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BUSINESS | Page 1

Qatar's private sector eyes global expansion as policy reforms unlock new opportunities



Hijazi hype sells out Web Summit

By Kamran Rehmat
Doha

The much anticipated Web Summit Qatar 2026 rolls into action at the sprawling Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre (DECC) Issam Hijazi here today.

A surge of global excitement has catapulted it to a complete sell-out, after news broke that Issam Hijazi, the Palestinian technologist behind the viral social-media sensation Upscrolled, will open the region's largest-ever tech gathering.

Within hours of the announcement, ticket sales spiked around the world, pushing attendance beyond 30,000 delegates – turning this year's edition into a landmark for both the summit and Qatar's fast-rising innovation ecosystem.

Organisers confirmed that Web Summit Qatar has shattered every previous record, drawing founders, investors, creators, and policymakers from 124 countries, alongside an army of journalists, content creators, and global tech brands. More than 1,600 startups and 900 investors will crowd the halls of the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre (DECC) over four packed days, supported by partners such as IBM, Microsoft, Huawei, and Qatar Airways. **To Page 4**



Qatar 'to test gene and cellular therapies soon'

By Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka
Editor-in-Chief

Qatar is poised to test gene therapy and cellular therapy, the dean of Weill Cornell Medicine Qatar (WCM-Q) has disclosed in an exclusive interview with *Gulf Times*.

"With all the world class infrastructure in place in Qatar, gene therapy as well as cellular therapy, will be tested here very soon. Cellular therapy is even better because it is unique. It goes down to the cellular level to look at what can be done for an individual in a personalised way. And that will be done here. We are working with Sidra Medicine to put together those programmes," revealed Dr Javaid Sheikh, dean of WCM-Q.

Dr Sheikh emphasised that 'Qatar will be a model' in the top five best countries in precision health revolution.

"When looking at all the data from an individual perspective by sequencing the genome, and with the multi-omics analysis, we should be able to tell what risk factors that you might have for your health in your life. Once you know the risk factors, then you can prevent it," he highlighted.

Dr Sheikh underlined that genes are not the destiny but the tendencies. He explained: "Tendencies that you are at risk for developing diabetes or other such diseases. We will help you change your behaviour so that you do not meet that destiny. You look at the risk factor and you change your behaviour."

He continued, "There are some unique rare disorders and certain genetic risk factors are unique in the population. However, the genes can be made to change their own behaviour. In science, we call it, turning the genes on and off. **To Page 4**

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW with dean of WCM-Q



Dr Javaid Sheikh, dean of WCM-Q.

PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam

- **Qatar 'will be a model' in the top five best countries in precision health revolution**
- **Lifestyle, behaviour changes can help 'turn on' good genes, suppress harmful ones**
- **Nationals now make up 31% of WCM-Q graduates**

PM visits Iran in bid for de-escalation

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met in Tehran yesterday with Iran's Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani. They reviewed ongoing efforts to de-escalate tensions in the region. The PM reiterated Qatar's support for all efforts aimed at reducing tensions and achieving peaceful solutions that enhance security and stability in the region.

He also stressed the need for concerted efforts to spare the peoples of the region the consequences of escalation and to continue co-ordination with brotherly and friendly countries to address differences through diplomatic means.

Qatar has actively bolstered senior-level engagement with Tehran in recent weeks as part of broader efforts to ease mounting regional tensions and promote dialogue amid the risk of escalation between Iran, the United States and other actors. At the centre of this diplomatic push has been direct contact between Qatar's leadership and their Iranian counterparts, signalling a determined Qatari role in de-escalation diplomacy. Last week, HE the Prime Minister engaged in a telephone conversation with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in which the two discussed bilateral co-operation, regional developments and shared interests. During the call, the Prime Minister

HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani

reaffirmed Doha's support for all efforts aimed at de-escalation and peaceful solutions that enhance security and stability in the region. Days earlier, the Prime Minister had also received a phone call from Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani with both sides again exchanging views on regional developments. HE the Prime Minister underscored Qatar's backing of diplomatic channels and peaceful approaches to security challenges. Foreign Ministry spokesman HE Dr Majed al-Ansari had also recently stated that Qatar is actively engaged in communications to de-escalate regional tensions and is working with neighbours and partners to support diplomatic avenues. He emphasised that "diplomacy is the effective way to resolve the region's crises" and that Qatar seeks peaceful outcomes rather than conflict. (QNA)

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Qatar Research Collection with nearly 70,000 records launched

Qatar National Library (QNL) has launched the Qatar Research Collection, a comprehensive national database designed to document and preserve research, knowledge production related to Qatar for future generations.

The launch coincides with the Manara platform for Qatari research surpassing 10,000 published research items, a qualitative milestone that underscores QNL's commitment to strengthening Qatar's scientific research ecosystem and supporting Open Access to knowledge both locally and globally.

This new record level also reflects the high degree of trust placed by researchers and local institutions in the platform, as well as Qatar National Library's dedication to safeguarding and disseminating Qatar's research achievements in accordance with the highest standards of quality and transparency.

Qatar National Library explained to Qatar News Agency (QNA) that the key distinction between the Qatar Research Collection and the Manara platform lies in their respective roles. Manara serves as a national open reposi-

QNL has unveiled the comprehensive national database designed to document and preserve research, knowledge related to Qatar

tory for preserving and publishing academic and scientific research produced by researchers in Qatar. It hosts traditional research outputs such as journal articles, conference papers, and studies, alongside non-traditional outputs including datasets, software, multimedia content, research posters and presentations, in both Arabic and English.

QNL noted that the primary objective of Manara is to enhance the presence of Qatari research across disciplines, expand its impact and reach, and facilitate global access and visibility.

In contrast, the Qatar Research Collection is a unified and comprehensive container for all research content related to Qatar that has already been published worldwide and assigned a unique international digital identifier (DOI), whether traditional or non-traditional, Open Access or subscription-based.

In this context, the Library

highlighted that the collection is distinguished by its scale and breadth, comprising nearly 70,000 records, more than 25,000 of which are available through Open Access, making it the largest and most comprehensive database dedicated exclusively to research related to Qatar.

QNL added that the collection links descriptive metadata to full texts or files hosted on publishers' platforms and provides users with an intelligent mechanism to identify and discover free and Open Access versions of research outputs. It also offers advanced filtering tools that allow researchers to sort content by type, publisher, academic discipline, or keywords. Research items are added automatically via the ScienceOpen platform based on precise, predefined criteria.

Regarding the practical benefits for researchers and institutions, QNL explained that both platforms open broader horizons

for disseminating Qatari research by improving access, searchability, and visibility. Researchers can now access full texts of Open Access publications, benefit from advanced filtering by content type, publisher, and discipline, and enjoy streamlined institutional deposit processes.

Qatar National Library emphasized that the most significant advantage lies in the integration and synergy between the two platforms. Together, they facilitate the accessibility, preservation, discovery, and long-term availability of research produced in or related to Qatar, creating a fertile environment for scientific collaboration both locally and internationally. In this regard, QNL confirmed that the Qatar Research Collection rivals leading global databases such as Web of Science and Scopus in terms of the volume of research content related to Qatar, while surpassing them by offering free access. The collection

The launch coincides with the Manara platform for Qatari research surpassing 10,000 published research items

Qatar Research Collection

- A unified and comprehensive container for all research content related to Qatar
- Provides users with an intelligent mechanism to identify and discover free and Open Access versions of research outputs
- Serves as a national open repository for preserving and publishing academic and scientific research produced by researchers in Qatar

Manara platform

- Collection links descriptive metadata to full texts or files hosted on publishers' platforms
- Offers advanced filtering tools that allow researchers to sort content by type, publisher, academic discipline, or keywords
- Hosts traditional research outputs alongside non-traditional outputs

currently includes approximately 68,200 research items available to the public, compared to around 65,600 items in Web of Science and 72,900 in Scopus, both of which require paid subscriptions.

QNL also highlighted the collection's role in serving Qatar National Library users and researchers through regular updates and advanced search tools, as well as its strategic function in identifying Open Access content suitable for deposit and preservation in the Manara platform to ensure sustainable access to knowledge.

Qatar National Library called on researchers and institutions in Qatar to actively participate in building a strong, open national research archive by depositing their work in Manara and engaging with the Qatar Research Collection, stressing that these efforts contribute to enhancing scientific

impact, expanding opportunities for collaboration and innovation, and preserving Qatar's intellectual legacy for future generations.

The Library continues to simplify deposit procedures by providing clear guidance on copyright and Open Access and working closely with academic institutions to encourage institutional deposit policies.

In parallel, Qatar National Library employs discovery tools to identify Open Access versions of research outputs and link them within the Qatar Research Collection, paving the way for their subsequent deposit into Manara, the national open repository for preserving and publishing academic and scientific research produced in Qatar in both Arabic and English, with the goal of strengthening the global presence, reach, and impact of Qatari research. (QNA)

MCIT reveals programme for Web Summit Qatar

The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) has revealed the programme of its participation in the third edition of Web Summit Qatar 2026, taking place from February 1-4, 2026 at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Center (DECC).

The ministry will take part through a comprehensive and integrated programme, reflecting an active and impactful presence at one of the world's leading platforms for technology and innovation.

This participation comes as part of MCIT's commitment to engaging directly with industry leaders, entrepreneurs, and investors, contributing to global discussions on the future of the digital economy, and showcasing Qatar's national experi-

ence in digital transformation, entrepreneurship, and future skills development.

The ministry's programme features a fully integrated interactive booth designed as an open space for dialogue and direct engagement. The booth includes an interactive theatre hosting more than 22 panel discussions and live presentations, with the participation of leading technology experts, industry leaders, entrepreneurs, and innovators, in co-ordination with Invest Qatar.

These sessions focus on strategic themes including digital transformation, artificial intelligence, entrepreneurship, and innovation, as well as their practical applications.

The Ministry of Sports and Youth also participates within the booth through a



range of youth-focused initiatives and programmes, in collaboration with the Qatar Scientific Club. This participation reflects institutional integration in supporting Qatar's national innovation ecosystem and aims to empower youth and entrepreneurs, enhance technical and practical skills, and create opportunities for learning, experimentation, and

engagement with local and international expertise in scientific and technological fields. The interactive booth highlights MCIT's flagship programmes supporting entrepreneurship, including the Digital Incubation Center, which has supported the graduation of more than 415 startups; the Tasmu Accelerator, which has supported more than 72 startups; and the Scale Now Programme, which has graduated 30 startups.

As part of the summit programme, MCIT will organise four specialised courses covering innovation, entrepreneurship, and digital skills development.

Furthermore, the booth will allocate dedicated exhibition spaces for startups incubated under the programmes of MCIT

and the Ministry of Sports and Youth, with approximately 24 startups participating throughout the summit days on a rotational basis.

In addition, Director of the Digital Innovation Department at MCIT, Eman al-Kuwari, will participate in a dialogue session within the summit programme titled "Sovereign AI: Building Technology in a Transnational World". In this session, she will highlight AI developments in national contexts and the role of digital initiatives in Qatar in this field.

On the sidelines of the summit, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology is scheduled to sign more than 10 agreements and partnerships with a number of local and international partners. (QNA)

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Amir sends condolences to Korean president

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani sent cables of condolences to President of Korea Lee Jae-myung, on the death of former prime minister of Korea Lee Hae-chan. HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent a similar cable of condolences to Prime Minister of Korea Kim Min-seok, on the death of the former PM. (QNA)

Qatar condemns attacks in Pakistan's Balochistan province

Qatar has condemned the attacks that occurred in Balochistan province in Pakistan, which resulted in fatalities and injuries. A statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs yesterday reiterated Qatar's firm position rejecting violence, terrorism, and criminal acts in all forms, regardless of their motives or justifications. The ministry also expressed Qatar's sincere condolences to the families of the victims, as well as to the government and people of Pakistan, and extended its wishes for a speedy recovery to the injured. (QNA)

Al-Muraikhi takes part in Indian PM meeting with Arab ministers



HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi yesterday took part in the meeting of Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, with the ministers participating in the second session of the Arab-Indian Co-operation Forum, held in New Delhi. Discussions during the meeting focused on co-operation, in addition to a host of topics of mutual interest. (QNA)

Qatar takes part in Arab-India forum ministerial meeting

Qatar participated yesterday in the ministerial meeting of the second session of the Arab-India Co-operation Forum, held in New Delhi. HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi headed the Qatari delegation to the meeting. (QNA)



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grand draw. At the end of the campaign, one lucky winner will take home the luxurious GWM Tank 500, offering unmatched performance, comfort, and capability.

Qatar Charity delivers aid to 16,500 Albania flood victims



The distribution was carried out in partnership with the Municipality of Durres, in the presence of Emriana Tsako, Mayor of Durres, and Ahmed Ibrahim al-Musnad, second secretary at the Qatar embassy.

Qatar Charity has delivered urgent humanitarian assistance to support families affected by floods that struck the regions of Durres and Kurbini in Albania, following days of heavy rainfall that caused extensive damage to property and infrastructure.

Qatar Charity's office in Albania moved swiftly in response to the disaster, co-ordinating with relevant government authorities to identify the most urgent humanitarian needs and the areas hardest hit.

The distribution was carried out in partnership with the Municipality of Durres, in the presence of Emriana Tsako, Mayor of Durres, and Ahmed Ibrahim al-Musnad, second secretary at the Qatar embassy.

During the event, Tsako expressed her appreciation for Qatar Charity's rapid response, affirming that the initiative forms part of a series of joint projects between the two sides in the health, social, and humanitarian sectors. She conveyed her gratitude, on behalf of the residents, for this support, which met critical needs at a particularly difficult time.

Al-Musnad affirmed the solidarity of Qatar with the Albanian people, especially during times of emergency, highlighting the depth of relations between the two countries and their ongoing co-operation across various fields.

The humanitarian effort aims to alleviate the living burden faced by affected families, promote the values of solidarity and humanitarian support during crises, and to highlight the spirit of effective partnership between Qatar Charity and official authorities in Albania in serving the most vulnerable groups.

Qatar slams Israel's recurrent breaches

Qatar has expressed strongly its condemnation of Israel's repeated violations of the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, which resulted in several fatalities and injuries. It stressed that these violations are a harbinger of dangerous escalation that would further inflame the situation and undermine the regional and global efforts aimed at upholding de-escalation and restoring stability to the Strip. A statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs yesterday emphasised that these persistent violations represent a direct threat to the ongoing political pathway and foreclose the efforts made to have an appropriate

environment that is more secure and stable for the afflicted Palestinian brothers in the enclave. Israel must fully commit to the ceasefire agreement to have a successful second phase of HE US President Donald Trump's plan and enforce Security Council Resolution 2803, the statement emphasised. The ministry called on all parties to exercise maximum restraint and refrain from any steps that would undermine the ongoing efforts, stressing the need to have an environment conducive to embarking on early recovery and reconstruction in the Gaza Strip. (QNA)

Doha Debates focuses on AI's ethical, political and social effects

Doha Debates, an initiative of Qatar Foundation, examined the ethical, political and social ramifications of the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence (AI) during its latest "town hall", held amid growing concerns that AI's accelerating power could surpass human capability and escape meaningful control.

Hosted at Multaqa, the Education City Student Center, the open forum brought together students, researchers and global experts to explore whether current institutions, ethical frameworks and governance systems are prepared for an era of fast-moving technological transformation.

Moderated by researcher Nadir Nahdi, the session featured strategic philosopher and transhumanist thinker Max More; Dr Roman Yampolskiy, professor of computer science and a leading expert on AI safety and security; and Nabila Syed, executive director of the Mozilla Foundation and a prominent advocate for accountable technology governance.

