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Finland President Alexander Stubb met yesterday with Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani, on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference. The meeting dealt with discussing bilateral co-operation relations between the two countries and ways to support and strengthen them. The meeting also dealt with the latest regional and international developments, in addition to topics of common interest. (QNA)

He pointed out that one of the challenges posed by AI technologies is cybersecurity, stressing Karwa's commitment to safely transporting passengers while protecting their data. He also highlighted AI's strong predictive and analytical capabilities, which enhance operational efficiency and service quality. He noted that the company's fleet maintains advanced levels of development and safety, alongside efforts to improve drivers' professional and health standards to ensure passenger safety and protect vehicles from potential cyber threats.



Sheikha Alya meets senior UN official



HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani met yesterday with UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) Jorge Moreira da Silva, at the Permanent Mission's seat in New York. The meeting dealt with co-operation between Qatar and UNOPS and ways to enhance it. - **QNA**

King of Bhutan receives credentials of Qatar's envoy



Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck has received the credentials of Mohammed bin Hassan Jaber al-Jaber as Qatar's ambassador (non-resident) extraordinary plenipotentiary to Bhutan.

The ambassador conveyed the greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to the king, as

well as His Highness the Amir's wishes of good health and happiness for King Jigme, and for the government and people of Bhutan continued progress and prosperity.

The Bhutanese king in turn entrusted the ambassador with his greetings to His Highness the Amir, wishing him good health and happiness, and Qatar contin-

ued development and growth.

Earlier the chief of protocol at the Bhutan's ministry of foreign affairs, Ugen Chozom, received a copy of the credentials from al-Jaber.

The presentation of a copy of credentials is a formal diplomatic step that precedes the ambassador's official accreditation ceremony. - **QNA**

UDST shows innovations at AgriteQ

The University of Doha for Science and Technology (UDST) is participating in leading agriculture exhibition AgriteQ 2026, showcasing a range of applied research projects and functional prototypes that support sustainable agriculture, food security, and smart farming practices in Qatar.

During the exhibition, the UDST presented advanced agricultural prototypes developed by faculty members, researchers, and students, demonstrating practical solutions to challenges related to water efficiency, climate resilience, soil health, and agricultural productivity.

The showcased innovations reflect the university's applied approach to education, where research and learning are closely aligned with real-world industry needs.

Among the exhibited prototypes were smart irrigation and monitoring systems, artificial intelligence (AI) and IoT (Internet of Things)-enabled agricultural technologies, sustainable soil and biomass solutions, and data-driven tools designed to optimise resource utilisation.

The exhibition also provided a platform to announce the launch of new bachelor's and diploma programmes in Animal Health and Veterinary Sciences, introduced to meet the growing demand for skilled professionals in animal health and sustainable livestock production.

"Agriculture is a priority for Qatar, and applied innovation plays a critical role in food security and sustainable production," said UDST president Dr Salem al-Naemi. "Through our participation and the prototypes showcased, we demonstrate how applied education and research at the UDST translate into practical solutions."



NPC holds programme for govt leaders

The National Planning Council (NPC) has organised an intensive executive programme for government leaders titled "Strategic Foresight as a Decision-Making Tool in Environments of Uncertainty".

The program is part of the NPC's efforts to enhance the skills of leaders in addressing rapidly evolving challenges in today's dynamic work environments.

A statement from the council said that the programme on February 11-12 brought together assistant undersecretaries from ministries and chief executives from the private sector, providing an interactive platform for sharing experiences and insights on global best practices in strategic foresight, risk management and decision-making.

"This intensive programme reflects the Council's commitment to enhancing foresight capabilities of

leaders across ministries, government entities and the private sector, supporting decision-making grounded in a deeper understanding of future trends," said Bas-sam Issa al-Mannai, the assistant secretary-general for the NPC's Centre for Future Foresight and National Visions. "Developing foresight skills is a cornerstone of the broader development agenda, enabling organisations to navigate complexities and challenges while turning them into opportunities for progress."

The programme covered practical modules, including the use of strategic foresight as a decision-support tool, the adoption of systemic thinking methodologies in planning and governance, and the review of models and case studies from leading global organisations.

It also contributed to the design of future learning programmes in Arabic to meet the evolving needs of government entities. - **QNA**



Minister meets UN, German officials



HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad met yesterday with United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict Vanessa Fraser on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference.

The meeting discussed bilateral co-operation and ways to support and develop it, particularly in the areas of international and institutional support to enhance the protection of children in areas of armed conflict.

HE al-Misnad separately met yesterday with State Secretary in the German Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation Niels Annen.



Discussions during the meeting dealt with co-operation, relations and ways to support and develop them. - **QNA**

Online auction by Public Prosecution

An online auction of assets is set to be organised by the Public Prosecution, in co-operation with the Supreme Judicial Council, through the Courts Auctions application, on February 18, from 4pm-7pm. The items on display include men and women's branded luxury bags.

Visit Qatar launches its Ramadan campaign

Visit Qatar has launched its Ramadan 2026 campaign under the slogan *Qatar, Your Home in Ramadan*, targeting local and regional audiences, and international visitors.

Building on the reach achieved during last year's campaign, the initiative highlights Ramadan values, including hospitality, generosity and togetherness, showcasing Qatar as a welcoming home for all during the Holy Month.

The campaign also includes a new artistic component, featuring the Qatari singer Fahad al-Hajjaji with an English-language segment performed by international artist Maher Zain. - **QNA**

National Paints Qatar hosting annual dealers gathering tomorrow

The National Paints Factories Company - Qatar has announced that its annual dealers gathering will be held tomorrow (February 15) at 6pm at the Giwana Hall of the Radisson Blu Hotel Doha.

The announcement was made during a press conference organised by the company on February 4 at the same venue.

The event was attended by deputy general managers Mohammed bin Saleh al-Khalifi and Ahmed bin Saleh al-Khalifi, represent-



ing Saleh bin Ahmed al-Khalifi, along with members of the administrative team and representatives of local print, television and radio media.

Sales and marketing manager John Abraham opened the press conference with welcoming remarks and an overview of the company's on-going initiatives.

Addressing the media, Mohammed bin Saleh al-Khalifi said that the annual dealers gathering will recognise outstanding custom-

ers for their performance in 2025, with awards to be presented in appreciation of their contribution and continued partnership.

He added that the gathering will also provide an opportunity to outline the company's vision for 2026 and showcase new developments and products in development.

These updates will be presented by the company's technical team.

The programme will conclude with a dinner in honour of invited guests.

Aston University, Al Jazeera Media Institute sign MoU

Aston University and the Al Jazeera Media Institute have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) establishing a distinctive partnership aimed at advancing forward-looking digital media education.

The Master's in Digital Media and Communication is set to be launched in September this year and aims to empower current media professionals and those aspiring to enter communication careers.

It also seeks to tackle the challenges and opportunities posed by rapid digital transformation.

The programme will prepare students for emerging careers in communication, including data journalism, content creation, and digital leadership, within a rapidly evolving global professional environment, and will offer the opportunity for those with existing industry experience to keep pace with change.

The online study model allows professionals from different



Prof Helen Wood with Eman al-Amri.

countries to pursue postgraduate studies without geographical constraints.

It ensures a strong practical dimension and offers unique opportunities for in-person additional training in Doha at the world-leading professional Media

Institute of the Al Jazeera Network.

The director of the MSc in Digital Media and Communications at Aston University, Prof Helen Wood, said: "This exciting new partnership is incredibly important for Aston University as it signals our intent to build a bridge be-

tween world-leading research and the outstanding professional practice that can be found at Al Jazeera Media Institute."

"Our partnership aims to generate critical, ethical and forward-thinking media leaders of the future capable of working across a range of global media and communication industries," she said.

"This is an incredibly exciting partnership that will enable the institute to develop advanced digital master's pathways in partnership with Aston University, combining the strength of internationally recognised academic curricula with our Institute's extensive professional expertise," said Al Jazeera Media Institute director Eman al-Amri.

This strategic partnership includes the development of additional degree courses to be delivered between Doha and the United Kingdom, as well as potential research exchanges and programmes to set the agenda for the future of critical digital media professional practice.

DI's History Programme hosts third student conference

The History Programme at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (DI) has organised its third student conference, titled "Memory, Identity, and Narrative in the Transformations of Historical Writing".

The conference witnessed wide participation from graduate students, alumni, and young researchers from the History Programme, as well as from related academic disciplines.

In his opening remarks, History Programme head Dr Issam Nassar (**pictured**) emphasised that the conference serves as an annual platform for presenting and discussing student research projects within a critical academic environment.

This, he said, contributes to refining their methodological skills and to enhancing their engagement in theoretical discussions of memory, identity, and historical narratives.

The conference activities extended throughout the day, comprising four research sessions

that collectively reflected a rich body of knowledge and a clear diversity of methodological approaches and geographical perspectives in the study of history.

The first session addressed issues in the history of knowledge, archival writing practices, travel literature, and medical history in colonial contexts.

It included research papers on the construction of truth in the records of Ottoman Sharia courts, a comparative reading of Persian travel narratives, and a study of the intersections of medicine and colonialism in Morocco.

The second session focused on urban memory and the challenges of state-building and local identity.

Papers addressed the formation of place memory in Old Sana'a, the challenges of the emergence of the modern state in Sudan, and the manifestations of shared identity in Oman.

In the third session, discussions focused on the intellectual



and cultural history of Palestine and its intercultural relations.

These discussions included studies examining biblical geography and Protestant Orientalism in Palestine, the Russian Orthodox role in the Holy Land, and an analytical reading of 19th-century Chinese travel literature that challenged other narratives.

The conference concluded with a fourth session that addressed topics in Mediterranean and African history.

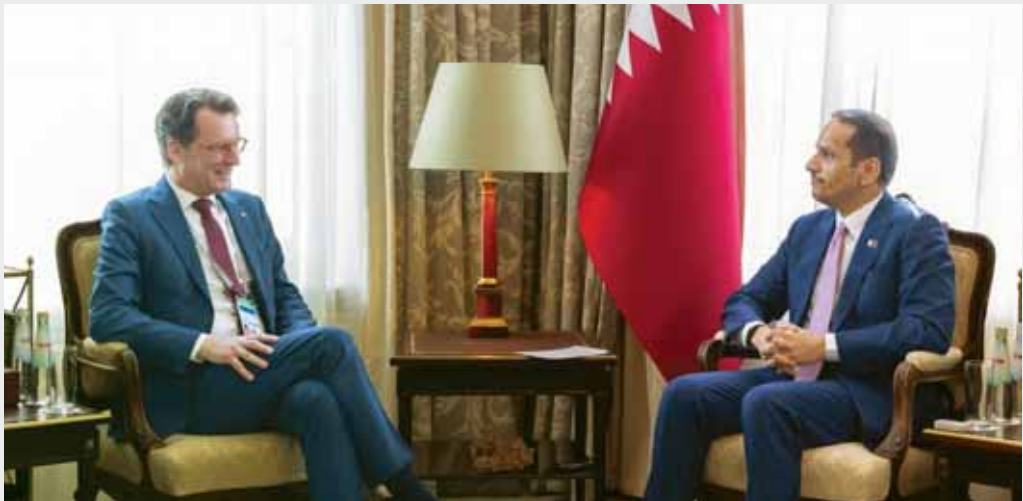
This included deconstructing conflicting narratives surrounding maritime activity in the western Mediterranean during the modern era, examining the epistemological conflict between colonial and local writings in Nigerian historiography, and analysing the impact of indirect rule on the social and political structure of contemporary Nigeria.

PM meets president of Kurdistan region



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met yesterday with President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Nechirvan Barzani, on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference. The meeting dealt with discussing bilateral co-operation and the means to enhance it, in addition to several issues of joint interest. **(QNA)**

PM meets minister-president of State of North Rhine-Westphalia of Germany



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met yesterday with Minister-President of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia of the Federal Republic of Germany, Hendrik Wüst, on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference. During the meeting, they discussed co-operation relations and ways to support and develop them, in addition to a number of topics of mutual interest. **(QNA)**

PM meets several officials on the sidelines of Munich Security Conference



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani yesterday held a series of bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference. HE the Prime Minister met, separately, with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, David van Wel; Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Co-operation of the Kingdom of Spain, Jose Manuel Alvarez; Minister of Foreign Affairs of

Canada, Anita Anand; Minister of Foreign Affairs of the French Republic, Jean-Noel Barault; United States Senator, Lindsey Graham; several members of the US Congress; member of the Gaza Strip Executive Council, Nikolay Mladenov; and Chairman of the Munich Security Conference, Wolfgang Ischinger. Discussions during the meetings, dealt with co-operation relations and the latest regional and international developments, in addition to a host of topics of mutual interest. **(QNA)**



HBKU to launch new masters programme in comparative education

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU), a member of Qatar Foundation, will be launching a new masters programme in comparative education from next semester.

"We are getting into comparative education. We are launching a new master's programme in comparative education. The programme will be launched from next academic semester," Dr Prabhat Hajela, Provost at HBKU, told the media on the sidelines of a workshop organised by the university highlighting data story telling in progressive education. The MA in Comparative Education is an innovative interdisciplinary programme that synthesises Islamic, African, Eastern, indigenous, and Western educational traditions.

