



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

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Defence minister visits Air Operations Center



HE the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Affairs Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman bin Hassan bin Ali al-Thani visited the Air Defence Operations Center, where he was received by Commander of the Qatari Amiri Air Defence Forces Major General Mohammed Mubarak al-Shahwani. During the visit, HE Sheikh Saud was briefed on the status and readiness of the air defence systems as well as the measures taken to enhance the security and protection of airspace and territorial waters. HE the deputy PM was accompanied by HE the Chief of Staff of the Qatari Armed Forces Lieutenant General (Pilot) Jassim bin Mohammed al-Mannai. (QNA)

9 drones intercepted on Friday: MoD

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) announced that Qatar was subjected to waves of attacks from Iran involving (10) drones, starting from dawn on Friday until late evening. The Armed Forces successfully intercepted (9) drones, while one drone struck an uninhabited area, without causing any casualties. The ministry further emphasised that the Qatar Armed Forces possess full capabilities and resources to safeguard the state's sovereignty and territory, and to respond firmly to any external threat. The ministry also urged citizens, residents, and visitors to remain calm, adhere to official instructions issued by the security authorities, avoid rumours, and rely solely on information released through official channels. (QNA)

RAMADAN THOUGHT



The likeness of those who take (false deities as) Auliya (protectors, helpers) other than Allah is the likeness of a spider who builds (for itself) a house; but verily, that frailest (weakest) of houses is the spider's house - if they but knew. (Qur'an 29:41)

Prayer times

Fajr...4.35; Zuhr...11.45; Asr...3.07; Maghrib...5.42; Isha...7.12

Fasting times

Iftar today 5.42pm
Imsak tomorrow 4.24am

Prolonged war can push oil price to \$150: al-Kaabi

HE the Minister of State for Energy Affairs, Managing Director and CEO of QatarEnergy, Saad bin Sherida al-Kaabi warned yesterday that the ongoing war in the Middle East will force Gulf states to halt the production and export of energy products within days. In an interview with the *Financial Times*, HE al-Kaabi indicated that continued hostilities could drive oil prices to \$150 per barrel, and he predicted that gas prices would rise to \$40 per million British thermal units (MMBtu). "Everybody that has not called for force majeure we expect will do so in the next few days that this continues. All exporters in the Gulf region will have to call force majeure," HE al-Kaabi said. "If this war continues for a few weeks, GDP growth around the world will be impacted," he added, pointing that, "Everybody's energy price is going to go higher. There will be shortages of some products and there will be a chain reaction of factories that cannot supply." HE the Minister also pointed that if the war ended immediately it would take Qatar "weeks to months" to return to a normal cycle of deliveries. He also warned that a prolonged disruption



HE Saad bin Sherida al-Kaabi

would significantly impact global energy markets and could lead to a "collapse of the world's economies". He noted that the North Field expansion project would delay the start of production, explaining: "It will delay all our expansion plans for sure." "If we come back in a week, perhaps the effect is minimal, if it's a month or two, it is different," HE al-Kaabi said. Qatar declared force majeure and halted liquefied natural gas (LNG) production last Monday, as Iran continued to target its territory and that of other Gulf countries. (QNA)

Authorities warn against unfair price hikes in retail outlets

- MoCI cautions against illegal price rise or hoarding
- Company fined QR1mn for violating consumer protection regulations
- Authorities ensure steady supplies, consumers urged to buy according to needs

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

Authorities in the country are strictly monitoring market prices for various products and have warned against any manipulation, such as hoarding commodities or price increases without permission from government regulatory bodies. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) has warned that any kind of illegal price rise or hoarding products will be dealt with very seriously, and actions will be taken against such practices, especially in the aftermath of the prevailing turbulent situation in the country and the region. The ministry said that officials are on the move to conduct field inspections at factories and various stores to ensure that supplies are in place and that no manipulation or malpractice is taking place. MoCI has stressed that nobody will be allowed any kind of profiteering making use of the current situation. "If you notice unjustified price increases, exploitative practices or suspicious commercial activities, please report immediately to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Contact us at 16001 or through the Ministry of Commerce and Industry App," the ministry said in a social media post. Recently, MoCI ordered the administrative closure of a com-



pany for one month and imposed a QR1mn fine for violating consumer protection regulations. The ministry said that the company was penalised for increasing prices without obtaining the required approval and for failing to comply with the pricing regulations under the provisions of Article (10) of Law No. (8) of 2008 regarding consumer protection. The ministry has confirmed the continued availability of goods and products across various retail outlets in the country, ensuring that consumer needs are met sufficiently and regularly. The ministry also called on everyone to adhere to official guidelines, purchase according to actual need, and promote a culture of responsible consumption.

Article (10) of Qatar's Law No. 8 of 2008 on Consumer Protection prohibits suppliers from hoarding commodities, refusing to sell or charging higher than advertised prices. It also restricts price increases for goods and services without adhering to specific ministry regulations. The law is part of the broader consumer protection framework to prevent monopolistic practices and ensure fair pricing in Qatar. It also notes that violating Article (10) can lead to severe penalties, including administrative closure of the establishment for one month and fines of up to QR1mn. MoCI has reiterated that the ministry conducts intensive inspection campaigns across the country to ensure the continuous availability of goods and products in sufficient quantities at all retail outlets. Additionally, 33 major branches operate 24 hours a day, with direct, ongoing co-ordination with retail outlets to ensure smooth supply and reinforce market stability. Hassan Sultan al-Ghanim, Assistant Undersecretary for Consumer Affairs at MoCI, in a recent television interview said that proactive steps have been taken, emergency procedures have been activated, and several sales outlets have been opened 24 hours a day to enhance market stability and ensure the smooth flow of supply chains. **To Page 2**

Qatar condemns Iranian attack on buildings in Bahrain housing Qatari Amiri Naval Forces personnel

Qatar condemned, in the strongest terms, the Iranian attack that targeted buildings in various areas of Bahrain housing personnel from the Qatari Amiri Naval Forces, participating within the Unified Maritime Operations Center affiliated with the Unified Military Command of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), describing it as a blatant act of aggression and a flagrant violation of the sovereignty of Bahrain and a direct threat to its security and stability as well as the security of the region.

In a statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs affirmed Qatar's full solidarity with Bahrain in confronting this attack, stressing that targeting facilities hosting forces operating within the framework of joint Gulf co-operation represents a dangerous escalation that affects the security of GCC states and undermines the principles of good neighbourliness and respect for state sovereignty. The ministry clarified that the personnel

of the Qatari Amiri Naval Forces who were present in the targeted buildings are safe and no injuries were recorded among them. The Qatari embassy in Bahrain has taken the necessary measures to follow up on their situation and ensure their safety, in co-ordination with the competent authorities in the kingdom. In this context, the ministry expressed its appreciation for the co-operation and co-ordination shown by the relevant authorities in Bahrain in dealing with

this incident and ensuring the safety of those present at the targeted sites. The ministry renewed Qatar's condemnation of all acts that threaten the security of countries in the region and the safety of their facilities, calling for an end to escalation and adherence to the principles of international law and the Charter of the United Nations in a manner that preserves the security and stability of the region and spares its peoples the risks of further tension. (QNA)

Qatar emerges as launching pad for Ukrainian innovation

By Peter Alagos
Business Editor

Startup founders and entrepreneurs from Ukraine are looking at Qatar as a vibrant launching pad for Ukrainian innovation, creating a dynamic environment that fosters creativity and technological advancement, a business council official has said. Daria Revina, co-founder and vice-chair of the Qatar-Ukraine Business Forum (QUBF), noted that the country's strategic investments across sectors, coupled with its robust infrastructure,



Daria Revina, co-founder and vice chair of the Qatar-Ukraine Business Forum (QUBF). **PICTURE:** Peter Alagos

provide Ukrainian entrepreneurs and startups with the resources and support they need to thrive. "By establishing partnerships and collaborating on projects, Qatar and Ukraine are cultivating a unique ecosystem that not only nurtures innovative ideas but also bridges cultural and economic ties between the two nations. "This initiative, spearheaded by QUBF, aims to enhance the flow of knowledge and expertise, ultimately driving growth and development in both regions," Revina told *Gulf Times* in an exclusive interview. Revina lamented that the war in Ukraine has taken its

toll on its citizens, citing "a major outflow of talent." This, however, presents an opportunity for Qatar, which has placed a premium on attracting both local and international human resources, she emphasised. "Many companies in Qatar align well with Ukraine's strengths, creating a natural opportunity. Ukraine is experiencing a major outflow of talent - around 10mn people have left the country, with many relocating startups to established hubs in the US or Europe. Estonia, for example, has become a tech hub despite its small size.

"For Qatar, this presents a clear chance to attract Ukrainian talent. The country is actively working on this, as seen during the recent Web Summit Qatar announcement of the Residency Visa for Executives and the Residency Visa for Entrepreneurs. Such initiatives show Qatar's commitment to welcoming innovators, and this aligns perfectly with what we are doing at QUBF," she explained. Revina also said, "The challenge now is awareness. Qatar is not widely known in Ukraine as a destination for startups; so much of this recognition comes through

our work. For three years, we've been bringing delegations of Ukrainian startups to Web Summit Qatar, and founders are consistently impressed by the opportunities here. "They see Qatar as a launching pad: a manageable market where technologies can be tested before scaling globally. Of course, funding is critical. For Ukrainian startups, access to seed capital often determines relocation decisions. By offering both talent pathways and funding opportunities, Qatar can position itself as a refuge and a springboard for Ukrainian innovation." **To Page 2**

QMC chief in video call to enhance Gulf media efforts



HE Sheikh Khalid bin Abdulaziz bin Jassim al-Thani, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Qatar Media Corporation (QMC), participates in the extraordinary meeting of the Undersecretaries of the Ministry of Media in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, via video conferencing, to enhance joint Gulf media efforts amid the current circumstances.

Qatar Airways suspension of operations extended

Qatar Airways (QA) said yesterday that flight operations remain temporarily suspended due to the closure of Qatar's airspace.

The company added that it will resume once the Qatar Civil Aviation Authority announces the safe reopening of Qatari airspace by the relevant authorities.

The carrier said that it is working around the clock to organise additional relief flights to operate whenever that would be possible, adding that it would get in contact with passengers in that regard, including those whose flights were affected by the disruption.

The QA called on passengers not to proceed to the airport unless they have received an official notification from the carrier confirming their flights, noting that it has representatives in certain hotels in Doha to help passengers currently in the country with any questions they might have regarding relief flights and travel arrangements.

Passengers are urged to update their contact details so that they can be reached with flight information and instructions, adding that details can be updated through the website or mobile app. - QNA

Markets, healthcare institutions operating normally, says MoI

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has affirmed that markets and healthcare institutions across the country are operating normally, noting that there is sufficient strategic stockpile of food and medical supplies available to ensure the continuity of supply and meet the needs of the community in accordance with approved emergency plans.

The ministry also urged in a post on its official X account that the public maintain responsible consumer behaviour, exercise awareness, and avoid unjustified stockpiling in order to support market stability. - QNA

Interior ministry confirms continuation of working hours for departments

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has confirmed that working hours in its departments and service centres will continue as previously announced during the holy month of Ramadan.

The ministry said in a post on its official account on X that many transactions can be completed through the Metrash app and the ministry's electronic platforms, allowing the public to complete their transactions easily and save time and effort.

Earlier, MoI announced the working hours



of its various departments during Ramadan 1447 AH, specifying official working times in several of its service sectors, from Sunday to Thursday.

The ministry indicated that the General

World leaders voice support in calls to PM, DPM, minister

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani received telephone calls yesterday from Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Andrej Babis, North Macedonia's Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski, and Poland's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Radoslaw Sikorski.

Discussions during the calls focused on the military escalation in the region and its serious repercussions on regional and international security and stability, as well as ways to resolve all disputes peacefully.

HE Sheikh Mohammed affirmed during the calls that the Iranian attack on Qatar's territory constitutes a flagrant violation of its national sovereignty, is inconsistent with the principles of good neighbourliness, and cannot be accepted under any justification or pretext.

The leaders expressed their countries' concern regarding the developments in the region, calling for de-escalation, the application of reason, and the return



HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani



HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraykhi

to negotiations and diplomatic means to avoid further chaos.

HE the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Affairs Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman bin Hassan bin Ali al-Thani meanwhile received a phone call yesterday from Syria's Defence Minister Major-General Marhaf Abu Qasra.

Their discussion were mainly focused on the latest security developments in the region and as well as aspects of co-operation and joint co-ordination under

the current circumstances.

On Thursday HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraykhi received phone calls from Slovenia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Tanja Fajon, Portugal's Minister of State and Foreign Affairs Paulo Rangel, and Uruguay's Minister of Foreign Affairs Mario Lubetkin.

The leaders expressed support for Qatar during this time of uncertainty. - QNA

Qatar sends 5th letter to UN, UNSC regarding latest Iranian attacks

Qatar has sent a fifth identical letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the Permanent Representative of the US to the UN and president of the UN Security Council for the month of March, Michael Waltz, regarding the latest Iranian attacks on its territories.

The letter was sent by HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the UN Sheikha

Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani.

The letter noted the continued attacks targeting Qatar's territories, explaining that Qatar's Ministry of Defence announced on Thursday, March 5, that Qatar was subjected, starting at 11.51am, to several waves of missile attacks, consisting of 14 ballistic missiles and four drones launched from Iran. Qatar's armed forces successfully inter-

cepted 13 missiles, while the last missile fell in Qatari territorial waters.

Four drones were also successfully intercepted without any casualties.

The letter clarified that all damages and losses resulting from the attacks will be assessed by the authorities, adding that it will keep the UN informed of developments.

The letter reiterated Qatar's strong con-

demnation of this attack and its right to respond in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter, in a manner commensurate with the nature of the aggression, in defence of its sovereignty and to safeguard its security and national interests.

Qatar also requested that this letter be circulated as an official document of the Security Council. - QNA

Qatar emerges as launching pad for Ukrainian innovation

From Page 1

Explaining the QUBF's criteria when selecting Ukrainian startups to introduce into the Qatari market, Revina said: "When the QUBF brings companies to Qatar, these are not casual visits." "They are firms with concrete plans to invest, establish themselves, and expand," she stated. "Our approach is deliberately targeted," Revina continued. "We don't simply invite everyone and hope something sticks." "Instead, we identify startups in Ukraine with real potential to meet Qatar's needs, then work closely with them to explore opportunities here," she said. Citing the strategic investment of X2 Ventures in Deus Robotics, which the QUBF facilitated and announced by X2 Ventures lead investor Hamad Mubarak al-Hajri during Web Summit Qatar, Revina noted: "We select startups that can deliver solutions in those areas, match them with local counterparts, and facilitate funding so they can set up operations." "Even after agreements are signed, as with Deus Robotics, we continue to represent and support them daily, ensuring progress and tangible results," she stressed. "This selective, hands-on approach has been our strategy from the very beginning."

Qatar reaffirms support for Palestinians' right to self-determination, an independent state

Qatar reaffirmed its full support for the brotherly Palestinian people and their legitimate, inalienable rights, foremost among them the right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent state on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.

This came in a statement delivered by acting charge d'affairs at the Qatar's embassy to Austria, Jamal bin Abdulrahman a-Jaber, before a session of the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) held in Vienna on the situation in Palestine. The diplomat said that the Palestinian state has become an established reality in international law and in the conviction of the international community, particularly after 160 of the 193 United Nations member states, about 90%, recognised it.

He called on Israel, the occupying power, to accept the

Palestinian state as a reality on the ground and to cease misusing religious texts to justify unlawful expansion in Arab land.

Al-Jaber stressed that sustainable peace for all can only be achieved through respect for international law, the United Nations Charter, and relevant international resolutions, foremost among them recognition of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. He added that Qatar supported UN Security Council Resolution 2,803 and the peace plan proposed by US President Donald Trump, and considers the swift and faithful implementation of both the resolution and the plan a collective responsibility shared by all UN member states.

He noted that Israel continues to violate the ceasefire, refuses to withdraw from Gaza, and obstructs the delivery of humanitarian and relief aid to it. - QNA

Qatar joins meeting on supervision of DR Congo ceasefire

Qatar participated in a meeting, via video conference, of the supervision and verification mechanism of the ceasefire stemming from the Declaration of Principles between the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) and the Congo River Alliance (March 23) Movement, which was signed in Doha on July 19, 2025.

In a speech during the meeting, Qatar affirmed the need to refrain from taking any escalatory steps or carrying out any measures that may be considered a violation of the ceasefire in the eastern region of the DR Congo, before formally reporting any concerns or observations through the approved mechanism.

Qatar also stressed the importance of raising all security concerns through the agreed channels, allowing mediators and facilitators the opportunity to address issues and work to resolve them through the agreed peaceful and diplomatic means.

During the meeting, reference was made to the active role played by the Expanded Joint Verification Mechanism (EJVM), with the support of the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DR Congo (MONUSCO), in assisting monitoring and verification on the ground.

They also emphasised the need to fully benefit from these mechanisms in a way that contributes to achieving a full and comprehensive ceasefire. - QNA

Authorities warn against unfair price hikes in retail outlets

From Page 1

Speaking to *Gulf Times*, a manager of a supermarket chain in Qatar noted that it is time to help the people in every possible manner and not to exploit them.

"We are selling every item at reasonable prices, and we want to make sure that the people are not affected in a big way," he said.

"As long as we have the supplies, we will ensure that the prices are not hiked and everything is made available to the public at best prices," he added.

"We hope that the current situation will not last long and everything will get back to normal very soon," he said.

Shop Responsibly According to Your Needs and Avoid Excessive Stockpiling

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry confirms the continued availability of goods and products across various retail outlets in the State of Qatar, ensuring that consumer needs are met sufficiently and regularly. The Ministry calls for adherence to official guidelines, purchasing according to actual need, and promoting a culture of responsible consumption.

