



Qatar Insurance Financial Results (FY 2025)

Gross Written
Premiums (GWP)

9%
QAR 9.9B

Net Profit
Before the Impact of
Pillar Two Taxes

19%
QAR 874M

Net Profit
Profit attributable to
QIC shareholders

9%
QAR 791M

Earnings
Per Share:

10%
QAR 0.188

qic-group.com

GULF TIMES



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BUSINESS | Page 1

Qatar's hospitality
sector to focus on
selective high-quality
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expansion: CWQ

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Thousands offer Ramadan's first Friday prayer at Al-Aqsa

Agencies
Jerusalem

An estimated 80,000 Palestinians performed the first Friday prayer of Ramadan at Al-Aqsa Mosque despite strict Israeli restrictions. The Jerusalem Governorate stated that Israeli forces prevented thousands from reaching the mosque, turning back worshippers at Qalandia and (300) checkpoints. Security measures around the mosque and the city were intensified, and over 300 Jerusalemites were recently barred from entering Al-Aqsa during Ramadan.



Many entered Jerusalem's Old City through Damascus Gate to reach the mosque, Islam's third holiest site, with hundreds of people heading in the same direction under the watchful eye of Israeli police. Thousands stood shoulder to shoulder in the mosque's compound as the prayer resonated on speakers. While most worshippers live in east Jerusalem, some crossed Israeli checkpoints to reach the mosque from the occupied West Bank, including at Qalandia, the main passage point between Jerusalem and Ramallah. An AFP journalist witnessed a large crowd waiting to be allowed in

by Israeli soldiers, while troops in riot gear stood by. The Islamic Waqf, the Jordanian-run body that administers the site, reported that 80,000 worshippers came to the compound for the prayer. Israel deployed thousands of extra police officers in Jerusalem to watch over the holy city for the length of Ramadan, and issued the same travel restrictions as last year for Palestinian residents of the West Bank - which Israel has occupied since 1967.

Israel announced it was issuing just 10,000 permits for Pal-

estinians living in the occupied West Bank wishing to attend weekly Friday prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan, only available to women over 50, men over 55, and children under 12. Um Awad, a West Bank Palestinian woman who applied for a permit that was denied, was not allowed to cross the checkpoint into Jerusalem. "They are only allowing a small number to obtain permits. We tried and applied, some obtained permits, while others were denied. It is wrong for them to prevent us from praying," she told AFP.

Qatar reiterates its steadfast support for Palestinian cause

- \$1bn pledge to Middle East Peace Council amid renewed diplomatic push
- Strong condemnation of settlement expansion and annexation measures

QNA
New York

Qatar has reiterated its firm commitment to the Palestinian cause and to the resilience of the Palestinian people, highlighting that any just and lasting settlement must be grounded in international legitimacy and the two-state solution. Doha affirmed its support for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, while pledging to continue working with international partners to promote security and stability across the region.

The position was outlined in a statement delivered by HE Sheikhha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani, Qatar's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, during a Security Council briefing at the UN headquarters in New York on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian issue.

Separately, Qatar announced a \$1bn contribution to support the work of the Middle East Peace Council, aimed at advancing a final settlement that fulfils Palestinian aspirations for an internationally recognised state. The announcement was made by HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, during the council's inaugural meeting in Washington, chaired by US President Donald Trump. Addressing the gathering, HE the Prime Minister stressed Qatar's longstanding role in mediation efforts and its continued commitment to achieving a fair, comprehensive, and durable resolution to the conflict. He noted that decades of instability have exacted a heavy toll on the region and beyond, calling for intensified collective action to end suffering and foster coexistence.



HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani attending the Board of Peace meeting in Washington.

HE added that the council would move forward with implementing its 20-point plan within a defined timeframe, ensuring justice and mutual trust for both Palestinians and Israelis. Qatar, he said, would continue co-ordinating humanitarian and reconstruction efforts with UN partners and the Peace Council to meet urgent needs and promote sustainable peace grounded in the Palestinian people's right to self-determination.

HE Sheikhha Alya, in her address, warned against what she described as illegal Israeli measures aimed at imposing sovereignty over occupied Palestinian territories, expanding settlements, and creating a new legal and administrative reality in the West Bank. She cited recent decisions to designate occupied lands as "state lands" under Israeli control as part of broader attempts to accelerate annexation and displace Palestinians.

Qatar condemned these actions as violations of international law and an extension of policies that undermine Palestinian rights. She stressed the need for the international community to act collectively to pressure Israel to halt such measures and prevent further escalation.



HE Sheikhha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani at the UN Security Council briefing.

Qatar also expressed deep concern over repeated violations of the ceasefire, describing them as a dangerous escalation that threatens prospects for stability. The statement emphasised the importance of full compliance with agreed arrangements to ensure the success of the next phase of the comprehensive peace framework and the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2803. Doha reiterated that sustained de-escalation and adherence to international resolutions remain essential steps toward preventing further deterioration and laying the groundwork for meaningful negotiations.

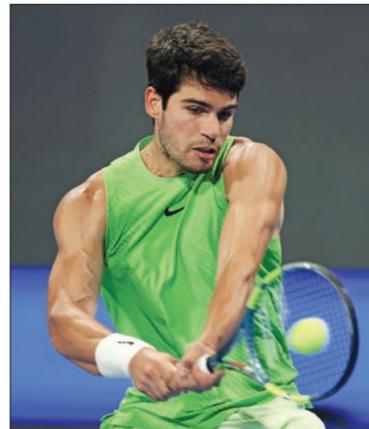
RAMADAN THOUGHT

O you who believe! Enter perfectly in Islam (by obeying all the rules and regulations of the Islamic religion) and follow not the footsteps of Shaitan (Satan). Verily! He is to you a plain enemy. (Qur'an 2: 208)

Prayer times
Fajr...4.47; Zuhr...11.48; Asr...3.05; Maghrib...5.34; Isha...7.04

Fasting times
Iftar today 5.34pm
Imsak tomorrow..... 4.36am

Alcaraz blazes into Doha final



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz in action during his semi-final match against Russia's Andrey Rublev on day five of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex in Doha yesterday. Alcaraz, the top seed, won 7-6, 6-4.

Sport Page 1

Ramadan reinforces demand for gold in Qatar despite record global prices

QNA
Doha

The holy month of Ramadan continues to consolidate its position as a peak season for the gold market in Qatar, despite unprecedented global price levels for the precious metal, which have recently surpassed the \$5,000 per ounce threshold for the first time in history.

This year's Ramadan coincides with a historic surge in gold prices, driven by a complex interplay of geopolitical tensions, supply-chain disruptions, and shifts in the monetary policies of major central banks toward easing cycles and diversification of reserve assets. These global developments have been directly reflected in local market prices, pushing retail gold rates in Qatar to record highs.

Gold traders told Qatar News

Agency (QNA) that demand has not been significantly undermined by the sharp price increases. On the contrary, growing awareness of gold's role as a long-term investment and store of value has reinforced consumer confidence, even as some market participants anticipate adjustments in purchasing patterns among certain segments due to higher costs. This divergence highlights evolving consumer behaviour under the influence of global economic uncertainty.

In this context, Ali Salah al-Yafai stressed that Ramadan remains a key barometer of the vitality of the local gold market, noting that record price levels are unlikely to weaken demand and may instead strengthen confidence among a broad segment of consumers in gold as a reliable hedge against economic volatility.

He explained that the price of 24-karat gold recently exceeded



Gold traders say demand has not been significantly undermined by the sharp increase in prices.

QR595 per gram, compared with around QR360 during the same period last year, while 21-karat gold stabilised above QR520 per gram, up from approximately QR315 in 2025. Despite the sharp

increases, he noted that many buyers still consider current levels acceptable entry points, supported by expectations of continued upward momentum over the medium term. **To Page 2**

Trump vows 10% global tariff after US Supreme Court ruling

President Donald Trump vowed yesterday to impose a 10% tariff on all imports into the United States after the Supreme Court issued a ruling yesterday striking down the sweeping global tariffs. The conservative-majority top court ruled (six-three) that a 1977 law known as the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) Trump has relied on "does not authorise the president to impose tariffs."

Trump, who had nominated two of the justices who repudiated him, responded furiously, alleging without any evidence that the court was influenced by foreign interests. "I'm ashamed of certain members of the court, absolutely ashamed, for not having the courage to do what's right for our country," Trump told reporters. Trump said he would use a separate authority to impose a uniform tariff of 10% - after he spent the past year imposing various rates spontaneously to cajole and punish other countries. "In order to protect our country, a president can actually charge more tariffs than I was charging in the past," Trump said, insisting that the ruling left him "more powerful."

Business groups largely cheered the ruling, with the National Retail Federation saying this "provides much-needed certainty" for American firms and manufacturers. "We urge the lower court to ensure a seamless process to refund the tariffs to US importers," the federation said. But the justices did not address the degree to which importers can receive refunds. This will likely be litigated. Delighted Democratic leaders pounced on the ruling, with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer lauding the outcome as a "win for the wallets" of US consumers. But top Democrat on the Senate Banking Committee Elizabeth Warren cautioned there remains "no legal mechanism for consumers and many small businesses to recoup the money they have already paid." The European Union said it was studying the court ruling and will remain in close contact with the Trump administration. **(AFP) Page 6**

Circular issued on student enrolment, relocation process

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) has issued a circular outlining instructions to regulate the enrolment and transfer of students in public schools for the upcoming academic year 2026-27.

These instructions are intended to streamline procedures for parents and ensure schools are ready to receive students early, the ministry highlighted in a statement, indicating that the first of these steps includes the automated relocation of students from one school to another after finishing their studies, namely students in kindergarten, fourth grade in model schools for boys, sixth grade, and ninth grade.

The statement noted that schools will begin finalising these measures internally during February 2026, and parents shall receive the relocation notifications from March 29-31, 2026.

As for enrolling new students or students who wish to transfer between schools, the ministry has provided the "Maaref" portal for public services for students to do so online based on a streamlined timeline.

The first phase commences on April 12, 2026, for students who are siblings of Qatari citizens, children of Qatari women, and children of citizens of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states.

The registration periods continue to include all students, beginning on May 24, 2026, with enrolment reopening at the start of the new school year on August 25, and remaining open until October 1, 2026, to ensure that every family has the opportunity to register their children.



Regarding age eligibility, the MoEHE has set the cutoff date as December 31, 2026.

Based on this, children born by the end of 2022 are eligible for kindergarten, those born by the end of 2021 are eligible for pre-kindergarten, and children born by December 31, 2020, are eligible to enrol in first grade, the statement read.

As such, the ministry exempted Qatari students born in January and February from the minimum enrolment age conditions from kindergarten through fourth grade.

In addition, the MoEHE is committed to providing educational opportunities for the sons and daughters of residents working in the private sector, alongside those residing in remote and rural areas, by allocating 18 schools geographically distributed for them.

These schools are Al Shamal Primary, Preparatory, and Secondary Schools for Boys and Girls; Al Zubara Primary, Preparatory, and Secondary School for Boys; Al Kaaban Primary, Preparatory, and Secondary Schools for Boys and Girls; Al Ghuwairiya Primary, Preparatory, and Secondary School for Girls; Al Jemaliya Primary, Preparatory, and Secondary Schools for Boys and Girls; Dukhan Primary, Preparatory, and Secondary Schools for Boys and Girls; Rawdat Rashid Primary, Preparatory, and Secondary School for Girls;

Al Karaana Primary, Preparatory, and Secondary Schools for Boys and Girls; and Al Kharsaa Primary, Preparatory, and Secondary Schools for Boys and Girls.

There are conditions for enrolment in the aforementioned schools, the statement said, including presenting proof of actual residence in those areas, such as an attested residential lease agreement or a utility bill in the name of the parents.

As for students with disabilities, the circular outlined that any potential cases of difficulty in learning or speech disorders should be directly registered in schools, while autism as well as mental and auditory disabilities should be referred to via the student support service centre to ensure proper evaluation.

The ministry urges parents to start preparing the required documents, such as QIDs, birth certificates, and health files, as a prerequisite for registration, along with proof of employment for students whose parents are residents, to ensure the swift completion of their transactions.

Accordingly, the ministry advises using the "Where is My School" electronic system, which allows parents to determine the school suitable for their residential location and ensures a smooth start for their students at the beginning of the new year. - QNA

MoI urges public to treat Early-Warning System messages with diligence

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has urged the public to treat the messages sent through the Early-Warning System with great importance and seriousness and follow those instructions with due diligence.

The ministry stated in a release that, recently, messages were sent through the system, coinciding with reduced horizontal visibility due to fog in many parts of the country.

The MoI said that "it was conducted to test the system's efficiency, alert levels, and the speed of message delivery to the public under real-world conditions".

The ministry further noted in the statement that the Early Warning System mechanism serves as an immediate alert mechanism used in emergency situations.



"Messages are sent to all the systems, including those set to silent mode, enabling the public to take necessary precautions in a timely manner," it said.

The ministry also highlighted that this system is not used in ordinary situations or routine notifications or general awareness.

It is activated only under exceptional circumstances requiring urgent warning to protect lives and property.

Ramadan reinforces gold demand in Qatar despite record prices

From Page 1

Al-Yafai also highlighted a noticeable improvement in financial awareness among consumers, with gold increasingly viewed as a strategic long-term asset rather than merely a form of personal adornment.

He anticipated stronger purchasing activity throughout Ramadan - traditionally one of the most active seasons for gold sales - particularly from the beginning of the month until the night of Garangao celebrations, affirming that demand has not been materially affected by global price surges.

Jassim Ahmed al-Yafai similarly expects demand to remain robust, especially during the first half of Ramadan, driven by sustained interest in traditional Qatari jewellery designs which are increasingly valued not only for their aesthetic appeal but also as family heirlooms passed down through generations.

He pointed to a shift in consumer behaviour toward combining traditional jewellery purchases with small gold bars or coins, reflecting a hedging approach that balances cultural preferences with investment considerations and liquidity needs, thereby offering greater financial flexibility to consumers.

Conversely, Nasser al-Awlaqi ruled out a significant increase in overall sales volumes compared with previous years, attributing this to the rapid escalation in prices over a short period, which could weigh on the purchasing power of some consumer segments.

He noted that the near doubling of gold prices per gramme compared with a year earlier may encourage some buyers to reduce quantities or opt for lighter-weight pieces, emphasising that retail demand tends to remain more sensitive to price fluctuations than investment-driven demand.

Against this backdrop, Qatar's gold market enters the Ramadan season amid a complex set of factors that heighten uncertainty surrounding price trajectories, while simultaneously reinforcing gold's status as a safe-haven asset and dependable store of value.

Despite global market volatility and the rapid pace of economic and monetary shifts, gold continues to maintain strong appeal among both consumers and investors, supported by seasonal demand rooted in social traditions and the cultural significance of the Holy Month.

As a result, the precious metal remains a pillar of relative stability in the local market, even amid heightened global uncertainty. - QNA

Fasting - a case of divine compassion

Both reason and revelation confirm that Allah, The Most Exalted, does not make obligatory that which does not benefit His servants nor does He prohibit that which is not harmful.

Some of us may in fact recognise some of these benefits and detriments on which divine commands and prohibitions are predicated.

Indeed, as Allah has placed wisdom in His creations, He has also placed wisdom in His Law.

For Allah is Wise in His Actions; He does not create something that has no value nor does He enact a law that is frivolous or of no significance.

Almighty Allah, in His Mercy and through His Knowledge of man's complex nature, has mandated fasting through gradual stages.

In fact, this progressive and forbearing method is not only evident in fasting but in all that Allah has ordered and prohibited.

Take for example the prohibition of alcohol.

Allah has regulated drinking gradually until the last and final prohibition came in the verse (which means): "O you who have believed, indeed, intoxicants, gambling, [sacrificing on] stone altars [to other than Allah], and divining arrows are but defilement from the work of Satan, so avoid it that you may be successful." [Qur'an 5:90]

Stages in Mandating Fasting

As regards fasting, it was mandated through three stages.

In the first stage, Allah granted the believers a choice to either fast during Ramadan or feed a poor person for each day of fasting.

In the second stage, fasting was made mandatory but if one happened to go to bed before breaking one's fast, one would be obliged to continue one's fast until the next day's Iftar time (sunset). [Al-Bukhari, the Book of Fasting]

Later, these two stages were abrogated and Ramadan fasting took the final shape that Muslims practise today.

What is more, Allah, The Most Exalted, has made feeding poor people an alternative to fasting for the elderly or those who are unable to endure certain challenging conditions.

