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SUNDAY Vol. XXXVI No. 13645

February 8, 2026
Sha'ban 20, 1447 AH

www.gulf-times.com 2 Riyals

published in
QATAR
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BUSINESS | Page 1

Dukhan Bank
launches Qatar's 1st
QDI-integrated digital
onboarding kiosk

Qatar launches 'AI Agent Factory' to boost efficiency

MoCI, Microsoft team up for digital platformBy A Staff Reporter
Doha

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) has teamed up with Microsoft to launch a pioneering "AI Agent Factory" – a digital platform that will deploy artificial intelligence (AI) across government services in a bid to modernise bureaucracy and boost efficiency.

The initiative, announced on Friday, marks one of the Gulf state's most ambitious steps yet in harnessing AI to transform how citizens and businesses interact with public institutions.

The platform will enable the ministry to rapidly develop and deploy intelligent AI agents – automated systems capable of handling tasks ranging from processing applications to answering queries – without the lengthy development cycles traditionally associated with government IT projects.

Built on Microsoft's technology infrastructure, the factory is

designed to integrate seamlessly with existing government systems whilst allowing new AI-powered services to be rolled out across multiple departments.

Ahmed al-Kuwari, director of the ministry's Information Systems Department, described the launch as a "pivotal step" towards comprehensive automation of government operations.

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Behind NSD, an economic strategy in motion

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

With the National Sport Day 2026 set for Tuesday, what appears to be a simple day off work is actually a calculated economic investment, according to a Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar (CMU-Q) professor. The annual observance isn't just about fitness – it's a strategic policy tool that pays dividends long after the workout ends.

"Qatar's National Sport Day is an economic policy in disguise. By nudging a large share of the population to be active, it is an investment in human capital as healthier people are less absent from work; they work better and stay productive longer. Over time, even small improvements in activity can ease

pressure on healthcare spending, which frees resources for other priorities," Dr Agustin Indaco, associate teaching professor in economics at CMU-Q told *Gulf Times*.

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QMC reinforces Arab media ties at Saudi forum

Qatar Media Corporation (QMC) participated in the Saudi Media Forum themed "Media in an Evolving World", under the patronage of The Custodian of Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud. The Qatari delegation was led by HE Sheikh Hamad bin Abdulaziz al-Thani, Media Adviser, and included Ahmed Abdulla al-Attiya, Director of Public Relations and Communications; Dr Mishal Rady al-Hajri, Media Adviser at the Office of the CEO; Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka, Editor-in-Chief of *Gulf Times*; Khalid Jassim, presenter on Alkass Channels; Abdulaziz al-Sayed, veteran media figure; Hassan Ghaneam al-Hammedi, Director of News at Qatar Television; and Jaber al-Suroor, Supervisor of General Programming at Qatar Radio.

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Amir attends Winter Games ceremony



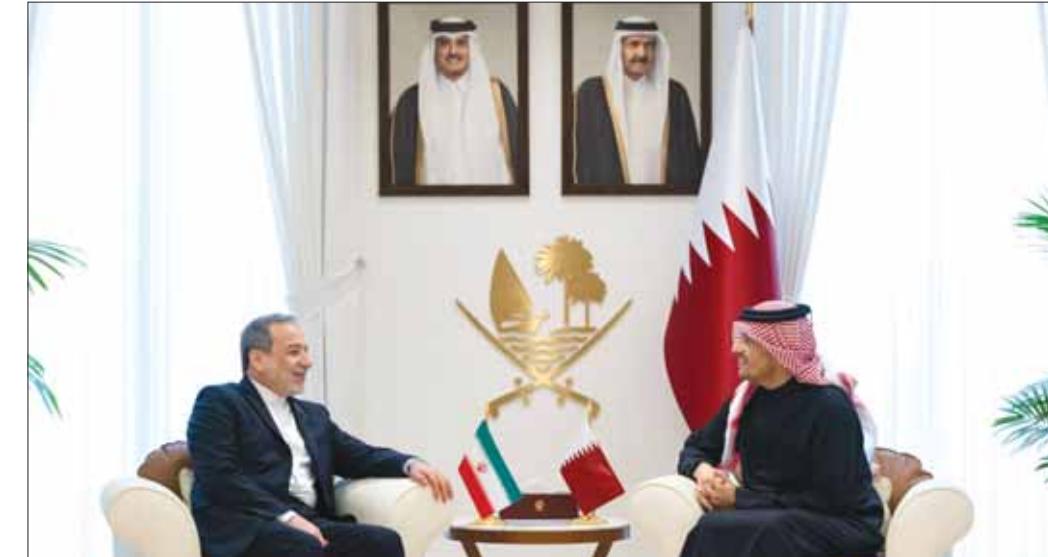
His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani attended the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games Milano Cortina 2026, in its 25th edition, held at the San Siro Stadium in Milan. The ceremony was attended by a number of heads of state and government, senior officials, as well as presidents and representatives of Olympic committees from brotherly and friendly countries. Also in attendance were a number of members of the official delegation accompanying His Highness the Amir.

The opening ceremony featured a variety of artistic and cultural performances celebrating the launch of the Games, followed by the parade of participating nations' flags and athletic delegations, before the Olympic flame was lit to mark the official opening of the Games. (QNA)

Amir hails Italian bid for Winter Games success

In a post on his X official account, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani said he was pleased to attend the opening ceremony of the Milan-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games in Milan, expressing his hopes for the success of the Games and praising Italy's efforts to ensure the success of the event.

PM hopes US-Iran talks will deliver



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met yesterday with Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Abbas Araghchi, who is visiting Qatar. They discussed the ongoing efforts aimed at de-escalating tensions in the region.

HE the prime minister voiced Qatar's welcoming of the negotiations between the United States and Iran, underway in Muscat, and expressed the

hope that they would lead to a comprehensive agreement that serves the interests of both parties and enhances 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-ordinating with brotherly and friendly countries to overcome differences through diplomatic means. (QNA)

Connected but unequal: how to bridge Arab digital gap

By Tawfik Lamary
Staff Reporter

Across the Arab world, Internet access has quietly become part of everyday life. Yet behind this surge in connectivity lies a deeper divide – not between those who are online and those who are not, but between those who can simply connect and those who can truly navigate the digital age.

In an exclusive interview with *Gulf Times*, sociologist and researcher Dr Laila Omar of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (DGI)

discusses what the latest Arab Opinion Index (AOI) reveals about digital literacy, inequality, and the shifting future of work in the region.

The AOI – one of the largest public opinion surveys in the Arab world – conducted face-to-face interviews with more than 40,000 respondents across 15 countries during its 2024–2025 round. Its findings point to a dramatic rise in internet usage: 79% of respondents now use the Internet, and nearly two-thirds go online daily. This marks a steep increase from 42% in 2012–2013, reflecting what Dr Omar describes as "a structural shift in communication, information consumption, and social life."

Internet access, she argues, now resembles a basic utility – in some countries, even more accessible than electricity or water. Smartphones have driven this transformation, with over 90% of users

"The future will not be defined by connectivity alone – but by who has the skills to use it wisely"
– Dr Laila Omar, researcher

going online via mobile devices. As a result, the line between digital and non-digital life has largely disappeared. Yet, Dr Omar cautions, connectivity alone tells only part of the story.

Despite widespread access, digital literacy remains uneven across generations, education levels, and nations. Many people can perform basic online tasks, but skills tied to critical thinking, fact-checking, and productive online engagement are far less common. This gap, she warns, has profound consequences – particularly in an era when social media dominates how information spreads.

AOI data show that around 80% of Internet users rely on social media for political news, especially during times of conflict. Yet only 41% trust the information they encounter there. For Dr Omar, this paradox underscores the urgency of digital literacy:

without the ability to evaluate sources and detect manipulation, access can amplify misinformation rather than foster informed participation.

Governments across the region have begun responding. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Morocco are investing heavily in digital infrastructure and e-government services, and education systems are integrating online tools. However, as Dr Omar observes, educational reform has lagged behind technological progress. Infrastructure has advanced faster than teacher training, curriculum redesign, and the development of workforce-relevant digital skills. **To Page 5**



NHRC signs pact with Saudi commission to enhance co-operation

The National Human Rights Committee (NHRC) signed a technical co-operation memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Human Rights Commission (HRC) in Saudi Arabia, within the framework of enhancing institutional partnership and expanding areas of joint co-ordination on issues of protecting and promoting human rights, serving mutual interests, and consolidating the principles of justice, equality, and mutual respect between the two sides.

The MoU was signed by HE the NHRC Chairperson Mariam bint Abdullah al-Attiyah, and President of the Saudi HRC Dr Hala bint Mazyad al-Tuwairji.

The MoU aims to develop mechanisms for technical work, exchange experiences, build the capacities of specialised personnel, and launch joint programmes and initiatives that contribute to supporting human rights culture and raising societal awareness, in addition to documenting regional co-operation in areas related to human rights.

In this context, al-Attiyah said this step represents an extension of the NHRC's approach in enhancing Gulf co-operation and exchanging best professional practices, emphasising that technical partnerships contribute to developing institutional performance, improving the quality of human rights services provided to the community, and supporting ongoing training and qualification paths for workers in the sector.

She added that the MoU opens the way for wider co-ordination in implementing joint initiatives and exchanging knowledge and experiences, enhancing the protection of rights and freedoms, and raising legal and humanitarian awareness among various groups.



She affirmed that the MoU reflects the Committee's direction toward expanding its regional partnership network and building a more integrated human rights work system, noting that exchanging institutional experiences in the region provides real opportunities for developing policies and preventive and awareness programmes, enhancing responsiveness to emerging human rights issues, protecting rights and freedoms, and fostering a culture of respect for human dignity in society.

The MoU also outlined several areas of co-operation, including joint work on building the capacities of personnel at both parties through specialised training programmes, exchanging studies, research, and projects, publishing their results for mutual benefit, raising societal awareness of human rights culture, organising reciprocal visits, seminars, lectures, and joint conferences, in addition to exchanging information, statistics, reports, and scientific publications, with attention to educating about the rights of persons with disabilities, children, women, and the elderly.

The MoU emphasised the importance of aligning co-operation activities with the national legislations in force in both countries, ensuring the efficient

implementation of joint initiatives and enhancing integration between the two institutions in various priority human rights files.

Through this framework, both institutions seek to unify efforts in monitoring, awareness, and capacity building, and to benefit from the accumulated expertise of each party to develop institutional work tools and exchange specialised knowledge, contributing to building an advanced Gulf model in managing human rights issues.

The MoU is scheduled to enter into force after completing the legal procedures in both countries, and it will continue for several renewable years, ensuring the sustainability of joint programmes and projects and achieving a long-term impact that positively reflects on enhancing and protecting rights and freedoms in both countries.

In a related context, the NHRC chairperson met with Dr Muhammad al-Shafai, director-general of the Judicial Training Center at the Ministry of Justice in Saudi Arabia and a member of the Saudi HRC Council, where they discussed prospects for co-operation in supporting the integration of human rights topics into training programmes for judicial practitioners. (QNA)



The Management and staff of Family Food Centre extend their deepest condolences and sincere sympathies to the family of the late



**Major General
Abdulaziz Abdullah Ibrahim
Al-Ansari**
(1957 - 2026)

May God Almighty bestow His abundant mercy upon the deceased, grant him eternal peace, and grant his family and loved ones patience and comfort during this time of loss.

Family
Food Centre
مركز التموين العالمي



Qatar condemns targeting of WFP relief convoy in North Kordofan

Qatar has strongly condemned the targeting of a relief convoy operated by the World Food Programme in North Kordofan state in Sudan, considering it an egregious violation of international humanitarian law principles. A statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Saturday stressed the urgent need to protect those operating in the humanitarian field and ensure that aid flows sustainably to those in need in the state. In addition, the ministry reiterated Qatar's call for combined regional and global efforts to end the war through peaceful means. It also reaffirmed Qatar's full support for the unity, sovereignty, and stability of Sudan, emphasizing that it stands by the people of Sudan in achieving their aspirations for peace, development, and prosperity. (QNA)

Qatar participates in Arab envoys meeting with Greek FM



Qatar's ambassador to Greece Ali bin Khalfan al-Mansouri participated Friday in a meeting between Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic Giorgos Gerapetritis and Arab ambassadors in Athens. Discussions during the meeting focused on the Arab-Greek relations and ways to support and strengthen them. (QNA)

Ramadan expected to begin on Feb 18: QCH

The Qatar Calendar House (QCH) announced that, based on precise astronomical calculations, the first day of Ramadan 1447 AH is expected to fall on Wednesday (Feb 18).

QCH emphasised that the official start of Ramadan remains under the authority of the Crescent Sighting Committee at the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs.

Executive Director of Qatar Cal-

endar House, Engineer Faisal al-Ansari, stated that the crescent of Ramadan will appear on Tuesday, Feb 17, 2026 (the day of sighting) at 3:02pm Doha time (12:02pm GMT).

He added that the crescent will set in Qatar one minute after sunset on the sighting day, with the interval increasing further towards the western parts of the country. (QNA)



Customs reveals declarations for January

The number of Customs Declarations processed across all the ports of the country, sea, air, and land, for January 2026 by the General Authority of Customs amounted to 671,462. These included 17,656 ship cargoes, 565,377 air cargoes, and 22,502 land cargoes.



DICID underlines shared human values at forum in Washington

Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) participated in the 2026 Global Faith Forum (GFF), held in Washington, DC, under the theme: "Building a culture of kindness for the common good."

DICID was represented by its Chairman of the Board of Directors Prof Ibrahim Saleh al-Naimi.