"We are bringing in our first cohort of students in that programme. It supports graduates in emerging as innovative educators and leaders, capable of designing ethical, impactful solutions for pressing educational needs and driving meaningful reform at local and global levels," explained Dr Hajela.

The new programme is rooted in a unique multiplex comparative framework. It is designed to equip students with the skills to address complex educational challenges across diverse sociopolitical and cultural contexts, including Qatar. Combining rigorous coursework, internships, and a research-based thesis, the programme fosters ethical leadership, cultural relevance, and empirical research. The MA in Comparative Education programme aims to develop educational professionals, educators, researchers, and leaders capable of analysing and



synthesising aspects of theories and practices from diverse educational frameworks.

The multiplex comparative approach of the programme is designed to align with specific national contexts that students wish to specialise in, acknowledging the significant influence of Islam on cultural and societal norms. It allows students to study education from a perspective that considers Islamic heritage, global influences, and local contexts.

Applicants seeking admission to the programme should have a bachelor's degree in Islamic studies, education, sociology, psychology, teacher training, or a related field, with a strong academic record (minimum 3.0 GPA out of 4.0) from a recognised institution. They should also have a minimum score of 3.0 GPA out of 4.0

Applicants with bachelor's degrees in areas of study that are not related to the subjects, must demonstrate that they have completed post-bachelor's coursework in education such as a diploma or certificate to indicate their foundational knowledge. It is a 36-credit degree programme taught over two years in English that includes topics such as comparative Theories and Methods in Education; Islamic Educational Philosophies and Practices in Child Education; Child Development, Pedagogy, and Culture; Educational Research Methodologies; Educational Research Methodologies; Comparative Ethics in Educational Processes and Advanced Comparative Theories and Methods in Education.

SABZAMC wraps up second Arabic language course for non-native speakers

The Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs has honoured an elite group of teachers at the Islamic Science University, operating under the United Ulama Council of South Africa (UUCSA), to mark the conclusion of the second Arabic language course and deepen knowledges in Islamic sciences. Organised by Sheikh Abdullah bin Zaid Al Mahmoud Islamic Cultural Centre (SABZAMC), the month-long course drew the participation of 15 teachers.

The event was staged in an official ceremony attended by HE Undersecretary of Awqaf Sheikh Dr Khalid bin Mohammed bin Ghanem al-Thani and ambassador of the Republic of South Africa to the State of Qatar Ghulam Hussain Ismail, alongside a variety of officials and guests.

At the closing ceremony, Sheikh Dr Khalid underscored that Awqaf is committed to supporting professional scientific and educational programs that contribute to spreading the Arabic language and promoting it among non-native speakers, as well as deepening knowledge in Islamic sciences to embody the message of Islam, which is grounded in moderation, openness, and dialogue, thereby strengthening values of civilisational understanding and people-to-people connections.

The ministry highly prioritises the undertaking of its scientific and Dawah role on the global stage, through staging professional courses and attracting scientific delegations from various countries of the world, something that helps communicate the bright image of Arab



and Islamic culture, Sheikh Dr Khalid underlined.

Assistant Director of SABZAMC, Sultan Saad al-Badr, clarified that the course was part of the centres constant efforts to teach the Arabic language to non-native speakers and boost its stature as a pioneering institution in this domain.

Since its inception, the centre has been organising scientific courses, receiving both scientific and cultural delegates, as well as forging effective partnerships with scientific institutions worldwide, al-Badr highlighted.

Al-Badr further indicated that the scientific programme included 130-hour extensive training in educating non-native speakers in Arabic language through the "Road to Arabic" curriculum series, invoking an approved scientific approach, in addition to professional lessons and lectures in Shariah sciences overseen by a contingent of teachers and scholars.

The course was not confined to academic aspects but went beyond to include cultural programmes, panel discussions, and activities to familiarise non-native speakers with Arab and Qatari culture, coupled with field visits to cultural and

heritage landmarks, which ultimately helped enhance civilisational communication for participants and consolidate values of understanding and openness, leaving a positive impression about the efforts of both the Ministry and the Center, al-Badr added.

For his part, Mufti Yusuf Bhamjee, representative of the University of Islamic Sciences of South Africa's Darul Ifta, asserted that he was profoundly grateful to Awqaf and SABZAMC for the incredible care and attention the course had received, emphasising that the programme constituted a bountiful scientific and educational experience that helped advance the participants' linguistic and educational skills.

He noted that the programme further enhanced their capabilities of teaching the Arabic language, disseminating it among South African communities, and imparting the knowledge and expertise they had internalised to their students and educational institutions.

This initiative further underscores the nation's commitment to supporting education and building cultural and scientific communications with wide-ranging countries around the world. **(QNA)**



Expatriate releases short story collection *Pathi 3 Kathakal*

Debut publication of Gulf Times staffer Niyas TM

A short story collection *Pathi 3 Kathakal* (13 Stories) by expatriate writer T M Niyas was launched recently at a function attended by prominent personalities from various fields.

The book was formally released by Dr K C Sabu, president of Qatar India Authors Forum (QIAF) and the first copy was received by R S Abdul Jaleel, president of the Centre for Indian Community.

The event, held at Aroma Restaurant, was presided by QIAF chairman Hussein Kadannamma. The inaugural address was delivered by Habib Rahman Kizhissery, director of Friends

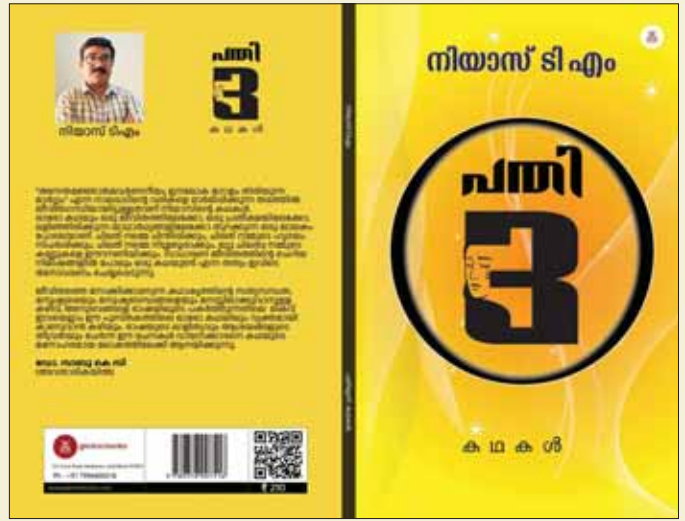


Cultural Centre. Writer Jayan Madikkai introduced the book to the audience.

Speakers at the function de-

scribed Niyas's stories as deeply engaging and richly infused with the fragrance of real life, capable of evoking curiosity and

reflection among readers. Niyas, who works as a designer at *Gulf Times*, has previously won accolades in literary competi-



tions held in Qatar and across the GCC.

The collection *Pathi 3 Kathakal* comprises of 13 selected short stories written by the author and marks his debut publication.

The book is published by Genius Books, based in Kozhikode.

Writers Amal Fermis, Thanseem Kuttyadi, E K Das and Ab-

bas OM, along with social worker Basheer Ahmed, Genius Books director Basheer Thoovarekkal, and artist Muthu ICRG extended their felicitations. K M Shafi recited a poem at the function.

The event was emceed by writer and actor Binu John. *Pathi 3 Kathakal* is now available on Flipkart and through Genius Books' online platform.

DPS-MIS hosts 'Poetry Under the Stars' event



DPS Modern Indian School (DPS-MIS) hosted an enchanting literary evening titled "Poetry Under the Stars" recently.

True to its tagline, "Recite, Relax, Stargaze," the event offered a refreshing blend of poetry and shared experience beneath the open sky. The programme was graced by chief guest, Sreedharan Kunniramath, director

of DPS Modern Indian School, along with principal Asna Nafees, the vice principals, and the headmistress. Students, parents and teachers gathered in a warm campfire setting. Students recited poems in English and other languages, captivating the audience.

Interactive games encouraged lively participation from both students and parents, while a

stargazing session emerged as a highlight. Parents and teachers commended the initiative, praising the school's commitment to nurturing creativity beyond the classroom.



Mesis marks National Sport Day with zeal

MES Indian School, Abu Hamour branch (Mesis), celebrated Qatar National Sport Day with great enthusiasm, transforming the campus into a hub of energy, creativity and teamwork.

The event highlighted the importance of physical fitness and healthy living, echoing the national vision of integrating sports into everyday life.

The celebrations began with a colourful opening display, followed by rhythmic performances that set an energetic mood for the day. A disciplined march followed.

Beyond physical activities, the programme also encouraged creativity and awareness.

Students expressed their thoughts through art, posters, presentations, and written reflections, all centred on the theme of sports and well-being. A special moment of the day was the prize distribution ceremony, where stu-



dents were acknowledged for their enthusiastic participation and effort by the principal, Pramila Kannan.

The event was co-ordinated by the Physical Education Department with the support of teaching staff.

NIARC wins award for special needs support



On the occasion of Eenam Doha's 20th anniversary celebration, the Nest International Academy and Research Centre (NIARC) was honoured with the Eenam Doha-Empowering Lives Award, in recognition of its compassion, dedication, and unwavering support for children with special needs and their families. The award was received by Shanahas Edodi, chairman of the NIARC Qatar chapter, in the presence of Ashraf KP, NIARC Global chairman; Fareed Thikkodi, president of Eenam Doha; Mustafa Eenam, general secretary; Jafar Munafar, general secretary; Rasik Mansoor, 121 Media; Ashique Mahe and Nishad Qube. The celebration was held at Inspire Hall, Doha, and was enlivened by a vibrant musical performance by Nachu Calicut, adding colour and joy to the memorable occasion.

MES staffer shines for Kerala in handball tourney

MES Indian School, Doha, Qatar announced that Mohamed Navas, a dedicated Physical Education staff member of the school, represented the Kerala team in the 8th National Master Games Handball Championship held at Pimpri-Chinchwad, Pune, Maharashtra, in January.

Competing in the 35+ men's category, Navas, with his skill and strategic play delivered an outstanding and commendable performance throughout the tournament, thus enabling the Kerala team secure the First Runner-Up position at the



national level. Dr Hameeda Kadar, the school principal, extended her heartfelt congratulations

to Navas on his remarkable accomplishment, his hard work and exemplary sportsmanship.



ISC organises vibrant National Sport Day celebration

The Indian Sports Centre (ISC) organised a wide range of sporting events to mark Qatar National Sport Day (NSD) at Asian Town, featuring sports and recreational activities of different regions of India.

NSD festivities were held in co-operation with Ibn Ajayan Projects and ISC-affiliated organisations. The programme included com-

petitions for men's and women's teams such as tug-of-war, arm wrestling, and kho-kho.

Demonstrations of traditional and modern disciplines, including Silambam, Karate, Kalaripayattu, and Zumba, offered a unique experience for sports enthusiasts.

Sports stalls were set up by various organisations, along

with activities such as sports quiz, cricket bowling, fitness challenge, football activations.

The ISC Sports Day was organised in collaboration with sports organisations, including the Qatar Indian Association, Vazhakkad Association, Tamil Youth Sports Club, Telugu Sports Association, Qatar Tamil Traditional Sports, Expat

Sportev, Aarise Sports, Absolute Sports Academy, MES Alumni Sports Festival, Punjab Sports Club, QITWA, Indo-Qat, Lagaan Cricket Club, Qatar Carrom Association and the Choorakkodi Kalari Sangam Veliappilly.

Winners of the competitions were awarded trophies and medals by Harish Pandey, first secretary of the Embassy of India in

Qatar and ISC co-ordinating officer. The event was presided by ISC president E P Abdurahman. Vice president Sithendu Pal delivered the welcome address and secretary Basheer Thuvarekkal proposed the vote of thanks. Officials and management committee members led the event.

Distinguished guests included ICC president A P Manikantan,

IBPC president Thaha Mohamed, ISC Advisory chairman Dr Abdul Samad, advisory board member Subrahmanya Hebba-gelu, former president Neelam Shunde, P N Babu Rajan, K S Prasad, Dipak Shetty, Abraham K Joseph, K V Boban, Pradeep Pillai and several office-bearers and leaders from various apex bodies.



Friendship Cricket Club hosts thrilling matches on Nat’l Sport Day

As part of the Qatar National Sport Day (NSD) 2026 celebrations, the Friendship Cricket Club, Qatar, organised a cricket tournament, with the final two matches played at a venue in Wakra.

The founding president of Bangladesh Community Qatar, Eng Anwar Hossen Akon, was the chief guest. Shahjahan Shaju, Eng Abdul Matin and Noor Mohammed were special guests. Mohammed Arshad presided over the prize distribution ceremony, and officials of the Friendship Cricket Club were also in attendance.

In their remarks, the speakers highlighted the broader significance of NSD, emphasising that the initiative is not aimed at producing professional athletes but at improving public health by encouraging

people of all ages to engage in physical activity and appreciate the long-term benefits of fitness.

The chief guest said that Qatar’s NSD is not a one-day celebration of sport, but a policy-driven reminder.

In the latest matches, FCC Thunders narrowly defeated FCC Warriors by one wicket, chasing down 149 runs in 14.3 overs after the Warriors posted 147 runs in 16 overs. Shahedul Alam was named ‘man of the match’ for his outstanding performance.