Obtain Your Information from Official Channels

- Rely only on official sources and avoid rumors that may lead to unnecessary stockpiling.
- Adhere to the instructions issued by official authorities.

Purchase Only Your Actual Needs

- Buy according to your family's needs for a reasonable period.
- Avoid buying large quantities out of concern or panic.

Prepare a Shopping List in Advance

- Identify essential goods such as food items, necessary medications, and children's supplies.
- Stick to your list to avoid random or unnecessary purchases.

Distribute Purchases Across Available Retail Outlets

- Avoid concentrating your purchases at a single store.
- Shop at alternative outlets, when available, to reduce crowding and keep goods accessible.

Partial resumption of air services in Qatar

QNA
Doha

Qatar Civil Aviation Authority (QCAA) announced the partial resumption of air navigation in Qatar, through designated navigational contingency routes with limited operational capacity, in full coordination with the Qatari Armed Forces and the relevant authorities in the State. This phase includes the operation of a limited number of flights designated for passenger evacuation, in addition to the operation of air cargo flights, in light of the current circumstances in the region, and in a manner that ensures the continued provision of essential air services.

QCAA affirmed that it continues to operate at the highest level of operational readiness, in close co-ordination with the competent authorities in the State, in order to ensure the safety and security of passengers and personnel in the civil aviation sector, and to maintain the safe and efficient flow of air navigation in accordance with the highest international standards. The authority is also continuously monitoring developments and will keep the public and aviation sector partners informed of any updates in due course.

The authority notes the importance for passengers who have confirmed bookings with airlines to follow the latest updates regarding their flights. It also emphasizes that the flights mentioned do not include scheduled flights to and from Doha, which will resume once an official announcement is issued by Qatar Civil Aviation Authority regarding the safe reopening of the airspace.

Sheikha Alya apprises OIC meeting at UN on regional situation

HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani participated in the emergency meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC) Group at the ambassadorial level, held at the United Nations headquarters in New York, to discuss the ongoing Iranian attacks targeting the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states, in addition to other countries.

Addressing the meeting, she stated that Qatar's territory had been subjected to a series of attacks by Iran, and noted that that Qatar's air defences, the Qatar Emiri Air Force, and the naval forces were able to intercept these attacks.

HE Sheikha Alya said that the attacks resulted in a number of injuries and caused damage to public and private property, adding that they targeted civilian facilities,

including a water tank at a power station, vital facilities for liquefied natural gas production, and areas surrounding Hamad International Airport.

She stressed that Qatar strongly condemns these attacks, describing them as a flagrant violation of its national sovereignty and a direct assault on its security and territorial integrity, as well as an unacceptable escalation that threatens the security and stability of the region.

She also conveyed Qatar's condemnation of violations affecting the sovereignty of a number of sisterly countries, affirming its full solidarity with those states in all measures they take to safeguard their sovereignty, security, and stability.

HE Sheikha Alya noted that Qatar has kept the UN Security Council informed of these developments, sending four letters so far to convey updated facts and

emphasise the civilian nature of the targeted sites, while strongly condemning the attacks and affirming Qatar's full right to respond in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter.

She added that GCC states, despite their diplomatic efforts to avoid escalation and their clear assurances that their territories would not be used to launch attacks against Iran, have continued to be targeted by Iran, in a clear violation of Paragraph 4 of Article 2 of the UN Charter.

HE Sheikha Alya voiced Qatar's appreciation for the positions expressed by many member states in solidarity with Qatar and the GCC countries and their condemnation of the illegal Iranian attacks, and called on the OIC Group to stand united in issuing a clear condemnation of these illegal and unjustified attacks targeting Qatar, the GCC countries, and other Arab states. - QNA



HE Sheikha Alya with UN chief Guterres and the other GCC permanent representatives to the UN.

Sheikha Alya, GCC envoys hold meetings with UN chief and UNGA president

HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani has participated in a meeting of the Permanent Representatives of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries to the UN with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to discuss the ongoing Iranian attacks targeting GCC states.

HE Sheikha Alya also participated in a meeting of the Permanent Representatives of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries to the UN with the

president of the 80th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Annalena Baerbock, to discuss the ongoing situation.

During the meetings with Guterres and Baerbock, the GCC permanent representatives affirmed the unified position of the council's member states in condemning these attacks, stressing the importance of respecting the principles of international law and the Charter of the United Nations, and ensuring the security and stability of the region.

They also underscored that the Iranian attacks on their territo-

ries represent an unacceptable escalation that cannot be justified under any pretext or justification.

Guterres strongly condemned the Iranian attacks, describing them as a violation of the sovereignty of the GCC states and a threat to regional security and stability, and warning that they pose serious risks to civilians.

Baerbock affirmed her condemnation of the Iranian attacks on GCC states, describing them as a flagrant violation of international law and an unjustified expansion of the conflict. - QNA



HE Sheikha Alya with UNGA president Baerbock and the other GCC permanent representatives to the UN.

Education an 'uncompromisable strategic national priority'

THE assistant undersecretary for Educational Affairs at the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE), Maha Zayed al-Qaqaa al-Ruwaili, has said that the implementation of distance learning system in public schools is an institutional model that reflects a high level of preparedness and established operational efficiency in managing educational transformation during crises.

Speaking to the Qatar News Agency (QNA), al-Ruwaili emphasised that education is a strategic national priority, the continuity of which will not be compromised under any circumstances.

This stems, she stressed, from the state's commitment to guaranteeing the right to continuous learning for all students without interruption, and its keenness to ensure the sustainability of the educational process according to the highest quality standards, in light of current regional developments and conditions.

Al Ruwaili said that the smooth tran-

sition to distance learning platforms was not a temporary, ad hoc response, but rather the result of long-term strategic planning and systematic institutional investment in building the digital capabilities of educational and administrative staff.

This, she continued, involved training teachers and empowering them to use technology effectively, adopting the latest digital methodologies based on interaction, quality, and measuring educational impact.

The official further emphasised that this transformation is based on a comprehensive institutional vision centred on proactive preparedness and managing educational risks according to best practices.

It also focuses on enhancing operational readiness to ensure the continuity of learning without interruption.

Al Ruwaili noted that the "Distance Learning Guidelines" serve as a governing organisational framework that defines roles and responsibilities, stand-



Maha Zayed al-Qaqaa al-Ruwaili

ardises procedures, and ensures clear decision-making processes.

The official noted that official daily monitoring reports revealed positive indicators reflecting outstanding field engagement.

The attendance rate of academic staff

in live broadcast classes exceeded 98%, while more than 16,000 teachers logged into the Qatar Education System, with more than 15,000 teachers participating in the live broadcasts.

As for students, the system saw the attendance of approximately 48,000 students in the live broadcast lessons.

Al-Ruwaili also emphasised the MoEHE's adoption of a precise daily monitoring mechanism for attendance and engagement rates.

This mechanism, she explained, includes continuous data analysis, ongoing field evaluation of the experience, and identification of challenges, which are then addressed promptly by specialised support teams.

This ensures continuous improvement and enhanced performance efficiency.

The official has commended the high level of flexibility and professionalism demonstrated by the educational field across all its schools and personnel, reflecting effective field engagement in

dealing with new developments.

She noted the allocation of a hotline in each school, in addition to activating central technical support channels, to ensure that those concerned are in constant contact with students and parents to overcome any technical obstacles they may encounter.

Al-Ruwaili also said that the system adheres to the highest standards of inclusivity and educational equity by providing flexible guidelines and teaching methods that guarantee the right of students with disabilities to receive an education that suits their needs through dedicated live broadcast sessions and supporting educational resources.

She added that work is proceeding rapidly to enhance and expand the capabilities of the digital infrastructure based on the outcomes of the current experiment.

This includes, the official said, providing the latest smart and mobile devices for educational and administrative staff. - QNA

Supplications from the Qur'an

ISLAM attaches great importance to supplicating, as it is the direct means through which the slave communicates with his Lord.

As Muslims we do not need any mediators between us and Allah.

In this article we will highlight some supplications that were mentioned in the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa salam.

Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, condemn us not if we forget or fall into error."

"Our Lord, lay not on us a burden like that you laid on those before us."

"Our Lord, lay not on us what we have no strength to bear. Blot out our sins, and forgive us, and have mercy on us, You are our Protector, so give us Your help against the faithless people." [Qur'an 2:286]

Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, not for naught have you created that (Heavens and Earth and what is between) Glory be to You, so shield us from the penalty of the Fire."

"Our Lord, whom you admit to the Fire, you have covered them with shame."

"Our Lord, forgive us our sins, and blot out from us our iniquities, and gather us with those righteous (in the Hereafter)."

"Our Lord, grant us what you promised us through Your Messengers, and do not shame us on the Day of Resurrection."

"Truly You, Allah never break Your promise." [Qur'an 3:191-194]

Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, You are the Master of the Kingdom, You grant the Kingdom to whom You will, and expropriate the Kingdom from whom You will."

"You bring honour to whom You will and You let whom You will be disgraced."

"In Your Hand is all the good, for You are Powerful over everything."

"You cause the night to gain on the day, and You cause the day to gain on the night."

"You bring the living out of the dead and You bring the dead out of the living, and You give sustenance to whom You will without measure." [Qur'an 3:26-27]

Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, truly You know what we conceal, and what we reveal, and

nothing is hidden from Allah whether on Earth or in Heaven." [Qur'an 14:38]

Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, forgive my parents and the faithful (people) when, the Day of Judgement comes."

"Our Lord, avert from us the wrath of Hell, for its wrath is indeed a grievous affliction. It is such a bad place to stay and abide." [Qur'an 25:65]

Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, in You we trust, and to You we return in repentance, to You is the destination (of all Your creation)." [Qur'an 60:7]

Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, forgive us our sins, and anything we may have done that transgressed our duty, and establish our feet firmly (when facing Your enemies) and help us against those that resist faith." [Qur'an 3:147]

Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, we have wronged our own souls, and if You do not forgive us, then we are certainly failures (losers)." [Qur'an 7:23]

Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, bestow on us Mercy from Yourself, and dispose of our affairs for us in the right way." [Qur'an 18:20]

Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, we do believe, so forgive us and have mercy on us, for You (Allah) are the most Merciful of any who show mercy." [Qur'an 23:109]

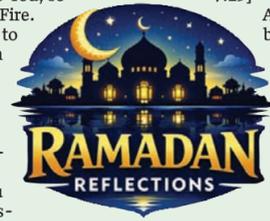
Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, Your reach is over all things in mercy and knowledge, so forgive those who repent and follow Your way and preserve them from the torment of the blazing Fire."

"Our Lord, grant them that they enter Paradise which You have promised them and the righteous of their fathers, and their wives, and their posterity for You are Exalted in might, full of wisdom."

"And preserve them from ills, for one whom You preserve from ill - on that Day of Judgement - You bestow mercy on him, and that is the supreme success." [Qur'an 40:7-9]

Allah says (what means): "Our Lord, let not our hearts deviate after You have guided us, and grant us Mercy from Your own presence, for You are (Allah) Granter of bounties without measure."

"Our Lord, You are He that will gather all the people together against a day which there is no doubt, for Allah never break his promise." [Qur'an 3:8-9]



Prisoner: A new novel by Qatari writer Asma al-Yaqub

ROSA Publishing House has announced the upcoming release of a new novel, *Prisoner*, by Qatari author Asma al-Yaqub.

The novel offers a profound human journey into the realm of the soul and inner conflict, presenting an existential experience that blends contemplation, sorrow, and hope.

The story revolves around a complex character who once possessed all the ingredients for success and seemed to control the world, but soon finds herself embroiled in a constant struggle be-



The cover of *Prisoner*.

tween freedom and constraints.

Life transforms into a postponed hell with every step that brings her closer to her true self.

From the heart of this conflict emerge ideas exploring the meaning of existence, the human sense of responsibility, and the possibility of self-retribution before confronting the world.

Prisoner is a valuable addition to Rosa Publishing House's library, a publication known for its literary works that challenge readers and prompt them to ponder life's fundamental questions.

The publisher says the novel offers a new vision in storytelling, combining poetic style with a philosophical dimension.

Spirituality, social cohesion features of Ramadan in Qatar

RAMADAN is a time distinguished by profound spirituality and a renewed sense of faith, noted by Mauritania's ambassador to Qatar Mohamed Abdallah Babana.

He said that in Mauritania, the holy month is welcomed with heartfelt anticipation, reflected in customs that blend devotion with strong social bonds.

Central to the observance are completing and frequently reciting the Holy Qur'an, filling mosques for prayers, and regularly attending Taraweeh and Tahajjud prayers.

The recitation of prophetic praises, he added, also forms

an integral part of the country's spiritual landscape.

Babana added that Ramadan in Mauritania is marked by vibrant social traditions.

Families exchange visits, communal Iftar gatherings are widely hosted, and Ramadan majlis serve as spaces for remembrance, conversation, and the sharing of knowledge.

These practices reinforce cooperation, compassion, and social solidarity.

The envoy said that he often maintains key Mauritanian traditions while in Qatar.

Regarding Ramadan in Qatar, the ambassador lauded the coun-



try's atmosphere, describing it as a harmonious blend of spirituality and social cohesion.

Babana observed that Qatar successfully balances authenticity with modern organisation, preserving time-honoured traditions while ensuring a well-managed and serene setting that honours the sanctity of the month.

He sees that Ramadan in Qatar also reflects the nation's broader philosophy of coexistence and tolerance.



Sleepless Iranians count cost of war as damage mounts

AFP
Paris

As US and Israeli war planes pummel Iran with daily strikes, witnesses say that civilian deaths, damage to infrastructure and anxiety are mounting while security forces remain an intimidating presence on the streets.

Millions of Tehran residents spent another stressful night on Thursday-Friday as huge explosions shook the city and lit up the sky, making it impossible for many to sleep, AFP correspondents said.

Israel and the United States insist they are focusing on military, police and administrative targets with high-precision munitions, seeking to undermine the Islamic Republic's clerical government that both sides would like to see fall.

"I don't think anyone who hasn't experienced war would understand it," a terrified 26-year-old teacher told AFP on

condition of anonymity. "When you hear the bombs, you have no idea where they will hit."

Verifying damage to housing and civilian infrastructure, as well as civilian deaths, is difficult inside Iran, where the few independent news organisations authorised to work there, including AFP, are subject to tight controls.

The health ministry puts the death toll after seven days of war at 926, with around 6,000 injured – numbers that AFP could not independently verify.

Government spokesman Fatemeh Mohajerani said yesterday that 3,090 homes and 528 commercial properties had been damaged.

AFP photographs and video emerging from Tehran, taken together with testimony from witnesses inside the country or crossing the borders, also provide a window into the destruction.

Some claims from witnesses, including alleged strikes on civilian targets, cannot

be confirmed, but the intensity and geographic spread of the bombardment that has encompassed small towns and regional cities is in no doubt.

"This war cannot be compared with the previous war," said Faiz Mohammad Rahimi, an Afghan man who fled Tehran, referring to the 12-day conflict between Israel and Iran last June.

"They are hitting everywhere, both residential places and government places," the 40-year-old told AFP after crossing back into his homeland at the Islam Qala border point.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Esmail Baqaei has accused the US and Israel of "deliberately target(ing) civilian areas and any location they believe will inflict the maximum possible suffering and loss of life."

Yesterday, footage emerged of the smouldering and ruined 12,000-seat Azadi Indoor Stadium in Tehran.

Homes, apartment blocks and shops

around targeted sites also appear to be sustaining major damage, given the force of the explosions in sometimes densely populated areas.

The high-end private Gandhi Hospital in northwest Tehran had its windows blown out in the first days of the war, one of 13 hospitals to have sustained damage, according to the World Health Organisation.

The biggest single loss of life is believed to have taken place at an elementary school in Minab in southern Iran where Iranian officials say that 150 people, including many children, were killed on Saturday. AFP could not access the site or obtain independent confirmation of the toll. Neither the United States nor Israel has claimed responsibility for the strike.

A *New York Times* investigation concluded that the US was most likely responsible.

The Pentagon has confirmed it is investigating the attack, while Secretary of

State Marco Rubio said the US would "not deliberately target a school."

Overseas human rights groups, a vital source of credible information about life inside Iran, say they too are struggling to confirm deaths and injuries because of an internet blackout and phone connectivity problems.

"Confirming the identities and getting statistics on data on the casualties has been really challenging for us," Awyar Shekhi, a member of the Norway-based Hengaw Organisation for Human Rights, told AFP.

On the streets, Iranian police and security forces, many in plain-clothes, are out in force.

"Because most (paramilitary) Basij and police bases have been destroyed, these forces no longer have anywhere to stay, so they roam the streets on their own initiative, spreading fear and terror, checking people's phones and inspecting them," Azad, an architect, told AFP.

Trump says only Iran's 'unconditional surrender' can end war

AFP
Tehran

President Donald Trump said yesterday that only Iran's "unconditional surrender" would bring an end to the Middle East war, as Tehran was pummeled by some of the heaviest US-Israeli strikes of the week-long conflict.

Now in its seventh day, the war has embroiled nations beyond the region, upended the world's energy and transport sectors, and brought chaos to even usually peaceful areas around the Gulf.

It has spread to Lebanon, whose prime minister warned of an impending humanitarian disaster as the death toll rose and tens of thousands fled heavy Israeli strikes on Beirut's southern suburbs.

Trump, who has given varying reasons for starting the war that killed Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei last weekend, promised to help rebuild the country's economy if Tehran installed a new leader "acceptable" to him.

"There will be no deal with Iran except unconditional surrender," Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform.

The main US crude oil price – already surging with the critical energy waterway the Strait of Hormuz in the Gulf effectively blocked – soared by 10% after Trump's comments.

Israel's military said it had hit more than 400 targets across Iran yesterday.