For travellers and the sick, fasting is not obligatory but the days missed must be fulfilled in the future, as soon as circumstances permit, as Allah says (what means): "...and whoever is ill or on

a journey - then an equal number of other days. Allah intends for you ease and does not intend for you hardship and [wants] for you to complete the period and to glorify Allah for that [to] which He has guided you; and perhaps you will be grateful." [Qur'an 2:185]

Not only did Allah break down the obligation of fasting into three stages, He also presented these stages in an attractive and appealing fashion so that we would willfully accept fasting and hope for its rewards.

In the first stage, it was the option in choosing whether to fast or feed the poor.

Allah then coupled this option with encouragement to mankind to fast, as He, The Most Exalted, says (what means): "And upon those who are able [to fast, but with hardship] - a ransom [as substitute] of feeding a poor person [each day]. And whoever volunteers excess - it is better for him. But to fast is best for you, if you only knew." [Qur'an 2:184]

This stage of fasting paved the way for the following stage - the last stage in which fasting is made absolute and obligatory on all mankind in the verse (which means): "The month of Ramadan [is that] in which was revealed the Qur'an, a guidance for the people and clear proofs of guidance and criterion. So whoever sights [the new moon of] the month, let him fast it." [Qur'an 2:185].

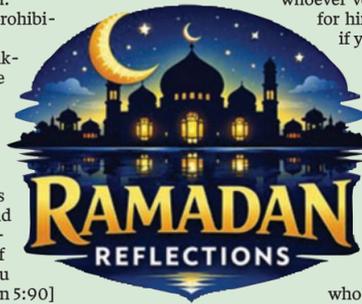
However, the licence to make it up still remains for those with substantial excuses.

And along with this last stage, Allah has brought forth His Forgiveness and Mercy, as He says (what means): "It has been made permissible for you the night preceding fasting to go to your wives [for sexual relations]. They are clothing for you and you are clothing for them. Allah knows that you used to deceive yourselves, so He accepted your repentance and forgave you." [Qur'an 2:187]

No doubt, fasting in this flexible manner is a blessing that deserves our gratitude.

And for this very reason Allah ended the verses of fasting with gratitude, such as the verse (which means): "Allah intends for you ease and does not intend for you hardship and [wants] for you to complete the period and to glorify Allah for that [to] which He has guided you; and perhaps you will be grateful." [Qur'an 2:185]

Article source: <http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/>



Municipality Ministry launches new e-services

The Ministry of Municipality has announced the launch of four new electronic services for Fisheries Resources Management, as part of the ministry's Digital Transformation Project to facilitate procedures and provide services around the clock through electronic channels.

The new services are Marine Vessel Registration Cancellation, Marine Vessel Registration Amendment Request, Marine Vessel Ownership Transfer to Heirs, and Marine Vessel Ownership Modification Service (addition or removal of a partner, and ownership status).

These services are meant to facilitate the related procedures and provide easy access to users from anywhere, anytime, while remaining accurate and easy to verify via links to the relevant government systems.

As part of the Digital Transformation Project for Public Services:
The Ministry of Municipality Launches Four New Electronic Services for Fisheries Management



Ministry holds introductory session on Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic Language

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) hosted a broad introductory session on the Doha Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language to explore how this major scholarly resource can be leveraged to support curriculum development and foster students' sense of cultural identity.

The director of the MoEHE's Educational Guidance Administration, Maryam Naaman al-Emadi, said that this lexicography is a civilisational project and an incredible addition to human knowledge, as it rereads the history of Arabic lexicons in their time and civilisational contexts.

She further noted that such a project embodies Qatar's commitment, under the judicious leadership, to supporting grand knowledge projects that serve the Arab and Islamic nations.

The executive director of the Doha Historical

Dictionary of the Arabic Language, Dr Mohamed al-Obaidi, emphasised that this monumental achievement is Qatar's gift to the nation.

He stressed that the dictionary sets the Arabic language in its well-deserved status among the international languages.

The project has succeeded, he said, in navigating the hindrances encountered in previous attempts since the beginning of the 20th century by pursuing a strict scientific approach and accurate regulations in terms of authorship.

He underlined the criticality of this resource in the pedagogical field, affirming that it literally protects learners and teachers from losing today's meanings from heritage texts, broadens new horizons to renovate teaching methodologies, and takes linguistic learners on a joyful exploration journey, positioning itself as a robust

foundation for further enhancement of a professional school lexicography.

Dr al-Obaidi touched on the role of the dictionary in enhancing Arabic artificial intelligence (AI) through the availability of tremendous and structured data.

The session included a primer presented by Dr Khalid al-Jabr, the dictionary's linguistic expert, showcasing how to use the online portal and conduct searches by word and root, followed by a discussion with educators on best practices for integrating the dictionary into classroom instruction.

Upon wrapping up the session, Maha Qaqa al-Ruwaili honoured the members of the dictionary in recognition of their efforts to accomplish this pioneering national project that bolsters linguistic identity in the education field. - QNA

BPS students shine in Infinity Maths Quiz contest in Mumbai

A proud moment for Birla Public School (BPS), Doha, as the students from the secondary section showcased their mathematical brilliance in the Infinity Maths Quiz 2026 - an international competition held at Aditya Birla World Academy, Mumbai, from January 8-10.

A highlight of the competition was the individual round titled "Clash of Mathematicians," in which Dhruv Amit Gaur and Niranjani Smithesh Jayaram represented the school and were awarded bronze medals.

The competition witnessed enthusiastic participation from

schools across India. The highly competitive quiz featured 60 teams comprising 180 students in the senior category. Participants were challenged through a series of rigorous individual and team-based rounds, designed to test their mathematical reasoning, analytical thinking, problem-solving skills, and ability to collaborate under pressure.

Birla Public School was represented by Dhruv Amit Gaur, Niranjani Smithesh Jayaram, and Adnan of Class X. In the team-based rounds - "Bulb Your Ideas," "Pass the Baton," and the "Team Challenge" - the team secured a

position within the top 30% of all participating teams. This noteworthy achievement earned the team certificates and a memento. Additionally, all three participants received Merit Certificates in recognition of their overall performance in the quiz. The students were trained under the guidance of Shibu PS, head of the Department of Mathematics. The team was accompanied by Shiju Mathew of the Mathematics Department.

The school management and the senior leadership team congratulated the students and the teachers for the remarkable achievement.



KMCC Qatar holds mega blood donation camp

The Kerala Muslim Cultural Centre (KMCC Qatar), a community organisation of expatriates from Kerala, recently organised a mega blood donation camp in association with Qatar National Blood Donation Centre at Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC).

The camp received an overwhelming response with 121 KMCC members donating blood.

The event was presided over by KMCC Qatar president Dr Abdul Samad. Kerala legislative assembly member Aryadan Shoukath inaugurated.

"The event underscored the community's commitment to

humanitarian service and supporting Qatar's healthcare system by contributing lifesaving blood supplies.

The initiative aligns with ongoing efforts to maintain adequate blood stocks for patients in need across Qatar's hospitals. Such collaborative camps play a vital role in encouraging regular blood donation," Dr Samad said.

"Organising this mega blood donation camp in collaboration with the Qatar National Blood Donation Centre at Hamad Medical Corporation is a testament to our community's spirit of service and solidarity. Every

drop of blood donated has the power to save lives, and I am deeply grateful to all our volunteers, donors, and the dedicated team from HMC for making this possible. We remain committed to such noble initiatives that benefit society and strengthen our ties with Qatar," he added.

KMCC Qatar has a long history of engaging in social welfare activities, including relief efforts, charitable programmes and health-related drives. This latest blood donation camp continues that tradition, highlighting the organisation's role in promoting community welfare and humanitarian values.



South Sudan's new cybersecurity law alarms journalists

AFP
Juba

South Sudan journalists have raised alarm over a new cybersecurity law they fear could undermine press freedom in the world's youngest nation, as it grapples with renewed tensions across several regions.

In recent weeks, hostilities have escalated between supporters of President Salva Kiir and those of his longtime rival Riek Machar, particularly in Jonglei State in the centre-east, where at least 280,000 people have been displaced, according to the United Nations.

Several journalists who spoke to AFP warned of possible misuse of the new legislation signed into law this week by Kiir, drawing parallels to the national security law "which has restricted press freedom since independence," according to multimedia journalist Woja Emmanuel Wani.

"Having worked in a harsh media environment marked by unlawful interference in journalistic work, arrests without warrants... killing of journalists without accountability, this law raises serious concerns about the future of a free press," Wani said.

According to the latest version of the law seen by AFP, publishing false information "with the intention of defaming, threatening, insulting, deceiving, or misleading" is now punishable by up to five years in prison.

The legislation also criminalises the publication of any communication deemed "harmful, abusive, or inappropriate," carrying a two-year jail sentence.

Another journalist, Morris Doga, expressed worry that investigative reporting exposing corruption and other abuses could face punishment under the new law "simply because some officials do not like scrutiny."

"Such reporting could easily be misinterpreted as spreading misinformation," Doga said.

He added that journalists also risk "increased surveillance," as the law authorises the interception of electronic communications in cases involving national security.

The government, however, has hailed the legislation as "historic," saying it establishes a legal framework to protect individuals, institutions and national infrastructure from cyber threats.

Government spokesperson Ateny Wek Ateny said at a press conference on Thursday that the law "targets abuses, not journalism." He stressed that "insulting someone personally is not freedom of expression, it is an abuse."

Last week, the country's Deputy Information Minister David Yau Yau called on journalists to "adopt the language" of the government to avoid "problems".

Freelance journalist Manyang David Mayar, whose reports have in the past been labeled as "anti-regime," fears the law may be "misused to suppress public opinion."

South Sudan has been plagued by civil war, poverty, and corruption since it declared independence from Sudan in 2011. It ranks 109th (out of 180 countries) in the global press freedom index compiled by the NGO Reporters Without Borders.

Gaza deaths in war's first 15 months 'higher than reported'

Reuters
Jerusalem

More than 75,000 Palestinians were killed in the first 15 months of Israel's military assault in Gaza, a figure far higher than the 49,000 deaths local health officials announced at the time, says a new study by *The Lancet Global Health* medical journal.

The peer-reviewed study, published on Wednesday, found that women, children and the elderly comprised some 56.2% of violent deaths in Gaza during that period, a composition that it said roughly aligned with reporting by Gaza's health ministry.

The field work was conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, run by Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki, who has carried out public opinion polling in the West Bank and Gaza for decades. The lead author is Michael Spagat, a professor at Royal Holloway, University of London.

The study is the first independent population survey of mortality in the Gaza Strip, said its authors, whose research involved surveying 2,000 Palestinian households over seven days starting on December 30, 2024.

"The combined evidence suggests that, as of Jan 5, 2025, 3-4% of the population of the Gaza Strip had been killed violently and there have been a substantial number of non-violent deaths caused indirectly by the conflict," the authors wrote.

The Gaza death toll has been bitterly disputed since Israel's assault began after the Hamas-led October 2023 storming of southern Israel. Gaza health au-



Displaced Palestinians walk along what used to be a main road, past tents housing displaced families erected between the rubble of homes and businesses destroyed by the Israeli military, in the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood of Gaza City, yesterday.

thorities, whose figures the UN has long deemed reliable, report more than 72,000 killed and estimate thousands more remain uncounted beneath destroyed buildings 28 months later.

Israel has questioned those tallies, citing Hamas control of the ministry, though a senior military officer told Israeli media last month its figures were broadly accurate - a view the army later said did not reflect official data.

Lancet researchers said their analysis contradicts claims of inflation and suggests the ministry numbers are, if anything, conservative under extreme conditions.

MORTALITY BASED ON FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS
Researchers who published a

statistical analysis last year for *The Lancet*, its flagship journal, found the health ministry likely undercounted deaths by about 40% during the first nine months of the war. The new research published yesterday appears to suggest an undercount by a similar margin.

Field staff, mostly female and experienced in surveying, conducted face-to-face interviews with Palestinians from households across Gaza's different districts, the authors wrote. The questionnaire, reviewed by Reuters, asks respondents to list individuals in their immediate household who were killed.

"We calculated mortality estimates as weighted sums. Each individual in the sample received a

weight representing the number of people in the Gaza Strip they represent," the authors wrote.

The authors wrote that the survey was the first on Gaza mortality that did not rely on administrative records from the health ministry. They said their results on violent deaths had a 95% confidence interval, a value that indicates how accurately a pollster has captured a data point.

There were an estimated 16,300 non-violent deaths during the first 15 months of the war, caused by disease, pre-existing conditions, accidents or other causes not directly related to combat, the authors wrote. These are separate from the 75,200 violent deaths estimated during that period.

Tehran says draft deal coming soon amid regional tension

AFP
Paris

US President Donald Trump said he was considering a limited strike on Iran after ordering a major naval buildup in the Middle East aimed at heaping pressure on Tehran to cut a deal to curb its nuclear programme.

The latest threat came after Iran's foreign minister said a draft proposal for an agreement with Washington would be ready in a matter of days following negotiations between the two sides in Geneva earlier this week.

Trump had suggested on Thursday that "bad things" would happen if Tehran did not strike a deal within 10 days, which he subsequently extended to 15.

Asked by a reporter yesterday whether he was contemplating a limited military strike, Trump

answered: "The most I can say - I am considering it."

After the talks in Geneva, Tehran said the two sides had agreed to submit drafts of a potential agreement, which Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told US media would be the "next step".

"I believe that in the next two, three days, that would be ready, and after final confirmation by my superiors, that would be handed over to Steve Witkoff," he said, referring to Trump's main Middle East negotiator.

Araghchi also said US negotiators had not requested that Tehran end its nuclear enrichment programme, contradicting statements from American officials.

"We have not offered any suspension, and the US side has not asked for zero enrichment," he said in an interview released yesterday by US TV network MS NOW.

"What we are now talking about

US aircraft carrier enters Mediterranean

The USS Gerald R Ford aircraft carrier was seen entering the Mediterranean Sea yesterday, where it was ordered by US President Donald Trump as part of a massive military buildup in the Middle East, AFP reported from Washington. The carrier was seen transiting the Strait of Gibraltar - which links the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean - in a photo taken from the Gibraltar side of the strait.



File photo of Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

Trump, who has repeatedly said Iran must not be allowed to enrich uranium at any level.

Western countries accuse the Islamic republic of seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, which Tehran denies, though it insists on its right to enrichment for civilian purposes. Iran, for its part, is seeking to negotiate an end to sanctions that have proven to be a massive drag on its economy.

Economic hardships sparked protests in December that evolved

into a nationwide anti-government movement last month, prompting a crackdown from authorities that left thousands dead, rights groups say.

The two nations held an initial round of discussions on February 6 in Oman, the first since previous talks collapsed during the 12-day Iran-Israel war last June, which the US joined by striking Iranian nuclear facilities.

Washington has pursued a major military build-up in the region in tandem with the talks, and both sides have traded threats of military action for weeks.

On Thursday, Trump again suggested the US would attack Iran if it did not make a deal within the timeframe he laid out.

"We have to make a meaningful deal otherwise bad things happen," Trump told the inaugural meeting of the "Board of Peace", his initiative for the post-war

Gaza Strip. Iran's ambassador to the UN, Amir Saeid Irvani, warned that US bases, facilities and assets would be "legitimate targets" if the United States followed through on its threats.

Araghchi, however, insisted that "there is no ultimatum".

"We only talk with each other how we can have a fast deal. And a fast deal is something that both sides are interested about," he said.

"We are under sanctions, (so) obviously any day that sanctions are terminated sooner it would be better for us," he said, adding Iran had "no reason to delay".

Washington has repeatedly called for zero enrichment, but has also sought to address Iran's ballistic missile programme and its support for fighter groups in the region - issues which Israel has pushed to include in the talks.



Hamas retakes control of daily life in Gaza

AFP
Gaza City

Hamas has reasserted control over large parts of Gaza from which the Israeli military withdrew under the US-sponsored ceasefire, exercising power through police and working to restart public administration.

The inaugural meeting of US President Donald Trump's "Board of Peace" on Thursday included an announcement on the recruitment of a new transitional Pales-

tinian police force in Gaza meant to take over security from Palestinian Hamas movement.

It also saw several countries pledge to send troops for the nascent International Stabilisation Force in the Gaza Strip, without any timetable set.

Hamas still refuses to lay down its arms under the conditions set by Israel, but it has pledged to hand over power, insisting it no longer wants to administer the territory it seized by force nearly 20 years ago.