Multi-Faith Neighbours Network (MFNN) honoured Prof Ibrahim bin Saleh al-Naimi with the prestigious Bridge Builder Award during a formal ceremony held on the sidelines of the 2026 Global Faith Forum in Washington, DC.

This recognition affirms Prof al-Naimi's prominent international standing and his pioneering leadership in the field of interfaith dialogue.

Prof al-Naimi delivered a keynote address during the Forum's third session, titled: "Principles of Engaging with the Other: Reflections on Our Shared Humanity."

He opened his remarks by expressing pride in the Center's participation and extending gratitude to the Multi-Faith Neighbours Network and its partners for organising this important event, commending their dedication to fostering dialogue, co-operation, and shared values among communities.

In his address, Prof al-Naimi emphasised the principles of ethical engagement with others and the critical role of shared human values in promoting interfaith dialogue and building bridges of understanding and peace in a world experiencing growing divisions and tensions. He addressed a central question posed by the Forum: "How do we recognise the humanity of those with whom we disagree?"

He highlighted that acknowledging shared humanity forms the moral foundation for any meaningful dialogue, citing Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings that emphasise human dignity and common origin, and stressing that: "Differences of opinion or belief do not negate the ethical duty of respect, nor justify the denial of another's dignity."

Prof al-Naimi further elaborated on the importance of reason, natural disposition (fitrah), and spirituality in sustaining relationships despite disagreements,

noting: "Humans are inherently inclined towards goodness and peace. Religions, at their core, call for noble character, justice, and compassion. Moreover, knowledge and education are essential pillars for responsible dialogue, as ignorance is a major source of misunderstanding and conflict. Scientific and dialogue-based platforms help dismantle stereotypes and cultivate an informed, ethical awareness."

Regarding human dignity, he underscored that protecting it is indispensable to our very humanity, particularly in the face of global challenges such as poverty, injustice, conflict, and displacement, and called for genuine international co-operation to counter forces that undermine human dignity.

Prof al-Naimi also extended an invitation to participants to attend the 16th Doha Interfaith Conference, organised by Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue on April 21-23, 2026, under the title: "Religious Dialogue in the Digital Age: New Horizons for Peacebuilding."

The Center's participation in the 2026 Global Faith Forum underscores its leading role in promoting a culture of dialogue, reinforcing shared human values, and contributing to international efforts to foster peace, understanding, and coexistence among diverse religious and cultural communities.

The Forum brought together an exceptional gathering of religious leaders, thinkers, diplomats, and academics from diverse faiths and intellectual backgrounds to explore ways of promoting human understanding, coexistence, and building more cohesive communities in a world increasingly marked by polarisation and division. (QNA)



QMC participates in Saudi Media Forum

Qatar Media Corporation (QMC) recently participated in the Saudi Media Forum, held under the theme 'Media in an evolving World', under the patronage of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud.

The forum brought together more than 300 prominent media professionals, experts, academics, and specialists from the region and around the world, who engaged in over 150 dialogue sessions addressing key challenges and opportunities shaping the future of the media industry at local, regional, and international levels.

The Qatari delegation was headed by Sheikh Hamad bin Abdulaziz al-Thani, media adviser, and included Ahmed Abdullah al-Attiya, director of the Public Relations and Communications Department; Dr Mishal Rady al-Hajri, media adviser at the Office of the CEO; Faisal Abdullaheem al-Mudhaka, Editor-in-Chief of *Gulf Times*; media professional Khalid Jassim, presenter on Alkass Channels; veteran media figure Abdulaziz al-Sayed; Hassan Ghanem al-Hammadi, director of News at Qatar Television; and Jaber al-Suroor, supervisor of general programming at Qatar Radio.

Sheikh Hamad affirmed that Qatar Me-



dia Corporation's participation reflects its firm belief in the importance of Arab media integration and the strengthening of professional partnerships that serve a purposeful and responsible media message.

He emphasised that such forums provide vital platforms for exchanging perspectives, sharing expertise, and keeping

pace with rapid developments in the media sector.

Sheikh Hamad also praised the innovative ideas and media initiatives observed during the visit, which reflect the vitality of the Saudi media landscape and the prominent role of young talents in its development.



He underscored the leadership's commitment to establishing a modern, aware media environment capable of showcasing national achievements and conveying the Kingdom's image to the world.

During the delegation's visit, Abdulrahman al-Majrashi, head of the Government Communication Centre, delivered a presentation outlining the ministry's efforts to unify government media messages, enhance co-ordination among entities, and activate effective communication between media professionals and communication officials across government agencies. The delegation also visited the Saudi Press Agency where they received a briefing from Hassan bin Mohammed

al-Asmari, president of SPA, on the agency's organisational structure, operational mechanisms, and ongoing development efforts to enhance performance.

Additionally, the delegation visited the headquarters of the Saudi Research and Media Group, where they toured its various departments and reviewed its publications and efforts to transform media work into a sustainable, economically viable investment while maintaining high professional standards and competitiveness.

The three-day visit programme also included tours of Al Arabiya and Al Hadath channels, as well as MBC and Asharq channels.

UDC set to organise community events at The Pearl and Gewan Island to celebrate Sport Day

United Development Company (UDC), master developer of The Pearl Island and Gewan Island, will transform its destinations into vibrant, open community spaces on February 10, as it marks Qatar's National Sport Day (NSD) with a full-day programme of inclusive, community-focused sports, and wellness activities.

Building on its continued success year after year, UDC has curated a comprehensive programme spanning multiple zones across The Pearl Island and Gewan Island, reinforcing its commitment to community engagement, wellbeing, and the promotion of active lifestyles.

The initiative reflects UDC's core values by encouraging movement as part of everyday life, strengthening social bonds, and activating public spaces in a way that supports both residents and the wider community.

Running from 8am-8pm, the National Sport Day activities will engage residents, visitors, and participating corporate entities from UDC, its subsidiaries, and partner organisations, alongside their employees and families. The full-day activation is designed to create a memorable, inclusive experience while supporting retail activity and enhancing footfall across key destinations.

A highlight of the programme is a community walkathon along Porto Arabia, extending from 1 La Croisette to 10 La Croisette, offering participants an opportunity to stay active while enjoying the waterfront setting.

Additional activities will be



hosted across prominent locations, including Porto Arabia and Qanat Quartier Boardwalks at The Pearl Island, and Crystal Walk on Gewan Island, turning these destinations into lively gathering points throughout the day.

The programme features fitness activation zones, interactive sports areas, table football, and light recreational activities suitable for all age groups. First aid support, health check-up points, and water stations will be available throughout the day to ensure a safe and comfortable experience for all participants.

Through this initiative, UDC reinforces its role as a lifestyle developer and community builder, supporting national efforts to promote health and well-being in line with the objectives of Qatar National Vision 2030. By activating public spaces and encouraging active participation, UDC continues to foster stronger, healthier, and more connected communities.

Inspections held at natural resource extraction sites

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, in co-operation with the Environmental Security Group of the Internal Security Force 'Lekhwiya', has carried out an extensive inspection campaign targeting a number of natural stone resource extraction sites and sand factories across various regions of the country, as part of efforts to strengthen environmental oversight and ensure compliance with approved requirements and standards.

The campaign, implemented by the Wildlife Development Department, is part of the ministry's efforts to regulate natural resource extraction activities and reduce the associated negative environmental impacts, thereby contributing to the protection of natural resources and the preservation of ecological balance. Accordingly, the specialised teams focused on monitoring the extent to which the targeted sites comply with environmental controls, identifying any potential violations related to operational practices, waste management, or exceeding permitted work



boundaries, in addition to verifying the implementation of applicable environmental safety procedures. The campaign further included assessing the environmental impact of ongoing activities at extraction sites, ensuring that operating entities adhere to approved environmental management plans, and taking the necessary actions regarding the observations recorded, in accordance with the legal and regulatory frameworks in force in the country.

Environment ministry conducts 1,652 monitoring hours in January

The Marine Protection Department at the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change carried out 1,652 hours of monitoring and inspection patrols in January, resulting in the detection of 36 various marine violations, including 31 violations related to the use of prohibited fishing nets.

Similarly, the Wildlife Development Department carried out 1,500 wild tree planting operations in January, in addition to fencing six rawdahs (natural meadows), as part of the environmental rehabilitation programme.

Further, the Environmental Monitoring and Inspection Department carried out 61 field visits and inspections during January, covering various sites and facilities.



MoC to hold Tajikistan Cultural Week activities from today

The Ministry of Culture (MoC) will host the activities of the Tajikistan Cultural Week today, as part of Qatar's vision to promote civilisational dialogue, expand cultural exchange with various countries, and to establish culture as a shared space for human interaction.

The Tajikistan Cultural Week will continue until February 10, offering an exceptional experience in the realms of Tajik culture and arts. The Tajikistan Cultural Week represents a significant milestone in the bilateral relations between Qatar and Tajikistan, reflecting the positive developments in these relations, particularly in the cultural field, which is one of the most prominent bridges of understanding and closeness between the two friendly countries.

The week's programme includes a diverse array of events showcasing the richness and variety of Tajik culture, including traditional fashion shows, musical evenings, handicraft exhibitions, visual arts contributions, and other various activities.



These cultural weeks are part of a continuous cultural journey that has achieved notable prominence in recent years.

The current season continues this approach by hosting Tajikistan, followed by the Russian Cultural Week next Wednesday, highlighting the diversity of cultural partnerships and the expanding openness to different cultures. (QNA)

ZULAL WELLNESS RESORT BY CHIVA-SOM AIMS FOR THE WORLD-RECORD TUG OF WAR THIS QATAR NATIONAL SPORTS DAY



In celebration of Qatar National Sports Day, Zulal Wellness Resort by Chiva-Som invites the community to come together for a dynamic, purpose-driven activation designed to inspire unity, movement, and collective achievement. Taking place on Tuesday, 10 February 2026, from 10:00 to 13:00, the activation will be hosted at Zulal Wellness Resort and is open to both guests and the wider community.

Curated to champion the spirit of wellness and community participation, the pre-event activation will bring people of all ages and fitness levels together through engaging physical challenges and guided wellness sessions. At the heart of the event is an ambitious Tug of War challenge, where participants will unite in an effort to achieve a 600-meter pull, with the goal of breaking a new distance of World Record. This collective challenge symbolises teamwork, resilience, and the power of shared determination values that lie at the core of Qatar National Sports Day.

Complementing the Tug of War challenge, guests will have the opportunity to participate in complimentary Yoga and Tabata sessions, thoughtfully designed to energise the body and promote mindful movement. These sessions will be offered in limited slots, ensuring a personalised and high-quality experience for all participants.

Event Details

What: Qatar National Sports Day Community Activation

When: Tuesday, 10 February 2026

Time: 10:00 - 13:00

Where: Zulal Wellness Resort by Chiva-Som, Al Ruwais

Activities Include:

10:00-10:50 Yoga Sessions (limited availability)

11:00-11:50 Tabata / Circuit Training / Booth Camp Fitness Sessions (limited availability)

12:00-12:45 600-meter Tug of War World Record Challenge

Entry: Complimentary

Registration:

Mandatory via WhatsApp on +974 7138 5422

This activation has been thoughtfully designed to encourage community members, wellness enthusiasts, families, and fitness groups to take part in a meaningful shared experience—working together to achieve an ambitious goal while embracing the principles of healthy living and collaboration that define both Qatar National Sports Day and Zulal Wellness Resort.

With limited availability across wellness sessions, early registration is strongly encouraged.

For more information or reservations, please email Zulal Wellness Resort by Chiva-Som at reservations@zulal.com, call/WhatsApp +974 4477 6555 or visit www.zulal.com.



'Meras 3 Seashore' championship at Aspire Zone Park concludes

Aspire Zone Park has witnessed one of the most prominent youth sporting events that reflects Qatar's commitment to supporting modern sports and physical fitness, with the recent conclusion of the 3rd "Meras 3 Seashore" Calisthenics Championship.

The championship was supported by the Seashore Group as the Main Sponsor, the Aspire Zone Foundation (AZF) as the Platinum Sponsor, Gulf Colours as the Gold Sponsor, and Mazzraty, Oakberry, and Penninsular as Bronze Sponsors, under the supervision of Kallos Fitness, highlighting the combined efforts of several institutions in supporting youth and sports in Qatar.

The championship featured intense competition for the title of best athletes in two categories: Lightweight (under 68kg) and Heavyweight (over 68kg).

Competitors demonstrated high levels of skill in exercises, such as push-ups, pull-ups, squats, muscle-ups, in addition to the 40kg dips exercise, which combines strength with precision performance.

A total of 43 Qataris competed for the championship titles in both categories.



Competitors demonstrated high levels of skill in exercises, such as push-ups, pull-ups, squats, muscle-ups, in addition to the 40kg dips exercise, which combines strength with precision performance.

In the Lightweight category, Abdulaziz al-Hassawi secured first place and won a cash prize of QR50,000, followed by Nasser Flamrzi in second place with QR25,000, and Faraj al-Marri in third place with QR15,000.

In the Heavyweight category, Abdulrahman al-Maadadi claimed first place with a prize of QR50,000, Yousef al-Balushi

finished second with QR25,000, while Abdulla al-Musallih secured third place with QR15,000.

Ahmed Mohammed al-Hassan, the Events & Venues director at Aspire Zone Foundation, stated: "Aspire Zone Foundation seeks to provide an ideal environment for high-quality sporting events by offering modern infrastructure and logistical services that enable participants to perform at their best."

"We recognise that calisthenics represents a unique training style that integrates strength, flexibility, and balance, while promoting a healthy lifestyle," he said. "Supporting it aligns with our vision of building a well-rounded athletic generation."

