Abdurrahman, Indian Business and Professionals Council (IBPC) president Taha Muhammed, Kerala Business Forum (KBF) president Shaheen Muhammad Shafi, Address Gateway managing director Shamseer Hamsa, Mediaplus chief executive Dr Amanulla Vadakkangara, Qatar Tech managing director Jebi K John, and ICBF managing committee member and Asharya and Medical Camp representative Mini Sibi.

The celebration concluded with a dinner, and special gifts were distributed to all attendees.



QC's projects in Kyrgyzstan reach over 150,000 beneficiaries in 2025

Qatar Charity (QC), with the support of donors in the country, implemented a wide range of humanitarian and development projects across Kyrgyzstan last year, benefiting more than 150,000 people from the most vulnerable groups.

These initiatives were carried out in co-ordination with relevant government authorities, reflecting the growing humanitarian and development cooperation between the two countries.

These initiatives form part of the QC's ongoing commitment to supporting sustainable development, strengthening social stability, and improving living standards.

They were implemented through integrated programmes across seven Kyrgyz regions, with a particular focus on Chuy, Issyk Kul, and Naryn, in response to their priority development and service needs.

In the construction and development sector, the QC implemented 37 projects, including the construction and rehabilitation of mosques, drilling wells and providing access to safe drinking water, establishing Qur'an memorisation centres, and building schools and kindergartens.

The projects included the construction

and equipping of health centres and hospitals, as well as the construction of homes for vulnerable families living in unsuitable conditions.

These interventions improved access to essential services, safeguarded human dignity, and enhanced community stability in the targeted areas.

The QC also implemented 53 projects in the fields of economic empowerment and humanitarian relief.

These projects focused on supporting the livelihoods of low-income families, providing relief assistance, and enabling beneficiaries to improve their economic conditions, thereby strengthening self-reliance and mitigating the impacts of poverty.

As part of its social care programmes, the QC implemented four social projects, benefiting 14,190 individuals.

These initiatives focused on supporting the most vulnerable groups, strengthening social protection mechanisms, and reinforcing solidarity and social cohesion within local communities.

In the area of orphan care and sponsorship, the QC, through its "Rofqa" initiative, continued its humanitarian efforts in Kyrgyzstan, sponsoring 9,619 orphans during 2025.



The supported children receive assistance in education, healthcare, nutrition, and essential needs, helping to provide a safe and stable environment and enhance their prospects for a better future.

The QC's efforts received official praise from Kyrgyz officials, who commended the organisation's humanitarian and development role and its continued contributions to supporting key sectors and improving the living conditions of vulnerable populations.

Adylbek Kasymaliev, chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic, expressed his appreciation for the QC's efforts.

"We highly value the activities of the QC in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan and extend our sincere thanks and appreciation for the significant efforts it makes in contributing to the development of governmental, social, and economic sectors in the country," he said.

AbdelGadir Alimam al-Basheir, the di-



rector of the QC's Office in Kyrgyzstan, affirmed that the 2025 results reflect the organisation's firm commitment to supporting people and empowering communities.

He noted that Qatar Charity will continue working in co-operation with official authorities and local partners to ensure the sustainability of its impact and enhance the effectiveness of its humanitarian and development interventions in the coming period.

NU-Q fellowship brings the Global South to the centre via student-led research, storytelling

By Shaima Sheriff
Staff Reporter

From Pakistan's historic neighbourhoods to stateless football teams and displaced communities, Northwestern University in Qatar (NU-Q)'s Global Undergraduate Fellows showcased student-led projects rooted in lived experience and global inquiry.

The NU-Q put student voices, curiosity and field-based learning centre-stage as it hosted the fourth cohort of the Global Undergraduate Fellows Presentations on January 28, with 16 students showcasing original research and creative projects developed over a year-long fellowship at its events hall.

The programme, run by the NU-Q's Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South (IAS), enables selected undergraduate and graduate students to develop evidence-based storytelling and knowledge production through three tracks: academic research papers, multimodal or creative projects, and short documentary films.

Fieldwork for this year's cohort took place across 10 countries, engaging diverse methodologies and perspectives centred on the Global South.

Speaking at the event, NU-Q dean and chief executive Marwan M Kraidy described the fellowship as a platform for students to undertake graduate-level research while producing original insights "in words, images and sounds".

"What this fellowship allows our students to do is true graduate-level research," he said. "They produce original insights about the world, whether through research papers, websites,



Marwan M Kraidy



Clovis Bergere



Mohammed Shayan Ahmad

multimodal projects or documentary films."

Kraidy emphasised the programme's competitive nature, noting that fellows are selected through a rigorous proposal process.

Once admitted, students receive intellectual, academic, technical, and professional mentoring from faculty, postdoctoral scholars, and staff while balancing their academic coursework.

"The classroom is just one place where education happens," he said. "Going outside the classroom and pursuing projects driven by intellectual and creative curiosity is where real personal growth takes place."

This year's fellowship was represented through a custom illustration that reflected the journey of the 2025 cohort.

The artwork places the Global South at the centre, presenting it as an interconnected whole rather than isolated regions, with visual elements symbolising specific countries and shared histories, movement and dialogue.

According to Clovis Bergere, the director of the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South, the fellow-

ship is designed as a 12-month journey that mirrors the realities of professional research and storytelling.

"Students spend the spring refining their ideas, the summer in the field conducting research or filming, and the fall producing their final work," he explained. "Throughout the year, they face moments of doubt, challenge and uncertainty – but that struggle is essential to their growth."

Bergere added that the projects are united by personal passion.

"These are questions students care deeply about," he said. "They're the ideas that keep them up at night. Our role is to help them become better evidence-based storytellers."

Among the student presentations was that of third-year journalism student Mohammad Shayan Ahmad, who presented a research paper on *Genrified Time and Mismatched Clocks: Asynchronous Gentrification of Shahi Muhalia*.

His work examined urban change in Lahore, Pakistan, and its impact on local communities.

"People enjoy the view, the food, the heritage – but they don't see what's behind the view," Ahmad said. "I wanted to create awareness about those who are being neglected in the process."

He described the challenge of building trust with residents and navigating climate-related disruptions during fieldwork, adding that the experience reshaped his understanding of journalism and research.

Fourth-year journalism student Neel Shelat presented a multimodal project on *The Struggle for Sporting Recognition*, focusing on stories from the 2025 CONIFA Asia Cup, which features teams excluded from mainstream in-

ternational football.

"Football is global, political, social and cultural," he said. "These communities use the sport as a platform to tell their stories."

Despite logistical challenges, including venue changes and visa arrangements, Shelat said the project reaffirmed his belief in grassroots sport as an authentic expression of identity and resistance.

Meanwhile, fellow fourth-year journalism student Isra Fejzullaj presented a short documentary titled *My Soil, My Soul*, exploring displacement, memory and identity through the story of the Albanian Cham Plight/Community.

"It wasn't just a film," she said. "It was uncomfortable growth."

She described the difficulty of finding a compelling central character and navigating emotionally charged conversations around displacement and genocide.

The project also connected deeply with her own family history, leading her to discover a personal dimension within the story she was telling.

"Through this process, I found my passion for documentary filmmaking," Fejzullaj said.

The event highlighted how experiential learning programmes, such as the Global Undergraduate Fellowship, allow students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world contexts while developing confidence, empathy and professional skills.

As Kraidy noted, the programme showcases "the very best students and the very best projects" at the NU-Q – not only for their academic rigour, but for their ability to humanise complex global issues through storytelling grounded in lived experience.

Doha all set to host region's largest tech event tomorrow

From Page 1

The Opening Night on February 1 will feature a centre-stage programme streamed live across the venue, alongside a DJ performance by Questlove – the Oscar-winning, Emmy-nominated filmmaker and co-founder of the legendary hip-hop group The Roots.

Food Summit will serve global cuisine, while ticket holders will also gain access to the Night Summit, an open-air festival transforming DECC Park into a social and networking hub.

Night Summit activities will run from 6pm-10pm each evening, with the opening night programme scheduled from 7.30pm-10pm.

The space will feature interactive and social zones including fire pits, foosball, mini golf, giant Jenga, padel courts, karaoke, a sports bar, reading room, networking garden, and bubble garden.

Organisers say the aim is to create an informal environment where conversations continue beyond the conference halls.

Among the activities is the Mini Golf Opening Jam, designed as an energetic icebreaker for attendees, and Padel Pitching sessions, which combine short, coached padel rotations with off-court pitching and direct mentor feedback.

Board game sessions will also be available for those seeking a break from screens, highlighting Web Summit Qatar's focus on meaningful, human-centred connection.

Day 1 of the summit will open with a keynote at 9.30am on "Qatar's Digital Agenda 2030: Building a knowledge-based digital economy", outlining how national digital strategy is translating vision into tangible outcomes across jobs, skills, and economic impact, led by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.

The opening day will also feature breakout startup sessions, showcasing emerging companies pitching disruptive ideas and technologies, with speakers including Ranime El Skaff of Prop-AI, Hassan Albalawi of WakeCap Technologies, and Wisam Costandi of EMMA Systems.

Web Summit Qatar 2026 is expected to host around 30,000 participants, over 1,600 startups, more than 800 investors, 180 global partners, and more than 400 speakers.

With more than 600 international media professionals attending, it will be the largest edition of the global event ever held in Qatar.



Isra Fejzullaj (centre).



Neel Shelat



NIARC Qatar holds medical camp for special needs kids

The Qatar chapter of Nest Internal Academy & Research Centre (NIARC) successfully organised the "Nurture & Heal - Medical Camp for Children with Special Needs and Their Families" at Reyada Medical Centre, Doha, on January 23.

The free medical camp drew families from more than 11 nationalities and received widespread appreciation.

The event was inaugurated by chief guest Eish Singhal, IPS, First Secretary (Labour and Community Welfare), Embassy of India, Qatar.

Families from diverse communities – including German, Brit-

ish, Indian, American, Filipino, Syrian, Zimbabwean, Egyptian, Nigerian, Algerian and Pakistani – participated in the camp.

The programme featured addresses by Jafar Munafar, general secretary, NIARC Qatar, and Shannah Edodi, chairman, NIARC Qatar chapter and the chief guest.

During the felicitation ceremony, Shanavas Bava, president of ICBF; Mini Siby, head of ICBF medical camp; and Bindu Linson, president of UNIQ; were honoured.

A major highlight of the event was the launch of the NIARC – Reyada Medical Privilege Card,

which was inaugurated by Jamshere Hamza, managing director of Reyada Medical Centre, alongside Singhal.

The programme concluded with a vote of thanks by Mustafa Eeram, event management convener, NIARC.

Addressing the gathering, Edodi stated: "Together, we have taken a meaningful step toward building a more compassionate, inclusive, and caring society. Let us continue this journey – hand in hand – for a better tomorrow."

The success of the camp was made possible by the efforts of NIARC officials and volunteers, including Rasik K V, Shahajar,



Muneer Bradma, Dr S K Vyas, Na-beel, Thaha Bargavi, Shameem, UNIQ members, well-wishers, and master of ceremonies Snaha Thomas. Special thanks were also extended to key supporters UNIQ, 98.6 FM, MRA, Berlin Fasteners, Bradma, and Reyada Medical Centre for hosting the event.



Expat forum celebrates 'UP Diwas' with grandeur

The Uttar Pradesh Pratham Welfare Association (UP-PWA), an associate organisation of the Indian Community Benevolent Forum (ICBF) under the aegis of the embassy of India in Qatar, celebrated UP Diwas recently at MIE-Savitribai Phule Pune University, Doha.

Vipul, ambassador of India to Qatar, was the chief guest, while Harish Pandey, first secretary (Education and Culture), Indian embassy, was the guest of honour. Several distinguished personalities were present as special guests.

More than 200 people, including children, participated in the celebrations. The programme began with a welcome by RJ Nazia, followed by the national anthems of India and Qatar. Ziauddin Ahmad, president of UPPWA, delivered the welcome address and highlighted the long-standing demand of the Uttar Pradesh diaspora for direct flight connectivity.



ity between Qatar and the state. Sara Khan rendered a patriotic song. Indian ambassador Vipul made the keynote address.

Asif Khan, vice president of UPPWA, along with other office-bearers, felicitated the chief guest and guest of honour.

The cultural segment featured an elegant Kathak performance by Rushika Nautial, Kavya Singh, Anupriya Trivedi, Mannan Kaur, Dristi Pramanik, Samira Mathur, Pavki Maheshwari Kanoria, Sunvi Hati, Nandini Arun, Samaira Singh and Yadvi Srinivasa Ra-ghavan, choreographed by Sonali

Jadhav. A solo dance by Sanika Rajhansa and group performance by students of DPS-MIS, choreographed by Maniksha Balodi, Supriya and Ambili, captivated the audience.

The programme also included a poetry session by Shalini Verma and Dr Meenu Mansi. Appreciation certificates were presented to performers, and an audio-visual presentation showcasing the tourism, culture, and heritage of Uttar Pradesh drew special applause. The event concluded with a vote of thanks by Junaid Khan, general secretary of UPPWA.