Several loud explosions sent clouds of black smoke into Tehran's sky, according to AFP journalists who described the day's strikes as the heaviest yet on the



Smoke and fire rise from the site of airstrikes in a central area of the Iranian capital Tehran, yesterday. (AFP)

capital. "It's really very scary," a Tehran businessman who gave his first name as Robert said.

"Checkpoints have been put up in place in the city to prevent looting and ensure control," the 60-year-old said as he crossed into Armenia.

'ADDITIONAL SURPRISES'
Both Israel and the US warned yesterday they were escalating their attacks on Iran.

According to Iran's health ministry, the US and Israeli strikes on the country have killed 926 people.

Iranian government spokeswoman Fatemeh Mohajerani said yesterday that 30% of the dead were children. AFP could not independently verify either toll.

Mohajerani added that 390 residential units and 528 commercial centres had been struck in Iran. Israel's military insisted it was only striking military targets.

Iran has launched missile and drone attacks at Israel and Gulf states since the war began, with AFP journalists in Tel Aviv report-

ing hearing several blasts yesterday. In Israel, at least 10 people have been killed, according to first responders there.

The US military has reported the deaths of six of its personnel.

The conflict has sucked in Lebanon after proxy group Hezbollah launched missiles at Israel in response to Khamenei's killing.

Israel's military pounded the country yesterday, including fresh strikes on Beirut's battered southern suburbs, considered a Hezbollah stronghold and home to an estimated 600,000 to 800,000 people. AFP correspondents saw scenes of panic on Thursday as residents fled en masse after an unprecedented Israeli order to evacuate the suburbs immediately if they wanted to save their lives.

Shadi Sayah, the mayor of Alma al-Shaab village in southern Lebanon, was among those who defied Israeli orders to evacuate.

"Of course I am scared, I am trembling," he told AFP over the phone from the basement of a church, as the sound of strikes got



Smoke rises following an explosion, amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Tehran, yesterday. (Reuters)



Men hold posters of slain leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during Friday noon prayers at the compound of a mosque in Tehran, yesterday. (AFP)

closer. "It is our right to preserve and remain in our land," he said, adding that "we are pacifists... a danger to no one".

The Norwegian Refugee Council said 300,000 people inside Lebanon had been forced to flee.

Lebanon's Prime Minister Nawaf Salam warned that a "humanitarian disaster is looming".

Lebanon's health ministry said the death toll in the country rose to 217 yesterday, a number that AFP could not independently verify.

Iraq, long a proxy battleground between the US and Iran, has also been dragged into the war. Drones struck an airport and two oil facilities in southern Iraq yesterday, a

security official said. Earlier in the day, oil prices surged after authorities in Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region said crude production had been halted by an attack on an oilfield.

The UN refugee agency said it has declared the crisis a major humanitarian emergency, stressing the need for an immediate response.

The UN's rights chief also called for "impartial investigations" after Iran said a strike on a school that it blamed on the US and Israel killed more than 150 people.

Neither the US nor Israel has said it was behind the strike. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio

said Monday that the Pentagon was investigating. AFP has neither been able to access the site nor obtain independent confirmation of the toll. The war has also come under increasing scrutiny in Europe, with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez calling the US-Israeli strikes an "extraordinary mistake" and "not in accordance with international law".

The war has not spared the rich countries of the Gulf, formerly seen as a tourist hot spot and a rare Middle East safe haven.

Yesterday, Saudi Arabia said it had destroyed a cruise missile near the central Al-Kharj area.

Thirteen people, seven of them civilians, have been killed in Gulf countries since the war began, including an 11-year-old girl, Elena Abdullah Hussein, in Kuwait.

Two hours before she died, the girl called her father at work to tell him she loved him. "It was as if she was trying to say goodbye," the girl's father Abdullah Hussein said at the funeral.

The conflict has also expanded as far afield as the Sri Lankan coast, in which a US submarine torpedoed an Iranian frigate, and Azerbaijan, which threatened retaliation after a drone hit an airport. Nations have scrambled to repatriate holidaymakers in the Gulf caught up in the fighting, with air traffic severely limited as missiles and drones dominate the skies above the region.

67 Kuwait army personnel 'injured in war'

AFP
Kuwait City

Kuwait's defence ministry said early yesterday that 67 army personnel have been injured since the beginning of Iran's retaliation campaign – the highest number by far of any Gulf military.

"Sixty-seven Kuwaiti military personnel have been injured" since the beginning of the at-

tacks, according to Colonel Saud al-Atwan, the defence ministry spokesman.

He did not specify where the soldiers were injured.

Kuwait had identified and "dealt with" 212 ballistic missiles and 394 drones since Saturday, he added.

Kuwait also has the highest death toll in the region so far, with eight out of 13 people killed in the Gulf having died in the country.

This includes four US service

members and two Kuwaiti army personnel as well as two civilians.

Washington said a total of six service members had been killed in the war.

The US has had a significant military presence in Kuwait since Washington came to the Gulf country's aid after Iraq invaded in 1990. Kuwait has several US bases, including Camp Arifjan, which is home to the forward headquarters for the US Army component of the

military's Middle East Centcom. The US Army also has stocks of equipment and supplies in the country.

Ali al-Salem Air Base hosts the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing, which the military describes as the "primary airlift hub and gateway for delivering combat power to joint and coalition forces" in the region. Additionally, the United States has drones including MQ-9 Reapers based in Kuwait.



Smoke rises after an Iranian drone was intercepted, amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Manama, Bahrain, yesterday. (Reuters)

Bahrain says Iran struck hotel, residential buildings in Manama

AFP
Manama

Bahrain said yesterday that Iran had struck a hotel and two residential buildings in the capital Manama, correcting a previous announcement that two hotels and one residential building were hit.

The attack came a day after

an Iranian missile strike sparked a blaze at Bahrain's main state-owned oil refinery, as Tehran pressed attacks across the Gulf.

"Iranian aggression targeted a hotel & 2 residential buildings in Manama," Bahrain's interior ministry posted on X, reporting "no loss of life".

It said the attack sparked a fire in one of the residential buildings, which had been extinguished.

UN chief slams 'unlawful attacks', says Mideast could spiral out of control

AFP
UN

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned yesterday "unlawful attacks" across the Middle East and warned that the situation could spiral out of control as the conflict spreads to multiple countries.

US and Israeli forces launched a massive air campaign against Iran on February 28. Iran has retaliated with strikes against Israel and Gulf countries. Washington said it aimed to curb nuclear and missile threats from Tehran but

it has also decapitated the country's government, and President Donald Trump is now demanding "unconditional surrender."

"All the unlawful attacks in the Middle East and beyond are causing tremendous suffering and harm to civilians throughout the region – and pose a grave risk to the global economy, particularly to the most vulnerable people," Guterres said.

"The situation could spiral beyond anyone's control. It is time to stop the fighting and get to serious diplomatic negotiations."

The UN's humanitarian chief Tom Fletcher said yesterday that "we're seeing staggering amounts of money, reportedly a bn dollars a

day, funding this war spent on destruction, while politicians continue to boast about cutting aid budgets for those in greatest need."

"We're seeing an increasingly deadly alliance of technology and killing with impunity," he added.

Fletcher said "we're seeing a sustained attack against the systems and laws meant to restrain us from our worst instincts and from reckless warfare." He also reflected mounting concern about the war's other impacts, warning that "it tears through markets, supply chains, food prices, and when that happens, it's the most vulnerable people who are hit first and hardest."

Ramadan prayer gathering in Somalia



Men attend Friday prayers during the holy fasting month of Ramadan at the Omar ibn al-Khattab Mosque in Hodan district of Mogadishu, Somalia, yesterday. (Reuters)

Highway anti-crime wall divides SA's tourist hub

AFP
Cape Town

Cape Town's plans to build a wall to prevent attacks on the airport highway have divided South Africa's tourist hotspot, with critics calling it an apartheid throwback to hide poverty.

The nearly nine-kilometre wall will separate part of the road that leads in from the international airport from the packed, impoverished settlements that line the route.

Attacks – some deadly – have been reported for years along the busy multi-lane route, including hijackings and smash-and-grab ambushes.

"They'll come with a stone and break the windscreen," said e-hailing driver Mustafa Hashim, recounting stories of attacks on the corridor known as the "N2 hell run". "If you want to keep your life, then you just leave them to take whatever they want," said Hashim, in his 30s.

The city announced the 114m-nrand (nearly \$7mn) N2 Edge safety project in December, shortly after a woman was fatally stabbed at a traffic light just off the highway after leaving the airport complex.

The key feature is a three-metre (10-foot) "safety barrier" to reinforce a broken concrete palisade fence and keep the road clear of criminals as well as pedestrians and animals. "Literally hundreds

of thousands of people a day use that road, and many of them feel unsafe," said Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis, stressing that most were local commuters.

'WALLS DON'T STOP CRIME'

Residents of the Nyanga informal settlement that will fall behind the highway wall say they are victims of the same crimes reported on the road, but the new barrier will do nothing to help them.

The attackers just disappear into the maze of shacks, said Linda Monakali, 43.

"This wall will assist the motorists, but for us, the perpetrators will be with us," she told AFP.

Between October and December 2025, the Nyanga Police Station reported the highest number of robberies with aggravating circumstances in the country, according to police statistics.

The station was also listed as the second highest for murders, seeing a 29% increase compared to the previous quarter.

Cape Town's high crime and murder rate is concentrated in its poorer areas – another world from the upmarket areas, beaches and mountains that attract millions of tourists.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has announced the imminent deployment of the army to parts of the city gripped by bloody gang wars.

City authorities should work out "how can we ensure we better our living environment rather than thinking of building a security wall on the N2," said Nyan-

ga Community Policing Forum chairman Dumisani Qwebe.

This included 24-hour surveillance cameras and decent sanitation, with women particularly at risk of physical violations when they use outside toilets at night.

"Walls might stop bullets but it doesn't stop crime," said city councillor Jonathan Cupido from the GOOD political party.

The city's government – led by the centre-right Democratic Alliance (DA) party – is "trying to hide what we cannot fix", Cupido said.

Thirty years after the end of White-minority rule, disparities between Cape Town's formerly segregated White and black areas are stark, with the city's DA authorities accused of not doing enough to tackle the imbalance.

Anger over the N2 wall dominated the Cape Town Pride mardi gras this month where activists carried banners reading "Homes not walls!", telling the city to address its deepening housing crisis instead.

"They are trying to build a wall behind which they are trying to hide the poor," former anti-apartheid activist and cleric Allan Boesak said at a recent Ramadan community gathering, calling it an "apartheid wall".

"They are trying to hide the fact that there is indeed a black Cape Town and a white Cape Town – a privileged Cape Town and a privileged-deprived Cape Town," he said.

brown tunic and was greeted with fanfare by officials and a brass band. Officials did not specify where he had flown from.

He waved from an armoured vehicle to several hundred people who were at the airport, many wearing caps and t-shirts with his image, an AFP journalist observed. For months Doumbouya's public appearances, in which he appeared visibly thinner, have been rare, fuelling speculation about his health.

After coming to power in a 2021 coup, Doumbouya was elected president for a seven-year term in December in a vote in which all major opposition leaders were barred.

For months, he has remained mostly out of the public eye, appearing only once on the campaign trail at a closing rally where he did not speak, and again to cast his ballot.

In January, he was sworn in before tens of thousands of supporters at a stadium and was seen again in February when he spoke at the AU summit.

poverty in their small country in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

Refugees have told AFP they are being forced out by violence, with Tanzanian security forces overseeing the destruction of their homes in the camps at Nduta and Nyarugusu.

"They started destroying our houses in early January," said Gerard, a 33-year-old former nurse, who lived in Nduta and like others in the camp gave only his first name for fear of reprisals. "They come with large tree trunks... to break the walls of our adobe brick houses. We can't do anything because the police are shooting at us if we try to resist," he said by phone.

Entire areas, including churches, have been destroyed, with schools and hospitals closed, according to

several refugees, who also said they were prevented from leaving their homes to farm.

"It is 100% coercion, and in that way, very illegal," said Stephanie Schwartz, a researcher at the London School of Economics.

Several refugees told AFP they were shocked at the lack of intervention by UNHCR.

In a statement to AFP, UNHCR said it "has observed and expressed serious concern over actions taken by Tanzanian authorities in the refugee camps that have put significant pressure on Burundian refugees to sign up for repatriation."

Jackson, 41, who lived in Nyarugusu, said the Tanzanian authorities were using Congolese refugees from a neighbouring part of the camp to carry out the demolitions.

Fearful African migrants warily work on through missile strikes in Gulf

AFP
Johannesburg

When blasts rolled across Dubai as air defences intercepted Iranian missiles overhead, Marion Kuria froze as a tremor ran through her building.

Then, like countless African migrants in the Gulf, she went back to work, driven by a need for income and with few alternatives to turn to.

The 36-year-old Kenyan, who has spent seven years in the city's retail sector, told AFP she felt the shock "in her spine".

"The anxiety was extremely high," she said.

She is one of thousands of Africans across the Middle East hunkering down as the Gulf fends off Iran's retaliatory drone and missile attacks since US-Israeli strikes sparked war last Saturday.

Explosions have rocked cities including Kuwait's capital, Manama, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, as Tehran targets US assets and hits civilian infrastructure across the region.

At least 13 people, including seven civilians, have been killed.

Yet for many African workers like Kuria, who has little chance of finding work at home, leaving is hardly an option.

Arnold Keumoe Tchimmoe, a 34-year-old Cameroonian restaurant supervisor has spent 11 years in Dubai.

The first blast caught him just as he arrived at work – a bang so sharp he thought someone had hit his car – before he stepped out and saw debris falling from the sky.

Even then, he said he felt calm, convinced that his wife, four-year-old son and mother remained better off in the United Arab Emirates than in Cameroon.

"I am more safer here," he told AFP, bluntly dismissing any thought of returning home: "Never".

For years, the Gulf states have pulled in workers from across Africa, offering salaries that far outstrip what many could earn at home.

Many take jobs in hotels, res-



Passengers and airline crew arrive from Dubai aboard Kenya Airways KQ305 flight at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA), as citizens return home amid the conflict with Iran, in Nairobi. (Reuters)

taurants and the security sector, or as cleaners and domestic workers in private homes.

Around 715,000 sub-Saharan Africans are in Saudi Arabia alone, making up more than 5% of the kingdom's foreign population, according to a 2022 census.

Little is known about the true scale of sub-Saharan migration to the Gulf, a 2024 study by the Gulf Research Center said, though growing African communities are now visible in the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain.

Kenya's foreign ministry said yesterday more than 500,000 of its nationals live and work across the Middle East, many sending home vital remittances.

For now, Nairobi says most are remaining. They are continuing "with their daily activities, whether for work, study, or personal matters, either in person or remotely, depending on prevailing local circumstances," Foreign Minister Musalia Mudavadi said in a statement.

Unlike European governments, which have chartered evacuation flights, African workers say the decision to stay or leave has been left to them.

While job opportunities are good for some, leaving for others may be more theoretical than real under the long-criticised sponsorship system common in the Gulf. Human rights groups have said employers often hold workers' passports and control their ability to change jobs.

"As much as we are safe now,

we did not sign up for this," Kuria said of the bombardments.

BALANCE SAFETY AND LIVELIHOOD

Many have weighed the dangers against the very reason they went to the Gulf.

Ghanaian Samuel Kwesi Appiah, 29, arrived in Dubai three years ago with help from an uncle who sponsored his move. He now works for a logistics firm.

"I came to work and support my family back home. If I leave suddenly, it will affect my income and the people depending on me," he said, vowing to pack up only if "the situation becomes very dangerous."

In another Gulf state, a Zimbabwean woman working in the hospitality industry, who spoke on condition of anonymity, described the fragile balance between safety and livelihood.

"We are worried and our relatives back home are also worried about us. They think that we are not telling them the truth about the real situation," she said.

Zimbabwean missions in Kuwait and the UAE have only urged Zimbabweans in the Gulf to remain vigilant – guidance that, for now, aligns with her own decision to stay.

"People want to maintain their jobs," said Peter, a Kenyan employed in a UAE restaurant, adding that many were wary of speaking openly, fearing fines if they are accused of spreading rumours about events.

Militants kill 15 soldiers in northern Benin attack: army

Reuters
Cotonou

Militants killed 15 soldiers and wounded five more at a military camp in northern Benin, an army spokesperson said yesterday, as violence spreads in the West African region.

Fighters linked to Al Qaeda and Islamic State have been rapidly increasing their attacks on the borderlands between Niger, Benin and Nigeria, turning remote transit corridors into active

conflict zones. Al Qaeda-linked JNIM claimed responsibility for the latest attack in Benin which it said took place in the northern village of Kofouno on Wednesday.

The "attack resulted in the loss of 15 of our personnel and five wounded, whose lives are not in danger," Benin armed forces spokesperson Colonel James Johnson said.

The army killed at least four of the "terrorists" and destroyed several of their motorcycles when they were retreating, Johnson added.

He denied JNIM's claim that it controlled the Kofouno camp.

Benin rarely comments on militant violence in the north, though it said last April that an attack by JNIM had killed 54 soldiers. Disgruntled soldiers attempted to oust President Patrice Talon in a military coup in December, citing the deteriorating security situation in northern Benin "coupled with the disregard and neglect of our fallen brothers-in-arms".

That plot was foiled with help from neighbouring countries including Nigeria.

Nairobi residents stranded by floods

Residents stand near a quarry that flooded after heavy rains within Kamulu area of Nairobi County, Kenya, yesterday. (Reuters)



Ethiopia does not want war: PM

AFP
Addis Ababa

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has said his country does not want war, even as regional Tigray authorities say federal forces are massing around the northern region, raising fears of renewed conflict.