"Our sponsorship of the third edition of the 'Meras 3 Seashore' Championship reaffirms our ongoing commitment to supporting Qatari youth and promoting a culture of sports within the community," said Seashore Group chief executive Salem Saeed al-Muhannadi. "We witnessed strong youth participation and a large audience turnout, reflecting growing awareness of the importance of sports in enhancing public health and building character."

"Meras 3 Seashore" Championship marked a significant milestone for calisthenics in Qatar," said Kallos Fitness director Omar al-Emadi. "Calisthenics offers a unique training model based on body-weight exercises, meeting the growing demand among youth for sports that combine fitness, skill, and flexibility."

Arab Book Award opens nominations, reveals 4th edition details

The Arab Book Award has announced the opening of nominations for its fourth edition, accepting submissions until May 28, 2026, through the award's website.

Launched by Qatar in March 2023, the Arab Book Award focuses on books written in Arabic and aims to honour researchers, publishers, and institutions contributing to the Arab book industry.

A statement issued by the award organisers indicated that nominations for the fourth edition have been opened following the awarding of prizes to the winners of the third edition, held under the auspices of the Qatari National Commission for Education, Culture and Science.

Dr Hanan al-Fayyad, media adviser for the Arab Book Award, said that the approved

categories for the fourth edition include linguistic and critical studies, with this year's focus on grammatical and morphological studies, and critical studies in narrative and theatre.

In the social and philosophical studies category, this edition will focus on Islamic and Arab philosophy and psychology.

For historical studies, they will be dedicated to research related to the history of the Arab and Islamic world only, from the 12th century AH to the present day.

Dr al-Fayyad added that the field of Islamic studies in the Arab Book Award will be open to research on Qur'anic sciences and the principles of exegesis, in addition to the field of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and textual criticism.

This cycle is dedicated to the critical edition of books on



creed, the foundations of religion, Islamic philosophy, and the principles of jurisprudence. She emphasised that the primary criterion for acceptance is scholarly contribution and the quality of the critical edition, noting that the award will not accept any nominations outside these fields and disciplines this year.

The media adviser for the Arab Book Award explained that the award encompasses two categories, nominations for which are both open, provided the work belongs to one of the award's

academic disciplines.

The first category is the "Single Book", which is for Arabic books whose subject matter falls within one of the fields of knowledge specified by the award

It must be written in Arabic, published in print, have an ISBN (International Standard Book Number) within the last four years, be at least 30,000 words long, adhere to scholarly standards, and be submitted by the author during their lifetime.

Joint submissions are also accepted, provided they are not the product of conferences or group seminars, and with the consent of all participants.

The award also stipulates that works in second or subsequent editions will not be accepted if they do not meet the specified timeframes.

The application form and nomination procedures must be completed through the website.

The second category, "Achievement", requires that the nominee, whether an individual or an institution, have produced original and innovative Arabic work that contributes to human knowledge, while adhering to intellectual property laws.

The online application form must be completed according to the conditions detailed on the award's website.

The award further states that allocating specific branches in each cycle is part of a scholarly vision aimed at systematically exploring various fields of Arabic knowledge, encouraging research in areas with limited output, and raising the quality of authorship and scholarly investigation.

The platform represents more than just a technical upgrade.

By enabling faster deployment of AI solutions, officials hope to create a unified experience for users across different government touchpoints.

Microsoft Qatar general manager Ahmed Dandashi said the partnership would "accelerate digital transformation and deliver sustainable impact for institutions, the business sector, and society".

The ministry indicated that once technical and regulatory frameworks are finalised, it will work with Microsoft to expand the platform's capabilities.

Doha Festival City to Welcome Primark to Qatar as It Expands Its Global Retail Portfolio



Reinforcing its role as the first destination to bring global brands to Qatar, Doha Festival City has announced the first-to-market opening of Primark later in 2026, marking a major milestone in the country's retail landscape.

Delivered in partnership with Alshaya Group, Primark's Qatar debut underscores Doha Festival City's long-standing role as Doha's destination for coveted global trends, achieved through attracting internationally recognised brands and serving as the gateway of choice for retailers entering the Qatari market.

The opening builds on Doha Festival City's proven ability to convert brand demand into sustained footfall, loyalty and long-term value.

Primark will open its first and largest store in Qatar at Doha Festival City, spanning three levels, firmly positioning it as a key anchor within the mall's portfolio.

Founded in Ireland and operating hundreds of stores across Europe and the United States, Primark has recently expanded into the Middle East through its partnership with Alshaya Group, with Qatar marking a key next step in the brand's regional growth.

Known globally for accessible, trend-driven fashion across women's, men's, kids' and home departments, Primark is expected to attract families, youth and value-seeking shoppers, supporting longer dwell time and cross-shopping across the destination while meeting everyday wardrobe and family shopping needs.

Primark's arrival aligns with Doha

Festival City's wider vision to scale experience-led retail, broaden accessible fashion and home offerings, and reinforce its leadership as Qatar's most established retail and lifestyle destination. With shoppers visiting weekly and spending up to three hours per visit, Doha Festival City offers the scale and performance required for high-impact first-to-market launches of this significance.

Mohamed ElSharkawy, Associate Director – Malls Leasing at Doha Festival City, said:

"The introduction of Primark to Qatar through Doha Festival City reflects our long-term strategy to attract first-to-market global brands that add scale, relevance and sustained value to the retail landscape. Our partnership with Alshaya Group builds on a proven track record of delivering successful international entries, while reinforcing Doha Festival City's position as the preferred destination for global retailers seeking confident, high-impact market entry into Qatar."

Primark's debut further demonstrates Doha Festival City's ability

to deliver complex, large-format international launches, supported by strong infrastructure, accessibility and proven trading dynamics. Beyond the immediate impact, the opening is expected to generate positive spillover across adjacent categories, strengthen the wider retail ecosystem and reinforce Doha Festival City's appeal to international brands evaluating expansion into Qatar.



Kazakh Darb Al Saai Cultural Week wraps up

The Ministry of Culture wound up yesterday the Kazakhstan Cultural Week, organised in collaboration with its Kazakh counterpart, held on February 4-7 at its Darb Al Saai permanent venue in Umm Salal.

The director of the ministry's International Co-operation Department, Nasser al-Maliki, said that the event achieved its objectives in forging rock-solid bridges of cultural bonds between Qatar

and Kazakhstan, offering the public in Qatar an opportunity to have a closer look at Kazakh artistic and civilisational legacy.

This week, the official said, came as a complement to a series of cultural weeks Doha has been hosting since 2024, which included Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, followed in 2025 by events in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, and Iraq, leading up to the 2026 agenda, which includes Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Russia.

Behind National Sport Day: An economic strategy in motion

From Page 1

The immediate economic impacts of observing such a day, according to Dr Indaco, are manifold. He explained: "The National Sport Day also creates a predictable burst of demand for the local sports economy such as gyms, coaches, events, equipment and venue operators while giving businesses a ready-made focal point to launch workplace wellness programmes that can persist even after the observance of the day. In other words, one day off can pay for itself if it helps shift habits and workplace norms for the other 364 days."

The academic believes that Qatar has progressed as a global sporting hub after the FIFA World Cup.

"It is best assessed by whether it has transitioned from staging a single mega-event to operating a repeatable hosting platform," he said. "The most convincing evidence is the continued flow of major events and the ability to run them smoothly across different sports, audiences, and governing bodies."

Dr Indaco stressed that Qatar has embedded itself in the global calendar through high-profile events like Formula 1 at Lusail and a growing slate of regional and world championships, including the upcoming FIBA Basketball World Cup in Doha.

"Economically, this matters because repeat hosting of mega events generates recurring demand for tourism, hotels, airlines, retail, and local services, while strengthening the case for long-lived investments in transport, venue management, and hospitality capacity," he pointed out.

"The developmental payoff is not just infrastructure, but capability building, a workforce and institutions that learn to deliver complex events reliably," Dr Indaco remarked that the identity impact follows the same logic.

"Repeated successful hosting turns the World Cup from a singular moment into an ongoing reputational asset, shaping how Qatar is seen and how it sees itself as a connected, modern country whose global role is expressed, in part, through sport," he said.

Highlighting the facilities offered at Qatar Foundation's Education City, he said it is a great place to indulge in sport and academics.

"The Education City is an unusually strong place to study sports analytics because the whole ecosystem blends serious academics with a lived culture of sport, including the presence of a FIFA World Cup stadium right in the Education City," Dr Indaco said. "That setting makes it natural for students to connect classroom tools to real events and real institutions."

The academic also pointed out that the CMU-Q offers rigorous technical skills through its Business Administration programme, where mathematics and statistics are used to solve real-world business problems, including in the realm of sport.

"They can complement that training with the Economics minor, which provides a systematic framework for thinking creatively about incentives, strategy, uncertainty, and human behaviour, the foundations of good analytics," he said. "For students who want to apply those ideas directly, our Sports Economics course brings data and economic reasoning to questions teams and leagues actually face, helping students develop both the technical competence and the analytical judgement needed for careers in sports analytics."

Connected but unequal: how to bridge Arab digital gap

From Page 1

This lag, Dr Omar says, has tangible social costs.

Digital illiteracy now compounds economic inequality as crucial services move online.

AOI findings reveal that 28% of households report incomes that do not meet basic needs.

Limited digital skills thus become barriers to employment, upskilling, and mobility, particularly among youth and women.

"Digital competence is no longer optional," Dr Omar stresses. "It is now a form of social capital."

Looking ahead, she believes computer literacy will form the foundation of the labour market.

As artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and remote work reshape employment, basic digital competence must evolve into what she calls "AI-era literacy" – an awareness of how automated systems operate and the critical capacity to interpret their outputs.

These themes, Dr Omar adds, will take centre stage at the 2027 Social Sciences and Humanities Conference, which she will chair under the theme *AI and the Social Sciences in the Arab World*.

To ensure digital literacy serves as a tool of empowerment rather than exclusion, she identifies three policy priorities: "embedding digital and media literacy into school curricula; expanding adult and workforce-focused training; and strengthening regulation around misinformation, algorithms, and data protection".

"The future," she concludes, "will not be defined by connectivity alone – but by who has the skills to use it wisely."



QSC to showcase innovations at inventions exhibition in Kuwait

QNA
Doha

The Qatar Scientific Club (QSC), affiliated with the Ministry of Sports and Youth, is participating in the 16th edition of the Middle East International Inventions Exhibition, organised by the State of Kuwait from February 8-11. The Qatari delegation will showcase a selection of innovative projects across various scientific and technological fields. The delegation is headed by Deputy Executive Director of the Qatar Scientific Club, Engineer Abdulrahman Saleh



Khamis, includes five innovators presenting projects that reflect the high level of creativity and excellence achieved by Qatari youth. Among the participants, innovator Hessa Mansour al-Nuaimi will present the

Ultrasonic Fire Extinguishing Device, an innovative system that uses directed sound waves to extinguish flames without chemicals or water. Innovator Shahd Ahmed al-Sulaiti will showcase the Smart Helmet, a device that captures images and measures distances at the push of a button, using ultrasonic sensors and artificial intelligence to provide precise object dimensions in real environments, displayed via an electronic interface. This project is a collaborative effort between the Qatar Scientific Club and the Public Works Authority (Ashghal) under the fourth edition of the "Engineer of the

Future" programme, with Ashghal participating as part of the Qatari delegation. Innovator Mohamed Hassan al-Sayed will present the Advanced Coral Reef Map, a project that uses deep learning and mathematical models to analyse underwater images and track changes in coral reefs, providing a scientific tool for monitoring reef health and supporting marine conservation efforts. Innovator Hessa Ibrahim al-Kuwari will present the Medication Reminder Device, a smart tool that alerts patients to take their medication through audio and visual notifications, helping

reduce missed doses among the elderly and chronically ill while improving adherence to treatment safely and conveniently. Innovator Jawhara Mohamed al-Shammary will present the Drone for Monitoring Fungal Diseases in Greenhouses, which employs an intelligent unmanned aerial vehicle to monitor crops and detect infected plants early through imaging and data analysis, enabling targeted treatment. Deputy Executive Director of the Qatar Scientific Club, Engineer Abdulrahman Saleh Khamis, said that the Club has consistently participated in this exhibition, the

second largest inventions exhibition in the world, to support Qatari innovations, empower young innovators, and foster connections with inventors from other countries, particularly Gulf and Arab nations, which builds confidence and enhances their skills. He added that the Qatar Scientific Club has a long history of awards and top rankings at this exhibition, reflecting the continuous development of the innovation process, with progress steadily aligned with time and achievements, and praised the Ministry of Sports and Youth for its support of Qatari youth and innovators.

High visitor turnout at MoC pavilion at Damascus book fair

The pavilion of Qatar's Ministry of Culture (MoC) at the Damascus International Book Fair attracted large crowds of visitors eager to explore the country's intellectual, cultural, and civilizational contributions.

Qatar's participation, represented by the Ministry of Culture, reflects the nation's commitment to highlighting its cultural presence on the Arab and international stages, and to showcasing its local literary and intellectual output to a wide and diverse audience. The initiative underscores Qatar's position as a hub for creativity and a centre of cultural and civilizational diversity.

The pavilion drew the attention of academics, students, and culture enthusiasts, many of whom expressed their delight at Qatar being the guest of honour at this year's fair. Visitors praised the opportunity to engage with Qatari literary and intellectual works, while also learning about aspects of the country's social and cultural heritage through direct interaction with participants at the pavilion.