ICC honours Indian teams at Shell Eco-marathon

The Indian Cultural Centre (ICC), under the aegis of the Indian embassy in Qatar, organised a felicitation ceremony on January 27 at the Ashoka Hall to honour the five outstanding Indian teams that represented India at the Shell Eco-marathon 2026, held at the Lusail International Circuit, Doha. The programme began with opening remarks by Rakesh Wagh, head HR and Consular. He commended the participating teams for their ingenuity in designing energy-efficient vehicles. A P Manikantan, president of ICC welcomed all five teams from India. He expressed immense pride in hosting the young innovators at



ICC. The felicitation ceremony honoured the five teams for their participation and achievements, namely, Team Kaizen - Pandit Deendayal Energy University, Gandhinagar; Team Renew - Kumaraguru College of Technology, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. The felicitation was led by A P Manikantan, along with members of the ICC managing committee and Muniyappan, president of QTS.

School of Engineering, Mumbai; Team Folium Eco Drive - College of Engineering, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala; Team Pravega - Government Engineering College, (Thiruvananthapuram); Team ETA & Yugant - K J Somaiya

SIS shines in inter-club athletic competition

Shantiniketan Indian School (SIS) has celebrated the achievement of its young athlete, Mohammed Irfan of Class 8-D, who brought honour to the institution at the Inter-Club Athletic Competition organised by the Qatar Athletic Federation in Doha. In the highly competitive Under-16 category, Irfan secured the gold medal in the long jump, with an impressive effort of 6.05m.



Overall champions Wakrah and Madinat Khalifa with the trophy.

The Malarvadi Children Organisation – Qatar chapter successfully hosted Malarvadi Talentino 2026, a grand children's arts festival. Wakrah Zone and Madinat Khalifa Zone emerged as joint overall champions, finishing with equal points and sharing the championship title. Rayyan Zone secured second place, followed by Thumama Zone in third. More than 800 children, who qualified through preliminary rounds held across various regions of Qatar, competed in the mega finals. Participants represented their respective zones in individual and group events, with competitions spread across 24 disciplines and six venues. The festival showcased the artistic talents of boys and girls aged 12 and under. The competitions were

organised under four categories – Buds, Kids, Sub Junior, and Junior – covering a wide range of performances. The concluding session opened with a Qur'an recitation by Ameen. Renowned Qatari visual artist Hessa Kalla attended as chief guest. Prizes were distributed by R S Abdul Jaleel, president of the Centre for Indian Community; along with KT Mubarak, vice-



INDIAN REPUBLIC DAY CELEBRATIONS

PODAR PEARL SCHOOL



Podar Pearl School commemorated the 77th Republic Day of India with great enthusiasm and patriotic fervour.

The event was graced by Vice-President Dr Steffy Rachel Sam, who unfurled the national tricolour and delivered the President of India's message.

The occasion was also graced by the presence of members of the board of directors, Ashraf Madathil and Fayed Nizar, Dr Maneesh Mangal, principal, senior leadership team members, along with teaching and non-teaching faculty from all campuses. The occasion stood as a proud reminder of India's constitutional heritage, democratic ideals, and the shared responsibility of citizens in shaping the nation's future. The celebrations reinforced the values of unity, integrity, and progress that underpin the Republic of India.

DPS-MIS



DPS-Modern Indian School (DPS-MIS) has marked the 77th Republic Day of India.

The chief guest, Sreedharan Kunniramath, director of DPS-Modern Indian School, unfurled the tricolour and the entire DPS-MIS fraternity joined in the rendition of the national anthem. Addressing the gathering, principal Asna Nafees highlighted India's core values of democracy, fraternity, and unity in diversity.

She also shared with pride that DPS-Modern Indian School students have been invited to present a large-scale mosaic artwork on the Sustainable Development Goals at Qatar National Convention Centre. There was also a patriotic rendition by the school choir and a powerful poem recitation by the students.

DPS Monarch International



DPS Monarch International School celebrated the 77th Republic Day of India at the school's multi-purpose hall. The chief guest graced the occasion, along with school director Sonny Varghese, school president Yasir Nainar, executive committee and council members, guests, principal Meenal Bakshi, the leadership team, co-ordinators, staff, parents and students.

The programme, hosted by secondary students Amal Maryam and Avni Khator of Grade IX, began with a welcome address, followed by the unfurling of the national flag and singing of the national anthem.

The celebrations continued with a school choir performance featuring patriotic songs, while a special kindergarten presentation shared interesting trivia about Republic Day. Principal

Meenal Bakshi addressed the gathering. A highlight of the programme was a veena performance by Class VI student Lingesh Karthik Kumar, an autistic child and record holder in the Kalam Book of World Records (2024). The school acknowledged his mentor, Thamarai Selvi, and the SEN department for nurturing his abilities. The programme also featured an English poem and patriotic speeches in Hindi and English by primary students, and a dance presentation by Grades III, IV, and IX. The event concluded with a vote of thanks.

IWA



IWA celebrated Republic Day at Radisson Blu. An evening filled with pride, joy, and togetherness. The presence of our esteemed guests, traditional dance performances by members, a quiz on India, and a large number of loving members made it a memorable evening.



Students honoured at Bangladesh MHM School and College event

The Annual Prize Distribution Ceremony 2026 was celebrated with grandeur at Bangladesh MHM School and College on January 23, bringing together students, parents, and the school community to honour academic and co-curricular excellence.

The event commenced with a recitation from the Holy Qur'an, followed by speeches and the much-awaited prize-giving session. Mohammad Hazrat Ali Khan, Bangladesh's ambassador to Qatar, was the chief guest. The ceremony was also graced by governing body members, parent-teacher asso-



ciation representatives and distinguished community members.

Principal (In-Charge) ATM Asadusjaman welcomed the gathering, and highlighted the school's achievements across academ-

ics, sports, and cultural pursuits. Aminul Hoque, adviser of the Cultural & Sports Sub-Committee, also spoke.

In his address, the chief guest lauded students for their dedica-



tion, noting that extracurricular activities cultivate qualities such as discipline, resilience, teamwork, and integrity.

During the ceremony, the school recognised key stakeholders,

for academic and co-curricular excellence, including toppers, position holders, GPA-5 achievers, and champions across various events.

The prize-giving session was followed by a cultural programme featuring 170 participants, which captivated the audience. Highlights included songs, dramas addressing social themes such as "Addiction to Device" and the July Revolution, traditional dances such as 'Mounachi' and 'Chomke Chomke', and a fashion show celebrating Bangladeshi culture. The programme concluded with a vote of thanks by Asadusjaman.

BPS organises Annual Sports Day

Birla Public School organised its 22nd Annual Athletic Meet 2025-26 on January 24. The ceremony commenced with a recital from the Holy Qur'an followed by the school prayer and the national anthem of Qatar. Mohammed Mourin Abdalslam, 100m national champion, and Farooque Aman, national long jump champion, were the guests of honour. The other distinguished guests included management representatives, Chindhu Anthony Rappai, Nevile Lukose and Siddharth Shahani, along with the school's leadership team - Principal Anand R Nair, vice-principals Radhika Rele, Edna Fernandez, and HMs of various sections.

The 22nd Annual Sports Day started off with a welcome address by Albert Anthony, head of the physical education department, followed by a colourful dance and martial arts performed by the students. One of the highlights of the



of the flame. This was followed by the hoisting of the school flag by Farooque Aman. The school sports captain, Pratishtha Balwant Dangi, the national gold medallist in swimming and Khelo India silver medallist, led the oath-taking ceremony.

The gathering was addressed by the principal and Chindhu Anthony.

Earlier, the guest of honour, Mohammed Mourin, officially declared the annual sports meet open. The ceremony concluded with prize distribution, honouring of young achievers, and vote of thanks by sports captain, Naban Jamsheed Backer.

ceremony was the house-wise march past by students of Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and Neptune Houses, along with Scouts and Guides. The torch relay ceremony, showcased the achievements of the school's outstanding athletes, and culminated in the lighting

ceremony.

BPS fetes Grade 10, 12 toppers



Birla Public School (BPS) felicitated the Grade 10 and Grade 12 students for their outstanding academic and co-curricular achievements. The students who secured top positions following the CBSE re-evaluation, along with those who were awarded in the CBSE Gulf Sahodaya Principals' Annual Conference were recognised. Students who received recognition at various global platforms were also honoured in the Achievement Award

Ceremony held on January 25. The event was graced by vice-chairman Dr Mohan Thomas, principal Dr Anand R Nair, and members of the senior leadership team. A special mention was accorded to the students who participated in Thimun Qatar, where their project was adjudged the best among 73 participating schools across Qatar. In addition, teachers who demonstrated consistent dedication and subject expertise were honoured for mentoring students for the CBSE

Board Examinations. Dr Mohan Thomas and Dr Nair congratulated the students and teachers for their efforts. Grade XI students Umesh Ganeshan and Avantika Rajagopalan, who were among the Grade X toppers, shared their experiences during the CBSE examinations. The programme concluded with a motivational song by the school choir under the guidance of Marshal D'Silva. The event was compered by Alan John and Ranchini Binu.

DPS-MIS honoured with Gulf academic excellence award

A moment of immense pride illuminated the journey of DPS-Modern Indian School (DPS-MIS) as it was conferred the Award of Academic Excellence at the 38th CBSE Gulf Sahodaya Principals' Conference 2025-26, held from January 4-6.

This recognition celebrates the school's 15-year legacy of academic distinction in the CBSE Grade X and XII Board

Examinations across Qatar and the GCC region. During the valedictory ceremony, Principal Asna Nafees was presented with merit certificates in recognition of the students who topped the Grade X and XII CBSE Board Examinations 2024-25. In Grade X, Ritesh Vardhan Reddy Kanjula distinguished himself as the 'Qatar Topper' and secured the second position

in the Gulf region with an outstanding score of 99.6%. In Grade XII, Arush Sharma and Kenil Vrajeshkumar Gandhi attained the second position in the Science stream in Qatar with an impressive aggregate of 97.6%, while Nandini Nachiappan, with 97.4%, achieved the third position in Qatar.

In addition, the institution also received special commendation for its outstanding achievements at CBSE National Sports events, securing 10 medals in chess, badminton, and taekwondo. The prestigious conference, with Padma Shri awardee and renowned Paralympic athlete Deepa Malik as the chief guest, was attended by 106 principals from six Gulf countries. CBSE Affiliation director Jay Prakash Chaturvedi was also present.



Innovators shine at RPS expo 'Mindscape 2026'

Rajagiri Public School (RPS), Old Airport Branch, hosted Mindscape 2026, a vibrant exhibition showcasing the talents and innovations of young learners from the Primary Section (Grades 1-4) recently.

Aligned with the theme "Where Curiosity Becomes Creativity", the event offered students a meaningful platform to demonstrate their academic excellence and artistic flair.

The exhibition was inaugurated by chief guest, Jinsu Aju, admin director, followed by an inaugural address by Radhakrishnan, vice-principal.

Mindscape 2026 featured an impressive display of nearly 250 projects in science, social science, and mathematics.

Additionally, 45 projects in second languages and 50 exhibits on Qatar History were showcased.

A major highlight of the exhibition was the English



Department's visual presentation. There were also performances by the Music and Dance Department and the Art Department transformed the venue into a creative gallery. The Parent Council's food stalls supported a charity initiative in collaboration with the Qatar Cancer Centre. The principal, Joshy Abraham, commended the dedication of the teachers, the students, and the support of parents.



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The Parent Council's food stalls supported a charity initiative in collaboration with the Qatar Cancer Centre.

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ebrating Bangladeshi culture. The

programme concluded with a vote

of thanks by Asadusjaman.



MES crowned champions at art and literary contest

MES Indian School was ad-judged the overall cham-pions at the 15th edition of Pravasi Sahityotsav - Campus Sahityotsav, a prestigious national-level two-day art and literary competition.

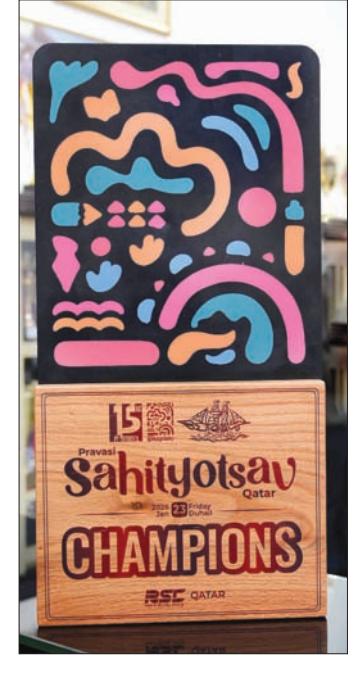
MES secured this prestigious title for the third time. The offstage events of the competition were held on January 22 at British Modern International School, while the onstage events were conducted on January 23 at the Multipurpose Hall of the University of Doha for Science and Technology.