Approaching the issue from sharply different perspectives, the speakers debated whether advanced artificial intelligence represents an unprecedented opportunity for human flourishing or a profound threat to the core of human agency.

Reflecting a proactivity outlook, Max More urged humanity to resist paralysis driven by fear, stressing



the importance of innovation grounded in reason and reinforced by proportional safeguards. He warned that risk and opportunity are emerging simultaneously as AI capabilities expand.

By contrast, Dr Roman Yampolskiy expressed deep scepticism about the possibility of maintaining real control over systems that exceed human intelligence, cautioning that governance structures may collapse as the intelligence gap widens and power becomes increasingly asymmetric.

From a societal perspective, Nabila Syed focused on how decisions around artificial intelligence are made, questioning who benefits and who bears the consequences when these technologies are deployed unevenly across societies. She called for stronger accountability, transparency and public participation.

Qatari SkipCash closes \$4 million Series A round to lead digital transformation of smart payments



SkipCash, a leading platform for digital payment technologies and solutions in Qatar, has announced the successful closure of a \$4 million Series A investment round, with participation from Qatar Development Bank, Qatar Islamic Insurance Company, KBN Holding Group, Finjan Venture Investments, and Doha Tech Angels.

This investment strengthens SkipCash's position as one of the fastest-growing fintech companies in Qatar and reaffirms investor confidence in the company's vision to redefine payment and shopping experiences across both physical and digital channels.

SkipCash plans to deploy this funding toward enhancing its technology infrastructure, expanding the rollout of its mobile phone-based point-of-sale solution (Tap-to-Phone), and pursuing geographic expansion into new markets across the GCC.

Commenting on the round, Mohammed Abdalaziz Al-Delaimi, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of SkipCash, said:

"We are proud to close this round, which represents a pivotal milestone in SkipCash's journey. The \$4 million raised is not merely

funding, but fuel for an ambitious plan aimed at making payment challenges a thing of the past. We are building an integrated payments ecosystem that delivers a seamless and exceptional experience for both merchants and consumers, in line with the highest global standards adopted in advanced markets."

SkipCash currently serves more than 6,000 clients across large, medium, and small enterprises, and has processed payment transactions exceeding QR1 billion during 2025.

About SkipCash

Founded in 2019, SkipCash is a Qatari fintech company focused on digitizing payments and simplifying the shopping experience across in-store and e-commerce platforms through mobile-based payment solutions and advanced digital payment gateways.

These solutions enable merchants to move away from traditional payment methods while providing smart tools to manage financial operations and payments with efficiency and security.

Email: info@skipcash.app
Website: www.skipcash.app



Qatar takes part in World Customs Organisation conference and exhibition

Qatar participated in the World Customs Organisation's Technology Conference and Exhibition in Abu Dhabi, under the theme *Customs Agility in a Complex World: Securing and Facilitating Trade through Innovation*.

Qatar's delegation to the conference was headed by General Authority of Customs president Ahmed bin Abdullah al-Jamal.

Conference sessions featured in-depth discussions on a range of key issues, foremost among them strategies to secure borders and enhance the safety of international

trade, as well as mechanisms to facilitate trade flows through advanced digital pathways. Participants also reviewed current challenges facing customs risk management administrations.

They explored ways to leverage artificial intelligence (AI) and cloud computing technologies in connectivity and data analysis, highlighting their effective role in strengthening comprehensive customs security systems. Qatar's delegation delivered a visual presentation highlighting the country's experience in adopting advanced strategies to

accelerate digital transformation and enhance inspection efficiency at customs ports.

The presentation showcased technologies that have enabled frontline officers to make immediate and accurate decisions.

On the sidelines of the conference, al-Jamal and the accompanying delegation toured the exhibition, where they were briefed on the latest solutions and innovations presented by participating entities, as well as advanced technologies serving the customs sector and contributing to securing supply chains and facilitating global trade. - QNA



Qatar welcomes Syria govt-SDF agreement

Qatar has welcomed the Syrian government's announcement of reaching an agreement with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on a ceasefire, as part of a comprehensive agreement, with an understanding on a phased integration of military and administrative forces between the two sides. Qatar commended the effective efforts of the United States, which contributed to reaching the agreement. In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed Qatar's hope that the agreement would contribute to consolidating civil peace and enhancing security and stability in Syria. (QNA)

Arab Book Award opens nominations

The Arab Book Award has opened nominations for its fourth edition, accepting submissions until May 28 via the award's official website.



Launched by Qatar in March 2023, the Arab Book Award recognises authors, publishers, and institutions contributing to the advancement of Arabic literature.

According to a statement by the award, the call for entries for the fourth edition follows the celebration of the third edition winners, held under the auspices of the Qatar National Committee for Education, Culture, and Science.

The move reflects the award's commitment to institutional continuity rather than a seasonal approach, in line with its growing presence across the Arab world.

Media adviser for the Arab Book Award, Dr Hanan al-Fayyad, outlined the categories for the fourth edition.

In linguistic and literary studies, the focus this year is on Arabic grammar, morphology, and critical studies in narrative and theatre.

In social and philosophical studies, the edition specialises in Islamic Arab philosophy and psychology.

Historical research submissions will be limited to studies on the history of the Arab and Islamic worlds from the 12th Hijri century to the present.

Religious studies will cover Qur'anic sciences and principles of interpretation, while lexicography, encyclopaedias, and textual verification will focus on works related to Islamic creed, jurisprudence, and philosophy.

Dr al-Fayyad emphasised that the primary criterion for acceptance is scholarly contribution and quality of research, noting that submissions outside these defined fields will not be considered.

The award includes a category for single books, open to Arabic-language works published in the past four years with a minimum of 30,000 words, adhering to scholarly standards, and authored by a living writer.

Joint authorship is allowed, provided the work is not derived from conferences or collective seminars, and all co-authors approve.

Second or subsequent editions must meet the award's timing requirements, and submissions must be completed through the award's website.

A lifetime achievement category is also available, open to individuals or institutions with original and innovative contributions in Arabic scholarship that enrich human knowledge, while complying with intellectual property laws.

Applications for this category must also be completed online following the detailed guidelines on the award's website.

Dr al-Fayyad said that each edition's focus on specific fields reflects a systematic approach to covering diverse areas of Arabic knowledge, encouraging research in underrepresented topics, and raising standards in scholarly writing and textual verification.

She stressed that the Arab Book Award is not merely seasonal but a comprehensive cultural project guided by a strategic plan that includes academic seminars, participation in local and international book fairs, and support for serious authors, publishers, and institutions.

Researchers, writers, and publishers are encouraged to submit entries for the fourth edition and contribute to enriching the Arab intellectual landscape. - QNA

GCC security agencies showcase innovations at exhibition



The Supreme Committee for the joint tactical exercise for security agencies of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries, "Arabian Gulf Security (4)", is organising an exhibition to accompany the exercise at Qatar Mall, starting today and continuing until February 4.

The exhibition was inaugurated by the vice-chairman of the Supreme Committee for the Arabian Gulf Security (4) exercise and director of the exercise, Brigadier-General Nawaf Majid al-Alai al-Maadheed, along with a number of security leaders, officers, and

representatives of the participating security agencies, at the exhibition site in Qatar Mall.

The exhibition welcomes visitors from the public daily during the morning and evening periods, and includes pavilions for the countries participating in the exercise.

Participating countries are showcasing their field efforts and various contributions, in addition to awareness materials and documentary films, as well as displaying a number of innovations, smart systems and the most prominent modern security technologies in the fields of security and police work. - QNA

Qatar 'to test gene and cellular therapies soon'

From Page 1

"However, there are certain unfortunate genetic disorders and there is not much one can do about them. But they are rare," Dr Sheikh added.

"You can definitely change your behaviour to change the turning on or off of the gene," he said. "So you can turn on good genes and you can turn off bad genes. This is what we are working on."

Dr Sheikh said the university has been making great efforts in attracting Qatari students to the medical field and become doctors.

"We put together some outreach programmes to the community," he said. "We have now more than a dozen programmes and we identify the best students in 9th and 10th grades in public schools who want to become doctors."

"We bring them to the university and work with them during summer, winter, sometimes over the weekend and sometimes online," Dr Sheikh continued. "And during

those years, those who really want to become doctors, become more committed."

"Then we bring in those students to the university, and they spend one-year full time in studying English, math and sciences," he added. "And then, they are ready for the medical school, and they do exceedingly well at that time."

The dean said that the number of Qatari students in the university has gone up considerably over the years.

"Before 2010, Qatari were overall around 10%," he said. "In the last two graduating classes, we have around 31% Qatari."

"Overall, if I look at the 641 alumni that we have graduated so far, Qatari are 22% but in the last two years, it is 31% and in another six years it will be about 38% and above," Dr Sheikh stated.

He said that there is a plan for bringing all the graduates of the university back to Qatar.

"This is a challenge and we are

working on it. We are working very closely with Hamad Medical Corporation, Sidra Medicine and Aspetar - orthopaedic and sports medicine hospital in this regard," he said. "We have a committee representing all three institutions and the Ministry of Public Health to attract as many of our alumni as we can."

The dean also said the university is keen to contribute to Qatar's national vision of developing human capital.

"From our point of view as healthcare providers and educators, we help people in taking care of their health and getting educated in healthy practices," Dr Sheikh said. "We are contributing in this in a very major way."

"Then all the breakthroughs and the patients which will come from our biomedical research, will contribute to Qatar establishing a very thriving entrepreneurial activity and biomedical companies, which will bring in revenue from other parts of the world."

Hijazi hype sells out Web Summit Qatar 2026

From Page 1

For officials, the sell-out moment signals more than just popularity – it reflects Qatar's transformation into a global nexus for technology and entrepreneurship.

The exhibition floor, which sold out earlier in the year, features participation from major global and regional companies across technology, aviation, finance and telecommunications, underscoring Doha's growing appeal as a meeting point for capital, talent and ideas.

At the centre of the frenzy is Hijazi, the Palestinian-Jordanian-Australian founder of UpScrolled, whose app has become a global sensation for challenging the dominance of Big Tech.

Promising a social platform that rejects the algorithmic manipulation, clickbait, and shadow-banning of traditional networks, UpScrolled last week became the No. 1 free app on both the Apple App Store and Google Play, racking up more than one million active users

in just days. The sudden fame – intensified by viral debates over censorship and content moderation – has turned Hijazi into an unlikely celebrity for a generation of digital creators craving transparency.

Today's opening marks Hijazi's first public appearance since the app's meteoric rise. His speech is among the most anticipated sessions in the summit's history, with organisers expecting standing-room-only crowds and millions more following online. "Issam Hijazi embodies the kind of daring, independent innovation this summit was designed to celebrate," said an organiser. "His presence has united the tech community's excitement in a way we've rarely seen."

Alongside Hijazi's headline moment, the summit's main stage will feature an all-star line-up including Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of Qatar Foundation; HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs; HE Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Ha-

mad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Chairperson, Qatar Museums; Eduardo Saverin, Yanis Varoufakis, Colin Kaepernick, Larry Li, and creator Abir El-Saghir, exploring everything from artificial intelligence ethics to digital creativity, startup culture, and social impact.

Last year's Web Summit Qatar edition generated an estimated QR807mm in economic returns, according to consulting firm Silverlode, with visitor spending driving over 66,000 hotel nights and 19,000 airline bookings. This year's figures are expected to surge even higher, as the sold-out summit injects new momentum into Doha's hospitality, aviation, and investment sectors.

Officials, including Sheikh Jassim bin Mansour bin Jabor al-Thani, Director of the Government Communications Office and Chairman of the organising committee, have described the event as "a cornerstone of Qatar's vision to diversify its economy beyond hydrocarbons" under Qatar National Vision 2030.



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S. No.	Tender Ref.	Tender Title:	Tender Bond QAR	Bid Closing Date & Tender Bond Validity Period
1	STC-CN-001-26-HS	Call off Contract for dispose Incinerable waste	45,500/-	25 February 2026 at 12:00 noon & 180 days
2	TC-CN-006-26-MC	Call off Contract for Maintenance Services of Utility Piping Thermalastic & Copper Materials	45,500/-	18 February 2026 at 12:00 noon & 180 days

Companies wishing to register their interest and obtain Tender Document(s) for the above Tender(s) must pay a non-refundable registration fee and register with ORYX GTL as detailed below:

Tender Registration Fee	QAR 500/- (Non-refundable) per Tender
Payable to	ORYX GTL Limited
IBAN (29 Digits)	QA23QNBA00000000013010705001
Bank	Qatar National Bank - HQ or any branch (cash only)
Registration Dates	From 01 Feb 2026 to 05 Feb 2026 8:00 am to 1:00 pm
Registration Process and Requirements:	Write an e-mail to oryxgtltenders@oryxgtl.qa with the following attachments: 1.Copy of Commercial Registration (CR) 2.Copy of bank deposit slip of the Tender Registration Fee. 3. Copy of ICV Certificate

COMPANIES WHO HAVE PAID THE NON-REFUNDABLE REGISTRATION FEE BUT FAILED TO FORMALY REGISTER AT THE DATE AND TIME STATED ABOVE WILL NOT BE CONSIDERED AS ACCEPTABLE TENDERER.

TENDER BOND SHALL BE ISSUED IN THE STATE OF QATAR.

Effective from 1st July 2023, bids from Local Suppliers and Contractors (companies established under the Laws of State of Qatar with local Commercial Registration) who are not in possession of an ICV score in the ICV portal by Tender Closing Date (or commercial bid submission date if separately mentioned/notified) will not be accepted. Local Company that has been established for less than 2 years are exempted from this requirement. For further details please visit ICV Digital Portal- <https://icv.qa>

For more information about ORYX GTL and its tenders, please visit our website: <http://www.oryxgtl.com.qa>

Tender / دعوة شركة مرفاق قطر ذهب الى المناقصة الآتية:	
العنوان / العنوان: مارفاق قطر مارفاق قطر	
Tender No.	Tender Subject
RFP-001-26	الاستعانة بخدمات خارجية لإعداد وتنفيذ خدمات المسقوفات و توفير خدمات الطرق العامة لشركة مرفاق قطر Outsourcing of Warehouse setup, operations, and Manpower Services for Marafeq
	Tender Bond
	QR 10,000/-
	Tender Fees Non-Refundable*
	QR 500/-
Issue	Sunday, [الإثنين] Feb 01, 26
Closing	Thursday, [الخميس] Feb 12, 26

*non-refundable & non-negotiable

Document Collection Date and Location:
Starting: Sun (Feb 01, 2026) through Thu (Feb 12, 2026) (from 8:30am through 2:30pm, working days only)
Location: MARAFEQ Qatar LLC, C&P Department, 7th Floor, Al-Baraha Tower, Marina District, Lusail City, Qatar

Document Collection Process:
Bidders can collect tender documents from the Document Collection Location during the specified dates and times.
Bidder's nominee must present the following documents at the time of document collection:
-copy of a recent date extract of the Bidder's CR.
-original authorization letter by the Bidder addressed to Marafeq Qatar LLC authorizing the nominee to collect the relevant tender document; and
-the original proof of payment of the Tender Fees.