In the second encounter, FCC Super Star edged past FCC Kings by a single wicket, reaching 270 runs in 14.5 overs after FCC Kings had scored 269 runs in 16 overs. Md Arafath earned the ‘man of the match’ award for his contribution.

UN defends expert on Palestinian rights after European criticism

Reuters
Geneva

A UN human rights spokesperson expressed concern yesterday about attacks on independent UN experts after several European governments criticised the organisation’s special rapporteur for Palestine, Francesca Albanese, and called for her resignation.

This follows condemnation from Germany, France and Italy this week of Albanese’s alleged criticism of Israel. Albanese, an Italian lawyer, denies making the remarks.

“We are very worried. We are concerned that UN officials, independent experts and judicial officials, are increasingly subjected to personal attacks, threats and misinformation that distracts from the serious human rights issues,” UN human rights office spokesperson Marta Hurtado told a press briefing when asked about the criticism.

UN experts are commissioned by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to monitor and document specific human rights crises but are independent of the organisation itself.

Yesterday, the Czech Republic’s Foreign Minister Petr Macinka quoted Albanese on X as having called Israel a “common enemy of humanity”, and he also called for her resignation.



File photo of UN Special Rapporteur for Palestine Francesca Albanese.

A transcript of Albanese’s remarks made on February 7 seen by Reuters did not characterise Israel in this way, although she has consistently criticised the country in the past over the Gaza conflict.

German Foreign Minister Johann Wadepuhl said on Thursday that Albanese’s position was “untenable”, while French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot accused her of making “outrageous and reprehensible remarks” against Israel.

Albanese said in overnight remarks on X: “Three European governments accuse me – based on statements I never made – with a virulence and conviction that they have never used against those who have slaughtered 20,000+ children in 858 days.”

She was citing figures from the Palestinian Health Ministry,

which puts the total death toll from the Gaza war at more than 72,000.

US President Donald Trump’s administration imposed sanctions on Albanese after she wrote letters to US companies accusing them of contributing to gross human rights violations by Israel in Gaza and the West Bank.

Albanese, whose term expires in 2028, is due to speak at the Rights Council in Geneva next month on Palestinian rights.

There is no precedent for removing a special rapporteur during their term, although diplomats said that states on the 47-member council could in theory propose a motion to do so.

However, they said strong support for Palestinian rights within the body means that such a motion was unlikely to pass.

Jailed Palestinian leader Barghouti’s writings to be collected in new book

AFP
Ramallah

Writings and correspondence from jailed Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti will be collected in a new book due out later this year, with his family expressing hope yesterday that it would give a new audience insight into his mindset.

Unbroken: In Pursuit of Freedom for Palestine will be published in November and feature “private letters to his family, letters to public figures, press interviews, public statements, important historical documents” and personal photos, according to publisher Penguin Random House’s Vintage division.

It will also include excerpts from his previous book, 2011’s *1000 Days in Solitary Confinement*, which was previously only available in Arabic, Vintage said.

Sometimes called the “Mandela of Palestine” by his supporters, Marwan Barghouti, 66, was one of the leaders of the second Intifada, the Palestinian uprising in the early 2000s, and is often cited as a possible successor to Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas.

In June 2004, an Israeli court sentenced him to five life sen-

tences after finding him guilty of involvement in four attacks.

“We just want to raise the awareness about who he is, why is he important for the Palestinian cause,” Arab Barghouti, who lives in the occupied West Bank, told AFP. “These are his writings so everyone can have access to them.”

He added that his mother Fadwa, who has campaigned for her husband’s release over the years and wrote the book’s introduction, also hoped the publication would broaden the reach of Marwan Barghouti’s thoughts.

“She really wishes that people can hear from him and see what he thinks and see his writings, especially his grandchildren,” Arab said.

The book’s publication will come roughly a year after his family and supporters launched a new campaign to secure Barghouti’s release, after his imprisonment caught US President Donald Trump’s attention.

In an interview with *Time* magazine in October 2025 – shortly after a US-brokered ceasefire went into effect in Gaza – Trump was asked if he thought Barghouti, as a potentially unifying Palestinian leader, should be released from prison.

Area 15 Toastmasters holds annual contests

The Area 15 Annual Speech Contests (2025–26) of Division D, District 116, were conducted with great enthusiasm at Barwa Madinatna, recently.

The event brought together Toastmasters from across the Area for an evening of inspiring speeches, sharp evaluations, and spirited competition.

It was held under the leadership of Area 15 director Remi Raji and co-ordinated by contest manager Manju Nair.

The event featured four categories – Humorous Speech, Evaluation, Table Topics, and International Speech – each highlighting different dimensions of communication and leadership excellence. In the Humorous Speech Contest, Midhila Grace Zacharia clinched first place, followed by Shanu Tiwari

in second place and Ajinas Arangatt in third place.

The Evaluation Contest saw Hamdoon Nizar emerge as the first-place winner, with Midhila Grace Zacharia securing second place and Yahkoob Kariyamthodi finishing third. Quick thinking and spontaneity defined the Table Topics Contest, where Yahkoob Kariyamthodi won first place, Esther Mwale secured second place, and S V Meghana placed third.

In the International Speech Contest, Midhila Grace Zacharia once again impressed, to take first place. Hamdoon Nizar finished second, while Yahkoob Kariyamthodi earned third place. The first and second place winners in all categories will now advance to represent Area 15 at the Division D Toastmasters Annual Conference scheduled on April 17.



Main donor US unclear on UNRWA future: agency chief

Reuters
Munich

The United States is still not clear about how it sees the future role of the UN Palestinian refugee agency, its chief said yesterday, warning that jettisoning it would create a black hole similar to Iraq after 2003.

US President Donald Trump’s administration has accused UNRWA staff of having links with Palestinian Hamas group, allegations UNRWA has vigorously disputed. Washington was long UNRWA’s biggest donor, but froze funding in January 2024 after Israel accused about a dozen UNRWA staff of taking part

in the deadly Oct 2023 Hamas storming of Israel.

“There is no definitive answer, because the interest of the US is also to be successful in this process and if you get rid of an agency like ours before you have an alternative, you are also creating a huge black hole,” UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini told Reuters on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference.

“Remember what happened in Iraq in 2003 when the entire administration had been dismantled (following the US-led invasion). There was no alternative and people were left without any services,” he said in an interview. UNRWA

has functioned for decades as the main international agency providing for the welfare of millions of Palestinian descendants of those who fled or were driven from homes during the war around Israel’s 1948 founding.

Lazzarini, who leaves his post at the end of March, said UNRWA did not foresee any more cuts in the immediate term and it continued to offer public health and education services that no one else was really providing.

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

Palestinian support gathering



Women in solidarity with Palestinians take part in a protest, outside the Palestinian embassy, against Israel in Jakarta, Indonesia, yesterday.

Floods wreak havoc in Morocco farmlands after severe drought

AFP
Kenitra

In the Moroccan village of Ouled Salama, 63-year-old farmer Mohamed Reouani waded through his crops, now submerged by floodwaters after days of heavy downpours.

Farmers in the North African kingdom have for the past few years endured severe drought.

But floods have now swamped more than 100,000 hectares of land, wiping out key crops and forcing farmers in the country’s northwest to flee with their livestock. “I have about four or five hectares” of crops, Reouani said. “All of it is gone now.”

“Still, praise be to God for this blessing,” he added while looking around at the water.

Morocco, where agriculture employs about a third of the working-age population, has seen seven consecutive years of drought.

As of December, its dams were only around 30% full on average, and farmers have largely relied on rainwater for irrigation.

Now their average filling rate stands at nearly 70% after they received about 8.8bn cubic metres of water in the last month – compared to just 9bn over the previous two years combined.

Many like Reouani had at first rejoiced at the downpours.

But the rain eventually swelled into a heavy storm that displaced over 180,000 people as of Wednesday and killed four so far.

In his village, the water level climbed nearly two metres, Reouani said. Some homes still stand isolated by floodwater.

Elsewhere, residents were seen stranded on rooftops before being rescued in small boats.

Others were taken away by helicopter as roads



File photo shows an orchard of citrus trees standing in flood water in the Sidi Kacem region, in northwestern Morocco.

were cut off by flooding. Authorities have set up camps of small tents, including near the city of Kenitra, to shelter evacuees and their livestock.

“We have no grain left” to feed the animals, one evacuee, Ibrahim Bernous, 32, said at a camp. “The water took everything.”

Bernous, like many, now depends on animal feed distributed by the authorities, according to Mustapha Ait Bella, an official at the agriculture ministry. At the camps, displaced families make do with little while waiting to return home.

“The problem is what happens after we return,” said Chergui al-Alja, 42. “We have no grain left to feed our livestock, and they are our main source of income.”

On Thursday, the government announced a relief plan of some \$330mn to provide aid to the hardest-hit regions. A tenth of that sum was earmarked for farmers and livestock breeders.

Rachid Benali, head of the Moroccan Confederation of Agriculture and Rural Development, said farming was “among the sectors most affected by the floods”.

But he said “a more accurate damage assessment was pending once waters recede”.

US moving second carrier to Middle East amid tensions

The Pentagon is sending an aircraft carrier from the Caribbean to the Middle East, US officials said yesterday, a move that would put two carriers in the region amid tensions, Reuters reported from Washington. The Gerald R Ford carrier, the US’ newest and the world’s largest carrier, has been operating in the Caribbean with its escort ships and took part in operations in Venezuela earlier this year. Asked why a second aircraft carrier was headed to the Middle East, US President Donald Trump said: “In case we don’t make a deal, we’ll need it... if we need it, we’ll have it ready.” One of the officials, who was speaking on condition of anonymity, said the carrier would take at least a week to reach the Middle East. The Gerald R Ford will join the Abraham Lincoln carrier, several guided-missile destroyers, fighter jets and surveillance aircraft that have been moved to the Middle East in recent weeks. The US most recently had two aircraft carriers in the area last year, when it carried out strikes against Iranian nuclear sites in June. With only 11 aircraft carriers in the US military’s arsenal, they are a scarce resource and their schedules are usually set well in advance. In a statement, US Southern Command, which oversees US military operations in Latin America, said it would continue countering “illicit activities and malign actors in the Western Hemisphere.”



File photo shows displaced Sudanese people who left El-Fasher after its fall, sitting in the shade in Tawila amid the remains of a fire that broke out in the camp.

UN report says war crimes committed in Sudan’s El-Fasher

AFP
Geneva

The UN rights office yesterday accused Sudan’s paramilitaries of war crimes and possible crimes against humanity during the capture of El-Fasher, saying some 6,000 were killed in just three days.

Since April 2023, the conflict between Sudan’s army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces has killed tens of thousands, displaced 11mn and triggered what the UN calls one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises.

During its final offensive in October, the RSF unleashed “a wave of intense violence... shocking in its scale and brutality” and amounting to war crimes and possible crimes against humanity, said a report from the UN Human Rights Office.

The report said the RSF and allied militia carried out widespread attacks, including mass killings and summary executions, physical violations, abductions for ransom, torture and ill-treatment, detention, disappearances, pillage and the use of children in hostilities.

In many cases, these were directed against civilians and people outside combat based on their ethnicity or perceived affiliation, it said.

Based on interviews with over 140 victims and witnesses conducted in Sudan and eastern Chad in late 2025, the Human Rights Office said it documented more than 6,000 killings in the first three days of the RSF offensive.

It said that of those, at least 4,400 people were killed within El-Fasher and over 1,600 others were killed as they fled along exit routes.

“The actual scale of the death

toll during the week-long offensive is undoubtedly significantly higher,” the office said.

The report voiced serious concerns over the fate of thousands of missing people.

“The unprecedented scale and brutality of the violence meted out during the offensive deeply compounded the horrific violations the residents of El-Fasher had already been subjected to during the long months of siege, constant hostilities and bombardment,” said UN rights chief Volker Turk.

He said persistent impunity was fuelling the violence.

“These must be credible and impartial investigations to establish criminal responsibility, including of commanders and other superiors,” Turk said.

“These must lead to meaningful accountability for perpetrators of exceptionally serious crimes, through all available means.”

Madagascar cyclone death toll rises to 40, water, power still out

AFP
Antananarivo

The death toll from Cyclone Gezani rose to 40 yesterday, three days after its passage across Madagascar, as officials struggled to restore widespread cuts to power and water supplies.

In its latest update yesterday, the National Office for Risk and Disaster Management (BNRGC) said 40 people had been killed and 427 people injured, as one aid worker spoke of “apocalyptic” scenes on the Indian Ocean island.

Six people were still missing and the cyclone had affected 273,417 people – or 74,393 households, the BNRGC added.

After visiting the island’s second-largest city of Toamasina, which bore the brunt of Gezani’s 250-kilometre-per-hour winds, the World Food Programme’s

Madagascar director Tania Goosens told journalists that “the scale of destruction is overwhelming.”

“The authorities have reported that 80% of the city has been damaged,” she added.

“The city is running on roughly five % of electricity and there is no water,” she said, adding that the WFP’s office and one warehouse “were also completely destroyed.”

AFP photos showed the scale of the destruction, with trees and sheets of metal scattered across the streets, hampering recovery efforts. “A lot of zones are still inaccessible to rescue workers,” one aid worker told AFP. “Bridges are down, roads are destroyed. It’s really terrible.”