The pavilion provides visitors with an immersive experience of Qatari culture, including access to publications from the Ministry of Culture and live demonstrations of traditional Qatari handicrafts, reflecting the authenticity of the country's folk heritage. In addition, the ministry is participating in the fair's programme through seminars, poetry evenings, folk performances, intellectual lectures, cultural presentations, and discussion sessions both within the pavilion and at the dedicated Children's Corner.

The Ministry of Culture organised yesterday an incredible poetry evening within the Damascus International Book Fair to mark the State of Qatar's participation as a guest of honour in this fair, held under the theme "A history we write, a history we read" until Feb 16.

The evening featured a high-profile official and cultural attendance, chief amongst them the Minister of Culture of Syria, Mohammad Yassin Saleh, and Assistant Undersecretary for Cultural Affairs at the Ministry of Culture Mubarak bin Abdullah al-Khalifa, alongside a contingent of poets, intellectuals, and a huge crowd of poetry enthusiasts. On the stage of the evening hosted by media presenter Thabet al-Saoudan, the two Qatari poets, Mohammed al-Sada and Abdulhamid al-Youssef, shone as they presented a bouquet of diverse poems addressing humanistic, emotional, and patriotic themes, receiving great engagement from the Syrian and Arab audience. This year's fair draws broad participation from over 500 local, Arab, and global publishing houses from 35-plus nations, with the event's cultural agenda comprising over 650 diverse events, including intellectual activities and symposia, as well as panel discussions and literary and artistic evenings. QNA

ANNOUNCEMENT

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ABU commends Qatar's support for persons with visual disabilities

QNA
Kuwait

The Asian Blind Union (ABU) praised the State of Qatar for its ongoing support of issues concerning people with visual disabilities at both regional and international levels, affirming that this role has had a significant impact in enhancing the Union's programmes and sustaining its activities.

This was highlighted by the President of the Asian Blind Union, Mansour al-Alanzi, during the activities of the ABU workshops held in Kuwait from February 2-6. He expressed appreciation for Qatar's generous and continuous support, noting that it has directly enabled the Union to fulfil its regional role, strengthen its programs and activities, and serve the interests of blind persons across Asia.



During the meetings accompanying the workshops, the Asian Blind Union announced the appointment of Chairman of the Board of the Qatar Cultural Center for the Blind, Faisal al-Kooheji, as a member of the Union's Executive Committee for the Middle East region. This appointment reflects regional confidence in Qatar's leading role in supporting and empowering people

with visual disabilities.

The appointment comes considering Qatar's pioneering experience and advanced model for enabling people with visual disabilities, and the tangible progress achieved in policies and programs supporting their social and institutional participation.

On the occasion, Faisal al-Kooheji expressed pride in the appointment, emphasising that trust entails significant responsibility and an opportunity to strengthen collaboration at the regional level. He highlighted Qatar's advanced model based on partnership, innovation, and equal opportunity. He expressed his aspiration to actively contribute to the development of Union policies and programmes that serve the interests of blind persons in the Middle East and enhance their participation in various fields.

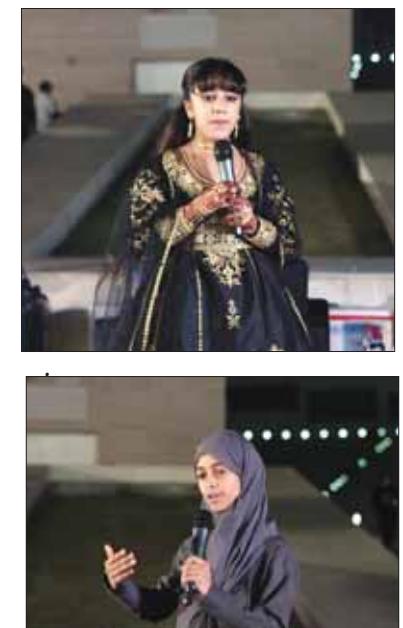
The Qatar Cultural Center for the Blind concluded its participation in the

ABU workshops with delegations and representatives from member states, in the framework of promoting regional cooperation and exchanging expertise in supporting and empowering blind persons.

The closing ceremony included an exchange of commemorative shields between the Qatar Cultural Center for the Blind and the ABU organising committee.

The centre participated in several specialised workshops, including sessions on assistive technology and the role of artificial intelligence in promoting independence, a workshop titled "Empowering Blind Women: Challenges and Aspirations", as well as workshops on entrepreneurship for persons with disabilities, the nutritional pyramid, and AI in facilitating access to health information, and self-marketing. These activities aim to enhance empowerment and the exchange of regional experiences and expertise.

Culture activities enhance Katara horse festival



Katara Cultural Village has seen a rich cultural and artistic programme that reflected the symbolic and aesthetic status of the Arabian horse in the Arab collective consciousness, as part of the events of the Katara International Arabian Horse Festival 2020.

The events were attended by Prof Dr Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Sulaiti, general manager of Katara and chairman of the Festival Organising Committee, who honoured the participants in the poetry events in recognition of their creative contributions and their role in enriching the cultural scene accompanying the festival.

In the meantime, Katara hosted a poetry evening titled 'Poetic Verses on the Arabian Horse,' held on the Katara Corniche near the amphitheatre, with the participation of several talented students. The poems portrayed the Arabian horse as a symbol of horsemanship, dignity, and beauty, and as a vessel for the values of courage and pride in Arab heritage.

The events also featured a humanitarian poetry evening titled 'The Neigh of Meanings... Poems Seen with the Heart,' with the participation of visually impaired members of Al-Noor Centre for the Blind, in a creative experience that affirmed that poetry transcends the limits of the senses to be perceived by the heart and soul. The evening included the participation of poet Mohamed Awad and was presented by Abdulsalam Mohamed al-Jallout.

As part of the accompanying cultural programme, a cultural lecture titled 'The Horse in the Poetry of Al-Mutanabbi' was presented by poet and novelist Mohammed Suleiman al-Shazli. The lecture explored the

symbolic and aesthetic presence of the horse in the poetry of Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi, as an embodiment of chivalry, heroism, and pride, and the deep intellectual and literary connotations it carries.

ANNOUNCEMENT

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Venezuela parliament chief pledges quick release of remaining political prisoners

AFP/Reuters
Caracas

Venezuela's head of parliament has promised the speedy release of remaining political prisoners during a meeting with their relatives in which he promised to correct the government's "mistakes".

"By Friday (February 13) at the latest they will all be free," Jorge Rodriguez, a former member of ousted leader Nicolas Maduro's inner circle, told prisoners' families outside the notorious Zona 7 detention centre in Caracas. "We are going to rectify all the mistakes that have been made."

Jorge Rodriguez is the brother of Venezuela's interim President Delcy Rodriguez. It was not clear whether he was refer-

ring to all remaining political prisoners – estimated to number around 700 by rights groups – or only those being held at Zona 7.

The meeting came a day after National Assembly members gave their initial backing to a draft amnesty covering the types of crimes used to lock up dissidents during 27 years of socialist rule.

However, Venezuela's largest opposition coalition denounced "serious omissions" in the amnesty measures on Friday, after a shorter and more general draft of the law was released compared to the previous version circulated the day before.

The text "excludes large groups of civilian and military political prisoners", "does not establish mechanisms for reparation to victims" and "does not guarantee the safe return of exiles", the Democratic Unitary Platform coalition said in a statement.

Acting president Delcy Rodriguez is pushing the bill as a milestone on the path to reconciliation, a month after the US overthrew of Maduro.

Jorge Rodriguez said the legislation would "repair all the mistakes" of Chavismo – the anti-US, socialist doctrine of late firebrand leader Hugo Chavez and his successor Maduro.

He said that he expected parliament to complete the adoption of the bill as early as Tuesday.

"As soon as the law is adopted, they (prisoners) will also be released the same day," he said.

Relatives surrounded the interim leader's brother, clamouring for the release of their loved ones.

"Help me get my family member out of there, please," a woman told him.

"We're going to get them all out," he replied while hugging another family member.

Nancy Plaza, whose husband is detained in Zona 7, said she told Rodriguez that "there are many mothers suffering" because of the detentions.

"I told him to please do it for my children, for me, for all the political prisoners," she told AFP. "We need him to be released. I'm going to believe that he will keep his promise."

Venezuela's opposition and human rights groups have said for years that the government has used detentions to stamp out dissent by politicians, members of the security services, journalists and activists, charging them arbitrarily with crimes like terrorism and treason.

The government has always denied holding political prisoners.

Rights group Foro Penal has verified that 383 political prisoners have been freed since the government announced a new series of releases on January 8.

However, the group says more than 680 remain jailed, an updated count that includes prisoners whose families had not previously reported their detentions out of fear.

Government officials have said the number of releases is nearly 900, but have not provided a clear timeline and appear to be including those freed in previous years.

Among the long-time advocates of releases and amnesty is Nobel Peace Prize winner and opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, who has several close allies imprisoned, including opposition politician Juan Pablo Guanipa and lawyer Perkins Rocha.

PM vows to rebuild ruined border towns in Lebanon

AFP
Tayr Harfa, Lebanon

Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam visited heavily damaged towns near the Israeli border yesterday, pledging reconstruction.

It was his first trip to the southern border area since the army said it finished disarming Hezbollah there, in January.

Swathes of south Lebanon's border areas remain in ruins and largely deserted more than a year after a US-brokered November 2024 ceasefire sought to end hostilities between Israel and the Iran-backed group.

Lebanon's government has committed to disarming Hezbollah, and the army last month said that it had completed the first phase of its plan to do so, covering the area between the Litani River and the Israeli border about 30km (20 miles) further south.

Visiting Tayr Harfa, around 3km from the border, and nearby Yarina, Salam said that frontier towns and villages had suffered "a true catastrophe".

He vowed authorities would begin key projects including restoring roads, communications networks and water in the two towns.

Locals gathered on the rubble of buildings to greet Salam and the

delegation of accompanying officials in nearby Dhayra, some waving Lebanese flags.

In a meeting in Bint Jbeil, further east, with officials including lawmakers from Hezbollah and its ally the Amal movement, Salam said that authorities would "rehabilitate 32km of roads, reconnect the severed communications network, repair water infrastructure" and power lines in the district.

Last year, the World Bank announced it had approved \$250mn to support Lebanon's post-war reconstruction, after estimating that it would cost around \$11bn in total.

Salam said funds including from the World Bank would be used for the reconstruction and rehabilitation projects.

The second phase of the government's disarmament plan for Hezbollah concerns the area between the Litani and the Awali rivers, around 40km south of Beirut.

Israel, which accuses Hezbollah of rearming, has criticised the army's progress as insufficient, while Hezbollah has rejected calls to surrender its weapons.

Despite the truce, Israel has kept up regular strikes on what it usually says are Hezbollah targets and maintains troops in five south Lebanon areas.

Lebanese officials have accused Israel of seeking to prevent reconstruction in the heavily



This handout picture released by the Lebanese Government Press Office shows Prime Minister Salam being showered with confetti as he is received by locals during a tour in the heavily-damaged southern village of Dhayra, near the border with Israel. -AFP

damaged south with repeated strikes on bulldozers, excavators and prefabricated houses.

Visiting French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said on Friday that the reform of Lebanon's

banking system needed to precede international funding for reconstruction efforts.

The French diplomat met Lebanon's army chief Rodolphe Haykal yesterday, the military said.

Haiti enters political limbo as transition government's mandate ends

Haiti entered political limbo yesterday as the mandate of the Caribbean nation's transitional governing council, a body intended to curb a bloody gang conflict and bring about long-delayed elections, ended with no succession plan in place.

The nine-member Transitional Presidential Council (CPT, by its French initials) was installed in April 2024 after prime minister Ariel Henry resigned. It has been led by a rotating roster of council presidents.

However, its term has been marked by a deterioration in security, corruption accusations and political infighting.

In late January, several members of the CPT said they were seeking to oust Prime Minister Alix Didier Fils-Aime, even as the US threatened serious consequences should they do so and backed Fils-Aime staying on after February 7.

The US also said the CPT must leave power and has imposed sanctions on five council members.

"As the Transitional Presidential Council's mandate ends on February 7, we support Prime Minister Fils-Aime's leadership in building a strong, prosperous and free Haiti," the US embassy in Haiti said on Wednesday.

Although there is broad agreement between Haiti's civil and political leaders that the CPT should step down, a consensus has yet to emerge over what structure should replace it.

Speaking to the *Miami Herald* on Wednesday, former lawmaker Antoine Rodon Bien-Aime, who has been involved in discussions, said there had been many proposals but an agreed solution has yet to emerge.

The Caribbean's most populous nation has been without an elected president since the 2021 assassination of Jovenel Moise, and its last senators' terms expired over three years ago.

It last held elections in 2016. -Reuters

Iran arrests 11 suspected members of Kurdish group over 'sabotage'

Iranian authorities have arrested 11 members of an outlawed Kurdish group on suspicion of committing acts of sabotage, state television said yesterday.

The arrest of the 11 alleged members of the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) – considered a terrorist group in Iran – comes in the wake of mass anti-government protests last month.

Since its formation in 2004, the PJAK – an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – has staged operations against the Iranian military.

The 11 people arrested in west Iran were "in direct contact with PJAK elements, seeking to launch sabotage actions and to disturb the population's security", the Fars news agency said.

"They were identified and arrested before they were able to commit the act," it added, citing Mohsen Karimi, a regional commander in Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

Both the governments of Turkiye and the United States also consider the PJAK to be a terrorist organisation. -AFP

Cuba adopts urgent measures to address energy crisis

AFP/Reuters
Havana

The Cuban government has announced emergency measures to address a crippling energy crisis worsened by US sanctions, including the adoption of a four-day work week for state-owned companies and fuel sales restrictions.