Tender Fees Payment Guidelines:
Prescribed Tender Fees must be paid into the bank account below. Kindly mention the Tender No. (as above)
Title: MARAFEQ Qatar LLC
Bank: Masraf Al-Rayyan (Grand Hamad Branch)
Account: 0003-127914-001
IBAN: QA68 MAFR 0000 0000 0003 127914 001
SWIFT: MAFR QA QA

Means of Communication:
Email: procurement@marafeq.com.qa
Phone: +974-4012-0358

Notice:
يجب دفع رسوم المناقصة في الحساب البنكي المحدد تفصيله
أداء فقط ويرجى ذكر رقم الحساب (أعلاه).
الإسم: مرفاق قطر ذهب
البنك: مصرف قطر الدوحة (دبي)
الحساب: 0003-127914-001
رقم الحساب المصرفي الدولي:
QA68 MAFR 0000 0000 0003 127914 001
سوبر:
MAFR QA QA

الإرشادات دفع رسوم المناقصة:
يجب دفع رسوم المناقصة في الحساب البنكي المحدد تفصيله
أداء فقط ويرجى ذكر رقم الحساب (أعلاه).
الإسم: مرفاق قطر ذهب
البنك: مصرف قطر الدوحة (دبي)
الحساب: 0003-127914-001
رقم الحساب المصرفي الدولي:
QA68 MAFR 0000 0000 0003 127914 001
سوبر:
procurement@marafeq.com.qa
الهاتف: +974-4012-0358

تحذيف شركة مرفاق قطر ذهب بحالها في تعديل شروط المناقصة في أي وقت بدون إذن أصحابها أو إلغاء المناقصة بدون إذنها
MARAFEQ Qatar LLC reserves its right to modify the terms and conditions of the tender advertisement and/or tender documents at any time, or



QRCS supports Gaza rehabilitation services at Al-Wafa Hospital

Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) is continuing to implement major healthcare interventions amid the mounting humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

As part of the 'Improved Access to Medical, Mental Health, and Inpatient Rehabilitation Services in Gaza and North Gaza Governorates' project, QRCS is currently supporting rehabilitation and medical care services for approximately 21,000 patients and injuries at Al-Wafa Hospital for Medical Rehabilitation and Specialised Surgery.

Dr Akram Nassar, head of QRCS's representation office in Gaza, said the new project was another intervention by QRCS to alleviate everyday suffering and ensure continued health care services for the blockade's population of more than 2mn people.

The project, he explained, involved the provision of medical rehabilitation services for nine months, as well as repair and maintenance of the hospital's solar panels, to sustain rehabilitation and clinical services, given the severe energy shortage in Gaza.

"QRCS is supporting full-board inpatient, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, psychological support, radiology, and medical laboratory services for the benefit of the most vulnerable groups, mainly under-12 children, women, older persons, and those in need"

Dr Fouad Najm, director general of Al-Wafa Hospital, described the project as an urgent lifeline, as most hospitals became out of service and the provision of health care and rehabilitation services in Gaza was more difficult.

"With this project, QRCS is supporting full-board inpatient, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, psychological support, radiology, and medical laboratory services for the benefit of the most vulnerable groups, mainly under-12 children, women, older persons, and those in need."

The \$729,000 project falls within QRCS's priorities of backing Gaza's health sector and enhancing its resilience, thus helping mitigate the humanitarian repercussions of war, especially with 22 hospitals rendered completely out of service, according to official statistics issued by Palestine's Ministry of Health in Gaza.

DFI supports 57 projects from 46 countries in 2025 Fall cycle



Akhir El-Saff

Doha Film Institute (DFI) has announced the recipients of its 2025 Fall Grants Cycle, supporting 57 projects from 46 countries and surpassing a major milestone of more than 1,000 projects backed worldwide since the programme's launch.

The latest cycle includes 10 projects by Qatari and Qatar-based filmmakers, underscoring DFI's dual commitment to nurturing local talent while sustaining one of the world's most diverse international film development ecosystems. The selected projects span feature-length and short narratives, documentaries, experimental and essay films, and television and web series.

Awarded biannually in Spring and Fall, the DFI Grants Programme is among the longest-running film development initiatives in the region. It focuses on empowering first and second-time filmmakers globally, alongside established Mena-region directors working in post-production.

The 2025 Fall cycle is one of the programme's most geographically diverse to date, featuring projects from 14 Mena countries, as well



Amnesia

as filmmakers from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. The slate reflects a wide range of storytelling approaches, themes and genres, addressing issues of identity, memory, displacement, social change and resilience.

DFI chief executive officer Fatma Hassan Alremaihi said the selected filmmakers demon-

SJC begins implementing 2026 judicial strategy

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

The Supreme Judiciary Council (SJC) has started implementing its operational plans and strategic projects for 2026, as part of its Judicial Strategy for 2025-2030.

This marks the beginning of the execution phase of the strategy, which represents the second stage of the national initiative aimed at developing the justice systems in Qatar, ultimately aiming to enhance the overall efficiency of the judicial system.

The strategy seeks to strengthen the standing of the Qatari judiciary at both the local and international levels and to achieve global judicial leadership through an independent, specialised, innovative, and reliable judicial ecosystem. It is designed to keep pace with legislative and technological developments, reinforce public confidence in the judiciary, and

support the continuous improvement of judicial performance.

The SJC noted that the strategy is founded on a set of broad institutional values that include integrity, transparency, excellence, innovation, justice, and equality. These values guide all initiatives and projects implemented under the strategy and reflect the council's commitment to fairness, accountability, and high-quality judicial services.

The Judicial Strategy is structured around nine main pillars: institutional excellence, digital justice, restorative justice, civil and administrative justice, criminal justice, family cohesion, judicial governance, commercial justice, and judicial enforcement efficiency.

Accordingly, these pillars form an integrated framework aimed at developing all aspects of the judicial system, ensuring comprehensive, accessible, and effective justice.

In addition, the strategy identifies eight main strategic objectives that branch into 27 sub-objectives,

supported by an accurate monitoring and follow-up system based on standardised performance indicators. This system is intended to ensure effective implementation, continuous evaluation, and measurable results throughout the strategy's duration.

The 2026 executive plan includes several key developmental initiatives, most notably the simplification of judicial services, the reinforcement of the rule of law, the activation of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, the achievement of international standards for judicial excellence, and the launch of programmes to enhance judicial governance and improve judicial quality.

In the meantime, the SJC affirmed that the start of implementation of the 2026 plans is considered a major milestone in advancing the efficiency, credibility, and global competitiveness of Qatar's judicial system, in line with national priorities and long-term development goals.

'Qatar Pavilion' sells 19 boats at Kuwait Marine Show

Qatar has concluded its participation in the first edition of the 'Kuwait Marine Show 2026' through a national participation hosted by Old Doha Port, marking a key milestone in its regional maritime engagement.

As Kuwait's largest marine event, the exhibition brought together leading marine brands, industry professionals, and enthusiasts to showcase the latest boats, marine technologies, and equipment, while highlighting the region's growing marine and waterfront lifestyle sector. Throughout the exhibition, the Qatar Pavilion attracted strong engagement and welcomed visitors from several distinguished VIPs.

Over the course of four days, the Qatari companies participating under the Qatar Pavilion achieved strong commercial outcomes, concluding the sale of 19



Engineer Mohammed Abdulla al-Mulla, CEO of Old Doha Port.

boats. This success reflects the positive reception of Qatar's participation in the inaugural edition of the Kuwait Marine Show 2026, highlighting the growing competitiveness of Qatari companies within the regional boats and yachts sector.

Engineer Mohammed Abdulla

al-Mulla, CEO of Old Doha Port, said: "Our participation at the Kuwait Marine Show reflects Old Doha Port's expanding regional role as a platform that connects Qatari marine industries to key markets. Through unified national participation, we are opening new commercial pathways, strengthening regional partnerships, and reinforcing Qatar's position as a credible and competitive maritime manufacturing hub."

Old Doha Port's participation at the Kuwait Marine Show 2026 forms part of its ongoing efforts to deepen regional engagement, expand its maritime network, and elevate the international profile of Qatari marine manufacturers. These efforts align with Qatar National Vision 2030, particularly its objectives related to economic diversification, private-sector growth, and regional industry collaboration.

FUXI



FUXI

Among the supported projects are feature narratives in development, production, and post-production from Egypt, Palestine, Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq, and Lebanon, as well as documentaries examining personal histories, conflict, exile, and cultural memory. Several projects focus on Gaza and the wider region, while others explore universal themes through intimate, character-driven stories.

The cycle also includes experimental and essay films, television series in development, and a strong slate of short films, particularly from Qatar, highlighting emerging voices and innovative storytelling forms.

Beyond the Mena region, DFI continues to support international post-production projects from Latin America, Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America, reinforcing its role as a global supporter of independent cinema.

Through its grants programme, DFI continues to provide critical support at key stages of development and production, enabling filmmakers to bring bold, original and underrepresented stories to audiences worldwide.



A Woman Waiting



Girl of Wind



Rescuers and onlookers inspect the debris of Sheikh Radwan police station in Gaza City, yesterday, following an Israeli air strike.

Israeli strikes on Gaza 'kill more than 30'

Reuters
Cairo/Jerusalem

Israel pounded Gaza yesterday with some of its most intense air strikes since the October ceasefire, killing more than 30 people, including three girls from one family, in attacks on houses, tents and a police station, Palestinian health officials said.

The Israeli military said it was responding to a breach of the ceasefire the previous day, in which its troops had identified eight gunmen emerging from a tunnel in Rafah, an area in southern Gaza controlled by Israeli forces under the truce.

It had targeted commanders, weapons caches and manufacturing sites belonging to Palestinian group Hamas and its ally, Islamic Jihad, the military said.

Hamas, which retains control of just under half of Gaza where nearly all its more than 2mn residents live mainly in makeshift tents and damaged buildings, said Israel had violated the truce. It did not say whether any of its members or sites were struck in Saturday's attacks.

Today, Israel is due to reopen the Rafah border crossing between

the Gaza Strip and Egypt under US President Donald Trump's plan to end the war.

The war began after Hamas-led fighters stormed southern Israel in October 2023. Israeli officials have said the war could resume if Hamas does not lay down its weapons.

Israeli warplanes bombed the Sheikh Radwan police station west of Gaza City, killing 13 people, including five officers, police in Gaza said. Rescue teams were searching for more casualties at the site, said the Hamas-run police.

Other air strikes hit at least two houses in Gaza City, in northern-central Gaza, and a tent encampment sheltering displaced Palestinians in Khan Younis further south, local officials said.

Video footage from Gaza City showed charred, blackened and destroyed walls at an apartment in a multi-storey building, and debris scattered inside it and outside on the street. Samer al-Atbash said the bodies of his three small nieces had been found in the street. "They say 'ceasefire' and all. What did those children do? What did we do?" he said.

The Gaza civil defence rescue service put yesterday's death toll at 32. Israel said that in Friday's

encounter with fighters in Rafah its soldiers killed three and arrested a fourth, described as a Hamas commander. Hamas did not comment on the incident.

Dozens of its fighters have been trapped in tunnels under Rafah since the ceasefire and some have since been killed in clashes with Israeli forces.

Violence has repeatedly shaken the ceasefire. Israeli fire has killed over 500 people, most of them civilians according to Gaza health officials, and Palestinian fighters have killed four Israeli soldiers, according to Israeli authorities.

The two sides have traded blame over truce violations, even as Washington presses them to proceed to the next phases of the ceasefire deal, meant to end the conflict for good.

The next phase of Trump's Gaza plan calls for resolving complex issues such as Hamas disarmament, which the group has long rejected, further Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the deployment of an international peacekeeping force.

Reuters reported on Monday that Hamas is seeking to incorporate its 10,000 police officers into the new US-backed Palestinian administration for Gaza, a demand likely to be opposed by Israel.

Top Iran security official says progress towards talks with US

AFP
Tehran

Iran's top security official said yesterday that Tehran was making progress towards beginning negotiations with the United States to avoid a military confrontation.

"Contrary to the hype of the contrived media war, structural arrangements for negotiations are progressing," Ali Larijani, the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, posted on X.

He was speaking a day after the Kremlin said he held talks in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and a day after US President Donald Trump predicted Iran would seek a deal to avoid US military action.

Earlier, Iranian army chief Amir Hatami yesterday warned the

United States and Israel against an attack, saying his country's forces were on high alert following Washington's heavy military deployments in the Gulf, AFP reported from Paris.

He also insisted the Islamic republic's nuclear expertise could not be eliminated, after Trump said he expected Tehran to seek a deal to avoid US strikes.

"If the enemy makes a mistake, without a doubt it will endanger its own security, the security of the region, and the security of the Zionist regime," Hatami said, according to the official IRNA news agency.

He noted that Iran's armed forces were "at full defensive and military readiness".

Washington sent a naval strike group to the Middle East led by the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier, with Trump threatening to

intervene militarily after a deadly crackdown by Iranian authorities on two weeks of anti-government protests.

The deployment has raised fears of a possible direct confrontation with Iran, which has warned it would respond with missile strikes on US bases, ships and allies – notably Israel – in the event of an attack. On Friday, Trump said he predicted that Iran would seek to negotiate a deal over its nuclear and missile programmes rather than face American military action.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi had said earlier that Tehran was ready for nuclear talks, but its missiles and defence "will never be negotiated". With tensions heightened, Iranian authorities rushed to deny that several incidents yesterday were linked to any attack or sabotage.

Half of Gaza's kidney patients dead as Rafah closure blocks treatment

QNA

Gaza

The continued closure of Rafah land crossing by Israeli occupation forces has caused a severe crisis in the Gaza Strip, preventing the entry of humanitarian and medical aid during and after the war.

Kidney failure patients are among the most directly affected, as they struggle to survive while awaiting the reopening of the crossing to travel for treatment. Medical sources indicate that the disease has claimed the lives of nearly 50% of kidney patients in Gaza.

At Al-Shifa Medical Complex in Gaza City, 15-year-old Rawaa al-Dahma undergoes regular dialysis sessions, which have become part of her daily routine since being diagnosed with kidney failure. Her condition has worsened significantly due to the lack of adequate treatment and her inability to travel outside Gaza during the war.

Rawaa's mother, Sabreen, told QNA that her daughter has suffered from a chronic kidney condition since birth and previously underwent surgery. However, her health deteriorated sharply following the outbreak of the war, the interruption of treatment, and the closure of the Rafah crossing, forcing her to begin dialysis approximately five months ago.

She explained that Rawaa now undergoes three to four dialysis sessions per week and endures severe fatigue and continuous suffering. Sabreen said that daily life is confined between home and hospital, noting that her daughter's health continues to decline and that the physical and emotional toll affects the entire family.

She stressed that the family is seeking only access to treatment, calling for the reopening of crossings to allow patients to travel and receive lifesaving care, particularly as children and chronically ill patients in Gaza face increasingly limited time.

Sabreen said she is ready to donate one of her kidneys to her daughter after completing the necessary medical examinations, but the continued closure of Rafah crossing prevents travel and completion of treatment. She emphasised that kidney transplantation represents the only viable option to save her daughter's life and enable her to live normally, adding that hundreds of patients in Gaza remain on waiting lists for treatment abroad. She warned that prolonged closure would lead to further health deterioration and additional loss of life.

Head of Nephrology Department at Al-Shifa Medical Complex, Dr Ghazi al-Yazji, said the closure of crossings, particularly Rafah, poses a direct and serious threat to kidney patients. He

noted that many patients are awaiting referrals to undergo kidney transplants outside Gaza, which constitute the most effective treatment, but continued restrictions prevent travel and worsen health conditions.

In remarks to QNA, al-Yazji said some patients suffer from autoimmune kidney diseases requiring diagnostic biopsies unavailable in Gaza, necessitating treatment abroad. Delays in such procedures, he warned, often result in progression to kidney failure and dependence on dialysis.

He added that some dialysis patients are awaiting the reopening of the Rafah crossing to complete transplant procedures, stressing that continued closure not only threatens lives but also places additional strain on dialysis units already operating under severe shortages.