Tigray emerged in 2022 from a two-year war that saw federal forces, backed by militias and the

Eritrean army, clash with rebels from the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

The TPLF dominated Ethiopian politics for some 30 years before Abiy, a non-Tigrayan, took power in 2018, with the group then marginalised and banned.

At least 600,000 people were killed in the conflict, according to estimates from the African Union. A ceasefire held for more than two years, but clashes between federal and Tigrayan forc-

es broke out again in November last year and January.

Large numbers of federal troops have for several weeks been massed at the Tigray border, where Tigrayan forces have also deployed.

"On our part, we believe problems should be resolved only through dialogue. We don't want war," Abiy said in an interview broadcast late Thursday by the Ethiopian news agency.

Doumbouya returns to Guinea after prolonged absence

AFP
Conakry

President Mamady Doumbouya returned to Guinea yesterday where he received a grand welcome at Conakry airport following a three-week absence that had raised questions about his health.

Doumbouya, 41, who has ruled the west African country with an iron fist since 2021 as junta leader then president, left Guinea on February 13 to attend an African Union summit in Addis Ababa. He had not been seen since.

Authorities said Monday that Doumbouya was in "good health", having taken "a few days of rest" on the sidelines of the summit and undergone a routine medical check-up. It did not specify his whereabouts.

Doumbouya arrived at Conakry's Ahmed Sekou Toure International Airport yesterday wearing a

Tanzania forcing out Burundi refugees

AFP
Gisuru

Refugees from Burundi are being forcibly evicted from camps as Tanzania destroys their homes and churches, pushing them to return, often after years in exile.

Burundi's Interior Minister Leonidas Ndaruzaniye said this week that more than 100,000 of its citizens would be repatriated by June under a deal with Tanzania, according to local media.

There were an estimated 142,000 Burundians in two camps as of late 2025, according to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), having fled years of civil war, political repression and entrenched

Cuba's government will 'fall pretty soon': Trump

President Donald Trump said yesterday that "Cuba is gonna fall pretty soon" in a renewed threat to the communist-ruled island already facing a US energy blockade.

"They want to make a deal so badly," Trump told CNN in an interview a day after suggesting that he would turn to an unspecified project for Cuba after the war against Iran.

"We've got plenty of time, but Cuba's ready — after 50 years," Trump said, explaining that Secretary of State Marco Rubio would be his point man on Cuba.

Both Trump and Rubio — the son of Cuban immigrants — have made no secret of their desire to bring

about regime change in Havana.

Washington has imposed an energy blockade on the Caribbean nation that has seen its fuel stocks plunge, following the US capture of president Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela — a key oil supplier to Cuba.

No oil has been imported to Cuba since January 9, forcing airlines to curtail flights to the island and deepening a long-running economic crisis.

Havana accuses Trump of seeking to strangle Cuba's economy.

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

Trump-LatAm summit to discuss 'democracy'

AFP
La Paz

President Donald Trump's huddle with right-wing Latin American leaders at his Florida resort tomorrow will focus on security and democracy, Bolivia's foreign minister has told AFP.

The US leader will host a dozen transcontinental allies at Mar-a-Lago, many of whom he has backed or helped put into office.

Among the guests will be Argentina's Javier Milei, Chile's hard-right president-elect Jose Antonio Kast, and El Salvador's Nayib Bukele — whose security

crackdown is seen as a model for many in the region.

During Trump's second stint in the Oval Office, he has put his finger on the scales of several Latin American elections.

He has threatened to withdraw fiscal support for Argentina if Milei's allies did not win legislative elections, and has openly endorsed presidential candidates.

The summit comes weeks after the US deposed Venezuela's long-time leader, Nicolas Maduro, and as Washington turns the screws on its old communist foe, Cuba.

"The purpose is to discuss the challenges facing Latin America," Bolivia's new foreign minister Fernando Aramayo told AFP on Wednesday.

He said topics would range "from the state of our democracies to security issues, matters related to trade, cooperation with the private sector."

Aramayo said that the meeting would also look at "current situations and what a more united and more resilient Latin America could accomplish."

Trump has sought to reestablish US primacy in the Americas — from bombing alleged drug trafficking boats killing more than 100 people, to backing friendly leaders and pushing Chinese firms out of the Panama Canal zone.

"American dominance in the Western Hemisphere will never be questioned again," Trump said in January.

US, Venezuela restore ties



US Interior Secretary Doug Burgum (centre) reacts during a meeting with Venezuela's interim president Delcy Rodriguez (out of frame) at the Miraflores Presidential Palace in Caracas on Wednesday. (AFP)

AFP
Maiquetia/Washington

Venezuela and the United States are restoring diplomatic ties, the two countries announced Thursday, in a new sign of thawing relations after Washington ousted former president Nicolas Maduro.

The announcement came as US Interior Secretary Doug Burgum wrapped up a two-day trip to Venezuela, part of US President Donald Trump's push for greater access to the country's mineral wealth.

The re-establishment of diplomatic and consular relations "will facilitate our joint efforts to promote stability, support economic recovery, and advance political reconciliation in Venezuela," the US State Department said.

"Our engagement is focused on helping the Venezuelan people move forward through a phased process that creates the conditions for a peaceful transition to a democratically elected government."

Venezuela's foreign ministry said it would "move forward in a new stage of constructive dialogue, based on mutual respect, the sovereign equality of states

and cooperation between our people," adding that the renewed ties would be "positive and mutually beneficial."

The announcement came hours after Burgum, a member of Trump's cabinet who leads the National Energy Dominance Council, said he had received assurances from Caracas that the government would ensure the security of foreign mining companies keen to invest there.

Burgum, who held talks with interim president Delcy Rodriguez during his trip, said dozens of companies had expressed interest in investing in Venezuela.

"I think you're going to see this government very concerned about providing the right kind of security," Burgum said.

He told reporters his meetings were "fantastically positive," and predicted Venezuela would surpass its oil and gas production targets in 2026.

Trump's administration says it effectively runs Venezuela and controls the country's vast natural resources after toppling Maduro.

Burgum is the second senior US official to visit since the bombing raid on January 3 that left around 100 people dead and saw Maduro and his wife flown to New York for

trial on drug trafficking charges.

Besides oil, Venezuela is rich in minerals such as gold and diamonds, as well as bauxite, coltan and other rare materials used to make computers and mobile phones.

Mining activity is concentrated in a territory known as the Orinoco Mining Arc, where armed groups are active.

Burgum's visit follows that of US Energy Secretary Chris Wright, who pushed for a "dramatic increase" in Venezuela's oil output and talked up "tremendous opportunities" for both Washington and Caracas.

The enthusiastic assessments of both men, which echo Trump's stance, reflect the sea change in relations between Washington and Caracas since the capture of Maduro.

Trump has allowed Rodriguez, who was Maduro's vice president, to move up to interim leader so long as she grants US access to Venezuela's natural resources.

Venezuela has the world's largest proven oil reserves, and Rodriguez last month overhauled the state-controlled oil sector to enable a wave of private investment. She now has her sights set on updating the mining code.

Oil spill disrupts livelihoods in Mexico's Veracruz state

Reuters
Mexico

Coastal residents in the Mexican state of Veracruz are concerned about the recent appearance of oil on local beaches, which has disrupted their livelihoods, fearing it could contaminate a nearby lagoon where communities farm fish and shrimp.

Residents of Jicacal, on the Gulf of Mexico, have organised themselves to remove as much of the hardened tar as possible from the beaches, while the viscous spill spreads along the coast. Authorities have not told residents what caused the spill.

Veracruz is heavy on oil activity in Mexico, both on land and at sea. State oil company Pemex ruled out any leak or spill from its facilities this week.

"As usual, we went out fishing and cast our nets, and we realised that the net was full of oil," said Aurora Apolonia Martinez, describing how she noticed the presence of the spilled crude, which rendered the fishing nets unusable.



Black tar slicks cover parts of a beach as members of Civil Protection survey the area before starting cleanup work following an oil spill that has affected fishermen and several coastal communities, in Las Barrillas, Coatzacoalcos, Mexico, on Wednesday. (Reuters)

Pemex did not immediately respond to a request for comment about whether it had new information about the spill following the surveillance efforts it said it would carry out in the area.

Cemda, an environmental organisation, said this week that since March 1, over a dozen spill sites have been identified along the beaches of Veracruz and neighbouring Tabasco along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

Pemex has denied responsibility

for the spill. But the company has been involved in several such incidents in recent years. The most recent was in October in Veracruz, where 2.7mn litres were recovered from the Pantepec River following a leak in an oil pipeline.

Both Jicacal and the neighbouring town of Las Barrillas, also in Veracruz, are fishing villages and local tourist destinations. The spill has also impacted the local tourism industry, discouraging visits to the coast.

Mexico to deploy 100,000-strong security personnel for FIFA World Cup

AFP
Zapopan, Mexico

Mexico said yesterday it would deploy nearly 100,000 security personnel to protect fans at the football World Cup in three host cities, one of which, Guadalajara, has been plagued by cartel violence.

Mexico is co-hosting the biggest World Cup in history, along with the United States and Canada, from June 11-July 19.

Guadalajara, capital of Jalisco state, Mexico City and the northeastern city of Monterrey will host 13 games between them, including opening match on June 11 at Azteca Stadium in the capital.

President Claudia Sheinbaum unveiled the country's security plan less than two weeks after an explosion of violence in Guadalajara, and other parts of the country, triggered by the death of a notorious drug lord.

Mexico City and Monterrey were spared by the violence.

Sheinbaum presented her plan at a military base in Zapopan, a suburb of Guadalajara, which was rocked by the killing of Nemesio "El Mencho" Oseguera, leader of the fearsome Jalisco New Generation Cartel (JNGC) in an army raid on February 22.

Oseguera was Mexico's most wanted man and was also sought by the United States, which had a \$15mn bounty on him.

He was buried Monday in a



Marcela Figueroa Franco, Head of the Executive Secretariat of the Mexican Public Security System, speaking during Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum's daily press conference at a military base in Zapopan, Guadalajara state, Mexico, yesterday. (AFP)

gold-coloured coffin in a cemetery near the military base in Zapopan.

After news of his death broke, members of his cartel went on the rampage.

They blocked roads in 20 of Mexico's 32 states and torched vehicles and businesses, including in Guadalajara and the Jalisco tourist resort of Puerto Vallarta.

Over 70 people were killed during the operation to capture Oseguera and subsequent clashes between the security forces and JNGC gunmen.

Both FIFA and Sheinbaum

have said that the violence has no bearing on the World Cup and that visiting fans have nothing to fear.

Mexico is expecting millions of visitors over the course of the monthlong World Cup.

Plan Kukulkan, named after the serpent deity of the Mayan civilization, covers the host cities as well as nearby tourist destinations.

General Roman Villalvazo Barrios, head of Mexico's World Cup co-ordination centre, said the nearly 100,000-strong security deployment would include 20,000 military personnel, including National Guard troops, and 55,000 police officers, as well as members of private security companies.

"That gives us a total of just over 99,000 personnel," he said, adding that the government was coordinating with the United States and Canada on security.

The operation will draw on around 2,500 military and civilian vehicles, 24 aircraft, anti-drone systems, and dogs trained to detect explosives and other substances, he said.

The head of the world football body Gianni Infantino told AFP two days after Oseguera's killing that he was "very reassured" about Mexico's hosting of the tournament.

Infantino and Sheinbaum spoke on February 26 by phone about preparations for the tournament.

And on Thursday, Security Secretary Omar Garcia Harfuch, met with FIFA representatives.

Colombians to elect new Congress, choose three presidential candidates

Reuters
Bogota

Colombians head to the polls on Sunday to elect a new Congress and choose three of the presidential candidates who will contest elections this May, a vote that will shape the next president's ability to push through legislation and fulfill their agenda.

Voters will choose from over 3,000 candidates to fill 102 Senate seats and 182 House seats, in a vote analysts predict will be divided among dozens of parties, likely forcing the next president to form a coalition government.

Some 41.2mn eligible voters will also be able to participate in consultations through which the right, centre and left-wing parties will select their presidential candidates.

However, the candidates leading the polls, leftist Ivan Cepeda, an ally of current President Gustavo Petro, and right-wing Abelardo De La Espriella, will not participate in Sunday's consultations but will be on the ballot for the May 31 presidential election.

Sergio Guzman, the director of consultancy firm Colombia Risk Analysis, said that with a Congress split among several political parties, "any government will see its legislative proposals diluted" and have difficulty getting them approved.

Morgan Stanley also expects Colombia's fragmented party system to persist in Sunday's legislative vote, meaning centrist and traditional parties will likely remain crucial to forming congressional alliances.

JPMorgan said Colombian assets currently price little extra election risk, suggesting the leg-



Supporters of Colombian presidential candidate Ivan Cepeda hold campaign posters with his picture as they attend the closing ceremony of the Historic Pact (Pacto Historico) campaign at Plaza de Bolivar in Bogota, Colombia. (Reuters/File photo)

islative vote alone is unlikely to move markets unless it clearly signals a shift in policy.

A divided result would likely keep markets steady. Stronger opposition momentum could

support the peso and narrow sovereign spreads, while gains for the left could weigh modestly on local assets and keep fiscal concerns in focus.

For Guzman, the consultations to choose candidates will allow the right, the left, and the centre parties to measure their strength in the lead-up to the presidential elections.

Petro has repeatedly questioned the software that will be used for the vote count in the elections, calling it unreliable and vulnerable to fraud, and has raised doubts about the way in which the physical tally sheets from the polling stations, called E-14, are filled out manually.

"The transparency of the Colombian electoral process is complete and absolutely guaranteed. There are absolute guarantees with the software and the E-14 forms," National Registrar Her-

nan Penagos recently said.

The registrar denied the possibility the software used to tally the votes could be altered, and reiterated the main guarantee would be the 860,000 jurors at the 125,000 polling stations set up throughout the country, in addition to more than three million party witnesses.

Some 246,000 members of the military forces and the national police have been placed on high alert to prevent attacks by illegal armed groups seeking to disrupt the election or pressure voters to cast their ballots for certain candidates, Defence Minister Pedro Sanchez said this week.

Leftist guerrillas throughout the country often carry out attacks during elections, a common occurrence of the six-decade internal armed conflict that has left more than 450,000 dead in Colombia.

Canadian minister for trade to meet US counterpart in Washington

Reuters
Ottawa

Canada's minister in charge of trade relations with the US, Dominic LeBlanc, will meet with his US counterpart Jamieson Greer on Friday in Washington, the minister's office confirmed, as the two countries come close to an official review of the North American free trade pact which also includes Mexico.

The trilateral free trade deal called the United States-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) agreement, also known as CUSMA in Canada, is up for review by July 1 this year.

"They will discuss the upcoming trilateral review of the CUSMA, as well as bilateral concerns," said Jean-Sébastien Comeau, director of communi-

cations for the minister's office. This is the first time the trade representatives will be meeting this year, although they had spoken occasionally over the phone, LeBlanc had said last week.

They last met in October. Canada is also hoping to reduce tariffs on key sectors including steel and aluminium, automobiles and parts, copper products and lumber and wood products that have led to job losses in Canada, although almost 90% of overall exports have been flowing into the US duty free due to the USMCA pact, data shows.

President Donald Trump has previously said that he could ditch the trilateral deal as it was irrelevant for the United States, and could strike separate deals with Canada and Mexico instead. Last week, during a

fireside chat, LeBlanc had said that Canada was negotiating with the US to remove tariffs on some affected sectors, and a deal could be folded into bilateral pacts alongside a review of the free trade agreement.

US Trade Representative Greer has previously said that negotiations with Canada were "more challenging," citing unresolved barriers such as restrictions on dairy and milk markets and US wine and spirits sales.

Canada and the US have not officially started the review process of the USMCA, although the US has already kicked it off with Mexico. US and Mexican negotiators will hold bilateral discussions starting the week of March 16 as part of the joint review of the trade agreement, the US Trade Representative's office said on Thursday.

US ex-presidents gather for Jesse Jackson memorial



From left: Former US vice-president Kamala Harris, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former president Bill Clinton, former president Barack Obama, former first lady Jill Biden and former president Joe Biden attend a public memorial service to celebrate the life of civil rights activist Reverend Jesse Jackson in Chicago, Illinois, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Chicago

Three former US presidents gathered for a public memorial service to civil rights leader Jesse Jackson yesterday, marking the life of a pillar of the struggle for civil rights after his death at age 84.

Former presidents Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and Joe Biden were to address a crowd of hundreds as a stylised, blue-lit image of Jackson was projected on a giant screen behind an altar in a Chicago venue.

A choir sang as attendees pho-

tographed a large panel emblazoned with one of Jackson's mantras "keep hope alive."

Among the other speakers due to address the memorial were former vice-president Kamala Harris, Illinois Governor JB Pritzker and Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson.

Jackson, who died on February 17, was a close associate of Martin Luther King Jr in the 1960s and remained a prominent voice of African Americans on the national stage for more than six decades.

In 1960, he participated in his first sit-in, in Greenville, and then joined the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights marches in 1965, where

he caught King's attention.

Jackson, a Baptist minister, later emerged as a mediator and envoy on several notable international fronts.

He became a prominent advocate for ending apartheid in South Africa, and in the 1990s served as presidential special envoy for Africa for Bill Clinton.

Missions to free US prisoners took him to Syria, Iraq and Serbia.

He founded the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, a Chicago-based non-profit organisation focused on social justice and political activism, in 1996.

He is survived by his wife and six children.

White House downplays report Russia aiding Iran's forces

AFP
Washington

The White House yesterday downplayed a report that Russia is providing Iran with targeting information about US forces in the Middle East.

"It clearly is not making a difference with respect to the military operations in Iran because we are completely decimating them," House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt told reporters.