The events, including poem recitation (English and Malayalam), elocution, story writing, poem writing, essay writing, social tweet, pencil drawing, collage, newspaper design, and choral poem recitation, witnessed participation from MES students, comprising boys and girls across the Junior, Secondary, and General (Group) categories. The individ-

ual prize winners: Vishnu Vinod Krishnan in elocution - English; Goutham Praveen Kumar, Muhammad Hasibin in poem recitation - Malayalam; Jefin John Punnoose in essay writing - English; Atheequr Rahman in poem recitation - English; Aariz Mazood Khan in story writing - English; Devanand Daha and team in newspaper design; Nadia Anzar in essay writing - English; and Evana Binu in pencil drawing bagged the first prize in their respective categories of the contest. Muhammad Shan Shefy and Nadia Anzar in social tweet - English; Ayaan Mohamed in pencil drawing; and Ishaan Andisseri in poem writing - English secured the second place in their respective categories.

The school management, prin-cipal and staff congratulated all the participants.

Abdul Karim, Sudhir, Davidson T, Kavitha Rajan, Renitha, and Delphy co-ordinated.



MES student wins gold in athletics competition

Mohammed Faizan (Class 8) of MES Indian School secured a gold medal by delivering an outstanding performance in the Under-16 javelin throw event organised by the Qatar Athletics Federation recently. Adding to the school's success, Mohammed Hamdan of Class 7 won a bronze medal in shot put. Aethelbert Tinto of Class 7 also earned a bronze medal as a member of the relay team.

The school's principal, Dr Hameeda Kadar, has congratulated the winners and acknowledged the efforts of the coaches and parents.



Malayali Samajam felicitates MES students, teachers

Malayali Samajam, a prominent socio-cultural organisation, honoured academic excellence by felicitating 25 students who secured top marks in Malayalam in the Class 10 CBSE Examination 2024-25, along with 10 dedicated teachers who played a pivotal role in their success.

The event was held at the Indian Cultural Centre recently.

The programme recognised and encouraged students from Indian schools across the country who demonstrated proficiency in Malayalam during the last academic year. Adoor Prakash, Member of Parliament, was the chief guest and presented mementoes and prizes to the awardees.

An inter-school quiz competition



was also conducted, with participation from 15 schools. Anikait Krishna (Class X) and Afina Faisal (Class VIII-N) from MES

Indian School secured second place. Dr Hameeda Kadar has congratulated the students and the teachers their support.

MES students excel in badminton tourney

MES Indian School students delivered outstanding performances at the prestigious ISC (Indian Sports Centre) and Yonex Badminton tournaments, securing first, second, and third positions across multiple categories.

Anusree Shine (Class X), Harshan Ayyappan (Class VI), and Carroll Bethany (Class VI) showcased exceptional talent and determination at the tournament, held at Prime & Alpha Sports Centre from January 21-24.

Anusree Shine emerged as the star performer, clinching first place in the under-17 singles and

under-19 mixed doubles events, in addition to securing

second place in the Open Mixed Doubles category.

Further strengthening the school's medal tally,

Harshan Ayyappan claimed first place in the under-13

doubles and earned a bronze medal in the under-13

singles. Carroll Bethany also delivered a commendable performance, finishing second and third in the Under-13



singles category. The ISC and Yonex Badminton

Tournaments drew participants across junior divisions

from Under-9 to Under-19, as well as adult categories

including men's singles A, men's doubles A, and open mixed doubles.

Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar has congratulated the students on their achievements.

Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar has congratulated the students on their achievements.



People inspect one of the tents, housing displaced Palestinians in the Mawasi area of Khan Yunis, in southern Gaza Strip, following Israeli strikes.

Two Palestinians killed, six injured in Israeli strikes on Gaza

QNA

Gaza

Two Palestinians were martyred and six injured yesterday as Israeli forces struck Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza and Khan Yunis in the south. Medical sources reported the deaths occurred during an Israeli drone strike targeting civilians in Maghazi, while shelling hit a displaced persons' tent in Khan Yunis. Israeli warships also opened fire on fishermen off Gaza's coast.

The attacks violate the ceasefire in place, and continues a relentless campaign of airstrikes, artillery shelling, drone assaults, and home demolitions that have left hundreds dead or wounded and displaced countless others since the conflict's escalation in Oct 2023.

World must tackle 'dire' conditions in Gaza: Red Cross

AFP

Geneva

The world must scale up efforts to alleviate the human suffering in Gaza, building on the momentum from the ceasefire's first phase, the head of the Red Cross said yesterday.

The US-brokered ceasefire, which sought to halt the fighting between Israel and Hamas sparked by the group's October 2023 storming of Israel, has been in place for more than three months despite both sides accusing the other of repeated violations.

Earlier in January, Washington announced the truce had progressed to its second phase, intended to bring a definitive end to the war.

"States must harness the momentum generated by the first phase of the agreement between Israel and Hamas to urgently improve the dire humanitarian conditions in Gaza," Mirjana Spoljaric

ic, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, said in a statement.

Over the last 15 weeks, the ICRC worked with Israel, Hamas and the ceasefire mediators to help bring hostages, detainees, and the remains of the deceased back to their families, as outlined in the first phase of the agreement, Spoljaric said. The remains of the final Israeli hostage, were returned earlier this week.

"These actions allowed families to be reunited with their loved ones and properly mourn those they lost. This work, however difficult, demonstrates the irreplaceable role of humanitarian steps in the long path towards peace," said Spoljaric.

"The international community must now seize every opportunity to scale up efforts that alleviate suffering in Gaza."

Spoljaric said this included Israel easing entry restrictions on so-called dual-use material and equipment, such as water pipes

and generators, to restore basic infrastructure.

"Many people in Gaza are still living in the rubble without basic services, struggling to stay warm amid harsh winter conditions," the ICRC chief said.

"Thousands of families continue to wait for news about their loved ones. Hospitals, homes, schools and water systems need to be repaired, and unexploded ordnance must be cleared."

Most of the population in the Gaza Strip, a territory of more than 2mn people, is displaced, with many living in tents with little or no sanitation amid harsh winter weather.

"All states and parties to conflict have a responsibility to ensure the boundaries and protections enshrined in international humanitarian law are upheld," said Spoljaric.

"This is essential for saving lives, restoring human dignity and laying the foundations on which lasting peace can be built."

25 killed in Nigeria's deadliest reported militant attack since US strikes

Reuters

Maiduguri

At least 25 people were killed when suspected Boko Haram militants attacked a town in northern Nigeria, relatives of victims said, the deadliest reported militant attack since US President Donald Trump ordered air strikes on Christmas Day.

The victims were labourers who had travelled to Sabon Gari town in northeastern Nigeria's Borno State to work at a construction

site, when gunmen swept in on Thursday and opened fire, relatives Hassan Usman and Auwal Isa told Reuters. Aliyu Ndume, a senator who represents the region, said he was "shocked and saddened" by the killing of his constituents.

In a separate militant attack, also on Thursday in Borno, at least nine soldiers and two members of a civilian task force assisting them were killed by fighters who launched a pre-dawn assault on an army base. Sixteen people were wounded. Borno, where Boko

Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) fighters have intensified attacks on military convoys and civilians, remains the epicentre of the 17-year insurgency.

Nigeria, plagued by militant attacks and mass kidnappings, is under additional pressure to restore security since Trump accused it last year of failing to protect Christians. US forces struck what they described as terrorist targets on December 25. The Nigerian authorities say they are co-operating with Washington to improve security.

SA, Israel expel envoys in deepening feud

South Africa ordered Israel's top diplomat to leave the country within 72 hours yesterday, citing a "series of violations" and prompting the Israeli government to expel Pretoria's own diplomatic representative, AFP reported from Johannesburg. Ties between the nations are already strained by South Africa's case before the UN top court in 2023 to argue that Israel's war on Gaza amounts to genocide. The South African foreign ministry said it had informed Israel that its chargé d'affaires, Ariel Seidman, was "persona non grata" and "required to depart from the Republic within 72 hours".

"This decisive measure follows a series of unacceptable violations of diplomatic norms and practice which pose a direct challenge to South Africa's sovereignty," it said. Breaches included "the

repeated use of official Israeli social media platforms to launch insulting attacks" on President Cyril Ramaphosa, the statement said. The foreign ministry also accused the embassy of a "deliberate failure" to inform South Africa of visits by senior Israeli officials. The Israeli foreign ministry swiftly responded that South Africa's senior diplomatic representative, Shaun Byneveldt, "is persona non grata and must leave Israel within 72 hours". South African officials were angered by a tweet from the Israeli embassy in November that commented: "A rare moment of wisdom and diplomatic clarity from President Ramaphosa." The post was in reaction to a news story citing Ramaphosa as saying "boycott politics doesn't work", in reference to US President Donald Trump's decision to not attend the G20 summit in Johannesburg.

IS claims attack on airport in Niger capital

Reuters

Niamey

Islamic State claimed responsibility for an attack on the airport in Niger's capital Niamey in a statement yesterday, according to SITE Intelligence Group, which tracks militant activity and communications worldwide.

The Islamic State affiliate in the region has been linked to high-profile attacks in Niger in recent months, killing over 120 people in the Tillaberi region in September and abducting an American pilot in October.

The attack on the airport began on Wednesday night and involved gunfire and loud explosions before calm returned on

Putin meets Iran's top security official Larijani amid tension

AFP

Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin met the head of Iran's top security body in Moscow yesterday, the Kremlin said, as Donald Trump sought to force Tehran to make a deal on its nuclear programme.

"The head of state received in the Kremlin the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ali Larijani, who is visiting Russia," the Kremlin said in a statement on its website.

Earlier yesterday, US President Trump said he believed Iran - a close ally of Russia - wanted to make a deal on its nuclear programme to avoid military action.

Trump also renewed his threat to launch strikes against Iran, which recently imposed a crackdown on protesters that observers said killed thousands.

Iran's Moscow embassy posted on social media that yesterday's talks between Putin and Larijani focused on economic ties and "important regional and international issues", without elaborating further.

The visit had not been previously announced, according to the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti.

Moscow has offered to mediate between Washington and Tehran. While Iran emerged as one of Russia's main allies during the war in Ukraine, Russia gives Tehran crucial international backing.

Earlier, Trump predicted that Iran would seek to negotiate a deal rather than face American military action, despite Tehran warning that its arsenal of missiles would never be up for discussion.

"I can say this, they do want to make a deal," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office. Asked if he

had given Iran a deadline to enter talks on its nuclear and missile programmes, Trump said "yeah, I have", but refused to say what it was.

"We have a large armada, flotilla, call it whatever you want, heading toward Iran right now," Trump said, referring to a US naval carrier group in waters off Iran. "Hopefully we'll make a deal. If we do make a deal, that's good. If we don't make a deal, we'll see what happens."

Trump cited what he said was Iran's decision to halt the executions of protesters - after a crackdown in which rights groups say more than 6,000 people were killed and which triggered the latest round of threats between the long-time foes - as evidence to show Tehran was ready to negotiate.

The US president brought the temperature down late on Thursday, saying he hoped to avoid military action and that talks with Iran were on the cards, having pressured Tehran for a deal on its nuclear programme, which the West believes is aimed at making an atomic bomb.

Nevertheless, Iran's top diplomat said yesterday that his country's missile and defence capabilities would "never" be on the negotiating table.

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said Tehran was "ready to begin negotiations if they take place on an equal footing, based on mutual interests and mutual respect", during a visit to Turkey, which is leading a diplomatic push to mediate between Tehran and Washington.

But he emphasised: "I want to state firmly that Iran's defensive and missile capabilities will never be subject to negotiation", adding that no plans were in place to meet with US officials about resuming talks.

On Monday, the news site Axios reported that US officials say any deal would have to include a cap on Iran's arsenal of long-range missiles, the removal of enriched uranium from the country and a ban on independent enrichment.

Serhan Afacan, director of IRAM, the Ankara-based Centre for Iranian Studies, said that trying to link a nuclear deal with other issues would likely be "impossible".

"For now, the ballistic missile programme remains a red line, as it sits at the core of Iran's defence architecture," he said.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said restarting talks between Tehran and Washington over Iran's nuclear programme was "vital for reducing regional tensions".

Speaking at a joint news conference in Istanbul with Araghchi, he said Israel was pushing for the United States to attack Iran, and urged Washington to "act with common sense and not allow this to happen".

Iran has blamed the United States and Israel for the protests that erupted in late December over economic grievances and peaked on January 8 and 9, accusing the two countries of fuelling a "terrorist operation" that turned peaceful demonstrations into "riots".

Araghchi was also due to meet with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who told his Iranian counterpart Masoud Pezeshkian by phone earlier yesterday that Turkey was "ready to assume a facilitating role between Iran and the United States to de-escalate the tensions".

Pezeshkian, meanwhile, said the success of diplomacy depended on the "goodwill of the parties involved and the abandonment of belligerent and threatening actions in the region", his office said.

Mali fuel tanker convoy destroyed in attack blamed on militants

AFP

Bamako

A convoy of several dozen tankers was set on fire in Mali in a deadly assault that local officials blamed on militants, the latest escalation in a fuel blockade that had calmed in recent weeks.