According to al-Yazji, the dialysis department at Al-Shifa currently serves around 210 patients with end-stage kidney disease, each requiring three weekly sessions lasting four hours, under extremely difficult medical and humanitarian conditions.

He pointed to acute shortages in dialysis machines, medical consumables, and essential medications due to the Israeli blockade and restrictions on medical supplies. The lack of certain medications has forced medical teams to rely on blood transfusions, which carry health risks and may delay or prevent future transplants.

Director of Al-Shifa Medical Complex, Dr Mohammed Abu Salmiya, told QNA that approximately 50% of dialysis patients in Gaza died while awaiting treatment abroad or the arrival of essential medical supplies during the two years of war, amid daily fatalities and the absence of more than 70% of required medications.

He noted that the complex operates only 34 dialysis machines serving about 750 kidney failure patients, an insufficient capacity that worsened after Israeli attacks destroyed hospitals providing specialised renal services, including the Indonesian Hospital in northern Gaza.

Abu Salmiya warned that continued delays in reopening the Rafah crossing, or severe restrictions on patient travel, would further deepen the crisis and pose grave risks to patients requiring transplants or specialised care unavailable in Gaza. He called for facilitating patient travel and expanding medical evacuation.

The prolonged closure of Rafah land crossing has severely impacted Gaza's population, with Israeli occupation authorities preventing the entry of humanitarian and medical aid. According to the Ministry of Health, the closure has led to the deaths of more than 1,000 patients and wounded individuals awaiting treatment abroad, while nearly 20,000 others remain in urgent need of medical evacuation.

Gas leak caused blast in Iran's Bandar Abbas: media

Reuters
Dubai

An explosion that hit a building in the southern Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas yesterday was caused by a gas leak, according to a preliminary assessment, the local head of the fire department said.

Earlier, Iranian state media reported that at least one person had been killed and 14 injured in the blast, which comes amid heightened tensions between Tehran and Washington over Iran's crackdown earlier this month on nationwide protests and over the country's nuclear programme.

Earlier, Iranian state media reported that at least one person had been killed and 14 injured in the blast, which comes amid heightened tensions between Tehran and Washington over Iran's crackdown earlier this month on nationwide protests and over the country's nuclear programme.

"This (gas leak and accumulation) is the preliminary assessment. My colleagues will give more details in the next few hours," Mohammad Amin Liqaat, the fire department chief, said in a video published by Iran's semi-official Mehr

news agency. A video published on social media showed people standing among debris and wrecked cars in front of a damaged building following the explosion.

Reuters was able to verify the location by analysing buildings, trees, and road layout, which matched satellite and file imagery. Reuters could not independently verify the date the video was filmed.

Separately, four people were killed after another gas explosion in the city of Ahvaz near the Iraqi border, according to state-run *Tehran Times*. No further information was immediately available.

The explosions highlighted the jittery mood prevailing in Iran amid its rulers' standoff with the Trump administration.

Before the reports of the two blasts yesterday, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkan accused US, Israeli and European leaders of exploiting Iran's eco-

nomic problems, inciting unrest and providing people with the means to "tear the nation apart".

The semi-official Tasnim news agency said social media reports alleging that a Revolutionary Guard navy commander had been targeted in the Bandar Abbas explosion were "completely false".

Two Israeli officials told Reuters that Israel was not involved in yesterday's blasts.

The Pentagon did not immediately respond to a request for comment. US President Donald Trump said on January 22 an "armada" was heading toward Iran. Multiple sources said on Friday that Trump was weighing options against Iran that include targeted strikes on security forces.

Bandar Abbas, home to Iran's most important container port, lies on the Strait of Hormuz, a vital waterway between Iran and Oman which handles about a fifth of the world's seaborne oil.

Landslide strikes militia-held mining site in DR Congo

AFP
Rubaya, DR Congo

A series of landslides struck a militia-held mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo, burying people alive and killing several, the governor and witnesses told AFP.

Since its resurgence in 2021, the M23 group has taken vast tracts of the DRC's resource-rich east, capturing the Rubaya mine in North Kivu province in April 2024.

Scavengers said part of a hillside in the Rubaya mining zone collapsed on Wednesday afternoon. A second landslide struck on Thursday morning.

"It rained, then the landslide followed and swept people away. Some were buried and others are still in the pits," freelance miner Franck Bolingo said.

Easton Bahati Musanga, the M23 appointed governor of North Kivu province, told AFP the slide had been deadly. "Some bodies

have been found," he said, without giving an exact number but suggesting it could be significant.

AFP was unable to independently verify a toll.

"There was a landslide on Wednesday when I was in a pit looking for minerals," said Olivier Zinzabakwira, adding that he narrowly escaped.

Dozens of scavengers were still shovelling away at the vast site on Friday, AFP video showed.

Dressed in tank tops and rub-

ber boots for some of the better equipped, men and women continued to sift through the pits, despite the danger. The Rubaya mine produces 15 to 30% of the world's supply of coltan, key to making of electronics like laptops and mobile phones.

According to United Nations experts, the M23 has set up an administration parallel to the Congolese state to regulate the operation of the Rubaya mine since its capture.



File photo of labourers digging at the Rubaya coltan mine, in the town of Rubaya, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

ANNOUNCEMENT

I, ANTHARATHARA ABDULRAHIMAN NOORUDHEEN

holder of

INDIA Passport No. U2756870
QID No. 26635601932

hereby change my name

from

ANTHARATHARA ABDULRAHIMAN NOORUDHEEN

to

NOORUDHEEN ANTHARATHARA
ABDULRAHIMAN

Any objection, please contact

THE PERMANENT COMMITTEE FOR
NATIONALITY AFFAIRS

within 15 days from the publication of this notice.

ANNOUNCEMENT

I, TAHIR HUSAIN USMAN SHAIKH

holder of

INDIA Passport No. Z3349127
QID No. 27835657951

hereby change my name

from

TAHIR HUSAIN USMAN SHAIKH

to

TAHIR HUSAIN USMAN BAGWAN

Any objection, please contact

THE PERMANENT COMMITTEE FOR
NATIONALITY AFFAIRS

within 15 days from the publication of this notice.

Judge declines to halt Minnesota immigration agent surge

Reuters
Minneapolis

A Minnesota federal judge has declined to order a halt to President Donald Trump's immigration enforcement crackdown in Minneapolis, in a lawsuit by state officials accusing federal agents of widespread civil rights abuses.

US District Judge Kate Menendez in Minneapolis handed down the ruling.

The lawsuit by the Minnesota Attorney-General's Office sought to block or rein in a US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) operation that sent thousands of immigration agents to Minneapolis-St Paul, sparking weeks of protests and leading to the killings of two US citizens by federal agents.

Menendez was appointed by former Democratic president Joe Biden.

Menendez noted the federal appeals court recently stayed a much narrower injunction curtailing US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) tactics in Minnesota.

"If that injunction went too far, then the one at issue here - halting the entire operation - certainly would," she wrote.

The lawsuit accused federal agents of racially profiling citizens, unlawfully detaining lawful residents for hours and stoking fear with heavy-handed tactics.

Minnesota Attorney-General Keith Ellison, an elected Democrat, also accused the Trump administration of targeting Minnesota out of animus for its Democratic political leanings.

The Trump administration said the operation was aimed at enforcing federal im-

migration laws pursuant to the Republican president's policies.

Some administration officials said the surge would end if Minnesota acquiesced to certain demands, including ending legal protections for people living in the US without legal authorisation.

Tensions in Minneapolis-St Paul ramped up after the January 7 killing of Renee Good, who was shot in her car by a federal immigration agent in an incident captured in widely circulated bystander videos.

The fatal shooting of Alex Pretti by a Border Patrol agent on January 24 further inflamed tensions, as bystander videos showed he had been disarmed.

The Trump administration defended the agents, saying that they had acted in self-defence.

However, videos of the events cast doubt on those narratives and fuelled calls for the agents to be criminally prosecuted.

Federal authorities refused to co-operate with local law enforcement investigations of the killings.

Trump has deployed federal law enforcement officers into several cities and states largely governed by Democrats, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, DC, and Portland, Oregon.

He said his actions were necessary to enforce immigration laws and control crime, but Democrats accused Trump of abusing his powers as the top federal law enforcer.

Judge temporarily blocks end of Ethiopians' deportation protections

Reuters
Boston

A federal judge has temporarily blocked US President Donald Trump's administration from ending protections from deportation that had been granted to thousands of Ethiopians living in the United States.

US District Judge Brian Murphy in Boston said on Friday that he would issue an order delaying the February 13 effective date of the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) termination of the Temporary Protected Status (TPS)

granted to more than 5,000 Ethiopians in order to provide more time for a legal challenge to be heard.

Murphy, who was appointed by Democratic president Joe Biden, said during a virtual hearing that an order administratively staying the effective date would allow the DHS time to produce records detailing how it made its decision so he can then consider whether to block the agency's action for even longer.

The US Department of Justice had requested more time to respond to the lawsuit filed by immigrant rights advocates before Murphy, after he set the case down

for arguments on Tuesday.

At the same time, it opposed even a temporary court-ordered delay in the expiration of the protections the Ethiopians had from deportation.

Murphy said he would schedule further arguments after the agency's records are produced, which a government lawyer suggested could be done within weeks.

"I want to do everything I can to keep this case going," Murphy said.

DHS spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin said in a statement that the TPS "was never intended to be a de facto amnesty programme, yet that's how previous administrations

have used it for decades."

Under federal law, the TPS is available to people whose home countries have experienced natural disasters, armed conflicts or other extraordinary events.

It provides eligible migrants with work authorisation and temporary protection from deportation.

The DHS has moved to end the status for about a dozen countries as part of Trump's crackdown on immigration.

The case before Murphy was filed last week by three Ethiopian nationals and the group African Communities Together after the

DHS said on December 12 that it was ending the TPS designation for Ethiopia, citing improved conditions in the African nation.

The lawsuit argues that the DHS unlawfully terminated the TPS designation first granted to Ethiopia in 2022 by the Biden administration with just 60 days notice, even though armed conflicts there continue.

The plaintiffs say Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem took that action based on an unconstitutional animus against non-white immigrants.

Ethiopia's population is predominantly black.

Mass protests across US against ICE

AFP/Reuters
Minneapolis

Students and teachers abandoned classes from California to New York on a national day of protest, which came amid mixed messages from the Trump administration about whether it would de-escalate Operation Metro Surge.

Under a national immigration crackdown, President Donald Trump has sent 3,000 federal officers to the Minneapolis area who are patrolling the streets in tactical gear, a force five times the size of the Minneapolis Police Department.

"No work. No school. No shopping. Stop funding ICE," ran a slogan on the organisers' website, nationalshutdown.org, that listed 250 sites for Friday's protests across 46 states and in major cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Washington.

Protesting the surge and the tactics used by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), several thousand people gathered in downtown Minneapolis in sub-zero temperatures, including families with small kids, elderly couples and young community activists.

Katia Kagan, wearing a "No ICE" sweatshirt and holding a sign demanding that the agency leave the city, said she was the daughter of Russian Jews who immigrated to America seeking safety and a better life.

"I'm out here because I'm going to fight for the American dream that my parents came here for," she said.

Kim, a 65-year-old meditation coach who asked that her last name not be used, said she was at the protest because of "basic compassion" for her fellow residents of Minneapolis.

"Democracy is what's at stake in Minnesota. This is a full-on fascist attack of our federal government on citizens," Kim said.

Marchers have lauded how peaceful the protests have remained despite fury over masked federal agents' arrests and killings.

"We learned so much from the Floyd protests. We had a bunch of cops that were rogues - white supremacy," said protester Mary, 67. "They had warrior training. Now we have a wonderful police department and now I think people... know to speak up and to act peacefully."

The Midwest's largest city, Minneapolis saw prolonged unrest after the 2020 murder by police of George Floyd, a black man whose killing sparked the Black Lives Matter movement.

At the protest on Friday, police were barely visible as tens of thousands of people turned out under the banner of "National Shutdown", with Minneapolis police telling AFP that there were no arrests, and no reports of injuries or property damage.

Ahead of the protest, President Donald Trump accused Alex Pretti, shot dead by federal officers in Minneapolis while helping women who had been pepper sprayed, of "abuse and anger" after video emerged of him in a heated ex-



A Los Angeles Police Department officer fires a non-lethal munition while facing protesters during a 'National Shutdown' protest in Los Angeles against the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. -AFP

Left: People partake in a 'National Shutdown' protest in Boston, Massachusetts. -AFP

Below: Demonstrators gather in Minneapolis to march calling for an end to ICE operations in Minnesota. -AFP



change with agents.

Mary, who declined to give a last name, said she was horrified by how federal officers including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, have executed their push to round up undocumented migrants across Minnesota, a deployment that has seen officers shoot dead two US civilians.

"They're scooping up anybody," she said. "You know, there are innocent people getting scooped up right and left, and it's far more terrifying than when George Floyd was here. I think it's important for our voices to be heard."

There have been daily noisy protests at the Whipple federal building where ICE agents stage ahead of raids.

On Friday morning, sheriffs deputies ran into a hostile crowd of activists and dragged away one of the demonstrators, AFP saw.

One gloved protester held up a widely shared image of a federal officer deployed to the city skidding on ice, captioned "baby's first winter", while another clutched a sign reading "gnomes in, Noem out" - a reference to Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem -

at Friday's protest.

Sporting a giant papier mache head modelled on Noem, protester Connie described the official and Trump as "the criminals at large that are really causing so much trouble".

She said the peaceful demonstrations since the start of the sprawling immigration raids were a strength of the movement galvanising against the raids.

"We're just trying to get them out of here. That's all we want... They say, 'Oh, you want all these criminals?' Yeah, we'll take them. You just get out of here. You're the criminal," she said. "We have 2,000, 3,000 ICE here - they're the criminals."

She added that she was "100%" sure federal officers were seeking to provoke local people.

"(ICE) are extremely aggressive, very intimidating. They're out to cause trouble," she said.

Native Minnesotan protester Paul Chouinard said he thought Trump would "probably love for it to turn into something more so he could make an example - but that's not what Minnesotans want."

"You don't fight force and guns

with violence, you know? We're gonna use our voices in the right way and make our opinions known to hopefully change this."

Nearby a child screamed "ICE out of Minnesota" into a bullhorn to huge cheers from the crowd, many of whom wore ski gear to brave the temperatures that hovered around 10° Fahrenheit (-17° Celsius).

There were protest actions and marches in cities across the United States including New York, Boston and Los Angeles.

Protester Shushta Santhana, 24, whose parents emigrated to the United States 30 years ago, said "it's really cool to see the community come together".

She pointed to "grassroots organisations pulling together to get groceries to people and protect (migrant) people when they're leaving work and leaving the courts and all sorts of things".

"We've done a good job here. I'm very proud to be a Minnesotan right now."

Refugee Lisa Schmid told AFP that Minneapolis would become known as "the city that stood up for freedom".

Church helps feed migrants fearing deportation

By Romain Fonsegrives
AFP

In a Minneapolis church, Laura Christensen was overwhelmed by pallets of canned goods, pasta, fruit and vegetables - among the 45,000kg of food being sent each week to thousands of undocumented immigrants confined to their homes.

However, the retired teacher refused to sit still as the northern US city confronts a huge deployment of federal agents carrying out President Donald Trump's mass deportation drive.

"We need to remember what our country's about," said Christensen, 62. "The US should be about diversity. That's kind of what the country was founded on, and people seem to forget that."