"Everyone knows that Hamas possesses the real power in Gaza,"

said Jaber Shaaban, a displaced Palestinian living in a tent in Gaza City. "Hamas is the strongest and largest organised entity and it has power, police and a government," the 64-year-old added.

"Without Hamas, the committee cannot work," he said, referring to the 15-member Palestinian technocratic committee formed to handle day-to-day governance of Gaza.

Since a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel began on October 10, Gaza has been divided by a so-called "Yellow Line" beyond which Israeli forces are stationed and which leaves the military in control of just over half of the territory.

"Currently, we operate only in areas under Hamas control," said Abu Ashraf Barbah, a merchant who before the war supplied food items across the territory of more than 2mn Palestinians.

"The Hamas ministry is the one that deals with traders and controls the markets, while the Hamas police carry out campaigns against tax evaders," he added.

The newly-formed Palestinian technocratic body is primarily mandated to oversee civilian services such as health, education and municipal affairs.

Phase two of Trump's Gaza ceasefire plan, which the UN Security Council endorsed in November, stipulates that Hamas should disarm and the Strip's day-to-day governance be handed over to the technocratic committee.

But Israeli officials say Hamas still has around 20,000 fighters in Gaza and several thousand



Palestinians perform prayers during the first Friday of the holy month of Ramadan, at the war-damaged Great Omari Mosque, in Gaza City, yesterday.

rockets. The return to some form of public order is one of the challenges of the second phase, which the US launched last month.

Concrete results have been slow to materialise.

While waiting for the transitional authority to take shape, Gaza's existing police force — which answers to Hamas authorities — has returned to the streets since the ceasefire took effect.

AFP journalists reported that uniformed, armed police have deployed at major intersections, hospital entrances and government buildings, directing traffic and regulating markets.

With many police stations destroyed during Israeli air strikes, some units have resumed operations from temporary tents, residents said.

For traders, Hamas's influence is most visible.

"The one controlling everything

in Gaza's economy is Hamas," said 41-year-old merchant Samir Abu Adnan.

"Hamas has started collecting taxes, the ministry of economy publishes daily price lists, and the police and ministries are still affiliated with Hamas," he said.

Several traders confirmed to AFP that civil servants were collecting taxes in markets and shops, relying on police enforcement in cases of non-compliance.

In rare testimony to the media, a police captain in Gaza City told AFP that the force would maintain law and order regardless of who formally governs the territory.

"We are a police force that carries out the government's instructions," the 44-year-old officer said, declining to be identified for security reasons.

"We do not care who will be in the political leadership of the government," he added.

"What matters to me is that the incoming government is not affiliated with the occupation," he said, referring to Israel.

"If the committee takes over Gaza, we will help it."

But there is uncertainty over how the transitional technocratic committee would be deployed in the territory and what would happen to the current police force.

Amani Ashtawi, a teacher living in a tent in central Gaza, said the committee would need "very strong support from the Palestinian Authority, Egypt and America to be able to govern Gaza".

"The committee faces a long and difficult road because Hamas controls the levers of life in Gaza," Ashtawi added.

For merchant Abu Adnan, Hamas still "holds the power".

"If the committee takes over, it will need Hamas's approval for every decision," he said.



Two displaced Palestinian boys, one carrying a pray mat on his shoulder, leave following the first Friday noon prayers of the holy month of Ramadan, outside the destroyed Al-Huda Mosque, in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday.

Lebanon says two killed in Israeli strike on Palestinian refugee camp

AFP
Sidon

Lebanon said an Israeli strike on the country's largest Palestinian refugee camp killed two people yesterday, with Israel's army saying it had targeted the Palestinian Hamas group.

The official National News Agency said "an Israeli drone" targeted a neighbourhood of the Ain al-Helweh camp, which is located on the outskirts of the southern city of Sidon.

Lebanon's health ministry said two people were killed in the raid. The NNA had earlier reported one dead and an unspecified number of wounded.

An AFP correspondent saw smoke rising from a building in

the densely populated camp as ambulances headed to the scene.

The Israeli army said in a statement that its forces "struck a Hamas command centre from which fighters operated", calling activity there "a violation of the ceasefire understandings between Israel and Lebanon" and a threat to Israel.

The Israeli military "is operating against the entrenchment" of the Palestinian group in Lebanon and will "continue to act decisively against Hamas fighters wherever they operate", it added.

Israel has kept up regular strikes on Lebanon despite a November 2024 ceasefire that sought to halt more than a year of hostilities with the Hezbollah group.

Israel has also struck targets belonging to Hezbollah's Pales-

tinian ally Hamas, including in a raid on Ain al-Helweh last November that killed 13 people.

The UN rights office had said 11 children were killed in that strike, which Israel said targeted a Hamas training compound, though the group denied it had military installations in Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

In October 2023, Hezbollah began launching rockets at Israel in support of Hamas at the outset of the Gaza war, triggering hostilities that culminated in two months of all-out war between Israel and the Lebanese fighter group.

On Sunday, Lebanon said an Israeli strike near the Syrian border in the country's east killed four people, as Israel said it targeted operatives from Palestinian fighter group Islamic Jihad.

UN's Sudan investigation reveals 'hallmarks of genocide' in El-Fasher

AFP
Geneva

The United Nations' independent fact-finding mission on Sudan said the siege and capture of El-Fasher by a paramilitary group bore "the hallmarks of genocide".

Its investigation concluded that the Rapid Support Forces' (RSF) seizure of the city in Darfur state in October had inflicted "three days of absolute horror" and called for those responsible to be brought to justice.

The mission warned that "urgent protection of civilians is needed, now more than ever" in neighbouring Kordofan state, the flashpoint of fighting since the RSF's capture of El-Fasher, which was marked by ethnic massacres, physical violations and detention.

"The scale, co-ordination and public endorsement of the operation by senior RSF leadership demonstrate that the crimes committed in and around El-Fasher were not random excesses of war," said mission chairman Mohamad Chande Othman.

"They formed part of a planned and organised operation that bears the defining characteristics of genocide."

Since April 2023, the conflict between Sudan's army and the paramilitary RSF has killed tens of thousands and forced 11mn people to flee their homes.

It has triggered what the UN says is one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

The UN Human Rights Council established the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan in October 2023, to begin gathering evidence of violations.

Its investigation into the takeover of El-Fasher, following an 18-month siege, concluded that thousands of people, particularly from the Zaghawa ethnic group, "were killed, physically violated or disappeared".

The Zaghawa is one of the area's largest non-Arab ethnic groups.

Chadian President Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno, who has been widely accused of funneling support to the RSF on behalf of the



British Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper speaks to the press before a UN Security Council meeting on Sudan at UN headquarters in New York.

"The scale, co-ordination and public endorsement of the operation by senior RSF leadership demonstrate that the crimes committed in and around El-Fasher were not random excesses of war"

United Arab Emirates, is also Zaghawa, which has led to tension among Deby's people across the border.

In a statement to AFP, the UAE expressed "deep concern" at the mission's findings and condemned "in the strongest terms the atrocities documented therein, including those committed by the RSF".

The mission interviewed 320 witnesses and victims from El-Fasher and the surrounding areas, including in investigative visits to Chad and South Sudan.

It authenticated, verified and corroborated 25 videos.

Survivors spoke of widespread killings, including indiscriminate shootings, and mass executions at exit points. They described seeing roads filled with the bodies of men, women and children, the mission said. The report also detailed detention, torture, humiliation, extortion, ransom and disappearances.

Widespread physical violations targeted women and girls particularly the Zaghawa, it added.

Physical violations was often committed in locations where

mass killings had taken place, including at El-Saudi Hospital and at El-Fasher University.

Concluding that the RSF had acted "with genocidal intent", the mission found "at least three underlying acts of genocide were committed".

These included killing members of a protected ethnic group and causing serious bodily or mental harm.

"The RSF acted with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, the Zaghawa and Fur communities in El-Fasher. These are the hallmarks of genocide," said investigator Mona Rishmawi.

The mission said such levels of atrocity had been reached because the perpetrators acted with impunity. Reacting to the report at the UN Security Council on Thursday, UN Under Secretary General Rosemary DiCarlo said: "Strong action by the Security Council is more important than ever."

Chairing the meeting, British Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper said: "There's page after page of the most distressing accounts imaginable. It is horrific."

Eighteen dead in vehicle collision in Egypt

A minibus carrying fish-farm workers collided with a heavy truck in Egypt, killing 18 people, local media said, AFP reported from Cairo.

The minibus was transporting its passengers from Dakahlia governorate, near the northeastern city of Port Said, to their workplace when it collided on Thursday with the truck along the June 30 Axis, a main northern corridor. Dakahlia governor Tarek Marzouk yesterday mourned the "martyrs", according to a statement from his office published on Facebook.

Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly offered his condolences to the families of the victims and

ordered they be financially compensated. According to the newspaper Al-Shorouk, the collision was caused by "excessive speed, compounded by reduced visibility due to bad weather conditions".

The authorities have not yet released an official death toll. Traffic collisions are frequent in Egypt, where roads are often in disrepair. In 2024, more than 5,200 road deaths were recorded across the country, according to government statisticians. Traffic laws are also widely flouted, with the interior ministry yesterday pointing to 111,583 traffic violations in 24 hours.

Norway moves some of its 60 soldiers in Middle East due to security situation

Reuters
Copenhagen

Norway is relocating some of the around 60 soldiers it has in the Middle East to Norway as well as to other countries in the region on security grounds, a spokesperson for the Norwegian armed forces said yesterday.

US President Donald Trump warned Iran on Thursday it must make a deal over its nuclear programme or "really bad things" will happen, setting a deadline of 10 to 15 days, drawing a threat from Te-

hran to retaliate against US bases in the region if attacked. Norway declined to say how many soldiers it was relocating and which locations were affected.

"These are soldiers who have jobs like training local forces and other missions," Lieutenant Colonel Vegard Finberg from the Norwegian Joint Headquarters told Reuters.

"The way the situation is now, it's not possible for them to do their primary tasks, and that's why we are relocating them," he said, adding other nations had made similar moves in recent days.

Norway has forces stationed in several sites in Iraq and other nearby countries.

Ghana petitions maritime tribunal over border dispute with Togo

Ghana said yesterday it would settle its long-running maritime boundary dispute with neighbouring Togo through international arbitration, after nearly a decade of negotiations failed to produce an agreement, AFP reported from Accra.

Government spokesman Felix Kwakye

Oforu said Accra had notified Lome that the border would be delimited under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea framework. "This follows attempts at negotiating a boundary which have gone on for the past eight years but have not resulted in an agreed outcome," Oforu said.

He said the move was intended to pre-

vent "escalation of incidents that have created tensions" between the two west African countries. The decision mirrors Ghana's earlier arbitration against Ivory Coast, resolved through a 2017 ruling by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, and highlights Accra's push to secure legal certainty over offshore wa-

ters vital to its economy. While boundary disputes in the Gulf of Guinea are often linked to oil, a source at the Ghana Maritime Authority told AFP the stakes here were broader.

Ghana's offshore zone, covering tens of thousands of square kilometres, contains not only petroleum blocks but also key fish-

ing grounds and shipping lanes. The marine sector supplies most of the country's fish consumption and supports hundreds of thousands of coastal livelihoods, while around 90% of Ghana's trade moves by sea through ports such as Tema and Takoradi. Clear borders are also critical for energy investors wary of drilling in contested waters.

Ramadan prayers



People (above and below) attend Friday prayers during the holy month of Ramadan at the Lagos Central Mosque in Nigeria, yesterday.



Muslim worshippers listen to the Imam's sermon on the first Friday prayers of the holy month of Ramadan at the Al Maida Mosque Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya, yesterday.

Attackers kill at least 50, abduct women, children in Zamfara state

Reuters
Maiduguri

At least 50 people were killed and several women and children abducted after armed men attacked a village in Nigeria's northwestern Zamfara state, a state lawmaker told Reuters yesterday.

Hamsu A Faru, lawmaker representing Bukkuyum south, said the attackers raided Tungan Dutse village from around 5pm on Thursday until about 3:30am yesterday, burning down buildings and shooting

residents who tried to flee.

"They have been moving from one village to another ... leaving at least 50 people dead," Faru told Reuters by phone.

He said the number of abducted victims was yet to be determined. Traditional leaders and local government officials were still accounting for the missing.

A Zamfara state police spokesperson did not respond to calls seeking comment.

Abdullahi Sani, 41, a resident of Tungan Dutse, said three family members were killed in the attack.

"No one slept yesterday, we are all in pain," he said.

A day earlier, residents contacted security forces and local authority when they saw more than 150 motorcycles carrying armed men. But the warning was ignored, Sani said.

Insecurity is a pressing concern in Nigeria and the government is under mounting pressure to restore stability.

There has been a surge in attacks blamed on "bandits", who have carried out deadly assaults, abductions for ransom, and displaced communities across northern Nigeria.

Wednesday, which Kinshasa accepted "in principle", while not confirming that date, and Thursday brought a precarious lull in a region ravaged by 30 years of violence.

Since 2021 the region has laboured under the resurgence of the anti-government armed group M23, which has seized large swathes of territory in the provinces of North Kivu and South

Kivu, with the support of Kigali and its armed forces.

The armed group launched a new offensive in December on the town of Uvira, in the midst of the ratification of an agreement between the DRC and Rwanda under US mediation.

While Kinshasa immediately declared that it accepted "the principle" of the Angolan-brokered ceasefire, the M23 accused

From the sky, NGO searches for west African migrant boats in distress

AFP
Off the coast of the Canary Islands

Every hour is crucial when searching for distressed west African migrant boats in the Atlantic, where the long route and harsh weather easily spell disaster, a nonprofit that conducts aerial surveillance told AFP during a recent mission.

AFP rode along with the organisation Humanitarian Pilots Initiative (HPI) as it raced to locate several missing pirogues — long, rickety canoes — that had left The Gambia but never showed up at their final destination.

The mission: search an area larger than Switzerland, from hundreds of metres in the air, with an aim of rendering aid before it is too late.

"People could be dead or dying from dehydration, heat stroke or any other conditions," pilot Omar El Manfalouty said.

Migrants departing from west Africa and travelling up the Atlantic are usually trying to reach Europe via the Canary Islands off northwest Africa.

The Spanish archipelago is the jumping off point for their continued journey onward to the European continent.

With many recent departures taking place from further south in The Gambia and Guinea, migrants are now spending longer at sea and facing more hardships.

More than 3,000 migrants died in 2025 while attempting to reach Spain clandestinely, according to the Spanish NGO Caminando Fronteras.

While HPI has operated since 2016 in the central Mediterranean, it is a relative newcomer to the Atlantic.

In the Mediterranean, it has already helped spot more than 1,000 boats, alerting international NGO rescue ships which then go and help.

AFP flew with HPI on its third mission in nine months in the Atlantic, riding for several days in the NGO's Beechcraft Baron 58 nicknamed "Seabird".

"The Atlantic Ocean is huge. It's a vast area and it's impossible to cover it in its entirety," said El Manfalouty.

"We brought our longest-range aircraft here and we're focusing on the area which other actors cannot reach, approximately between 300 and 500 nautical miles from the Canaries," he said.

Once HPI spots a vessel, it sends an alert for emergency response to nearby merchant ships so that they can provide immediate support. From there, Spain's maritime safety and rescue authority, Salvamento Maritimo, takes over.

"Having an aircraft in the area to support from the air with 10 times the speed (of boats) makes a lot of sense," said Samira, the mission's tactical coordinator who asked not to use her last name due to threats the NGO receives in several European countries.

One morning in January the crew received an alert from another NGO that a boat which had departed The Gambia carrying 103 people, including nine women and three children, was missing. HPI quickly mobilised.

The trip from The Gambia to the Canaries is 1,000 nautical miles, meaning there is a vast region where the boat might be, Samira said. On her tablet, she plotted out several routes.

Once the plane reached the pa-

trol zone, the aircraft descended below cloud cover and followed straight, parallel trajectories. Three crew members kept their eyes glued to the windows for the pirogue.

While in the air they received word of another vessel: a second boat, which left The Gambia seven days earlier with 137 people on board.

With the strong winds and swell, "the boats may have drifted", Samira said.

Boats have previously drifted so far as to reach the Caribbean or South America without any survivors.

After three consecutive days of flying, the crew had covered nearly 3,800 nautical miles, but there was still no trace of the two boats.

Near a migrant reception centre in Las Palmas, a major city in the Canary Islands, Ousmane Ly, a recently arrived 25-year-old Senegalese man, gazed at the beach. Other migrants, also from Senegal, were taking advantage of the sunny day to take photos.

The joy of having made it outweighed the difficulty some were having walking after days crammed into a pirogue.