The situation was even worse beyond Toamasina, he added. “In the outlying towns, in rural areas, it’s apocalyptic.”

China has offered 100mn yuan (about \$14.5mn) in aid, Madagas-

car’s presidency announced.

On Thursday, France said it was sending food and rescue teams from the French island of La Reunion after Madagascar’s new leader, Colonel Michael Randrianirina, called for “international solidarity”.

Fears that the full force of Cyclone Gezani would be unleashed on southern Mozambique – already hit by devastating floods this year – faded after meteorologists at the CMRS on the French island of La Reunion downplayed that prospect.

It would instead brush the coast of Mozambique to the west, they said, bringing heavy rainfall and strong winds to the Mozambican coastal city of Inhambane and the tourist resort of Tofo.

Officials in Inhambane called on those of the city’s 100,000 residents living in makeshift housing to evacuate to a safer place.

African Union to hold annual summit this weekend

AFP
Addis Ababa

The African Union (AU) holds its annual summit in Ethiopia this weekend at a time of genocide, myriad insurgencies and coups stretching from one end of the continent to the other, for which it has few answers.

The AU, formed in 2002, has 55 member states who are often on opposing sides of conflicts. They have routinely blocked attempts to hand real enforcement power to the AU that could constrain their action, leaving it under-funded and under-equipped.

It has missed successive dead-

lines to make itself self-funding – in 2020 and 2025. Today, it still relies for 64% of its annual budget on the US and European Union, who are cutting back support.

Its chairman, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, is reduced to expressing “deep concern” over the continent’s endless crises – from wars in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo to insurgencies across the Sahel – but with limited scope to act.

“At a time when the AU is needed the most, it is arguably at its weakest since it was inaugurated,” said the International Crisis Group (ICG) in a recent report.

With 10 military coups in Africa since 2020, the AU has been forced

to ignore the rule in its charter that coup-leaders must not stand for elections. Gabon and Guinea, suspended after their coups, were reinstated this past year despite breaking that rule.

Meanwhile, there has been no “deep concern” over a string of elections marred by rigging and extreme violence.

Youssouf was quick to congratulate Tanzania’s President Samia Suluhu Hassan after she won 98% in a vote in October in which all leading opponents were barred or jailed and thousands of protesters were killed by security forces.

The AU praised the “openness” of an election in Burundi in

June described by Human Rights Watch as “dominated by repression (and) censorship”.

The problem, said Benjamin Auge, of the French Institute of International Relations, is that few African leaders care about how they are viewed abroad as they did in the early days after independence.

“There are no longer many presidents with pan-African ambitions,” he said.

“Most of the continent’s leaders are only interested in their internal problems. They certainly don’t want the AU to interfere in domestic matters,” he added.

AU representatives point out that its work stretches far be-

yond conflict, with bodies doing valuable work on health, development, trade and much more.

Spokesman Nuur Mohamud Sheekh told AFP that its peace efforts went unnoticed because they were measured in conflicts that were prevented.

“The AU has helped de-escalate political tensions and support dialogue before situations descend into violence,” he said, citing the work done to prevent war between Sudan and South Sudan over the flashpoint region of Abyei.

But African states show little interest in building up an organisation that might constrain them. Power remains instead with

the AU Assembly, made up of individual heads of state, including the three longest-ruling non-royals in the world: Teodoro Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea (46 years), Paul Biya of Cameroon (44) and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda (40).

“The African Union is weak because its members want it that way,” wrote two academics for The Conversation last year.

This weekend, the rotating presidency of the AU assembly passes to Burundi’s President Evariste Ndayishimiye, fresh from his party’s 97% election victory.

Coups, conflicts and rights abuses may get discussed, but the main theme is water sanitation.

Turkiye calls EU statements on Syria ‘misguided’

AFP
Ankara

Ankara yesterday accused the EU of adopting “misguided” resolutions condemning violence in Syria and said the bloc was interfering in Turkish affairs.

European Union lawmakers had on Thursday voted in favour of two resolutions, one condemning violence against civilians in northeastern Syria and calling on regional actors, particularly Türkiye, to refrain from breaching the ceasefire there, whether through military action or supporting armed groups.

Another resolution con-

demned Türkiye’s “harassment of foreign journalists under national security pretexts”.

The Turkish foreign ministry said the first resolution “disregards Türkiye’s role in Syria’s recovery and stabilisation”.

“We advise the European Parliament to exert greater effort to understand the realities on the ground and the aspirations of Syria and the Syrian people, rather than adopting misguided and ill-intentioned resolutions,” it said in a statement.

It added that the allegations in the second resolution “contradict the facts”.

“No foreign institution, including the European Parliament, can interfere in judicial

proceedings conducted in our country,” the ministry said.

Ankara is a key ally of the new leadership in Damascus, supporting its offensive against Kurdish forces in northern Syria which was launched in January.

Until now, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had been the main partner on the ground of a Western anti-militant coalition, but under military pressure from Damascus they are to integrate into the Syrian army.

The agreement dashed the Kurds’ hopes of retaining an autonomous zone they had established in northern and northeastern Syria during a civil war that ravaged Syria between 2011 and 2024.

Lebanon’s parliamentary election must be held on time: Berri

Reuters
Beirut

Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said yesterday he was committed to holding a parliamentary election as scheduled on May 10, despite calls from some politicians to postpone the vote.

Several politicians have called for a delay, citing security concerns in southern Lebanon,

where Israel has carried out air strikes targeting Hezbollah.

Berri, a leader allied with Hezbollah, said in a statement carried by the state-run National News Agency that he had informed President Joseph Aoun and the government of his position.

“It is not permissible that, at the start of a new era, we obstruct its launch by disrupting, postponing or extending the most important constitutional

entitlement, which is the foundation for forming authorities and producing political life,” Berri said.

Berri has opened the candidacy registry for the election and submitted the first nomination request for the Tyre-Zahrani district in southern Lebanon.

Lebanon last held a parliamentary election in May 2022, a vote marked by low turnout and deep public anger over a financial collapse.

DR Congo offers step towards truce

AFP
Kinshasa

The DR Congo government said yesterday it had accepted “the principle” of a ceasefire but its foes in the eastern conflict, the M23 militia, condemned “attempts at manipulation”.

While the Congolese government gave no date for when the proposed truce would come into force, the announcement comes after mediator Angola called on the warring sides to respect a ceasefire from February 18. The resource-rich eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has been mired in relentless violence between scores of armed groups for 30 years. Angola in recent weeks has resumed its mediation efforts and released during Wednes-

day night a ceasefire proposal. It followed the announcement last week that the UN would soon send peacekeepers to the eastern DRC to help enforce any ceasefire. The region, which borders Rwanda and Burundi, has been targeted by the M23 since the anti-governmental group’s resurgence in 2021.

Since then, half a dozen ceasefires and truces have been signed and broken.

“The president of the republic has accepted the principle of a ceasefire,” the Congolese presidency said in a statement on Friday. But the M23 reacted by denouncing “the delaying tactics and attempts at manipulation by the Kinshasa regime”.

The group accused the DRC of continuing to carry out “indiscriminate attacks” in the region while claiming to support Angola’s ceasefire proposal.

Crime prevention operation in SA



A South African policeman stands guard outside a house while it is searched during the crime prevention operation Shanela in Tafelsig, Cape Town, yesterday. Operation Shanela, “to sweep” in Setswana, is a high-density, multi-disciplinary, and countrywide crime-fighting initiative led by the South African Police Service (SAPS) to combat serious crime, specifically targeting hotspots, illegal mining, and unlicensed firearms.

Two shot dead in US university attack

Gunfire killed two people and wounded another in an apartment at a historically black university in the southern United States on Thursday, officials said, marking at least the third shooting on the campus since October.

The United States, where firearms are readily available, has a long history of gun violence that kills thousands of people every year.

The shooting at South Carolina State University's Hugine Suites student residential complex was reported around 9.15pm on Thursday (0215 GMT yesterday), the college said in a statement.

The university had two shootings on its campus in October, including one at the same student housing complex, ABC News reported, adding that one person was killed and another wounded.

"University officials have not yet confirmed the victims' identities or the condition of the wounded person," the university said in a social media post early yesterday. "The campus remains on lockdown."

School officials did not say whether anyone was in custody in connection to the shooting, but they announced that classes were cancelled.

They said local law enforcement agencies were assisting the university "in patrolling on and around the campus".

South Carolina State, whose enrolment numbers more than 3,000 students, is one of two historically black universities in Orangeburg, South Carolina, a riverfront college town about 40 miles (60km) southeast of the state capital, Columbia. The other is Claflin University.

A person answering the phone line for the university public safety office on Thursday night said that they were not at liberty to provide any information about the incident.

Thursday's violence came just days after an 18-year-old shooter killed eight people at a secondary school and a residence in British Columbia, Canada – a rare mass shooting in the country.

A gunman opened fire inside a classroom at Brown University in Rhode Island in December, killing two people and wounding nine others.

There were more than 1,000 gun deaths in the United States in the first month of 2026, according to the non-profit The Gun Violence Archive.

As of February 2, the United States had suffered 28 mass shootings, the organisation said, which defines the attacks as at least four people killed or wounded. – **AFP/Reuters**

Carney to mourn victims at site of mass shooting

Reuters
Ottawa

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney and opposition leaders will attend an evening vigil in the remote town of Tumbler Ridge, British Columbia, to pay respects to the victims of one of the country's worst mass shootings.

Carney, a Liberal, will be joined by Conservative chief Pierre Poilievre and Yves-Francois Blanchet, the head of the third-largest party, the Bloc Quebecois, as they set aside their differences to mourn the eight victims of Tuesday's shooting.

Governor-General Mary Simon, the personal representative of King Charles, Canada's head of state, will also be at the vigil, which will begin at 6.15pm local time (0115 GMT today).

Jesse Van Rootselaar, 18, who had suffered a series of mental health problems, killed her mother and stepbrother before shooting a teacher and five young students at the school in Tumbler Ridge, a settlement of around 2,400 in the Canadian Rockies, according to police.

Van Rootselaar, who police say was born a male but began identifying as a woman six years ago, then died by suicide.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) said on Wednesday that they had at one point seized guns from the house where Van Rootselaar was living but returned them after the owner, who they did not identify, successfully appealed the decision.

The Canadian Coalition for Firearm Rights, a pro-gun lobby group, questioned why weapons had been returned to a house where a person with mental illness was living.

"The firearms were seized out of that home for good reason, if you look down the list of the warning signs... the perpetrator should not have had access to firearms," chief executive officer Rod Giltaca told CTV News. "So my question for the RCMP is – how did they get guns in their proximity?"

The mass shooting was one of the worst in Canadian history.

The deadliest took place in April 2020 when a 51-year-old man killed 22 people in Nova Scotia, before police shot him dead.

Few townspeople wanted to speak to media on Thursday and British Columbia police said families and friends of the victims had requested privacy.

Police named the school victims as Abel Mwansa, 12, Ezekiel Schofield, 13, Kylie Smith, 12, Zoey Benoit, 12, Ticaria Lampert, 12, as well as teacher Shanda Aviugana-Durand, 39.

Lampert's mother Sarah, speaking to reporters on Thursday, described her daughter as a "blazing light in the darkness... (who) just wanted to bring sunshine to everyone and everything she ever touched."

Trump administration files new lawsuit against Harvard

The Trump administration sued Harvard University yesterday, accusing it of failing to comply with a federal investigation and seeking documents to determine whether the university had illegally considered race in its admissions process.

The move comes less than two weeks after US President Donald Trump said his administration was seeking \$1bn from Harvard to settle probes into school policies, after a news report that said Trump had dropped his demand for a payment from the Ivy League school.

Harvard representatives did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Trump's administration has been threatening to withhold federal funds from Harvard and several other universities over issues including campus diversity.

The Justice Department said yesterday in a press release that Harvard had "repeatedly slow-walked the pace of production and refused to produce pertinent data and documents", including admissions policies and correspondence related to banned diversity, equity

DHS partially shuts down

Reuters/AFP
Washington

The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was on track for a partial shutdown when its annual funding expired at midnight EST yesterday, after Republicans and Democrats failed to reach a deal on immigration enforcement reforms.

While some "non-essential" workers were expected to be put on leave, the Trump administration's intensive migrant deportation operations were likely to continue, along with most other domestic federal security programmes.

Republican President Donald Trump, in remarks to reporters on Thursday, attacked congressional Democrats' push for new constraints on immigration agents, underscoring a gulf between the two parties that could point to a prolonged shutdown.

Asked yesterday whether he would personally be involved in DHS shutdown talks, Trump told reporters at the White House: "I will", but gave no details.

"We're talking," he said.

"We have to protect law enforcement", including ICE and CBP agents, he added.

On Thursday, Trump accused Democrats of wanting to put agents "in a lot of danger".

Democrats argue that they want federal immigration agents to abide by the same rules guiding police forces across the country that are aimed at protecting the public from overzealous law enforcement activities.

"For weeks, we've been pushing common-sense reforms," Chuck Schumer, the top Democrat in the Republican-controlled Senate, said ahead of the partial shutdown that went into effect after midnight yesterday.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt put the blame on the opposition, telling Fox News that "Democrats are barreling our government towards another shutdown for political and partisan reasons".