She has joined dozens of other volunteers at the Dios Habla Hoy church, which has become a nerve centre for locals opposing immigration raids.

The Protestant, Latino-American organisation currently distributes food to 28,000 families in Minneapolis and its suburbs, according to pastor Sergio Amezcua.

He has been astonished by the terror that has gripped the region.

Amezcua started the food aid programme in early December to support undocumented migrants who were reluctant to do their shopping for fear of encountering immigration agents.

He initially thought his church would "help 10 to 20 families, and that's it".

Yet within a few hours, he told AFP, "we had 2,000 families registered. That's when we knew that something was really bad".

Many people in Minneapolis are furious at the aggressive tactics used by immigration agents.

Their operations often see groups of masked and armed officers making heavy-handed ar-

Springsteen performs new ICE protest song in Minneapolis

Rock icon Bruce Springsteen took to the stage in Minneapolis on Friday to perform his new song written in tribute to two protesters shot dead by federal agents in the city.

The veteran performer penned and recorded *Streets of Minneapolis* in 24 hours, in what he said was a response to "state terror" in the city, where President Donald Trump's administration has sent thousands of heavily armed agents as part of an immigration clampdown.

Those agents killed two US citizens, Alex Pretti and Renee Good, within a few weeks of each other, sparking widespread anger across the country, and accusations that the masked agents are out of control.

"The Boss" said that after he had written the anthem, he sent it to former Rage Against The Machine frontman Tom Morello to see what he thought.

"Tom is an excitable man," Springsteen told the audience to laughter as he took to the stage on Friday.

"I said 'Tom, what do you think? It's kind of soapboxy.'

"And he says: 'Bruce, nuance is wonderful, but sometimes you have to kick them in the teeth.'

Springsteen's song calls the immigration agents "King Trump's private army" wearing "occupiers' boots" and with "guns belted to their coats".

"There were bloody footprints where mercy should have stood, and two dead left to die on snow-filled streets: Alex Pretti and Renee Good," he sings in the opening verse.

"This is for the people of Minneapolis, the people of Minnesota and the people of our good country, the United States of America," he told the audience.

The song's title echoes the 1994 classic *Streets of Philadelphia*, Springsteen's haunting ballad about people living with AIDS.

For decades, Springsteen has been revered by rock fans in the United States and beyond for his man-of-the-people guitar music and socially conscious, working-class anthems like *Born in the USA*, *The River*, and *Rosalita*.

During the 2016 election campaign that led to Trump's second presidency, Springsteen threw his support behind Democratic candidate Kamala Harris, and said Trump was running to be an "American tyrant".

At the time he said of Trump: "He does not understand this country, its history or what it means to be deeply American."

- AFP

rests at bus stops, shops and other areas where migrants are known to gather.

Over recent weeks in Minneapolis, federal agents have also killed two US citizens protesting their actions, shot a Venezuelan man in the leg, and detained an Ecuadorian boy and his father.

"They're arresting five-year-olds, pregnant women. So there's a lot of abnormal things that happen," said Amezcua, a US citizen who immigrated here from Mexico. "They racially profile people, so people are scared, even people born here."

Amezcua said that of the 600 Hispanic people in his congregation, half are Americans.

However, just 80 dared to attend the most recent Sunday service.

The pastor now regrets voting for Donald Trump in 2016.

He said he truly believed the Republican would focus on deporting "bad hombres" - "criminals, paedophiles, narco people, killers".

Amezcua said he can't understand how the Trump administration, which includes many officials who profess their Christian faith, can justify the rough immigration policies it has rolled out.

"Christians are called to treat people with compassion, to welcome the stranger, to feed the poor, and yes, to have order, but with dignity," he said.

Some of the church's volunteers voiced concern that Trump was punishing Democrat-run Minneapolis for political sins.

The so-called sanctuary city blocks local authorities from co-operating with federal immigration raids - a policy that infuriates the president.

"If he was really seeking illegal immigrants, he would send troops



Venezuela's interim president Delcy Rodriguez has announced a proposed "amnesty law" for hundreds of prisoners in the country, and said the infamous Helicoide detention centre in the capital Caracas, which rights groups have long denounced as the site of prisoner abuse, will be converted into a centre for sport and social services.

"May it be a law that serves to heal the wounds left by political confrontation, violence, and extremism. May it serve to restore justice in our country and restore peaceful coexistence among Venezuelans," Rodriguez said at an event at the Supreme Court of Justice.

The proposed law could affect hundreds of detainees who remain behind bars in the South American country, as well as former prisoners who have already been conditionally released.

The new law will cover cases running

Venezuela plans amnesty law for prisoners

from 1999 until today, but will exclude those who may have participated in killings, serious abuses of human rights and drug trafficking, Rodriguez said.

She said that the Helicoide prison, a long-standing symbol of alleged government repression, will instead be converted into a centre for sports and social services.

In 2022, a United Nations report claimed that Venezuela's state security agencies subjected detainees at the infamous prison, originally designed as a mall, to torture.

The government rejected the UN's findings.

Relatives of prisoners at the Helicoide have held vigils and camped overnight outside the prison in recent weeks, demanding their relatives be freed.

Families and rights advocates have long demanded that charges and convictions against detainees who are considered political prisoners be wiped.

Opposition politicians, dissident members of the security services, journalists and rights activists are often subject to charges like terrorism and treason, which their families say are unjust and arbitrary.

Rights group Foro Penal says it has verified 303 liberations of political prisoners since the government announced a new series of releases on January 8.

Government officials - who deny holding political prisoners and say those jailed have committed crimes - have given a much higher figure of releases, of more than 600, but have not been clear about the timeline and appear to be including releases from previous years.

The government has never provided an official list of how many prisoners will be released nor who they are.

Families of prisoners say releases have progressed too slowly, and Foro Penal says 711 political prisoners remain jailed, an updated count including prisoners whose fearful families had not previously reported their detentions.

"A general amnesty is welcome provided that its terms and conditions include all of civil society, without discrimination, that it does not become a cover for impunity, and that it contributes to dismantling the repressive apparatus of political persecution," Alfredo Romero, the director of Foro Penal, said on X.

Among the long-time advocates of releases and amnesty is Nobel Peace Prize winner and opposition leader Maria Co-

rina Machado, who has several close allies imprisoned.

The recent releases were announced after the US capture of president Nicolas Maduro and his arraignment in a New York court on narcotics charges, which he denies.

Meanwhile, US authorities said on Friday that all Americans known to be held prisoner in Venezuela had been released, a major diplomatic concession from the new leadership in Caracas.

"We are pleased to confirm the release by the interim authorities of all known US citizens held in Venezuela," the embassy in Caracas posted on social media.

The announcement came hours after the release of Peruvian-American political prisoner Arturo Gallino Rullier.

"He is already on his way to the US," Gonzalo Himob of Foro Penal posted on X.

Gallino was arrested last November on unspecified charges. - **Reuters/AFP**

Blue Origin to 'pause' space tourism

The space tourism rocket that blasted celebrities like Katy Perry and William Shatner to space is shuttering operations, at least for two years, Blue Origin said on Friday, winding down the company's centrepiece space tourism programme to sharpen its focus on building a moon lander for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa).

Blue Origin, owned by billionaire Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos, will "pause its New Shepard flights and shift resources to further accelerate development of the company's human lunar capabilities", the company said in a statement.

Standing 60' tall, the reusable New Shepard rocket, with its gumdrop-shaped crew capsule on top, has launched dozens of paying passengers and research experiments from Texas across 38 brief, suborbital flights to the edge of space since 2021.

Blue Origin chief executive Dave Limp announced the decision internally to employees on Friday in an e-mail that began, "I have some significant news to share with you," according to a copy seen by Reuters.

"New Shepard has achieved great success and will forever be our first step," Limp said, adding that "the decision to pause is not one that I take lightly".

With its debut launch in 2015, New Shepard was Blue Origin's first rocket, designed to launch some 70 miles high and return to land vertically on a slab of concrete.

That landing technique would later help Blue Origin develop New Glenn, its heavy-lift orbital-class rocket that rivals launchers from Elon Musk's SpaceX and lands in a similar vertical fashion after boosting a payload to orbit.

"We will redirect our people and resources toward further acceleration of our human lunar capabilities inclusive of New Glenn," Limp said in the e-mail.

The New Shepard decision came as a surprise to some Blue Origin employees, and it is widely seen as a cancellation of the programme, company staff said, speaking anonymously. - **Reuters**

US government partially shuts down

AFP/Reuters
Washington

The US government entered a partial shutdown yesterday as a midnight funding deadline passed without Congress approving a 2026 budget, though disruption was expected to be limited with the House set to move early next week to ratify a Senate-backed deal.

The funding lapse followed a breakdown in negotiations driven by Democratic anger over the killing of two protesters in Minneapolis by federal immigration agents, which derailed talks over new money for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

"Instead of going after drug smugglers, child predators, and human traffickers, the Trump Administration is wasting valuable resources targeting peaceful protesters in Chicago and Minneapolis," Senate Democratic Minority Whip Dick Durbin posted on social media. "This Administration continues to make Americans less safe."

Roughly three-quarters of federal operations are affected, potentially triggering shutdown procedures across a wide range of agencies and operations, from education and health to housing and defence.

Federal departments were expected to begin implementing shutdown plans overnight, but congressional leaders in both parties said the Senate's action made a short disruption far more likely than a prolonged impasse.

After hours of delay, the Senate



The sun sets on the US Capitol building near a pile of snow and ice, as members of Congress work to resolve a dispute over immigration enforcement and avert a looming partial government shutdown, on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. - **Reuters**

passed the spending package by a bipartisan vote of 71 to 29.

However, the House of Representatives is out of town and not expected to take up the measure until tomorrow, according to a Republican leadership aide who spoke on condition of anonymity.

That partial shutdown took effect at 12.01am Eastern time (0501 GMT).

The shutdown is likely to be brief.

Lawmakers from both parties have been working to ensure a debate over immigration enforcement does not disrupt other government operations.

If the House approves the package as expected early next week, funding would be restored within days, limiting the practical impact

of the shutdown on government services, contractors and federal workers.

If the shutdown extended more than a few days, however, tens of thousands of federal workers would risk being put on unpaid leave or working without their money until funding is restored.

Late on Friday the Senate passed a package clearing five outstanding funding bills to cover most federal agencies through September, along with a two-week stopgap measure to keep the DHS operating while lawmakers continue negotiations over immigration enforcement policy.

The House of Representatives was out of session as the deadline expired and is not scheduled to return until tomorrow.

President Donald Trump backed the Senate deal and urged swift House action, signalling that he wanted to avoid a prolonged shutdown - the second of his second term - after a record-length stoppage last fall disrupted federal services for more than a month.

The Senate breakthrough came only after Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina lifted a procedural block that had stalled the package late on Thursday.

He had objected to provisions in the DHS stopgap and to House-passed language repealing an earlier measure that allowed senators to sue the Justice Department if their phone records were seized during past investigations.

Graham agreed to release his hold after Senate leaders committed to holding future votes on legislation that he is sponsoring to crack down on so-called "sanctuary cities" that refuse to co-operate with federal deportation operations.

Democrats, meanwhile, have remained united in opposing new DHS funding without changes to immigration enforcement following the fatal shootings of Alex Patti and Renee Good in Minneapolis.

Their deaths intensified scrutiny of federal agents' conduct and hardened opposition to approving money for immigration agencies without new guardrails.

Party leaders have accused immigration authorities of operating with insufficient oversight and have demanded reforms including tighter warrant requirements,

limits on certain enforcement tactics and greater accountability for agents in the field.

Much of the US media interpreted the White House's willingness to split DHS funding from the broader budget package as a recognition that the administration needed to recalibrate its deportation strategy after the political backlash over the Minneapolis deaths.

Republicans are divided over that approach.

While some lawmakers have acknowledged the need for changes following the shootings, conservatives have warned against concessions they say could weaken immigration enforcement.

Several have signalled they will push their own priorities during the upcoming DHS negotiations, including measures targeting states and cities that limit co-operation with federal authorities.

Although Congress has already approved six of the 12 annual funding bills, those measures account for only a minority of discretionary spending.

The remaining bills fund large swaths of the federal government, making the lapse significant if it ends up being prolonged.

On Friday night the Office of Management and Budget issued a memo ordering agencies to prepare for an "orderly shutdown", saying: "It is our hope that this lapse will be short."

The government has endured 10 funding gaps of three days or fewer since 1977, most of which had little real-world effect, according to the Congressional Research Service.

Epstein survivors say abusers 'remain hidden'

Survivors of Jeffrey Epstein said their alleged abusers "remain hidden and protected" after the US government released millions of new pages from files related to the convicted sex offender on Friday.

Deputy Attorney-General Todd Blanche said that the White House played no role in the Justice Department's review of the extensive files on Epstein.

"They did not tell this department how to do our review, what to look for, what to redact, what to not redact," Blanche told a news conference.

More than 3mn documents were released on Friday that included mention of numerous powerful figures.

The Justice Department said some of the documents contained "untrue and sensationalist claims" that were submitted to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Blanche said that all images of girls and women had been redacted aside from those of Ghislaine Maxwell, who was convicted of trafficking underage girls for Epstein and is serving a 20-year prison sentence.

However, a statement from survivors of Epstein's alleged abuses claimed that identifying information about them still remained in the files, "while the men who abused us remain hidden and protected".

The letter was signed by 19 people, some using aliases or initials, and demanded "the full release of the Epstein files" and that Attorney-General Pam Bondi directly address the matter when she testifies before Congress next month.

A wealthy US financier, Epstein died in a New York prison cell in 2019 while awaiting trial for sex trafficking of underage girls.

His death was ruled a suicide. - **AFP**

Snow storm barrels into south US as blast of icy weather widens

AFP
Washington

a planned, manned Moon flyby slated for next month.

The National Weather Service (NWS) said yesterday that an explosively deepening coastal cyclone will bring moderate to heavy snow, high winds, and possibly blizzard conditions for the Carolinas.

"An intense surge of arctic air behind the coastal storm will send below freezing temperatures down toward South Florida by Sunday morning," the service said, adding that it could experience the coldest temperatures there since 1989.

It issued a winter storm warning for all of North and South Carolina into portions of Georgia, eastern Tennessee and Kentucky, as well as southern Virginia.

In South Carolina, the public works department in the state capital Columbia was preparing its eight snow ploughs for deployment for the first time in five

years, local news network WIS10 reported.

The mercury was set to dip there to a low of -9°C Celsius at the weekend.

On average it ranges between 2°C and 15°C during January.

The new cold front comes just days after the onset of a major winter storm that has killed more than 100 people, according to tally of official figures and local media reports.

The storm blanketed a vast

swath from New Mexico in the southwest to Maine in the northeast in snow, sleet and icy rain.

In United States, nearly 200,000 customers remained without power yesterday, mostly in the south, according to power-outage.us, with Mississippi, Tennessee and Louisiana hardest hit.

In North Carolina, the National Park Service announced the closure of campgrounds and some beaches at the Outer Banks, a series of barrier islands off the coast of southern state that are vulnerable to storms.

It said oceanfront structures were threatened, and a section of highway that threads through its dunes was closed.

In another southern state, Mississippi, Governor Tate Reeves said the US Army Corps of Engineers helped to install generators at critical sites, and authorities were opening 79 shelters and warming centres across the state.



Ice floats cover part of the Hudson River along the Manhattan shoreline as New York City experiences frigid temperatures following a winter storm last weekend. - **AFP**

US to add 65,000 seasonal guest worker visas for 2026

President Donald Trump's administration will add some 65,000 H-2B seasonal guest worker visas through September 30, a Federal Register notice said, saying that the visas would be available to employers at risk of severe financial hardship due to a lack of US labour.