Their hands, arms and legs bore wounds caused by the salt water.

He recounted how once they boarded the pirogue, he and the other passengers were covered with a tarpaulin: "I closed my eyes and thought of my mother," he said.

The tarpaulin — used to protect them from the sun during the day and cold at night — was removed only 10 days later, when the boat was rescued by Salvamento Maritimo.

There were 108 people on board, two of whom were found dead during the rescue.



File photo shows migrants standing on a fiberglass boat wave at NGO Open Arms rescue boat "Astral" as they assist them in international waters south of Lampedusa, in the Mediterranean Sea.

Food aid in Somalia could halt within weeks due to funding shortages: WFP

Reuters
Geneva

The UN World Food Programme said yesterday its life-saving food and nutrition assistance in Somalia could grind to a halt by April unless new funding is secured, putting millions of people at risk of worsening hunger.

An estimated 4.4mn people face crisis-level food insecurity, with nearly one million of them experiencing severe hunger, due to the impact of failed rainy seasons, conflict and declining humanitarian funding, the WFP said.

"The situation is deteriorating at an alarming rate," Ross Smith, WFP director of emergency preparedness and response, said in a statement.

"Families have lost everything, and many are already being pushed to the brink. Without immediate emergency food support, conditions will worsen quickly," Smith said.



File photo shows internally displaced Somali women carry their relief packages after receiving dry relief food from Kuwait charity, during the holy fasting month of Ramadan, in Mogadishu.

Somalia declared a national drought emergency in November after recurrent seasons of poor rainfall, and other countries in the region have also been hit.

The WFP, the largest humanitarian agency in Somalia, said it has already scaled back assistance from 2.2mn people earlier this year to just over 600,000 due to funding shortages.

DR Congo, fighters trade accusations over ceasefire

AFP
Kinshasa

The DR Congo government and the M23 armed group accused each other yesterday of violating an Angolan-mediated ceasefire in the DRC's troubled east.

Angola proposed a ceasefire to the DRC and Rwanda to start last

Wednesday, which Kinshasa accepted "in principle", while not confirming that date, and Thursday brought a precarious lull in a region ravaged by 30 years of violence.

Since 2021 the region has laboured under the resurgence of the anti-government armed group M23, which has seized large swathes of territory in the provinces of North Kivu and South

Kivu, with the support of Kigali and its armed forces.

The armed group launched a new offensive in December on the town of Uvira, in the midst of the ratification of an agreement between the DRC and Rwanda under US mediation.

While Kinshasa immediately declared that it accepted "the principle" of the Angolan-brokered ceasefire, the M23 accused

Kinshasa of "manipulation" for not confirming when it would begin. Local sources and security sources said nonetheless there had been a lull since Wednesday in the fighting. However, yesterday saw the Congolese military accuse the M23 of having "attacked its positions in the provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu" and thereby "torpedoing the peace process."

The M23 denounced in an overnight statement "ceasefire violations" by Kinshasa forces.

AFP was unable to immediately verify the allegations with independent sources.

However, local sources said yesterday that fighting had resumed around Minembwe, a town in the South Kivu highlands, where Congolese troops, backed by local militias and Burundian soldiers, have been battling a coalition of

M23-affiliated militias for weeks.

Relative calm persists on other parts of the front line in South Kivu province, those sources added.

Countless armed groups are present in DR Congo's east and the warring parties sometimes use them as proxy forces. Since the resurgence of the M23 in 2021, half a dozen ceasefires and truces have been signed and broken.



Los Angeles sues Roblox over child exploitation allegations

Officials in Los Angeles said on Thursday that they are suing Roblox, alleging the popular online platform exposes children to sexual content, exploitation and online predators.

In a lawsuit, Los Angeles County said the company does not carry out adequate moderation and its age-verification systems are not fit for purpose.

The suit against Roblox, which contests the claims, is the latest effort to hold an online firm to account for alleged exploitative practices.

It comes as a trial unfolds in America's second largest city in which social media giants, including Facebook, are being sued over claims their addictive algorithms target young teenagers.

"This lawsuit is about protecting children from online predators and inappropriate content," Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Chair Hilda Solis said. "Roblox has a responsibility to keep kids safe, but instead it has allowed its platform to become a place where children can be exposed to grooming and exploitation."

Roblox says it has around 144mn active users every day around the world, with more than 40% of them under 13 years old.

Users create, share and play various games and other experiences, chatting to each other and using customisable avatars.

While it is free to use, players can purchase a virtual currency that allows them to buy specific upgrades.

The firm has long faced accusations that it is not doing enough to protect children from violent and sexual content.

A 2024 report by Hindenburg Research described it as an "X-rated paedophile hellscape" that exposed children to grooming and pornography.

This month Australia's government said it was seeking an urgent meeting with the company about child safety.

The lawsuit filed on Thursday alleges that Roblox has failed to adequately moderate user-generated content, enforce age restrictions or disclose the extent of inappropriate material and risks posed by sexual predators on the platform.

"This is not about a minor lapse in safety. It is about a company that gives pedophiles powerful tools to prey on innocent and unsuspecting children," Los Angeles County lawyer Dawyn R Harrison said. "The trauma that results is horrific, from grooming to exploitation to actual assault. This needs to stop."

In a statement to AFP, Roblox rejected the allegations in the suit, insisting that the platform was built "with safety at its core".

"We have advanced safeguards that monitor our platform for harmful content and communications, and users cannot send or receive images via chat, avoiding one of the most prevalent opportunities for misuse seen elsewhere online," a spokesman said.

The company said it takes swift action against people found violating its rules and works with law enforcement to hold them accountable.

"There is no finish line when it comes to protecting kids, and while no system can be perfect, our commitment to safety never ends." - AFP

US judge upholds \$243mn verdict against Tesla over 2019 crash

Reuters
Washington

A federal judge rejected Tesla's request to overturn a \$243mn jury verdict over the 2019 crash of an Autopilot-equipped Model S, which killed a 22-year-old woman and severely injured her boyfriend.

In a decision made public yesterday, US District Judge Beth Bloom in Miami said that the evidence at trial "more than supported" the August 2025 verdict, and Tesla raised no new arguments to set the verdict aside.

Tesla, led by Elon Musk, is expected to appeal. Its lawyers did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The case arose from an April 25, 2019,

incident in Key Largo, Florida, in which George McGee drove his 2019 Model S through an intersection at about 62mph (100kph) while he bent to look for his phone, which he had dropped.

McGee crashed into Naibel Benavides Leon and Dillon Angulo's SUV, which was parked on a shoulder and which they stood beside.

Jurors found Tesla 33% responsible for the crash.

They awarded compensatory damages of \$19.5mn to Benavides's estate and \$23.1mn to Angulo, plus \$200mn of punitive damages to be split between them.

McGee previously settled with the plaintiffs.

The verdict was the first from a federal jury concerning a fatal accident involving Autopilot.

In seeking a reversal, Tesla said that McGee deserved sole blame for the crash, his Model S wasn't defective, and the verdict defied common sense.

Tesla said that automakers "do not insure the world against harms caused by reckless drivers" and punitive damages should be zero because it did not exhibit "reckless disregard for human life" under Florida law.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs also did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Tesla has faced many similar lawsuits over its vehicles' self-driving capabilities, but they have been resolved or dismissed without going to trial.

Musk, the world's richest person, has long touted Tesla as a leader in autonomous driving for private vehicles and robotaxis.



The interior of a Tesla Model S is shown in autopilot mode in San Francisco, California. - Reuters

US Supreme Court strikes down Trump's global tariffs

AFP/Reuters
Washington

The US Supreme Court has ruled Donald Trump's sweeping global tariffs illegal - a stunning rebuke of the president's signature economic policy that upended international trade.

The conservative-majority high court ruled six-three in the judgment, saying that a 1977 law known as the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) that Trump has relied on "does not authorise the President to impose tariffs".

The ruling does not impact sector-specific duties Trump separately imposed on imports of steel, aluminum and various other goods.

Several government probes which could lead to more sectoral tariffs remain in the works.

Still, this marks Trump's biggest defeat at the Supreme Court since returning to the White House last year.

While Trump has long relied on tariffs as a lever for diplomatic pressure and negotiations, he made unprecedented use of emergency economic powers in his second term to slap new duties on virtually all US trading partners.

These included "reciprocal" tariffs over trade practices that Washington deemed unfair, alongside separate sets of duties targeting major partners Mexico, Canada and China over illicit drug flows and immigration.

The court noted yesterday that

"had Congress intended to convey the distinct and extraordinary power to impose tariffs" with the IEEPA, "it would have done so expressly, as it consistently has in other tariff statutes".

The Supreme Court's three liberal justices joined three conservatives in yesterday's ruling, which upheld lower court decisions that tariffs Trump imposed under the IEEPA were illegal.

Conservative Justices Brett Kavanaugh, Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito dissented.

Chief Justice John Roberts, in delivering his opinion, said the "IEEPA contains no reference to tariffs or duties".

"Our task today is to decide only whether the power to 'regulate ... importation' as granted to the president in the IEEPA, embraces the power to impose tariffs. It does not," Roberts wrote in the ruling, quoting the statute's text that Trump claimed had justified his sweeping tariffs.

The top judge, citing a prior Supreme Court ruling, wrote that "the president must 'point to clear congressional authorisation' to justify his extraordinary assertion of the power to impose tariffs," adding: "He cannot."

The Supreme Court reached its conclusion in a legal challenge by businesses affected by the tariffs and 12 US states, most of them Democratic-governed, against Trump's unprecedented use of this law to unilaterally impose the import taxes.

A lower trade court ruled in May that Trump overstepped his authority with across-the-board levies and blocked most of them,



This picture taken in April last year shows Trump holding a chart as he delivers remarks on reciprocal tariffs during an event in the Rose Garden, entitled 'Make America Wealthy Again', at the White House. - AFP

but that outcome was put on hold as the government appealed.

The US Constitution grants Congress, not the president, the authority to issue taxes and tariffs.

The IEEPA lets a president regulate commerce in a national emergency.

Trump became the first president to use the IEEPA to impose tariffs, one of the many ways he has aggressively pushed the boundaries of executive authority since he returned to office in areas as varied as his crackdown on immigration, the firing of federal agency officials, domestic military deployments and military operations overseas.

With the White House already bracing for a negative outcome, KPMG chief economist Diane Swonk warned that "tariffs ruled illegal can be rapidly reinstated via other levers".

"Financial markets rallied on the news, but that is premature," she added.

Nonetheless, business groups cheered the ruling, with the National Retail Federation saying that this "provides much-needed certainty" for American firms and manufacturers.

"We urge the lower court to ensure a seamless process to refund the tariffs to US importers," the federation said.

However, the justices did not address the degree to which importers can receive refunds. This will likely be litigated.

Kavanaugh warned that this process - as acknowledged dur-

ing oral arguments - could be a "mess".

EY-Parthenon chief economist Gregory Daco told AFP that the loss of IEEPA tariff revenues for the US government could amount to around \$140bn.

Delighted Democratic leaders pounced on the ruling, with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer lauding the outcome as a "win for the wallets" of US consumers.

However, top Democrat on the Senate Banking Committee Elizabeth Warren cautioned there remains "no legal mechanism for consumers and many small businesses to recoup the money they have already paid".

The Budget Lab at Yale University estimates consumers face an average effective tariff rate of 9.1% with yesterday's decision, down from 16.9%.

However, it said this "remains the highest since 1946", excluding 2025.

Striking down the emergency tariffs "would constrain the president's ambitions to impose across-the-board tariffs on a whim", said Erica York of tax policy nonprofit the Tax Foundation.

However, it leaves him other statutes to use for tariffs, even if they tend to be more limited in scope - or require specific processes such as investigations - York told AFP.

"The ruling dismantles the legal scaffolding, not the building itself," said ING analysts Carsten Brzeski and Julian Geib of Trump's trade restrictions.

Trump 'calls apex court tariff ruling a disgrace'

US President Donald Trump has called the Supreme Court ruling on his sweeping global tariffs a "disgrace" after the decision came during his meeting with state governors.

He was addressing a gathering of state governors at the White House when he was handed a note from an aide informing him of the Supreme Court decision, according to two sources familiar with the event.

Trump appeared visibly frustrated and told the audience that he had to do something about the courts, the sources said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

At an event in Georgia on Thursday on the eve of the ruling, Trump said: "Without tariffs... everybody would be bankrupt. Everybody. The whole country would be bankrupt. And the language is clear that I have the right to do it as president. I have the right to put tariffs on for national security purposes."

The White House had no immediate comment on the ruling.

Canada meanwhile said that the US Supreme Court decision proves the levies were "unjustified", but noted the trade measures causing Canadians the most pain remained in force.

The conservative-majority US high court ruled 6-3 that the law Trump used to enact his tariffs, the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), "does not authorise the President to impose tariffs".

Canada was largely spared from IEEPA levies, as Trump has broadly adhered to tariff exemptions under the existing North American free trade agreement.

However, sector-specific measures affecting industries like steel, aluminum and autos remain in place despite yesterday's ruling.

Canada's Minister for International Trade Dominic LeBlanc said that businesses impacted by those measures still need "support".

He also promised Canada would continue working with the US "to create growth and opportunities on both sides of the border".

The Canadian Chamber of Commerce cautioned against viewing yesterday's court ruling as "a reset of US trade policy".

"Canada should prepare for new, blunter mechanisms to be used to reassert trade pressure, potentially with broader and more disruptive effects," the chamber's president, Candace Laing, said in a statement.

The EU said that it was studying the US Supreme Court ruling. "We take note of the ruling... and are analysing it carefully," EU trade spokesman Olof Gill said.

"We remain in close contact with the US administration as we seek clarity on the steps they intend to take in response to this ruling," he added. "Businesses on both sides of the Atlantic depend on stability and predictability in the trading relationship."

The EU and United States last year struck an agreement for US tariffs of 15% on most European goods, and it was not immediately clear what Brussels would or could do next following the ruling.

The European Parliament's trade committee was due to approve the EU-US deal on Tuesday but the Supreme Court judgment cast doubt on the deal's implementation.

The committee's head, Bernd Lange, welcomed the US ruling, saying that the "judges have shown that even a US president does not operate in a legal vacuum".

Lange said on X he would convene an urgent meeting on Monday with the parliament's negotiating team "to assess possible implications on the ongoing work and in particular in view of the committee vote".

- Reuters/AFP

Trump banner unfurled at Justice Department headquarters

Reuters
Washington

A banner of US President Donald Trump has been unfurled outside the headquarters of the Justice Department (DOJ) in the latest effort to stamp his identity on a Washington institution.

The blue banner unfurled on Thursday between two columns in a corner of the agency's headquarters includes the slogan: "Make America Safe Again."

Since returning to the White House last year, Trump has moved aggressively to imprint his image and influence on federal institutions.

He has reshaped cultural and policy bodies by installing loyalists, renamed prominent institutions, and sidelined officials linked to past probes, steps critics say blur the lines between political power and traditionally independent government functions.

Florida airport to be renamed after US president

An airport in Florida will soon be renamed after US President Donald Trump, after a bill proposing the change was approved by the state's legislature on Thursday.

Banners bearing Trump's image were affixed last year to the Department of Labour, the Department of Agriculture and the US Institute for Peace buildings.

A board of directors appointed by the president voted in December to add Trump's name to the John F Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts.

Trump's name was also affixed last year to the US Institute of Peace building in Washington.

The White House referred questions about the latest banner to the Justice Department, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In a statement cited by NBC News, a DOJ spokesperson said the department was "proud" to celebrate its "historic work to make America safe again at President Trump's direction".

In 2023, former Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith secured indictments accusing Trump of illegally retaining classified documents following his first

term in office and of plotting to overturn his defeat in the 2020 election.

Trump falsely claimed that he won the 2020 election.

His supporters stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent the Congress from certifying the results of that election.

After taking office for a second time in January 2025, Trump pardoned the rioters.

Trump denied wrongdoing in the cases against him, calling them politically motivated.

Smith dropped both cases against the Republican after Trump won the 2024 election, citing a Justice Department policy against prosecuting a sitting president.

Smith resigned from the Justice Department days before Trump returned to the White House early last year.

The Trump administration's Justice Department has since targeted and fired many officials involved in probes against the Republican leader.

Florida airport to be renamed after US president

Governor Ron DeSantis is expected to sign the measure into law.