Deputy Prime Minister Oscar Perez-Oliva Fraga blamed Washington for the crisis, telling Cuban television that the government would "implement a series of decisions, first and foremost to guarantee the vitality of our country and essential services, without giving up on development".

"Fuel will be used to protect essential services for the population and indispensable economic activities," he said.

"This is an opportunity and a challenge that we have no doubt we will overcome," Perez-Oliva said. "We are not going to collapse."

Among the new measures are the reduction of the working week in state-owned companies to four days, from Monday to Thursday; restrictions on fuel sales; a reduction in bus and train services between provinces; and the closure of certain tourist establishments. -Reuters

School days will also be made shorter and universities will reduce the requirement of in-person attendance.

These measures are intended



People wait for transportation in Havana as Cubans brace for fuel scarcity measures after the US tightened the oil supply blockade. -Reuters

to save fuel in order to promote "food and electricity production" and enable "the preservation of fundamental activities that gen-

erate foreign currency", said Perez-Oliva Fraga.

The government will supply fuel to the tourism and export sec-

tors, including for the production of Cuba's world-famous cigars, to ensure the foreign exchange necessary to fund other basic programmes, he said, adding: "If we don't have income, then we will not overcome this situation."

Domestic and international air travel will not be immediately affected by the fuel rationing, although drivers will see cutbacks at the pump until supply normalises, he said.

Perez-Oliva also announced an ambitious plan to plant 200,000 hectares (500,000 acres) of rice to guarantee "an important part of our demand", but acknowledged fuel shortfalls would push the country to depend more on renewable energy for irrigation needs and animal-power for till-ing fields.

Education Minister Naima Ariatne, appearing on the same programme, said infant-care centres and primary schools would remain open and in person, but secondary schools and higher education would implement a hybrid system that would require more "flexibility" and vary by institution and region.

"As a priority, we want to leave (open) our primary schools," Ariatne said.

Top officials said healthcare would also be prioritised, with special emphasis on emergency services, maternity wards and cancer programmes.

The island of 9.6m inhabitants, under US economic embargo

since 1962, has been mired in a severe economic crisis for six years.

Washington has increased pressure on its communist government in recent weeks.

The United States cut off oil deliveries from Havana's key ally Venezuela following its ouster of president Nicolas Maduro in early January.

US President Donald Trump also signed an executive order last week allowing his country to impose tariffs on countries selling oil to Havana.

Trump said that Mexico, which has been supplying Cuba with oil since 2023, would stop doing so under threat of US tariffs.

The oil shortages have threatened to plunge Cuba into complete darkness, with power plants struggling to keep the lights on.

Washington has long sought to overthrow or weaken the communist-led Cuban government.

Havana accuses Trump of wanting to "strangle" the island's economy, where power cuts and fuel shortages, already recurrent in recent years, have become even more acute.

This week, Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel said his country is willing to hold talks with the United States, but not under pressure.

He said any talks must take place "from a position of equals, with respect for our sovereignty, our independence and our self-determination" and without "interference in our internal affairs".



Thailand goes to polls today



Nataphong Ruengpanyawut, People's Party leader and prime ministerial candidate, meets with supporters during a rally event ahead of the February 8 election in Bangkok, Thailand.

Bangladesh PM front-runner rejects unity government offer

Reuters

Dhaka

Bangladesh's leading prime ministerial contender, Tarique Rahman, rejected a proposal from his main rival for a unity government after elections next week, saying his party was confident of winning on its own. Rahman, 60, who heads the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), returned home in December after nearly two decades in exile in London following a youth-led uprising that toppled long-time leader Sheikh Hasina, a bitter rival of his mother, the country's first woman Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

The BNP's main rival in the February 12 election is the Islamist group Jamaat-e-Islami, once banned but now resurgent. The two parties governed together between 2001 and 2006, and Jamaat has said it is open to renewing the partnership for a unity government to help stabilise the country, whose giant garments industry was badly disrupted by months of turmoil in 2024.

Bangladesh has been run by an interim government since August 2024 when Hasina fled to long-time ally India, where she remains. "How can I form a government with my political opponents, and then who would be in the opposition?" Rahman said in an interview at his party office, sitting beneath portraits of his mother and his father, a former president. "I don't know what will be their seat number, but if they are in the opposition, I hope to have them as a good opposition."

His aides said the BNP was confident of winning more than two thirds of the 300 parliamentary seats up for grabs. The party

is contesting 292 of them, with allies vying for the rest. Rahman declined to give a number but said "we are confident that we'll have enough to form a government".

All opinion polls have forecast a BNP victory but also a stiff challenge from the Jamaat alliance, which includes a Gen Z party that emerged from the anti-Hasina protests. New Delhi's decision to shelter Hasina, whom a Dhaka court last year sentenced to death for her role in a deadly crackdown on the protests, has badly strained Bangladesh-India relations while giving China an opening to expand its investments and political outreach. Asked whether he would pivot away from India toward

China should he win, Rahman said Bangladesh needed partners capable of boosting economic growth for its nearly 175mn people.

"If we are in the government, we need to provide jobs for young people. We need to bring businesses into the country so that jobs can be created and people can have a better life," he said.

"So whoever, while protecting the interests and sovereignty of Bangladesh, offers what is suitable for my people and my country, we will have friendship with them, not with any particular country."

On Hasina's presence in India, Rahman said: "She did commit a crime in the eyes of the law in Bangladesh in 2024. A judgment has been passed, so she must be

China overturns death sentence for Canadian in drug case

China has overturned the death sentence of Canadian Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, a Canadian official told AFP, in a possible sign of a diplomatic thaw as Prime Minister Mark Carney seeks to boost trade ties with Beijing. Schellenberg's lawyer Zhang Dongshuo, reached by AFP over the phone in Beijing on Saturday, confirmed the decision was announced Friday by China's highest court.

Schellenberg was detained on drug charges in 2014 before China-Canada ties nosedived following the 2018 arrest in Vancouver of Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou. That arrest infuriated Beijing, which detained two Canadians - Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig - on espionage charges that Ottawa condemned as retaliatory. Then, in January 2019, a court in northeast China retried Schellenberg, who was 36 at the time, sentencing him to death while declaring that his 15-year prison

term for drug trafficking had been too lenient. The court said he had been a central player in a scheme to ship narcotics to Australia, in a one-day retrial that Amnesty International called "a flagrant violation of international law."

Schellenberg has denied wrongdoing. The Canadian official requested anonymity in confirming the decision by China's highest court to overturn Schellenberg's death sentence. Schellenberg, who has been held in northeastern Dalian since 2014, will be retried by the Liaoning High People's Court, his lawyer Zhang said. The timing for the retrial has not yet been set. Zhang said he met with Schellenberg in Dalian on Friday, and said the Canadian appeared relatively relaxed. Carney, who took office last year, visited China in January as part of his global effort to broaden Canada's export markets to reduce trade reliance on the United States.

"Global Affairs Canada (GAC) is aware of a decision issued by the Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China in Mr Robert Schellenberg's case," foreign ministry spokesperson Thida Itth said in a statement sent to AFP.

Itth said the ministry "will continue to provide consular services to Mr Schellenberg and to his family," adding: "Canada has advocated for clemency in this case, as it does for all Canadians who are sentenced to the death penalty."

Key sectors of the Canadian economy have been hammered by US President Donald Trump's tariffs, and Carney has said Canada can no longer count on the United States as a reliable trading partner. Carney says that despite ongoing tensions, including allegations of Chinese interference in Canadian elections, Ottawa needs a functioning relationship with Beijing to safeguard its economic future.

- AFP

Takaichi talks tough on immigration on poll eve

AFP

Tokyo

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi pledged yesterday to make Japan "more prosperous and safer", including through tougher immigration screening, in a final appeal to voters on the eve of snap elections.

Opinion polls suggest that Takaichi's ruling bloc, led by the Liberal Democratic Party, could romp home in today's vote and secure a two-thirds majority in the powerful lower house. "Pushing the button for growth is the Takaichi cabinet's job. Japan will become more and more prosperous and safer," Takaichi, 64, told a campaign rally attended by thousands in Tokyo. "This is the year in which we want to turn the anxieties people feel about their lives today and about the future into hope," she said.

The arch-conservative Takaichi, a heavy metal drummer in her youth and an admirer of Margaret Thatcher, became Japan's fifth premier in as many years in October. This followed a string of calamitous elections for the once-mighty Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), leaving it short of a majority in both houses of parliament.

With ordinary Japanese, especially younger ones, Takaichi has enjoyed sky-high popularity ratings, becoming something of a fashion icon and a hit on social media.

Her tough talk on immigration appears, for now, to have slowed the sharp rise of the populist "Japanese first" Sanseito party, which did well in upper house elections last year. Immigration screening "has already become a little stricter, so that terrorists, and also industrial spies, cannot



A person holds a booklet bearing a picture of Sanae Takaichi.

enter easily," Takaichi said Saturday.

"We must properly examine whether (foreigners) are paying taxes, whether they are paying their health insurance premiums," Takaichi said.

She added that she wanted "a Japanese archipelago where, no matter where you live, you can live safely, where you can receive the medical care and welfare support you need, where you can receive high-quality education, and where proper workplaces and jobs exist."

"But in order to do that, we have to make the economy stronger. Healthcare costs money. Education also requires investment. So we must build a strong economy," she said. Surveys ahead of the election indicate - with some caution due to undecided voters - that the LDP will easily win more than the 233 seats needed to regain a majority. Together with the LDP's coalition partner, the Japan Innovation Party (JIP), Takaichi's ruling bloc could even win a two-thirds majority.

Pushed to margins, women vanish from Bangladesh's political arena

AFP

Dhaka

For more than three decades, Bangladesh was one of the few countries in the world to be led by women, yet there are almost none on the February 12 ballots. Despite helping to spearhead the uprising that led to this vote, women are poised to be largely excluded from the South Asian country's political arena.

Regardless of which parties win next week, the outcome will see Bangladesh governed almost exclusively by men.

"I used to be proud that even though my country is not the most liberal, we still had two women figureheads at the top," first-time voter Ariana Rahman, 20, told AFP.

"Whoever won, the prime minister would be a woman."

Women make up less than four percent of the candidates for this election: just 76 among the 1,981 contestants vying for 300 parliamentary seats. And most of the parties put only men on their tickets. Women's political representation has always been limited in the conservative South Asian nation. Since independence, the highest number elected was 22 in 2018.

But from 1991 until the 2024 revolution, Bangladesh was helmed, represented abroad and politically defined by two women: Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia.

Zia died in December after leading the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for four decades and serving three terms as premier.



Dhaka University student and first-time voter Ariana Rahman.

Hasina, the five-time prime minister overthrown in the July 2024 uprising, is hiding in India and sentenced to death in absentia for crimes against humanity.

Many rights campaigners had hoped the revolution that ended Hasina's autocratic rule would usher in a period of greater equality, including for women. While the caretaker government of Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus set up a Women's Affairs Reform Commission, his interim administration has also been criticised for sidelining the body and making unilateral decisions without consulting women officials.

And there has been a surge of open support for Islamist groups, which want to limit women's participation in public life. After years of being suppressed, emboldened hardliners have demanded organisers of religious commemorations and other public events remove women from the line-up, as well as calling for restrictions on activities

like women's football matches.

"Historically, women's participation has always been low in our country, but there was an expectation for change after the uprising, which never happened," said Mahrurk Mohiuddin, the spokesperson for women's political rights organisation Narir Rajnoitik Odhikar Forum (Women's Political Rights Forum). An entrenched patriarchal mindset means women are often relegated to household duties, she added. Those who dare to speak out often face hostility.

"Women are censored, vilified... judged for simply being part of a political party," said uprising leader Umama Fatema. "That is the reality."

Even the group formed by student leaders of the revolution, the National Citizen Party (NCP), is fielding just two women among its 30 candidates. "I don't take part in any decision-making of my party, (and) the biggest and most important decisions are not taken in our



Tasnim Jara, an independent candidate for Dhaka-9 constituency, interacts with voters during an election campaign ahead of the national election in Dhaka.

presence," said NCP member Samantha Sharmin. The NCP has allied with Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist party and one of 30 parties to have failed to nominate a single woman.

Jamaat's assistant secretary-general, Ahsanul Mahboob Zubair, said society was not yet "ready and safe" for women in politics. Nurunnesa Siddiqua of its women's wing added: "In an Islamic organisation, there can't be any women leaders, we have accepted that."

One of the few women running in this election, Manisha Chakraborty, said women's participation in Bangladesh's politics has

long been limited to tokenisation.

The nation of 170mn people directly elects 300 lawmakers to its parliament, while another 50 are selected on a separate women's list. "The concept of reserved seats is insulting," said Chakraborty, whose Bangladesh Socialist Party has nominated 10 women among its 29 candidates - the highest share in this poll. "Lobbying, internal preference, nepotism - all play a role in making women's participation in parliament just a formality," she told AFP.

Former minister Abdul Moyeen Khan said the reserved seats "were meant to help women establish a

foothold", but "the opposite happened". Selima Rahman, the only woman on the BNP's standing committee, said promising women leaders often "fade away" due to a lack of party support.

And while Zia and Hasina served important symbolic roles, she pointed to how both had been elevated to the pinnacle of power through family connections. Student voter Ariana Rahman fears a long struggle lies ahead. "More women in this election would have made me feel better represented," she said. "The next few years are likely to be more hostile towards women."