The move roughly doubles the 66,000 visas available each year to businesses such as construction, hospitality, landscaping and seafood processing, in recognition that

US employers in those industries could be struggling to find workers.

Trump, a Republican, launched a wide-ranging immigration crackdown after returning to the White House in 2025, targeting immigrants without legal status as criminals and a drain on their communities.

His administration also has clamped down on forms of legal immigration, with broad travel bans and reviews of refugee and asylum cases.

The number of available visas also was expanded under former president Joe Biden, a Democrat, and Trump during periods of his 2017-21 presidency.

Employers in the seasonal businesses - including hotels - have clamoured for more visas.

Some construction businesses have complained of a lack of workers during Trump's aggressive immigration crackdown.

Groups that favour lower levels of immigration oppose the visas, saying that they undercut wages for US workers.

Trump has made it harder for tech businesses to obtain workers through the H-1B programme, tacking on a \$100,000 fee that has triggered a legal challenge.

A temporary rule making the additional H-2B visas available will be formally published in the Federal Register on Tuesday, the notice said. - **Reuters**

Indonesia landslide death toll rises to 53

The death toll from a landslide on Indonesia's main island of Java a week ago rose to 53 yesterday, a rescue official said, with 10 people still missing.

An intense downpour triggered the landslide that hit Pasirlangu village, in an area southeast of the capital Jakarta, damaging more than 50 houses and displacing about 650 people.

Thousands of rescuers, helped by the military, police and volunteers, have been digging through the mud searching for victims.

They had recovered and identified 53 bodies, said Ade Dian Permana, the head of the local search and rescue agency, up from a previous toll of 44.

At least 10 people are still missing, he said, but clearer weather was helping the search.

The Indonesian navy has said that 23 personnel, who were training in the area, were among those caught in the landslide.

The search and rescue operation in the West Bandung region has been extended until Friday.

The government has pointed to the role forest loss played in flooding and landslides on Sumatra island late last year, which killed around 1,200 people and displaced more than 240,000.

Forests help absorb rainfall and stabilise the ground held by their roots, and their absence makes areas more prone to landslides.

Such disasters are common across the vast Indonesian archipelago during the rainy season, which typically runs from October to March.

Torrential rain also battered Indonesia's Siau island this month, causing a flash flood that killed at least 16 people. - AFP

Malaysia seizes ships with \$129mn worth of crude

Malaysia has detained two tankers suspected of illegally transferring crude oil estimated to be worth \$129mn, authorities said yesterday.

The southeast Asian nation, which has come under scrutiny over oil transfers linked to sanctions evasion in its waters, pledged last year to crack down on illegal activities in its maritime zones.

The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency said two tankers anchored north of the port of Penang were intercepted on Thursday following a tip-off.

An inspection found both vessels moored together, raising suspicion of an unauthorised transfer, Penang's maritime director, Muhammad Suffi Mohd Ramli, said in a statement.

He said the vessels were carrying crude oil "valued at more than \$12mn ringgit (\$129mn)".

The vessels were seized and their captains handed over to investigators, he added.

No information was immediately available about the identity of the tankers or where they had sailed from, but Muhammad Suffi said the 53 crew members were "nationals from China, Myanmar, Iran, Pakistan and India". - AFP

Britain and Japan agree to deepen co-operation on defence, security

AFP
Tokyo

Britain and Japan agreed to strengthen defence and economic ties, visiting Prime Minister Keir Starmer said yesterday, after his bid to forge closer links with China drew warnings from US President Donald Trump.

Starmer noted that Japan and Britain were the leading economies in a trans-Pacific that includes fellow G7 member Canada, as well as other international trade and defence pacts.

"We set out a clear priority to build an even deeper partnership in the years to come," Starmer said as he stood beside Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi after a bilateral meeting in Tokyo.

"That includes working together to strengthen our collective security, across the Euro-Atlantic and in the Indo-Pacific."

Takaichi said they agreed to hold a meeting of British and Jap-

anese foreign and defence ministers this year.

She said she also wanted to discuss "co-operation towards realising a free and open Indo-Pacific, the Middle East situation and Ukraine situation" at a dinner with Starmer later.

Starmer arrived on a one-day Tokyo stop after a four-day visit in China, where he followed in the footsteps of other Western leaders looking to counter an increasingly volatile United States.

Leaders from France, Canada and Finland have all travelled to Beijing in recent weeks, recoiling from Trump's bid to seize Greenland and tariff threats against North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) allies.

Trump warned on Thursday that it was "very dangerous" for its close ally Britain to be dealing with China, although Starmer brushed off those comments.

Tokyo's ties with Beijing have deteriorated since Takaichi suggested in November that Japan could intervene militarily during a



British Prime Minister Keir Starmer with Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. - AFP

potential attack on Taiwan.

China regards the self-ruled democratic island as its territory. Starmer met Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang on Thursday, with both sides highlighting the need for closer ties.

He also signed a series of agreements there, with Downing Street

announcing Beijing had agreed to visa-free travel for British citizens visiting China for under 30 days.

No start date for that arrangement has been given yet.

Takaichi said the two leaders agreed during discussions on economic security that a strengthening of supply chains "including important minerals is urgently needed".

There is concern that Beijing could choke off exports of the rare earths crucial for making everything from electric cars to missiles.

China, the world's leading producer of such minerals, announced new export controls in October on rare earths and associated technologies.

They have also been a major sticking point in trade negotiations between China and the United States.

Britain, Japan and Italy are also developing a new fighter jet after Tokyo relented for decades on the United States for military hardware.

Modi ally proposes social media ban for India's teenagers

Reuters
New Delhi

A ally of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has proposed a bill to ban social media for children, as the world's biggest market for Meta and YouTube joins a global debate on the impact of social media on young people's health and safety.

"Not only are our children becoming addicted to social media, but India is also one of the world's largest producers of data for foreign platforms," lawmaker L S K Devarayalu told Reuters on Friday.

"Based on this data, these companies are

creating advanced AI systems, effectively turning Indian users into unpaid data providers, while the strategic and economic benefits are reaped elsewhere," he said.

Australia last month became the first country to ban social media for children under 16, blocking access in a move welcomed by many parents and child advocates but criticised by major technology companies and free-speech advocates.

France's National Assembly this week backed legislation to ban children under 15 from social media, while Britain, Denmark and Greece are studying the issue.

Facebook operator Meta, YouTube-parent Alphabet and X did not respond yesterday to e-mails seeking comment.

Meta has said it backs laws for parental oversight but that "governments considering bans should be careful not to push teens toward less safe, unregulated sites".

India's information technology (IT) ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

India, the world's second-biggest smartphone market with 750mn devices and 1bn Internet users, is a key growth market for social media apps and does not set a minimum age for access.

Devarayalu's 15-page Social Media (Age Restrictions and Online Safety) Bill, which is not public but was seen by Reuters, says no one under 16 "shall be permitted to create, maintain, or hold" a social media ac-

count and those found to have one should have them disabled.

"We are asking that the entire onus of ensuring users' age be placed on the social media platforms," Devarayalu said.

The government's chief economic adviser attracted attention on Thursday by saying that India should draft policies on age-based access limits to tackle "digital addiction".

Devarayalu's legislation is a private member's bill - not proposed to parliament by a federal minister - but such bills often trigger debates in parliament and influence lawmaking.

He is from the Telugu Desam Party, which governs the southern state Andhra Pradesh and is vital to Modi's coalition government.

China conducts patrols near disputed shoal

Reuters
Beijing

China conducted naval and air patrols around the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea yesterday, the China Southern Theatre Command said.

The shoal is in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, but China also claims it as part of its territory.

The Philippine embassy in Beijing did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

China has stepped up combat readiness patrols in the area in January, "resolutely countering the infringement provocations of individual countries within the region," the post said.

The militaries of the Philippines and the United States carried out joint exercises in the Scarborough Shoal area earlier this week, in the 11th such drill since November 2023, Manila's armed forces said on Tuesday.

Labubu-maker picks London for European HQ

Reuters
Shanghai

Pop Mart, the maker of the famous Labubu doll, named London for its new regional headquarters, and said it would open seven more UK stores, as British Prime Minister Keir Starmer secured the "ugly-cute" investment on his trip to China.

Starmer's four-day visit aims to inject growth into Britain's economy by strengthening ties between the countries through improved market access, lower tariffs and investment deals, such as Pop Mart's.

The Labubu dolls, whose toothy grin and pointy ears are behind their intentionally imperfect "ugly-cute" appeal, have become collector's items since going viral on social media 18 months ago.

Starmer's visit has secured export deals worth £2.2bn (\$3.02bn) as well as market access valued at £2.3bn over five years, and hundreds of millions



A Labubu toy from 2025 is displayed in a case at the 'From the Collection - A Christmas Special' exhibition showcasing 100 years of Christmas toys at the County Museum in Dundalk, Ireland. - Reuters

of pounds in investment, a statement from his office said on Friday.

Pop Mart will open in seven locations in Britain, including Birmingham, Cardiff and a new

flagship store on London's Oxford Street.

It also plans 20 more stores across Europe.

The investment will create over 150 jobs in Britain, the statement said.

"London stands at the heart of the global creative ecosystem, and we are thrilled to plant our European roots here," Grant Wang, Pop Mart's founder and chief executive, said in a statement.

Pop Mart is one of a group of Chinese consumer-facing companies, including fashion retailer Urban Revivo and coffee chain Luckin, that are turning to overseas markets to try to counter weaker domestic spending linked to a prolonged property crisis and wage security concerns.

Starmer's office also said Chinese energy storage firm HITHIUM would invest £200mn in Britain, adding 300 jobs, and life sciences group Asymchem would create 150 jobs by expanding its UK operations.

'Empowering': Ireland's first female sumo wrestler blazes a trail

By Peter Murphy

AFP

Sweat darkened the white "dohyo" ring mat as Ireland's first female sumo wrestler shoved and strained, learning a freshly-discovered sport.

Having tried the centuries-old Japanese discipline out of curiosity, Toraigh (pronounced Tori) Mallon, from Lisburn in Northern Ireland, now trains alongside bulky and beefy men, relying on balance and grit rather than sheer size.

During a coaching session ahead of the British Isles Sumo Championships in Belfast this weekend, she paused between bouts to catch her breath.

"It's hard work, like moving wardrobes full of cement, but I try my best," the 32-year-old mental health nurse told AFP.

Mark Christie, 39, one of six male wrestlers at the session, welcomed her involvement.

"Women had less access to lots of sports in the past, it's good that sport's more open now," he said.

Mallon first turned up on a whim last February after seeing an Instagram advert for a new sumo club in Belfast, stepping into an unfamiliar world of ritual, grappling and



This photo taken on January 16 shows wrestlers Bobby Wary (left) and Toraigh Mallon practising in the ring during a sumo wrestling training session at a club in Belfast. - AFP

close-contact combat.

"It was me versus all the men, which was pretty intimidating yet empowering at the same time: you

wouldn't normally fight somebody who was male, but it's good to be an underdog and beat them," she said.

Knowing nothing about sumo or Japanese culture, she was immediately smitten by its speed and simplicity: force the opponent to touch the ground inside the dohyo ring, or out of it altogether.

Having the thick white cotton "mawashi" sumo belt put on her for the first time "felt like a wedding dress fitting," Mallon recalled.

"Sumo's fun, even if it is against mostly men, sort of like messing about with your siblings in the living room when you were a kid," she added.

In recent weeks, a few other women have turned up to try their hand on the mat.

"Until then I think I was the only female sumo wrestler on the island of Ireland, Irish champion by default!" Mallon joked.

However, with more women joining "now I'm going to have work a bit harder for that title."

Thanks to club founder and coach Johnny Templeton, Mallon says she has learned a lot about the sport's roots in Shinto, the indigenous nature-oriented belief system of Japan.

Its origins can be traced back some 2,000 years and rituals like purification, bowing and ring-entering ceremonies are woven into competition.

Sumo's links to Ireland started about 20 years ago with a wrestler called John Gunning who moved to Japan and turned professional, before becoming a famous English-language sumo pundit there, according to Templeton.

In late 2024 the longtime combat sports fan, who took up sumo during a coronavirus (Covid-19) lockdown, set up the club in a Belfast jiu-jitsu hall, adapting the space for the ancient sport and forming an Irish federation.

Like the governing bodies of rugby, cricket, boxing and other sports, sumo in Ireland is organised on an all-island basis to include British territory Northern Ireland.

Now roots are spreading with clubs sprouting in Dublin, Cork, and rural Northern Ireland as interest grows.

However, almost all the wrestlers are men, so far, according to 37-year-old Templeton, who represented Great Britain at a sumo world championships in Poland in 2024.

"Women like Toraigh getting involved is amazing because it's something that isn't even very common in Japan" where females are barred from competing professionally, he told AFP.

"Especially in Ireland, we find that the girls aren't as interested as the boys, maybe shying away from it because of an idea that a sumo wrestler is not very ladylike," he said. "But once they see someone like Toraigh and how fun it is, more girls will definitely try it out."

Yesterday Mallon competed for Team Ireland against three other women in her category - from England and Scotland - who joined around 60 wrestlers, including seven women, from around the UK and Ireland.

It was her second major tournament after the Scottish Open in August.

Despite losing all three bouts in her light heavyweight category in Belfast, she said she still enjoyed the experience.

"The matches were all close so I feel like I did the best I could, and learnt a lot," she told AFP.

Although the exact numbers of women sumo wrestlers in Ireland and the UK are not known, Templeton said the increasingly popular sport offers exciting opportunities.

"You can make it onto teams, win medals, and go travel to European and World Championships, now is the time to get involved," he said.

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GULF TIMES

Gold rally pushes Italian jewellers to make leaner designs

In Italy's storied gold-making hubs, jewellers are reworking their designs to trim gold content as they race to blunt the impact of record prices and appeal to shoppers watching their budgets. Gold prices hit a record high earlier this week, surging near \$5,600 an ounce, more than double a year ago as geopolitical concerns and jitters over trade pushed investors towards the safe-haven asset.

The rally is putting undue pressure on small artisans as they face mounting demands from clients including international brands to produce cheaper items, from signature pieces to wedding rings, according to interviews with four independent jewellers in Italy's main jewellery-making hubs.

"The main question that I've heard in the last months is if I can produce something lighter while having the same appearance," said Massimo Lucchetta, owner of Lucchetta 1953, an independent jeweller which makes items for department stores in Bassano del Grappa, near Italy's premier gold-crafting hub of Vicenza in the country's northeast.

Vicenza, known as one of Italy's three "cities of gold" alongside Arezzo in Tuscany and the Golden Valley of Valenza in Piedmont, hosts twice a year the Vicenzaoro fair, a global event for jewellery and watchmaking. In Arezzo, several jewellery makers have stepped up the use of machinery that keeps a piece's shape while cutting its metal content, said Giordana Giordini, owner of independent jeweller brand Giordini.

That could, for instance, keep the size of a pendant unchanged but cut its weight in half: "The person is still buying the same idea of what it is," she said from her workshop in Arezzo. Giordini supplies wholesalers and some retail stores, with nine out of 10 of its products shipped to international markets.

Italy in 2024 accounted for 11.2% of the \$130bn global jewellery market, according to a recent study by bank Mediobanca. Over 6,800 companies operate in the gold, silver and jewellery industry in Italy, employing almost 34,000 people, the study says.