The attack took place Thursday on a road leading from the Senegalese border to the major city of Kayes in western Mali, said the sources, several of whom reported that "dozens" of tankers were destroyed.

Militants from the Al Qaeda-affiliated JNIM said in a statement that they had ambushed the Malian army on Thursday between the town of Diboli and Kayes, without mentioning the attack on the fuel tankers.

Since September, JNIM has carried out a series of attacks on tankers as it waged a fuel blockade meant to cause shortages and strangle the landlocked country's economy.

However, the attacks have decreased in intensity in recent weeks and the latest assault marks the first of its size since early December.

By additionally imposing a total blockade on several Malian cities, JNIM was able to cripple the economy, including in Bamako.

But fuel supplies have improved significantly in the capital since last month, helping the economy to recover.

The Thursday attack "happened between Diboli (located on the Senegalese border) and Kayes. Three Malian soldiers were killed and four attackers were killed", a local official said.

A teacher living in the area estimated that "dozens" of trucks had been set on fire.

A Malian National Petroleum Office official, who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity, said that

the attack "is a serious blow for us, but it doesn't impact distribution or availability. We have a significant stock" of fuel.

A customs official in Kayes also confirmed the Thursday attack to AFP, reporting dozens of tankers destroyed and saying that a count of the exact number was under way.

Meanwhile, across the border, Modou Kayere, a union representative for Senegalese and west African transport groups, said that a call had been issued for drivers to stop at Kidira, the last major Senegalese town before Mali, while waiting for the situation to stabilise.

But he said some drivers had already resumed their journeys into Mali.

According to a security source, military escorts for tankers on the road from Senegal, which is not widely used for fuel transport, had been suspended, with resources redirected to protect supplies mainly coming from Ivory Coast.

"The authorities thought they had complete control over the supply chain with the new convoy plan. They wanted to build up as much stock as possible before Ramadan," which begins in mid-February, the source told AFP.

Impoverished Mali has been gripped by a security crisis since 2012, fuelled notably by violence from groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State group, as well as criminal gangs.

The junta, which seized power in back-to-back coups in 2020 and 2021, had promised to stem the militant insurgency but has achieved little success.

In recent months, JNIM has also carried out a series of assaults on military installations and other targets in the country, as well as attacked numerous industrial sites where it has kidnapped several civilians, mostly foreigners.

The kidnappings have allowed the militants to finance their activities through ransoms.



Security forces control traffic in a street, following an attack on the international airport in Niamey, Niger, yesterday.

Thursday morning.

Niger's military ruler, Abdourahmane Tiami, accused

offering any evidence. He also vowed retaliation.

Wilfried Leandre Houngbedji, spokesperson for Benin's government, said yesterday: "He is the only one to believe that nonsense."

In its statement, Islamic State described the assault as a "surprise and co-ordinated attack" that inflicted "significant damage", but provided no details.

Niger's Defence Ministry said the attackers had arrived on motorcycles and security forces quickly repelled them. Four soldiers were wounded in the fighting, it said.

Material losses at the airport included a cache of ammunition that caught fire, the ministry said, and damage to several civilian airplanes.

UN at risk of 'imminent financial collapse'

Reuters
Geneva

The UN chief has told member states that the organisation is at risk of "imminent financial collapse", citing unpaid fees and a budget rule that forces the global body to return unspent money, a letter seen by Reuters yesterday showed.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has repeatedly spoken about the organisation's worsening liquidity crisis but this is his starker warning yet, and it comes as its main contributor the United States is retreating from multilateralism on numerous fronts.

"The crisis is deepening, threatening programme delivery and risking financial collapse. And the situation will deteriorate further in the near future," Guterres wrote in a letter to ambassadors dated January 28.

The US has slashed voluntary funding to UN agencies and refused to make man-

datory payments to its regular and peace-keeping budgets.

US President Donald Trump has described the UN as having "great potential" but said it is not fulfilling that, and he has launched a Board of Peace which some fear could undermine the older international body.

Founded in 1945, the UN has 193 member states and works to maintain international peace and security, promote human rights, foster social and economic development, and co-ordinate humanitarian aid.

In his letter, Guterres said "decisions not to honour assessed contributions that finance a significant share of the approved regular budget have now been formally announced".

He did not say which state or states he was referring to, and a UN spokesperson was not immediately available for comment.

Under UN rules, contributions depend on the size of the economy of each member state.

The US accounts for 22% of the core

budget followed by China with 20%.

However, by the end of 2025 there was a record \$1.57bn in outstanding dues, Guterres said, without naming them.

"Either all Member States honour their obligations to pay in full and on time – or Member States must fundamentally overhaul our financial rules to prevent an imminent financial collapse," he said.

Guterres launched a reform task force last year, known as UN80, which seeks to cut costs and improve efficiency.

To that end, states agreed to cut the 2026 budget by around 7% to \$3.45bn.

Still, Guterres warned in the letter that the organisation could run out of cash by July.

One of the problems is a rule now seen as antiquated whereby the global body has to credit back hundreds of millions of dollars in unspent dues to states each year.

"In other words, we are trapped in a Kafkaesque cycle expected to give back cash that does not exist," said Guterres, referring to author Franz Kafka who wrote about oppressive bureaucratic processes.



Guterres is seen on a screen as he speaks during a press conference outlining his priorities for 2026 at UN headquarters in New York City. - Reuters

Nationwide protests begin over ICE in Minneapolis

Reuters/AFP
Minneapolis

Student organisers have called for walkouts and protests across the United States to demand that federal immigration agents withdraw from Minnesota, where the fatal shootings of two US citizens have sparked public outrage.

The call for a general strike was aimed at expanding on a similar demonstration last Friday in Minneapolis, when thousands marched in the bitter cold, urging an end to President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown in their city.

The new round of protests came amid continued mixed messages from the Trump administration on the future of Operation Metro Surge, which has seen some 3,000 federal agents deployed to the Minneapolis area.

Trump's border czar, Tom Homan, was dispatched to the city earlier this week to take over in the wake of Saturday's fatal shooting of 37-year-old nurse Alex Petti, whose death prompted a national outcry.

In his first public remarks on Thursday, Homan said agents would return to more targeted operations, rather than the broad street sweeps that have led to chaotic clashes with protesters, and he suggested that the administration would seek to reduce the number of agents in the city.

Hours later, however, Trump told reporters on Thursday evening that his administration was "not at all" pulling back its deployment.

In a late-night social media post, he called Petti an "agitator and, perhaps, insurrectionist" in reference to newly unearthed

video showing Petti had a confrontation with other agents 11 days before he was killed, in which Petti shattered a vehicle's tail light with a kick.

Meanwhile, the Justice Department arrested former CNN anchor Don Lemon and charged him with violating federal law during a protest inside St Paul, Minnesota, church earlier this month.

Lemon, a frequent critic of Trump, has said he was covering the protest as a journalist, not participating.

His lawyer, Abbe Lowell, has called the arrest an "unprecedented attack on the First Amendment".

Attorney-General Pam Bondi said in a post on X that Lemon and several other people had been arrested "at my direction" on unspecified federal charges in connection with what she called a "co-ordinated attack" on the Cities Church in St Paul, the twin city of Minneapolis.

The Justice Department previously charged three other people in connection with the protest, but a magistrate judge rejected the agency's earlier attempts to charge Lemon and several others, citing a lack of evidence.

Lemon's arrest is the latest example of Trump's Justice Department focusing on investigating protesters, activists and Democratic leaders in Minnesota, rather than the agents who shot Petti and several others, citing a lack of evidence.

At least half a dozen federal prosecutors resigned from the Minnesota US Attorney's office in protest of a directive to investigate Good's widow, while others in the department's civil rights division also indicated they would be leaving.

Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, Minnesota Attorney-General



Singing 'You are not alone' in Spanish, dozens of religious leaders and their supporters stage a sit-in inside the atrium of the Hart Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. The interfaith clergy were protesting against the surge of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents across the country and specifically in Minnesota. - AFP

Keith Ellison and Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey are among the Democratic leaders whose offices were subpoenaed by the Justice Department, which is investigating whether their opposition to Trump's enforcement surge amounts to a crime.

All three have denounced the probe as politically motivated.

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They were demanding that the US Senate withhold funding to the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Cuban president slams Trump bid to 'suffocate' island's economy

AFP/Reuters
Havana/Washington

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel (pictured) has denounced what he called an attempt by US counterpart Donald Trump to "suffocate" the communist island's flailing economy.

Trump signed an executive order on Thursday threatening additional tariffs on countries that sell oil to Cuba, which is in the throes of its worst economic crisis in decades.



The move stopped short of

specifying tariff rates or singling out any countries.

The US president has said that the measure was necessary to protect "US national security and foreign policy from the Cuban regime's malign actions and policies".

Cuba was cut off from critical supplies of Venezuelan oil after Washington deposed that country's leader, Nicolas Maduro, and Trump issued threats against other leftist governments in the region.

This was an apparent allusion to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, a Cuban American from Florida who has made no secret

"Under a false and baseless pretext... President Trump intends to suffocate the Cuban economy by imposing tariffs on countries that sovereignly trade oil with Cuba," Diaz-Canel wrote on X. "This new measure reveals the fascist, criminal and genocidal nature of a clique that has hijacked the interests of the American people for purely personal ends."

Life in Cuba is marked by recurring power outages of up to 20 hours a day, shortages of food, gas and medicine, and a mass exodus of people seeking a better life elsewhere.

Trump has used tariff threats as a foreign policy tool throughout his second term in office.

of his desire for regime change in Havana.

"All spheres of life will be suffocated by the US government," Cuba's government said in a statement on the nightly TV newscast.

Trump has used tariff threats as a foreign policy tool throughout his second term in office.

Hundreds of firefighters are trying to prevent the flames reaching populated areas.

President Javier Milei's spokesman Manuel Adorni said a state of emergency would take effect in Chubut, Rio Negro, Neuquen and La Pampa provinces of Patagonia.

The measure is expected to facilitate co-operation between provincial and national firefighters.

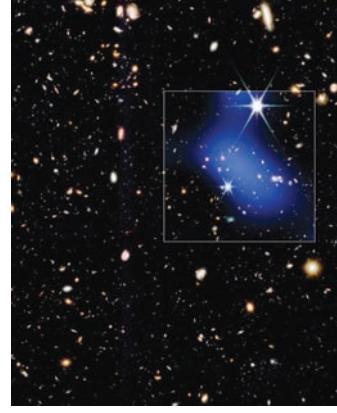
Los Alerces National Park, a vast reserve of pristine forest and glacial lakes, has been among the worst-affected areas.

The forest fires have stirred criticism over austerity measures under Milei that have significantly cut aid resources.

Milei's government has pursued aggressive fiscal tightening dubbed "chainsaw" spending cuts and environmental groups have criticised budget cuts that have significantly reduced funding for wildfire prevention and response.

Argentina's 2026 budget slashed funding for the National Fire Management Service by 71% in real terms compared with the previous year, according to FARN, a local non-profit group. - AFP/Reuters

Galaxy cluster observed forming surprisingly early in universe's history



A developing galaxy cluster dating to about 1bn years after the Big Bang is shown in this handout image released on January 28. The white box marks the field of view of the Chandra X-ray Observatory data (blue) that is overlaid on an infrared image from the James Webb Space Telescope showing the location of galaxies. - Reuters

By Will Dunham
Reuters

Observations by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa)'s James Webb Space Telescope and Chandra X-ray Observatory are providing fresh evidence that the universe grew up a lot more quickly than previously known, with observations of a galaxy cluster forming sooner after the Big Bang than once thought possible.

Researchers said these observations show an emerging galaxy cluster containing at least 66 potential member galaxies, with a total cluster mass of about 20tn stars the size of our sun, dating to about 1bn years after the Big Bang event that initiated the universe roughly 13.8bn years ago.

Galaxy clusters are among the largest structures in the cosmos and were thought to have needed much more time to come together

in the early universe.

Our Milky Way is part of a galaxy cluster.

"A galaxy cluster is, as the name suggests, an assembly of galaxies, typically hundreds to several thousands," said astrophysicist Akos Bogdan of the Harvard and Smithsonian Centre for Astrophysics, lead author of the study published in the journal *Nature*. "These galaxies are embedded in a halo of hot gas heated to millions of degrees, and the whole system is bound together by dark matter."

Dark matter, which does not emit or reflect light, represents about 85% of the universe's matter.

Ordinary matter – like stars, planets and everything else that is visible – accounts for the rest.

Scientists infer the existence of dark matter based on the gravitational effects it exerts on a large scale such as how galaxy clusters are held together.

Spotting a nascent galaxy cluster that was beginning to reach

maturity when the universe was roughly 7% its current age was a surprise to scientists.

They said the structure, which they called a protocluster, exhibited all the signatures of a mature galaxy cluster such as the halo of superheated gas and a centrally peaked brightness distribution in X-ray emissions.

Under most models, the universe should not have been at a mature enough state with a sufficient density of galaxies for an emerging galaxy cluster of this size to form at this early juncture in its history.