US, India unveil interim trade framework

Reuters

Washington/New Delhi

The US and India moved closer to a trade pact on Friday, releasing an interim framework that would lower tariffs, reshape energy ties and deepen economic co-operation as both countries seek to realign global supply chains.

The framework reaffirms a commitment to negotiations toward a broader bilateral trade agreement, the two governments said in a joint statement, while noting that further negotiations were needed.

Separately, US President Donald Trump in an executive order removed the additional 25% tariff imposed on Indian goods for Russian oil purchases as New Delhi "committed to stop directly or indirectly importing" Russian oil.

However, US officials will monitor and

recommend reinstating the tariff if India resumes oil procurement from Russia, the order said, as Washington pressures India to restrict energy ties with Moscow.

The joint statement did not mention India's Russian oil purchases or a formal pledge from India to confirm the move.

Trump announced a deal with India on Monday to cut US tariffs on Indian goods to 18% from 50% in exchange for India halting purchases of Russian oil and lowering trade barriers.

Half of the 50% rate had been imposed separately by Trump as punishment for India's purchases of Russian oil, which he said were fuelling Moscow's war effort in Ukraine.

Trump signed an executive order on Friday rescinding that 25% portion after India agreed this week to shift its oil buying to the US and Venezuela.

However, the statement indicated that

New Delhi resisted Washington's push to broadly open its agricultural market.

Trade Minister Piyush Goyal said that the agreement safeguards farmers' interests and rural livelihoods by "completely protecting sensitive agricultural and dairy products".

Imports of genetically modified agricultural products would not be directly allowed as there was no such provision in the pact, while fruits like apples would be allowed under a tariff quota, he said at a press briefing.

On Russian oil, Goyal declined to comment, saying that the foreign ministry would respond.

India's opposition Congress party, however, said the trade deal was concluded on US terms and hurt farmers and traders, calling the pact a "complete surrender" of national interests.

Friday's joint statement provides addi-

tional details compared with initial outlines of the trade deal revealed by Trump on Monday.

It confirms that India will purchase \$500bn in US goods over a five-year period, including oil, gas, coking coal, aircraft and aircraft parts, precious metals, and technology products.

The last category includes graphics processing units, typically used for artificial intelligence (AI) applications, and other goods used in data centres.

It said India would eliminate or reduce tariffs on all US industrial goods and a wide range of US food and agricultural products.

However, the deal will apply an 18% tariff rate on most imports to the US from India, including textiles and apparel, leather and footwear, plastic and rubber, organic chemicals, home decor, artisanal products and certain machinery.

India will get the same tariff relief

granted to other allied countries that have signed trade deals with the United States on certain aircraft and aircraft parts, and will receive a quota for auto parts imports that will be subject to a lower tariff rate, according to the statement.

Depending on the results of the Trump administration's tariff investigation into pharmaceuticals and their ingredients, "India will receive negotiated outcomes with respect to generic pharmaceuticals and ingredients," the statement said.

Goyal hailed the framework agreement as opening a market worth \$30tn – to India's exporters, especially farmers, fishermen, and micro and small-to-medium enterprises.

Goyal had said on Thursday that Washington and New Delhi aimed to sign a formal trade agreement in March, after which India's tariff cuts on US exports would go into effect.

UK police search properties in Mandelson probe

AFP/Reuters
London

UK police probing Britain's former ambassador to the United States Peter Mandelson searched two properties on Friday, authorities said, following fresh revelations in the Epstein files.

The searches came as Prime Minister Keir Starmer faces intense scrutiny over his decision to appoint Mandelson as the country's envoy to the United States despite his association with convicted US sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Earlier this week, London's Metropolitan Police confirmed that it was investigating Mandelson, 72, over allegations of misconduct in a public office.

It came after newly released documents appeared to show him sharing confidential government information with Epstein when Mandelson was a UK government minister, including during the 2008 financial crisis.

On Friday, officers from the Met's specialist

crime team were deployed at two addresses, one in the western English county of Wiltshire and another in London, according to Deputy Assistant Commissioner Hayley Sewart.

"The searches are related to an ongoing investigation into misconduct in public office of fences, involving a 72-year-old man," she said. "He has not been arrested and enquiries are ongoing."

Several people believed to be police officers arrived outside Mandelson's house in central London on Friday afternoon.

Mandelson, a pivotal figure for decades in British politics, stood down from parliament's unelected upper chamber, the House of Lords, earlier this week following the release of the latest batch of files.

He also faces being formally stripped of the title that allowed him to sit in parliament.

Meanwhile Global Counsel, the lobbying firm Mandelson co-founded, announced in a statement on Friday that it had cut all ties with him, saying he no longer had a stake in or any influence over the business "in any capacity".

A day earlier, Starmer had apologised to Epstein's victims for appointing Mandelson as ambassador to Washington, but indicated he himself would not resign over the scandal.

With polls suggesting Starmer is already unpopular with the British public, some lawmakers say his position is under threat.

Starmer fired the former UK minister and EU trade commissioner in September, seven months into Mandelson's term as ambassador in Washington, following an earlier release of Epstein documents.

The ex-envoy was one of numerous prominent figures again embarrassed by last week's latest revelations of ties to the late US financier, who died in jail in 2019 while facing charges of alleged sex trafficking.

US officials ruled Epstein's death a suicide.

E-mail exchanges between Mandelson and Epstein showed an intimate friendship, financial dealings, private photos as well as evidence that Mandelson passed confidential and potentially market-sensitive information to Epstein nearly two decades ago.



This picture taken on October 30 last year shows US Representative Mikie Sherrill, Democratic nominee for New Jersey governor, campaigning in support of the Gateway Tunnel Project at the Westfield NJ Transit Train Station in Westfield, New Jersey. -Reuters

Judge unfreezes funding for Gateway Project

Reuters
New York/Washington

A New York federal judge on Friday unfroze funds withheld by US President Donald Trump's administration, for a \$16bn project to overhaul critical rail infrastructure in New York and New Jersey.

The Gateway Project will build a new commuter rail tunnel between Manhattan and New Jersey and repair a century-old tunnel used by more than 200,000 travellers and 425 trains daily.

The existing Hudson Tunnel was heavily damaged by Hurricane Sandy in 2012 and needs frequent emergency repairs that disrupt travel on the nation's most heavily used passenger rail line.

US District Judge Jeannette Vargas in Manhattan handed down the temporary ruling hours after New York and New Jersey said construction would halt for lack of funding.

Vargas said the states were likely to succeed on their claims that a Trump administration directive freezing the funds was arbitrary and ran afoul of legal procedures for making policy changes.

The White House and Department of Transportation did not immediately respond to requests

for comment on the ruling.

New Jersey Acting Attorney-General Jennifer Davenport and New York Attorney-General Letitia James issued statements praising the ruling.

"The Trump Administration must drop this campaign of political retribution immediately and must allow work on this vital infrastructure project to continue," Davenport said.

The states said in a January 3 lawsuit that Trump's Republican administration had frozen the funds in a "brazen act of political retribution" against their Democratic leaders.

They said a work stoppage would hold up a crucial infrastructure project, damage their economies and saddle them with costs from securing idled construction sites.

The Trump administration has withheld \$205mn in reimbursements for the project since October 1.

Trump has reportedly demanded that Washington Dulles Airport and New York's Penn Station be renamed for him in exchange for unfreezing the funds, drawing strong criticism from Democrats.

He told reporters on Friday that he had not proposed renaming Dulles or Penn Station. Trump did not comment on Vargas' decision.

The Department of Transporta-

tion said on September 30 that it froze the funds pending a review of the project's compliance with new prohibitions against race- and sex-based considerations in contracting decisions.

The Gateway Development Commission informed the department that it had made changes and conducted a review to ensure compliance with the regulations but has not heard back, according to the lawsuit.

Gateway said the suspension would idle 1,000 construction workers and that Trump's decision had endangered passengers who had to rely on "decaying, century-old rail infrastructure".

Gateway had previously said work was already suspended.

The Gateway Project was allocated \$15bn in federal support under former president Joe Biden.

Nearly \$2bn has been spent on the project so far.

Explaining the latest reversal, Trump's proclamation said the plants and animals in question were already protected under existing laws, making a ban on commercial fishing unnecessary.

The move, expected since last year, was welcomed by the New England Fishermen's Stewardship Association (NEFSA).

"For decades, overregulation has stopped fishermen from making a living and putting healthy, heart-healthy, American-caught products on store shelves," said NEFSA chief ex-

ecutive Jerry Leeman in a statement last May. "NEFSA is pleased that the Trump administration is committed to making America's natural resources available to all Americans."

Conservation groups pushed back.

During an aerial survey last August, the New England Aquarium documented more than 1,000 marine animals in the area, including an endangered fin whale and calf, an endangered sperm whale, pilot whales, and a wide array of other whales, dolphins and rays. -AFP

US reinstates commercial fishing in protected Atlantic waters

US President Donald Trump has issued a proclamation reopening commercial fishing in protected waters off the Atlantic coast, in a region renowned for its rich biodiversity.

The Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument spans nearly 5,000 square miles – larger than Yellowstone National Park.

Long a focus of scientific interest, the monument lies about 130 miles southeast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and was es-

tablished in 2016 by former Democratic president Barack Obama, who warned that it was threatened by overfishing and climate change.

In a familiar political yo-yo, Republican Trump reopened the monument to commercial fishing during his first term, only for the decision to be reversed by Democratic successor Joe Biden.

Biden's administration cited the monument as part of its pledge to conserve 30% of US land and waters by 2030.

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Trump administration re-approves twice-banned pesticide

US President Donald Trump's administration has re-approved the use of pesticide dicamba for spraying on top of genetically modified cotton and soybean crops, drawing swift backlash from environmental groups and the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) movement.

The move comes despite federal courts in 2020 and 2024 striking down the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)'s previous approvals of the contentious weed-killer.

"This decision responds directly to the strong advocacy of America's cotton and soybean farmers, particularly growers

across the Cotton Belt, who have been clear and consistent about the critical challenges they face without access to this tool for controlling resistant weeds in their growing crop," the EPA said in a statement.

A persistent concern about dicamba is "drift": when the chemical volatilises in high heat it can spread for miles, poisoning other farms, home gardens as well as trees and plants.

The 2020 court ruling that first overturned dicamba's approval found it caused damage across millions of acres and "has torn apart the social fabric of many farming communities".

The EPA acknowledged this concern as real but said that by imposing certain restrictions, such as reducing the amount used and avoiding application in higher temperatures, it was safe.

Agricultural industry giant Bayer, which acquired dicamba when it bought Monsanto, welcomed the news and said the chemical would be marketed under the name "Stryax".

"With federal registration in hand, we'll begin the process of seeking state approvals," said Ty Witten, the company's vice-president of commercial stewardship, in a statement. "In the coming weeks, we'll launch applicator training opportu-

nities, and stewardship education to help ensure that growers and applicators have the best experience possible with Stryax herbicide."

Environmental advocates dismissed the safeguards as insufficient – pointing out, for example, the new approval allowed year-round use, including in the hottest summer months.

"They're clearly looking out for the interests of polluting companies much more than the interests of the public, and this is because this office is being run by former industry lobbyists," Nathan Donley, environmental health science director for the Centre for Biological Diversity, told AFP.

Kyle Kunkler, a former lobbyist for the American Soybean Association, is now the deputy assistant administrator for pesticides in the EPA's Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention.

Alexandra Munoz, a molecular toxicologist who works at times with the MAHA movement, criticised the move.

"The EPA's approval for over-the-top application of dicamba will result in poisonous drift that will damage American farmland, moving us farther away from a future where regenerative agriculture can thrive," she said. "This decision is not what is needed to make America healthy again." - AFP

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GULF TIMES

Pricier iPhones? Global memory chip crunch puts spotlight on Apple

As the global memory chip shortage hits the smartphone market, a key question is echoing from Silicon Valley to Shenzhen: Will Apple raise prices, or sacrifice profit to gain new customers?

The iPhone maker predicted strong sales growth last week, spurred by demand for its iPhone 17 models. CEO Tim Cook told investors he expected memory chip prices to increase sharply, but declined to answer analysts' questions about whether Apple would raise prices in response.

"There are different levers that we can push, and who knows how successful they'll be, but there's just a range of options," Cook said on the post-earnings call.

He did not address whether the shortage offered Apple a chance to increase its iPhone and Mac marketshare by maintaining prices at the expense of rivals who might have greater supply constraints.

Analysts assume that even amid a shortage, Apple has the clout with long-time suppliers such as Samsung Electronics, SK Hynix and Micron to secure enough chips to make iPhones, unlike smaller phone makers.

A rapid build-out of AI infrastructure by tech firms such as Meta, Google and Microsoft has absorbed much of the supply of memory chips, lifting prices as manufacturers prioritise components for higher-margin data centres over consumer devices. Memory chips, or DRAM, are crucial to smartphones as they allow power-hungry applications to run smoothly. Apple's decision will likely have far-reaching consequences.

With memory chip prices climbing, Apple faces a pivotal choice that could reshape smartphone pricing worldwide

The memory chip crunch faced by these competitors is in part expected to drive this year the first annual decline in the global smartphone market since 2023, according to IDC data. Qualcomm, the world's biggest designer of smartphone chips and a major supplier for high-end Android phones, fanned those fears on Wednesday with a forecast that missed Wall Street estimates due to a lack of memory chips at its handset customers.

The company's finance chief, Akash Palkhiwala, said that key customers in China don't have enough memory chips to build phones, despite robust demand from customers. "We've seen several OEMs (device makers), especially in China, take actions to reduce their handset build plans and channel inventory," Palkhiwala said.