"We are achieving the military objectives of this operation and that is going to continue," Leavitt said. *The Washington Post*, citing officials familiar with the intelligence, said Russia has provided Iran with the locations of US military assets, including ships and aircraft.

Six US service members were killed in a drone attack on a US base in Kuwait on Sunday and the CIA station in Riyadh has also been hit.

The Post said China did not ap-

pear to be aiding Iran's defences.

US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth was asked earlier this week if he had a message for Russia and China. "I don't have a message for them, and they're not really a factor here, and our issue is not with them," Hegseth said.

Russia and China have long-standing diplomatic and trade ties with Iran, while Russia has close military links to the country.

Both Moscow and Beijing have criticised the US-Israeli war against Iran.

Trump to press defence firms to boost production

Reuters
Washington

US President Donald Trump plans to meet executives from the biggest US defence contractors on Friday, the White House said, as the Pentagon works to replenish supplies drawn down by US strikes on Iran and other recent military operations.

The meeting underscores the Trump administration's drive to shore up weapons stocks after the Iran operation drew on munitions.

Companies including Lockheed Martin and Raytheon parent RTX, along with key suppliers, have been invited to attend the meeting, sources familiar with the plan said, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the plan is private.

Pentagon negotiators have not been able to reach terms with large defence contractors as quickly as they would like, a US official told Reuters earlier this week.

Lockheed did not respond to a request for comment. RTX declined to comment on the meeting.

The administration has been steadily ratcheting up pressure on defence contractors to prioritise production over shareholder payouts. Trump signed an executive order in January to identify contractors deemed to be underperforming on contracts while distributing profits to shareholders.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 and Israel's military operations in Gaza, the US has drawn down billions of dollars' worth of weapons stockpiles, including artillery systems, ammunition and anti-tank missiles.

In a sign of the preparations underway ahead of Friday's gathering, Deputy Defense Secretary Steve Feinberg held a call with select defence contractors on Wednesday



Military personnel work on a USAF B1-B bomber after it landed at RAF Fairford airbase, which also hosts United States Air Force personnel, in Fairford, Britain, yesterday. (Reuters)

evening, a previously unreported development, people familiar with the matter told Reuters, speaking on condition of anonymity. The Pentagon did not respond to a request for comment.

At the centre of the talks are deals with large contractors like Lockheed Martin, two government sources and one industry executive said. In January the company reached a seven-year agreement with the Pentagon to increase annual production capacity for its PAC-3 missile interceptors to 2,000 units a year from about 600 previously. The company has announced it expects to quadruple production of its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, missile interceptors to 400 per year from 96.

Demand for air defence systems such as the PAC-3 has surged among the US and its allies amid heightened geopolitical tensions and the conflict in Iran.

The White House meeting also may coincide with the release of a supplemental budget request of around \$50bn, which Reuters was first to report on Tuesday. The new money would pay for replacing weapons used in recent conflicts including those in the Middle East. The figure is preliminary and could change depending on the length of the operation.

The supplemental request would come on top of an additional \$150bn in defence spending included in Republicans' sweeping "one big beautiful bill."

US pressing Sri Lanka not to repatriate Iranian crew, survivors from sunken ship

Reuters
Washington

The United States is pressing Sri Lanka's government not to repatriate the survivors from the Iranian warship it sank this week, as well as the crew of a second Iranian ship that is in Sri Lankan custody, according to an internal State Department cable seen by Reuters yesterday.

A US submarine sank the IRIS Dena warship in the Indian Ocean about 19 nautical miles off Sri Lanka's southern port city of Galle on Wednesday, killing dozens of sailors and dramatically widening Washington's pursuit of the Iranian navy.

On Thursday, Sri Lanka began offloading 208 crew members from a second Iranian ship, the naval auxiliary vessel IRIS Booshehr, which had found itself stranded in Sri Lanka's exclusive economic zone but outside its maritime boundary.

President Anura Kumara Disanayake said his island nation had a "humanitarian responsibility" to take in the crew.

The torpedoing of the Dena - which US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth described as "quiet death" - was the first such action by the United States since World War Two and a clear sign of the Iran conflict's widening geographic scope.

The internal State Department cable, which was dated March 6 and has not been previously reported, said Jayne Howell, the charge d'affaires at the U.S. embassy in Colombo, had emphasised to Sri Lanka's government that neither the Booshehr crew nor the 32 Dena survivors should be repatriated to Iran.

It said "Sri Lankan authorities should minimise Iranian attempts to use the detainees for propaganda."

The State Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Representatives for Disanayake's office and Sri Lanka's foreign ministry were not immediately available for comment.

The cable said Howell also told the Israeli ambassador to India and Sri Lanka there was no plan to repatriate the crew to Iran. The envoy asked Howell whether there was any engagement with the crew to encourage "defection", the cable said.

A representative for the Israeli embassy in New Delhi did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

On Wednesday, Sri Lanka's deputy minister for health and mass media, Hansaka Wijemuni, told Reuters that Tehran had asked Colombo for help repatriating the bodies of those killed aboard the Dena, but a timeframe to do so has not yet been determined.

The Dena had taken part in naval exercises organised by India in the Bay of Bengal last month and was returning to Iran when it was struck by a US torpedo.

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Reuters the Dena was armed when it was hit and the United States did not provide a warning before carrying out the strike.

The State Department cable said the second vessel, the Booshehr, will remain in Sri Lankan custody for the duration of the conflict.

Sri Lankan authorities said yesterday that they were escorting the Booshehr to a harbour on the eastern coast and moving most of its crew to a navy camp near Colombo.

US customs agency says tariff refund system will be ready in 45 days

By Tom Hals
Reuters

The US customs agency is readying a system within 45 days to process refunds on US President Donald Trump's tariffs that were struck down as illegal, a customs official said in a court filing yesterday. The declaration by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) official Brandon Lord came as government lawyers met with a federal trade judge to try to hammer out a broad settlement process, as Reuters reported exclusively, for returning \$166bn in tariff payments to around 330,000 importers. The

tariffs that were a central part of President Donald Trump's economic policy were struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court last month. However, the Supreme Court did not say how the collected tariffs should be refunded, leaving small importers worried the process would be expensive and time-consuming.

"This new process will require minimal submission from importers," Lord said in his declaration, which was filed with the US Court of International Trade just as government lawyers began meeting with Judge Richard Eaton from the court. Eaton called the meeting to discuss how the government will carry out his sweeping order is-

CBP is preparing a refund system that will not require importers to sue

sued on Wednesday directing the CBP to begin refunding tariffs to potentially hundreds of thousands of importers using the agency's existing internal process.

Eaton said in his Wednesday order that he had been appointed by the trade court to hear the roughly 2,000 lawsuits filed by importers including FedEx and L'Oreal seeking refunds. Trade lawyers said those lawsuits were the tip of the iceberg, and thousands more were prepared to sue if the govern-

ment failed to develop a system for automatic refunds. Affiliates of Nintendo and CVS became the latest large companies to sue for refunds yesterday.

Lord said in the court filing that the customs agency expected importers to file a declaration with the CBP's computer system known as ACE detailing tariff payments, which would then be validated before refunds are processed with interest. The importers would not have to sue.

Each importer would receive a single payment from the Treasury Department, regardless of how many separate entries of goods the importer had made.

Lord did not estimate how long

it would take to process the refunds, but said the CBP would not be able to comply with Eaton's order from Wednesday. Eaton contemplated refunds would be automatically returned to importers through the existing system without documentation or input from the importer.

"Its existing administrative procedures and technology are not well-suited to a task of this scale and will require manual work that will prevent personnel from fully carrying out the agency's trade enforcement mission," Lord said in explaining why the agency could not use its existing system.

He said importers had paid an estimated \$166bn in tariffs on

more than 53mn shipments. Eaton's order would have required the agency to manually review paperwork on every shipment, a process Lord said would require more than 4mn hours of labour.

However, Lord's declaration also indicated that few importers had signed up for the CBP's electronic system for refunds. Out of more than 330,000 importers who paid the illegal duties, only 21,423 signed up for the electronic refund system that went into place on February 6, according to Lord.

Eaton is overseeing a refund lawsuit by Atmus Filtration Inc, which the judge is using as a vehicle to order CBP to issue the refunds for all importers.



'Indonesia will withdraw from Board of Peace if it does not benefit Palestinians'

Reuters
Jakarta

Indonesia's President Prabowo Subianto has reassured that he will withdraw from US President Donald Trump's 'Board of Peace' if the platform does not benefit Palestinians, a government statement said yesterday.

The participation of Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, on the board, and its decision to contribute troops for a Gaza stabilisation force, has drawn criticism from experts and Muslim groups at home, who say it compromises its long-standing support for the Palestinian cause.

Prabowo gathered the groups' leaders for a meeting on Thursday evening where he reiterated his reasoning behind joining the board, according to a statement put out by the government communication office.

Prabowo will withdraw from the board if it does not benefit Palestinian and Indonesian interests, the statement quoted Hanif Alatas of the Islamic Brotherhood Front as saying.

"The president said that if he sees that there is no longer any benefit for Palestine...and that it is not in line with Indonesia's national interests, he will withdraw," Hanif said in the statement.

The Indonesian Ulema Council,

a leading clerical body, had previously called for Indonesia to exit the board due to the US role in the ongoing Iran war.

Nahdlatul Ulama, the country's largest Muslim group, said Indonesia's government could use the board to encourage de-escalation in the Middle East.

"Indonesia could declare that the (board's) agenda is on hold until there are talks on de-escalation and peace from the American-Israeli war against Iran," its chief Yahya Cholil Staquf said in a statement issued by Prabowo's office late on Thursday. All Board of Peace discussions have been halted due to the war, Indonesia Foreign Minister Sugiono has previously said.

Indonesia to restrict social media access for children under 16

Reuters
Jakarta

Indonesia will restrict access to social media platforms for children under 16, its communications and digital ministry said yesterday, making it the latest country to install online guardrails to reduce the risks of addiction and cyberbullying.

A number of governments have imposed curbs on social media for children amid mounting concerns over the impact that social media is having on the safety and mental health of minors.

Australia introduced a ban on social media for under-16s in December, and Spain also said last month that it would ban access to social media for minors under 16.

Indonesia's neighbour Malaysia announced in November that it would also ban social media for users under the age of 16 starting from 2026.

Meutya Hafid, Indonesia's Communications and Digital Minister, said in a video statement that the government will "delay access" to social media accounts for children under 16 through a ministerial regulation issued yesterday.

Starting March 28, accounts owned by children under 16 on "high risk platforms" will be gradually deactivated, Meutya said, adding the platforms include TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and Roblox.

"The process will be done gradually until all platforms perform their obligations," she said, without elaborating on what they need to do to meet the new requirements.

"We realise this may cause discomfort in the beginning. Children may complain and parents may be confused dealing with their complaints."

"Our children are facing risks, from porn, cyberbullying, online

fraud to most importantly, addiction," she said, adding Indonesia will be the first non-Western country to impose such restrictions.

TikTok, Meta - which owns Facebook and Instagram, and Roblox did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The details of the new regulation have yet to be revealed. Ministry officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Internet penetration in Indonesia, a country of about 280mn people, reached 79.5% in 2024, according to a survey of 8,700 people by the Indonesia Internet service providers' association.

The survey showed 48% of children under 12 had access to the Internet, with some respondents of that age group using Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. The survey showed internet penetration stood at 87% among "Gen Z" users aged 12-27.

Japan approves stem-cell treatment for Parkinson's in world first

AFP
Tokyo

Japan has approved groundbreaking stem-cell treatments for Parkinson's and severe heart failure, one of the manufacturers and media reports said Friday, with the therapies expected to reach patients within months.

Pharmaceutical company Sumitomo Pharma said it received the green light for the manufacture and sale of Amchepry, its Parkinson's disease treatment that transplants stem cells into a patient's brain.

Japan's health ministry also gave the go-ahead to ReHeart, heart muscle sheets developed by medical startup Cuorip that can help form new blood vessels and restore heart function, media reports said.

The treatments could be on the market and rolled out to patients

as early as this summer, reports said, citing the health ministry, becoming the world's first commercially available medical products using (iPS) cells.

Japanese scientist Shinya Yamanaka won the Nobel Prize in 2012 for his research into iPS, which have the potential to develop into any cell in the body.

"I hope this will bring relief to patients not only in Japan but around the world," health minister Kenichiro Ueno told a press conference.

"We will promptly carry out all necessary procedures to ensure it reaches all patients without fail."

In a statement, Sumitomo Pharma said it had obtained "conditional and time-limited approval" for the manufacture and marketing of Amchepry under a system which is reportedly designed to get these products to patients as quickly as possible.

The approval is a kind of "pro-

visional licence", the Asahi newspaper said, after the safety and efficacy of the treatment was judged based on data from fewer patients than in ordinary clinical trials for drugs.

A trial led by Kyoto University researchers indicated that the company's treatment was safe and successful in improving symptoms.

The study involved seven Parkinson's patients aged between 50 and 69, with each receiving a total of either 5mn or 10mn cells implanted on both sides of the brain.

The iPS cells from healthy donors were developed into the precursors of dopamine-producing brain cells, which are no longer present in people with Parkinson's disease.

The patients were monitored for two years and no major adverse effects were found, the study said. Four patients showed improvements in symptoms.

Ramadan celebrations in Sydney



Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his wife Jodie Haydon visit Lakemba during Ramadan celebrations in Sydney, Australia, yesterday. (Reuters)

Canada PM vows defence, economy ties with Japan

AFP
Tokyo

Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney vowed yesterday to strengthen defence co-operation and economic security with Tokyo, in the Japan leg of his Asia-Pacific tour aimed at shedding reliance on the US.

Having arrived from Australia in his multi-country tour seen as a hedge against what he has described as a fading US-led global order, Carney met Japanese premier Sanae Takaichi.

"We are enhancing our security and defence cooperation through information sharing, technology transfers, cooperation in maritime security," Carney told reporters in a joint statement with Takaichi.

Also among the "six priority areas" with Japan he laid out was the strengthening of "economic security with robust supply chains".

"We're expanding our existing cooperation within the G7 critical minerals alliance to secure reliable stockpiles and build our processing capacity."

Prior to their meeting, Japanese media had reported both sides want to share more intelligence on Chinese and Russian cyberattacks and boost joint military exercises.



Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney (left) and Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi attend a joint press conference in Tokyo yesterday. (AFP)

In his earlier Australia visit, Carney said he couldn't rule out his country's military participation in the escalating war in the Middle East, and that US-Israeli strikes on Iran appeared "inconsistent with international law".

Fresh from saying in Davos in January that under US President Donald Trump the world was seeing a "rupture", Carney also called in Canberra for "middle powers" to work more together.

In Tokyo, the Canadian leader made no reference to the war, although Takaichi said they will discuss Iran over dinner.

"Mark's visit here under this tough international situation is very meaningful," she said, pledg-

ing to "carve out a new chapter in the Japan-Canada relationships."

As a strong backer for the rules-based international order, the Iran war has put Japan - another similarly sized power - in a difficult position.

Japan is a close US ally that is home to some 60,000 US military personnel and which relies on US backing as China flexes its muscles in the region.

The world's fourth-largest economy is also its fifth biggest oil importer, with some 70% shipped through the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran has effectively closed.

Takaichi said on Tuesday that she would hold "candid" discussions on the war with Trump

at their talks in Washington on March 19.

Japan-China ties have worsened since Takaichi suggested in November that Japan might intervene militarily in any Chinese attempt to take Taiwan.

China-Canada relations have, meanwhile, thawed, with Carney visiting in January and signing a trade deal after years of tit-for-tat arrests and tariff disputes.

His current tour, which also included India, is part of efforts to pivot Canada away from excessive reliance on its southern neighbour under Trump.

"Japan is a natural partner for Carney's desire to 'be on the table, not on the menu'" said Yee Kuang Heng, a professor specialising in international security at the University of Tokyo.

Up for discussion could be co-ordinating naval transits through the Taiwan Strait, as well as better tracking and intercepting of Russian-Chinese bomber patrols in the western and northern Pacific, Heng told AFP.

Canada may also potentially be interested in buying future fighter jets made under the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) between Japan, Italy and Britain.

Carney was due to return to Canada on Saturday.

Philippines shifts to four-day work week as war pushes oil prices up

Oil-poor Philippines is to shift to a four-day work week with fuel prices set to rocket up amid the Iran war, President Ferdinand Marcos said yesterday.

Marcos announced the shift, set to start at all government offices on Monday, among measures aimed at easing the economic impact of the armed conflict involving Iran, Israel and the United States.

He warned the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz, through which a fifth of the world's oil supply transits, would increase local pump prices next week by 7.48 pesos per litre for gasoline, 17.28 pesos for diesel, and 32.35 pesos for kerosene (13-55 US cents).

"We are victims of a war that is not of our choosing," Marcos said in a statement, adding it was uncertain when it would end. "But we control how we will protect the Filipino."

The Philippines imports most of its crude oil from the Middle East and still relies on oil-fired power plants to generate electricity.

Marcos also ordered all government agencies to cut their fuel and power consumption by 10-20 percent, banned government study tours and team-building activities, as well as "meetings that can be done online".

He urged Congress to authorise him to reduce excise taxes on petroleum products if the price of crude oil breached \$80 per barrel, as well as to amend a biofuels law so cheaper bioethanol can be used for blending with petroleum products. The government will also provide fuel subsidies and cash transfers to affected sectors, he said without giving details.

Marcos said the four-day work week will be "temporary" but gave no end date. Frontline services, police, and firemen are exempt from the four-day work week, he added. (AFP)

'S Korea in talks with US on possible relocation of weapons'

South Korea's foreign minister said yesterday that Seoul and Washington are in talks on possibly relocating weapons, as the war in Iran intensifies. South Korea, a US security ally, hosts around 28,500 American troops and air defence assets, including Patriot missile interceptors, to deter the nuclear-armed North.