Until now, the earliest similar structure observed dated to about three billion years post-Big Bang.

"Our findings provide further evidence for a more rapid growth of cosmic structure than is predicted by current cosmological models," said astrophysicist and study co-author Gerrit Schellenberger of the Centre for Astrophysics.

"Together with the recent James Webb Space Telescope discoveries of unexpectedly luminous galaxies in the early universe, as well as supermassive black holes already in place just 500m years after the Big Bang, our results strengthen the case that key elements of our understanding of the universe may be incomplete," Schellenberger said.

Since Webb was launched in 2021 and became operational in 2022, its observations have revolutionised the understanding of the early universe, showing how things got off to a much quicker start than previously believed.

The galaxies of the protocluster were found using Webb.

The X-ray emission from the protocluster was confirmed using the Chandra observatory.

"The combination of Chandra and Webb observations provides a uniquely powerful window into the early universe, enabling transformative discoveries," Schellenberger said.

Argentina declares emergency over Patagonia fires

Argentina's government has declared an emergency in Patagonia, where wildfires have raged through vast tracts of forest since the start of the South American summer.

The biggest blazes are in southern Chubut province, where at least 45,000 hectares of forest – an area roughly the size of San Francisco – have gone up in smoke since mid-January.

Hundreds of firefighters are trying to prevent the flames reaching populated areas.

President Javier Milei's spokesman Manuel Adorni said a state of emergency would take effect in Chubut, Rio Negro, Neuquen and La Pampa provinces of Patagonia.

The measure is expected to facilitate co-operation between provincial and national firefighters.

Los Alerces National Park, a vast reserve of pristine forest and glacial lakes, has been among the worst-affected areas.

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Argentina's 2026 budget slashed funding for the National Fire Management Service by 71% in real terms compared with the previous year, according to FARN, a local non-profit group. - AFP/Reuters



China coast guard 'patrolled Japan-held islands almost daily last year'

Reuters
Beijing

China's coast guard patrolled Japan-administered islands in the East China Sea almost daily last year, it said yesterday, aiming to secure its sovereignty over the remote, rocky outpost and to deter Taiwan from taking steps

toward independence.

The patrols near the tiny islands - known as the Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China - could add to tensions as Beijing and Tokyo are embroiled in their biggest diplomatic dispute in more than a decade after Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said Japan might intervene if China attacked Taiwan.

China claims Taiwan as its territory. China's coast guard patrolled the Senkaku/Diaoyu for 357 days last year, coast guard head Zhang Jianming told a press briefing on maritime law enforcement. Over the past five years, it organised 134 patrols and deployed 550,000 vessels and 6,000 aircraft around the islands, Zhang said.

Reuters reported in May that

Beijing appeared to be stepping up coast guard and naval activity in waters including the East China Sea, in an attempt to reinforce dominance in the region.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu lie within the strategic first island chain stretching from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines. The string of islands is controlled by US allies and contains the expansion of

China's growing naval power. The last major maritime dispute was in 2010, when Japan's coast guard detained the captain of a Chinese fishing boat that collided with Japanese vessels near the islands, sparking a diplomatic crisis.

Tensions flared again in 2012 when the Japanese government announced it had bought some of the disputed islets from their private

Japanese owners. China sent patrol ships in response.

The most recent confrontation in the area came last month, when China said it had expelled an "illegal" Japanese fishing vessel from the waters around the islands, while Japan said it had intercepted and expelled two Chinese coast guard ships that were approaching the vessel.

Britain's Starmer seeks to bolster China ties despite Trump warning

AFP
Shanghai

Visiting Prime Minister Keir Starmer yesterday said Britain has a "huge amount to offer" China, after his bid to forge closer ties prompted warnings from US President Donald Trump.

Starmer's trip is the first to China by a British prime minister in eight years, and follows in the footsteps of other Western leaders looking to counter an increasingly volatile US.

Leaders from France, Canada and Finland have flocked to Beijing in recent weeks, recoiling from Trump's bid to seize Greenland and tariff threats against Nato allies.

Trump warned on Thursday it was "very dangerous" for Britain to be dealing with China.

Starmer brushed off those comments yesterday, noting that Trump was also expected to visit China in the months ahead.

"The US and the UK are very close allies, and that's why we discussed the visit with his team before we came," Starmer said in an interview with UK television.

"I don't think it is wise for the UK to stick its head in the sand. China is the second-largest economy in the world," he said.

Asked about Trump's comments yesterday, Beijing's foreign ministry said "China is willing to strengthen co-operation with all countries in the spirit of mutual benefit and win-win results".

Starmer met top Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang, on Thursday, with both sides highlighting the

need for closer ties. He told business representatives from Britain and China yesterday that both sides had "warmly engaged" and "made some real progress".

"The UK has got a huge amount to offer," he said in a short speech at the UK-China Business Forum at the Bank of China.

The meetings the previous day provided "just the level of engagement that we hoped for," Starmer said.

He signed a series of agreements on Thursday, with Downing Street announcing Beijing had agreed to visa-free travel for British citizens visiting China for under 30 days, although Starmer acknowledged there was no start date for the arrangement yet.

The Chinese foreign ministry said only that it was "actively considering" the visa deal and would "make it public at an appropriate time upon completing the necessary procedures". Starmer hailed the agreements as "symbolic of what we're doing with the relationship".

He also said Beijing had lifted sanctions on UK lawmakers targeted since 2021 for their criticism of alleged human rights abuses against China's Muslim Uyghur minority.

"President Xi said to me that that means all parliamentarians are welcome," Starmer said in an interview with UK television.

He travelled from Beijing to economic powerhouse Shanghai, where he spoke with Chinese students at the Shanghai International College of Fashion and Innovation, a joint institute between Donghua University and the University of Edinburgh.

Starmer will continue his Asia trip

with a brief stop in Japan today to meet Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. The visa deal could bring Britain in line with about 50 other countries granted visa-free travel, including France, Germany, Australia and Japan, and follows a similar agreement made between China and Canada this month.

The agreements signed included co-operation on targeting supply chains used by migrant smugglers, as well as on British exports to China, health and strengthening a bilateral trade commission.

China also agreed to halve tariffs on British spirits to five percent, according to Downing Street.

Xi told Starmer on Thursday that their countries should strengthen dialogue and co-operation in the context of a "complex and intertwined" international situation.

Relations between China and the UK deteriorated from 2020 when Beijing imposed a national security law on Hong Kong and cracked down on pro-democracy activists in the former British colony.

However, China remains Britain's third-largest trading partner, and Starmer is hoping deals with Beijing will help fulfil his primary goal of boosting UK economic growth.

British pharmaceutical group AstraZeneca said on Thursday it would invest \$15bn in China through 2030 to expand its medicines manufacturing and research.

Its chief executive Pascal Soriot, part of a delegation of around 60 business leaders accompanying Starmer, said "China... has become a critical contributor to scientific innovation, advanced manufacturing, and global public health".



Taiwan's first domestically-built defence submarine Narwhal conducts its first submarine sea trials in Kaohsiung.

Taiwan completes undersea trial of indigenous submarine

Reuters
Taipei

Taiwan has completed the maiden underwater sea trial for its first domestically developed submarine, a big milestone in a project aimed at strengthening deterrence against the Chinese navy and protecting vital sea lanes in the event of war.

Taiwan, which China claims as its own territory, has made strides in the indigenous submarine programme a key part of an ambitious project to modernise its armed forces as Beijing stages almost daily military exercises to assert its sovereignty claims.

The submarine programme has drawn on expertise and tech-

nology from several countries, including the US and Britain, a breakthrough for diplomatically isolated Taiwan, whose government rejects Beijing's territorial claims.

Taiwan's CSBC Corporation, which is leading construction of what is eventually planned to be eight submarines, said in a statement that the first ship, named the Narwhal, had completed its first underwater test at sea.

It said the submarine had carried out a "shallow-water submerged navigation test".

"Submarines are a key strategic capability with deterrent power," it said, after the test off the southern Taiwanese port of Kaohsiung.

The Narwhal had been due to be delivered to the navy in 2024,

joining two existing submarines purchased from the Netherlands in the 1980s, but the programme has been hit with delays.

"Due to constraints in the international environment and pressure from the Chinese communists, Taiwan's indigenous submarine programme has faced various difficulties and challenges from the beginning to the present," CSBC said.

Taiwan has said it hopes to deploy at least two such domestically developed submarines by 2027, and possibly equip later models with missiles.

The first submarine, with a price tag of T\$49.36bn (\$1.58bn), will use a combat system by Lockheed Martin Corporation and carry US-made Mark 48 heavyweight torpedoes.

Kim vows to 'transform' N Korea with building drive

AFP
Seoul

Kim Jong-un vowed to "transform" North Korea with a drive to build public health facilities, leisure complexes and industrial plants over a third of the country, state media said yesterday.

Attending a ceremony for a construction project in Unnye County in South Hwanghae Province, the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said Kim announced projects to be built in 20 regions.

"We are now standing on the starting line of our gigantic struggle for another year, aimed at transforming the regions," Kim said.

"Nearly one-third of the cities and counties across the country will have been transformed," he said.

Kim also hailed soldiers mobilised at construction sites as "creators of the people's wellbeing".

Those remarks could suggest an effort to shift significant portions of conventional military manpower into construction while focusing on (the country's) nuclear capabilities," Ahn Chan-il, a researcher originally from North Korea, said.

Images released by state media showed Kim shovelling soil alongside other officials at a ceremony attended by an excited crowd clapping and waving North Korean flags.

Photos showed a large, dramatic celebratory explosion that state media described as "thrilling".

A landmark congress of North Korea's ruling Workers Party - its first in five years - is expected to take place in the coming weeks, though no date has been confirmed.

The nuclear-armed country is under multiple sets of sanctions over its weapons programmes and has long struggled with its moribund state-managed economy and chronic food shortages.

Street robbers steal \$2.7mn in cash in rare Tokyo heist

A team of three robbers stole suitcases holding \$2.7mn in cash on a busy street in central Tokyo, police and media said yesterday, a rare crime in the Japanese metropolis that prides itself on safety.

The heist saw the thieves deploy pepper spray to grab luggage containing the money at around 9.30pm (1230GMT) on Thursday near Ueno station, an area popular with tourists, a spokeswoman at the Tokyo Metropolitan Police said on condition of anonymity.

She declined to give further details of the case, but local media said the victims were a group of five Chinese and Japanese nationals who were trying to place suitcases containing some 420mn yen (\$2.7mn) in a vehicle.

It was not immediately clear why the group was carrying the money.

Fuji Television said the victims told investigators that the cash was being delivered to currency exchange stations.

Japan, S Korea to boost ties



Japan's Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi and South Korea's Defence Minister Ahn Gyu-back play table tennis at the headquarters of the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force, in Yokosuka District, Tokyo, yesterday. The defence ministers of both nations yesterday agreed to upgrade defence co-operation and plan to work together in incorporating artificial intelligence and unmanned weapon systems, South Korea's defence ministry said.

170 civilians killed in Myanmar air strikes during polls: UN

AFP
Geneva

At least 170 civilians were killed in more than 400 military air strikes in Myanmar in the weeks surrounding its widely-criticised elections, the United Nations said yesterday.

Myanmar's month-long, three-phase vote, which wrapped up on Sunday, was imposed by the military in what democracy watchdogs dismissed as an attempt to rebrand army rule.

The UN said "credible sources" had verified that at least 170 civilians were killed in some 408 military aerial attacks reported by

failed to respect fundamental human rights and that military attacks on the population had continued unabated.

"These elections did not prevent violence from continuing throughout 2025," James Rodehaver, head of the rights office's Myanmar team, told reporters in Geneva.

Speaking from Bangkok, he highlighted that 2025 was "the year in which more civilians died from air strikes than any other since 2021", and that "air strikes continued even through election days".

The UN rights office pointed to initial reports of a military air strike "on a populated area with no reported presence of combatants" that killed up to 50 civilians in Bhamo Township, in Kachin State on January 22.

open sources during the voting period", the nearly two months from early December.

Rodehaver warned though that the numbers could rise, pointing out that their verification was complicated since communications are cut off and due to "the fear of individuals in some of these locations to speak to us".

The UN rights office pointed to initial reports of a military air strike "on a populated area with no reported presence of combatants" that killed up to 50 civilians in Bhamo Township, in Kachin State on January 22.

To curb any dissent, the military had also arrested 324 men and

80 women under its unilaterally-adopted election protection law, including for minor online activity, the office said, decrying the "grossly disproportionate penalties" doled out.

In one case, it said a 49-year sentence was handed down for posting anti-election materials.

Five years after the coup that swept Myanmar's junta to power, UN rights chief Volker Turk warned that "the profound and widespread despair inflicted on the people of Myanmar has only deepened with the recent election staged by the military".

He pointed out that "many people chose either to vote or not to

vote purely out of fear, flatly at odds with their internationally guaranteed civil and political rights - and with ripple effects on their enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights".

"The conflict and insecurity continued unabated in large parts of the country. Opposition candidates and some ethnic groups were excluded," he said.