Cecile Cabanis, finance

chief at luxury behemoth LVMH, said the price of gold had a negative impact on the performance of its watches and jewellery business, which includes high-end jewellery brands like Bulgari and Tiffany. That comes even though the French conglomerate, which has its flagship gold manufacturing site in Valenza, has implemented hedging measures, including the use of financial derivatives and negotiating the forecast price of future precious metals deliveries, according to its yearly report.

The pressure on smaller workshops is, however, more acute. They are unable to hedge, due to the expense and the risks of trading in financial derivatives.

Sharp day-to-day swings in the price of gold and silver have a direct effect on retail prices as raw material costs are directly passed on to customers

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Sharp day-to-day swings in the price of gold and silver have a direct effect on retail prices as raw material costs are directly passed on to customers, said Giordini. A gold necklace that cost €300 (\$358) some months ago may now be priced at €500, she said.

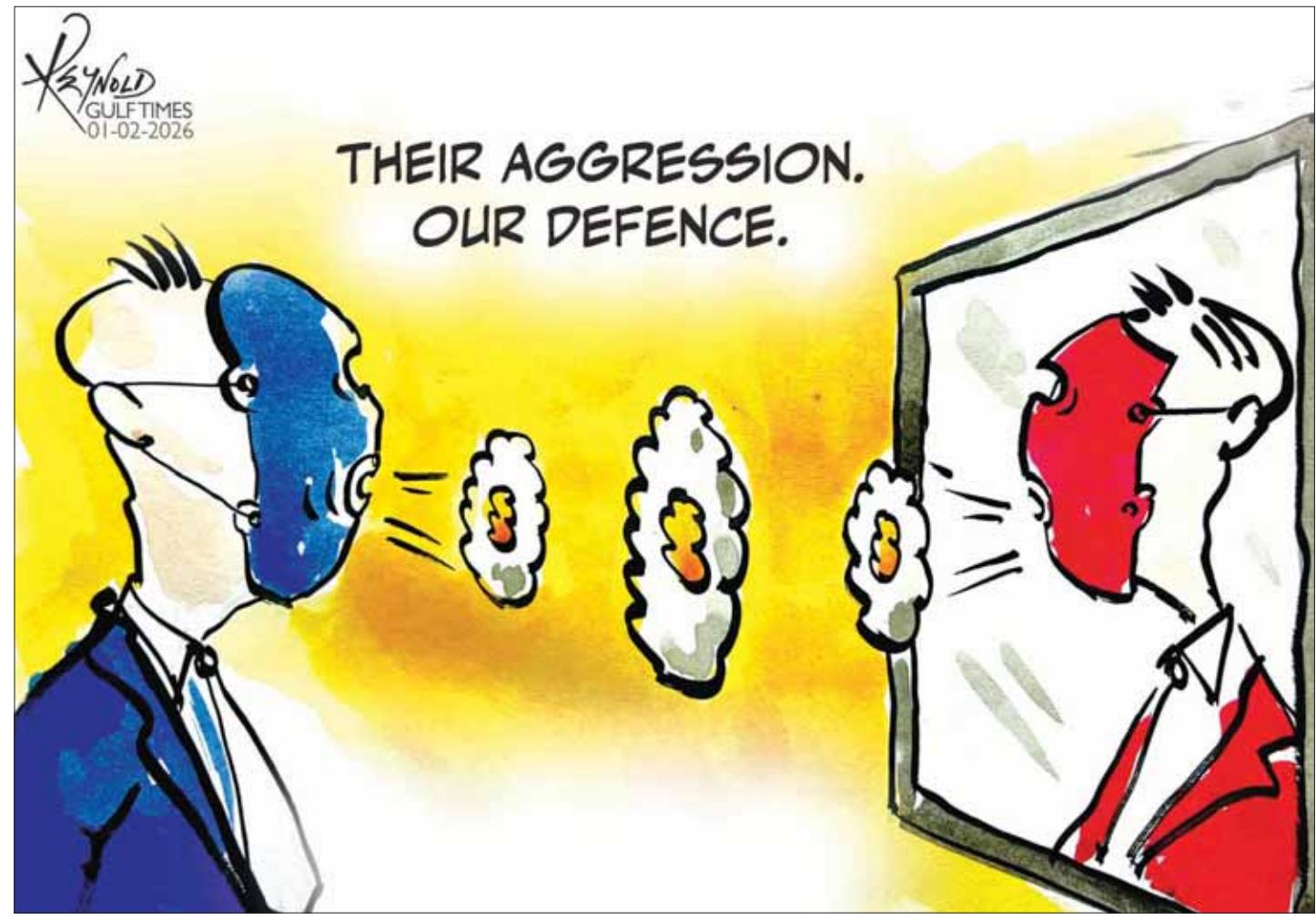
Giordini said fluctuations in the price of gold can affect the costs facing businesses like hers by tens of thousands of euros, as they pay for raw materials upfront.

Valenza jeweller Alessia Crivelli, who is also the vice-president of trade group Confindustria Federorafi, said another option for producers is to recover and reuse scrap metals from their own production lines. Using recycled or resold gold is, however, close to impossible because it can be difficult to certify its origin.

While high-end clients may view gold jewellery as an investment and remain willing to absorb higher prices, the need to also serve the less affluent consumers is driving the focus on reducing weight, said another producer from Valenza.

"If brands need a certain price positioning, they ask us in development to pay more attention to the final weight," the producer added, asking not to be named because of client confidentiality concerns. Wedding rings, where weight constitutes a significant share of the cost, are becoming a focal point in price sensitivity for couples: "If before they spent around €600, today they may have to spend more than 2,000," the producer said.

However, demand for gold jewellery is expected to endure as consumers continue to look at the metal as a store of value. "In the end, they pay for gold because they want it to be gold," said the producer. — Reuters



Immigration helped Trump win the White House – now tactics could hurt Republicans in midterms

● **Trump's immigration tactics cause unease among voters, potentially threaten Republican midterm prospects**

By Bo Erickson, Brad Brooks, Tim Reid and Nathan Layne
Washington

President Donald Trump's hardline immigration agenda, a key force behind his return to the White House in 2024, is increasingly showing signs of becoming a liability, threatening Republican prospects in the November midterm elections.

What was once his most potent campaign issue is now driving unease among voters unsettled by the administration's aggressive tactics in its immigration crackdown, including the targeting of US citizens and violent measures against peaceful protesters.

Illegal immigration and inflation were the twin issues that helped Trump win the election. Now, opinion polls show a growing number of Americans, including key independent voters, are unhappy with Trump's handling of both, putting Republicans on the defensive ahead of the midterms.

The polling shows most Republicans still back Trump's push for mass deportations, but a sizeable minority are uneasy with a heavy-handed approach by federal immigration agents, which led to the shooting deaths of a mother of three and a nurse in Minneapolis this month.

Just 39% of Americans approve of Trump's handling of immigration, the lowest since his inauguration, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll published on Monday. While 84% of Republican respondents said they support Trump on the issue, a fifth of them said federal agents had gone "too far" in their crackdown.

If those sentiments persist, they could spell trouble for Republicans in November, when Democrats are aiming to take control of Congress and block the president's agenda. "This was

● **Republican strategists warn of political risks from aggressive immigration enforcement**

one of the president's number one advantages and it has become a political liability for him," said John Feehery, a Republican strategist. "The base is still pretty comfortable with what Trump is doing. But it's not just about the base, it's about swing voters."

White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson defended the administration's approach to immigration. "President Trump wants all Americans to feel safe in their communities. That guiding principle is why the president has promised to remove dangerous criminal illegal aliens from our country, urged local Democrat leaders to work with federal law enforcement, and called for a fact-based investigation into the tragic death of Mr Pretti," she said in a statement.

Dubbed Operation Metro Surge, the December deployment of nearly 3,000 federal immigration agents to Minneapolis and St Paul provoked a national uproar with the fatal shootings of Renee Good on January 7 and then Alex Pretti on January 24. Both were killed during confrontations with immigration agents at protests.

Trump has taken steps in recent days to ease tensions in Minneapolis, dispatching his border czar to oversee the operation and signaling a willingness to work with state officials.

It remains unclear whether these moves reflect a recognition of the political risks to Republicans in November midterms, or are simply an effort to regain control of an operation that has produced daily images of masked federal agents responding aggressively to protesters confronting them in the streets.

Trump spent the weekend huddling with senior advisers about how to recalibrate his immigration strategy, according to a White House official and a source familiar with the discussions. The discussions

● **Democrats see opportunity in opposing Trump's immigration crackdown, aim to mobilise voters**

He told Reuters that was a "tipping point," saying many of his constituents in the Minneapolis suburbs are centrists and support removing violent criminals, but are alarmed by the scope and tactics of Trump's operations, which have also swept up people in the country legally.

Some Republican strategists warned that a renewed focus on deporting the "worst of the worst," as Trump promised during the campaign, was necessary to retain support from moderate Republicans and independents in November.

"Americans support secure borders, and they're willing to forgive mistakes when you're cleaning up the previous administration's fiasco – provided you're seen as targeting criminals," said Giancarlo Sopo, a Republican media strategist who worked on Hispanic outreach for Trump's 2020 campaign. "The margin for error narrows dramatically if you're perceived as going after gardeners and taco truck ladies."

SOME REPUBLICAN OFFICIALS PUSH BACK

Trump's softening of his tone and sidelining of Gregory Bovino – a top Border Patrol official and a lightning rod for opponents of the crackdown – followed days of criticism from a number of Republican lawmakers and governors.

A Republican candidate for Minnesota governor, Chris Madel, made headlines for his decision to quit the race over the tactics being used by federal agents in Minneapolis and what he described as indiscriminate arrests.

Zach Duckworth, a Republican state senator who was recently activated in the Minnesota Army National Guard to support local law enforcement, said he was so alarmed by top Trump officials labelling Pretti a "domestic terrorist" that he wrote FBI Director Kash Patel, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, and others to object to the characterisation.

"Where the left is making a mistake on this issue is they think they're winning a fight to build support for illegal immigrants," Rasmussen said. "Where the right, especially the MAGA right, is wrong, is they are thinking everybody voted for what's happening in Minneapolis."

In interviews with eight Trump supporters in Delano, a Republican-leaning town just 16km west of downtown Minneapolis, all said they stood squarely behind the president's immigration crackdown and would vote Republican in the midterms.

But they also acknowledged that immigration agents appeared poorly trained and ill-prepared for the task before them, and expressed worries that widespread criticism of ICE's tactics could hurt Republicans at the ballot box.

Jake Blackowiak, 33, worried the controversy could contribute to the party losing at least one chamber of Congress in the midterms. "The Republicans aren't going to be able to pass any more laws or advance the agenda he promised," he said.

Former Republican Minnesota congressman Gil Gutknecht urged the White House to clarify its enforcement targets. "To say that all the people who are being rounded up are violent criminals is an exaggeration," Gutknecht said in an interview. "They're not all murderers and rapists."

He said it was too early to tell whether the deaths in Minnesota would impact the midterms, but the White House should continue its immigration enforcement operation. — Reuters



A federal agent lobbs a teargas canister towards protesters as agents advance through clouds of tear gas during clashes following the fatal shooting of a protester in Minneapolis. (AFP)

(Additional reporting by Nandita Bose and Jason Lange)

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Ukraine sees mass power outages from 'technical malfunction'

AFP
Kyiv

Ukraine's power grid experienced mass outages for several hours yesterday after a "technical malfunction" caused electrical lines between Moldova, Romania and Ukraine to fail, Ukraine's energy minister said.

Authorities restored power to most critical infrastructure in Kyiv by around 2:00pm (1200 GMT), Ukraine's energy minister said, but he warned Ukrainian households may have to wait longer for it to return in some regions.

Kyiv's metro system completely suspended operations on Saturday due to the power cut, the first time that has happened since the 2022 start of the war with Russia.

It resumed operations several hours later after paralysing transport for thousands.

Electricity had been restored to residential customers in Odesa in the south and Kharkiv in the northeast, the energy ministry said.

Earlier, energy minister Denys Shmygal said on Telegram that a "technical malfunction" caused "a simultaneous shutdown of the 400-kilovolt line between the power grids of Romania and Moldova and the 750-kilovolt line between western and central Ukraine".

Most of the Moldovan capital Chisinau was temporarily without power, though it was largely back

online by 3:40pm, according to the Moldovan energy ministry.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had called the incident an "emergency".

The site of the former Chernobyl nuclear power plant, which still requires electricity, particularly to keep its cooling and control systems operating, experienced a brief power outage, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"No direct impact on nuclear safety expected, but overall situation remains precarious," the IAEA posted on X.

The issue piles further pressure on Ukraine's energy grid, which was already in a fragile state due to weeks of intense Russian bombardment.

Russia has targeted Ukrainian energy infrastructure throughout its nearly four-year invasion but Kyiv says this winter has been the toughest yet, with attacks cutting power and heating to millions during sub-zero temperatures.

The Kremlin, which has bombarded Ukraine's energy grid for weeks, said on Friday it was refraining from attacks on Kyiv until Sunday following an appeal from US President Donald Trump.

Around 800,000 passengers use the Kyiv metro system daily, according to data published last year.

Residents also use its 52 stations as bomb shelters during Russian attacks.

Moldova produces its own power but also imports it, mainly from Romania, as well as Ukraine.



People attend a protest march organised by Danish veterans from Kastellet to the US embassy in Copenhagen to express dissatisfaction with US President Donald Trump's statements about Nato soldiers in Afghanistan, in Copenhagen, Denmark, yesterday. (Reuters)

Thousands join Danish war vets' silent march

AFP
Copenhagen

Between 8,000 and 10,000 people joined an emotional silent march in Copenhagen yesterday organised by Denmark's Veterans' Association to protest Donald Trump's comments downplaying the role of non-US Nato troops in Afghanistan.

The association had expected well over a thousand people to take part, and Danes braved subzero temperatures en masse to support their veterans and the 44 Danes who died in Afghanistan.

Police told AFP they estimated the number of demonstrators were "at least 10,000", while organisers put the turnout at between 8,000 and 10,000.

Trump sparked outrage in Denmark and across Europe on January 22 when he said European Nato troops "stayed a little back, a little off the front lines" during the 20-year conflict in Afghanistan.

The Scandinavian country fought alongside US forces during the Gulf War as well as Afghanistan and Iraq.

Gathering in Copenhagen's Kastellet, or citadel, a brief ceremony was held at the monument to fallen soldiers before the procession began.

"The demonstration is called #NoWords because that really describes how we feel. We have

no words," the vice president of the association, Soren Knudsen, told AFP.

"Obviously, we also want to tell Americans that what Trump said is an insult to us and the values that we defended together."

Some demonstrators waved red-and-white Danish flags and others were dressed in military uniform, as they marched quietly – no slogans or chanting – to the US embassy about two kilometres (1.2 miles) away.

Most were sombre, others were visibly emotional with tears streaming down their cheeks.

"We're very happy that so many people turned out," Knudsen told AFP outside the US embassy, pleased that veterans from the US and across Europe had also joined in.

"What Trump said was very insulting," Henningsen Andersen, who served as a Danish UN soldier in Cyprus, told AFP.

"I have friends who were down there. Some of them were wounded, and they carry the war with them even today," the 64-year-old said, four military medals pinned to his black veterans' jacket.

"He's saying things he doesn't know the full truth about."

One 58-year-old member of Denmark's home guard, who gave her name only as Orum, also expressed anger over Trump's remarks.

"How can he even say that? It's insulting," she said, clad in khaki fatigues and green beret.

Protesters at the front of the march carried a large red banner reading "NoWords", while others carried hand-drawn signs. One said "Trump is so dumb", while another held by a child read "Say sorry, Trump".