On Qualcomm's conference call, analysts again pointed to Apple. "It just seems like they are going to continue to get disproportionate share of the available DRAM," said Ben Reitzes of Melius Research.

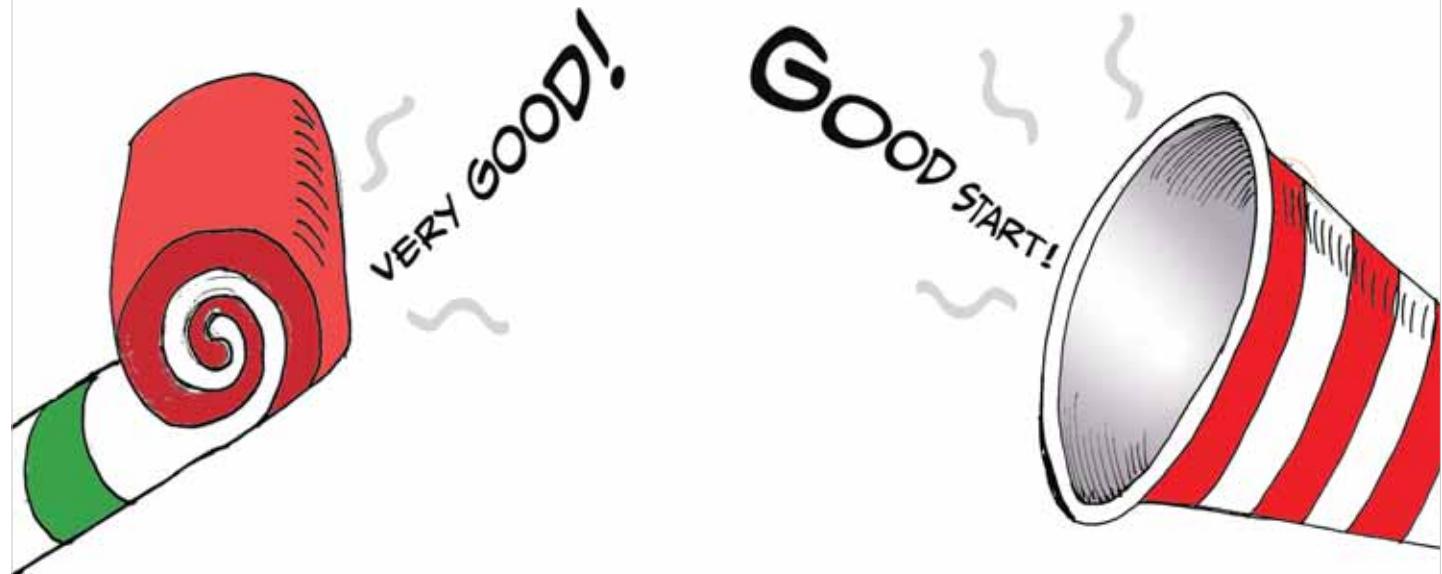
One veteran smartphone industry executive, who asked not to be named because was he was discussing sensitive supply matters, said Android phone makers are cautiously watching if Apple will increase prices. "If Apple absorbs their whole memory increase and doesn't change their phone price, then the Android phones become more expensive, and much volume they expect to have is going to be a question," the executive said. Some Apple investors think a price hike is coming.

"Apple generally holds priority over competitors... but is immune to market shortages," said Dan Morgan, portfolio manager at Synovus Trust. "Apple will most likely continue to raise prices on newer iPhone model introductions," Morgan added.

What Samsung does could also influence matters. Analysts believe the South Korean company's phone division may also be able to absorb memory price increases because it sources memory from another Samsung unit. "We're observing Apple and Samsung," said Emarketer analyst Gadjio Sevilla. "If they raise prices, then they raise the ceiling and other manufacturers will likely need to adjust pricing." — Reuters

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GULF TIMES
08-02-2026

OPTICS FIRST. REALITY LATER.



Greenland villagers stay focused on 'normal life' amid stress of US threat

AFP
Sarfannguit, Denmark

Proudly showing off photographs on her tablet of her grandson's first hunt, Dorthe Olsen refuses to let the turmoil sparked by US president Donald Trump take over her life in a small hamlet nestled deep in a Greenland fjord. Sarfannguit, founded in 1843, is located 36km east of Sisimiut, Greenland's second-biggest town, and is accessible by boat in summer and snowmobile or dogsled in winter if the ice freezes.

The settlement has just under 100 residents, most of whom live off from hunting and fishing. On this February day, only the wind broke the deafening silence, whipping across the scattering of small colourful houses. Most of them looked empty. At the end of a gravel road, a few children played outdoors, rosy-cheeked in the bitter cold, one wearing a Spiderman woolly hat.

"Everything is very calm here in Sarfannguit," said Olsen, a 49-year-old teacher, welcoming AFP into her home for coffee and traditional homemade pastries and cakes. In the background, a giant flat screen showed a football match from England's Premier League.

Olsen told AFP of the tears of pride she shed when her grandson killed his first caribou at age 11, preferring to talk about her family than about Trump. The US president has repeatedly threatened to seize the mineral-rich island, an autonomous territory of Denmark.



A man walks past a building with Greenland flags hanging in the windows in downtown Nuuk, Greenland.

alleging that Copenhagen is not doing enough to protect it from Russia and China.

He nevertheless climbed down last month and agreed to negotiations.

Greenland's health and disability minister, Anna Wangenheim, recently advised Greenlanders to spend time with their families and focus on their traditions, as a means of coping with the psychological stress caused by Trump's persistent threats.

The US leader's rhetoric "has impacted a lot of people's emotions during many weeks", Wangenheim told AFP in Nuuk.

Powerless

Olsen insisted that the geopolitical crisis — pitting Nato allies against each other in what is the military alliance's deepest crisis in years — "doesn't really matter".

"I know that Greenlanders can survive this," she said. "I am not worried about what would happen to her and her neighbours if the worst were to happen — a US invasion — especially given her settlement's remote location."

"Of course I worry about those who live in the settlements," she said. "If there's going to be a war and you are on a settlement, of course you feel powerless about that." The only thing to do is go on living as normally as possible, she said, displaying Greenland's spirit of resilience. That's the message she tries to give her students, who get most of their news from TikTok. "We tell them to just live the normal life that we live in the settlement and tell them it's important to do that."

The door opened. It was her husband returning from the day's hunt, a large plastic bag in hand

containing a skinned seal. Olsen cut the liver into small pieces, offering it with bloodstained fingers to friends and family gathered around the table.

"It's my granddaughter's favourite part," she explained. Fishing and hunting account for more than 90 percent of Greenland's exports.

No private property

Back in Sisimiut after a day out seal hunting on his boat, accompanied by AFP, Karl-Jorgen Enoksen stressed the importance of nature and his profession in Greenland. He still can't get over the fact that an ally like the United States could become so hostile towards his country. "It's worrying and I can't believe it's happening. We're just trying to live the way we always have," the 47-year-old said.

The notion of private property is alien to Inuit culture, characterised by communal sharing and a deep connection to the land. "In Greenlandic tradition, our hunting places aren't owned. And when there are other hunters on the land we are hunting on, they can just join the hunt," he explained.

"If the US ever bought us, I can for example imagine that our hunting places would be bought."

"I simply just can't imagine that," he said, recalling that his livelihood is already threatened by climate change. He doesn't want to see his children "inherit a bad nature — nature that we have loved being in — if they are going to buy us."

"That's why it is we who are supposed to take care of OUR land."



The family of teacher Dorthe Olsen watches football at their home at the settlement Sarfannguit, near Sisimiut, Greenland.

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US pressing Ukraine and Russia to end war by June, says Zelensky

AFP

Kyiv

The United States wants Ukraine and Russia to end their nearly four-year war by June, and has offered to host talks between the two sides in Florida next week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said.

US-led efforts to end Europe's deadliest conflict since World War II have stepped up a gear in recent weeks, but Moscow and Kyiv remain at odds over the key issue of territory.

Russia, which occupies around 20 percent of its neighbour, is pushing for full control of Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region as part of any deal and has threatened to take it by force if talks fail.

But Ukraine says ceding ground will embolden Moscow and has signalled it will not sign an agreement that fails to deter Russia from invading again.

"The United States has proposed for the first time that the two negotiating teams – Ukraine and Russia – meet in the United States, probably in Miami, in a week's time," Zelensky told reporters in comments made public early yesterday.

"They say that they want to do everything by June," he added. The US has mediated two rounds of negotiation between the two sides in Abu Dhabi since January, brokering a major prisoner exchange but failing to reach a breakthrough on territory.

Both Moscow and Kyiv say talks have been difficult.

Zelensky has repeatedly expressed frustration that his country is being asked to make disproportionate compromises compared to Russia.

Ukraine has proposed freezing the conflict along the current front lines.

But Russia has rejected this, and Washington has pushed for Kyiv to convert the land it currently controls in the Donetsk region into a "free economic zone" where neither side has military control. "Even if we come to the



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky chairs a meeting with journalists at his office in Kyiv, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (AFP)

creation of a free economic zone, we will need fair and reliable rules," Zelensky said.

The two sides have also failed to reach a "common understanding" on the issue of control over the Russian-occupied ZapORIZHIA nuclear power plant, Zelensky said.

Russian forces seized the plant, the largest in Europe, at the start of the conflict and have held onto it since.

Ukraine will not tolerate Russia and the United States making deals about Ukraine behind its back, Zelensky added.

Throughout the negotiating progress Russia has launched waves of deadly strikes on Ukraine that have cut heating and power to millions during freezing temperatures.

Russian attacks earlier Saturday forced Ukraine's three operating nuclear power plants to throttle their generation capacity,

"creating a direct risk of a nuclear incident", Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiga said.

The UN's atomic energy watchdog issued a statement calling for "restraint".

Russia, which denies targeting civilians, accused Ukraine on Friday of orchestrating the shooting of a top military intelligence general in Moscow, leaving him wounded. Kyiv has yet to comment.

Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, describing it as a "special military operation" to prevent the expansion of Nato, a war aim that Kyiv has called a pretext for an illegal land grab.

The conflict has resulted in a massive wave of destruction that has left entire cities in ruins and killed tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians, while forcing millions to flee their homes.

Frozen



A group of people ice skate on frozen water in central Stockholm, Sweden, yesterday, as cold temperatures grip the capital. Stockholm has not been above 0°C so far in February 2026. (AFP)

Capri limits big groups to tackle the crowds

The Italian island of Capri will this summer ban tourist groups of more than 40 people as it seeks to manage hordes of day-trippers, the ANSA news agency reported yesterday.

Tour guides with groups of more than 20 people will also be required to use wireless headsets instead of loudspeakers, according to new rules approved by the city council.

Guides must also carry a discreet

sign rather than an umbrella or any other potentially unsightly object to identify themselves to their group.

Capri, in the Bay of Naples, is famed for its white villas, cove-studded coastline and upscale hotels. It has around 13,000 permanent residents but attracts huge numbers of day-trippers in summer months, with some estimates suggesting 50,000

people arrive every day. Business association Ascom Confcommercio Capri welcomed the new rules, which follow a cap of 25 on tourist groups introduced in Venice in 2024.

Ascom Capri President Lorenzo Coppola said they were an "essential tool for easing congestion" in popular areas, "restoring proper space to our pedestrian walkways".

A group of climate activists said they were filing another lawsuit against the Swedish state for alleged climate inaction, after the Supreme Court threw out their case last year.

The group behind the lawsuit, Aurora, first tried to sue the Swedish state in late 2022. Sweden's Supreme Court in February 2025 ruled that the complaint filed against the state – brought by an individual, with 300 other people joining it as a class action lawsuit – was inadmissible. The

country from joining an organisation led by a single foreign leader.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, a Trump ally, last month noted "constitutional problems" with joining, but suggested Trump could perhaps reopen the framework "to meet the needs not only of Italy, but also of other European countries".

Tajani appeared yesterday to rule that out.

"We cannot participate in the Board of Peace because there is a constitutional limit," he told the

ANSA news agency.

"This is insurmountable from a legal standpoint," he said, the day after meeting US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and US Vice-President JD Vance at the Olympics in Milan.

Although originally meant to oversee Gaza's rebuilding, the board's charter does not limit its role to the Palestinian territory and appears to want to rival the United Nations.

Key US allies, including France and Britain, have expressed doubts about joining.

Climate activist group files second lawsuit against Sweden

AFP

Stockholm

court at the time noted the "very high requirements for individuals to have the right to bring such a claim" against a state.

"We still have a chance to get out of the planetary crises and build a safe and fair world. But this requires that rich countries that emit as much as Sweden stop breaking the law," Aurora spokesperson Ida Edling said in a statement Friday.

The group, which said the lawsuit had been filed with the Stockholm District Court Friday, said it believes the Swedish state is obliged "to reduce Sweden's emissions as much and as quickly as necessary in order for the

country to be in line with its fair share".

"This means that emissions from several sectors must reach zero before 2030," the group said, while noting this was 15 years before Sweden's currently set targets.

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency as well as the OECD warned last year that Sweden was at risk of not reaching its own goal of net zero emissions by 2045. While the first lawsuit was unsuccessful, the group noted that international courts had made several landmark decisions since the first suit was filed, spotlighting two in particular.

Spain, Portugal face fresh storms, torrential rain

AFP

Ronda

Spain and Portugal yesterday faced fresh storms and torrential rain just days after floods caused by Storm Leonardo proved fatal in both countries and caused significant damage.

In Portugal, the latest depression – christened Storm Marta – has prompted the deployment of more than 26,500 rescuers and led three municipalities to postpone by a week a presidential vote meant to be held today.