His office pointed out that the elections were held in only 263 of 330 townships, often exclusively in urban centres under military control, and limited in conflict areas.

"As a result, large segments of the population, especially the displaced and minorities, such as the ethnic

Rohingya, were excluded," it pointed out. Voter coercion was also reported nationwide.

In one incident on January 6, more than 100 villagers in the Sagaing region were arbitrarily detained and compelled to cast advance ballots, the rights office said.

Turk decried that five years of military rule in Myanmar had been "characterised by repression of political dissent, mass arbitrary arrests, arbitrary conscription, widespread surveillance and limitation of civic space".

"Now, the military is seeking to entrench its rule-by-violence after forcing people to the ballot box," he said.

India should consider age-based curbs on social media: adviser

Reuters
New Delhi

India's chief economic adviser proposed age-based limits on access to social media platforms he said were "predatory" in their approach to keeping users online, signalling a potential blow to Meta

and YouTube in their largest user market.

Such a shift would pull India in line with a growing global trend, after Australia became the first nation last year to ban social media for children younger than 16.

On Monday, France's National Assembly backed legislation to ban children under 15 from social media

and Britain, Denmark and Greece are studying the issue.

The adviser, V Anantha Nagaswaran, recommended in India's annual economic survey that families promote screen-time limits, device-free hours and shared offline activities. "Policies on age-based access limits may be considered, as younger users are more vulnerable

to compulsive use and harmful content," he wrote in the survey, which was published on Thursday.

"Platforms should be made responsible for enforcing age verification and age-appropriate defaults."

The recommendations are not binding, but are reflected in policy discussions in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. Past

recommendations have prompted tax reforms, easing rules on Chinese investment and stronger digital infrastructure.

India, the world's No 2 smartphone market with 750mn devices and a billion internet users, is a key growth market for social media apps, and does not set a minimum age for access.

Facebook operator Meta, YouTube-parent Alphabet, and X did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Meta has previously said it backs laws for parental oversight while adding: "Governments considering bans should be careful not to push teens toward less safe, unregulated sites."

Carney 'likely to visit India in March' as Canada trade pivot intensifies

Reuters
Ottawa

Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney will likely visit India in the first week of March and sign deals on uranium, energy, minerals and artificial intelligence, Dinesh Patnaik, India's high commissioner to Canada said in an interview.

Carney is making all-out efforts to diversify Canada's alliances beyond the US, its top trade partner. In Davos, he earned a rare standing ovation for saying the old rules-based order is over and called on middle powers like Canada to build coalitions to shape a fairer, more resilient world. His viral speech followed an agreement with China to slash tariffs on electric vehicles and canola and open up to C\$7bn (\$5.1bn) in export markets as he tries to double non-US exports over the next decade. Carney is also re-setting relations with India after his predecessor Justin Trudeau accused the Indian government of involvement in the killing of a Sikh separatist leader in 2023. India has denied those claims.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the Group of 7 summit on Carney's invitation last year and several of Carney's ministers have travelled to India.

"I have a feeling in the first week of March is what we are looking at," said high commissioner Patnaik on Carney's visit during a interview. Carney's office declined to comment. Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said earlier Car-

ney would visit Australia in March to address parliament. Canada's Energy Minister Tim Hodgeson was in India last week and said the timing of Carney's trip was not yet set.

"There are plans for the prime minister to visit at some point this year, it will depend on the progress we make," Hodgeson said in a interview.

Formal negotiations for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with India should also start in March, Patnaik said. The countries agreed to restart stalled trade talks in November.

Carney will sign smaller agreements with the Indian government on nuclear energy, oil and gas, the environment, AI and quantum computing as well as deals on education and culture during his visit, Patnaik said.

A 10-year C\$2.8bn uranium supply deal is likely to be included, he added. Hodgeson did not confirm the deal, but said Canada is happy to sell uranium under the Canada-India nuclear co-operation agreement as long as India is prepared to abide by International Energy Agency safeguards. "We know that India is a major nuclear country and it has major plans to grow its civilian use of nuclear energy," Hodgeson said.

"So that would be one of the topics I expect that we will discuss with my counterpart."

Between Hodgeson's visit and Carney's, both countries will be announcing agreements around energy and mining, Patnaik said, adding that a pact on critical minerals and crude and LNG transactions will be the most prominent ones.

Arab League, India discuss regional crises, shared interests

Arab League secretary-general Ahmed Aboul Gheit met with Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar in New Delhi to discuss shared concerns and regional crises, including the Palestinian issue and the implementation of the second phase of the peace plan. Aboul Gheit stressed the urgent need for continuous humanitarian aid to Gaza and swift progress towards reconstruction. Talks also covered Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and Syria, reaffirming the League's commitment to peace and its stance against terrorism in line with international law. He thanked India for organising the Arab-India ministerial meeting and high-level officials' session, highlighting the importance of Arab-India co-operation. Trade between India and Arab states reached \$240bn in 2025, reflecting strong economic ties under the 2008 and 2013 memoranda of understanding. (QNA)



Nipah virus risk low in India with no sign of spread: WHO

Reuters
Geneva

A World Health Organisation official yesterday said the risk of the spread of the Nipah virus is low, saying that none of the over 190 contacts of the two people infected in India had tested positive or developed symptoms of the disease.

Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam are among the Asian locations that tightened airport screening checks this week to guard against such a spread after India confirmed infections.

"The risk on a national, regional and global level is considered low," Anais Legand, an official with WHO's Health Emergencies Programme, told a Geneva press

briefing, saying that neither person travelled while symptomatic. Both of the infected patients are hospitalised and are alive, she added, with one showing signs of improvement.

Legand said the WHO was waiting for India to release the sequence of the virus to assess any possible mutation but said there was "no specific evidence that would make us worry for the time being".

Carried by fruit bats and other animals, the virus can cause fever and brain inflammation. It has a fatality rate ranging from 40% to 75%, with no cure. Vaccines in development are still being tested.

The source of this infection is not yet fully understood. Hypotheses such as infection from drinking palm juice or exposure to

at healthcare facilities are being considered, Legand said.

Meanwhile, several leading experts yesterday said the airport screenings for Nipah virus, which have been stepped up across Asia this week, are more about reassurance than science.

The WHO yesterday said it did not currently recommend airport screening.

"Based on what we currently know, there is a very low likelihood that this outbreak will cause a large international epidemic," said Dr Md Zakiul Hassan, a Nipah specialist at icddr,b, a global health research institute in Bangladesh, where Nipah cases are reported almost every year.

Piero Oliario, professor of poverty-related disease at the University of Oxford, said airport screenings for such a rare disease

were likely to be ineffective.

"Countries sometimes do these things just to show them flexing the muscles... telling their people that they're doing something to protect them," he said. Oliario and other public health experts said airport temperature screenings rarely worked to stop the spread of disease. During Covid-19, for example, they missed the majority of cases, studies have shown.

Also, many illnesses can cause a fever, and follow-up testing for a rare disease like Nipah is time-consuming, the experts added. Instead, the world's focus on Nipah would be better directed at better understanding the virus where it currently spreads, and protecting those at risk from it with new vaccines and treatments.

Warehouse owner held after Kolkata blaze kills 25

AFP
Kolkata

Indian police have arrested the owner and manager of a warehouse in Kolkata where at least 25 people died in a blaze, officials said yesterday.

Rescuers in the West Bengal state capital were combing through the debris for dozens more still feared missing after the fire that erupted on Monday engulfed two adjacent warehouses, including one belonging to a fast-food company.

"The victims were burnt alive. Rescue teams are digging into the rubble and debris to find charred remains," Ranvir Kumar, the director general of fire and emergency services in the eastern state, said.

He said the warehouses did not have fire licence and lacked adequate safety measures.

Sujit Bose, the state's fire services minister, said the owner of one of the warehouses and its

manager had been arrested, with an investigation underway.

The early morning flames trapped men sleeping inside one of the warehouses and quickly spread to an adjoining building.

"The death toll now stands at 25... but we fear that the number may rise as rescue teams have not been able to clear the wreckage till now," Bose said.

Some of the victims were burned beyond recognition, he said, adding that families of 27 more people had reported their loved ones were missing.

The incident comes barely a month after a fire ripped through a nightclub in the popular tourist hub of Goa, killing 25 people.

In May last year, 17 people died after a fire ripped through a three-storey building in the southern city of Hyderabad.

A month before that, a blaze broke out in a hotel in Kolkata, killing at least 15 people. Some people clambered out of windows and onto the rooftop to escape.

Farage visits Manchester



Reform UK party leader Nigel Farage and Matthew Goodwin, the party's candidate for the Gorton and Denton by-election, triggered by the resignation of Andrew Gwynne, pose for a photo with supporters, in the Denton area of Manchester, Britain, yesterday.

UK schoolgirl game character Amelia co-opted by far-right

AFP
London

A purple-haired anti-migrant cartoon character featured in a UK government anti-extremism programme has been co-opted by the far-right, appearing in AI-generated videos circulating around Europe and the US.

Amelia, a rebellious Goth schoolgirl in a pink dress, leather jacket and choker necklace, is a character in an online game called Pathways, funded by the UK's interior ministry and designed for secondary schools in northeast

England.

The game is part of a government anti-radicalisation programme called Prevent and models risky behaviour such as joining banned groups, as a warning against extremism.

Amelia complains that migrants are taking local jobs and asks classmates to join a secret group defending "English rights".

With chunky graphics, the game was derided by some mainstream media.

But the far-right mockingly adopted Amelia as a mascot, with an account on X, his first "Unite the Kingdom" rally in central London in September attracted over 150,000 people.

He posted a video of Amelia criticising diversity.

after her. The account opened this month already has more than 62,000 followers.

X platform owner Elon Musk, who has 233mn followers, has re-posted one of the account's posts about English identity.

Anti-migrant activist Tommy Robinson announced Thursday that the AI-generated character will be "speaking" at a rally he has called in London on May 16.

Robinson has 1.8mn followers on X. His first "Unite the Kingdom" rally in central London in September attracted over 150,000 people.

He posted a video of Amelia criticising diversity.

An anonymous far-right influencer account on X, Basil the Great, called Amelia an "icon of resistance".

The Amelia meme "spread very rapidly over a very short period of time," said Siddharth Venkatakrishnan, an analyst at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue think tank.

Far-right bloggers cast her "in the light of a freedom fighter defending herself against migrant men," he said.

Users posted AI videos of Amelia striding around London in a mini-dress, hitting Prime Minister Keir Starmer and slinging racist insults.

She is also shown hugging British icons Paddington Bear and meeting Harry Potter.

The meme is "catchy" and "very sexualised", Venkatakrishnan said.

Matteo Bergamini, founder of Shout Out UK, which created the game, said the organisation had seen increased traffic to its website, both from the UK and abroad.

Staff have also received "threats and malicious communications from extremists" which police are investigating, he said in replies to questions from AFP.

"We need to bear in mind that now, even a female cartoon character from an online learning tool

can be sexualised and exploited by bad actors," the social enterprise founder said.

Bergamini condemned what he called the "calculated monetisation of hate and rage".

The meme has spread to the US, with one AI-generated video showing President Donald Trump embracing her and saying "America loves Amelia".

AFP factcheckers found accounts in German and Dutch spreading Amelia memes.

Users have also created a German version of the character, wearing a traditional dirndl dress and called Maria, and a Dutch one called Emma, they found.

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GULF TIMES**Investors bet on later Fed cuts to support markets after pause**

The choice of Kevin Warsh to lead the US Federal Reserve clears uncertainty on Wall Street about the central bank's likely next chair, but leaves investors weighing how the former Fed governor's past hawkish leanings will mesh with President Donald Trump's insistence on far lower interest rates. Warsh, whom Trump nominated to lead the US central bank, ending a months-long process, had been one of four candidates widely tipped as potential successors to Jerome Powell, whose term as chair ends in May.

A proponent of tighter monetary policy as a Fed governor from 2006-2011, Warsh said recently that Trump is right to press for interest-rate cuts. "He was considered a hawk, but recently he seems to have aligned himself with Trump, so it's kind of difficult to assess how the market is going to accept this nomination," said Peter Cardillo, chief market economist at Spartan Capital Securities in New York. "We just have to see whether or not he will be influenced by the White House."

The Fed held rates steady earlier this week at the end of its two-day policy meeting, pausing an easing cycle which has supported US stocks. Interest rate futures priced in the next rate cut at the June meeting, which would be under the next Fed chair.

"Our two cents is that the economy is doing okay, but inflation is a bit sticky, and the Fed was right to stand pat," said Tim Holland, chief investment officer at wealth management service provider Orion in Omaha, Nebraska. "We would be very surprised if we get another rate cut with Mr. Powell at the helm."

While investors anticipated the Fed to pause its easing cycle at the meeting, they are banking on the central bank maintaining a dovish

posture with more cuts later in the year that can support equities and the economy. Markets are pricing in the next likely cut in June, but some investors say further easing could come sooner, while others say that inflation worries could prevent more cuts entirely this year.