The operation of US forces in South Korea is "being closely co-ordinated between the military authorities of both countries," Seoul's Foreign Minister Cho Hyun said at a parliamentary hearing.

The minister said Washington had not sought Seoul's support for its military action against Iran. Dismissing reports that the United States could run out of interceptors, President Donald Trump said the country's military has "a virtually unlimited supply". (AFP)

Taiwan defence minister rejects opposition's cut-price budget, US arms deadline

Reuters
Taipei

Taiwan's Defence Minister Wellington Koo yesterday rebuffed the main opposition party, which had proposed a defence budget roughly one-third of the amount sought by the government and set a deadline for US arms purchases that he said was impossible.

Taiwan has faced pressure from the United States to sharply raise defence spending. Taiwan President Lai Ching-te last year proposed extra defence spending of \$40bn to counter China, which has ramped up military pressure to force the island to ac-

cept its claim of sovereignty.

But the main opposition Kuomintang, which together with a smaller party holds a majority in parliament, refused to review the proposal and instead this week advanced its own, less expensive proposals, which only fund around 30% of the spending that Lai wants.

The move came after growing pressure from politicians in the United States, Taiwan's most important international backer and arms supplier, to not hold up spending.

In the KMT's counter-proposal, a copy of which was reviewed by Reuters, the party set a cap of T\$380bn (\$11.96bn) on the spending and a deadline for



File photo of Wellington Koo. (Reuters)

completion by the end of 2028. Talking to reporters in Taipei,

Koo said the government's proposal included precision artillery

and anti-armour unmanned systems.

"If everything is required to be delivered and fully implemented before that deadline, it would in effect shut down these projects, making their execution impossible," he said.

The KMT also said it backs US arms deals handled between the two governments and opposes deals arranged through commercial channels, which it views as vulnerable to irregularities and inadequate scrutiny.

In response, Koo said omitting any channel for acquiring weapons would "create a major gap in our overall defence and operational capabilities and significantly undermine the im-

provement of our joint combat capabilities."

He added the government's proposal has the backing of the U.S. administration and congress.

The KMT has described Lai's plan as "sky-high" and vague, citing the need for clearer oversight.

KMT chairperson Cheng Li-wun has said her party has been in communication with the Chinese Communist Party and that she hopes to visit China this year for a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

China regularly stages military exercises around Taiwan, and refuses to talk to Lai, calling him a "separatist". Lai says only Taiwan's people can decide their future.

Nepal's Balendra Shah takes early lead in key election

AFP
Kathmandu

Nepal's centrist party of rapper-turned-politician Balendra Shah took an early lead in the high-stakes parliamentary election yesterday, but counting was slow after the first polls since a deadly uprising last year.

Shah's party loyalists danced on the streets of Kathmandu in celebration but the number of votes counted remained too low to be confident that they would translate into concrete wins.

Early trends issued by the Election Commission put Shah's Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) ahead by yesterday afternoon, 24 hours after polls closed.

Alongside Shah, key figures vying for power include Marxist leader KP Sharma Oli, the four-time prime minister who was ousted by the September 2025 anti-corruption protests, and the newly elected leader of the Nepali Congress party, Gagan Thapa.

RSP was leading in more than 100 of the 165 constituencies by 8:00pm (1415 GMT).

However, there were only five declared results, with RSP and Nepali Congress both claiming two seats. The Nepali Communist Party won one seat.

Prakash Nyupane, a spokesman for the Election Commission, said counting was continuing "in a peaceful manner" across the Himalayan nation, from snowbound high-altitude mountain regions to the hot plains bordering India.

Voters have chosen who will replace the interim government in place since the uprising, in which at least 77 people were killed and par-



Electoral officials sit on the floor as they count votes at the counting centre after voting ended in Nepal's general election in Kathmandu. (AFP)

liament and scores of government buildings were torched.

Youth-led protests under a loose Gen Z banner began as a demonstration against a brief social media ban but were fed by wider grievances over corruption and a woeful economy.

Kunda Dixit, publisher of the weekly Nepali Times, told AFP that, if trends were reflected in final wins, the political shift was dramatic. "This is even a bigger upset than we expected - it underscores the level of public disenchantment with the old parties for under-performance, as well as anger over the events of September," he said.

The polls are among the most hotly contested in the Himalayan republic of 30mn people since the end of a civil war in 2006.

All eyes are on the results in the key head-to-head battleground constituency

of Jhapa-5, a usually sleepy eastern district, where 35-year-old Shah directly challenged the 74-year-old Oli.

Shah, better known as Balen, snappily dressed in a black suit and sunglasses, has cast himself as a symbol of youth-driven political change.

At 8:00pm local time, with 20% of the votes counted in Jhapa-5, Shah was ahead by nearly five times as many votes as Oli.

Soldiers with armoured trucks manned barbed wire barricades around the counting centre in Jhapa.

"I hope this result changes the fate of the country for the better," Bhagawati Adhikari, 38, told AFP among a crowd of dozens at Jhapa gathered outside the security cordon.

"The country should be peaceful and secure, youth should get opportunities, corruption should stop - that's my appeal."

Axel Springer buys UK's *Telegraph* for \$766mn, ending ownership limbo

Reuters
London/Berlin

German media group Axel Springer said yesterday it had agreed to buy Britain's *Telegraph* Media Group for 575 million pounds (\$766.3mn) in cash, bringing to an end a prolonged period of uncertainty over the newspaper's ownership.

The deal gatecrashed *Daily Mail* owner DMGT's attempt to buy its broadsheet rival, which had been facing regulatory probes in Britain amid concerns about media plurality.

Axel Springer said it would preserve the *Telegraph's* legacy while providing a platform for expansion, including in the US, and reaffirmed its commitment to "high-quality, independent journalism" and media plurality in Britain.

After buying Politico in a deal valued at around \$1bn in 2021, the *Telegraph* purchase becomes Axel Springer's second-largest investment since its founding in 1946, following an earlier failed attempt to acquire the paper in 2004.

Mathias Dopfner, Axel Springer's CEO, said owning the *Tele-*



File photo: Copies of *The Daily Telegraph* are displayed on a rack in a supermarket in London. (Reuters)

graph was "a privilege and a duty".

He said the group aimed to grow the title while preserving its character and helping it become "the most read and intellectually inspiring centre-right media outlet in the English-speaking world".

He acknowledged *Telegraph* staff had faced a prolonged period of uncertainty and said that the publisher intended to "bring that uncertainty to an end".

The company credited *New York Sun* publisher Dovid Efuno for his support in the deal.

Efuno led a consortium with Axel Springer to bid for the titles last month, but Axel Springer con-

cluded the deal alone. RedBird IMI said it was pleased to have reached agreement following "swift and efficient" negotiations.

"With the strength of their commercial offer and a straightforward regulatory path to ownership, we believe that Axel Springer is well placed to take the *Telegraph* forward into its next chapter," RedBird said in a statement.

The companies said they were now working with the British government to obtain the necessary approvals.

Culture minister Lisa Nandy's decision last month to issue a public-interest intervention no-

tice sent DMGT's deal to regulators, which were examining the implications for media plurality and competition.

Nandy's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The deal brings an end to a saga that began in June 2023, when Lloyds Banking Group effectively repossessed the *Telegraph* after longtime owners the Barclay family fell into arrears on about 1.2bn pounds of debts secured against the newspaper group.

RedBird IMI took control after paying off a 600 million pound loan owed to Lloyds, but the titles remained in limbo as Britain moved to block foreign state involvement in national newspapers, forcing it to reverse course.

US investment firm RedBird Capital Partners then tried to buy the group, with Abu Dhabi-backed IMI taking a minority position, but the deal collapsed in November 2025.

The bid had been restructured to comply with new rules capping foreign state ownership at 15%, but was withdrawn after a slower-than-expected regulatory process and internal opposition from senior *Telegraph* newsroom figures.

Indian refiners seek legal clarity on US waiver for Russian oil

Reuters
New Delhi

Indian refiners are seeking a legal opinion on how they can purchase sanctioned Russian oil after Washington granted New Delhi a waiver to buy crude stranded at sea to ease pressure on global markets, two government sources said yesterday.

The US on Thursday allowed Indian refiners a 30-day waiver from sanctions to buy Russian oil loaded on vessels as of March 5. Approval related to Russia's oil sale to India is valid until April 4.

Indian state refiners have snapped up at least 20mn barrels of prompt Russian oil loaded on vessels floating in international waters to help navigate the oil supply crunch triggered by the Middle East crisis, Reuters reported on Thursday.

The world's third-biggest oil importer gets about 40% of its oil imports from the Middle East through the Strait of Hormuz.

"So far refiners have bought only non-sanctioned oil," one of

the sources said, adding refiners want to avoid complications including payment problems if they buy oil linked to sanctioned entities and vessels.

India was the top buyer of Russian seaborne crude after Moscow's 2022 Ukraine invasion, but in January, its refiners started to reduce purchases under pressure from Washington.

Cutting Russian oil purchases helped New Delhi avoid 25% tariffs and clinch an interim trade deal with the US.

India has been hit by the stoppage of liquefied natural gas production by Qatar and the disruption to supplies from Abu Dhabi National Oil Co.

India has cut gas supplies to industries, including fertiliser plants, refineries and petrochemical plants. The nation has already asked refiners to boost production of liquefied petroleum gas to avoid any shortage of cooking fuels in the country.

This source said India will take more steps if required to avoid any shortage of fuels, including gasoline and gasoil, in the country.

Indian state to ban social media for children under 16

India's chief minister for the southern state Karnataka proposed yesterday banning children under the age of 16 from using social media, as scrutiny over its addictive qualities surges globally.

India is the world's most populous nation, with approximately one bn Internet users, and all major cities and 95% of villages connected online, according to the latest government data. "Social media will be banned for children under the age of 16 to prevent the adverse effects of increasing mobile usage," Siddaramaiah, who uses only one name, said during a speech in the state's legislative assembly, without providing further details or a timeline for the ban.

The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) advocacy group said a "blanket social media ban... can do more harm than good," suggesting children may turn to unregulated and illegal platforms.

Last month, Indian IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said that his country was discussing age-based measures with social media firms.

The federal government's annual economic survey also recommended national guidelines on children's screen time in January. Several nations are toughening age restrictions on social media platforms as concerns mount that excessive screen time could harm childhood development and mental health. (AFP)

UK MP quits parliament group after husband accused of spying

AFP
London

UK lawmaker said Thursday she was stepping out of the parliamentary group of the governing party after her husband was reportedly arrested on suspicion of spying for China.

UK police on Thursday said they had released three people, reportedly including David Taylor, the husband of Labour member of parliament Joani Reid.

"I am voluntarily suspending myself... and will not sit as a Labour MP until internal investigations are concluded. I will welcome and co-operate with any questions and worries the party may have," Reid said in a statement.

"I am not under investigation by the police and no accusations have been against me. I have done nothing wrong. I love my country."

The three suspects were arrested on Wednesday by counterterrorism officers in London and Wales on suspicion of assisting a foreign intelligence service.

All three had "subsequently been released on bail to a date in May", London's Metropolitan Police said in a statement.

Chinese espionage is a politically sensitive subject in Britain and the case could become awk-

ward for Starmer who visited Beijing recently aiming to reset relations with the Asian giant.

Media reported that Taylor was among the three. Reid said Wednesday she had never "seen anything to make me suspect my husband has broken any law".

Taylor, 39, is listed as a "lobbyist" on her list of registered interests. According to his LinkedIn page, he works for Asia House, a think tank.

"I am not part of my husband's business activities and neither I nor my children are part of this investigation," Reid added.

The arrests came amid rising concerns over alleged Chinese espionage in the UK.

A spokeswoman for China's foreign ministry said: "We have always been against the hyping up of the so-called Chinese spy allegations, which tarnish China's image and mislead the public."

Starmer has been criticised by opposition politicians, human rights groups and US President Donald Trump for approving a massive new Chinese embassy in London and for his Beijing visit.

The UK leader has repeatedly defended the visit, the first by a British prime minister since 2018, as important step to closer ties with the world's second largest economy.

Bangladesh caps fuel sales to curb panic buying and hoarding

Reuters
Dhaka

Bangladesh yesterday imposed daily limits on fuel sales after panic buying and stockpiling raised concerns about supply as the war in the Middle East roiled global energy markets.

The measures follow US and Israeli air strikes on Iran - and retaliatory strikes by Tehran across the Middle East - which have disrupted oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, a key energy route, and sent energy prices soaring.

Bangladesh Petroleum Corp (BPC), the state-run importer and distributor, said the curbs aim to restrain excessive demand, calm the public and keep nationwide stocks stable.

"Fuel oil is essential for the country's development, but about 95% of it must be imported," it said, adding that global instability had occasionally delayed shipments. Rumours about shortages had prompted consumers



Vehicles queue at a fuel station, as concerns grow over fuel supplies following US-Israel conflict with Iran, in Dhaka, yesterday. (Reuters)

and dealers to hoard fuel, it added.

Under the limits, motorcycles can buy up to 2 litres of octane or petrol a day; private cars

10 litres; SUVs, jeeps and minibuses 20-25 litres; pickups and local buses 70-80 litres; and long-distance buses, trucks and container carriers 200-220 litres of diesel.

BPC said demand at depots was abnormally high, with some dealers trying to withdraw more fuel than usual and some consumers storing fuel illegally. Filling stations must now issue cash memos showing quantity and price and verify previous purchase receipts before refuelling.

Despite the rush, BPC said imports were continuing normally and supplies were being sent to depots via rail tankers. It said buffer stocks should stabilise soon and urged consumers not to hoard. It also warned that selling fuel above government-set prices is a punishable offence.

Bangladesh also faces higher liquefied natural gas import costs after Qatar suspended deliveries amid the conflict, prompting authorities to ration gas and shut several fertiliser plants.

Sri Lanka denounces war deaths, houses 250 Iranian sailors

AFP
Colombo

Sri Lanka denounced the toll of Middle East fighting yesterday as it gave refuge to more than 250 Iranian sailors two days after a deadly torpedo strike on another of Iran's ships.

The crew from the second ship were brought ashore on Thursday and were being accommodated at a military camp near the capital Colombo. Their ship, IRIS Bush-

ehr, was under Sri Lankan control. The vessel reported engine trouble and sought port entry after another Iranian vessel, IRIS Dena, was hit by a US torpedo off Sri Lanka's southern coast on Wednesday.

Washington said it had carried out that attack, which killed at least 84 Iranian sailors and left 64 more missing. Sri Lanka rescued 32 injured survivors.

"Our approach is that every life is as precious as our own," Sri Lanka's President Anura Kumara Disسانayake wrote on X yester-

day, urging peace after the Israeli-US campaign led to Iranian retaliatory strikes.

Wednesday's attack was the first military strike far outside the Middle East since the US and Israel launched their war on Iran on Saturday. US authorities said Wednesday's strike was the first by a torpedo fired from an American submarine since World War II.

Sri Lanka gave permission to IRIS Bushehr to enter its territorial waters and also evacuated its 219 crew to the naval facility, while

the 32 survivors from the first vessel are in hospital.

"All our actions are aimed at saving lives and ensuring that humanity prevails," Disسانayake said. He said in an earlier address to the nation that sheltering the sailors was the "most courageous and humanitarian course of action that a state can take".

"We jealously guard our non-aligned policy while ensuring that humanitarian values and the saving of lives remain our top priority," he said.



A Sri Lanka Navy vessel approaches an Iranian vessel during a rescue operation, off the coast of Colombo, Sri Lanka. (Reuters)



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What you need to know about France's local polls

France will hold municipal elections on March 15 and 22, votes seen as a key test ahead of next year's presidential election. The two-round ballot will measure the strength of the far-right National Rally (RN) and showcase what types of alliances could emerge in an increasingly fragmented landscape.

Heading nearly 35,000 communes – from major cities to villages with only a few dozen residents – mayors are France's most trusted elected officials, seen by voters as the political figures closest to their daily concerns.

Local results can also shape national momentum and reveal which themes resonate with voters, especially when they take place just over a year before the next presidential election.

The anti-immigration, eurosceptic party, which has so far struggled to make meaningful gains at a local level, is treating the March votes as a critical step toward building momentum for the 2027 presidential ballot.

It hopes to consolidate towns it already controls and expand into larger urban areas, saying it would field about 650 lists, substantially more than in previous cycles. Currently, only around a dozen mayors belong to, or are backed by, the RN. The far-right party only runs one city of over 100,000 inhabitants, Perpignan.

One key question ahead of the 2027 vote is what alliances the RN will strike with other parties between the two rounds. Will decades of tradition of shunning the far right hold? Some, especially in mainstream parties on the right, are tempted to do otherwise this time.

Heading nearly 35,000 communes – from major cities to villages with only a few dozen residents – mayors are France's most trusted elected officials, seen by voters as the political figures closest to their daily concerns.

In a sign of how important this election is for the RN, 33 out of 119 of its members of parliament are candidates in the municipal elections. Marseille is a long-time conservative city which the left won in the last ballot in 2020, and which all main parties, including the RN, are fighting over. Paris is another key battleground. For decades a city led by conservatives, it has had a Socialist mayor since 2001.

The RN is also targeting Toulon, a city of 180,000 in southern France, which it already ruled under its previous name, the National Front, from 1995 to 2001. The left did well across France in the last municipal elections in 2020. It is

now weakened nationally. Whether it can keep some of the cities it won last time, such as Nantes and Montpellier for the Socialists, or Lyon and Strasbourg for the Greens, will be in focus.

The hard-left France Unbowed, which like the RN has never been strong in local elections, is also hoping to make gains, including in the Seine-Saint-Denis area where it has several members of parliament. The conservative Republicans (LR) have lost heavily in the last national elections but have long been strong in municipal elections.