The airport renaming will also require the approval of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). - AFP



A new banner depicting US President Donald Trump is hung on the Department of Justice building in Washington, DC. - Reuters

Venezuela parliament passes amnesty law

AFP
Caracas

Venezuela's National Assembly has unanimously approved a long-awaited amnesty law that could free hundreds of political prisoners jailed for being government detractors.

However, the law excludes those who have been prosecuted or convicted of promoting military action against the country – which could include opposition leaders like Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Corina Machado, who has been accused by the ruling party of calling for international intervention like the one that ousted former president Nicolas Maduro.

The bill was signed by interim President Delcy Rodriguez, who pushed for the legislation under pressure from Washington, after she rose to power following Maduro's capture during a US military raid on January 3.

"One must know how to ask for forgiveness and one must also know how to receive forgiveness," Rodriguez said at the Miraflores presidential palace in the capital Caracas, after signing the bill into law.

In one of the first releases after the bill passed, Machado ally and former National Assembly vice-president Juan Pablo Guanipa announced his release from detention after months in prison and house arrest.

"After 10 months in hiding and almost nine months of unjust imprisonment, I confirm that I am now completely free," Guanipa wrote on social media, posting an image of him holding the country's flag.

He called for all other political prisoners to be freed and exiles allowed to return, criticising the law as not an amnesty but a "flawed document" that excludes some Venezuelans who remain behind bars.

"I thank all Venezuelans for fighting for my release and that of all political prisoners," he wrote.

The law is meant to apply retroactively to 1999 – including the coup against previous leader Hugo Chavez, the 2002 oil strike and the 2024 riots against Maduro's disputed reelection – giving hope to families that loved ones will finally come home.

Some fear, however, the law could be used by the government to pardon its own and selectively deny freedom to real prisoners of conscience.

Article 9 of the bill lists those excluded from amnesty as "persons who are being prosecuted or may be convicted for promoting, instigating, soliciting, invoking, favouring, facilitating, financing or participating in armed actions or the use of force against the people, sovereignty, and territorial integrity" of Venezuela "by foreign states, corporations or individuals".

Venezuela's National Assembly had delayed several sittings meant to pass the amnesty bill.

"The scope of the law must be restricted

to victims of human rights violations and expressly exclude those accused of serious human rights violations and crimes against humanity, including state, paramilitary and non-state actors", UN human rights experts said in a statement from Geneva on Thursday.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Venezuelans have been jailed in recent years over plots, real or imagined, to overthrow the government of Rodriguez's predecessor and former boss Maduro, who was in the end toppled in the deadly US military raid.

Family members have reported torture, mistreatment and neglected health problems among the inmates.

The non-governmental organisation (NGO) Foro Penal says about 450 prisoners have been released since Maduro's ouster, but more than 600 others remain behind bars.

Family members have been clamoring

for their release for weeks, holding vigils outside prisons.

One small group in the capital Caracas staged a nearly weeklong hunger strike, which ended on Thursday.

"The National Assembly has the opportunity to show whether there truly is a genuine will for national reconciliation," Foro Penal director Gonzalo Himiob wrote on X ahead of the vote.

On Wednesday, the chief of the US military command responsible for strikes on alleged drug smuggling boats off South America held talks in Caracas with Rodriguez and top ministers Vladimir Padrino (defence) and Diosdado Cabello (interior).

All three were staunch Maduro backers who for years echoed his "anti-imperialist" rhetoric.

Rodriguez's interim government has been governing with US President Donald Trump's consent, provided she grants access to Venezuela's vast oil resources.

Most Haiti gangs 'involved' in child trafficking

As Haiti reels from a devastating crisis, gangs in the country are perpetrating "brutal and widespread" child trafficking, the United Nations said yesterday, denouncing the international response as insufficient and fragmented.

"Most of the 26 gangs currently operating in Haiti are involved in child trafficking," the UN rights office said.

In a report issued jointly with the UN Integrated Office in Haiti, it detailed various forms of child exploitation, from running errands, monitoring security forces and collecting extortion payments, to more violent acts such as destroying property, kidnappings, targeted killings and sexual violence.

"Children in Haiti are being robbed of their childhoods and their futures," said UN rights chief Volker Turk. "The impact and long-term consequences of child trafficking are devastating for the victims and their families, as well as for the stability of the country."

While there is no comprehensive data on the number of children trafficked by gangs, in 2024 the UN estimated that more than 500,000 were living in areas under gang control.

Gangs now control 90% of the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince, and killed nearly 6,000 people in 2025, according to the UN.

About 1.4mn people, or 10% of the population, have been displaced by the violence, and nearly half of all Haitians face acute food insecurity, including 1.2mn children under the age of five. – AFP

Trump orders government release of UFO records

Reuters/AFP
Washington

President Donald Trump said on Thursday that he would direct federal agencies to begin releasing government files related to aliens and unidentified flying objects (UFOs), pointing to what he described as strong public interest in the issue.

In a social media post, Trump said he would order Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth and other agencies to release the information, calling the matter "extremely interesting and important".

"Based on the tremendous interest shown, I will be directing the Secretary of War, and other relevant Departments and Agencies, to begin the process of identifying and releasing Government files related to alien and extraterrestrial life, unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP), and unidentified flying objects (UFOs)," Trump posted on his Truth Social platform.

While he did not specify whether classified documents would be released to the public, the president added that the files should include "any and all other information connected to these highly complex, but extremely interesting and important, matters".

Earlier in the day, Trump, without providing evidence, accused former president Barack Obama of improperly disclosing



This picture taken in 2019 shows closed gates at the entrance to Area 51, Nevada, US. – Reuters

classified information when discussing aliens publicly, saying that Obama "made a big mistake".

"He took it out of classified information... he's not supposed to be doing that," Trump told reporters while traveling to Georgia.

During an interview with podcast host Brian Tyler Cohen released on Saturday, Obama was asked if aliens were real.

"They're real, but I haven't seen them, and they're not being kept in... Area 51. There's no underground facility unless there's this enormous conspiracy and they hid it from the president of the United States," Obama said.

Area 51 is a classified Air Force facility in Nevada that fringe theorists have speculated holds alien bodies and a crashed spaceship.

Central Intelligence Agency

(CIA) archives released in 2013 said it was a test site for top-secret spy planes.

There was no indication in Obama's remarks that the former president released classified information.

Obama's office did not respond to a request for comment.

"I saw no evidence during my presidency that extraterrestrials have made contact with us. Really!" Obama said in an Instagram post on Sunday.

In the post, Obama explained his belief that aliens exist by saying that the statistical odds of life beyond Earth were high because the universe is so vast.

He added that the chances of extraterrestrial life visiting Earth were low given the distance.

Following his comments on Obama, Trump added that he had not seen evidence that aliens exist, saying: "I don't know



Obama: I saw no evidence during my presidency that extraterrestrials have made contact with us. Really!

if they're real or not?"

In recent years, the Pentagon has investigated reports of UFOs, and senior military leaders said in 2022 they found no evidence to suggest that aliens had visited Earth or crash-landed here.

A 2024 Pentagon report said US government investigations since the end of World War II had found no evidence of extraterrestrial technology and most sightings were misidentified ordinary objects and phenomena.

The website of the National Archives and Records Administration says that it has records related to UFOs across numerous collections.

Alberta plans referendum to wrest control over immigration from federal government

Reuters
Calgary

Alberta will hold a referendum this fall to ask residents if its government should limit the number of new international students, temporary foreign workers and asylum-seekers arriving in the oil-rich Canadian province.

The move, announced by Premier Danielle Smith in a televised address on Thursday evening, represents an attempt by Alberta to wrest control of a key issue from the federal government.

Immigration policy in Canada is primarily the responsibility of Ottawa, not the provinces.

It marks a potential blow to Canadian unity at a time when Prime Minister Mark Carney has made efforts to improve relations with western, resource-rich provinces and head off a simmering Alberta separatism movement.

Smith said her government is facing what will be a significant deficit in next week's provincial budget, partly because of a decline in provincial resource royalties due to lower global oil prices.

However, she also blamed Alberta's fiscal challenges on the province's exceptionally rapid population growth, the strongest in Canada.

Alberta's population, which ticked past the 5mn mark in 2025, according to Statistics Canada, added more than 600,000 people in the past five years – something Smith said has been putting a strain on provincial resources.

"Throwing the doors wide open to anyone and everyone across the globe has flooded our classrooms, emergency rooms and social support systems with far too many people, far too quickly," she said in her address.

Alberta is not the only province with a growing population attributable to immigration.

After several years of a welcoming immigration policy under former prime minister Justin Trudeau, Canada has recently begun reducing its immigration targets and imposing caps on temporary residents, citing pressure on housing, infrastructure and social services.

The main difference between Alberta and the other provinces, according to an ATB Financial analysis, is that Alberta has a very high level of interprovincial migration from Canadians seeking better opportunities and more affordable housing.

However, Smith said that Albertans identified international immigration as one of their top concerns in a recent series of town hall panels, and so she will seek a referendum mandate to pursue changes.

Cubans fight blackouts with solar as US extends oil chokehold

By Anett Rios and Allen Fernandez
Reuters

Cubans are scrambling to install solar panels on their homes, shops and vehicles to combat extended blackouts as Washington prevents oil shipments from reaching the Caribbean's largest island, contributing to electricity generation shortfalls.

US sanctions and a deep economic crisis have for years made it impossible for the government to buy enough fuel, and a more recent drought in shipments from Venezuela and Mexico due to US tariff threats has worsened existing shortages.

Cuba's government, helped by Chinese financing and equipment donations, has installed upwards of 1,000 megawatts of solar generation in the past year, and promises to double that capacity in the coming years.

However, some private citizens have taken matters into their own hands.

"Given the frequent outages, which pretty much stop you from doing anything, a friend offered to help me invest in panels and set everything up," Havana resident Roberto Sarriga told Reuters.

He said that with the help of solar panels he could have Internet, charge his phone so people can locate him and power a TV to keep his elderly mother entertained watching her favorite soap operas.

"The idea was to at least have the basics covered."

The panels, imported and sold in dollars,



Workers install a solar panel on the rooftop of a private business establishment in Havana. – Reuters

are well out of reach of most Cubans, but have offered a solution for a growing class of private business owners and those who still receive money from relatives abroad.

The government, aiming to encourage such investments, late on Thursday announced new measures that would waive personal taxes for up to eight years for business people who undertake renewable energy projects.

Solar panel installer Raydel Cano, who works in homes and private businesses throughout the Cuban capital Havana, told Reuters that demand had increased as fuel has run short in the past few weeks, leaving those with gas and diesel-driven generators in the lurch.

"Private businesses see themselves obligated to install panels," he said, noting that alternatives to fully renewable power had

mostly become obsolete as the grid falters.

Though installing solar panels demands a higher cost upfront, Havana cafe manager Dariem Soto-Navarro said with diesel increasingly difficult to buy, solar was the better option.

"In addition to being clean, green energy, it optimises operating costs," he said. "It is without a doubt one of the best solutions for entrepreneurs and private businesses."

Alejandro Arritola, who drives a tricycle-taxi with solar panels installed on the roof, told Reuters that he had installed the panels to help him travel further when he runs out of gas.

"It extends my range and I don't have to use any gasoline," he said, noting that his family continues to get around with ease despite the shortages. "If there's no public transportation, it doesn't matter."

The Trump administration says its measures increase pressure for political change in Cuba.

On Wednesday, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said it was in Cuba's "best interest to make very dramatic changes very soon".

The UN has warned that if Cuba's energy needs are not met this could cause a humanitarian crisis.

The island, already suffering from severe shortages of food, fuel and medicine, has implemented rationing measures to protect essential services.

Russia, one of Cuba's last remaining oil suppliers, is preparing to send crude in the near future, *Izvestia* newspaper reported last week, without providing a specific date.

Epstein estate agrees to settle outstanding victim claims for up to \$35mn

AFP/Reuters
Washington

The estate of Jeffrey Epstein has agreed to pay up to \$35mn to settle the outstanding legal claims of potentially dozens of victims, according to a court filing on Thursday.

The agreement must be approved by a federal judge in New York before it can be made final.

The settlement is related to victims who

said they were "assaulted or abused or trafficked by Jeffrey Epstein between January 1, 1995, and through August 10, 2019", the date of the disgraced financier's death in prison, the proposed plan said.

Epstein's estate would pay \$35mn if there are 40 or more people eligible in the class and \$25mn if there are fewer than 40.

The co-executors of the settlement are Darren Indyke, Epstein's former lawyer, and Richard Kahn, the financier's former accountant.

Both have denied any wrongdoing

through their association with the convict and have not been accused of any abuse crimes or witnessing of abuse.

However, the settlement, if confirmed, will bring to a close the initial lawsuit filed in 2024 in which the pair of advisers were accused of enabling Epstein's illicit activities through their legal and business services.

The judgment filed in federal court in Manhattan on Thursday said that the agreement does not mean the co-executors admit fault or are liable to further legal action from victims.

The law firm representing the class of victims, Boies Schiller Flexner LLP, did not immediately respond to a request for comment on how many people were part of the lawsuit.

Bloomberg News reported late on Thursday that the firm was confident they had at least 40 victims who had not yet settled with Epstein's estate.

Epstein's estate previously set up a restitution fund that paid out \$121mn to victims. The estate also paid out \$49mn in additional settlements to victims.

Thursday's settlement comes after the release by the US Justice Department of millions of documents, photographs and videos related to the investigation into Epstein.

Epstein cultivated a global network of powerful politicians, business executives, academics and celebrities – many of whom have been tainted by their association with him.

He died in a New York jail in August 2019.

His death was ruled a suicide.



Indonesia secures 19% tariff deal with US

Palm oil and other commodities exempt; deal to facilitate US investment in Indonesian critical minerals

Reuters
Jakarta

Indonesia and the United States finalised a trade deal to cut US levies to 19% from 32% on goods shipped from southeast Asia's biggest economy, with Jakarta securing tariff exemptions for its top export, palm oil, and several other commodities.

The agreement was signed in Washington by Indonesia's senior economic minister Airlangga Hartarto and US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer after months of negotiations.

"This deal respects the sovereignty of both countries," Airlangga said during an online press conference, describing the deal as a "win-win" for both countries.

Palm oil was a particularly important exemption, accounting for around 9% of Indonesia's overall exports.

Indonesian coffee, cocoa, rubber and spices would also be tariff-free, Airlangga said.

The 19% rate is on par with US



Workers load fresh oil palm fruit bunches from Melati Hanjalipan co-operative palm oil plantation in Hanjalipan village, Indonesia. (Reuters/File Photo)

deals with southeast Asian rivals such as Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines. Vietnam, however, has a slightly higher rate of 20%.

The deal comes after a rough start to the year for Indonesian markets. Setbacks include last month's warning from index provider MSCI that the equity market risked a downgrade to "frontier" status over transparency issues, as well as Moody's cutting of the country's credit rating outlook two weeks ago that cited reduced predictability in policy making.

Investor confidence in Indonesia could improve if Jakarta uses the US deal as a springboard for further reform, said Yose Rizal Damuri, ex-

ecutive director of CSIS Indonesia.

Under the deal, textile products from Indonesia will be subject to a 0% levy under a quota mechanism that is still to be discussed. The quota will be determined by the quantity of US materials such as cotton and man-made fibre used in textiles.

The US dropped requests to add non-economic provisions to the deal, including those related to nuclear reactor development and the South China Sea, Airlangga said.

In return, Indonesia will remove tariff barriers on most US products across all sectors and address a range of non-tariff barriers such as local content requirements,

according to a White House fact sheet. It will also accept US product standards on vehicle safety, emissions, medical devices and pharmaceuticals.

The deal also appears to take aim at what analysts have said are concerns in Washington about China's stranglehold on many critical minerals and the offshoring of Chinese companies' operations to countries like Indonesia.

Under the agreement, Indonesia will implement restrictions on 'excess production' by foreign-owned mineral processing facilities by ensuring production conforms to Indonesian mining quotas. Such minerals include nickel, cobalt, bauxite, copper and manganese.

Jakarta has also agreed to take action against companies owned or controlled by foreign countries operating within its jurisdiction when their practices harm US trade interests.

And Indonesia will facilitate US investment in critical minerals and energy resources as well as cooperate with US companies on expediting development of its rare-earth sector. The deal is due to take effect 90 days after both sides complete related legal procedures, Airlangga said, adding that changes could still occur if both sides agree.

South Korea ex-president apologises after life sentence

By Kyu-seok Shim
Reuters

Former South Korean president Yoon Suk-yeol apologised yesterday for his short-lived declaration of martial law in December 2024, a day after a Seoul court sentenced him to life in prison for masterminding an insurrection.