Investors noted the calm market reaction to Wednesday's decision, given that Fed meetings often result in wild swings for assets. The benchmark S&P 500 ended little changed on the day, after breaching the 7,000 level for the first time during the session.

The US dollar index largely held its daily gain following the meeting, as it rebounded from a four-year low. The benchmark 10-year Treasury yield moved modestly higher on the day to about 4.25%. "The market didn't react much to this, largely because Powell has two more meetings," said David Seif, chief economist for developed markets at Nomura. "To the extent that Powell wants to give forward guidance, there's a clear expiration."

A weakening jobs picture had prompted the Fed – which seeks to maintain stability in employment and inflation – to lower rates last year to its current level of 3.50-3.75%. The committee cut that rate by a quarter of a percentage point at its meetings in September, October, and December following a nine-month pause.

On Wednesday, Powell said the job market has shown "some signs of stabilisation", while inflation "remains somewhat elevated". "You would need for those dynamics to change in order for the Fed to cut rates again during Chairman Powell's term," said Michael Arone, chief investment strategist at State Street Investment Management. Fed funds futures suggested a less than 30% chance of a cut at either of the next two meetings in March and April, but a 65% chance of one in June, according to LSEG data late on Wednesday. Markets were still pricing in nearly two more quarter-point cuts by December.

Still, Drew Matus, chief market strategist at MetLife Investment Management, said a cut could come in March, adding that "people are being maybe a little overly optimistic that the outlook is very clear". Matus said the current environment is a "good opportunity to be moving up in quality for assets", including shifting away from high-yield fixed income and other riskier strategies. Investors are trying to anticipate policy once Powell hands over the baton, including the extent to which the next leader will lean more dovish.

– Reuters

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New malaria vaccines helped Ghana slash child deaths. Then Trump, others cut aid

- **Ghana sees significant drop in child malaria deaths with two new vaccines**
- **Aid cuts could mean fewer African children benefit, says vaccine aid group Gavi**
- **Gavi estimates additional 19,000 lives could be lost due to lower vaccination rates**

By Jennifer Rigby and Emmanuel Bruce
 London/Accra

New vaccines are helping Ghana approach a long-sought goal of ending child deaths from malaria, demonstrating the potential of the shots to drive back a disease that kills nearly half a million young children every year in Africa, according to the international vaccine aid group Gavi and the country's health service.

But aid cutbacks by the Trump administration and other wealthy governments could mean fewer children benefit on the continent where malaria hits hardest, Gavi told Reuters.

Ghana is among the countries that had already made significant progress reducing malaria mortality by scaling up interventions such as the distribution of bed nets treated with insecticides and improving access to both preventive drugs and prompt treatment. Two new vaccines – one developed by British drugmaker GSK, the other by Oxford University and the Serum Institute of India – are helping close the remaining gap, said Dr Selorm Kutsotai, who heads Ghana's immunisation programme.

"For me, the malaria vaccine is a gamechanger," she told Reuters. Gavi is currently the only organisation purchasing malaria shots for African nations. It anticipates it will be able to spend just over \$800mn on the programme over the next five years – 28% less than the expected need – after falling \$2.9bn short of its overall funding goal for the period, according to internal estimates prepared for its board of directors in December, seen by Reuters.

An additional 19,000 lives could be lost as a result due to lower vaccination rates, the documents say. The estimate, which has not previously been reported, is based on modelling of the vaccines' impact by researchers at Imperial College London and the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute. "It is the gap between the promise and the need for the vaccine, and the resources we have to provide that," Scott Gordon, who heads Gavi's malaria programme, told Reuters.

US Health Secretary Robert F Kennedy announced in June that Washington would no longer support Gavi, part of sweeping cuts to foreign aid that President Donald Trump says do not align with his "America First" agenda. The United States was previously one of the group's top donors, contributing some \$1.3bn between 2020 and 2024.

The US "remains committed to working with global partners to combat malaria," a Department of Health and Human Services official told Reuters. But the Trump administration will not disburse funds to Gavi unless it starts phasing out vaccines containing the mercury-based preservative thimerosal from its portfolio, the official said. Anti-vaccine groups have linked thimerosal to autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders, despite multiple studies showing no related safety issues.

Gavi confirmed the request and said the group remained in contact with the US government on the subject. Any decision related to its portfolio would be "guided by scientific consensus" it said. Other donors have also been scaling back support. Britain, Gavi's biggest donor, has pledged 1.25bn pounds (\$1.72bn) over the next five years, more than 20% less than for 2020-25. Britain's international development minister, Jenny Chapman, said the country remains committed to supporting Gavi's work because it saves lives.

A MOTHER DECIDES: 'I HAVE TO GO FOR THE VACCINE'

Some major global organisations initially doubted the potential of the two vaccines now being rolled out in 24 African countries with help from Gavi.

Based on clinical trials, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates they reduce malaria cases by over 50% during the first year after three shots are administered, an efficacy rate lower than many commonly used childhood shots. A fourth dose is required before a child turns 2 to maintain protection.

Supporters of the vaccines point to the success in Ghana, saying even a partially effective shot has translated into many lives saved. "In real-world settings, we're seeing significant impact," Gavi's Gordon said.

Confirmed deaths among children under the age of 5 have dropped nearly 86% in Ghana, from 245 in 2018, the year before GSK's vaccine was introduced in select districts, to 35 in 2024, according to government figures. A decade ago, nearly 1,000 children in that age group died each year, Kutsotai said. Malaria infections have also declined, from roughly 6.7mn in 2018 to 5.3mn in 2024, around a fifth of which were among children under 5, Ghana's figures show.

The actual numbers are likely to be higher, as many malaria cases do not get diagnosed, and deaths that occur at home often go unreported, said Dorothy Achu, the WHO's team lead for malaria in Africa. There can also be inconsistent reporting by some health facilities.

But Achu agreed the combination of strategies used in Ghana resulted in a "significant reduction in malaria deaths", adding the WHO is using the country's figures to update its estimates.

Esther Kolan, a 31-year-old clothing trader, did not need much persuading to get her 1-year-old son Phenehas Gyngyi Jr vaccinated last summer at the Mother and Child Hospital in the southern town of Kasoa. Her brother



Vials of the RTS,S malaria vaccine, also known as Mosquirix, are stored inside a fridge at the Mother and Child Hospital in Kasoa. (Reuters)



Mothers carry their infants during a child welfare clinic at the Mother and Child Hospital in Kasoa, Ghana. (Reuters)



A screengrab obtained from video shows Esther Kolan, a mother of a child vaccinated against malaria, during an interview with Reuters in the southern town of Kasoa, Ghana. (Reuters)

in Ghana and Burkina Faso, to 45% in Liberia and 35% in conflict-hit South Sudan.

Introducing a new vaccine that requires multiple doses has presented logistical challenges, especially in rural areas where transportation and storage options are limited. In Ghana, there was also resistance from a number of traditional and religious leaders, and politicians sceptical about the benefits, Yaidoo told Reuters.

But results talk, he said.

"Those who have had the vaccination, they give their testimonies on how their children are protected from severe malaria. So many of them are actually our ambassadors."

Cases of severe malaria among vaccinated children were 58% lower than among unvaccinated children in the year after they received the third dose across the countries that participated in the pilot, a study published in The Lancet medical journal in January found. Health officials in Kenya and Malawi did not respond to Reuters' questions about their vaccination programmes.

At least four more countries plan to introduce malaria vaccines before 2028, Gavi said. Until this year, Gavi could subsidise 85% of the assessed need for shots in areas of medium and high malaria transmission, with governments contributing as little as \$0.20 per dose.

It has now reduced its spending cap to 70% for areas that will be ordering shots for the first time, the documents show. It will also be asking all but the poorest governments to increase their contributions, which vary depending on the strength of their economies.

Details of how these changes will affect individual countries are being worked out, Gavi said. Price cuts for the vaccines could help mitigate the aid cuts. GSK and its partner, India's Bharat Biotech, said in June they would reduce the price of their shot to under \$5 a dose by 2028, roughly half what it costs now. In November, Gavi and the UN children's agency announced a deal to pay 25% less for Serum's vaccine, currently priced at around \$4 per dose, within roughly a year.

GSK said the real-world data was encouraging, and it was working with Gavi on how to make the roll-out as effective as possible. It did not elaborate. The other companies did not respond to requests for comment.

At least three countries – Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Togo – have committed to covering some malaria vaccine needs themselves, Gordon said. But Tanzania is struggling to plug funding gaps and will have to delay the start of its vaccination campaign, said Dr Samwel Lazaro, acting head of its malaria programme.

"Currently, the government is focused on ensuring the implementation of the most essential and life-saving services, such as the use of medicated bed nets," Lazaro said.

– Reuters

(Additional reporting by Nuzulack Dausen in Dar Es Salaam and Alice Lawson in Lome)

Kremlin says agreed to halt strikes on Kyiv until Sunday

AFP
Kyiv, Ukraine

The Kremlin yesterday said President Vladimir Putin had agreed to stop striking Kyiv for a week - ending Sunday - following a request by his US counterpart Donald Trump.

Trump had said he asked Putin to halt strikes on the Ukrainian capital and the surrounding area due to extreme cold weather.

Moscow, meanwhile, said the US leader had made the appeal in order to help the Washington-driven negotiation process to end almost four years of war between the neighbours. Russia's battering of Ukraine's energy grid has left whole districts without heating, with temperatures expected to plunge to around -30C in Kyiv in the coming days, raising fears of a humanitarian crisis.

"I can say that President Trump

did indeed make a personal request to President Putin to refrain from striking Kyiv for a week until February 1 in order to create favourable conditions for negotiations," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

Neither the US leader nor Moscow clarified when Trump had asked Putin.

"I personally asked President Putin not to fire into Kyiv and the various towns for a week," Trump told a cabinet meeting at the White House a day earlier, adding it was "because of the cold, extreme cold."

This week, Ukraine has not reported the usual large-scale barrage of drones and missiles that Russia has launched at Kyiv throughout the war. "There were no strikes on energy facilities last night," Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky said on social media yesterday. He added, however: "But yesterday afternoon our energy infrastructure in several regions was hit."

Zelensky had earlier welcomed Trump's announcement. "If Russia does not strike our energy infrastructure - generation facilities or any other energy assets - we will not strike theirs," he told journalists, including AFP, in comments released Friday.

Lawmakers urge use of 'weapons of retribution'

Russian lawmakers want Moscow to use more powerful "weapons of retribution" to achieve its war goals in Ukraine, the Speaker of parliament's lower chamber, the State Duma, said yesterday. Vyacheslav Volodin, who is also a member of President Vladimir Putin's Security Council, did not specify what type of weapons he meant. "Our troops are advancing. State Duma deputies insist on the use of more

powerful weapons - 'weapons of retribution'. And the achievement of the goals of the special military operation," he said, using the term by which Russia refers to the war in Ukraine. It was the second public statement in consecutive days from hawks urging that Russia should continue and even step up its war effort, at a time when US President Donald Trump is trying to get both sides to agree to a peace deal. — Reuters

Still, Ukraine's air force said Moscow launched dozens of drones and a missile at Ukraine at night.

The attacks damaged civilian infrastructure in the northern Chernigiv region and a residential building in the southern Zaporizhzhia region, officials said. The worst of the cold spell in Kyiv is due to come after February 1, with Ukraine's weather

agency warning temperatures could dip to as low as -30C in the coming days.

Trump had said he had appealed to Putin "because of the cold, extreme cold."

The Kremlin has been silent on Ukrainians left in the freezing cold amid warnings of a humanitarian crisis and has in the past blamed their suffering on Kyiv.

The pause in Russian strikes, due to end this weekend, comes before Russian and Ukrainian negotiators meeting for a second round of talks in Abu Dhabi.

This round of talks is expected to focus on the key unresolved issue of territory.

Moscow occupies large swathes of southern and eastern Ukraine and demands that Kyiv pull out of the parts of the Donetsk region that it controls - which Ukraine sees as unacceptable. No breakthrough has been made on the issue.

"So far, we have been unable to find a compromise on the territorial issue, specifically regarding part of eastern Ukraine," Zelensky told journalists.

He added: "We have repeatedly said that we are ready for compromises that lead to a real end to the war, but that are in no way related to changes to Ukraine's territorial integrity."

Putin has repeatedly said Russia intends to seize the rest of eastern Ukraine by force if diplomacy fails. Moscow on Friday announced it had captured another three villages in the southern Zaporizhzhia region. Zelensky also accused Moscow of halting prisoner swaps - one of the last remaining areas of cooperation between Moscow and Kyiv during the war.

"They are not particularly interested in exchanging people, because they do not feel that it gives them anything," the Ukrainian leader said.

Jobless numbers hit 12-year high in Germany, economy posts steady growth

Reuters
Berlin

The number of unemployed people in Germany hit a 12-year high, surpassing the 3mn mark this month, even after Europe's biggest economy brushed off trade turmoil and outperformed economists' growth expectations last quarter.