President Emmanuel Macron's allies hold relatively few municipalities, limiting the potential for an anti-government vote. Menton, a quiet Riviera town popular with retirees, is bound to attract attention. Former President Nicolas Sarkozy's son Louis, openly inspired by Trump-style rhetoric, is a candidate there.

There are nearly 35,000 separate elections, many of which are focused on local issues and are not reviewed by pollsters, making them hard to predict. Nationwide, security, housing and local taxes are among key issues for voters in this election, surveys show.

Another factor making those elections hard to predict is how they work. A list that wins an absolute majority in the first round takes control of the municipality. Falling that, all lists with 10% or more advance to the second round. Those with at least 5% can merge with larger lists. This system often leads to three- or four-way runoffs, making the second round quite unpredictable.

There could also potentially be an impact from the killing of far-right activist Quentin Deranque, who was beaten to death in February in a fight with alleged hard-left activists. The incident soured the mood towards France Unbowed, a poll showed. Voting starts at 8am on March 15 and closes between 1700 GMT and 1900 GMT, depending on the city. In most medium to large cities, there will be a second round on March 22. Voting times are the same. Results will trickle in on those evenings. – Reuters

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Remembering Chavez



Supporters of late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez walk to the 4F military fort, Cuartel de la Montana, which houses his mausoleum, to mark the 13th anniversary of his death, in Caracas, Venezuela.

For Mexico's security chief, the El Mencho killing was personal

- Mexico's security chief was targeted by El Mencho's cartel in 2020
- Omar Garcia Harfuch is architect of Mexico's tougher stance toward cartels
- After El Mencho killing, Harfuch bolstered as possible presidential candidate

By Emily Green
Reuters

Mexico's security chief, the man who helped lead the operation that killed the drug lord known as "El Mencho," spends his days and nights inside fortified office buildings, including a one-bedroom apartment in the security ministry built for him. His quarters – inside a modern complex beside a busy thoroughfare – include a bedroom, gym, kitchen and a conference room that seats 25. From the living room, guests can hear the crack of gunfire from a firing range within the building complex, according to a high-ranking government official who has visited the apartment. A red telephone on his desk provides a direct line to the president.

Omar Garcia Harfuch, 44, has lived this way since 2020, when on his commute to work a truck cut off his armored Suburban and gunmen disguised as road workers sprayed his vehicle with more than 400 bullets. Harfuch returned fire and survived with three gunshot wounds. Two of his bodyguards and a bystander were killed.

The security chief blamed the assassination attempt on Nemesio Oseguera, 59, better known as El Mencho, leader of the brutal Jalisco New Generation Cartel, one of Mexico's largest and bloodiest crime groups. Six years later, bringing down the cartel leader was a deeply personal moment for Harfuch, who friends say was devastated by his security guards' deaths. Harfuch declined to comment for this story. The account is based on interviews with a dozen friends, colleagues and security analysts.

Those close to Harfuch say that he's unlikely to let his guard down now that El Mencho is gone. But the death of the kingpin has lifted the profile of Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum's Minister of Security and Citizen Protection, who's credited with spearheading her more muscular approach to fighting cartels, so much so he's considered an early frontrunner for the presidency when her six-year term ends in 2030.

"Omar Garcia Harfuch is the number one presidential candidate today," said Armando Vargas, the top security expert at the think tank Mexico Evalua. "He is the most visible leader of this new strategy."

The approach is not without risks: El Mencho's death triggered a wave of violence across Mexico that killed 25 National Guard members and could fuel deadly feuds as rival cartel factions fight for control. It's also a marked departure from former President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's "hugs not bullets" philosophy, under which cartels grew in power and reach to control vast swaths of territory and diversified from drugs into extortion, human trafficking, and contraband fuel.

TRUSTED BY THE PRESIDENT

Harfuch rose to prominence within the Mexico City government when now-President Sheinbaum was the capital's mayor. Rodrigo Canales, who advised Sheinbaum on her security strategy, said Harfuch helped her navigate a difficult period early in her mayoral tenure when high-level police officers were accused of corruption. "He has Claudia's absolute trust and earned it by being extremely loyal and effective in key moments early in her mayorship," Canales said.

Sheinbaum promoted Harfuch to head of the city's police in 2019 after sacking his predecessor over a money laundering scandal. Harfuch had been in the job for



Mexico's Secretary of Security and Citizen Protection, Omar Garcia Harfuch, checks a note during a press conference after the killing of Mexican drug lord Nemesio Oseguera, known as "El Mencho," in a military operation, at the National Palace in Mexico City, Mexico. (Reuters)



▲ Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes commonly referred to by his alias "El Mencho". (AFP)

under a year when assassins made the attempt on his life. After initially returning fire, he scrambled into the back seats of his armored SUV and crouched down until reinforcements could arrive, he recalled in interviews after the attack. Twelve alleged members of the Jalisco cartel were arrested and given life sentences.

Following the ambush, he moved out of his house and into Mexico City's police headquarters. His inner circle, already small, became even tighter. He sees his children in fleeting moments. "He went from someone who could go to a restaurant, meet friends, attend a colleague's birthday party, to being guarded in an office, spending practically 90 percent of his life inside police buildings," said a friend who has known Harfuch for 20 years. Like the cartel bosses he hunts, one misstep could cost him his life.

FOLLOWING IN FAMILY FOOTSTEPS

Harfuch comes from a line of Mexican top brass. His grandfather, Marcelino Garcia Barragan, was defence minister in the 1960s while his father, Javier Garcia Paniagua, was a senator and presidential contender who led a federal security agency in the 1970s. That mix of police and military heritage is rare in Mexico and puts Harfuch in a unique position to lead the country's heavily militarized public security structure, two sources who've worked with him say.

"Garcia Harfuch was sort of destined to follow in his father and grandfather's footsteps," said Gladys McCormick, a professor and historian of US-Mexican relations at Syracuse University. But that same legacy is regarded with suspicion in parts of the ruling leftist Morena party. Both his grandfather and father oversaw periods of military abuses and repression of social movements by security forces.

Critics also highlight Harfuch's links to the infamous disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa teaching college in 2014. A 2022 truth commission report cited

him-then a mid-level federal police officer-as having attended meetings where officials crafted a version of events that masked the role of security forces in the disappearances.

Harfuch, who was never accused of wrongdoing, has previously said he only attended meetings to help coordinate the search for the missing students. No local or federal officials have been sentenced in the case. For the United States, Harfuch

has emerged as the linchpin in security collaboration with Mexico at a time when US President Donald Trump is piling pressure on his southern neighbour to aggressively combat cartels, and threatening US military force if Mexico can't show results.

Derek Maltz, former acting administrator of the US Drug Enforcement Administration, said he met Harfuch last year shortly after Mexico transferred 29 suspected high-level cartel members to the US in what was then the largest such handover in history. "He looked me in the eyes, and he said, 'This is only the beginning,'" Maltz recalled. Maltz had his doubts, but in the coming months Mexico handed over another 63 suspected cartel leaders and took down the country's most-wanted drug lord. "I'm very impressed with what I'm seeing," he said. The prisoner transfers underscore what officials from both countries say is an unprecedented level of co-operation and intelligence sharing as they seek to dismantle cartels through military confrontations, money laundering investigations, and drug and firearm seizures.

HUNT FOR EL MENCHO

The hunt for El Mencho gained urgency in November, when the Jalisco cartel kidnapped two of Harfuch's investigators in the city of Zapopan, a cartel stronghold, according to the high-ranking Mexican official.

Soldiers raided houses of suspected cartel members and interrogations produced information that helped tighten the net around El Mencho. Reuters is the first outlet to report the role of the kidnappings in the search for El Mencho. The agents were released after a week.

The breakthrough came when authorities tracked one of El Mencho's multiple girlfriends to his villa, Mexico's Defence Minister Ricardo Trevilla has said. A new US-military-led task force confirmed the exact location of the house, Reuters reported. But the government official said the real slip wasn't the romance; it was that the 59-year-old cartel leader wanted to see his two children with the woman. Mexican troops swooped in after the girlfriend and El Mencho's children left.

After a shootout, El Mencho died on a military helicopter en route to a hospital. Eight of his bodyguards were also killed. Two soldiers died during the raid; another two died later from injuries. Harfuch received a confirmation text with an image of El Mencho's body, still clad in a flak jacket, the Mexican official said.

"I spoke with him Sunday morning after El Mencho was killed," said Eduardo Clark, a top health official in Mexico who is close to Harfuch. "He told me, 'this is a huge relief!'"

Hungary to expel Ukrainian bank workers in row with Kyiv

AFP
Budapest

Hungary will expel seven detained Ukrainians, the government said yesterday, as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky traded threats in a row over stalled Russian oil supplies.

Hungary accuses Ukraine of deliberately delaying the reopening of a key pipeline that it and neighbouring Slovakia depend on for oil supplies, which Kyiv says was damaged by Russian strikes in January.

The countries' row escalated yesterday as Ukraine accused Hungary of kidnapping seven of its citizens, whom Hungarian authorities said they were investigating on money-laundering charges.

Orban meanwhile said he would use "every means" to pressure Ukraine over the Russian oil.

A day earlier, Zelensky appeared to issue a direct threat against Orban, saying Ukraine's armed forces would "talk to him in their own language" — a statement condemned by Hungary and the European Union, of which it is a member.

Early yesterday, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiga accused Hungary of taking "hostage" a group of Ukrainian bank employees transporting \$40mn, 35mn euros and nine kilogrammes (317 ounces) of gold through the country.

Hungary's National Tax and Customs Administration (NAV) said it had detained seven Ukrainian citizens, including a former Ukrainian secret service general, and two armoured cash-transport vehicles on Thursday.

NAV "is conducting criminal proceedings on suspicion of money laundering", it said in a statement.



Hungary's Foreign Minister Peter Sijjarto speaks during a protest against what organisers call "Ukrainian blackmail" in Budapest, Hungary, yesterday. (Reuters)

Government spokesman Zoltan Kovacs said those detained would be expelled.

The government also released footage on social media showing what it said was the arrest of the Ukrainians and stacks of cash seized.

Ukraine summoned Hungary's charge d'affaires over what it called the "unlawful" detentions, and urged its citizens to avoid travel to Hungary, citing "the inability to guarantee their safety amid the arbitrary actions of the Hungarian authorities".

Sybiga on X slammed "this state banditism", adding that Ukraine reserved "the right to take appropriate action, including initiating sanctions and other restrictive measures".

In a radio interview earlier yesterday, Orban said until the oil delivery issue was resolved, Hungary "will use every step and every means at our disposal", including stopping "things passing through Hungary, things that are important to Ukraine".

Relations between the two neighbours were already strained

by Orban's sustaining ties with Russia despite Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, and his opposition to military aid for Kyiv.

But ties deteriorated further after the Hungarian premier ramped up political attacks on Ukraine ahead of a closely fought parliamentary election set for April 12.

Orban has been stalling a 90-billion-euro (\$106-billion) EU loan to the war-torn country and a new round of sanctions on Russia, demanding that Kyiv first reopen the Druzhba pipeline, whose alleged damages he disputes.

Hundreds of people demonstrated in front of the Ukrainian embassy in Budapest yesterday to protest what they called an oil blockade, carrying Hungarian flags and posters including one that read "Ukraine = mafia state", according to an AFP photographer.

The demonstration was organised by a pro-Orban group.

Zelensky said on Thursday the pipeline can only be made operational after another four to six weeks, although he would personally prefer not to restore transit.

"We hope that one person in

the European Union will not block the 90bn (euros)... Otherwise we will give this person's address to our Armed Forces, to our guys. Let them call him and talk to him in their own language," Zelensky said.

The European Union slammed the apparent threat as "not acceptable", denouncing "inflammatory rhetoric" on all sides and calling for calm.

In his state radio interview, Orban said he would not give in, "not even if they blackmail me, not even if they threaten my life".

Hungarian opposition leader Peter Magyar at a campaign rally said his party — seen ahead in polls — rejects Zelensky's threats, while also condemning Orban for his "incitement, threats and fear-mongering".

The State Savings Bank of Ukraine, or Oschadbank, said the bank staff were transporting the cash and gold between Raiffeisen Bank Austria and Oschadbank Ukraine in a "routine trip".

Ukraine's central bank said it would send a team to Budapest "to clarify circumstances".

Pakistani, Afghan border forces clash

Reuters
Kabul

Pakistani and Afghan troops exchanged fire at dozens of points along their border yesterday as the UN said their week-old conflict has forced the displacement of more than 100,000 people.

The South Asian nations show no signs of rapprochement in their worst fighting in years, adding to the volatility in a region also contending with US and Israeli strikes on Iran — a nation that borders both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Combat has included Pakistani air strikes on Taliban government installations, such as the Bagram air base north of the Afghan capital Kabul.

Afghanistan's Ministry of Defence said Taliban forces struck Pakistani military installations in more than two dozen locations along the 2,600-km (1,600-mile) border, destroying 14 posts and shooting down a drone.

It said seven Afghan civilians and three Taliban fighters were killed in overnight fighting.

Pakistani security sources said they carried out ground and air operations against military targets including Kandahar, the heartland of the Taliban and where its core leadership resides, and destroyed several Afghan border posts.

Dozens gathered in Kabul yesterday to protest Pakistan's attacks on Afghan territory, chanting anti-Pakistan slogans, a witness said, while the Bakhter news agency said a large gathering in Laghman Province demonstrated against Pakistan's recent attacks. People living in border towns have told Reuters that troops begin exchanging heavy shelling after sunset, placing homes in the firing line just as families sit down to break

their fast in the holy month of Ramadan.

Haji Shah Iran, a Pakistani labourer who lives in the town of Torkham, the main border crossing with Afghanistan, said he had evacuated with his family and was now living with friends.

"When we leave our homes in the morning, shells start raining down on us," he told Reuters. "Shells have damaged our homes... Our belongings are still there."

The town was quiet yesterday, with only a few vehicles on the roads. Some homes were damaged from the fighting, and a cloud of black smoke could be seen across the border.

"The situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan remains tense amid active conflict along the border," the UN refugee agency said, adding that some 115,000 people in Afghanistan and 3,000 in Pakistan were thought to have fled their homes.

Several countries have offered to negotiate a truce, most recently Turkiye, although the Iran war has diverted the attention of most Gulf states that had stepped forward.

Pakistani government spokesperson Mosharraf Zaidi said no negotiations were taking place to end the conflict.

"There is nothing to talk about. There will be no dialogue and no negotiations," he told state-owned Pakistan TV. "Terrorism from Afghanistan has to end — that is Afghanistan's problem. Pakistan's responsibility is to protect its citizens."

The conflict began last week with Pakistani air strikes inside Afghanistan that Islamabad said targeted militant strongholds. Afghanistan called the strikes a violation of sovereignty and announced retaliatory operations.

Islamabad has said Kabul provides safe haven to militants executing attacks on Pakistan from its soil.

Zelensky visits eastern front as Ukraine and Russia exchange POWs

Reuters
Kyiv

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that he had visited the eastern front line yesterday as Ukraine and Russia completed a two-day prisoner-of-war swap, exchanging 500 soldiers each. Zelensky gave awards to troops defending the positions near Druzhkivka and Kostiantynivka, cities in the eastern Donetsk region where Russia has concentrated its forces. Moscow was preparing for a spring offensive there, he said.

"It is important not only from the point of view of defending our state on the battlefield, but it is also very important geopolitically," Zelensky told soldiers from the 28th separate mechanised brigade in a video posted on his Telegram channel.

"The stronger we are in the eastern direction, the stronger we are in the talks process." Under pressure from US President Donald Trump's administration, Ukraine and Russia held several rounds of talks trying to find a diplomatic solution on how to end the war, now in its fifth year.

But the two sides remain far apart in their positions and territory in the eastern Donetsk region is a key sticking point.

One of the few concrete results emerging from the talks included agreements about exchanging



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (centre) posing for a photo with Ukrainian servicemen while visiting the command post of the 3rd Battalion of the 28th Separate Mechanized Brigade named after the Knights of the Winter Campaign near Druzhkivka, Donetsk region, yesterday. (AFP)

prisoners of war.

"This week, Ukraine and Russia carried out another prisoner exchange, with 1,000 individuals returned following agreements reached during the recent trilateral negotiations in Geneva with the US," US special envoy Steve Witkoff said on X.

Kyiv and Moscow exchanged 300 service personnel each yesterday, and another 200 prisoners of war each were swapped a day earlier. It is the second POW exchange so far this year. Zelensky said that two Ukrainian civilians were also returned home yesterday.

The Russian Defence Ministry said that the US and the United Arab Emirates acted as mediators in the exchange.

Zelensky posted a video of dozens of men exiting big white buses, smiling, waving, and thanking the Ukrainian border guards who greeted them.

"I am at home, my dear mum. That's it, I am home. We will see each other soon. I love you, mum," said one soldier, speaking on a mobile phone.

The previous POW swap was in early February after peace talks in Abu Dhabi earlier that month.

Ukraine hoped for a new round of peace talks at the start of March, but it was postponed after the US and Israel launched strikes on Iran, prompting Tehran to fire missiles toward Israel and several Gulf locations hosting US military facilities in retaliation.

Croatia to re-launch mandatory military service after 17 years

Croatia is set to resume mandatory military service for the first time in 17 years as part of the European Union member's broader strategy to address security concerns in Europe and the Western Balkans. On Monday, 800 recruits will start two-month basic training in military compounds across the country. Croatia amended its defence law last October to introduce mandatory service in line with European trends and as tensions with Russia spurred calls for stronger defence capabilities across Europe. Despite initial public division, more than half of the first batch of recruits were volunteers, 10% of them women. Only 10 people have filed conscientious objections

and applied to serve in the civilian service instead, which is the lowest percentage in Europe, according to academics.