The Homeland Security sign along South Elizabeths Road in Washington, DC. – **AFP**

Even without an injection of new money through September 30, the DHS's controversial Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) operations have a separate funding stream of over \$135bn, the result of Republicans' "One Big Beautiful Bill" enacted July 4.

Included in the DHS spending bill that is stuck in Congress, which has begun a 10-day recess, is funding for the US Secret Service, US Coast Guard and Federal Emergency Management Agency (Fema).

Fema, however, will have \$7bn available during the shutdown in its disaster relief fund, which experts say is roughly enough to last for two months.

The shutdown beginning today comes on the heels of a record-long, 43-day government disruption late last year because of a battle in Congress over extending a federal health insurance subsidy.

Democrats in Congress have refused to vote for a fiscal 2026 DHS funding bill until Republicans go along with a series of reforms to tighten controls over the ICE and CBP.



A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket and Dragon spacecraft lift off on Nasa's Crew-12 mission to the International Space Station, carrying Nasa astronauts Jessica Meir and Jack Hathaway, ESA astronaut Sophie Adenot, and Russian cosmonaut Andrey Fedyaev, from Launch Complex 40 at the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Cape Canaveral, Florida. – **Reuters**

International crew en route to space station

AFP/Reuters
Cape Canaveral

Four astronauts were on their way to the International Space Station (ISS) yesterday after they successfully embarked on their research mission to the orbiting laboratory.

The US space agency's international Crew-12 blasted off at approximately 5.15am local time (1015 GMT) aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from the Cape Canaveral launch site in Florida, according to a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) video feed.

The journey takes approximately 34 hours – the astronauts are expected to arrive at the ISS and dock by about 3.15pm eastern time today.

They will replace a crew that returned from the station early due to a medical issue with one of its members.

Crew-12 will be welcomed aboard the space station by three current ISS occupants – Nasa astronaut Chris Williams and Roscosmos cosmonauts Sergey Kud-Sverchikov and Sergei Mi-kaev.

The pre-dawn launch was delayed by two days over adverse weather forecasts across the US East Coast, including high winds that could have complicated any potential emergency manoeuvres.

However, superstitions aside, Friday the 13th proved to be their lucky day.

"I understand it's the first time Nasa has ever launched on Friday the 13th," said Steve Stich, a Nasa official who co-ordinates ISS launches, with a laugh. "Pretty amazing times."

Crew-12 is composed of Americans Jessica Meir and Jack Hathaway, along with French astronaut Sophie Adenot and Russian cosmonaut Andrey Fedyaev.

"We have left the Earth, but the Earth has not left us," Meir said as the astronauts ventured into space. "When we gaze on

our planet from above, it is immediately clear that everything is interconnected."

"We are one humankind," she added.

The travelers are replacing Crew-11, which returned to Earth in January a month earlier than planned in the first medical evacuation in the space station's history.

The ISS, a scientific laboratory orbiting 250 miles (400km) above Earth, has since been staffed by a skeleton crew of three.

Nasa declined to disclose any details about the health issue that cut the previous mission short.

Once the astronauts arrive, they will be one of the last crews to live aboard the football field-sized space station.

Continuously inhabited for the last quarter-century, the ageing ISS is scheduled to be pushed into Earth's orbit before crashing into an isolated spot in the Pacific Ocean in 2030.

The ISS, once a symbol of warming post-Cold War relations, has been a rare area of continued co-operation between the West and Russia since Moscow invaded Ukraine in 2022.

During a post-launch briefing, Daniel Neuenschwander, an official at the European Space Agency (ESA), emphasised the collaborative commitment to "the peaceful exploration of space".

"We are here this morning after the launch of two Americans, a Russian and a European as one crew. This is again a testimony of what we can achieve together. The ISS stands as a powerful symbol of humanity," he said.

Adenot has become the second Frenchwoman to fly to space, following in the footsteps of Claudie Haignere, who spent time on the Mir space station.

When Adenot saw Haignere's mission blast off, she was 14 years old – a moment she has called "a revelation".

Colombia court suspends govt's minimum wage hike

Colombia's Council of State has temporarily suspended the government's decree that raised the 2026 minimum wage by 22.7%, the high court said yesterday.

In a statement, the Council of State, a high court that settles disputes between private parties and state entities, said it had ordered the government of President Gustavo Petro to issue a new temporary decree within eight days setting a new increase that will be in force until the court makes a final ruling.

The government was ordered to clearly explain how it calculated its minimum wage increase.

Petro had established the wage hike under a "vital minimum wage" framework, a departure from the method previously used by the country. This decision began to exert pressure on inflation and led to an increase in interest rates.

The so-called "vital" minimum wage for this year is 1,746,882 pesos (approximately \$476.50) per month, and the increase was significantly higher than the 9.54% rise seen in 2025.

The suspension is not a final decision about whether Petro's decree was legal, and the court said it will decide that later in a full ruling. – **Reuters**

UN 'extremely worried' by fuel crisis in Cuba

AFP
Geneva

The United Nations said yesterday that it is deeply alarmed by the crisis unfolding in Cuba as the island nation struggles under what amounts to a US blockade of oil deliveries.

President Donald Trump has vowed to starve Cuba of oil after last month's US military ousting of Nicolas Maduro, the leader of Venezuela, which had been communist Cuba's main oil supplier.

"We are extremely worried about Cuba's deepening socio-economic crisis – amid a decades-long financial and trade embargo, extreme weather events, and the recent US measures restricting oil shipments," UN human rights office spokeswoman Marta Hurtado told a media briefing in Geneva. "This is having an increasingly severe impact on the human rights of people in Cuba."



People line up to board an electric tricycle on a street in Havana. – **AFP**

ingly severe impact on the human rights of people in Cuba."

UN rights chief Volker Turk "reiterates his call on all states to lift unilateral sectoral measures, given their broad and indiscriminate impact on the population. Policy goals cannot justify actions that in themselves violate human rights", the spokeswoman said.

Hurtado said that given the dependence of health, food, and water systems on imported fossil fuels, oil scarcity in Cuba had put the availability of essential services at risk.

"Intensive care units and emergency rooms are compromised, as are the production, delivery, and storage of vaccines, blood products, and other temperature-sensitive medications," she said.

More than 80% of water pumping equipment in Cuba depends on electricity, she added, saying power cuts were undermining access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene.

The island of 9.6mn inhabitants, under a US trade embargo since 1962, has for years been mired in a severe economic crisis marked by extended power cuts and shortages of fuel, medicine and food.



BNP registers historic win in Bangladesh poll

Reuters
Dhaka

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party won a landmark parliamentary election yesterday, local TV stations showed, as ballots were counted through the night in a pivotal vote that is expected to restore political stability.

The parliamentary election held on Thursday was Bangladesh's first vote since the 2024 Gen Z-driven uprising that toppled long-time premier Sheikh Hasina.

A clear outcome had been seen as crucial for stability in the Muslim-majority nation of 175mn after months of deadly anti-Hasina unrest disrupted everyday life and hit major industries, including the garment sector in the world's second largest exporter.

It was also the first national election to follow recent revolts led by the under-30s that have cropped up through the wider region. Nepal is set to hold a vote next month.

By around 4am local time, the BNP had secured 185 seats in the 300-member Jatiya Sangsad, or House of the Nation, TV channels showed, easily crossing the half-way mark for a simple majority.

As counting continued, BNP leaders said the party was confident of winning 200 seats and securing a two-thirds majority.

"Of course, BNP is winning, the majority of course, and it would even be a landslide victory," Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, a



A supporter carrying a painting of BNP chairman and election candidate Tarique Rahman (centre), his wife Zubaida Rahman (left) and daughter Zaima Rahman stands outside the party office in Dhaka yesterday.

BNP standing committee member, said. "Winning two-thirds of the seats is called a landslide victory, I think we would cross the 200-seat limit."

The BNP is led by top prime ministerial contender Tarique Rahman, the 60-year-old son of former prime minister Khaleda Zia and former president Ziaur Rahman.

Its campaign promises included financial aid for poor families, a limit of 10 years for an individual to remain prime minister, boosting the economy by measures including foreign investments, and anti-corruption policies.

Shafiqur Rahman, the head of BNP's main rival, Jamaat-e-Islami, conceded defeat, with his party on just 56 seats. Rahman said Jamaat would not engage in

the "politics of opposition" for the sake of it. "We will do positive politics," he told reporters.

Despite the landslide result, the election had been seen as Bangladesh's first truly competitive vote in years. Hasina's Awami League party, which ruled the country for more than 15 years until her ousting, was barred from contesting.

Turnout appeared on track on Thursday to exceed the 42% recorded in the last election in 2024. Local media reported that more than 60% of registered voters were expected to have cast ballots.

More than 2,000 candidates – including many independents – were on the ballot, and at least 50 parties contested seats, a national record. Voting in one constituency was postponed after a candidate died.



BNP chairman and election candidate Tarique Rahman (left) greets his supporters as leaves his residence in Dhaka yesterday, a day after Bangladesh's general election.



Supporters of BNP show a victory sign in front of a banner with Tarique Rahman's photo, as the results project BNP's victory in the 13th general election, in Dhaka, yesterday.

Australia's Liberals elect net zero opponent as new leader

Australia's centre-right opposition Liberal Party yesterday elected as leader a conservative who lobbied to drop its commitment to net zero emissions, local media reported.

Angus Taylor – a former energy minister – replaces Sussan Ley, the party's first female leader who had been in office for less than a year. Ley was ousted after a leadership challenge was called on Thursday, leading multiple members of her team to resign.

The Liberals have endured an agonising existential crisis since a disastrous election showing last year, torn between centrist factions arguing for a more moderate stance and right-wingers sceptical of climate legislation and multiculturalism.

The party leadership has also been spooked by recent opinion polling showing it falling behind the right-wing populist One Nation.

Last month, Ley endured a very public spat with longtime coalition partners the Nationals, with whom the Liberal Party has governed Australia for much of the past century. And in November the party dropped its commitment to net zero, introduced in 2021 by former leader Scott Morrison when he was prime minister.

Australia's "climate wars" – a years-long domestic fight over emissions policy – stalled progress and the country remains dependent on its fossil fuel economy for growth.

New leader Taylor was seen as a key proponent of the decision to drop the commitment to zero emissions. He attracted online ridicule in 2019 when he replied to his own social media post with: "Fantastic. Great move. Well done Angus".

The next general election must be held by May 2028 after Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's centre-left Labor Party won power by a wide margin last year. **(AFP)**

China hands over satellite ground station to Namibia, state media reports

Reuters
Beijing

Chinese officials on Thursday handed over a satellite ground station to Namibia outside the southern African nation's capital Windhoek, Chinese state media reported, marking another step forward in China's expanding space programme overseas.

The Chinese-built ground data receiving station will "significantly enhance Namibia's ability to receive and process remote-sensing data from satellites," the

state-run Xinhua news agency said yesterday.

As the US has pulled back from aid to African countries, China has been building alliances and widening its space footprint on the continent, offering satellites, laboratories, and monitoring stations. Beijing says it is helping boost African space programmes because it wants no country left behind.

Reuters has reported that China's aid projects are giving it access to a broader surveillance network as it seeks space dominance.

Beijing can tap data and images collected from satellites,

telescopes and ground stations it has provided African countries. Chinese personnel also maintain a long-term presence in facilities it builds in Africa.

"Namibia will fully own the satellite ground station and operate it independently," Zhao Weiping, the Chinese ambassador to Namibia, was quoted by Xinhua as saying on Thursday.

But Chinese experts will continue to provide technical support to the 14 local technicians they helped train, he said.

A second phase of the facility is also in the works, the envoy added.

Indonesia to go ahead with free meals programme, says president

Reuters
Jakarta

Indonesia's President Prabowo Subianto said yesterday that he will proceed with his free meals programme despite the "extraordinary" campaign mounted against it, adding that it is being funded through budget efficiency measures.

"We will implement this programme," Prabowo said during the launch of a free meal kitchen operated by the national police in Jakarta.

"We will face the extraordinary

campaign, which said that I am wasting money," he added.

Southeast Asia's biggest economy has been in turmoil following a warning about stock market transparency by index provider MSCI, which caused a frantic sell-off that slashed the market's value by \$120 billion.

Days later, Moody's cut its bond-rating outlook for Indonesia's government and some of its companies to negative.

Investors have also expressed concern about Prabowo's big spending plans, including the \$20 billion free meals scheme, but he said savings from elsewhere will

ensure that Indonesia remains within its fiscal deficit limit of 3% of GDP.

"This is what we are saving money on, this is what we are diverting... Our state budget does not exceed the parameters we set," he said.

Since the programme's launch in January last year, at least 15,000 children across the country have fallen ill as a result of food poisoning.

During the event, Prabowo said the percentage of children affected was low and stressed that the overall scheme had "succeeded", with 60 million free meal recipients as of yesterday.

Lunar New Year



Lanterns hang in Qianmen street as part of decoration for the Lunar New Year next to Zhengyang Gate Archery Tower, in Beijing, China, yesterday. **(Reuters)**

Japan seizes Chinese fishing vessel, arrests captain

Japan seized a Chinese fishing boat and arrested its skipper, authorities said yesterday, an incident that could deepen a spat between the Asian giants.