In a statement released by his lawyers, Yoon said that while he was sorry for the "frustration and hardship" brought upon the people by his martial law decree, he stood behind the "sincerity and purpose" behind his actions.

The Seoul Central District Court's decision to hand him a life sentence on Thursday was "predetermined," he said, adding that the verdict against him was political retaliation.

"Forces that seek to smear a decision made to save the nation as an 'insurrection' and to use it beyond political attacks as an opportunity to purge and eliminate their opponents will only grow more rampant going forward," he said.



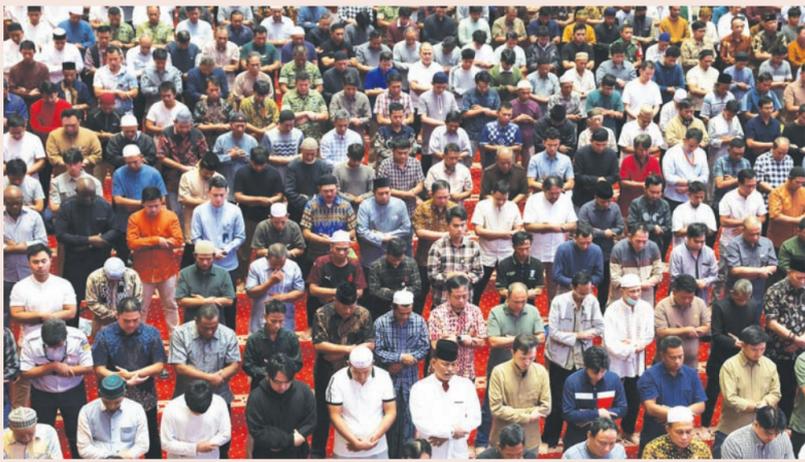
Supporter of Yoon Suk-yeol reacts as she watches a live stream of Yoon's trial on his insurrection charges near the Seoul Central District Court in Seoul, on Thursday. (AFP)

Yoon also questioned whether an appeal would have meaning in what he described as an environment where judicial independence could not be guaranteed, while telling supporters to "unite and rise."

His lawyers separately said the statement did not amount to an intention to forgo an appeal.

Yoon's martial law declaration lasted around six hours before being voted down by parliament, but it sent shockwaves through the country and sparked street protests.

Ramadan first Friday prayers in Jakarta



Muslim men attend the first Friday prayers during the holy fasting month of Ramadan at the Istiqlal Mosque, in Jakarta, Indonesia, yesterday. (Reuters)

Kim Jong-un vows to boost living standards as he opens rare congress

AFP
Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un vowed to lift living standards as he opened a landmark congress, state media said yesterday, offering a glimpse of economic strains within the sanctions-hit nation.

Kim took centre stage with a speech to start the Workers' Party congress, a gathering that directs state efforts on everything from house building to war planning.

Held just once every five years, the days-long congress offers a rare glimpse into the workings of a nation where even mundane details are shrouded in secrecy. "Today, our party is faced with heavy and urgent historic tasks of boosting economic construction and the people's standard of living and transforming all realms of state and social life as early as possible," Kim said in his opening speech.

"This requires us to wage a more active and persistent struggle without allowing even a moment's standstill or stagnation."

For decades, nuclear weapons and military prowess came

before everything else in North Korea, even as food stocks dried up and famine took hold.

But since assuming power in 2011, Kim made an extremely rare admission that mistakes had been made in "almost all areas" of economic development. Analysts believe such language is designed to head off public discontent stirred by food shortages, military spending, and North Korea's continued support for Russia's war effort in Ukraine.

Kim said North Korea had overcome its "worst difficulties" in the last five years, and was now entering a new stage of "optimism and confidence in the future."

North Korea's economy has for years languished under heavy Western sanctions that aim to choke off funding for its nuclear weapons programme. But Pyongyang refuses to surrender its atomic arsenal.

Kim has already declared this year's congress will unveil the next phase in the nation's nuclear weapons programme.

Thousands of party elites packed the cavernous House of Culture in Pyongyang for the

opening day of the congress.

It is just the ninth time the Workers' Party congress has convened under the Kim family's decades-long rule.

The meeting was shelved under Kim's father Kim Jong-il, but was revived in 2016.

Kim Jong-un has spent years stoking his cult of personality in reclusive North Korea, and the congress offers another chance to demonstrate his absolute grip on power. Footage showed Kim stepping out of a black limousine and striding into the meeting flanked by officials.

Delegates broke into hearty applause as he took his place at the centre of the imposing rostrum overlooking proceedings.

Analysts will scour photographs to see which officials are seated closest to Kim, and who is banished to the back row.

Particular attention will be placed on the whereabouts of Kim's teenage daughter Ju Ae, who has emerged as North Korea's heir apparent, according to Seoul's national intelligence service. The ruling parties of China and Russia — North Korea's long-time allies — sent friendly messages to mark the start of the meeting.

"In recent years, under the strategic guidance of the top leaders of the two parties and two countries, China-DPRK relations have entered a new historical period," said a telegram from the Chinese Communist Party, using the official acronym for North Korea.

Kim appeared alongside China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin at a military parade in Beijing last year — a striking display of his elevated status in global politics.

At the previous congress five years ago, Kim declared that the US was his nation's "biggest enemy". There is keen interest in whether Kim might use the congress to soften this stance, or double down. US President Donald Trump stepped up his courtship of Kim during a tour of Asia last year, saying he was "100 percent" open to a meeting. Kim has so far largely shunned efforts to resume top-level diplomatic dialogue.

Channels still open with Beijing on South China Sea: Philippines

The Philippine foreign ministry said yesterday that it is maintaining open communication with China even as it strengthens co-operation with "like-minded" countries that support its stance in the South China Sea.

"Even as the DFA (foreign ministry) deepens alliances and partnerships with like-minded countries, it also maintains open lines of communication with the Chinese side in pursuit of candid, constructive dialogue and practical co-operation," foreign ministry spokesperson Rogelio Villanueva said in a briefing. The Philippines recently held separate bilateral talks with the US and Canada on maritime issues. Philippines and the US have recently committed to

ramp up the deployment of "US cutting-edge missile and unmanned systems" in the southeast Asian nation.

The Chinese embassy in Manila did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The Philippine foreign ministry says it will uphold "effective and principled diplomacy" in advancing the country's interests amid recent ill-tempered exchanges between government officials and the Chinese embassy in Manila.

The Philippines and China have been locked in a series of maritime confrontations in recent years over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. (Reuters)

PM Takaichi warns of China 'coercion'

PM plans to review defence strategy, military export rules; Plans intelligence council and foreign investment screening; Promises to speed nuclear reactor restarts

Reuters
Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi warned of growing Chinese "coercion" in her first post-election speech to parliament yesterday, pledging to overhaul defence strategy, ease curbs on military exports and strengthen critical supply chains.

Takaichi's four-month tenure has been marked by a diplomatic dispute with China after she said Japan could use military force to respond to any attack on Taiwan that also threatened Japanese territory.

Fresh from turning a fragile majority into a landslide victory in this month's lower house election, Takaichi outlined an agenda to counter what she sees as a mounting economic and security threat from China and its regional partners.

With her ruling coalition now holding more than two-thirds of seats, she faces little political resistance.

"Japan faces its most severe and complex security environment since World War Two," Takaichi said, pointing to China's widening military activity and closer security ties with Russia, as well as North Korea's growing nuclear missile capability.

She said the government would revise Japan's three core security documents this year to produce a new defence strategy and would accelerate a review of military export rules to expand overseas sales and strengthen defence companies.



Japan's Prime Minister Takaichi delivers her policy speech in the parliament, in Tokyo, Japan, yesterday. (Reuters)

A policy panel of Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party proposed yesterday to scrap rules that limit military exports to non-lethal equipment such as body armour, the Kyodo news agency said.

Such a change could significantly widen the range of defence equipment Japanese firms can sell overseas. "China has intensified its attempts to unilaterally change the status quo through force or coercion in the East China Sea and South China Sea," she told lawmakers.

Takaichi has hastened a military build-up launched in 2023 that will double Japan's defence spending to 2% of GDP by the end of March, making it one of the world's biggest military spenders despite its pacifist constitution.

She also announced plans for a national intelligence council chaired by her to consolidate information gathered across agencies, including police and the defence ministry.

Japan does not have foreign or domestic intelligence services comparable to the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or Britain's MI5.

Beyond security, Takaichi proposed setting up a Japanese version of the US Committee on Foreign Investment (CFIUS) to screen overseas investment in sensitive sectors, and said rules governing land purchases by foreigners would be reviewed.

She pledged to reduce dependence on "specific countries" by strengthening supply chains and working with allies to secure critical materials, including rare earths, around Minamitori, a remote Pacific island.

Takaichi also promised to speed the restart of reactors idled since the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster in 2011.

"A nation that does not take on challenges has no future," she said in concluding remarks. "Politics that only seeks to protect cannot inspire hope."

Seven Chinese tourists dead after bus sinks in Russia's Lake Baikal

Seven tourists, reported to be Chinese citizens, died yesterday when a tour bus crashed through the ice of Russia's Lake Baikal in Siberia, local officials said. The bus fell into an ice fissure three metres wide and sank, the regional branch of Russia's emergency situations ministry said in a post on social media. "Rescuers carried out an inspection using an underwater camera. The bodies of seven people were discovered," it said. The nationalities of the victims was not explicitly stated, though the governor of the Irkutsk region said they were foreign citizens and that "the consulate general of the People's Republic of China has been notified." Governor Igor Kobzev said according to eye witness reports one tourist managed to escape the bus before it sank.

The vehicle was found 18 metres beneath the surface. Russia's Lake Baikal, the deepest in the world, is a major tourist destination in Siberia. It is just north of Mongolia and popular with Chinese visitors.

In the winter, the vast body of water freezes, creating visually stunning crystal-like columns and a distinctive cracking noise from crashing waves trapped underneath the surface.

Officials set up specific ice roads over the frozen lake that are monitored by authorities and opened for certain types of vehicles depending on the conditions.

Driving elsewhere on the lake is officially prohibited. Kobzev said the road had not been cleared for use and that a criminal case had been opened into the incident. (AFP)



In this picture released by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency shows North Korean leader Kim Jong-un attending the Ninth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea in Pyongyang, North Korea. (Reuters)

US-India negotiating Venezuelan oil sale

Reuters
New Delhi

The United States is in "active negotiation" over the sale of Venezuelan oil to India, to help India diversify its sources of crude oil, US envoy Sergio Gor said yesterday.

The US has made diversification away from Russian crude a condition for cutting tariffs on goods imported from India, the world's

third-biggest oil importer and consumer.

"The Department of Energy is speaking to the Ministry of Energy here, and so we're hoping to have some news of that very soon," Gor told reporters on the sidelines of an event in New Delhi where India joined the US-led Pax Silica initiative aimed at building a silicon supply chain for high-tech products.

US President Donald Trump this month agreed to cut tariffs on

Indian goods to 18% under an interim trade deal. He also removed a 25% punitive levy after India agreed to end the purchase of Russian oil, which the US said helps fund Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

He said India would buy more oil from the US and potentially Venezuela.

A final trade deal with India will be signed "sooner than later" as a "few tweaking points" are required, Gor said, adding Trump has been invited to India by Prime

Minister Narendra Modi. The interim trade deal is set to become effective in April and the US is likely to issue a formal notification this month to reduce its tariff on Indian goods to 18%, India's trade minister, Piyush Goyal, said yesterday.

The US and allies imposed sanctions on Russia's energy sector following Russia's 2022 invasion. India then became the top customer for Russian seaborne crude which it bought at rock-

bottom prices, to the consternation of Western nations.

"On the oil, there's an agreement... We have seen India diversify on their oil. There is a commitment. This is not about India. The United States doesn't want anyone buying Russian oil," Gor said.

The US had pitched the sale of Venezuelan oil to India to help replace Russian oil imports, Reuters reported last month.

It granted licences to trad-

ing houses Vitol and Trafigura to market and sell millions of barrels of Venezuelan oil after capturing Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro last month and reaching a supply agreement with interim president Delcy Rodriguez.

State-run Indian Oil Corp, Hindustan Petroleum and Bharat Petroleum as well as private-sector refiners Reliance Industries and HPCL-Mittal Energy have ordered Venezuelan oil, Reuters has reported.

AI summit statement delayed to 'maximise' signatories: India

AFP
New Delhi

Dozens of national delegations at an artificial intelligence summit in India will issue their statement on how the world should handle the technology today, a day later than expected, the host country said.

"There is huge consensus on the declaration. We are just trying to maximise the number," India's IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw told reporters at the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi yesterday.

"The declaration and its contours will be shared transparently tomorrow," he said, adding it had more than 70 signatories so far but he hoped the figure would cross 80.

Vaishnaw declined to give details of what the statement would say as he thanked participants of this week's event that was attended by tens of thousands of people, including world leaders and tech CEOs.

The summit was the fourth annual international meeting to discuss the implications of fast-evolving AI technology, and the first hosted by a developing country.

Some visitors had complained of poor organisation, including chaotic entry and exit points, at the vast summit and expo site.

Police detained yesterday a group claiming to be from the youth wing of the opposition Congress party who staged a shirtless protest against Prime Minister Narendra Modi inside the venue.

Hot topics at the summit included the societal benefits of multilingual AI translation, the threat of job disruption and the



Visitors arrive at Bharat Mandapam, one of the venues for AI Impact Summit, in New Delhi, yesterday.

heavy electricity consumption of data centres.

But analysts said that the broad focus, and vague promises made at its previous editions in France, South Korea and Britain, would make concrete commitments unlikely.

The next AI summit will take place in Geneva in 2027.

In the meantime, a UN panel on AI would start work towards "science-led governance", the global body's chief Antonio Guterres said yesterday.

"We are barreling into the unknown," he said. "The message is simple: less hype, less fear. More facts and evidence."

The UN General Assembly has confirmed 40 members for a group called the Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence, Guterres said.

It was created in August, aiming to be to AI what the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is to global environmental policy.

However, the head of the US

delegation warned against centralised control of generative AI, highlighting the difficulties of reaching a consensus.

"As the Trump administration has now said many times: We totally reject global governance of AI," White House technology adviser Michael Kratsios said at the Delhi summit.

The United States did not sign last year's summit statement, and it released its own bilateral declaration with India yesterday.

The two countries agreed to "pursue a global approach to AI that is unapologetically friendly to entrepreneurship and innovation?"

India has used the summit to push its ambition to catch up with the United States and China in the AI field, including through large-scale data centre construction, and new nuclear power plants to power them.

Delhi expects more than \$200 billion in investments over the next two years, and US tech titans unveiled a raft of new deals and infrastructure projects in the country this week.

Iftar preparation in Hyderabad



A boy prepares Iftar meals on the first Friday of the holy month of Ramadan at the Makkah Masjid in Hyderabad yesterday.

Police search property as royals reel from Andrew's arrest

AFP
Sandringham

Police were yesterday searching the former home of ex-prince Andrew for a second day, as his sensational arrest tipped the British monarchy into a crisis unprecedented in its modern era.

The disgraced royal, now known as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, was "released under investigation" late Thursday after hours of questioning, as police probe misconduct claims over his links to the Jeffrey Epstein.

During around 11 hours in custody, officers raided his current home on the private San-

dringham Estate belonging to his brother, King Charles III, and his previous residence in Windsor, west of London.

Footage aired yesterday showed officers back at Mountbatten-Windsor's former Royal Lodge home on the Windsor estate, with large black unmarked vans believed to be police vehicles on site.

Meanwhile Mountbatten-Windsor - who was marking his 66th birthday when arrested - was nowhere to be seen, hunkering down within the sprawling grounds of Sandringham in Norfolk, eastern England.

King Charles III issued a rare, personally signed statement Thursday insisting "the law must

take its course" and sought to project a business-as-usual air, carrying out public duties including opening London Fashion Week.

But royal commentators were in no doubt the first arrest of a senior royal in centuries signalled a profound crisis.

"It's a hugely significant moment for the British monarchy," royal expert Ed Owens told AFP, noting much remained unclear including whether Mountbatten-Windsor would be criminally charged.

"It's the unknown elements in this particular instance that I think pose so much concern and arguably a threat to the monarchy."

PM Albanese plays down chance of vote on monarchy

AFP
Sydney

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese played down yesterday the chance of a vote to remove the British monarch as Australia's head of state following the arrest of former prince Andrew.

Albanese, who favours changing his country to a republic, said Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor's arrest and detention on suspicion of misconduct in public office represented "an extraordinary fall from grace".