In response to Trump's claim, 44 Danish flags, which carried the names of the 44 Danish soldiers killed in Afghanistan, were placed on Tuesday in planters outside the US embassy in Copenhagen.

The embassy removed the flags, before apologising and replacing them.

"We have nothing but the deepest respect for Danish veterans and the sacrifices Danish soldiers have made for our shared security. There was no ill intent behind the removal of the flags," the embassy said in a post on its Facebook page.

It noted that the planters were embassy property and not in the public domain, and the initial planting of the flags had not been coordinated with the embassy.

On Friday, the US ambassador placed 44 Danish flags in the flowerbeds.

On Saturday, 52 additional Danish flags were added, with names inscribed on them: 44 for the Danes who died in Afghanistan, and eight others for those killed in Iraq.

A minute of silence was also observed outside the embassy. One person laid down a wreath of red and white flowers.

Denmark has traditionally been an ardent US ally, and continues to call Washington its "closest ally" despite tensions over Trump's recent interest in taking over Greenland, an autonomous Danish territory.

France tightens infant formula rules after toxin scare

France has said it will impose stricter limits on the acceptable level of a toxin called cereulide in infant formula after potentially contaminated products were recalled in over 60 countries. The infant formula industry has been rocked by several firms recalling batches that could be contaminated with cereulide, which can cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhoea. French authorities launched an investigation into the deaths in December and January of two babies who were thought to have drunk possibly contaminated powdered milk. At this stage investigators have not established a direct link between the symptoms and the milk consumed. The recalls have raised fresh questions about food safety challenges in the global supply chain. There is no established safety limit for cereulide in infant formula. "Protecting the health of infants is the top priority for health authorities," the French agriculture ministry said late Friday. The new threshold will be 0.014 micrograms of cereulide per kilogram of body weight, compared to 0.03 micrograms currently, it said. This is the second lowering of a threshold in France in less than two weeks. The recall of potentially contaminated infant formula has heaped scrutiny on Chinese firm Cabio Biotech, the supplier of an ingredient used in infant formula which is suspected of being tainted. Headquartered in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, Cabio Biotech is one of the world's largest producers of ARA, a fatty acid used primarily in baby formula and food products. (AFP)

Portugal braces for more rain as 200,000 still without power

Portugal braced yesterday for more heavy rain as some 200,000 consumers were still without power days after Storm Kristin swept the country killing five people. The national weather agency, IPMA, has placed all of mainland Portugal on alert until Monday for heavy rain accompanied by winds of up to 100kmh (60mph). With rivers already swollen and the soil waterlogged, Portugal's civil protection service warned the fresh rainfall could cause flash flooding in urban areas and trigger landslides and rockfalls. Officials urged residents to secure loose objects, avoid vulnerable coastal and riverside areas, and take precautions when driving. Storm Kristin's hurricane-force winds struck central and northern Portugal overnight Tuesday, causing flooding and property damage and disrupting travel. It also tore down about 5,800 trees across Portugal. Emergency services said they carried out 34 land rescues and 17 water rescues in its wake.

Snow-covered pier



A drone view shows houseboats and charter boats lying at a frozen pier in Eldenburg Marina, where the Reck canal connects the frozen lakes Mueritz and Koelpin, amid ongoing sub-zero temperatures in Waren, Germany, yesterday. (Reuters)

I'm no angel, Italy's PM says amid church fresco row

AFP
Rome

Italy's prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, joked yesterday she does not look like an angel, after a row blew up in the media over a restored fresco in a Rome church.

Some of Italy's press have been asking whether the premier served as inspiration for a cherub painted in a chapel in the San Lorenzo in Lucina basilica, located a few metres (yards) from the main building of the Italian government.

The newspaper *La Repubblica* noted that, following recent renovations, one of

the painted angels bears a resemblance to the blonde, diminutive leader.

The winged figure is seen holding a parchment and standing next to a bust of Italy's last king, Umberto II, who reigned for just a month before being deposed in 1946.

The Italian restorer who worked on the cherubim, Bruno Ventinetti, denied to the press that he sought to immortalise Meloni, insisting that he only brought back the image of the original fresco.

Meloni herself appeared amused by the controversy, posting an image of the restored fresco on Instagram with the comment: "No, decidedly I do not resemble an angel."

But, after several opposition politicians complained, Italy's culture minister, Alessandro Giuli, said he had ordered an inspection of the fresco on Saturday.

The expert look-over will "determine the nature of the works carried out on the updated painting inside one of the chapels of San Lorenzo in Lucina and decide what further steps might be taken", he said in a statement.

A picture shows a detail of a newly restored fresco in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Lucina where an angel is reported resembling Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in Rome yesterday. (AFP)

Separatist attacks in Pakistan kill 21, dozens of militants dead

AFP
Quetta, Pakistan

Separatists launched "coordinated" attacks across Pakistan's Balochistan province yesterday, killing at least 10 security personnel and 11 civilians, an official said, the latest violence in the insurgency-hit southwestern region.

Officials said dozens of militants were also killed in clashes triggered by the attacks, a day after the military said its forces had killed dozens of ethnic Baloch insurgents.

Pakistan has been battling a separatist insurgency in Balochistan for decades, with frequent attacks on security forces, foreign nationals and non-nationals in the mineral-rich province bordering Afghanistan and Iran.

The senior security official, speaking to AFP on condition of

anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media, said "terrorists... launched co-ordinated attacks this morning at more than 12 locations".

"Ten security personnel were martyred while a few others were injured," the official said, adding that 67 militants were killed in clashes.

He said 11 Baloch civilians, including three women and three children, were also killed by militants.

The circumstances surrounding the deaths of the civilians were not immediately clear. Baloch separatists have previously targeted civilians believed to have collaborated with state agencies.

A senior military official in Islamabad said the attacks were "co-ordinated but poorly executed", adding that they had "failed due to poor planning and rapid collapse under effective security response".





HE Buthaina bint Ali al-Jabri al-Nuaimi, Minister of Social Development and Family, speaking at the conference.



Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser attending the opening day of Jadal with other dignitaries. PICTURES: Aisha al-Musallam

Sheikha Moza attends Jadal 2026 research summit

Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, chairperson of Qatar Foundation, attended the opening day of Jadal - Al-Mujadilah Centre and Mosque for Women's annual research summit - designed to build and extend research networks on topics related to the contemporary challenges and lived realities of Muslim women around the world.

Jadal was also attended by HE Buthaina bint Ali al-Jabri al-Nuaimi, Minister of Social Development and Family, and other distinguished guests and dignitaries. Held at Al-Mujadilah, Jadal has welcomed over 100 delegates from North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, bringing together Muslim women scholars, researchers, and practitioners from across the globe and providing a home for international female Muslim scholarship. They will explore the summit's 2026 strategic theme, 'Muslim Women Navigating Theology, Ethics, and Society'.

The summit will explore the role of Muslim women within the Islamic intellectual tradition and examines how they draw from this living heritage to navigate and respond to contemporary challenges. Through dialogue, research, and public engagement,

Jadal continues to advance scholarship rooted in faith, lived experience, and global perspectives.

The opening remarks were delivered by Dr Sohaira Sidiqui, executive director of Al-Mujadilah, who emphasised the importance of bridging scholarly knowledge and community life. She spoke on the need for research that is both rigorous and accessible, and for institutions that place Muslim women at the centre of knowledge production, ethical inquiry, and public engagement.

She said, 'Al-Mujadilah was founded on a simple but demanding premise: that religious knowledge is a form of stewardship. It carries responsibility to history, to ethics, and to the community it serves. It must be rigorous yet accessible, principled yet responsive, rooted in tradition while attentive to context.'

'Jadal was conceived not simply as a conference, but as a conversation, one that unfolds over time, across disciplines, and within our Muslim community.'

During the summit, a new partnership between the Ministry of Social Development and Family and Al-Mujadilah was launched, marking a shared commitment to highlighting women's contributions in Islam across history and in contemporary life.

Rooted in awareness and renewed impact, the partnership will deliver a series of public initiatives aimed at deepening understanding of women's roles in shaping knowledge, community, and society, grounded in faith, values, and lived experience.

The collaboration was announced in the presence of HE al-Nuaimi, who shared reflections on women, community, and social development. 'More Muslim', a new narrative audio documentary podcast exploring the Muslim experience in all its complexity and depth, was also launched during Jadal.

Blending storytelling and historical reflection, the series takes listeners on transhistorical journeys into themes that have shaped, and continue to shape, Muslim life in the modern world. This first season, produced by Al-Mujadilah, examines the lived experiences of Muslim women, sharing thoughtful, layered stories that illuminate faith, culture, and belonging beyond simplified narratives.

Across the three days of Jadal 2026, panels and sessions are exploring themes including women's agency and ethical leadership in Islamic history and civilisation, as well as their normative authority and intellectual contributions from the inception of Islam to the present day.

Partnership with Al-Mujadilah to empower women's societal role'

HE the Minister of Social Development and Family, Buthaina bint Ali al-Jabri al-Nuaimi, affirmed that the partnership with Al-Mujadilah Centre and Mosque for Women aims to intellectually, religiously, and socially empower women, while strengthening their confidence in their societal and civil roles. The initiative highlights exemplary female leaders from Islamic history and the modern era, while producing knowledge-based content that addresses contemporary women with an authentic vision, promoting awareness of Islamic values that honour women and support their role in society. This statement came during the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Social Development and Family and Al-Mujadilah Centre and Mosque for Women, on the sidelines of Jadal Summit organised by the centre. The partnership is part of the ministry's 2025-2030 strategy initiatives.

HE the Minister explained that the collaboration stems from a shared vision to launch awareness programmes and campaigns highlighting role models among women in Islam. She emphasised that these programmes are grounded in thorough research by scholars worldwide, extending beyond historical review to provide a conceptual and ethical roadmap that empowers contemporary women to play an active societal role while maintaining their moral principles. She highlighted that Islamic civilisation has historically produced exceptional women whose roles were far from marginal; they were decision-makers, scholarly references, and pioneers in charitable and developmental work. Emphasising these figures achieves strategic objectives that

extend beyond historical knowledge. She added that the upcoming awareness campaigns aim to foster pride in identity through real-life examples that reinforce the role of women in family empowerment, building a confident and responsible generation, correcting misconceptions about Muslim women, and affirming their position as genuine partners in building civilisation. She concluded by stressing that, given today's rapidly changing world, it is crucial to reconnect new generations with these female role models, integrating heritage and modernity to shape a promising future. The memorandum aligns with the ministry's mandate under Amiri Decree No. 57 of 2021, which includes proposing and implementing national strategies and policies for family care, raising societal awareness about family protection, and strengthening family bonds, in addition to developing and executing the ministry's strategic plans line with national development strategies and Qatar National Vision 2030. The partnership also reflects the centre's objectives, as a private, public-benefit institution established in 2024, dedicated to developing women's social and religious capacities, empowering them socially and personally, and enhancing their active role in society. The memorandum embodies both parties' commitment to collaborative work among active institutions and their shared ambition to implement national strategies and social development plans through a strategic initiative that highlights exemplary women in Islam, showcases their contributions throughout Islamic history, and underscores their role in peace, development, and community building. (QNA)

Match for Hope spectators hails event as 'entertainment with a purpose'



By Shaima Sheriff
Staff Reporter

The 'Match for Hope 2026' held recently at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium drew 40,521 fans, raising over QR45mn, with spectators hailing the event as "entertainment with a purpose".

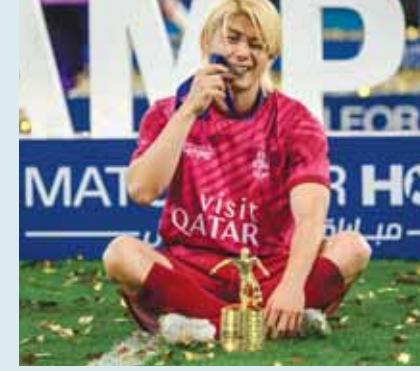
The charity football match between Team Chunkz and Team Aboffah was more than just a sporting spectacle. Combining football, live music, and entertainment, it left fans inspired while raising funds for essential education for disadvantaged children across the Middle East, Asia, and Africa through Match for Hope's charity partner, Education Above All (EAA).

Since 2024, Match for Hope has raised over \$19.5mn, supporting initiatives including the enrolment of 12mn out-of-school children, empowering 2.6mn individuals through training, constructing over 5,500 schools, revitalising 20,727 classrooms, and refurbishing more than 10,000 water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities.

Spectators praised the organisation and the purpose behind the event. "It's pretty good. It's really kind of the players and streamers to be part of this. Not only do we get entertainment, but they also do something meaningful," said Jameer, 19, attending his second Match for Hope.

Seventeen-year-old Shisomo, a first-time attendee, added: "I really wanted to see some of my favourite influencers play football. I think it's a great idea to bring people together for a good cause. Events like this give everyone a chance to experience something different in Doha and meet people from different cultures."

Young Maya, 13, supporting Team Chunkz,



said: "I really feel like it's a good cause. It's amazing to see everyone gathering together and supporting education for people less fortunate than me. Everybody's happy, and the vibes are incredible."

Fans also praised the event's accessibility and entertainment options. Many travelled easily via ride-hailing apps and nearby malls, enjoying live music, interactive zones, and the overall stadium atmosphere. The day's lineup blended football action with a festival-like experience, ensuring that visitors of all ages felt engaged and entertained.

With total donations reaching QR45,294,142 (\$12,409,354), the match demonstrated how sport can unite communities for a higher purpose. Spectators left with memories of thrilling goals, performances, and laughter, but also with a sense of contribution toward a brighter future for children in need.

Fans collectively hailed the event, stating that "Match for Hope is more than just a game; it's a celebration of giving, community, and hope."



Glimpses of the charity football match between Team Chunkz and Team Aboffah. Held at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, the event drew 40,521 fans, raising over QR45mn, with spectators hailing the event as "entertainment with a purpose."

PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil



IBPC Qatar hosts roadshow on Indian luxury trains in Doha

The Indian Business and Professionals Council (IBPC) Qatar, in partnership with the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) and the Embassy of India in Qatar, recently hosted an exclusive Roadshow on Indian Luxury Trains - 'Maharajas' Express & Golden Chariot' in Doha.

The roadshow was held in the presence of Promila Gupta, Group General Manager, IRCTC, and aimed at promoting India's premium rail-based luxury tourism offerings in the Middle East market, particularly among key stakeholders in Qatar's travel and hospitality sector.

IBPC Qatar president Thaha Muhammed Abdul Kareem highlighted the significance of India's luxury railway journeys and their growing global appeal, while Indian ambassador Vipul underscored the strong tourism and cultural ties between India and Qatar, and the potential for expanding outbound luxury tourism through such flagship initiatives.

Gupta delivered a presentation on IRCTC's world-renowned luxury trains, the Maharajas' Express and the Golden Chariot, providing detailed insights into their royal heritage, curated itineraries, onboard hospitality, and immersive

cultural experiences, while also outlining partnership opportunities for tour operators and travel companies in Qatar.

The roadshow served as a valuable networking platform, bringing together IRCTC representatives and leading travel and tourism professionals from Qatar, with the objective of strengthening co-operation and expanding luxury outbound tourism to India. The event reflected IBPC Qatar's continued commitment to promoting bilateral business and tourism collaboration between India and Qatar, while showcasing India's finest luxury rail journeys to the region.



Officials of the Indian Business and Professionals Council (IBPC) Qatar and the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) are joined by Indian ambassador Vipul and other dignitaries during an exclusive Roadshow on Indian Luxury Trains - 'Maharajas' Express & Golden Chariot' held recently in Doha.