The episode on Thursday off southern Japan came three months after Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi suggested that Japan would intervene militarily if Beijing sought to take Taiwan by force. China swiftly reacted to the seizure, the Japanese fisheries' agency first since 2022 of a Chinese fishing boat, by urging Japan to protect the rights of Chinese crew.

"It is hoped Japan strictly respects the China-Japan fisheries agreement, fairly enforces the law and safeguards the safety and legitimate rights and interests of Chinese crew members," foreign ministry spokesman Lin Jian told a news conference yesterday. Japan's fisheries agency said the vessel's captain was ordered to

stop for an inspection, but the boat "failed to comply and fled".

"Consequently, the vessel's captain was arrested on the same day," the agency said in a statement.

The boat was inside Japan's exclusive economic zone 89.4 nautical miles (166 kilometres) southwest of Meshima island in the Goto archipelago, Japan's statement said – not a disputed area. The captain was named as Chinese national Zheng Nianli, 47. The status of the other 10 people on board the vessel, named the Qiong Dong Yu, was unclear.

"To prevent illegal fishing operations by foreign vessels, we will continue to take firm action and engage in enforcement activities," chief government spokesman Minoru Kihara said. China has a number of territorial tussles with Japan, and there have been repeated incidents around the Senkaku Islands,

known as the Diaoyu in China.

The 2010 arrest of another Chinese fishing boat captain off those islands in the East China Sea became a major diplomatic incident.

Japan and China have close economic ties but Takaichi's comments about Taiwan have sent relations spiralling downwards again. China has long insisted that Taiwan, occupied for decades by Japan until 1945, is its territory and has not ruled out force to achieve "reunification".

Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te told AFP in an interview this week that other countries – including Japan – would be China's next targets should Beijing seize the democratic island.

"The next countries under threat would be Japan, the Philippines, and others in the Indo-Pacific region, with repercussions eventually reaching the Americas and Europe," Lai said. **(AFP)**

North Korea warns of 'terrible response' if South sends more drones

AFP
Seoul

North Korea threatened yesterday a "terrible response" if it detects any more drones buzzing across the border from the South.

South Korean President Lee Jae-myung has sought to repair ties with North Korea since taking office last year, criticising his predecessor for allegedly sending drones to scatter propaganda over Pyongyang.

But North Korea claims it shot down a surveillance drone just last month, an incident which threatens to blight Lee's efforts to patch things up.

Kim Yo-jong, the powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, warned of severe repercussions if the drones did not stop.

"I give advance warning that recurrence of such provocation as violating the inalienable sovereignty of the DPRK will surely provoke a terrible response," Kim said in a statement carried by Pyongyang's official Korea Central News Agency.

"We don't care who the very manipulator of the drone infiltration into the airspace of the DPRK is and whether it is an individual or a civilian organisation," she added, using the acronym for North Korea's official name.

Seoul initially denied any official involvement in the January drone

incursion, with officials suggesting it was the work of civilians.

But a joint military-police task force announced earlier this week it was investigating three active-duty soldiers and one spy agency staffer in an effort to "thoroughly establish the truth".

Seoul's unification minister Chung Dong-young expressed "deep regret" earlier this week.

Any government involvement in the January drone incursion would run counter to Lee's efforts to lower the temperature with Pyongyang.

Chung has previously suggested the drone may have been the work of government staffers still loyal to former hardline leader Yoon Suk-yeol.

Kim Yo-jong said that Chung's

conciliatory remarks were "quite sensible behaviour".

South Korea's unification ministry responded to Kim's statement, vowing to "immediately implement preventative measures to prevent similar incidents from recurring".

"Whenever the opportunity arises, we have reaffirmed three principles – recognising and respecting the other side's system, refraining from any hostile acts, and not seeking unification by absorption," it said.

The statement by Kim Yo-jong suggests that Pyongyang is "closely monitoring the latest developments in the South Korean side", Yang Moo-jin, former president of the University of

North Korean Studies, told AFP.

The North Korean military downed a drone carrying "surveillance equipment" in early January, according to a statement published by the state-run KCNA.

Photos showed the wreckage of a winged craft scattered across the ground next to a collection of grey and blue components that allegedly included cameras.

The drone had stored footage of "important targets" including border areas, a military spokesman said at the time.

South Korea's disgraced ex-president Yoon Suk-yeol was accused of using unmanned drones to scatter propaganda leaflets over North Korea in 2024.

Lee has vowed to mend ties with North Korea by stamping out such provocations, and has even suggested a rare apology may be warranted.

A UN Security Council committee recently approved exemptions allowing fresh flows of food and medicine into North Korea.

Analysts said this could kick-start efforts to lure Pyongyang into nuclear negotiations with US President Donald Trump.

North Korea is preparing to hold a landmark party congress at the end of February.

The political showcase – typically held just once every five years – will lay out the nation's foreign policy, war planning and nuclear ambitions for the next five years.

India says world leaders, tech bosses to attend AI summit

AFP
New Delhi

At least 17 heads of state, the UN chief and several global tech CEOs are set to attend next week's AI Impact Summit in New Delhi, India said yesterday. Touted as the biggest yet, it is the fourth edition of the annual global gathering to address the risks and opportunities posed by the booming artificial intellignce (AI) technology.

Leaders from France, Brazil,

Spain, the United Arab Emirates and 13 other nations will join, as well as Google's Sundar Pichai, Sam Altman of OpenAI and Nvidia boss Jensen Huang, according to a statement from India's foreign ministry.

The summit "will bring together global leaders, policy-makers, innovators, and experts from across the world to deliberate on the way forward for AI", it said.

Panels and talks are planned from Monday, and on Thursday Indian Prime Minister Narendra

Modi will open the two-day summit with leaders.

The Delhi event will focus on issues like child safety and sustainability.

Leaders from Bhutan, Croatia, Finland, Greece, Mauritius, the Netherlands, Serbia, Slovakia, Sri Lanka and Switzerland are among those who have confirmed they will attend, according to the foreign ministry.

Ministerial delegations from at least 45 countries and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will also be at the summit.

Modi congratulates Bangladesh election winner

AFP
New Delhi

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) yesterday for winning landmark elections, as New Delhi seeks to reset rocky ties with its neighbour. Hailing a "decisive victory" by the

BNP and its leader Tarique Rahman, Modi said on social media that it "shows the trust of the people of Bangladesh in your leadership". "India will continue to stand in support of a democratic, progressive and inclusive Bangladesh." In a separate statement, Modi said he spoke with Rahman over the phone to convey his wishes. "As two close neighbours with

deep-rooted historical and cultural ties, I reaffirmed India's continued commitment to the peace, progress, and prosperity of both our peoples," the Indian leader said in a post on X. Ties between Delhi and Dhaka nosedived after 78-year-old Hasina fled to India. India's sheltering of Hasina despite extradition requests angered Dhaka's interim government.

Palestine Action wins legal challenge against UK ban

AFP
London

The High Court in London yesterday upheld a challenge to a UK government ban on activist group Palestine Action under terror legislation, saying it had interfered with the right to freedom of speech.

The 2025 ban put Palestine Action on a blacklist that also includes Hamas and the Lebanese Iran-backed group Hezbollah, and sparked a severe backlash.

And it made it a criminal offence to be a member of the group or to demonstrate support for it — punishable by up to 14 years in prison.

Following a legal challenge by co-founder Huda Ammori, a three-judge panel yesterday found the ban was "disproportionate" and resulted in a "very significant interference with the right to freedom of speech and free assembly".

But UK interior minister Shabana Mahmood said she was "disappointed" and would appeal the ruling while Jewish representative bodies said they were "deeply concerned".

Palestine Action remains banned to allow the government to contest the decision, judges said, setting February 20 for a new hearing.

London's Metropolitan Police force said they would stop arresting the group's supporters pending the appeal and concentrate on gathering evidence.

The proscription led to nearly 3,000 arrests, primarily for people carrying placards defending the group, according to protest organisers Defend Our Juries.

Hundreds have also been charged and face court hearings.

"We won," said Ammori on social media after the ruling.

Outside the court, people waving Palestinian flags and wearing keffiyah scarves cheered and hugged each other.

One protester with a megaphone held up a placard saying: "Palestine Action is BACK!"

'Over the moon'

Niall Pemberton, a 58-year-old retiree who has been arrested



File photo shows a protester reacting as he is taken away by police officer at a "Lift The Ban" demonstration in support of the Palestine Action, calling for the recently imposed ban to be lifted, in Trafalgar Square, central London.

four times at pro-Palestine Action demonstrations, told AFP he was "over the moon".

"I think it shows that we were right that direct action groups should not be proscribed as terrorist organisations," he said.

The Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Jewish Leadership Council, however, said Palestine Action had repeatedly targeted Jewish-linked institutions and businesses "in ways that cause fear and disruption far beyond the immediate protest sites".

They called on the government and police to provide "clarity" on how they intended to ensure Jewish communities were "protected from intimidation and criminality" following the ruling.

The government banned Palestine Action in July, days after activists protesting against Israel's military assault on Gaza broke into an air force base in southern

England and caused millions of pounds worth of damage to two aircraft.

UN rights chief Volker Turk has previously called the move "disproportionate and unnecessary".

'Right the wrongs'

"It's the very opposite of what a terrorist organisation is to most people," she added.

"Together we took action at great personal risk... We helped make this proscription unenforceable," protest organisers Defend the Juries said in a statement after the ruling.

It called for a meeting with Mahmood and Metropolitan Police chiefs "to right the wrongs of the ban".

Set up in 2020, Palestine Action's stated goal on its now-blocked website is to end "global participation in Israel's genocidal and apartheid regime".

say all residents have been able to return home since fighting ended.

But on the Cambodian side, officials estimate that about 80% of land and homes in Prey Chan and Chouk Chey communes are now inaccessible, leaving more than 4,600 people living in temporary shelters.

Thailand said in a statement on Friday the installation of barriers "to enhance safety and security along the border" was "fully consistent" with the joint statement agreed by the two countries during the ceasefire on December 27.

The border clashes killed at least 149 people and displaced hundreds of thousands along the 817-kilometre border (508-mile) before Thailand and Cambodia agreed to a second ceasefire in late December, after an earlier truce from July collapsed.

Radio museum



A visitor photographs old radios on display at a newly inaugurated radio museum, opened to mark World Radio Day and showcasing more than 120 valve-tube sets from brands across India, US, England, Germany and other countries, in Ahmedabad, India, yesterday.

UK launches probe into Telegraph sale

AFP
London

Britain's government said on Thursday it had launched an investigation into the sale of *The Telegraph* newspaper to the owner of the *Daily Mail*, a rival right-wing publication, citing competition concerns.

The Labour government's Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy has issued a Public Interest Intervention Notice in relation to the planned takeover, a statement said.

The Daily Mail and General Trust (DMGT) struck a £500mn (\$682mn) deal with US-Emirati consortium RedBird IMI in November for the purchase of *The Telegraph*, which is 170 years old.

The tie-up has the potential to create one of the biggest right-leaning media groups in the UK.

In a statement late Thursday,

a spokesperson for DMGT said it welcomed the intervention notice, "which marks a significant step forward in our proposed acquisition".

"We remain committed to investing in *The Telegraph* and its journalists, preserving its distinctive editorial voice and team, and accelerating its global expansion, with a focus on the US," the statement added.

It said DMGT would work "constructively with regulators and the government to secure a timely completion of the transaction".

The investigation will involve UK competition and media regulators.

Nandy said it was motivated by "public interest considerations" and "the need for a sufficient plurality of views in each UK market for news media".

The investigation will also look at "the need for a sufficient plurality of persons with control of media enterprises serving

every different UK audience", she added.

The intervention revives uncertainty over the *Telegraph's* future, which has been in limbo since British bank Lloyds put the paper up for sale in 2023 to pay off heavy debts accumulated by former owners Frederick and David Barclay.

RedBird IMI, a joint venture between US investment firm RedBird Capital and Abu Dhabi's International Media Investments, had struck a deal for the *Telegraph Media Group* in late 2023.

However, the previous UK Conservative government triggered a swift resale given concern about the potential impact on freedom of speech due to Abu Dhabi's press censorship record.

That government also amended merger laws to bar foreign powers from controlling UK newspapers.

RedBird then pursued the takeover under a revised structure, but abruptly dropped its bid in November.

Thai PM agrees coalition with Thaksin-backed party

AFP
Bangkok

Thai caretaker Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul's conservative party, which won a stunning election victory at the weekend, agreed to form a coalition with jailed ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra's party, both announced yesterday.

Anutin's pro-military and pro-monarchy party had its best electoral performance in polls that took place after two rounds of deadly border clashes with Cambodia last year.

It campaigned on a nationalist platform, promising to build a wall on the frontier with Cambodia, keep all border crossings closed and recruit 100,000 volunteer soldiers.

Thaksin's Pheu Thai is Thailand's most successful party of the 21st century but had its worst election result on Sunday, raising questions about the future of the political machine built by the jailed billionaire.

"Although the election results have not yet been officially confirmed, we have a consensus that Pheu Thai will support us in

leading the coalition, as planned," Anutin told a news conference at his Bhumjaithai party's headquarters.