However, he appeared to rule out holding a vote to remove Andrew's brother King Charles III as Australian head of state, recalling a failed 2023 referendum on

Indigenous people's rights that he had supported during his first term in office.

"I'm a republican but we had a referendum during the last term. Referendums are hard to pass in Australia," Albanese said when asked in an interview with *The Guardian* whether Australia should reassess its ties with the monarchy.

He said he had a good relationship with King Charles, who he said loved Australia.

"But that doesn't change the fact that I think there should be an Australian head of state," Albanese said.

Australia was a British colony for more than 100 years and gained de facto independence in 1901, but has never become a fully-fledged republic.



In a 1999 referendum, Australians narrowly voted against removing Queen Elizabeth II after a row over whether her replacement would be chosen by members of parliament, not the public.

Twenty-five years later, a 2024 YouGov poll found that 37% of respondents favoured Australia becoming a republic, 43% were against and 20% undecided.

Lunar New Year in Hanoi



People pose for photo during the Lunar New Year celebrations, known in Vietnam as Tet, at Hoan Kiem lake in Hanoi yesterday.

ASOS co-founder Quentin Griffiths dies in Thailand after balcony fall

Reuters
Bangkok

Quentin Griffiths, who co-founded British fast-fashion retailer ASOS, has died after a fall from a balcony in Thailand, Thai police said yesterday.

Police told Reuters that Griffiths, 58, had fallen from the 17th floor of an apartment block in the seaside resort city of Pattaya on February 9.

The police went to the scene and found the body of a British national, whom they identified as Quentin John Griffiths, on the ground directly below the balcony, they said.

Police said initial investigations

suggested suicide, and there were no indications of foul play. CCTV showed no sign of anybody entering his apartment, where he had lived alone, but his body has been sent for an autopsy, they added.

The police also quoted a Thai friend of Griffiths as saying the Briton had been worried about lawsuits from his former wife, a Thai national.

Documents related to those lawsuits were found in his apartment, the police said.

When asked about Griffiths, Britain's foreign office said it was supporting "the family of a British national who has died in Thailand" and was in touch with the local au-

thorities. Griffiths' case did not initially attract media attention in Pattaya, which has a large contingent of foreign residents, until *The Sun* newspaper in Britain reported it on Thursday.

Griffiths co-founded ASOS, then known as 'As Seen on Screen' with Nick Robertson, a former advertising executive and great-grandson of tailor Austin Reed, in 2000, and floated it on London's Alternative Investment Market in 2001.

The company defied the wave of failures that hit other web-based companies after the Internet bubble burst and emerged as a standout success in the British retail scene.

ASOS expanded rapidly into new

countries, broadening its offer of both own-brand and third-party products, and moved quickly to capitalise on the rise of social media.

Griffiths was marketing director at ASOS before he left the firm in 2004. He remained a large shareholder in ASOS for nearly another decade.

In recent years, the online retailer has struggled with profitability against a backdrop of rising costs and stiffer competition from cheaper Chinese rivals.

Shares of the company, whose own-label creations have been worn by the likes of Michelle Obama and Catherine, Princess of Wales, have slid around 96% from their peak value.



An apartment building in Pattaya, from which British national and ASOS co-founder Quentin Griffiths (inset) fell from a balcony on February 9, according to Thai police, yesterday. (Reuters)



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How will companies get refunds after US court ruling on tariffs?

The US Supreme Court said yesterday that tariffs imposed by President Donald Trump under an economic emergency law were illegal. In a landmark 6-3 decision, the apex court struck down the sweeping global tariffs imposed by the US president under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA). The court ruled that the IEEPA, a 1977 law meant for national emergencies, does not authorize the president to impose broad trade tariffs. Chief Justice John Roberts noted that the Constitution grants the power to levy taxes and tariffs solely to Congress.

The court did not say how the government should refund the illegal tariffs, worth an estimated \$175bn. For nearly all goods subject to tariffs, an importer posts a bond with the Customs and Border Protection agency and pays an estimated tariff on the merchandise to bring it into the United States. The government makes a final determination of the tariffs on those goods, a process known as liquidation, which usually happens 314 days after entry of the goods. Excess payments are refunded or the importer must cover the shortfall. Importers filed suit at the US Court of International Trade to try to stop the process of determining final tariff payments while the Supreme Court was considering the case, but that court denied the request.

Did the Supreme Court say how to refund the money? No. In a dissenting opinion, Justice Brett Kavanaugh said the court's ruling was likely to generate serious practical consequences in the near term, including refunds. He noted it was acknowledged at oral arguments that distributing refunds was likely going to be "a mess."

The case will now go back to the Court of International Trade to sort through the refunds.

More than 1,000 lawsuits have been filed by importers in the trade court seeking refunds, and a flood of new cases is likely.

More than 1,000 lawsuits have been filed by importers in the trade court seeking refunds, and a flood of new cases is likely

Each importer might have to sue in the Court of International Trade to get a refund, and it is not clear that a class action could be formed to cover the broad range of companies that paid tariffs, legal experts said. Importers have two years to sue to claim a refund, under US trade law. The process could disproportionately hurt smaller businesses, many of which already suffered more from tariffs than well-funded companies like Costco. Lawyers for importers said some smaller importers might abandon a potential refund rather than pay thousands of dollars in legal and court fees to bring a case.

The Court of International Trade has overseen large-scale refunds before. Congress enacted a harbor maintenance tax in 1986 that was assessed on the value of all cargo into and out of US ports. The Supreme Court ruled part of the tax was unconstitutional in 1998. The Court of International Trade oversaw a refund process involving more than 100,000 claimants that was managed by Judge Jane Restani, who remains on the court.

Trade experts said the government has tracked tariff payments and improved recordkeeping systems that should make it easier to determine the size of refunds. Small businesses have called on the Trump administration to issue automatic repayments and have expressed concern that the government might scrutinize entry paperwork in a way that slows the refund process.

Even if refunds are distributed, some companies that sought them might not get the money. That's because the company might not have been the importer of record, which is the entity responsible for ensuring imported goods comply with regulations and paying duties. Once the refund is distributed, it will depend on the contractual arrangement between the company that paid the tariff and the importer of record to determine who ultimately gets the money, creating another potential legal dispute.

The process could take years, trade groups have warned. — agencies

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People walk along a market street during the holy month of Ramadan in the Balata camp for Palestinian refugees, on the eastern outskirts of Nablus in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Ramadan in Gaza: War weary, but Palestinians continue to hold fast to their faith and patience

QNA
Gaza

Amid the rubble of destroyed homes and between worn-out tents, residents of the Gaza Strip are welcoming the holy month of Ramadan for the third consecutive time since the outbreak of the Israeli aggression on October 7, 2023. This year, however, they hold onto hope that goodness and peace will prevail during the blessed month following a ceasefire agreement reached last October, despite little change on the ground as humanitarian suffering continues due to the Israeli blockade and restrictions on the entry of sufficient aid.

Like Muslims everywhere, the people of Gaza observe Ramadan through prayer and devotion, including performing prayers and reciting the Holy Qur'an. At the same time, Palestinian women and homemakers strive to diversify the Ramadan table with renowned Palestinian dishes, drinks, and sweets that reflect the authenticity and deep-rooted heritage of Palestinian cuisine, alongside newly introduced foods that add variety and break the routine of everyday meals.

Culinary traditions

Gazans have long held on to culinary traditions and dishes that are inseparable from the holy month. However, the impact of the war, food shortages, and soaring prices — particularly for essential ingredients such as meat, poultry, and fish — has significantly altered Ramadan food customs in the Strip. Some traditional dishes have disappeared altogether due to the unavailability of ingredients or prices that have doubled compared to pre-war levels.

Standing at the entrance of her tent in Gaza City, where she now lives with her family after their home was destroyed during the war, 50-year-old Um Bilal Muheisen said that many Palestinian families have inherited cultural traditions, including the preference to begin Ramadan with molokhia served with white rice and stuffed chicken on the first day of fasting. "This tradition has largely faded due to displacement, rising costs, poverty, and the limited means people now have," she told Qatar News Agency (QNA).

She added that the Gaza table was once rich with hearty Palestinian dishes, most notably "maqluba", Gaza-style fatta made with saj bread (flatbread) soaked in broth and served with white rice and chicken or beef, and various stuffed vegetables. Time-honoured dishes such as maffoul, okra, cauliflower, green beans, stuffed zucchini, and the traditional sumagiyya were also staples of the Ramadan spread.

Muheisen also highlighted other dishes that traditionally featured during Ramadan, including musakhan — roasted chicken served

on taboon bread with generous amounts of olive oil, onions, and local sumac — which is considered a Ramadan essential. Another celebrated dish is qidra, regarded as one of Gaza's most distinguished heritage meals. Cooked over fire or in clay pots, it consists of yellow spiced rice prepared with a special blend of Palestinian spices, onions, chickpeas, beef or lamb, and generous amounts of clarified butter.

However, she noted that all these culinary traditions have become subject to the harsh economic realities and food shortages caused by the war, which has upended not only homes and neighborhoods but also long-standing dietary customs.

Families now rely on limited food and drink options, as poverty and scarce resources prevent them from purchasing the variety and quantities traditionally associated with the holy month. For his part, Chef Moadaz Abdo, owner of a well-known restaurant in Gaza City specializing in Eastern and Western cuisine, said the war has profoundly altered Ramadan food traditions and dining rituals that were once deeply rooted in Gaza's social fabric.

He explained that before the war, one of the most prominent Ramadan features at his restaurant was large communal banquets and family gatherings characterized by open buffets and diverse dishes. "All of that was affected last Ramadan," he told QNA, noting that the difficult living conditions and loss of income among Palestinian families led to a sharp decline in demand for restaurant meals, with many relying instead on what they had at home or on aid distributed to displaced persons.

Abdo added that both homes and restaurants in Gaza used to

present a wide array of Eastern and Western dishes during Ramadan, particularly rice meals with grilled chicken, various mixed grills, salads, and appetizers such as stuffed kibbeh, grape leaves, tabbouleh, hummus, and an assortment of juices. Traditional beverages commonly served at the Gaza table included carob, hibiscus, tamarind, and qamar al-din, alongside fresh juices made from seasonal fruits.

Iftar gatherings

He further noted that the Ramadan table in Gaza traditionally featured a variety of sweets, most prominently qatayef, Nabulsi kunafeh with cheese, and Arabic kunafeh — one variety of which is produced exclusively in Gaza — along with kolaj, halawet al-jibn, basbousa, and nammoura stuffed with nuts and clarified butter.

"Not all families can afford such foods, which are considered relatively expensive," he said, adding that demand has grown for affordable popular foods such as hummus, fowl, falafel, hummus fatta, pastries, and manageesh, which remain within reach for many amid the deteriorating economic conditions caused by the war.

In the same context, psychologist and social specialist Noha Odeh said Ramadan food traditions in Gaza have been profoundly affected by the war and the resulting poverty, unemployment, and resource scarcity among Palestinian families.

"Ramadan in Gaza has traditionally been marked by spiritual, familial, and culinary atmospheres," she told QNA. "Streets and markets would be

filled with countless varieties of food that made their way to family tables, becoming traditional and sometimes newly introduced dishes in line with the evolving Palestinian kitchen. But over the past two years, as we have spent Ramadan amid killing, displacement, hunger, and fear, these manifestations — especially food traditions — have largely disappeared."

Odeh explained that the forced changes imposed by war have affected all aspects of life in Gaza, including Ramadan customs. Communal iftar gatherings, once a hallmark of social solidarity, have nearly vanished, as families can no longer host large meals in their homes — many of which have been destroyed. For many breadwinners, the daily challenge has become securing a single iftar or suhoor meal for their families, while tens of thousands of displaced persons break their fast in shelters or amid the ruins of their homes.

She added that iftar, once a social occasion, has become a daily ordeal for thousands of families facing food shortages and relying heavily on limited charitable assistance that often fails to meet the nutritional needs of those fasting.

Concluding, Odeh said Ramadan in Gaza is no longer as it once was. Many families who were previously well-off now live in displacement and sorrow. Joy has turned into hardship, and long-standing Ramadan traditions have shifted under the weight of war. Yet despite the immense challenges, Palestinians in Gaza continue to hold fast to their faith and patience, striving to preserve their Ramadan traditions as much as circumstances allow.



Families now rely on limited food and drink options, as poverty and scarce resources prevent them from purchasing the variety and quantities traditionally associated with the holy month.

Europe's top powers launch 'low-cost' air defence

AFP
Kraków, Poland

Five of Europe's top military powers announced a joint programme yesterday to quickly develop low-cost drones, as the use of unmanned aerial vehicles in the fighting in Ukraine drives a shift in modern warfare.

Defence ministers and deputy ministers from Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Poland said in a statement that the Low-Cost Effectors and Autonomous Platforms (LEAP) initiative would help "improve our collective security" within Nato while strengthening European co-operation.

Drones have become ubiquitous and decisive in the war triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine

four years ago, forcing a rethink of air defence systems.

Polish Defence Minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz noted that drone systems had "revolutionised" the war in Ukraine and had already led to "changes in armaments strategies".

The proliferation of drones along the front line – and increasingly – deep behind it, has forced a recalibration of air defence systems. It is not cost-effective to use expensive missiles to shoot down drones, requiring the development of new, cheaper systems.

At a press conference, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said the aim of the project was to "rapidly and cheaply develop innovative systems, in particular for defence against drones, and then just as rapidly produce them in large numbers".



From left: Italy's Undersecretary for Defence Isabela Rauti, France's Defence Minister Catherine Vautrin, Poland's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius and Britain's Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry Luke Pollard take part in joint press conference after the European Group of Five defence ministers meeting in The Collegium Maius - the Jagiellonian University's oldest building, in Krakow, Poland, yesterday. (AFP)

UK minister of state, Luke Pollard, who is responsible for the defence industry, said each member of the group has made a "multi-

million" dollar commitment to advance the technology needed to start producing components of the new system "within 12 months".

Also yesterday, the ministers agreed to "assume greater responsibility" to ensure the continent's security by working to-

ward a "more European Nato". At a summit in The Hague last year, and under pressure from the US administration, Nato members pledged to raise defence spending to five % of their national GDP by 2025, up from a previous target of two %.

At the conference, the ministers emphasised the need for "a fair sharing of the burden among Allies" which has long caused divisions between Europe and the US.

"We will work toward a more European Nato, strengthening the state of readiness of European defence," they said in a joint statement.

Poland, the largest country on Nato's eastern flank, borders Russia and its close ally, Belarus. It is Nato's largest spender in relative terms, allocating 4.48% of GDP to defence last year.

Despite headwinds, Merz wins strong party backing

AFP
Stuttgart

A year after his national election win, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz yesterday passionately rallied his conservatives and won a strong endorsement with a 91% vote to confirm him as party chairman.

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party congress came as Merz faces pressure over a limping economy, poor personal approval ratings and the sustained threat of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) ahead of several regional elections.

for the first time in years was his predecessor and long-time party rival Angela Merkel.

Merz, 70, has made it his mission to steer the CDU back to its conservative roots and undo the liberal legacy of Merkel, especially her welcome to more than a million migrants a decade ago.

Whatever differences they have had, they did not show them, instead greeting each other with smiles in the packed hall.

Merz, after his party's February 2025 election win, took office in May at the helm of a coalition with the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) of ex-chancellor Olaf Scholz.

At the time, Merz boldly vowed to revitalise the stagnating economy, limit irregular migration, re-arm Germany to deter Russia, and strengthen Germany's role in the world.



German Chancellor and leader of Germany's Christian Democratic Union Friedrich Merz gives a speech during his CDU's party congress in Stuttgart, southern Germany, yesterday. (AFP)

this week to present "a genuine reform programme" with tax and social welfare cuts and less bureaucracy.

Merz has faced headwinds from surveys that have often given the AfD a lead over the CDU/CSU coalition of his party and its Bavarian sister the Christian Social Union.

Another poll shock came this week when Merz was deemed less popular than Scholz – whose bland leadership style Merz mercilessly mocked while in opposition – in an INSA survey for Bild daily.

Merz, a longtime proponent of fiscal discipline, broke a campaign promise of no new debt before even taking office in order to finance a spending splurge on defence and infrastructure.

German chancellor to visit China next week

AFP
Berlin

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz will visit China next week for talks with President Xi Jinping centred on trade between the top EU economy and the Asian giant, Berlin said.

to Hangzhou to visit Chinese robotics firm Unitree and German turbine-maker Siemens Energy.

Hille said Merz would travel with a delegation of business leaders, but without yet naming the companies.