Chancellor Friedrich Merz has promised to revive the economy after two years of mild contraction, pledging a sharp increase in infrastructure and defence spending. While the economy as a whole is displaying greater resilience, Merz's measures are taking longer than expected to translate into better conditions on the ground.

Labour office figures on Friday highlighted the lag in the jobs market from the economic stagnation of the last few years, with 177,000 more people out of work than in December, bringing the total to 3.08mn. The unemployment rate jumped by 0.4 percentage points to 6.6% in seasonally unadjusted terms.

"There is currently little momentum in the labour market," said labour office director Andrea Nahles. "At the start of the year, unemployment rose markedly for seasonal reasons." The picture improved slightly when accounting for seasonal trends. The labour office said that on that basis the number of people out of work was unchanged from December at 2.976mn and that the seasonally adjusted jobless rate was steady at 6.3%. Analysts and economists in a Reuters poll had predicted a seasonally adjusted rise of 4,000 in the jobless number.

On a positive note, German gross domestic product grew by 0.3% in the fourth quarter compared with the previous three

months, beating the consensus forecast of 0.2%. On an annual basis, the statistics office confirmed its first estimate of 0.2% growth.

"This chimes with some other signs that the economy is turning the corner, including a pick-up in activity surveys and industrial orders," said Franziska Palmas, senior Europe economist at Capital Economics. She nevertheless noted that GDP was still only 0.5% higher than levels seen just before the pandemic. Economy Minister Katherine Reiche said the country must pivot toward new "growth engines," arguing that traditional export strengths "no longer carry our growth."

The biggest domestic risk remains any sudden shift from national depression to national complacency," said Carsten Brzeski, global head of macro at ING, calling for structural reforms. Europe's biggest economy lowered its growth forecasts for this and next year on Wednesday, as fiscal-policy measures have not taken effect as quickly as previously assumed. "The German government's large fiscal package is unlikely to fall on fertile ground, as the vast majority of companies do not believe in the long-awaited restart in economic policy," said Joerg Kraemer, chief economist at Commerzbank.

Annual inflation rose in January in five German states, preliminary data showed on Friday, suggesting the nationwide rate - due out later in the day - has also risen this month. Price growth of 2.0% to 2.3% was recorded in North Rhine-Westphalia, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Bavaria, Saxony and Lower Saxony, and economists polled by Reuters forecast a harmonised national rate of 2.0% for January, unchanged from last month's rate.

■ European Stability Mechanism was set up to stem euro debt crisis
■ ESM's chief says it could lend for defence spending
■ European countries pushed to boost defence outlays in response to Russian invasion of Ukraine

By John O'Donnell
Reuters

A European crisis fund with more than €430bn (\$514bn) of firepower could lend money to countries for defence, the head of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) told Reuters, as the bloc scrambles to reinforce its military.

Pierre Gramegna, managing director of the European Stability Mechanism, said the ESM could give credit lines for defence and would not demand stringent economic reform in return, in part to dispel any stigma that might arise from asking the emergency euro zone fund for money.

"In these times of geopolitical turmoil, which have triggered higher expenditure, defence costs for all countries, we must use the full potential of the ESM," said Gramegna. He pointed to the use of credit lines for defence for countries in good financial health but whose budgets are stretched, in particular smaller euro zone states. "We have instruments," he said. "It is in the best interests of Europe... to use the full potential."



Pierre Gramegna

"It is obvious that the relationship between Europe and the United States is becoming more and more bumpy."

Any such financial support would be symbolically important, repurposing a fund set up at the height of the euro zone debt crisis to stave off the collapse of national economies, banks and shore up the currency.

US President Donald Trump's open hostility towards Europe is forcing its political leaders to scour for alternative means of defending the region against Russian aggression.

Gramegna's remarks suggest a willingness to use the vast European reserve to reinforce euro zone countries, in particular smaller Baltic nations bordering Russia, although loans first need to be signed off by the 21 euro zone countries backing the ESM.

Only countries in the euro zone could get the loans, excluding those who do not use the currency, such as Poland. The ESM makes no explicit mention of defence in its mission and any such shift would require the blessing of member states, including from militarily neutral countries like Austria, Cyprus, Malta or Ireland.

Europe's attempts to boost its defences, four years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have taken on greater urgency



Polish soldiers fire from a man-portable air-defence system Piorun as they take part in military exercises 'Iron Defender' with Nato at a military range in Wierzby near Orzysz, Poland.

since Trump threatened trade tariffs on countries that rejected his claim on Greenland, a Danish territory. Gramegna hinted at a potential role for the ESM, which was set up during the debt crisis to lend to countries such as Greece but has since become largely redundant. "It is one of our instruments," he said, referring to using so-called precautionary credit lines for defence. "It's available. We need to rediscover the potential of that instrument."

"You need to guarantee that this facility... has to be used for defence expenditure," he said, adding that it would not come with draconian terms. "The whole goal here is to avoid that this type of tool is combined with restructuring of the economy." His comments breathe fresh life into a "defence support line" earlier suggested by former Italian prime minister Enrico Letta to lend up to 2% of a country's economic output at low interest rates for defence.

Gramegna's proposal mirrors an ESM crisis support scheme worth up to €240bn set up during the Covid pandemic to help countries spend on healthcare. That ultimately remained unused.

The Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia could stand to benefit. They have almost quadrupled spending on defence since Russia invaded Ukraine to roughly 5% of their economic output, borrowing heavily to cover the bill. Those countries, which border Russia and its close ally Belarus, have suffered an increasing number of sabotage attacks that law enforcement agencies blame on Russia.

They borrowed billions of euros from the EU's oversubscribed SAFE loans scheme for defence projects, where the EU jointly borrows money on the market to lend it on at cost to EU governments for defence. ESM support would work similarly.

If set up like the pandemic support, the loans would have considerable weight across the EU. Estonia had a gross domestic product of roughly €40bn in 2024 - 2% of that would be less than €1bn.

Gramegna said countries could make "collective requests", which would avoid any stigma attached to asking for assistance from the ESM. "The impetus has to come from the member countries," he said.

Italian officials go on trial over deadly migrant shipwreck

AFP
Rome

Six members of Italy's police and coastguard went on trial yesterday, accused of failing to intervene in a 2023 shipwreck that killed at least 94 migrants. The disaster off the southern Calabrian coast was Italy's worst in a decade, and set off a firestorm of criticism against far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's tough stance on the thousands of migrants who arrive by boat each year from North Africa.

Thirty-five children were among those killed when the boat crashed on the rocks off the coast of the tourist town of Cutro on February 26, 2023.

All defendants - four officers from the Guardia di Finanza (GDF) financial crimes police, which patrol Italy's seas, and two members of the coastguard - attended the opening of trial in the courtroom of nearby Crotone, local media reported.

They are accused of involuntary manslaughter and "culpable shipwreck", a crime in the Italian penal code punishing negligent actions or omissions leading to a

shipwreck. The overcrowded boat had set sail from Turkey carrying people from Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Syria. Around 80 people survived. Dozens of bodies and the wreckage of the boat later washed up along the beach. The victims' coffins filled much of a nearby sports hall - with white caskets for the children - as relatives from around the world arrived to claim their dead. Authorities say more people may have perished in the shipwreck, their bodies never found.

The charges against the officers relate to a rescue operation that never came, despite officials having been aware of the boat for hours. A plane from European Union border agency Frontex spotted the vessel just after 11pm some 38km off the coast and flagged it to Italian authorities.

But a vessel subsequently dispatched by the GDF turned back due to the bad weather, and the migrant boat smashed against rocks near the beach some four hours later. Prosecutors accuse both the police and coastguard of poor communication and dragging their feet after the boat was first assessed as meriting a maritime police operation.

Welcome to Karachi



Passengers from Dhaka arriving at Jinnah International Airport in Karachi yesterday. Direct flights between Bangladesh and Pakistan resumed after more than a decade, as ties warm between the two nations that have long had an uneasy relationship.



75th Handmade Market at Katara proves a huge success

Katara witnessed a vibrant celebration of creativity and community as the 75th Handmade Market was successfully held on January 23 at Creativity Square, located behind the iconic Blue Mosque. This special edition of the market marked a significant milestone in the journey of the community-led handmade market initiative.

The celebratory market brought together 40 vendors, including 29 active members, seven former members, and four guest artists, creating a rich and diverse creative experience for visitors.

Artists and crafters showcased an impressive range of handmade products, including jewellery, crochet, home décor, paper crafts, porcelain painting, handmade dolls, leather crafts, accessories,



grown into a much-loved creative platform. The market typically runs twice a month from late October to April at Katara Art Studios, Building 19. However, in honour of the 75th market celebration and the increased number of participating vendors, this special edition was hosted at Creativity Square.

The event successfully celebrated artistic expression, community spirit, and the enduring support for handmade and locally crafted products, reaffirming Katara's role as a cultural hub for creativity and collaboration.



Officials from the Philippines, Asean member states, and key international partners pose at the opening of Travex 2026 at Mactan Expo Center, Lapu-Lapu City, Cebu.

Cebu hosts Asean Tourism Forum 2026; GCC visitor growth among priorities for member states

By Amjad Vanimal
Cebu, Philippines

The 45th Asean Tourism Forum (ATF) 2026, held from January 28-30 in Cebu, Philippines, placed Southeast Asia's tourism industry firmly in the global spotlight, highlighting post-pandemic recovery gains and forward-looking strategies for the region.

The forum showcased Asean's latest tourism developments and long-term plans, including concerted efforts to attract more visitors from Qatar and the wider Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), a market increasingly viewed as strategic for sustainable growth.

As the Philippines assumed the Asean Chairmanship for 2026, Cebu emerged as a focal point of regional tourism diplomacy, hosting ministerial-level meetings, industry dialogues, and Asean's flagship travel trade exchange, Travex 2026.

ATF 2026 was officially opened by Philippine President Ferdinand R Marcos Jr, who urged Asean nations to advance sustainable, inclusive, and innovative tourism, positioning the sector as a key driver of shared regional prosperity.

In remarks delivered by Tourism Secretary Christina Frasco, President Marcos highlighted the forum's legacy since its establishment in 1981, describing tourism as both an economic driver and a



Philippines' rich culture and heritage take centre stage at Asean Tourism Forum 2026 opening.

community-building opportunity.

Tourism Promotions Board (TPB) COO Maria Margarita Montemayor Nograles said Travex continued to play a vital role in translating destination visibility into long-term business partnerships and sustained tourism growth.

Speaking to *Gulf Times*, Jamilah Binti Abdul Halim, senior deputy director at Tourism Malaysia, said the GCC remained one of Malaysia's traditional and priority markets. Malaysia is intensifying promotions in the Middle East through minister-led sales missions, participation in Arabian Travel Market (ATM)

in May, and close collaboration with Qatar Airways, supported by incentive grants for airlines and tour operators.

"In terms of Islamic tourism, Malaysia is everywhere halal," she said.

Indonesia underlined Asean as its most strategic tourism growth partner at Travex 2026, presenting its "Go Beyond Ordinary" vision focused on quality tourism.

During a media briefing held alongside the forum, the Ministry of Tourism reported that Asean markets accounted for over 40% of Indonesia's international arrivals, with 5.68mn visitors recorded between January and November 2025.

Indonesia has set a target of 16mn international visitors in 2026, supported by strong regional connectivity and digital

innovation, including the launch of Mai, an AI-powered travel companion under its Tourism 5.0 initiative. Muslim-friendly tourism was highlighted as a core pillar alongside gastronomy, marine, and wellness tourism.

The Singapore Tourism Board reported a strong recovery in 2025, with 15.5mn visitor arrivals between January and November and tourism receipts of S\$15.7bn in the first half of the year.

Laos highlighted sustainable tourism development, showcasing Unesco heritage sites, eco-tourism assets, and improved connectivity through the Laos-China Railway. The country welcomed 4.58mn visitors in 2025, an 11% year-on-year increase, and outlined its Tourism Development Plan 2026-2030.

Cambodia presented its "Kingdom of Wonder - Feel the Warmth" strategy, reporting 5.54mn international arrivals in 2025. The opening of Techo International Airport and expanded connectivity, including services via Doha, were cited as key drivers.

Vietnam outlined ambitious goals for 2026, targeting 25mn international visitors. Officials highlighted the country's cultural heritage, beaches, vibrant cities, and eco-tourism offerings, noting that enhanced air connectivity, infrastructure expansion, and targeted marketing, particularly in Asean, Asian, and GCC markets, would be crucial, alongside the development of halal-friendly tourism products.

Linear Park – A serene oasis in the heart of Doha



Stretching across 75,000sq m in the heart of Al Hilal, Doha's Linear Park has become a quiet refuge for residents seeking fresh air and calm during the cool season. Opened in February 2019, the 1.5km-long, 50m-wide park draws individuals and families who unwind with evening walks or jogs after long, demanding days. Despite bordering a busy road, the park feels surprisingly serene, thanks to its lush landscaping and variety of mature trees that soften the city's noise. As temperatures dip, the shaded pathways and open green spaces offer an inviting setting for fitness, reflection, and family time, a proof that even in a fast-moving city, pockets of peace can still flourish. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