Prasert Chanruangthong, secretary-general of Pheu Thai, told reporters the party "is ready to support Bhumjaithai Party in forming the coalition. Other issues will be discussed further".

The latest incarnation of the organisation founded by the telecom billionaire, Pheu Thai came a distant third in Sunday's election, its vote share in the party-list section plunging by more than half.

Voters also appeared to turn their backs on the reformist People's Party, which came second.

Pheu Thai and Bhumjaithai were previously coalition partners, until Anutin pulled out over a Cambodia border dispute scandal last June.

"Our priority is for the country to move forward for the greatest benefit of the people," Prasert said ahead of coalition talks yesterday.

Thaksin is serving a one-year prison sentence for corruption in office, but many observers expect him to be released earlier than scheduled alongside a political agreement.

The Shinawatras have produced no fewer than four Thai prime ministers this century. Pheu Thai had put forward Thaksin's nephew Yodchanan Wongsawat, a biomedical engineering professor, as their latest nominee for the position.

Thaksin's political clan has for two decades been the key foe of Thailand's pro-military, pro-royalty elite who view their populist brand as a threat to traditional social order.

Some analysts had said Pheu Thai's losses on Sunday marked the end of the Shinawatra dynasty.

But its inclusion in the coalition leaves open the possibility of a political comeback.

The Southeast Asian nation's next administration will need to tackle anaemic economic growth, with its vital tourism industry yet to rebound to pre-Covid highs, and manage fallout over multi-billion-dollar cyber-scams operating from the region.

Perhaps most pressing is the Cambodia dispute, which erupted into open fighting in July and December, killing scores of people on both sides and displacing around a mn altogether.



Thailand's caretaker Prime Minister and Bhumjaithai Party leader Anutin Charnvirakul shakes hand with Yodchanan Wongsawat, Pheu Thai Party prime ministerial candidate, during a meeting at Bhumjaithai Party headquarters, after Pheu Thai Party, who came third general election, agree to form a coalition, in Bangkok, Thailand, yesterday.

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GULF TIMES

US billionaires Musk and Bezos race China to moon

The space race between US billionaires is heating up, with Elon Musk's SpaceX planning to build a lunar base and Jeff Bezos pushing Blue Origin's ambitions as both companies aim to return humans to the moon ahead of a planned mission by China in 2030. With a planned IPO this year, SpaceX CEO Musk has said in recent podcast interviews and company meetings that he wants to build "Moonbase Alpha" and put a satellite-slinging launch device on the lunar surface. The lunar base would help build up his envisioned AI-computing network of up to one million satellites.

Musk's intensified drive toward the moon has shifted SpaceX's aspirational focus from the Mars colonization mission he has pushed consistently since founding the company in 2002. As recently as last summer, Musk said he hoped to launch an uncrewed Starship mission to the Red Planet, calling the moon a "distraction".

In recent weeks, Bezos's space company Blue Origin has also put more focus on its own moon program, shuttering its suborbital space tourism business to shift those resources into its Blue Moon lunar lander program ahead of a planned uncrewed mission to the surface this year.

Musk now wants to convince investors that SpaceX will remain the dominant force in space ahead of a planned IPO later this year that could value the company at over \$1tn. After a flurry of Musk posts on X this week about a "pivot" to the moon, Bezos posted a black-and-white image of a tortoise, recalling Aesop's fable in which the slow and steady tortoise wins the race against the speedy but impulsive hare. Blue Origin has embraced that fable in its motto "Gradatim Ferociter", Latin for "step by step, ferociously."

Musk now wants to convince investors that SpaceX will remain the dominant force in space ahead of a planned IPO later this year

on SpaceX's Starship. Seattle-based Blue Origin's lander last week was shipped to NASA's Johnson Space Center in Texas for thermal and vacuum testing, a key development step in its path to launch. Blue Origin and SpaceX are building their moon landers with billions of dollars in funding from NASA, which aims to use them for a series of astronaut moon landings starting with SpaceX's Starship. NASA landed the first humans on the moon in 1969, and a total of 12 US astronauts walked on the moon as part of the Apollo program that ended in 1972.

NASA sees a return to the moon as practice for future missions to Mars. The agency has pressed the companies to speed up their lunar lander development to win the space race against China, which has targeted its own 2030 moon astronaut landing. Musk said this week he wants to go a few steps further by building a "self-growing city" on the moon and launching AI satellites from the lunar surface -- part of his broader goal to expand AI computing into space after SpaceX acquired Musk's xAI this month.

"If the moon becomes a strategic jump-off point, and one that's important to SpaceX, if they can get there first or early and build out that infrastructure, they might have a say in how that gets used and how they use it," said Andrew Chanin, CEO at ProcureAM, a space-specialized investment firm.

SpaceX's Starship rocket has not yet deployed anything into orbit, but has launched 11 times since 2023 and is poised for an upgraded test in a month. The rocket's upper stage, which acts as the moon lander, faces a 2028 crewed moon landing date that many in the industry see as tough to meet.

SpaceX has many more steps in Starship's development as a lunar lander, from practicing its novel refueling process in orbit with another "tanker" Starship to reliably landing on the moon's rugged surface before carrying humans aboard. — Reuters

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Water, water everywhere



A man holding an umbrella walks by a flooded street at the village of Montemor-o-Velho, Coimbra, in central Portugal, yesterday. In Coimbra, authorities fear a 'hundred-year flood' of the Mondego River that could inundate downtown neighborhoods, the municipality said, as it prepared for possible preemptive evacuations.

Education Excellence Award: 20 years of outstanding contributions to Society

QNA

Doha

The State of Qatar believes that investing in human capital through education is the optimal and sustainable investment for present and future generations, as education is a fundamental pillar of the State's Permanent Constitution and building educated individuals capable of achieving academic excellence, contributing to national development, and creating a prosperous future for all is among the foremost objectives of Qatar National Vision 2030.

There is no doubt that the progress and renaissance of nations depend on the quality of their education and the strength of their educational systems. In embodiment of this vision, the Qatar Education Excellence Award was launched in 2006 to honour academically outstanding Qatari students, foster and reinforce a culture of excellence and innovation within society and the educational field, motivate high achievement, and improve educational outcomes in line with international standards.

Academic honour

The award has become the highest academic honour in the country, aiming to build a knowledge-based human capital capable of meeting future challenges, while also promoting positive attitudes toward knowledge and scientific research. The award, whose 20th anniversary the State of Qatar, represented by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, will celebrate next Sunday, is not merely a means of honouring outstanding and distinguished achievers. It also stands as a testament to the efficiency and quality of Qatar's educational system, and as clear evidence of the capabilities of all its members.

During the ceremony, 108 winners will be honoured across the award's nine categories: the Excellence Award for Primary School Students, the Excellence Award for Intermediate School Students, the Excellence Award for Secondary School Students, the Outstanding Teacher Award, the Outstanding School Award, the Distinguished Research Award, the Excellence Award for University Graduates, the Excellence Award for Master's Degree Holders, and the Excellence Award for Doctorate Holders.

In this context, the Executive Committee of the Qatar Education Excellence Award announced on Jan 6 the results of the 19th edition, following their approval by the Award's Board of Trustees, chaired by HE Minister of Education and Higher Education Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhatir. The results revealed that 108 candidates



were selected from a total of 371 applicants in this cycle, an indicator reflecting the rising level of competitiveness, the high quality of submissions, growing awareness of the award's criteria and requirements, and a demonstrated commitment to meeting them, in alignment with Qatar's vision of building a qualified and capable human capital.

The results also reflected notable diversity in the educational institutions represented by the winners, including students from public, private, and specialized schools, as well as from civilian and military universities and various colleges, further highlighting the broad base of excellence and the widespread culture of achievement across the country's educational institutions.

The current cycle will witness the introduction of a gold medal in addition to the platinum medal for the doctoral category, which had previously been limited to the platinum medal only. Moreover, for the first time, a platinum medal has been introduced for master's degree students, in addition to the gold medal that had already been awarded in previous cycles.

As for the Research Award designated for secondary school students, a platinum medal has also been approved alongside the gold medal granted in past years. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education announced last September the adoption of the new

title for the award in its 19th edition, which will henceforth be known as the Qatar Education Excellence Award

The adoption of the new title coincided with the launch of a new visual identity under the slogan 'A New Identity and Promising Horizons', as well as an increase in the financial rewards starting from the current cycle.

The award is also preparing to introduce three new categories: Educational Leader, the Diploma Holders, and the Educational Research categories. These will come into effect beginning with the twenty-first cycle in 2028. These additions represent a qualitative expansion in the scope of the award and serve to recognize educational leadership and research and applied contributions in the field of education.

This year's edition witnessed outstanding participation and high-quality contributions, which confirmed the status of the Qatar Education Excellence Award as a national platform that promotes the value of serious quality and innovation, and contributes to preparing distinguished national role models capable of contributing positively to the development process.

The overall win rate in this round was close to the average win rates recorded during the past five rounds, which confirms the consistency of the adopted evaluation methodology. The

award was limited to candidates who achieved the approved score for winning, following thorough and comprehensive evaluation processes that included carefully reviewing files, conducting interviews with candidates, and giving each candidate their full right to evaluation, thus ensuring the highest levels of fairness, objectivity, and equal opportunities, and enhancing confidence in the award's outcomes and credibility.

As in previous editions, the results of this round showed the impact of a supportive family environment on the continued excellence of some winners. In some cases, more than one person from the same family won the award, within the approved evaluation criteria for the award. The Qatar Education Excellence Award highlighted the role of parents in education and upbringing, especially in light of their contributions to their children's education.

Equal opportunities

The award, through the diversity of its categories, affirms the comprehensiveness of the concept of excellence and its extension across different educational stages, thereby promoting equal opportunities and motivating society to invest in education and knowledge as a fundamental pillars of development.

For all these reasons, the 19th edition of the Qatar Education Excellence Award represents a milestone in the award's journey since its establishment in 2006. The launch of a new visual identity for the award reflects both authenticity and modernity, while the adoption of its new official name reinforces its national dimension and enhances its regional and international presence.

There is no doubt that what the Board of Trustees has approved by raising the value of the prizes for the winners starting from this edition represents an investment in the Qatari people. All these steps are part of a comprehensive development project launched in 2023, with the aim of making the award more consistent with Qatar National Vision 2030, and expanding its scope to include new segments of the educational community with a well-established arbitration system based on fairness and transparency.

Since its inception in 2006, the award has honoured more than 1,300 distinguished individuals across various categories. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education affirms that the new identity, the updated name, the increased value of the rewards, and the introduction of new categories all represent a renewed launch for the award's journey, consolidating its national and regional standing and making it a platform for creativity and inspiration for future generations.

Ex-PM Khan has lost ‘85% vision in one eye’

Reuters/AFP
Islamabad

Small groups of protesters gathered in some Pakistani cities on Friday in support of ex-prime minister Imran Khan, after his lawyer said the former cricket star had lost 85% of the sight in his right eye while in prison.

Khan has been in jail since 2023 and was sentenced late last year along with his wife to 17 years on corruption charges that they both deny.

Nearly 100 protesters chanted anti-government slogans in the southern port city of Karachi a day after the lawyer told the Supreme Court in a report that Khan had been having problems with his vision since October.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Tariq Fazal said that authorities had only been told about the eye problem a month ago and that Khan had been taken to hospital for a procedure on January 24.

Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said at the time that Khan was “fine and healthy”, while government officials have repeatedly rejected claims that Khan was being mistreated in prison.

“It is not a political issue. It is a medical issue. We will provide every possible support for his health,” Fazal told reporters yesterday in the capital.

A large police contingent stopped dozens of protesters led by an alliance of opposition parties from marching outside the parliament in Islamabad.

“We demand that a panel of (doctors) of his choice be allowed to treat him,” Salina Khan, a lawmaker for Khan’s party, said at the rally in Karachi.

Khan, 73, is serving a 14-year sentence on corruption charges, one of dozens of cases that he says were made up by the army to keep him out of politics, a charge the military denies.

The Supreme Court called a hearing and asked for the report after lawyer Salman Safdar filed a petition last week asking for Khan to have access to his doctor and family.

“He has been left with only 15% vision in his right eye,” Safdar said in the report seen by Reuters.

The document cited Khan as saying that he had been complaining about “experiencing persistent blurred and hazy vision” since October 2025, and alleged that jail authorities took no action at the time.

Safdar said Khan appeared “visibly perturbed and deeply distressed by the loss of vision”, adding that his “eyes were watery, and he repeatedly used a tissue-paper to wipe them”.

The Supreme Court set a February 16 deadline for the authorities to allow the former prime minister access to his personal

physician for a report on his condition.

Khan was diagnosed with a right central retinal vein occlusion, or blockage, according to a February 6 medical report submitted in the court, based on an examination by an ophthalmologist in his prison cell in the city of Rawalpindi.

The medical report said Khan was taken to Islamabad’s Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, where doctors carried out a 20-minute procedure in an operating theatre with his consent.

Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party said in a statement that it demanded unrestricted access to qualified specialists of Khan’s choice.

The party, which had faced a crackdown after Khan’s May 2023 arrest sparked nationwide protests against the military, emerged as the single biggest in a 2024 election.

It said rigging robbed it of more seats, allowing other parties to form a coalition government under Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, accusations that Sharif and his allies deny.