The Iberian Peninsula is on the front lines of climate change in Europe. It has been experiencing increasingly prolonged heat waves and more frequent, intense episodes of heavy rainfall for several years.

Both Spain and Portugal have issued warnings over potential fresh floods, after inundations that have blocked hundreds of roads, disrupted trains and forced thousands to evacuate from the rising waters.

In Spain, much of the country's south, particularly the region of Andalusia, was placed on orange alert on Saturday, as was the north-west, which was facing heavy rain and violent storms.

"We have never seen such a series of storms,"

said Andalusia's regional president, Juan Manuel Moreno, describing the situation as "complex" with dozens of roads cut off, rail traffic largely suspended, and a total of "more than 11,000 people" evacuated. He said the farming sector was badly hit, adding it would cost over 500mn euros (\$590mn) to repair roads. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez held a crisis meeting on Saturday, a day after visiting flood-affected areas. Evacuated from Grazalema, one of the hardest-hit municipalities in Andalusia, residents were taken in at a gymnasium in the city of Ronda.

"Yesterday, I was told this would last a long time," said Jesus Ramirez, a 37-year-old resident. "It won't be a week or two – it could be longer."

"There are a lot of children who are suffering," added Nieves de los Santos, a 67-year-old pensioner. Sevilla Football Club announced that its home match against Girona, scheduled for Saturday evening, had been postponed by the authorities to ensure spectator safety.

Portuguese Prime Minister Luis Montenegro meanwhile said 2026 was a "particularly unusual year" with "exceptionally violent" climatic conditions. Several landslides were reported in Portugal but there were no casualties, authorities said. The risk of flooding from the Tagus river in the country's central Santarem region remained at its highest level, authorities said.

They added that, further south, in Alcacer do Sal, the waters of the Sado river had receded to the banks. According to meteorologists, the Storm Marta depression was expected to move north and start pulling away from Portugal by the end of the day, on the eve of the second round of the presidential election.

Portugal had already been reeling from the effects of Storm Kristin, which led to the deaths of five people, injured hundreds and left tens of thousands without power, when Leonardo hit earlier this week. One person died during the passage of Storm Leonardo earlier this week and 1,100 people were evacuated across the country, according to the authorities.

A succession of atmospheric depressions saw Portugal's dams release "a volume of water equivalent to the country's annual consumption" in just three days, said Jose Pimenta Machado, president of the Portuguese Environment Agency (APA), on Friday.

Several hundred miles farther south, Morocco has also been hit by a series of violent storms which have displaced 150,000 people in the northwest of the country in recent days. Scientists say human-driven climate change is increasing the length, intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, such as the floods and heatwaves that have struck both countries in recent years.

Denmark better placed on Greenland with US but 'not out of the crisis': FM

AFP

Nuuk

Denmark's foreign minister said yesterday his country is now in a better position in regards to US President Donald Trump's desire to acquire Greenland – an autonomous Danish territory – but stressed the crisis is not yet resolved.

"We are not out of the crisis, and we do not have a solution yet," Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen told reporters in Greenland's capital Nuuk, while adding: "We are in a much better position now, compared to a few weeks ago."

The minister added that there are no threats on the table, there is no trade war with Europe and that everyone agreed the situation should be worked out in a "normal diplomatic way".

Since returning to the White House last year, Trump has insisted that Washington needs to control the strategic Arctic island for security reasons.

He last month backed off threats to seize Greenland after striking a "framework" deal with Nato chief Mark Rutte to ensure greater US influence.

"So I take it as a clear sign that it should be doable to find a solution while at the same time respecting these red lines," Lokke Rasmussen said, noting that the talks had begun with this precondition stated.



Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Anita Anand (left), Danish Foreign Affairs Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen (centre), and Greenlandic Foreign Affairs Minister Vivian Motzfeldt stand in front of a Canadian icebreaker during a joint press conference in Nuuk, Greenland, yesterday. (AFP)

Italy FM rules out joining Trump's 'Board of Peace'

AFP

Rome

Italy will not take part in US President Donald Trump's "Board of Peace", Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said yesterday, citing "insurmountable" constitutional issues.

Trump launched his "Board of Peace" at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January and some 19 countries have signed its founding charter.

But Italy's constitution bars

the country from joining an organisation led by a single foreign leader.

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The rising Guadalquivir River flows beneath the Roman Bridge in Cordoba, Spain, yesterday. (AFP)



A person strolls at the seashore as waves' foam flies around in Costa da Caparica, Portugal, yesterday. (AFP)



Amir, Qatar delegation witness Winter Olympic Games opening ceremony



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani attended the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games Milano Cortina 2026, in its 25th edition, held at the San Siro Stadium in Milan, Italy. The ceremony was attended by a number of heads of state, government, senior officials, as well as presidents and representatives of Olympic committees from friendly countries. Also in attendance were members of the official delegation accompanying the Amir. The opening ceremony featured a variety of artistic and cultural performances celebrating the launch of the Games, followed by the parade of participating nations' flags and athletic delegations, before the Olympic flame was lit to mark the official opening of the Games. (QNA)

Beckham tours Visit Qatar activation at Art Basel Qatar

David Beckham attended the Art Basel Cafe presented by Visit Qatar activation at the inaugural edition of Art Basel Qatar where Visit Qatar is participating as lead partner. During the engagement, Beckham explored the hospitality-led Visit Qatar activation, designed to connect with collectors, cultural stakeholders, media, and invited guests, while reinforcing Doha's position as a leading global destination for culture and the arts. Reflecting the vibrancy and connectivity of Msheireb Downtown Doha, he reached the activation on a short walk from Visit Qatar's new headquarters, experiencing firsthand the modern atmosphere and sustainable architectural designs that define the area. Themed 'Doorway to Qatar', Beckham viewed designs inspired by traditional Qatari doors, a symbol of welcome and opportunity. The Art Basel Cafe, presented by Visit Qatar, reinterprets these forms as contemporary gateways to discovering, belonging in, and investing in Qatar, translating national identity into a modern, design-led setting.



Msheireb Downtown emerges as top GCC winter destination as it engages 5mn visitors

Msheireb Downtown Doha has wrapped up its winter season as the premier destination for residents and tourists across the GCC, recording 5mn visits since November 2025 until the first week of February.

The district has emerged as a go-to winter hub, presenting a mix of art, culture, sports, family entertainment, and community experiences under the theme "In Msheireb, there is a vibe for everyone."

Residents and international visitors travelled to iconic spaces across the city, including Barahat Msheireb, Sikkat Wadi Msheireb, and Msheireb Museums, to participate in the scheduled activities. This winter, Msheireb Downtown Doha became the destination of choice for GCC residents and international travellers seeking an engaging urban experience. The district's hotels achieved near-full occupancy rates above 95% throughout November, December, and January, with a significant year-on-year increase from 2024 to 2025. This surge was driven by a strong mix of GCC guests and international visitors, confirming Msheireb as one of Qatar's most preferred locations.

Dr Hafiz Ali Abdulla, senior director of Corporate Communication at Msheireb Properties, stated: "The close of this winter season is a key success for Msheireb Downtown Doha. By uniting sport, global artistry, and Qatari hospitality, we have shown that our district is a place where every visitor can find a connection. Our objective was to create a people-centric urban environment that celebrates our local identity. The extraordinary participation from across the GCC and beyond shows that Msheireb is the place to be during the winter months."

The season gained momentum in early December to coincide with the excitement of the Arab Cup 2025. The Baraha Premium Fan Zone and Sikkat Wadi Msheireb served as key hubs for football fans, featuring live match screenings and interactive activations that captured the energy of the tournament through community gatherings.

Families also enjoyed Sahat Al Nakheel during the second year of Sweet Sikka, a dedicated Candy Zone with interactive games, while Barahat Msheireb hosted the fourth edition of Baraha Cinema, offering outdoor screenings under the winter sky.

Mid-December featured city-wide activations for Qatar National Day, with interactive installations, live performances, and cultural experiences celebrating the nation's heritage and unity. In January, the Baraha Musical Concert brought the Al Jazeera Orchestra and Choir to Barahat



Msheireb for a two-day outdoor event, blending symphonic grandeur with a welcoming, community-focused atmosphere.

Msheireb Museums remained a centre for cultural engagement, welcoming over 70,000 visitors from November through early February. Highlights included the Identities of Perfection exhibition by the late Egyptian artist Hazem el-Mestikawy, exploring the balance between architecture and geometry, the Positive Impact Leadership Summit, and a series of educational workshops.

Hosh Msheireb, located in the Company House Courtyard, proved especially popular, offering a boutique glamping experience with cabanas, fire pits, and warm beverages. Its dedicated reading corner became a favourite for families, hosting storytelling and literacy activities throughout January and creating a cozy,

welcoming escape from the city's bustle.

The winter season concluded by hosting Art Basel Qatar, the fair's first edition in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia (MENASA). Presented by Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) and QC+, the event concluded yesterday across M7 and Doha Design District in Msheireb Downtown Doha.

Featuring 87 international exhibitors and 84 artists, more than half from the MENASA region, the fair highlighted solo artist presentations in an open layout, providing an innovative way to experience contemporary art.

By hosting this landmark event, Msheireb Downtown Doha successfully bridged regional tradition and global contemporary art, closing the winter season as a leading creative and cultural destination in the Middle East.

Calling all fitness enthusiasts at MOVE fest



MOVE, Old Doha Port's six-day sports and wellness festival, invited visitors to explore expert-led panels, interactive fitness zones, and a diverse lineup of sports and wellness experiences at Mina Park. Day two featured the Erada Ladies' Throwdown Competition 2026, in addition to a series of fitness classes, including mobility-focused workouts and women's fitness classes delivered by A13 Academy and Matrix Gym, with guided sessions designed to support flexibility, strength, and recovery for participants of all fitness levels. A key highlight of the day was the panel discussion, 'Wellness, Recovery & Smart Performance.'

The Future of Athletic Excellence', which explored the link between recovery, the usage of smart devices like WHOOP, and the importance of a personalised nutrition plan. The discussion featured Director of WHOOP Qatar, Reem al-Muftah, Assistant Secretary-General of the Qatar Cycling Triathlon Federation and Vice-President of the Arab Cycling Federation for 2025, Fatma al-Ghanim, and Clinical Dietitian at Clinica Joelle Qatar, Farah Istateya. Across the festival, visitors explored immersive zones showcasing sportswear, equipment, and marine sports, alongside a range of family-friendly activities. (QNA)

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Art Basel Qatar marks global breakthrough for regional artists

By Amjad Vanimal
Doha

The hosting of Art Basel in Qatar marks a defining moment for the country and the wider Middle East, positioning regional artists and cultural ecosystems firmly on the global art map, according to Dr Alia al-Senussi, Art Basel's senior adviser for International Outreach and VIP representative for the UK and Mena.

Speaking to *Gulf Times* on the sidelines of Art Basel Qatar, al-Senussi said the partnership between Art Basel and Qatar represents far more than the launch of a new fair, describing it as a transformative cultural platform. "Art Basel is the world's leading brand within the cultural ecosystem. To see these conversations happening here, with artists present in person and collectors engaging directly with them, is deeply impactful for how artists from the region are perceived globally," she said.

She noted that the strong presence of

artists from across the Arab world and Africa, alongside international collectors, curators, and institutions, has already begun to reshape perceptions. Many visitors, she said, described the fair as an eye-opening experience, gaining insights into their home institutions and programmes.

"I hope that in the coming years we will see more artists from this region represented in international museums and institutions around the world," she noted.

Comparing Art Basel Qatar with other global editions such as Miami Beach and Hong Kong, al-Senussi said the Qatar edition stood out for its emotional and cultural significance. A Libyan by heritage, she expressed pride in seeing artists from Libya, Qatar, Palestine, and across the Arab world receiving meaningful international engagement.

"I've been overwhelmed with joy seeing people from the West come here and truly learn about artists from our region," she said, adding that the growing cultural dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Qa-



Dr Alia al-Senussi, Art Basel's senior adviser for International Outreach and VIP representative for the UK and Mena.

tar has been particularly inspiring. She pointed to her work with the Diriyah Bi-

ennale Foundation as an example of how regional collaboration is shaping a powerful cultural moment.

Reflecting on her roles with institutions such as Tate, the Guggenheim, and the Delfina Foundation, al-Senussi said global institutions that began engaging seriously with the Middle East have continued to deepen those commitments. She highlighted Tate's early establishment of international acquisition committees and the creation of the Guggenheim Middle East Council as vital platforms supporting artists and galleries from the region.

Addressing the challenges faced by young Middle Eastern artists seeking global access, al-Senussi pointed to communication barriers and the intimidation often associated with the art world. "It's not about English or Arabic. It's about understanding how the art world works and making it more accessible and more human," she said.

Turning to Qatar's local scene, she praised the country's growing residency ecosystem, including programmes such as Fire Station, saying they are laying the

foundation for a new generation of Qatari artists. "These initiatives are creating an ecosystem that will educate, support, and elevate artists for years to come," she said.

On education, al-Senussi highlighted Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar as a strong example of bridging theory and practice. Drawing on her teaching experience there, she stressed the importance of demystifying the art world and expanding career pathways beyond artistic practice to include curators, gallerists, collectors, and cultural leaders.

Looking ahead, she said success for Art Basel Qatar should be measured not only by attendance or market impact, but by the emergence of a strong regional collector base. "We've always had extraordinary artists. What we need now is the next generation of Arab collectors who are active in Basel, Miami, and across the global art market. Seeing Middle Eastern collectors become part of the international art canon would mark a major milestone for the region's cultural future," al-Senussi concluded.