When Leon Dejanovic, 18, starts his training in May, he will be one of 4,000 conscripts that the government plans to call on an annual basis. Even though receiving a draft notice in January felt "a little scary and surprising," the Internet influencer with thousands of followers said he views the upcoming training as a chance to take a break from his digital lifestyle.

"Honestly, I cannot wait to be without my cell phone for a while because I am on my cell phone all day for my job," Dejanovic

told Reuters in his hometown of Karlovac, 50km (31 miles) southwest of the capital Zagreb. New recruits will be trained in basic survival skills, self-defence, first aid and FPV drone operation. The programme also offers incentives such as a 1,100 euro (\$1,272.04) monthly allowance, work record credit and preferential access to public-sector employment. Dejanovic's friend Josip Franjo Cvitesic does not share his enthusiasm.

"I haven't received a call-up yet, but honestly, I'm against it," said Cvitesic, a 19-year-old factory worker, adding that he was concerned that the service could disrupt his job and income. (Reuters)

Italy challenges EU over key climate tool

AFP
Rome

Italy is once again challenging the EU's green transition, pushing for an overhaul of the bloc's carbon trading scheme and changing the way the tool operates to try to cut electricity bills.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni called Thursday for the European Union's Emissions Trading System (ETS) — which obliges heavy polluters to buy permits — to be suspended pending a reform.

"Italy specifically wants to propose suspending the ETS system at this time of risk of a surge in energy prices," Meloni said, referring to the fallout from the Iran war.

Rome would "forcefully demand (its) suspension" at summit of EU leaders in two weeks, she said.

It is the latest effort by Rome to reshape the EU's green agenda, following a successful campaign to get Brussels to push back a landmark 2035 ban on new petrol and diesel cars.

Meloni, leader of the far-right Brothers of Italy party, has long railed at what she says are "green follies" imposed by Brussels.

Italian Industry Minister Adolfo Urso has also called for "a substantial overhaul" of the ETS. Italy is now one of several countries in the bloc pushing

for a greater flexibility on decarbonisation goals, particularly on energy, as its industries struggle with the Mediterranean nation's sky-high energy costs.

Rome also wants to lower energy bills by transferring the cost for carbon permits from gas-fired power plants to consumers.

It claims the move will cut costs because the price of electricity generated by different forms of energy — even renewables — is pegged to the most expensive, which is usually gas.

But many commentators are sceptical that meaningful savings from the measure, which is currently being debated in parliament, will be passed onto consumers. Instead, analysts say, it risks rewarding dirty energy producers while reducing revenues at green energy companies, slowing Italy's already sluggish renewables rollout. The potentially "chilling effects on renewable and energy storage investment in Italy are quite clear," Davide Panzeri, head of Italy-EU policy at climate think tank ECCO, told AFP.

"It would both make gas more competitive and signal a willingness by the Italian executive to upend a longstanding European decarbonisation policy," he said.

Brussels is preparing proposals for a reform of the bloc's 20-year-old flagship carbon market scheme later this year.

But European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen is against any major changes, saying that high energy prices can only be alleviated by slashing fossil fuel use.

Italy's plan of "neutralising carbon costs is in contradiction with the ETS Directive and single market rules, so engagement on this with the Commission will be complex," Panzeri said.

He argues that it would also make Italy's competitive challenges "worse, as it incentivises reliance on gas".

European gas prices have surged dramatically since the US and Israel launched their war against Iran, which responded with retaliatory strikes across the region.

Gas accounted for 47% of Italy's electricity production in 2025, the highest share in the EU after Ireland and Malta, according to research group Ember.

The country has not had nuclear power since 1990, though Meloni's government is working on a potential return.

Italy's renewable energy sector continues to grow despite bureaucratic hurdles: 49% of its electricity in 2025 came from renewables in 2025, up from 39% in 2015.

But the share of solar and wind still trails well behind countries like Greece, Spain, and the Netherlands.

Swedish coast guard boards suspected stateless ship in the Baltic Sea

Reuters
Stockholm

The Swedish coast guard said it boarded and took control of a suspected stateless vessel in Swedish waters of the Baltic Sea yesterday, and it was carrying out investigations on the ship.

"At 3:50pm today, the Coast Guard took control of a vessel with unclear flag status and thus suspected of being a stateless vessel," it said in a statement, adding that the boarding had taken place off the coast of

the southern Swedish town Trelleborg.

The ship Caffa was sailing under a Guinean flag, but the coast guard said it regarded the vessel to be stateless "based on national and international legislation". Swedish police said the ship was suspected of sailing under a false flag.

According to ship-tracking service Marine Traffic, Caffa is a 96-metre general cargo ship.

Sweden's minister for civil defence, Carl-Oskar Bohlin, said in a post on X that the ship was a freighter on Ukraine's sanctions list.

"The ownership structure is unclear and there are suspicions that the vessel is not insured. As recently as this summer, the ship is said to have changed from a Russian to a Guinean flag," Bohlin wrote.

The coast guard said it had launched a preliminary investigation into suspected violation of maritime law regarding lack of seaworthiness.

"The Coast Guard has personnel on board to gather information about the condition of the vessel and crew, conduct searches, and conduct interviews," it added.



Calm amid caution: Souq Waqif a reflection of Doha's resilience

By Shaima Sheriff
Staff Reporter

Six days after regional tensions escalated and missile interceptions were reported across Qatar's skies, Souq Waqif remained open and active, though visitors say the atmosphere feels calmer and quieter than usual.

Despite the uncertainty caused by the recent regional developments, Doha's historic Souq Waqif continues to reflect a sense of cautious normalcy, with residents and visitors stepping out while closely following updates from authorities.

While the traditional market remains open, several people interviewed noted that the usually bustling crowds appeared noticeably thinner.

Celine, a tourist from China who had been travelling across the Middle East before the situation unfolded, said that her stay was unexpectedly extended when flights were disrupted.

"We got stuck here since the 28th; we were supposed to have departed at midnight," she said. "But during the day Iran

started to bomb, so we couldn't go anywhere."

According to Celine, travellers like her were initially uncertain about what to expect.

However, she praised the assistance provided by local authorities.

"After the first few days, Qatar Tourism took care of our accommodation, food and hotels where we would stay, which is quite good," she said. "Even though we were not flying with Qatar Airways, they still gave us free accommodation."

Although she admitted that war-related developments are "scary anyway to anyone", Celine said she personally remained calm.

"I travel a lot, so I don't really feel scared," she said. "But some people around me think it's scary because it's the first time in their life they have experienced something like this."

At Souq Waqif, however, she observed that the atmosphere had changed compared to earlier in the week.

"Before, when we came here on Friday, there were many people," Celine said. "Now it's maybe half of the crowd, maybe

even less. I think people are still a little concerned about going out."

Meanwhile, aviation professionals living in Qatar acknowledged the unusual circumstances while expressing confidence in the country's response.

Cabin crew member Faith said that the past week had been overwhelming yet reassuring.

"We still feel a bit scared of the situation," she said. "But after six days, this is actually our first time going out in the city."

Faith added that following developments closely had strengthened trust in the country's safety measures.

"We can see that Qatar is handling the situation very well," she said. "Out of the many missiles sent, Qatar was able to intercept most of them, so although we are scared, we still feel very safe."

Her colleague Sheena echoed the sentiment, praising the defensive response and communication.

"I'm really thankful for the Qatari Air Force for intercepting almost all the missile attacks here in Doha," she said.

Sheena added that clear communica-



Sheena (left) and Faith. PICTURES: Shaima Sheriff

Right: Celine has praised the assistance provided by the authorities.

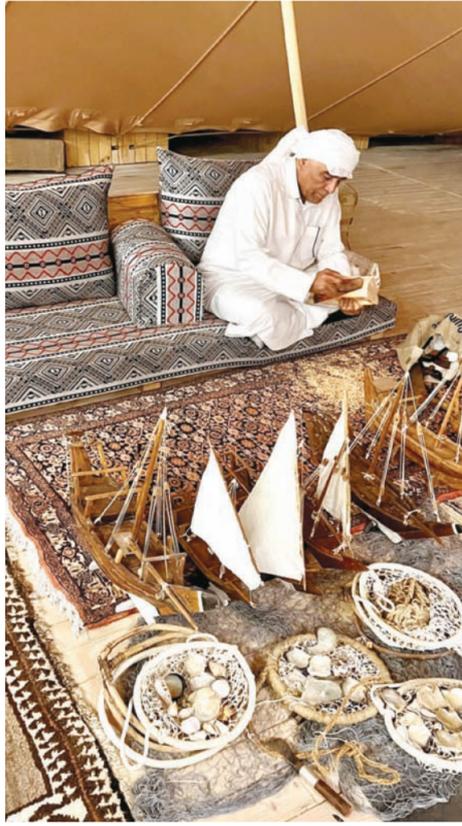
tion from authorities had helped maintain public confidence.

"We trust the government," she said. "They've been very openly communicating about what's happening and what they're doing to keep us safe."

For now, Souq Waqif reflects a city balancing vigilance with everyday life, quieter than usual, yet still welcoming visitors who continue to walk its historic alleys.



Traditional shipbuilding a key part of national heritage



In a small shipyard along Qatar's coast, the rhythmic sound of wood being cut and shaped keeps alive the centuries-old craft of Al-Qallaf, the traditional wooden shipbuilding that once sustained the country's fishing, pearl diving and trading communities long before the discovery of oil.

Today, craftsmen such as Abdullah continue the labour-intensive practice passed down through generations, preserving a key symbol of Qatar's maritime heritage even as modern boats and changing lifestyles threaten the trade's survival.

He explained that he learned the craft from his late father, who also worked in the field.

Abdullah's connection to the profession began in childhood when he accompanied his father to the shipyard and helped prepare tools while observing the construction process.

At the age of 17, he began practising the craft himself.

Learning the profession relied primarily on hands-on experience and observation rather than formal instruction, gradually building the knowledge needed to use tools, work with wood, and understand each stage of ship construction.

The construction of traditional wooden boats depended on carefully selected natural woods to ensure durability in marine environments.

Teak was widely used due to its strength and resistance to water and humidity.

Other woods included pine, mahogany, and other types of wood,

known for their durability and ability to withstand long exposure to sea conditions.

Craftsmen also used plant fibres and natural ropes to reinforce the structure and seal gaps between wooden planks, preventing water leakage and strengthening the vessel's framework.

Traditional tools played a central role in the shipbuilding process.

These included the saw for cutting wood, chisels and hammers for shaping it, a hand drill for making holes, and other tools for carving wooden components.

Nails were used to secure the vessel's parts together.

In the past, the entire process relied solely on manual tools and the craftsman's personal expertise in measuring and shaping components, which required significant time, precision, and effort.

Building a wooden vessel followed several stages.

The process began with determining the design, which shipbuilders often sketched directly on the sand to outline the vessel's dimensions and structure.

The entire construction process typically took eight to ten months, and sometimes up to a year, depending on the vessel's size and complexity.

Traditional shipbuilders used to produce several types of boats according to the targeted use and the distance of the journey.

Eventually, technological development has introduced modern electric tools that simplify tasks such as cutting and drilling, significantly reducing time and labour.

However, Abdullah stressed that these tools have not replaced the importance of craftsmanship and experience, which remain essential to shipbuilding.

Despite its historical importance, demand for traditional wooden boats has declined significantly.

Many fishermen now prefer fiberglass boats, which are faster, easier to maintain, and simpler to clean.

The cost of building wooden vessels has also increased dramatically.

In the past, construction costs ranged between QR60,000 and QR90,000, whereas today they can reach millions of riyals due to higher prices for wood, materials, and labour.

Interest among younger generations in learning the craft has also declined.

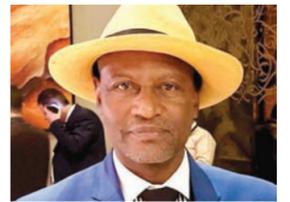
While the profession was traditionally passed from fathers to sons, changing lifestyles and the availability of alternative careers have reduced youth participation.

Abdullah noted that the craft requires patience, time, and dedication to master.

For him, the profession remains deeply personal.

He described it as more than a job, but rather a part of his identity and a link to his childhood and family heritage.

Abdullah also highlighted the importance of heritage festivals and cultural events in preserving traditional maritime crafts in Qatar by introducing younger generations to these professions and raising awareness of their cultural significance.



Hamodi Check

Ramadan is 'a month of compassion'

The holy month of Ramadan in the Central African Republic is considered a deeply spiritual and communal period characterised by solidarity, generosity, and social cohesion, said Hamodi Check, the head of mission at the embassy of the Central African Republic in Doha and goodwill ambassador for the US state of Arkansas.

He said that one of his most cherished Ramadan memories is the tradition of families and neighbours gathering at sunset to break the fast together, regardless of their social status.

The holy month, Check said, fosters a strong sense of generosity and mutual support, with people sharing meals and helping those in need.

Ramadan also promotes peaceful coexistence among different religious communities in the Central African Republic, reflecting the country's values of unity and mutual respect.

The diplomat said that he is making a sincere effort to preserve these traditions while living in Qatar.

He maintains elements of his cultural heritage by preparing traditional dishes, practising hospitality, and meeting members of the Central African community alongside friends from various cultures.

These practices help maintain a connection with his roots while embracing the cultural diversity of his host country.

Check described Ramadan in Qatar as a unique experience that blends spirituality, generosity, and cultural richness.

He highlighted the widespread charitable initiatives, communal Iftar gatherings, and a strong sense of social responsibility during the month.

Qatar's ability to combine tradition with modernity, the diplomat added, also enriches the Ramadan experience.

He noted that Ramadan in Qatar clearly reflects the country's commitment to coexistence and cultural diversity, with people from different nationalities and backgrounds gathering to celebrate the values of the holy month, fostering mutual respect and understanding.

This diversity, Check stated, strengthens the universal message of peace and solidarity that Ramadan represents.

He emphasised that the humanitarian message of Ramadan transcends borders and cultures, reminding people of the importance of compassion, generosity, and empathy toward others, especially those in need.

The diplomat said that the holy month serves as an opportunity to strengthen social bonds, promote unity, and encourage acts of charity, which are essential for building peaceful and harmonious societies.

A tale from a bygone era: The call to prayer, a tone familiar to all

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

In old Qatar, the call to prayer had a limited range.

A single minaret in each neighbourhood, and the muezzin's voice, carried as far as the wind could carry.

People set their time by that sound; when the call to prayer was heard, shops closed, and the breaking of the fast began.

There were no large loudspeakers or unified broadcasts; each neighbourhood had its own sound, and its muezzin's tone was known to all as well as they knew each other's faces.

In Ramadan, the call to prayer had a different impact.

The Maghrib (sunset) call to prayer was a collective moment,



awaited in shared silence by everyone.

The Fajr (dawn) call to prayer marked the end of Suhoor (pre-dawn meal) and the beginning of a new day of fasting.

The sound was a marker of

time and spirituality simultaneously.

As cities developed, loudspeakers were introduced, followed by standardised timing, and then radio and television broadcasts of the call to prayer.

Today, you might hear the call to prayer from several mosques simultaneously, or through an app on your phone, or even via a live broadcast from a mosque hundreds of kilometres away.

However, despite all these technological advancements, the sound itself still carries the same ancient impact: a moment of pause, a moment of transition.

Many people today do not break their fast according to a digital clock as much as they await the call to prayer, even if it's broadcast through a modern loudspeaker.

The story here is about a voice that has continued to fulfil the same role, even as its medium has changed.

From the throat of a muezzin on the roof of an old-style mosque to a sound network cov-

ering an entire city, the means have evolved.

Still, the psychological impact remains the same: a brief silence... then a new beginning, Iftar followed by Maghrib prayers.

In the past, the muezzin was a well-known figure in the neighbourhood, a man trusted to determine prayer times.

With the development of technology and the adoption of precise astronomical calendars, the matter of timing was transferred to specialised authorities, and adherence became standardised nationwide.

However, the muezzin's status did not disappear; his voice remained an element of the mosque's identity.

Most of the time, everyone anticipates it with reverent hearts.

Majlis tale in Ramadan: A lesson, honesty is salvation

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

The attendees, after Taraweeh prayers, gathered around the Hakawati (storyteller), who just finished perfuming his beard and moustache with musk.

He then said: "In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, and invoked blessings and peace be upon the Prophet Muhammad."

It is said that a young man, aged no more than 18, decided to travel from Doha to Baghdad in pursuit of knowledge once upon a time.

Before he left, he stood before his mother and said: "Mother, give me some advice."

She looked at him with the knowing gaze of one who understands the long journey ahead and said: "My son, promise me you will never lie."

He promised her, and he had with him four hundred dirhams, which she had set aside for him to use during his travels.

Then he mounted his camel and set off.

On the way, a gang of bandits accosted him.

They asked him mockingly: 'Do you have any money, young man?'

He replied firmly: "Yes, I have four hundred dirhams."

They laughed at him derisively, thinking he was mocking them, and let him go.

However, he had not gone far when their leader himself approached him and repeated the question: "Do you have any money?"

The young man replied: "Yes."

"How much?"

"Four hundred dirhams."

The bandit leader was surprised by his honesty, so he took the money and asked him in astonishment: "Why did you trust



me? You could have denied it and saved your money."

The boy calmly replied: "I promised my mother I wouldn't lie. And I don't want to break my promise."

The words fell on the bandit leader's heart like rain on parched land.

He trembled and said: "I'm amazed at you! You're afraid to break your promise to your mother, and I'm not afraid to break my promise to Allah!"

He returned the money to him and said: "Go in peace. I bear witness that I have repented to Allah at your hands."

That evening, his followers returned with what they had stolen and found him weeping with remorse.

He said to them: "We return what is rightfully not ours to its owners. Today, my repentance begins."

They said to him: "If you, our leader, have repented, then we are even more deserving of repentance."

And they all repented.

Until the next Majlis reunite us, stay safe.