The talks between the leaders of China, the world's number two economy, and Germany, the third-biggest, come at a critical time for Germany, whose car makers and other companies are increasingly reeling from intense Chinese competition.

own global ambitions and political beliefs.

"China today sees itself in stark contrast to the US and claims the right to define a new multilateral order according to its own rules," Merz told a congress of his CDU party.

He said that when it comes to freedom of opinion, religion and the press, Beijing considers human-rights advocacy "as interference in its internal affairs".

Hille, asked earlier if sensitive rights questions would be up for discussion, said it could be assumed Merz would "of course discuss the whole spectrum of issues".

Undeterred, Merz gave a vigorous speech in which he sought to assure around 1,000 top delegates of the CDU that his government remains committed to meeting its bold campaign pledges.

"Perhaps we didn't make it clear quickly enough after the change of government that we couldn't accomplish this enormous reform effort overnight," Merz told them, adding: "I accept this criticism."

But, in a speech that fired up delegates in the southern city of Stuttgart, he vowed "to motivate us to peak performance" rather than "be dragged down by pessimism, fatalism and intellectual laziness".

Party delegates thanked him for his passion and candour by re-electing him as party chief with 91% of the vote – not an unusual result for a party that values tight discipline, but one that visibly relieved Merz.

Among the high-profile guests

Merz stressed yesterday.

But on the home front, the score card has been more mixed as his plans for boosting Europe's biggest economy were slowed by Trump's tariff blitz and other hurdles.

With GDP growth forecast at a meagre 1% this year, the captains of Germany Inc have harshly attacked the leader of Germany's pro-business party.

Rainer Dulger, head of business group BDA, called on Merz

The visit, the conservative leader's first to China since taking office last May, will be just after Lunar New Year festivities, his spokesman Sebastian Hille pointed out yesterday, calling this "a good omen".

China's top diplomat Wang Yi told Merz at the Munich Security Conference last week that Beijing hoped to bring ties "to a new level" and wanted Germany to be a "stabilising anchor for strategic relations".

Merz leaves Berlin on Tuesday and is scheduled to be welcomed with military honours on Wednesday in Beijing by Prime Minister Li Qiang before later meeting Xi for talks and a dinner, Hille said.

During the two-day visit, Merz will also visit Beijing's Forbidden City and German car company Mercedes-Benz. He then travels

The countries' traditionally deep economic ties have frayed in recent years over issues ranging from claims of unfair trade practices to protectionism and the supply of critical minerals.

The visit comes as US President Donald Trump, with his unpredictable foreign- and trade-policy manoeuvres, has upset traditional allies and threatened to upend the international order.

Merz said yesterday he was going to China in part because export-dependent Germany needs "economic relations all over the world".

"But we should be under no illusions," he added, pointing out that the one-party state has its

Another point of contention will be the Ukraine war, where Germany has been a strong backer of Kyiv since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion four years ago next week.

China and Russia are close partners, and while Beijing has said it takes a neutral stance on the Ukraine war, it has never condemned the invasion.

Germany's foreign minister Johann Wadepuhl visited Beijing in December, pressing Chinese officials including Wang to use their influence to help end Russia's war in Ukraine.

Hungary to block \$106bn loan to Ukraine in Russian oil row

Reuters
Warsaw

Hungary will block a 90-billion-euro (\$106bn) EU loan for Ukraine until it resumes oil shipments to the country via the Druzhba pipeline, its foreign ministers said yesterday after Budapest said it would tap strategic reserves to tackle a shortage.

Hungary and Slovakia, which have the only remaining refineries in the European Union using Russian oil through Druzhba, have been trying to secure supply since flows were halted on January 27 following what Ukraine said was a Russian drone attack that damaged pipeline infrastructure.

Both countries have blamed Ukraine for the delay in restarting

ing the flows for political reasons. Reuters requested comments from the Ukrainian foreign ministry and the state oil and gas company on Thursday.

"By blocking oil transit to Hungary through the Druzhba pipeline, Ukraine violates the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, breaching its commitments to the European Union. We will not give in to this blackmail," Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto said on X.

The Hungarian government said in a decree late on Thursday that it would release about 1.8mn barrels of crude oil from its strategic reserves to make up for shortfalls.

Croatia's JANAF pipeline operator, however, said yesterday there was no need for Budapest to do so after Hungary's oil company MOL said JANAF must allow transit of

the Russian seaborne oil during the Druzhba outage.

"At this moment, a significant quantity of non-Russian crude oil is being transported via JANAF's pipeline for MOL Group, while three additional tankers carrying non-Russian oil, also for MOL Group, are on their way to the Omisalj Terminal," JANAF said in a statement.

"There was no need to tap into (their) reserves since oil transport via the JANAF pipeline towards MOL's refineries is being carried out continuously and without delays."

MOL is entitled to priority access to released crude oil reserves, and it will have access to the freed reserves until April 15 and has to return them by August 24, the Hungarian government decree said

Rainfall batters western France



This aerial view shows an isolated house encircled by the floodwaters of the River Garonne in the village of Tonneins, south-western France yesterday. The floods affecting western France have reached levels rarely observed simultaneously on several rivers, according to provisional data from the public Hydroportail platform and hydrologists interviewed by AFP. Municipalities along the Garonne or the Dordogne rivers have in recent days already experienced levels not seen for at least thirty years. (AFP)

No peace dialogue ongoing with Japan: Russia

The Kremlin said yesterday that relations with Japan had been reduced to zero over Tokyo's "unfriendly" stance towards Russia, and there was no ongoing dialogue towards peace.

Russia and Japan never signed a formal World War II peace treaty, with the main obstacle being an unresolved territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, known in Japan as the Northern Territories.

In her inaugural address to parliament yesterday, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said: "Although Japan-Russia relations are in a tough spot, the Japanese government's position remains unchanged, aiming to resolve the territorial issue

and conclude a peace treaty," according to Russia's TASS state news agency.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, however, said Russia's relations with Japan "have been reduced to zero" over what he cast as Tokyo's "unfriendly stance" towards Moscow. "There is no dialogue, and it is impossible to discuss the issue of a peace treaty without dialogue," he told reporters at a daily briefing. "Russia has never been in favour of ending this dialogue." "...Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that any agreements can be reached without changing the modalities of our relations," he added. (Reuters)

Sweden to introduce cellphone air raid alert system

Sweden will introduce a cellphone alert system this year to warn the population of air raids in wartime, inspired by a similar system in Ukraine, the agency responsible said yesterday.

Sweden currently has an outdoor alarm system consisting of around 4,500 horns on rooftops and other tall buildings throughout the country.

"Based on the experiences we've seen in Ukraine, we've seen that the enemy, in this case Russia, would shoot down our outdoor warning system," Henrik Larsson, head of the population protection department at the Swedish Civil Defence and Resilience Agency, told AFP.

"So this would complement that," he said of the new system, dubbed SE Alert.

In the event of an air raid, cellphones connected to the Swedish telecoms network would automatically

emit voice message warnings, sirens and begin vibrating, he said.

The system, to be rolled out within six months, could also be used to send alerts in case of major crises during peacetime, such as nuclear or chemical accidents.

Larsson said the agency was also working with the Swedish armed forces to develop an app that lets people easily photograph airborne drones and report them to authorities.

Sweden has been beefing up its civil preparedness and so-called "total defence" measures since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The idea is to mobilise all of society, from authorities to citizens and businesses, to collectively resist armed aggression while maintaining essential functions. (AFP)

Swiss industry group urges to seal US deal despite court tariff ruling

Reuters
Zurich

Swiss industry association Swissmem yesterday urged Switzerland to finalise a preliminary trade deal with Washington in order to create legal certainty, despite the US Supreme Court's decision to strike down President Donald Trump's tariffs.

Switzerland was subject to the highest US tariffs in Europe when Trump imposed a 39% import

duty on its exporters' products in August. In November, Bern secured an initial deal that cut the tariffs to 15%, mirroring the rate for the European Union.

Switzerland has since begun talks to formalise that agreement, which Washington has been pressing to conclude by the end of the first quarter.

Swissmem said the government would be well advised to turn that preliminary accord into a legally binding deal.

"This is because it is to be ex-

pected that the Trump administration will invoke other laws to legitimize tariffs," Swissmem said in a statement after the court's ruling.

Separately, the Swiss government said that it would analyse further developments and specific impacts of the Supreme Court decision.

Swissmem said the Swiss mechanical and electrical engineering sector posted an 18% drop in exports to the US during the final quarter of last year amid the tariff hit.

Iraqi envoy highlights Ramadan as a bridge of unity and cultural heritage in Qatar

Qatar is a country deeply committed to preserving its cultural heritage, customs, and traditions, while simultaneously serving as a living model of cultural and religious diversity, Iraqi ambassador to Doha Mohamed Jaafar al-Sadr has said.

He noted that in this environment, the holy month of Ramadan serves as a unifying force that transcends differences among nationalities, as Qatar hosts a wide range of Arab and Muslim communities, each reflecting its own traditions within Doha's social fabric.

Al-Sadr stressed the importance of maintaining the Iraqi identity during Ramadan by recreating a traditional family atmosphere through home decorations and



Iraqi ambassador to Qatar Mohamed Jaafar al-Sadr

the preparation of authentic Iraqi dishes within his household.

He said that Ramadan memo-

ries from Iraq remain closely associated with symbolic traditions such as the scent of Tandoor bread,

the Ramadan cannon broadcast on television, and the collective anticipation of the call to prayer announcing Iftar.

Al-Sadr added that social solidarity defines the Iraqi Ramadan, particularly through the exchange of the "Ramadan tray" (some distinctive dishes of various meals) among neighbours before Iftar and the sharing of traditional desserts afterwards.

Family gatherings around a shared meal featuring dishes such as dolma, Masgouf, biryani, and charcoal-grilled kebab are central to the experience. Evenings are invigorated by bustling streets, cafés serving tea and coffee, and social activities such as the traditional game of Mheibes, while the Mesaharati continues the

nightly tradition of calling people get up late for Suhoor.

During his diplomatic posting in Doha, the ambassador has sought to preserve these traditions while adapting to the local customs that closely resemble Iraqi heritage. Participation in community Ramadan events and engagement with diverse Muslim communities further enrich this shared cultural experience.

Al-Sadr noted that Ramadan in Qatar uniquely combines spiritual reverence with social celebration through traditions such as the Ramadan cannon and Ramadan tents, alongside cultural and artistic festivals. The presence of diverse communities enhances this atmosphere, with each nationality

contributing its own customs.

Qatar also exemplifies cultural coexistence, where Ramadan becomes an occasion for unity across backgrounds. Participation in cultural activities at venues such as Katara Cultural Village and Msheireb Downtown Doha demonstrates how shared events foster dialogue and mutual understanding, reflecting the country's broader vision of tolerance.

The humanitarian spirit of Ramadan is further embodied in charitable initiatives, notably the efforts of Qatar Charity through the "Aqraboon" centre, which seeks to mobilise significant support for vulnerable groups including low-income families, orphans, widows, patients, and others in need.

Qur'anic Botanic Garden hosts Market Day on finale of organic farming contest

Qur'anic Botanic Garden (QBG), a member of Hamad Bin Khalifa University, hosted its "Market Day" event recently, marking the conclusion of the 'Our Organic Farming Future' competition.

Launched as part of the Garden's Educational Food Security Programme, the initiative advances QBG's mission to promote experiential learning among students, raise awareness of botanical knowledge and environmental conservation, and address contemporary environmental challenges such as food insecurity and climate change.

Introduced at the start of the 2025-2026 academic year, the programme brought together 120 students from 23 schools across Qatar in a hands-on learning experience focused on establishing and managing organic farms within their schools. Under the supervision of QBG specialists, students cultivated agricultural products, while gaining practical experience and skills in sustainable farming.

QBG provided participating schools with the necessary supplies and continuous field support, enabling students to undertake a comprehensive learning journey from planting to harvest.

The Market Day event served as the competition's final milestone, with students presenting their produce to a committee of agricultural specialists and industry leaders, demonstrating the knowledge and practical competencies acquired throughout the programme.

Fatima Saleh al-Khulaifi, director, QBG, emphasised that the Market Day represents the outcome of an integrated educational experience that enhances students' awareness of sustainable agriculture and food security. She underlined the importance of investing in younger generations as a cornerstone of building a resilient food system for Qatar.

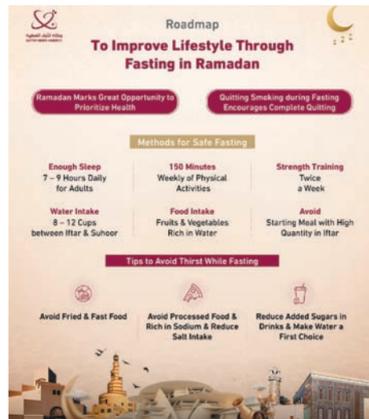


Health education official outlines roadmap for improving lifestyle through fasting in Ramadan

Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan represents a golden opportunity to reset one's lifestyle and enhance both physical and mental well-being. By granting the body a period of physiological rest, fasting can help improve key health indicators such as blood sugar regulation, weight management, and digestive health. However, experts emphasise that certain conditions must be met to fully realise these benefits.

In this context, Acting Head of Health Education at the Ministry of Public Health, Hind al-Tamimi told Qatar News Agency (QNA) that Ramadan offers a valuable chance to reorganise health priorities based on several essential principles. Foremost among these is obtaining sufficient sleep - between seven to nine hours per night for adults - to maintain focus, reduce fatigue, and regulate appetite and the hormones responsible for hunger and satiety. She noted that disrupted sleep patterns during Ramadan can lead to chronic exhaustion and increased consumption of sugars and stimulants.

Al-Tamimi stressed that the enforced abstinence from smoking during fasting hours presents a genuine opportunity to quit permanently. Smoking cessation, she explained, improves lung function, lowers blood pressure, and significantly reduces the risk of heart disease and cancer within a relatively short period. She also recommended engaging in moderate physical activity, such as brisk walking for at least 150 minutes per week, along with muscle-strengthening exercises at least twice weekly. The optimal time for exercise, she advised, is either two hours after Iftar or sufficiently before Suhoor. Intense workouts during fasting hours



should be avoided to prevent dehydration and exhaustion. Regarding nutrition between Iftar and Suhoor, al-Tamimi advised consuming between eight to twelve cups of water during this period, distributed gradually. She also encouraged eating water-rich fruits and vegetables to support hydration and promote digestive health. She cautioned against overeating at Iftar after long hours of fasting, as this can strain the stomach. The ideal approach, she said, is to begin with three dates and a glass of water, followed by a fibre-rich salad, and then a balanced main meal. Dates provide natural, fast-absorbing sugars that help restore energy levels gradually.

A balanced Iftar meal, she emphasised, should include carbohydrates such as brown rice or whole-grain bread; healthy protein sources such as chicken, fish, or legumes; and healthy fats such as olive oil and nuts. This balance helps stabilise blood sugar levels and prevents lethargy.

Al-Tamimi further suggested a light snack between Iftar and Suhoor consisting of fresh fruits, vegetables, unsalted raw nuts, and low- or fat-free milk. These options supply essential nutrients without excessive caloric intake.

In her remarks to QNA, she also offered guidance on reducing thirst during fasting hours by adopting specific dietary habits. These include avoiding fried foods and fast food between Iftar and Suhoor, steering clear of processed and sodium-rich items, reducing salt in meals, limiting added sugars in beverages, and making water the primary drink of choice. Salty and fried foods, she explained, increase fluid loss and intensify thirst the following day. She underscored the importance of Suhoor as a critical component of healthy fasting, provided it meets key criteria. A wholesome Suhoor should include slow-digesting carbohydrates such as oats or whole-grain bread; protein sources such as eggs or low-fat labneh; vegetables and fruits; and adequate water intake. Such a meal prolongs satiety and minimises blood sugar fluctuations. Finally, al-Tamimi highlighted the importance of observing healthy preparation standards when making traditional sweets. This includes reducing overall calorie content by cutting back on sugar or using natural alternatives such as fruits and dates, and opting for low- or fat-free milk instead of full-fat varieties. (QNA)

Community initiative to clean Rawdat Sidra Al Shamal



A number of community members has carried out a voluntary initiative to clean Rawdat Sidra Al Shamal, where they removed the waste materials found there and cleaned the site thoroughly to preserve vegetation and protect wildlife. Accordingly, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change commended the participants' efforts and urged all members of society to continue contributing to the preservation of the local environment, recognising it as a natural refuge and an environmental heritage that deserves care and protection.