Khan was prime minister from 2018-22 before being removed in a no-confidence vote during a political crisis over tensions between his government and Pakistan’s powerful military establishment.

He has since faced multiple legal cases on corruption and other charges.



Supporters of jailed former prime minister Khan’s PTI party carry a poster of him during a protest in Karachi over concerns about their leader’s health. - **Reuters**

Fresh water leak adds to Louvre museum woes

AFP
Paris

After a break-in, strikes and a ticket fraud scandal, the beleaguered Louvre museum in Paris said yesterday that it had suffered a water leak in its most-visited wing, the second flood in three months.

The fire brigade had to be called overnight after a burst pipe in the Louvre’s Denon wing, which houses some of the museum’s most valuable exhibits including the *Mona Lisa*, according to a statement.

While the space containing Leonardo Da Vinci’s masterpiece was not affected, the leak damaged a room of 15th-century Italian works and its decorative ceiling, painted by French artist Charles Meynier.

“The ceiling artwork shows two tears in the same area, caused

by water, and lifting of the paint layer on the ceiling and its arches,” a statement from management said.

The cause of the damage was a heating-system pipe above the room, the statement added. Firefighters intervened shortly after midnight.

The water leak adds to a growing picture of structural and maintenance problems inside the world’s most visited museum, which suffered a hugely embarrassing robbery last October.

A water leak in late November damaged several hundred works in the Louvre’s Egyptian department, and management had to close a gallery housing ancient Greek ceramics in October because ceiling beams above it threatened to give way.

The Louvre’s chief architect Francois Chatillon conceded in

front of MPs in November that the building was “not in a good state”.

A message on the museum’s website yesterday stated that “for reasons beyond our control, certain rooms are exceptionally closed”.

The news came just a day after revelations that police had dismantled a “large-scale” ticket fraud network at the Louvre that allegedly includes two museum employees and several tour guides.

The Paris prosecutor’s office estimates that the fraud, which involved Chinese tourists, could have cost the institution up to €10mn (\$11.9mn).

Investigators believe several guides working with Chinese tourists were re-using tickets and entering the Louvre several times, bribing security staff to get their compliance.

Police have seized around €1mn

in cash and €486,000 from different bank accounts linked to the gang.

The accumulation of problems has piled pressure on museum boss Laurence des Cars who faced calls to resign after the October 19 robbery in which thieves steal crown jewels worth more than \$100mn.

Two intruders used a truck-mounted extendable platform to access a gallery containing the jewels, slicing through a glass door with disk-cutters in front of startled visitors before grabbing eight priceless items.

Disgruntled staff have also launched a wave of strikes since the start of the year demanding more recruitment and improved salaries, forcing management to shutter the former royal palace on several Mondays.

The Louvre welcomed 9mn visitors last year.

Albanian actor sues government for using her image as ‘AI minister’

Reuters
Tirana

An Albanian actor is suing the government for using her face and voice to create the avatar for an “AI minister” – a virtual member of the cabinet.

When Edi Rama began his fourth term as Albania’s prime minister last September, he also unveiled an artificial intelligence (AI)-generated virtual minister, “Diella” – sun in Albanian – to oversee the awarding of government contracts as a step to fight corruption.

Diella features the face and voice of Anila Bisha, a film and theatre actor who says she never gave consent for her likeness to be used that way, and it has led to harassment online and unwanted attention in the street.

“First I was surprised, smiled and I said it must be a joke,” Bisha told Reuters. “Now people call me Diella and they consider me as just

another minister of the government.”

She says that she allowed her likeness to be used last year to create an AI-powered virtual assistant for a government website to help citizens and businesses get state documents, but not as a virtual politician on the prime minister’s team.

“People who don’t like the prime minister, now they also hate me.”

The government denies using her likeness improperly.

The “lawsuit is nonsense, but we welcome the opportunity to solve it once and for all in a court of law”, the government’s press office said in response to questions from Reuters.

The Albanian government’s public image has been battered since December after a special prosecution unit indicted Rama’s deputy, Belinda Balluku, for meddling in tenders for infrastructure projects, which she denies.

Diella’s image appears in the first row of the cabinet list on the government’s website, next



Albanian actor Anila Bisha, who is suing the government for allegedly using her face and voice to create an AI chatbot named Diella, presented as a ‘virtual minister’, shows her phone displaying a governmental website. - **Reuters**

to photos of Rama and Balluku.

A court is expected to rule on Monday whether to order the government to stop using her image.

Her lawyer, Aranit Roshi, said Bisha is seeking €1mn in damages.

“The law says that in cases of personal data violation, penalties for state institutions are up to €21mn so our request for €1mn is a reasonable amount,” he said.

Three killed in French Alps avalanche

Three skiers died after being swept away in an avalanche in the upmarket French Alpine ski resort of Val d’Isere yesterday, Cedric Bonnevie, who is in charge of the resort’s pistes, told reporters.

Bonnevie said one of the victims was a French national while the others were foreigners.

He said an inquiry into the incident was underway.

On Thursday Meteo France, the national weather service, placed the local area under a red alert for avalanche risk. - **Reuters**

Sweden to criminalise gang membership

Sweden said yesterday that it plans to criminalise membership in crime networks and gangs, including life sentences, in a mounting crackdown ahead of legislative elections in September.

The minority right-wing government, backed by the far-right Sweden Democrats, said it is considering introducing legislation that police have estimated could put 700 people behind bars each year.

Sweden has struggled for over a decade to contain a surge in organised violent crime, linked primarily to gang wars and battles to control the drug market.

A government-commissioned report was submitted to Justice Minister Gunnar Strommer yesterday, recommending legislation criminalising membership in, and association with, criminal networks and gangs.

“This could include gang leaders and others who, in various ways, enable the gangs’ criminal activities without there being a clear link to a specific offence,” the minister told reporters. “We know that this type of legislation has been very important in other countries that have successfully combatted gang-related crime.”

Strommer said that Swedish society “has not been equipped to cope with” the surge in crime.

A new law could be in place by April 1, 2027, and could carry Sweden’s harshest penalty of life in prison for the most severe offences.

Police have earlier estimated that 17,500 people are actively involved in criminal networks in Sweden, and 50,000 have ties to the networks. - **AFP**

Rome cuts majestic trees near Colosseum

Rome has started cutting down ageing umbrella pines flanking the ancient Roman Forum after tests found a dozen were at risk of collapse.

Three large trees have fallen along the ceremonial avenue that links the Colosseum with Piazza Venezia since early January, slightly injuring three people.

The Italian capital’s umbrella pines are as much a part of the landscape as the ruins and cobbled streets, and residents are fiercely attached to them.

Yesterday – a rare day of sunshine following almost daily downpours – tree surgeons could be seen cutting through branches, the sound of electric saws echoing along the Forum.

“It’s sad to cut them down, they’re so majestic,” Portuguese tourist Margarida Dos Santos Fernandes, 53, told AFP. “It’s a shame, but apparently it’s for everyone’s benefit.”

The pines provide welcome shade during the summer months, but they have grown increasingly fragile, partly because of climate change with the weather in Rome marked by alternating periods of extreme heat and intense rainfall.

Authorities closed the panoramic road which is often packed with tourists, and convened a technical committee to investigate the problem.



Workers cut a pine tree along Rome’s Imperial Forum avenue. Tree surgeons cut down historic pines near Rome’s Colosseum yesterday, a fortnight after three people were hurt when a massive tree fell near the Imperial Forum. - **AFP**

It said in a statement yesterday that 12 of the first 36 trees tested in the vicinity of the forum were unstable, while 24 were either considered secure or required further checks.

The area has 54 historic pines, many around 120 years old.

The Rome statement said officials hoped to partially reopen the avenue to pedestrians from Monday, while additional tests continue on the remaining trees.

“The removed pines will be

replaced with specimens of the same species, of suitable size and age,” the statement said.

Besides suffering from extreme weather, many pines which used to dot Rome have succumbed in recent years to an invasion of the Pine Tortoise Scale parasite.

City officials estimated two years ago that up to 80% of its 60,000 pines were infested and launched a programme to try to counter the deadly pest. - **AFP/Reuters**

Heritage and sustainability take centre stage at Halal Qatar Festival 2026

The Halal Qatar Festival 2026 continues to draw large crowds as breeders from Qatar and across the region showcase prized livestock in competitions that celebrate heritage, sustainability, and the enduring bond between desert life and animal husbandry.

The festival, taking place at Katara Cultural Village's southern area until February 16, unfolded in a traditional atmosphere that reflects the depth of Qatari and Gulf heritage and its close connection to livestock, a fundamental pillar of desert life.

Visitors showed significant interest in the accompanying shows and competitions, as well as in the specialised pavilions displaying breeding supplies and products linked to the Bedouin environment. This underlines the festival's position as an annual platform that brings together breeders and enthusiasts while documenting an important aspect of Qatari and Gulf identity.

Yesterday's competitions in the Arab sheep and Awarid categories demonstrated the high quality of local production and strong competition among participants. It highlights the festival's growing status as a specialised platform for supporting breeders and preserving authentic breeds. These competitions align with the festival's commitment to supporting local production, encouraging breeders, advancing the livestock sector, and strengthening its sustainability.



Visual artists added a cultural and aesthetic dimension to the festival through live paintings inspired by livestock and the Qatari environment, allowing visitors to engage directly

with the creative process. Maryam al-Mulla expressed pride in participating, noting that Katara's events offer artists a meaningful opportunity to create within national heritage contexts, presenting a decorative cubist-style painting using symbolic traditional colours.

Lulwa al-Mughisib described her first participation as a rich experience that evokes traditional professions and crafts practised by ancestors. Asmaa Shukr explained that her work portrayed sheep within a natural environment inspired by Qatar's landscape, reflecting the relationship between humans and livestock and marking an important milestone in her artistic journey.

Khaled Hijazi highlighted how live painting in the festival setting encourages direct interaction with audiences and strengthens the connection between art and heritage, while artist Amal al-Abdullah presented a work depicting a tender human scene symbolising protection and closeness between shepherd and flock, reflecting the value of livestock in Qatari society.

Halal Qatar Festival 2026 continues to attract visitors and enthusiasts through a comprehensive programme that blends traditional competitions, educational activities, and artistic participation. It reflects Katara's commitment to preserving heritage while presenting it in a contemporary spirit that balances authenticity and creativity.



AgriteQ 2026 draws global experts

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The Scientific Conference tackles pressing topics such as climate change mitigation, sustainable waste management, and innovative agricultural technologies. Sessions included presentations on decentralised bokashi fermentation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the production of quantum carbon points from biochar derived from food waste, and the use of locally sourced modified biochar to enhance vegetable production. Researchers also shared strategies to improve crop quality and yield in both greenhouse and open-field conditions in Qatar.

Spanning 40,000sq m, AgriteQ 2026 features more than 520 exhibitors from 41 countries. The exhibition covers a wide range of sectors, including plant and animal production, fisheries and aquaculture, horticulture, food industries, transport and logistics, biotechnology, and smart agricultural systems. Organisers said the event not only showcases innovations but also fosters collaboration, knowledge exchange, and partnerships that are vital for a sustainable and resilient agricultural future.

PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



Qatari innovators win six medals at Kuwait International Invention Exhibition

QNA
Doha

Qatari inventors participating in the 16th International Invention Exhibition in the Middle East, held in Kuwait over four days, won six medals (three gold and three silver), amidst competition from more than 200 inventions from around the world.

The innovators' participation was supported by the Ministry of Sports and Youth, represented by the Qatar Science Club, showcasing the best Qatari innovations developed recently.

The gold medallists were: Shahd Ahmed al-Sulaiti for her invention of a smart helmet, a result of fruitful co-operation between the Qatar Science Club and the Public Works

Authority through the Future Engineer programme; Hessa Mansour al-Nuaimi for her invention of an ultrasonic fire extinguishing device; and Al Jawhara Mohammed al-Shammari for her invention of a drone for monitoring fungal diseases inside greenhouses.

The silver medals were awarded to: Mohammed Hassan al-Sayed for his invention of an advanced coral reef map; Hessa Ibrahim al-Kuwari for her invention of a medication reminder device; and Mohsen Hussein al-Sheikh, representing the GCC General Secretariat for his invention of a smart e-commerce platform.

In this regard, Engineer Abdulrahman Saleh Khamis, head of the delegation participating in the exhibition, commended the outstanding participation of the young innovators who represented the State of

Qatar so well, wishing them continued success and excellence in international scientific forums.

For her part, Engineer Noor al-Kuwari from the Public Works Authority expressed her pride in the young Qatari inventors as they discussed and defended their inventions in an enthusiastic and confident atmosphere. She noted their distinguished presence at the exhibition, which qualified them for these advanced positions.

She also thanked the Qatar Science Club, which has always been at the forefront of supporting innovators and guiding them to the global arena of innovation.

The Middle East International Invention Exhibition is a prestigious international scientific platform that brings together innovators from various scientific and technological fields, ena-



bling them to market and manufacture their innovations, while also fostering direct communication with investors, reflecting the exhibition's motto: "Meeting

Investors and Inventors."

The exhibition enjoys the support of prominent international organisations such as the World Intellectual Property Organisation

(WIPO), the International Federation of Inventors' Associations (IFIA), and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco).