



**Qatar Insurance**  
Financial Results (FY 2025)

Gross Written Premiums (GWP)

9%   
QAR 9.9B

Net Profit Before the Impact of Pillar Two Taxes

19%   
QAR 874M

Net Profit Profit attributable to QIC shareholders

9%   
QAR 791M

Earnings Per Share:

10%   
QAR 0.188

qic-group.com

# GULF TIMES



SATURDAY Vol. XXXXVI No. 13679

March 14, 2026  
Ramadan 25, 1447 AH

www.gulf-times.com 2 Riyals

Published in QATAR since 1978

This Ramadan enjoy unlimited roaming calls with Call+ on the new Unlimited+ plans!



Stay connected with premium voice quality wherever you travel

Activate via MyVodafone app



**ORIX POLYDEX**  
Durable waterproofing-performance for roof protection

44601602/3

## Running Hotel Business For Sale

Furnished Hotel With License & Prime Location.  
Serious Party Call Us:  
33598672 / 30200166 / 52038746

**Every Brick Tells A Story**  
Of Strength and Trust

APARTMENTS COMMERCIAL SPACES WORKERS ACCOMMODATION WAREHOUSE

+974 3030 0880, +974 3341 9475

**CUSTOM CAKES MADE TO ORDER**

70256690

**Ready to GUAC AND ROLL?**

Only on talabat

## Amir condoles with Sultan of Oman, discusses regional developments in phone call

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani held a phone call yesterday with Sultan Haitham bin Tarik of the Sultanate of Oman, during which he expressed his sincere condolences and heartfelt sympathy to the Sultan, the esteemed ruling family, and the brotherly Omani people on the passing of Fahd bin Mahmoud al-Said, praying to Allah Almighty to grant the deceased His abundant mercy and admit him to Paradise, and to grant his family patience and solace. His Highness also expressed his condolences on the death of a drone crash in Sohar, wishing a speedy recovery to the injured. For his part, the Sultan expressed his thanks and appreciation to His Highness the Amir for his sincere brotherly sentiments. During the call, they discussed several regional developments, particularly the continued brutal Iranian aggression, with both sides emphasizing the importance of de-escalation and prioritizing dialogue and diplomatic means to enhance security and stability in the region. **(QNA)**

## Oil stays above \$100

Oil prices stayed over \$100 per barrel yesterday with no end in sight to the disruption in supplies of crude, while stock markets slid lower. With the conflict heading towards its third week, equity markets fell further amid investor worries about an extended crisis that could fan inflation and hammer the global economy. The price of Brent crude, the benchmark international oil contract, dipped below \$100 during the day, sending equities briefly higher. But stocks slid back into the red as Brent climbed back above the \$100 mark. "Crude oil is continuing to dictate direction for markets as we head towards the end of a volatile week... the pressure remains with no end in sight in the Middle East conflict," said Fawad Razaqada, market analyst with Forex.com. "Traders are trying to figure out what a fair value for crude oil is right now, given the big release of emergency oil reserves, and the temporary relaxation of sanctions on Russian oil sales that's already at sea," he added. Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz - through which a fifth of global crude oil and liquefied natural gas passes - has sent energy prices soaring. **(AFP)**

## Sheikh Jassim conveys Amir's condolences to al-Said family



His Highness the Personal Representative of the Amir, Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani, conveyed the condolences of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, to members of the al-Said family, on the demise of Fahd bin Mahmoud al-Said. His Highness offered his condolences to members of the Royal Family, senior officials, and dignitaries at the family council in Muscat yesterday, praying to God Almighty to grant the deceased His abundant mercy, and to grant his family and loved ones patience and solace. **(QNA)**

## Final week of Ramadan: Malls see rising activity

As we enter the final week of Ramadan, markets and shopping malls are seeing a noticeable increase in activity as shoppers prepare for the Eid al-Fitr holidays, buying clothing, gifts, sweets, and food. Festive shopping has been progressing at a normal pace across the country despite the current circumstances, supported by the availability of goods, stable market conditions,

and intensified monitoring efforts to ensure products remain accessible to consumers.

Families are traditionally keen to prepare for the festive occasion, which is closely tied to long-standing social customs. Demand typically rises for clothing, perfume, and gifts, while stores selling sweets and nuts experience particularly strong sales during the days leading up to the holidays. **Page 12**



A festive Ramadan decoration displayed inside a shopping mall attracts visitors as footfall increases with shoppers completing their Eid al-Fitr preparations. **PICTURE:** Joey Aguilar

# Qatar security stable, authorities on full alert, says Interior Minister

Sheikh Khalifa elaborates the security situation in the country and the functioning of various sectors in the current scenario

By Ayman Adly  
Staff Reporter



HE Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani

Qatar's security remains stable and fully under control, with authorities maintaining round-the-clock vigilance to safeguard residents and infrastructure while closely monitoring regional developments, HE Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Minister of Interior and Commander of the Internal Security Force (Lekhwiya), said yesterday. Speaking to Qatar TV, HE Sheikh Khalifa stressed that, upon the directives and instructions of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the concerned entities in the country are following the updates of the situation closely with constant vigilance and efficiency as maintaining the safety and security of the citizens, expatriates and all who live in this country is of the foremost priority.

HE Sheikh Khalifa pointed out that there has been extensive work over the past years to prepare for such situations, and all concerned entities have been working as an integrated team. In particular, the Watan Exercise formed a key part of these preparations, involving intensive drills and training for the Civil Defence and the Civil Defence Council to ensure readiness to respond to various scenarios.

His Highness the Amir has always been the main supporter of these national readiness exercises, he added. HE the Interior Minister noted that the National Command Centre (NCC) has worked round the clock, as it supports decision-making and ensures a swift, immediate response to emergencies and events. Further, the Operations Room has received more than 5,000 related reports since the attacks started and responded accordingly, as Qatar's defences cleared 600 sites of missile shrapnel.

In the meantime, he affirmed

- Relevant authorities monitoring situation closely
- Strategic reserve of food sufficient for 18 months, and of water for several months
- Air and sea free of any pollution following the fuel tank incident in Industrial Area
- Health sector fully functional, maintaining stock of essential medicines for over nine months

that Qatar has clear, applicable strategies in the field of food security, as the strategic food supply stock has already been increased to meet the country's needs for 18 months, up from nine months previously. However, he stressed that the country did not have to use this stock, so long as there were open supply channels and routes that guaranteed an uninterrupted food supply by both land and air. Similarly, the strategic stock of water supply is very secure and sufficient for more than four months of consumption. Besides, he added that the concerned entities are currently working to increase the volume of this stock, with a continuous supply guaranteed.

HE Sheikh Khalifa, also the chairman of the Civil Defence Council, said that the health sector in Qatar is working very efficiently, with a strategic stock of medications for up to nine months and medical supplies for up to 12 months. He added that 26 cases of injuries were reported, and the country's health sector has handled them all very efficiently, as it continues to function normally. Regarding the quality of the air in the country, he noted that the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC) has taken all necessary measures to ensure air quality and has conducted the required tests and examinations, especially following

the targeting of fuel tanks. So far, everything is perfectly normal.

In the meantime, HE Sheikh Khalifa pointed out that the country has taken the necessary measures to ensure the return of the stranded citizens and residents through a limited number of flights and the land crossing at Abu Samra border. Further, special flights have been arranged to ensure the safe return of citizens from other countries to their homes, involving more than 7,000 travellers over the past few days.

Regarding remote work for some entities, he said, the situation remains the same until further notice, based on the latest updates on the ground. He also stressed the importance of the Early Warning System, which was perfected through intensive training and testing, to maintain public safety and security, describing it as instrumental and necessary for the safety and security of all, despite its occasional annoyance.

Eventually, he greatly appreciated the co-operation of the country's citizens and residents and their high level of awareness in abiding by the relevant instructions and co-operating to enhance the country's security. In particular, the Ministry of Defence has been doing great work, and the same applies to the employees of the services and health sectors across the country.

## RAMADAN THOUGHT



O mankind! Verily, the Promise of Allah is true. So let not this present life deceive you, and let not the chief deceiver (Satan) deceive you about Allah. **(Qur'an 35:5)**

### Prayer times

Fajr...4:28; Zuhr...11:43; Asr...3:08; Maghrib...5:45; Isha...7:15

### Fasting times

Iftar today ..... 5.45pm  
Imsak tomorrow..... 4.16am

# How Qatar demonstrated a model of crisis leadership

By Tawfik Lamari  
Staff Reporter

In moments of uncertainty, the true strength of a nation is revealed. Crises often expose weaknesses in governance and communication, but they can also highlight leadership, preparedness, and unity. During the recent tense period in the region, Qatar presented what many observers describe as a disciplined and reassuring model of crisis management, one that prioritised the safety, stability, and psychological well-being of everyone living in the country.

From the earliest moments of

the situation, state institutions moved quickly to maintain clarity and public confidence. Authorities ensured that information reached the public through direct alerts and official communication channels, limiting speculation and rumours. Therapeutic, nutrition and community consultant Moudhi al-Hajri said the government's approach stood out for its calm and methodical execution.

According to her, the response was characterised by transparency and immediacy. Rather than allowing uncertainty to spread, authorities communicated developments clearly and in real time. She noted that the system of public notifications and updates reassured resi-



Moudhi al-Hajri

dents that any potential threat was being monitored and addressed.

"It did not leave society prey to rumours or anxiety," she explained, emphasising that official

communication ensured people understood both the risks and the measures being taken to resolve them. Security co-ordination also played a central role in the national response. The Qatari Armed Forces, working alongside the Ministry of Defence, strengthened readiness and monitored the country's borders while maintaining a visible posture of preparedness. At the same time, the Ministry of Interior reinforced internal security measures, ensuring that daily life remained orderly and safe.

This institutional co-ordination demonstrated a broader principle: crisis management in Qatar relies on co-operation across multiple sectors rather than iso-

lated responses. Beyond security, authorities recognised the importance of information and public awareness. Media outlets and digital platforms were used to disseminate verified updates, counter misinformation, and warn the public about potential scams or cybercrimes, which sometimes increase during periods of tension.

Economic stability was also a priority. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) intensified market monitoring to prevent price manipulation or stockpiling of essential goods. Officials made it clear that exploiting exceptional circumstances for profit would not be tolerated. **To Page 11**



## Minister reviews food production

**H**E the Minister of Municipality Abdullah bin Hamad bin Abdullah al-Attiyah reviewed the abundance and diversity of local production and its ability to meet market demand during an inspection tour that included Mahaseel for Marketing and Agricultural Services Company, as part of efforts to monitor the food security system and strengthen local production.

During his tour, HE al-Attiyah was briefed on the efforts made to support the agricultural sector and enhance its contribution to achieving food security, in a way that contributes to increasing local

production and meeting market demand.

The tour included Al Saliya Central Market, where the minister followed the progress of auction operations for local and imported fruits and vegetables and reviewed the approved sales mechanisms that ensure the smooth flow of trading operations and the availability of goods in markets.

HE al-Attiyah was also briefed on the efforts of the Hassad Food Company in ensuring the continuity of food supplies through various logistical routes, thereby enhancing market stability and the availability of food products to meet consumer needs. - QNA

## Deputy PM receives telephone calls from Singapore, Poland ministers

**H**E the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Affairs Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman bin Hassan al-Thani received phone calls yesterday from Sin-

gapore's Minister for Defence and Co-ordinating Minister for Public Services Chan Chun Sing and Poland's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz.

Discussions on the latest security developments in the region, and ways of co-operation and joint co-ordination under the current circumstances, were made during the calls. - QNA

## Al-Murakhi participates in foreign ministers' meeting

**Q**atar participated in the joint ministerial meeting of the foreign ministers of the Gulf Co-operation Coun-

cil (GCC) states with Morocco, Egypt and Jordan, which was held on Thursday via videoconferencing.

HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Murakhi represented Qatar at the meeting. - QNA

## Minister receives copy of Kuwait envoy's credentials

HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Murakhi received on Thursday a copy of the credentials of Kuwait's ambassador to Qatar Ahmad Abdulrahman al-Shuraim.

HE al-Murakhi wished the envoy success in his duties, assuring him of all support to enhance bilateral relations and foster closer co-operation in various fields. - QNA



## Qatar's ambassador takes part in Uzbek minister's meeting with GCC diplomats

**Q**atar's ambassador to Uzbekistan Hassan bin Hamza Hashim participated on Thursday in the meeting between Uzbek Minister of Foreign Affairs Bakhtiyor Saidov with the heads of dip-

lomatic missions of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Oman.

During the meeting, they discussed relations and current developments in the region. - QNA

## Qatar welcomes broad access granted to international inquiry on Syria

**Q**atar has welcomed the broad access granted by the Syrian government to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and its continued co-operation with the Commission.

This came in a statement delivered yesterday by the second secretary of the Permanent Mission of Qatar to the United Nations Office at Geneva, Hamad Mohammed al-Suwaidi, during his participation in the interactive dialogue with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic under Item 4, within the framework of the 61st session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Qatar noted that such engagement strengthens the complementarity between national efforts and the Commission's work in supporting investigations into human rights violations, providing technical assistance and expertise to Syrian national authorities, promoting justice and accountability, and assisting Syria in meeting its international human rights obligations.

The statement also commended the efforts undertaken by the Syrian government and its engagement with various UN mechanisms, including the establishment of national commis-

sions on transitional justice and missing persons.

It further welcomed the recent agreement on the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces into the Syrian National Army, describing it as a positive step toward reinforcing stability, fostering national consensus, and advancing the building of a state grounded in strong and inclusive institutions.

The statement called on the international community to continue providing technical, humanitarian, and developmental support to Syria, to work toward lifting sanctions, and to take the necessary measures to halt Israeli aggression and end its occupation of Syrian territory. - QNA

## NHRC welcomes UNSC resolution against Iran's attacks on neighbours

**T**he National Human Rights Committee (NHRC) has welcomed the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution condemning the Iranian attacks on Qatar and several other Arab states.

HE the NHRC Chairperson Maryam bint Abdullah al-Attiyah welcomed the resolution adopted by the UNSC on Wednesday, which included an explicit condemnation of the Iranian attacks on Qatar's territory and that of several other Arab countries, describing them as acts of aggression and a violation of the UN Charter and relevant principles of international law.

HE al-Attiyah said in a statement that the resolution carries particular significance as it clearly affirms that the ongoing attacks by Iran against Qatar, the GCC states, and other Arab countries constitute acts of aggression prohibited under the UN Charter and relevant international treaties.

She called for the effective implementation of the resolution, including ensuring the immediate and unconditional cessation of all attacks targeting vital civilian infrastructure essential to the lives of the population, given the grave risks posed by such aggression and its adverse impact on the enjoyment of human rights. - QNA

## Qatar slams Israeli attacks on southern Lebanon

**Q**atar has strongly condemned the Israeli attacks on southern Lebanon, considering them a blatant violation of international humanitarian law and UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

In a statement issued on Thursday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) called on the international community to fulfill its responsibilities by compelling the Israeli occupation authorities to cease their repeated attacks on Lebanon and to respect international conventions and laws.

The ministry affirmed Qatar's unwavering stance towards Lebanon, its unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and its full support for all efforts that enhance its stability and prosperity. - QNA

## MoCI closes Al-Sawaed Al-Qatariya firm over illegal handling of subsidised goods

**T**he Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) issued Administrative Decision No. (01-2026) ordering the administrative closure of Al-Sawaed Al-Qatariya Contracting, Transport and Trading Company for a period of 30 days for violating the provisions of Law No. (5) of 2017 regulating the handling of subsidised goods.

According to the ministry, the decision followed the detection of goods present at the establishment that had not been registered in the approved electronic system.

In addition, the distributor was found in possession of ration cards and subsidised goods in violation of the applicable laws and regulations, constituting a clear

breach that undermines the rights of beneficiaries of subsidised goods.

This measure forms part of ongoing efforts to monitor markets and ensure that suppliers comply with the laws and regulations in force.

Authorities stressed that any practices that harm the rights of beneficiaries of subsidised goods or violate the applicable regulatory framework will not be tolerated.

The public was also urged to report any violations or illegal practices through the following channels:

- ☎ Call Centre: 16001
- ☎ MoCI social media accounts: @MOCIQATAR

**T**he scope of worship in Islam is universal, in the literal sense, for the Qur'an tells us that each and every constituent of creation, near or far, seen or unseen, animate or inanimate - worships The True and Only God.

"Indeed, every being in the heavens and the earth but comes to the All-Merciful as a worshipper." [Qur'an 19:93]

It is only human beings, then, that are called upon to voluntarily join in the wonderful symphony of worshipful creation.

Islam's five pillars are the cornerstones upon which we build such an outstanding and worshipful life.

However, no such establishment of a dignified life of faith on earth, either personally or socially, can take place without one essential pillar that represents the intersection of our professed convictions and our practical lives.

Zakat is that pillar, for it is the primary instrument that Allah has placed at our disposal to spiritually and socially uplift every Muslim and the entirety of our community and thereby to assert a benevolent hand for the commonweal of humanity.

Among Zakat's most blessed manifestations - and certainly its most widespread - is the obligatory annual giving of the Zakatul-Fitr charity, before the solemnising of Ramadan by Eid prayer.

### The overarching meaning of Zakat

The Arabic word *Zakaah* means "purity", "cleansing", "wholesomeness", and "integrity" (in both their physical and moral senses). It also means "growth" or "increase".

Understanding these linguistic meanings helps our proper appreciation of what Zakat is as a financial, or fiduciary, rite mandated by Allah.

For, indeed, each of these senses finds its native ex-

## Rulings of Zakatul-Fitr

pression in Zakat's correct function in our lives and in our local communities and societies.

It is known also by the term Sadaqatul-Fitr, or the Sincere, or Righteous Charity of Fast Breaking, because it testifies to one's sincerity to Allah and his or her righteousness in seeking to comply with Allah's legislation, or Sanctioned Laws and legislations.

Zakat's main goal is not simple "charity"; Allah has instituted other mechanisms for this purpose.

Rather, Zakat is much farther seeing and reaching.

Its objective is to secure the psycho-spiritual well-being of every single Muslim as an individual servant of Allah, and to safeguard the socio-moral welfare of the entire Muslim nation.

The reason that the objectives of Zakat are so profound and sweeping is that its principle is so universally sound and materially decisive.

Zakat is the incumbent giving of wealth, in all its material manifestations, from all those who have it (and this is its comprehensive aspect) to all those whose need gives them a right to a minimally dignifying sum from it - and this is its deeper significance.

For it means that Allah has chosen to invest the wealth of some of us, for lawful increase, with others among us as a trust that must be conveyed to its rightful beneficiaries, if our own holdings are to remain pure and our societies are to have integrity.

What is, indeed, so profound about this is that it un-

derscores to humanity that all of its wealth, in fact, is disbursed to it on loan from Allah, who, as the Creator, is the sole Owner of life and all that the living possess.

Allah has revealed this pillar of faith to every believing community in history.

However, He has expanded it into an inclusive, highly systematised institution enjoined upon all who would follow Islam.

### The sum of Zakatul-Fitr

Originally, the stated amount of Zakatul-Fitr was a Saa' of dates, or barley, or wheat.

A Saa' was a "goblet", or drinking utensil, at the time of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam.

There have been periodic inquiries by Muslim scholars (like the well-known investigation by Abu Yoosuf, the great Hanafi scholar) to determine updated weight-and-measure equivalents to that of the Saa' at the time of the Prophet.

There is some minimal discrepancy, or difference, in determining this weight based upon the conversion of quantities of varying items (dates and wheat, for example) into a unified measure.

Thus a Saa' is now estimated to be equal to anywhere from 2.176 to 2.25kg, or just under 5lbs.

### Who is liable for the Zakatul-Fitr payment

As we have noted previously, every Muslim is liable

for the payment of Zakatul-Fitr, provided food exists for one, and one's dependents, for Eid eve and the following day.

Knowing now what a Saa' is, in terms of its contemporary weight equivalents, we can be more exact in defining who is liable to make the Zakatul-Fitr payment.

Every Muslim, whether rich or poor, who possesses (or has stored on his behalf) grains, or similar foodstuffs - or the monetary means of achieving the like of this - sufficient for one's sustenance, and that of one's dependents for a full night and day, must give Zakatul-Fitr.

This sum is due not per household, but per person.

The Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Give Zakatul-Fitr on behalf of [all your] dependents" [Al-Bayhaqi], for he indicated that Zakatul-Fitr would purify the wealth of the rich and be the cause of Allah giving more to the poor than what they have given.

Thus whoever meets the feeding requirements for his or her family must pay the Zakatul-Fitr payment for each and every household member.

The Shaafi'ee and the Hanbali schools of jurisprudence state that a Muslim should give the Zakatul-Fitr payment on behalf of him - or herself and on behalf of every single person under his or her care - including one's wife; children (even if they are older but still dependent, or ineligible to make the payment according to Zakatul-Fitr requirements); parents (if they are poor or dependent); and any others who are established dependents of the household (such as foster children, orphans, and the like).

Article source: <http://www.islamweb.net/emain-page/>





## Dubai's workers on edge as Mideast war hits tourism

AFP  
Dubai

For thousands of workers in Dubai's tourism sector, the Middle East war has brought business to a standstill – leaving their income suddenly at risk.

At the famous Jumeirah Beach Residence (JBR), normally heaving with visitors, rows of sun loungers now face an almost empty sea.

Restaurant terraces sit deserted, while souvenir, watersports and perfume vendors watch for the rare passerby.

Across the water, Ain Dubai – the world's tallest Ferris wheel – has stopped turning, and the Madame Tussauds wax museum below is drawing few visitors despite hefty discounts.

"Yesterday: zero. Today: zero. Not a single customer," said Dulash, 26, a Sri Lankan worker at a jet-ski rental company.

"I've never seen Dubai like this."

With its artificial islands and soaring skyscrapers, the UAE's second city has become a major Middle Eastern tourism hub, welcoming nearly 19.6mn visi-

tors last year. But in the middle of peak season, before the summer heat sets in, the barrage of Iranian missiles and drones since February 28 has sent tourists fleeing.

Starved of income, the industry is hoping for a quick end to the war, triggered by US-Israeli strikes on Iran.

But many workers, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, said they were already struggling.

Paid 4,500 dirhams (\$1,225) a month, Dulash did not receive his salary on time.

"I borrowed 1,000 dirhams from a friend, paid my 800-dirham rent and now I have 200 dirhams left to live on," he said. He had no idea when his employer would catch up.

"Even going back home isn't an option," he added. Airfares had tripled because of reduced flight traffic. "We have no choice but to wait and hope."

The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTTC) estimated this week that the war is costing the Middle East \$600mn a day.

In the UAE, the sector made up nearly 13% of GDP in 2025 and supported about 925,000 jobs, mostly expats.

Many workers come from Asian countries or elsewhere in the Middle East, drawn by hopes of safety and economic stability. "I'm from Syria, I've lived through war so missiles and drones don't scare me," said a young perfume seller.

"But I'm paid only on commission, and the idea of no longer being able to afford to stay here – that, yes, that scares me."

Kalhan, also from Sri Lanka, earns a small percentage on each sale, topping up a fixed salary of barely 3,000 dirhams – an amount he will have to survive on this month.

"I came to Dubai for better living conditions, but now I don't know what comes next," he said.

As the Eid al-Fitr holiday approaches, hundreds of Dubai's luxury hotels are slashing rates in a bid to attract at least local residents and their families.

Offers are piling up on the man-made Palm Jumeirah island, where one hotel was hit by drone debris early in the conflict.

Another property was damaged on Thursday in Dubai's Creek Harbour.

Industry professionals also fear lasting damage to the country's image as a haven of peace and security in a volatile region.

Nabil Haryouli, owner of a Dubai-based travel agency, said there would "certainly be an impact for a few months", but he believed visitors would eventually return.

"What matters most is the return of stability," said the Frenchman, recalling the city's resilience after the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid pandemic.

"If there's one city that has shown us it can bounce back, it's Dubai."



Smoke rises above Dubai, yesterday. (AFP)

## New year looms as war steals Iranians' joy

AFP  
Paris

Beneath a hail of bombs, few Iranians have the heart to prepare for Nowruz, the Persian New Year, as war casts a shadow across the country.

"People just aren't thinking about it," said a resident of the northern city of Bukan, reached by phone from Paris.

"It's the first time in my life that I've forgotten how to grow sabzeh," a mother said, referring to the sprouted lentils grown for Nowruz.

Yet the holiday is a central moment in Persian culture, typically marked by weeks of anticipation.

Nowruz, meaning "new day", will ring in the year 1405 on the Persian calendar and the arrival of spring on the afternoon of March 20.

But this year, the festive spirit eludes many.

The dazzling "fire festival" (Chaharshanbe Suri) that kicks off the holiday season will be closely watched on Tuesday evening.

It is the first moment for Iranians to gather in public outside state-organised rallies in support of the authorities. On the night of bonfires, Iranians jump over flames to ward off misfortune and welcome renewal.

Over the past two decades, the ancient celebration has become a powerful outlet for young people despite the disapproval of authorities and much of the clergy. Whether Iranians will be allowed to gather at all this year is unclear. Security forces are out in large numbers across major cities and the country remains in a 40-day mourning period following the death of su-

preme leader Ali Khamenei on the first day of the war.

"Normally in the days before Nowruz, everyone is cleaning their home and getting ready for the holiday," the Bukan resident said. "This year that feeling is completely gone."

In Tehran and many other cities, bazaars – typically the heart of pre-holiday life – are nearly empty.

Many shops and markets remain shut two weeks after the war launched by the US and Israel on February 28. In Piranshahr, in the northwest, "the lively, energetic mood of past years has disappeared," said a 40-year-old man, also contacted by AFP from Paris and requesting anonymity.

The downturn is another blow to shopkeepers who normally make much of their annual income during the pre-Nowruz rush.

"My cousin has a clothing shop, but he hasn't been able to open because it's in a city where there are many explosions," said a resident of the capital Tehran.

A 48-year-old Afghan migrant who has returned home to seek safety said the streets and bazaars should be packed at this time. "But when I went to the market, I didn't see anyone."

Even so, many families are trying to find some joy for their children, for whom Nowruz is also a holiday of gifts and treats.

"I have a six-year-old boy who has no real sense of the war. All he wants are new clothes, sweets and traditional cakes for Nowruz," the Bukan resident said.

"People try to buy chocolates and snacks for their kids. They want to reassure them," said a father living near Tehran. "But the children know and understand everything."



Iranians, some holding their national flag, take part in the Al-Quds (Jerusalem) Day rally, a commemoration in support of the Palestinian people on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan, in Tehran, yesterday. (AFP)

## Iran defiant, US vows even heavier bombing

AFP  
Tehran

Iranian officials led a pro-government rally in Tehran as explosions rocked the city yesterday, while the United States vowed it would intensify strikes in the coming hours and days.

The hardline stances and renewed strikes unleashed by Israel and Iran presaged no let-up in the conflict engulfing the Middle East and roiling the global energy market.

AFP journalists in Tehran reported loud blasts over the city as Israel's military said it had carried out 7,600 strikes in Iran since the war started on February 28, with most targeting the country's missile programme.

US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth told a news conference the US military would bombard Iran more heavily yesterday than any other day so far in the war.

He also said Iran's new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, was "wounded and likely disfigured" in the attack that killed his father and predecessor Ali Khamenei at the start of the US-Israeli campaign.

President Donald Trump said on social media that he viewed it "a great honour" to be killing Iran's rulers.

He later said in an interview on Fox News Radio that the United States would be hitting Iran hard over the "over the next week".

**FRESH STRIKES**

While Mojtaba Khamenei has not appeared since being named supreme leader, other Islamic republic officials walked in the open in Tehran with pro-government demonstrators who waved flags and brandished banners reading "Death to America" and "Death to Israel!"

Iran's state media said at least one woman was killed when blasts hit an area near the demonstration.

"These attacks are out of fear,

out of desperation," said Ali Larjani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, who attended the rally to mark Quds Day, the last Friday of Ramadan and a day of support for the Palestinian cause.

"It's clear that it (the enemy) has failed," said Larjani in a speech broadcast on state TV.

President Masoud Pezeshkian and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi also attended the rally, while images on Iranian media showed the head of the judiciary being interviewed just as a blast occurred.

Shortly afterwards, state television said Iran had launched a fresh salvo of missiles at Israel. Explosions were later heard on the outskirts of Tel Aviv, but Israeli paramedics reported no casualties.

Earlier, a strike on the Israeli town of Zarzir wounded around 60 people, according to police, with AFP images showing burnt-out vehicles and craters in the ground.

Iran also kept up launches of drone and missile strikes against neighbouring states hosting US military assets.

Saudi Arabia's defence ministry said yesterday its forces had intercepted dozens of drones, while an AFP journalist reported an explosion heard over Dubai that rattled buildings.

Turkiye said Nato forces shot down a ballistic missile launched from Iran – the third such interception in the war.

The conflict has sparked chaos in global markets and sent oil prices soaring.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards have all but closed the Gulf's strategic Strait of Hormuz through which 20% of global oil supplies pass.

Oil stayed at over \$100 a barrel yesterday, leaving markets and governments everywhere skittish about the consequences of higher inflation.

"Every day on the ship, I can see missile launches and hear

explosions, making me feel like I was in danger," said Wang Shang, a sailor stuck on one of the ships unable to pass through the strait.

The US government has said that the US Navy would likely not be able to escort ships through the strait until the end of the month.

Yesterday, the White House and Pentagon lashed out at CNN for a report suggesting that Washington had underestimated Iran's ability to disrupt oil traffic through the strait.

"The Pentagon has been planning for Iran's desperate and reckless closure of the Strait of Hormuz for decades," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said on X.

**BREAD RATIONED**

Within Iran, the Revolutionary Guards have warned of an even stronger response to any anti-government protests, after ones in January in which several thousand people were killed.

Iranian authorities have maintained an Internet blackout since the war started.

Iranians speaking to AFP under cover of anonymity have described a grim picture of cities in ruins and cash running short.

"Bread is now rationed. The population is extremely tense and outraged," said one 30-year-old woman in Kermanshah, western Iran.

Another woman in the city said "countless" people from Tehran had come to seek refuge from the airstrikes, adding to demand for food and scarce medicine, with prices "nearly doubling".

"As a result, locals face serious shortfalls... the situation is extremely tough," she said.

The UN refugee agency has estimated that up to 3.2mn people have been displaced inside Iran since the war started.

Iran's health ministry said on March 8 that more than 1,200 people have been killed, a figure AFP has not been able to verify independently.

## Israel destroys bridge in Lebanon, threatens Gaza-scale destruction

Reuters  
Tel Aviv/Beirut

Israel destroyed a bridge in southern Lebanon yesterday and dropped leaflets in Beirut threatening Gaza-scale devastation as it deployed more troops to fight Hezbollah and warned of more attacks on the country's infrastructure.

As Israeli warplanes pounded Beirut's suburbs with air strikes, Lebanon's interior minister said authorities were unable to accommodate the hundreds of thousands of people who have sought refuge in the capital.

Israeli strikes have killed 773 people in Lebanon since March 2, Lebanon's state news agency said on Friday, citing the health ministry.

Israel launched its offensive against Hezbollah after it opened fire on March 2 to avenge the killing of Iran's supreme leader at the start of the US-Israeli war on Iran.

Making a visit to Lebanon yesterday, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he was seeking \$308mn in emergency funding



Smoke rises from the site of an Israeli airstrike that targeted an area in Beirut's southern suburbs, yesterday. (AFP)

to help authorities grapple with the humanitarian fallout. At least 800,000 people have been uprooted in Lebanon. "Solidarity in words must be matched by solidarity in action," Guterres said.

Israel's military said it struck the Zraieh Bridge spanning the Litani River early yesterday, claiming it was being used by Hezbollah fighters to move between Lebanon's north and south. The mili-

tary provided no evidence for the claim. It appeared to be the first time Israel acknowledged attacking civilian infrastructure during its current military campaign in Lebanon.

"The Lebanese government... will pay increasing costs through damage to infrastructure and loss of territory" until Hezbollah is disarmed, Defence Minister Israel Katz said in a statement.



The damaged Zraieh Bridge over the Litani River, after it was hit by an Israeli strike in Tayr Falsay in southern Lebanon, yesterday. (Reuters)

International law generally prohibits militaries from attacking civilian infrastructure, though such operations can be sometimes permitted if it is being used for military purposes. Lebanon's government has sought to disarm Hezbollah, and the country's army had said before the war that progress had been made in areas near the Israeli border. On March 2, the Lebanese government

banned military activities by Hezbollah, which has refused to fully disarm.

Israel says that Hezbollah's military capabilities have been degraded since a 2024 war but that it still poses a formidable threat and possesses hundreds of rockets.

Israeli aircraft dropped flyers over Beirut threatening to inflict damage on Lebanon similar to the devastation the military wrought on

Gaza during its two-year war with Hamas. Much of Gaza has been reduced to rubble and nearly all its population displaced.

"In light of the great success in Gaza, the newspaper of the new reality arrives to Lebanon," the flyer said. Another flyer called on Lebanese to strip Hezbollah of its weapons. It featured two QR codes to links on WhatsApp and Facebook, accompanied by a message telling Lebanese to make contact if they want to see "real change" in their country.

Israel's military did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the flyers. Lebanon's state media reported yesterday that a drone struck a residential apartment in Beirut's Bourj Hammoud district on the northern outskirts of the Lebanese capital. It was the first time in the war that Beirut's predominantly Christian northern suburbs have been hit as Israel appeared to widen its targeting.

Lebanon's Interior Minister Ahmad al-Hajjar said the country had opened as many shelters as possible in Beirut for internally displaced Lebanese, many of whom have been sleeping on streets or in parks.

**'Al Quds Day' gatherings in South Africa, Yemen**

A demonstrator reacts during a march marking the annual Al-Quds Day (Jerusalem Day) on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan in Cape Town, South Africa, yesterday. (Reuters)



Supporters of Yemen's Houthi fighters hold placards bearing portraits of Iran's slain supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during the Al-Quds (Jerusalem) Day rally, a commemoration in support of the Palestinian people on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan, in Sanaa, yesterday. (AFP)

**Israeli strike kills three in Gaza amid regional offensives**

**Violence persists in West Bank, spike in settler attacks reported**

Reuters  
Cairo/Jerusalem

An Israeli airstrike in Gaza killed three Palestinians, including two 17-year-olds, Palestinian medics said yesterday, with violence continuing in the West Bank and Gaza even as Israel expands its offensive across the region. Israel has used lethal force in Iran, Lebanon, Gaza and the occupied West Bank over the past 24 hours.

Israeli forces killed two in the West Bank city of Nablus on Thursday, according to Palestinian officials, while the death toll in Lebanon reached 773, its Health Ministry said yesterday.

After nearly two weeks of war, 2,000 people have been killed, most of them in Iran, with several mn people displaced from their homes.

The Israeli military told Reuters that they were not aware of the strike in Gaza.

The military said separately in a statement on Thursday that they had killed two individuals after they attempted to carry out a car-ramming attack on soldiers. It did not immediately respond to a request for evidence of the attempted ramming.

While Israeli attacks on Gaza



Palestinian boys pray during the last Friday noon prayer of the holy fasting month of Ramadan, outside the Al-Talbani Mosque, destroyed by the Israeli military in Khan Yunis, in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. (AFP)

declined at the beginning of the war with Iran, they have since begun to rise. Israel has killed 23 in Gaza since the US and Israel jointly struck Iran on February 28.

While a ceasefire went into effect in Gaza in October, there

have been regular outbreaks of violence since then. Reuters has reported that US President Donald Trump's peace plan for Gaza has been on hold since the start of the Iran war.

Violence has also persisted in the West Bank. Israeli settlers

and military forces have killed at least eight Palestinians across the West Bank since the US-Israeli attacks on Iran began. Reuters has reported that there has been a spike in settler violence since then, as Israel has put much of the West Bank under lockdown.

**Turkiye says third ballistic missile from Iran shot down**

AFP  
Ankara

Turkiye said yesterday its "top priority" was to avoid being dragged into the Middle East war, hours after Nato shot down a third ballistic missile from Iran.

"We are acting very cautiously against plots, traps and provocations that seek to drag our country into war," President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, pledging an "appropriate and measured" response after the defence ministry said another missile was intercepted.

"Keeping our country out of this fire pit is our top priority."

The missile, which set sirens wailing at Turkiye's Incirlik air base, a Nato facility where US troops are stationed near the southern city of Adana, "was neutralised by Nato air and missile defence assets," the defence ministry said.

Nato shot down a first ballistic missile from Iran on March 4, with a second intercepted on Monday. Adana residents were woken by sirens at 3:25 am (0025 GMT), several posting footage of a fast-moving object in the sky, the Ekonomim business news website reported.

Defence news site SavunmaSanayiST said they could be "fragments of a third ballistic missile" or of the interceptor, which caught fire upon entering the atmosphere.

Iran's embassy in Ankara immediately denied any involvement, saying "no projectile" had been fired towards Turkiye, but experts said it was unlikely.

"The first one you can explain

it away, the second one possibly, but the third? No. This cannot be accidental," Sinan Ulgen, senior fellow with Carnegie Europe told AFP.

This leaves Ankara in a real bind," he added, saying Turkiye would have to find some kind of "low-threshold way to respond".

"In a way, the Gulf countries have not responded but Turkiye's political and military culture is different. It's a matter of demonstrating deterrence to Iran, so that things don't escalate further," he said.

Erdogan said Turkiye would "maintain common sense" as it sought to respond "to the complex events around us".

Monday's incident prompted Washington to close its consulate in Adana and urge all US citizens to leave southeastern Turkey.

Incirlik is an important Nato facility used by US troops for decades. It also hosts military personnel from Spain and Poland, its website says.

Experts say it also houses 50-60 US-owned tactical nuclear weapons.

US troops are stationed at Kurecik base in Malatya where they man an early-warning radar system Nato describes as a "key element" of its missile shield that can detect Iranian missile launches.

Although Ankara has categorically denied radar data has ever been used to help Israel, its presence has rattled Tehran.

On Tuesday, Turkiye said a Patriot missile defence system was being deployed in Malatya just days after Nato said it had moved to strengthen its ballistic missile defence posture.

**Kenyan meat exporters hit by Middle East conflict as Ramadan shipments slump**

Reuters  
Nairobi

The war in the Middle East has reduced Kenyan meat exports to the region to below 5% of the expected level during the peak Ramadan season as a sharp increase in air freight costs grounds shipments, industry officials told Reuters.

The Middle East is Kenya's main market for meat exports, with the United Arab Emirates traditionally accounting for 40% to 60% of shipments, Nicholas Ngahu, chief executive of the Kenya Meat and Livestock Exporters Industry Council, said.

But exporters of fresh chilled meat such as beef, lamb, mutton and goat are currently only able to send limited volumes to Abu Dhabi and Dubai, while exports to markets such as Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain and Jordan have also been disrupted.

"We are doing below 15% of our normal exports, and now that it's Ramadan, we are doing less than 5% of what we are supposed to be doing," Ngahu said.

Kenya typically sends around \$2.3mn worth of meat and animal products to the Middle East every week.

Dennis Muraya, director of Konza Clearing Agency, said most airlines serving the region had cut



Goats wait at a holding room before they are slaughtered, after disruptions of fresh chilled meat exportation, due to the ongoing US-Israeli conflict with Iran, causing flight interference, at the Juja International Abattoir, in Kiambu County, Kenya, yesterday. (Reuters)

operations, forcing exporters to rely on costly cargo charters into the UAE.

"We usually pay \$1 to \$1.50 per kilo," Muraya said. "But at the current moment, we're even paying up to \$3 to \$3.50 per kilo."

He said airlines had attributed

the surge in rates to higher insurance costs linked to the conflict.

Ngahu said the industry would normally ship around 200 metric tons of meat a day during the holy month, but volumes had fallen to roughly 5 to 15 tons a day.

Since Sunday, March 8, exports

would have been expected to total a mn kilograms, Ngahu said. "We have not done even 50,000."

One consignment of about 20 tons on its way to Sharjah had to be sent back on February 28 as airspace closed, saddling Konza with a \$5,000 bill for handling, storage



A worker pushes a cart with goat meat inside a cold room to be exported using a chartered plane, after disruptions of fresh chilled meat exportation, due to the ongoing US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Kiambu County, Kenya, yesterday. (Reuters)

**The Middle East is Kenya's main market for meat exports, with the United Arab Emirates traditionally accounting for 40% to 60% of shipments, said Nicholas Ngahu, chief executive of the Kenya Meat and Livestock Exporters Industry Council**

and cold-room charges, Muraya said.

Exporters say the impact is rippling through the supply chain, from freight forwarders and slaughterhouses to livestock traders and farmers.

With shipments delayed, slaughterhouses are unable to clear meat quickly enough to make room for new stock, while

some exporters are forced to divert meat to the local market at lower prices. Ngahu said some abattoirs had cut casual labour by as much as 80%. If the conflict drags on beyond Ramadan, Muraya warned demand could weaken further, making freight costs unsustainable.

"If this war continues, we won't be in business," he said.

# Mideast war 'could knock 3% off Africa economies'

AFP  
Nairobi

Fuel shortages caused by the war in the Middle East could knock up to three % off African economies if they persist, a top regional energy regulator said yesterday.

"There is a little bit of panic," said Geoffrey Aori, CEO of the Regional Association of Energy Regulators for Eastern and Southern Africa.

Global oil prices have shot past \$100 per barrel this week as shipping through the vital Strait of Hormuz has come to an effective standstill, and Iran has struck energy facilities in the Gulf.

Aori said most African countries could already expect losses to GDP of between 0.5 and 1%.

"But if the war persists for a month or more that can mean two to three %," he added.

Rising fuel costs "will affect everything: freight prices, docking fees, tourism, food, transport and factories."

Time is also running out: most African countries have fuel reserves for just 15 to 25 days, compared to the International Energy Agency standard of 90 days.

Aori cited the example of his home country, Kenya, which has 20 days of reserve capacity.

Its government has promised there is enough fuel to last until the end of April, but Aori said that was only possible with rationing and a ban on exports to neighbouring countries.

"A new shipment must arrive within 30 days from today," he said.

African governments must mitigate the impact with immediate fuel rationing, and subsidies to cushion the blow of inflation and weakening currencies, though that was not sustainable beyond a few weeks, he said.

The war should serve as a "wake-up call" for the continent, he added, calling for investment in alternative energy sources such as hydrogen and methanol, and more use of electric vehicles.

"We are over-reliant on oil and these wars are not ending soon." There have been attempts to construct more refineries on the continent, and expand reserves, but infrastructure costs run into the billions of dollars at a time when countries have many competing demands and heavy debt burdens.



Ivorian culture minister Francoise Remarck shakes hands with Atchans traditional chiefs during the welcome ceremony of the Djidji Ayokwe, an ancestral talking drum of the Atchan people living in southern Ivory Coast, in Abidjan, yesterday. (Reuters)

# 'Talking drum' looted by France in 1916 back in Ivory Coast

AFP  
Abidjan

The Djidji Ayokwe "talking drum", which was looted by French colonial troops in 1916 and taken to France, arrived back in Ivory Coast yesterday, in the latest repatriation of stolen artefacts.

The wooden drum, more than three metres (10 feet) long and weighing 430 kilos (950 pounds), was used by the Ebrie tribe to transmit messages.

It was officially handed over on February 20 after France's parliament approved removing the artefact from the national museum collections to enable its return.

Ivory Coast had asked in late 2018 for the return of the Djidji Ayokwe among 148 works of art taken during the colonial period.

It arrived aboard a specially chartered plane at Ivory Coast's main city Abidjan and remained inside a huge wooden crate stamped "fragile", AFP journalists saw.

"It's an historic day and I feel deep emotion," Culture Minister



A participant performs during the welcome ceremony for the Djidji Ayokwe, in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, yesterday. (Reuters)

Francoise Remarck said, welcoming its arrival at the airport, where the Ebrie community also sang and played drums. "We are living a moment of justice and remembrance," the minister added.

French President Emmanuel Macron promised in 2021 to send the drum and other artefacts back home to the west African country.

It is one of hundreds of objects France is preparing to send back to Africa, with the efforts set to be accelerated by the passing of a new law to authorise mass repatriations.

"We are happy and relieved to know that this sacred piece of our culture is back on its native land," Aboussou Guy Georges Mobio, an Ebrie village chief, told AFP.

The drum will initially be held in a "safe space" to allow it to acclimatise, the culture minister said.

It is due to go on display at the Museum of Civilisations in Abidjan which has been specially renovated. The "talking drum" was used by the Ebrie community to warn of danger, mobilise for war or call villagers to ceremonies.

# Ivory Coast commemorates 2016 militant attack on resort

AFP  
Grand-Bassam

Ivory Coast yesterday commemorated the 19 victims of a militant attack on a popular beach resort a decade ago.

Three attackers wielding assault rifles stormed the beach at Grand-Bassam, popular with foreigners and 40 kilometres east of the main city of Abidjan, on March 13, 2016 before attacking restaurants.

The 45-minute bloodbath ended when Ivorian security forces shot the attackers dead.

The assault was the first militant attack in Ivory Coast, one of west Africa's economic powerhouses. The country has largely escaped the militant violence that regularly hits neighbours Burkina Faso and Mali. Al-Qaeda's North African affiliate, AQIM, claimed responsibility for the attack, whose victims comprised nine Ivorians, four French citizens, a Lebanese, a German, a Macedonian, a Malian, a Nigerian



France's Ambassador to Ivory Coast Jean-Christophe Belliard (right) and Ivory Coast's Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Tene Birahima Ouattara (fourth right) pay their respects at a memorial honouring the victims of a militant attack, at a beach in Grand-Bassam, yesterday. (AFP)

and one person who could not be identified. "This attack was not only against people," Deputy Prime Minister Tene Birahima Ouattara said at the official ceremony.

"It was against what defines the Ivorian nation: our cultural diversity, our history open to the

world, our legendary hospitality and our joy of living," he added, in front of a memorial honouring the 19 dead. The attack was in response to anti-militant operations in the Sahel by France and its allies. It targeted Ivory Coast for having handed over AQIM operatives to Mali.

# Incumbent Sassou favoured in Congo Republic ballot amid rights concerns

Reuters  
Dakar/Brazzaville

The Republic of Congo heads to the polls tomorrow in a presidential election expected to keep longtime ruler Denis Sassou Nguesso in power, with his challengers hampered by voter apathy and what rights groups describe as an atmosphere of repression.

Sassou, 82, has ruled the oil-producing Central African nation for all but five years since 1979. He faces six little-known challengers after the main opposition parties opted not to field candidates.

Two of the best-known opposition figures, General Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko and Andre



Incumbent President of the Republic of Congo and presidential candidate Denis Sassou Nguesso (centre) attends a campaign rally in Brazzaville, yesterday, ahead of Congo's presidential election scheduled for tomorrow. (AFP)

Okombi Salissa, have been in jail for nearly a decade after being convicted of undermining state security.

Much of the pre-election unease stems from what rights

groups describe as a clampdown on dissent.

Activists have been arrested, several opposition parties suspended, and public gatherings closely monitored, said Joe Wash-

ington Ebina, a prominent human rights activist.

He added that a recent violent crackdown by the state on youth gangs, known locally as "bebes noirs", had further heightened

tensions and "created a climate where people no longer feel safe leaving their homes and expressing themselves".

Security forces cast their ballots on Thursday.

"Intimidation and repression by state security forces will once again play a key role in sustaining Sassou Nguesso's rule. The tactic of having security forces vote before election day - freeing them to patrol polling stations - proved effective in 2021," said Maja Bovcon, an independent consultant focused on West and Central Africa.

In cities across Congo this week, Sassou's posters lined major roundabouts, while small groups of opposition campaigners handed out leaflets in markets with little visibility.

"Everywhere I look, I see only the president's face, as if the others weren't even in the race," said Rosalie Tsianko, a communications professional in Brazzaville.

Prime Minister Anatole Colinet Makosso rejected accusations of repression and political bias, telling Reuters that "no election is won in advance." He said Congo

was equipped with oversight bodies "to ensure transparency, fairness and the vitality of our democracy".

Some voters backed Sassou's emphasis on stability. "I support him because he is a man of peace," said businessman Roger Ennel Ahoue.

Meanwhile, opposition candidate Uphrem Dave Mafoula urged a small crowd of supporters at a rally in Brazzaville this week to consider an alternative. "Forty years of suffering is enough," he said, calling Sassou's economic and social record negative.

## LOW TURNOUT EXPECTED

Over 3.2m Congolese are eligible to vote, but many say they won't, expecting little suspense.

"I prefer to stay at home rather than go and vote," said Boudibangoyi Brunel, a student in Brazzaville.

Official turnout was nearly 68% in the 2021 presidential election, but civil society groups predict it will now be lower.

"The actual abstention rate will be very high. Congolese people are tired," Ebina said.

# Nigeria's 'Mothers of Chibok' turn peanuts into hope

AFP  
Lagos

Four Nigeria women whose daughters were abducted by Boko Haram in the infamous 2014 Chibok kidnapping set foot for the first time in two factories where they hope a new food line will help finance their families' education.

Beaming with pride and dressed in colourful traditional gowns, they donned hairnets before entering the production area, where peanuts they cultivate at home are processed into peanut butter and products, and marketed under the new "Mothers of Chibok" label.

"If we just sit back and do nothing, if we stop sending our children to school and stop going to our farms, that would mean accepting what Boko Haram wants, which is that Western education

should be forbidden," said Yana Galang, 55, a mother of eight, including Rifkatu, who was abducted at the age of 18 and whom she has never seen again.

"The little money we have, we will spend it on nothing but our children's education, sending them to the best schools."

In 2014, the abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno State, sparked international outrage and the global "BringBackOurGirls" campaign.

Some girls subsequently escaped, others were freed years later, some with children they had during captivity. But 12 years on, around a hundred of the girls are still missing, leaving their families in constant anguish.

In Chibok, a poor farming village where residents primarily rely on growing maize, peanuts, millet and rice, the threat of attacks and kidnappings persists. Boko Haram



Yana Galang, 55, reacts as she holds a packaged Nutzy Peanut Butter during their visit to the factory in Lagos. (AFP)

and its rival, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), still kidnap and terrorise local populations. Nine women from Chibok are collaborating with Zenfix Nigeria, a company that sells peanuts and nut products,

and Ajrena Foods, producer of the Nutzy peanut butter brand, very popular in Nigeria.

This partnership was supported by Joel Kachi Benson, director of the documentary "Mothers of Chibok," released in theatres

last week, which chronicles the lives of these mothers. "I think the message is clear that evil will never triumph over good. And that these women are not broken. They might be grieving, but they're not broken. And all they need really is the support, the collaboration, the encouragement," said Benson, surrounded by the women.

Some don't know if their daughters are even still alive.

Before the creation of Mothers of Chibok, their harvests were sold unprocessed to middlemen, generating meagre incomes. Today, their work has better value and they have a stable income.

The women's peanut production increased from 15 100-kilogram bags to 27 bags between 2024 and 2025.

Maryam Ali Maiyanga, 28, a former high school student who was kidnapped and managed to escape in 2016, gazed at the la-

belled jars and bags. Each product symbolises for her the promise of a different future for her nine-year-old son, Ali, born during her captivity from a forced marriage with a Boko Haram fighter.

Ruth Kwakwe, 48, is happy to have been able to label some of the products herself during the visit. For the mother of 10, Mothers of Chibok also represents the demand for peace in Chibok.

For Ajrena Foods and Zenfix Nigeria, the initiative is part of a project that could inspire other mothers whose children have been abducted by Boko Haram, other militant groups or criminal gangs.

"Our involvement comes in providing them an avenue to get out of the trauma that they went through and actually provide a sustainable business, both for themselves, their children and their communities as a whole," said Ajay Rammani, managing director of Ajrena Foods.



# Cuba opens talks with US as oil blockade takes a toll

Reuters  
Havana

Cuba has opened talks with the US government, President Miguel Diaz-Canel said yesterday, as an oil blockade imposed by US President Donald Trump pushes the Communist-run nation deeper into economic crisis.

"These talks have been aimed at finding solutions through dialogue to the bilateral differences we have between the two nations," Diaz-Canel said in a video aired on state television.

Diaz-Canel said he hoped the negotiations would move the two long-time rivals "away from confrontation".

Cuba is growing increasingly desperate. The Caribbean nation's citizens, already exhausted by years of economic crisis and shortages, now live the majority of their days without electricity. Rising prices, strictly rationed fuel and medicine shortages have pushed many to the breaking point.

Since the US captured Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and

**Cuba is interested in conducting the talks "on the basis of equality and respect for the political systems of both states, and for the sovereignty and self-determination of our governments"**

removed from power Cuba's most important foreign benefactor in January, Trump has cut off Venezuelan oil shipments to Cuba and threatened to slap tariffs on any country that sells oil to Cuba.

Trump in recent weeks had made a series of statements, saying Cuba was on the verge of collapse or eager to make a deal with the United States. On Monday he said Cuba may be subject to a "friendly takeover", then added, "it may not be a friendly takeover".

"As the president stated, we are talking to Cuba, whose leaders should make a deal, which he believes 'would be very easily made,'" a White House official said, on condition of anonymity.

"Cuba is a failing nation whose rulers have had a major setback with the loss of support from Venezuela and with Mexico ceasing to send them oil," the official said, in an e-mailed statement.

Cubans on the streets of Havana welcomed the news as a possible

solution to the power blackouts, which this week provoked protests in which Reuters observed Havana residents banging on kitchen pots in the dark.

"We are already overwhelmed, we can't take this situation anymore, and I think that this conversation between Cuba and the United States should lead to a better situation," said Yaimi Gonzalez, a 44-year-old homemaker.

Cuba said it was interested in conducting the talks "on the basis of equality and respect for the political systems of both states, and for the sovereignty and self-determination of our governments," Diaz-Canel said.

But he made clear in his remarks yesterday that the oil blockade was taking its toll.

No fuel has entered Cuba in three months, Diaz-Canel said in a subsequent press conference with the Cuban media on Friday, resulting in a decline in diesel and fuel oil reserves that have made

Cuba's electrical grid increasingly "unstable," he said.

A blackout last week plunged the majority of the island's citizens into darkness, and outages since then have spiked to over 12 hours daily across most of the capital Havana.

Diaz-Canel described Cuba's efforts to increase the island's energy independence amid ongoing talks with the United States, saying Cuba had increased production of domestic crude and gas thus far this year, and was set to boost solar generation by 10% by the end of March.

In a statement recorded Thursday night among high-level officials of the Communist Party, Diaz-Canel said he was directing the talks for the Cuban side, together with former Cuban President Raul Castro and other officials. He did not say who had participated for the United States, nor did he say when or where they had taken place.

Trump has said US Secretary of State Marco Rubio was involved.

The talks were in their initial stages and Cuba was willing to continue them, Diaz-Canel said. One goal was to determine if there



A man rides a bicycle as Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel said the country has opened talks with the US government, in Havana, Cuba, yesterday. (Reuters)

will on both sides to reach an agreement, he said.

Felipa Rodriguez, a 67-year-old retiree, said it was important that Cuba stick to its principles.

"If the talks are going to be friendly and Cuba doesn't have to give ground politically, there's no problem at all," Rodriguez said.

Trump has said repeatedly that the United States was already in high-level talks with Cuban representatives. Until now, the Cuban government had denied that any official encounters were underway but had not explicitly denied media reports of back-channel discussions with Raul Guillermo Rodriguez Castro, the grandson of Raul Castro, who is 94 and still wields great influence.

Rodriguez Castro was seated

behind Diaz-Canel and among the Communist Party officials pictured in the video, an unusual appearance given that he does not officially hold a high-level position within the party. The Castro grandson, 41, widely known as "El Cangrejo", or "The Crab", also attended the press conference on Friday morning.

On the eve of Friday's announcement, Cuba separately said it will release 51 prisoners in the coming days under an agreement with the Vatican. The prisoner release comes two weeks after Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez met with Pope Leo in the Vatican.

Diaz-Canel said the decision to release the prisoners was "sovereign" and not "imposed by another country".

## Venezuela signs deal with Repsol, Eni for gas production

Venezuela has signed "strategic agreements" on gas production with energy groups Repsol of Spain and Italy's Eni, the government of the South American country said on Thursday.

Speaking on state-run television, acting President Delcy Rodriguez said the deals would allow for gas production at the Cardon IV field, a 50-50 joint venture between Eni and Repsol.

She said they would also pave the way for the expansion of exports.

"I am very pleased that this is being done hand in hand with two European companies that stayed in Venezuela, that believed in Venezuela and did not turn their backs on our people," Rodriguez said.

A spokesman for Eni said yesterday that the agreement laid the groundwork for the group to restart exports of natural gas and liquids from Venezuela, "after obtaining the necessary legal and

regulatory authorisations."

This would strengthen "Venezuela's position as a potential regional exporter," the spokesman added.

Venezuela has accumulated more than \$7bn in debt towards Eni and Repsol as previous US sanctions blocked the possibility for the two European groups to lift products from the country and sell them abroad.

Venezuela's government said on Thursday it was committed to seeking agreements with global investors in oil and gas.

After the United States captured President Nicolas Maduro in January, it eased sanctions on Venezuela's energy sector, issuing general licences that allow global energy companies to operate oil and gas projects in the Opec country. Venezuela holds one of the largest oil reserves in the world but has dilapidated energy infrastructure. (Reuters)

## Venezuela leader's first trip abroad abruptly cancelled

AFP  
Cúcuta, Colombia

The first foreign visit of Venezuela's US-backed interim leader since taking power was abruptly cancelled on Thursday, just hours before she was to arrive in Colombia.

Delcy Rodriguez was due to travel to the border town of Cucuta for a summit yesterday with Colombian President Gustavo Petro.

"Everything is cancelled," a Colombian foreign ministry source told AFP. An AFP reporter in Cucuta saw a stage that was erected for the event being dismantled.

It was not immediately clear why the trip had been scrapped.

One Colombian official acknowledged reports of a security threat, without specifying whether those threats came from Colombia or Venezuela.

But a provincial official appeared to scotch such suggestions, telling AFP: "There are no security alerts of any kind".

The area around Cucuta is home to numerous drug-running left-wing guerrilla groups, which Colombia has long accused Venezuela of funding and protecting.

Rodriguez took power in January when her former boss, Nicolas Maduro, was captured by US forces and spirited to the US to face trial.

Since then, she has faced down hardliners who have spent decades railing against the US to embark on a series of US-backed reforms.

She has opened Venezuela's vast oil industry to foreign investment, sacked officials suspected of corruption, released scores of political prisoners and, according to Bogota, begun pushing Colombian rebels back across the border.

## Venezuela opposition leader urges compatriots exiled in Chile to return

AFP  
Santiago

The leader of Venezuela's political opposition, Maria Corina Machado, called on her compatriots exiled in Chile to return home during a Thursday rally before thousands of supporters in downtown Santiago.

The 2025 Nobel Peace Prize winner had travelled to Chile to attend the presidential inauguration of far-right leader Jose Antonio Kast on Wednesday.

"Venezuela needs us, I need you. It is time to move forward with strength," she told the cheering crowd the next day. "We need the return of all those exiles who have been persecuted" by Chavismo, the left-wing political movement popularised by late firebrand leader Hugo Chavez.

Thousands of Venezuelan rallygoers waved flags or wore the national team soccer jerseys to celebrate Machado's arrival.

Chile is presently home to some 700,000 Venezuelan citizens, according to the National



Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado gestures as she speaks to members of the Venezuelan community during an encounter in Chile at Almagro Square in Santiago on Thursday. (AFP)

Institute of Statistics.

The rally "fills our hearts," Baudany Garcia, a 53-year-old Venezuelan security advisor who attended the event, told AFP. "The regime (in Venezuela) has already fractured and we have to start cleaning house for a new return."

Machado reiterated hours earlier at a Santiago press conference that she aimed to return to her country in "a few weeks".

She had remained in hiding for

over a year until she escaped in December to travel to Oslo to receive her Nobel prize.

Venezuela is currently led by Delcy Rodriguez, the former vice president who took power on an interim basis after leftist autocrat Nicolas Maduro was captured in a US military raid in January.

US President Donald Trump, who has demanded greater access to Venezuela's vast oil reserves, has expressed satisfaction with Rodriguez so far.

## Colombia ministers travel to Caracas: sources

Colombia's foreign and defence ministers were travelling to Caracas on Friday, after the postponement of a meeting between Colombian President Gustavo Petro and his counterpart, acting President Delcy Rodriguez, two sources with knowledge of the matter told Reuters.

The meeting was to be Rodriguez's first presidential-level bilateral since she took power following her predecessor's ouster by the US. The officials are likely to discuss bilateral trade, which Petro, who leaves office in August, reopened at the start of his term, and cooperation on energy, including an agreement this week to repair a damaged section of a binational pipeline that will allow Bogota to import natural gas from its neighbour. The administration of US President Donald Trump has supported a series of moves by Rodriguez, formerly vice-president, to attract investors in oil and mining and stabilise the country since

the January raid that captured President Nicolas Maduro, with Trump repeatedly praising Rodriguez for her co-operation with the US. Rodriguez has repeatedly asserted that dialogue is the way to resolve long-standing disagreements with the US, has welcomed the US secretaries of energy and interior and potential investors in Caracas, and the two countries have formally re-established diplomatic ties. Despite this outward co-operation, Reuters reporting has shown the Trump administration is also quietly building a legal case against her to strengthen its leverage with Caracas. Petro, who had a cordial relationship with Maduro, has had repeated squabbles with Trump, though the two men were each positive after a face-to-face meeting in Washington last month and had a friendly call on Thursday, according to Petro's office, where they discussed the economy along the Venezuela-Colombian border.

Trump has repeatedly demanded more co-operation from Colombia in the fight against drug trafficking and has accused Petro, without evidence, of being an "illegal drug leader". Petro meanwhile, claims record drug seizures during his tenure and has said deadly strikes on alleged drug boats amount to war crimes.

Colombia, home to nearly 3mn Venezuelan migrants who fled economic collapse in their home country, and Venezuela have deep historical and cultural ties, especially in border areas where many families are bi-national. Colombia recorded a trade surplus with Venezuela of \$973.4mn in 2025, after exporting some \$1.07bn in goods like food, tobacco, chemicals, plastics and machinery, according to Colombian statistics agency DANE. Imports from Venezuela totalled \$98.3mn and included iron and steel, fertiliser and paper. (Reuters)

## New Chile govt signs agreement with US on critical minerals

AFP  
Santiago

The government of Chile's new right-wing president Jose Antonio Kast signed a memorandum with the United States on Thursday to co-operate on the supply of critical minerals and rare earths.

Chile is the world's leading producer of copper and the second-largest producer of lithium, critical to the tech and green energy sectors. China, which dominates the global supply chain for critical minerals, is Chile's top customer for both metals.

### Kast vows to pardon officers convicted after 2019 protests

Chile's new hard-right president Jose Antonio Kast said on Thursday that he would pardon the police and military personnel who were convicted of repression during the 2019 protests that left 30 people dead. During an interview with Canal 13, Kast was asked about the possible release of sentenced security officers and said "the power to grant pardons is a power that the president of the republic has to this day, and I am going to use it," adding that the cases were under review. (AFP)

On his first full day in office, the US-backed Kast presided over the signing of a joint declaration between US Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau and Foreign Minister Francisco Perez Mackenna to "establish consultations" on the minerals. The two countries committed to "explore financing mechanisms, both private and public, for investment projects involving critical minerals," the Chilean foreign ministry said in a statement.

"Mutual support in the supply of critical minerals is fundamental for the national security and commercial industries of both countries," the ministry added.

President Donald Trump has moved to aggressively reassert US dominance in Latin America in the face of competition from China for trade and influence.

Kast took office in the wake of a furor caused by a project to link Chile and Hong Kong via a submarine fibre optic cable.

Washington sanctioned three officials from former left-wing president Gabriel Boric's administration for greenlighting the project, even after the government had rescinded its approval.

In the run-up to his inauguration, Kast accused Boric of withholding information about the project.

## Argentine diplomat Gamba enters race for next UN chief

AFP  
UN

Argentine diplomat Virginia Gamba has thrown her hat into the ring to become the next leader of the UN, an official for the organisation said yesterday.

Her candidacy comes as some countries are calling on the UN to name a female secretary-general for the first time in its history.

The role has traditionally rotated between regions, meaning the next leader should be South American

although the unspoken agreement has not always been respected.

Gamba is seeking the UN top job alongside ex-Costa Rican vice-president Rebeca Grynspan, former Chilean president Michelle Bachelet, and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief and fellow Argentinian Rafael Grossi, as well as former Senegalese president Macky Sall.

Gamba was the UN's special representative for children and armed conflict between 2017 and 2025.

The selection process for the

next UN secretary-general, whose term will begin on January 1, 2027, was launched last November.

Each candidate must be formally nominated by a state or group of states, but not necessarily by their country of origin - as in the case of Gamba and Sall.

The Security Council must begin the selection process by the end of July.

It is with the council's recommendation that the General Assembly then elects the secretary-general for a five-year term, renewable once.

## Pentagon chief eager for Trump ally to buy CNN as he blasts war coverage

Reuters  
Washington

Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth yesterday said he was eager to see Trump ally and Paramount Skydance CEO David Ellison take over CNN, as he criticised the US news media's coverage of the Iran war.

"The sooner David Ellison takes over that network, the better," said Hegseth, a former Fox News show host and combat veteran, referring to Paramount's \$110 bn deal to acquire CNN-parent Warner Bros.

On the war's 14th day, Hegseth criticised CNN's reporting on the impact of Iran's disruption of traf-

fic through the Strait of Hormuz, a critical shipping passage, which has driven oil prices sharply higher and shaken the stock market. Reuters/Ipsos polling has shown little public support for the war, which Americans fear will drive gasoline prices higher.

The Pentagon has restricted press access under Hegseth, imposing policies that have led about 30 major news organisations, including Fox, the Washington Post and Reuters, to give up their credentials, with defense officials inviting in new outlets.

On Thursday, CNN reported that the Pentagon and the White House's National Security Council significantly underestimated Iran's

### We stand by our reporting: CNN

willingness to close the strait, citing multiple sources familiar with the matter. "We stand by our reporting," a CNN spokesperson said. Representatives for Paramount had no comment.

David Ellison, son of billionaire Larry Ellison, has deep ties to President Donald Trump's administration and is leading Paramount's Warner Bros takeover. Ellison took over Paramount after acquiring broadcaster CBS News in 2025 as part of its merger with Skydance Media.

The Trump administration must approve the Paramount-Warner

Bros deal, and the US Federal Communications Commission chair this month signalled the agency would not block it.

Both Democratic and Republican lawmakers have raised concerns that the media merger could reduce choices and raise costs for consumers. Critics have also raised concerns about the impact on editorial independence and the erosion of a free press despite protections under the US Constitution's First Amendment.

Hegseth has invited mainstream media outlets back for briefings in the past two weeks on Iran operations but has mostly taken questions from reporters with non-traditional outlets.

## Airport workers miss pay as US shutdown hits one month

AFP  
Washington

US airport security officers missed their first full paycheck yesterday as a partial funding shutdown of the government approached the one-month mark, with no breakthrough in a congressional standoff that is beginning to disrupt travel across the country.

The lapse in funding is forcing thousands of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) staff to work without pay as spring travel picks up, raising fears of staffing shortages, longer security lines and flight delays.

TSA officers — the army of workers who screen passengers, baggage and cargo — received only partial pay two weeks ago.

Yesterday's missed payment represents the first full check lost since the shutdown began, and unions and government officials warn the financial strain is pushing some workers to quit or seek other jobs.

Amid stalled talks on Capitol Hill to end the stoppage, President Donald Trump hit out at Democrats, accusing them of wilful obstructionism.

"These are people that hate our country. These are people that have Trump Derangement Syndrome... Anything I say, they go the opposite," he told Fox News Radio. More than 300 TSA employees have already left the agency since the shutdown began on February 14, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said, while US media reported unscheduled absences had more than doubled.

Airports in several cities have warned passengers to arrive hours earlier than usual because of long security lines.

Some officers are already taking on second jobs or relying on donations, union officials say, while several major airports are collecting gift cards and stocking food pantries for TSA staff struggling without pay.

**More than 300 TSA employees have left the agency since the shutdown, the DHS said, while US media reported unscheduled absences had more than doubled**

"Numerous employees have reported to me that their bank accounts are at zero or negative," Johnny Jones, a Dallas-based official in government workers' union AFGE, told USA Today.

"No funds for daycare, no funds for food. They just want to know why the hell they can't get paid when we have money to shoot missiles into other countries."

The shutdown stems from a dispute over funding for the DHS, the only federal department still without an approved budget after Congress completed most of its spending bills last year.

Democrats say they will not support funding immigration enforcement agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection without reforms to their operations.

Republicans say those demands are unacceptable and accuse Democrats of refusing to negotiate.

The stalemate has hardened in the Senate, where Democrats have repeatedly blocked legislation passed by the Republican-controlled House to fund the department. Republicans, in turn, rejected a Democratic proposal that would fund other DHS agencies while leaving immigration enforcement unresolved.

Airports and travel groups warn that the impact could intensify if the shutdown drags on, with exhausted workers leaving and further straining security operations nationwide. "Democrats have tried — six separate times — to pass simple bills to keep these critical parts of DHS running while negotiations continue," Senate Democratic Minority leader Chuck Schumer said in a statement.

## New unfair trade practices probes of 60 countries open

Reuters  
Washington

The US Trade Representative's office said late on Thursday it had begun a second set of Section 301 unfair trade practices probes of 60 economies in relation to what it called failures to take action on forced labour. President Donald Trump's administration has sought to rebuild tariff pressure on countries around the world after the US Supreme Court struck down his global tariffs as illegal on February 20.

"These investigations will determine whether foreign governments have taken sufficient steps to prohibit the importation of goods produced with forced labour and how the failure to eradicate these abhorrent prac-

tices impacts US workers and businesses," US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer said in a statement.

The list of 60 countries and economies includes some major US trade partners and allies such as Australia, Canada, the EU, Britain, Israel, India, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. China and Russia are also on the list.

The European Commission said it shared US concerns about forced labour and was fully committed to eradicating it from global supply chains. It also pointed to a law, which will enter into force in December 2027, prohibiting the sale in the EU market of forced labour products, as well as to the EU-U.S. trade deal of last year in which both sides agreed to work together to protect labour rights.

"Therefore, it is the firmly held

view of the European Commission that the European Union cannot in any serious analysis be considered as contributing to this global problem," it said.

A UK Department of Business and Trade spokesperson said Britain would engage with the US administration and make clear actions it was taking to tackle forced labour at home and in global supply chains to ensure that British businesses were not complicit. The government in Taiwan, which is listed too, said in a statement that it is committed to improving labor rights and preventing forced labour, and will work with the US to emphasise human rights, resilience, and sustainable governance. Trump imposed a 10% tariff for 150 days under Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974 after the Supreme Court's ruling. On Wednesday, his administra-

tion said it was launching unfair trade investigations into excess industrial capacity in 16 major trading partners.

The US has already cracked down on solar panels and other goods from China's Xinjiang region under the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, signed into law by former president Joe Biden.

Greer said he wanted other countries to enforce bans on goods produced with forced labour similar to those enshrined in a nearly century-old trade law.

The US alleges that Chinese authorities have established labour camps for ethnic Uyghur and other Muslim groups. Beijing denies allegations of abuse.

Greer said he hoped to conclude the Section 301 investigations, including proposed remedies, before Trump's temporary tariffs expire in July.

## With new ships, Canada aims to be 'icebreaking superpower'

AFP  
North Vancouver

At a massive shipyard in North Vancouver, Canadian workers grind metal beams for a powerful new icebreaker crucial to cementing the country's presence in the increasingly contested Arctic.

Icebreakers are specialised, expensive vessels able to navigate in the frozen far north.

And "this is the crown jewel," Eddie Schehr, vice-president of production at the Seaspan shipyard, told AFP.

For Prime Minister Mark Carney, who heads to Norway Friday to observe Arctic defence drills involving troops from 14 Nato states, Canada's extreme north has emerged as a strategic priority.

"Canada is, and forever will be, an Arctic nation," he said ahead of the trip.

During a stop in Canada's Northwest Territories before flying to Norway, Carney announced nearly CAN\$35bn (\$25.7bn) in Arctic funding, with most of the funds dedicated to upgrading existing military infrastructure.

"We cannot rely on other nations for our security," he said. "We are securing every corner of this terrain."

Concerns about Russian aggression, especially after the invasion of Ukraine, have focused attention on the Arctic, where territorial sovereignty is disputed in several areas.

Climate change is intensifying competition, with previously inaccessible minerals increasingly available for exploitation as the ice thaws and new shipping routes open.

For Wesley Wark, a national security expert at the Center for International Governance Innovation, icebreaker fleets are a key part of the defence innovation required to safeguard Canada's position.

"We're in the business of trying to reassert ourselves as an icebreaking superpower," he told AFP.

Two new ships are under construction, each costing more than CAN\$3bn.

One, partly being built in Fin-

**"We cannot rely on other nations for our security, we are securing every corner of this terrain"**

land, is due for delivery in 2030.

The other vessel, set to be ready in 2032, is being made at the Seaspan shipyards in North Vancouver.

Senior vice-president Dave Hargreaves said Canada's existing icebreaking fleet is "getting old." And this ship, he said, "gives Canada the ability to have a strong presence in the Arctic, which is where you start."

Canada's decision to upgrade its icebreaker fleet preceded US President Donald Trump's return to office.

But Carney has delivered stark warnings about new risks from US since entering Canadian politics last year, including a claim from last year's federal election campaign that Trump wanted to "break us so America can own us."

Wark told AFP that Canada's challenge in the Arctic has two main planks.

First, Carney's government wants "to show that it's a strong Nato partner and to take part in Nato collective security," he said, adding that Nato is "deeply concerned about Russian activities in the Arctic."

Russia has the world's largest icebreaker fleet by far — Canada is a distant second — and Wark said Carney wants to signal both to a domestic audience and allies that Canada can defend Nato's "Arctic flank."

Canada must also consider that

"the US itself potentially represents a danger to Canadian security," Wark said.

Trump has discussed annexing Canada at various points in his second term. He again mocked Carney as the "governor" of a US state this week, renewing a taunt he first levelled at former prime minister Justin Trudeau.

Wark maintains the chance of direct military confrontation with the US is low.

The more immediate risk is that Washington may conclude Canada is incapable of defending the Arctic, compelling the US military to take charge, he said.

"I think Canadian officials have come to understand that the US administration, Trump, people around Trump in positions of power and influence, do not hold Canada in high regard as a country... essentially arguing Canada has no military," he said.

For Canada, "the incentive to increase its hard power capacity is partly driven by those American concerns," Wark further said, while stressing that, "whatever the Trump administration might say, Canada is not a military free-loader."

Unlike Russia, Canada has no intention of arming its icebreakers.

But the ships are designed to operate in the harshest Arctic conditions, equipped for intelligence gathering, search-and-rescue as well as scientific exploration.

The Seaspan ship "can go anywhere in the Canadian Arctic any time of the year, which is a very difficult requirement to meet," Hargreaves said.



A worker welds the parts of the Polar Icebreaker under construction at Seaspan Shipyards in North Vancouver, British Columbia, yesterday. (AFP)

## Top Latin narco trafficker Marset arrested in Bolivia

AFP  
Santa Cruz, Bolivia

Notorious narco trafficker, Sebastian Marset, who eluded police across Latin America for years and was on the US most-wanted list, was arrested yesterday in Bolivia, a government source told AFP.

"Sebastian Marset was arrested this Friday at dawn in a Bolivian police operation," the source, who asked not to be identified, told AFP.

He was arrested in the eastern city of Santa Cruz in an operation that mobilised hundreds of police officers, an AFP journalist at the scene witnessed.

He was taken to the city's international airport, where he boarded a plane with a US registration, according to sources in the interior ministry.

Four other people were also arrested.

The most notorious drug baron in the southern part of South America, Marset has a \$2 million US bounty on his head for alleged money laundering.

He was also sought by Paraguay and Bolivia.

The soccer-mad Marset laundered the proceeds of his drug



Uruguayan alleged drug trafficker Sebastian Marset (3rd left) walking after he was detained by DEA officers, at the Viru Viru airport in Santa Cruz, Bolivia yesterday. (AFP)

enterprise by purchasing and sponsoring lower-level professional soccer teams across Latin America and Europe and even put himself in the starting lineups.

A Washington Post profile from 2024 said he paid \$10,000 in cash to wear the number 10 jersey worn by football icons Pele, Maradona and Messi and that referees, fearful of retribution, refused to blow their whistles when he fouled other players.

He stamped his drug shipments "The King of the South," the Post added, and gave orders for cocaine to be stashed in shipments of cookies and soybeans.

Paraguay's Interior Minister Enrique Riera told reporters his country would seek his extradition, while adding he believed Marset would most likely end up in US custody.

"The most important thing is that he has been detained," he added.

Marset had been on the run since July 2023, when fled his home in Santa Cruz, on the eve of a massive police operation to capture him.

A Paraguayan investigation linked him to seizures of more than 16 tons of cocaine, including a major haul in the port of Antwerp in 2021.

The investigation reportedly revealed Marset asking advice in text messages on how to disappear the bodies of murdered enemies.

His capture comes less than a month after a major Mexican drug kingpin, Nemesio "El Mencho" Oseguera, was killed by the military during a capture raid in that country.

## Brazil to revoke Trump adviser Beattie's visa, source says

Reuters  
Brasilia

Brazil's government will revoke the visa of Darren Beattie, who was recently tapped by US President Donald Trump for a senior advisory role monitoring the South American country, a source familiar with the matter told Reuters yesterday.

Earlier in the day, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva suggested that Beattie would be barred from entering Brazil until the US reinstated a visa for his Health Minister Alexandre Padilha,

which was revoked last year.

Beattie, a critic of Brazil's government, was appointed to the position shaping US policy toward the country last month, suggesting relations between the two nations remain delicate despite recent rapprochement.

Lawyers for imprisoned former President Jair Bolsonaro asked the Brazilian Supreme Court to allow Beattie to visit him in jail next week, when he had a trip scheduled to Brazil, but Justice Alexandre de Moraes denied it on Thursday.

Citing a document sent by Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira, Mo-

raes noted the US official only committed to attend a critical minerals forum and meetings with the government while in Brazil.

Bolsonaro, who served as president between 2019 and 2022, was a close Trump ally during the period when both were in office. He is currently serving a 27-year prison sentence for plotting a coup against Lula, his successor.

"That American guy who said he was coming here to visit Jair Bolsonaro was prohibited from visiting, and I forbade him from coming to Brazil until they release the visa for my health minister," Lula told an event yesterday.

## Islamic nations D8 summit postponed

An April summit of the D8 bloc of eight major Muslim developing countries that includes Iran has been postponed due to the war in the Middle East, host Indonesia said yesterday.

No new date was announced for the meeting that was to have stretched over four days, culminating in a leaders' summit on April 15.

Apart from Iran and Indonesia, the D8 Organisation for Economic Co-operation also includes Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkiye was established in 1997 to im-

prove co-operation between the countries stretching from Southeast Asia to Africa.

Referring to "developments since February 28" when the US-Israeli attacks on Iran started, Indonesian foreign ministry official Tri Tharyat said it was decided to hold the D8 meeting at a later date.

"It is regrettable that there are still no visible signs of de-escalation," he told reporters in Jakarta.

"Last night, the foreign minister signed a letter addressed to his counterparts announcing the postponement of the D8 summit," added Tri. (AFP)

## China donates \$200,000 to families of Iran school students killed in strike

AFP  
Beijing

China said yesterday it will donate \$200,000 to the parents of students killed in what it called an "indiscriminate" missile strike on a school in Iran early in the Middle East war.

Tehran has accused the United States and Israel of conducting the deadly missile attack on the school in Iran's south on the first day of the war.

Iranian media reports said funerals were held for at least 165 people, including children, killed in the strike.

The toll has not been verified independently. A US military investigation into the strike is underway.

Beijing's foreign ministry said

the Chinese Red Cross Society will donate \$200,000 in emergency humanitarian assistance to the Iranian Red Crescent Society, specifically for "condolences and compensations" to the parents of dead students.

Ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun called the strike a "severe violation" of international humanitarian law.

"Attacks on schools and children constitute a more severe violation of international humanitarian law and breach the bottom line of human conscience and morality," Guo told reporters at a regular news briefing.

"China stands ready to continue providing necessary assistance to Iran in a humanitarian spirit to support the Iranian people through this difficult time," he said.

The New York Times reported on Wednesday that the US military investigation has determined that a US Tomahawk missile had struck the school because of a targeting mistake.

Israel has denied any involvement in or knowledge of the strike.

AFP has been unable to access the location to independently verify the circumstances of the strike or the toll.

US President Donald Trump initially suggested that Iran itself may have been responsible, even though Iran does not have Tomahawk missiles.

He said later he could "live with" whatever the investigation reveals but, when asked about the Times report on Wednesday, he told reporters: "I don't know about it."

## Mysterious steel cylinder disrupts traffic in Japan

AFP  
Tokyo

Japanese authorities were investigating yesterday how a large steel cylinder suddenly emerged from the ground during sewer construction work and rose to the height of a four-storey building in the city of Osaka.

A city official told AFP they had received a report early Wednesday that the object, a steel casing used for soil retention, was "jutting out of the ground" near highways in Osaka. "It was not there the previous day," he said.

The incident comes after a massive sinkhole near Tokyo — that swallowed a truck and its driver — appeared last year, highlighting the risk posed by Japan's ageing infrastructure.

The cylinder — with a diameter of around 3.5m — rose 13m into the air, but had sunk to a height of around 1.6m by yesterday morning after workers rushed to pour water inside to help submerge it.

Two roads in the vicinity — both of which lead to city centre districts — have been closed to traffic since



A large steel column that suddenly jutting out from the ground near highways in Japan's western city of Osaka. (AFP)

Wednesday, causing congestion, the city official told AFP.

But one reopened Friday afternoon and the other will be opened "soon", with city officials considering cutting off the remaining exposed portion of the cylinder, he said. "We are still investigating the cause of the trouble," he added.

The incident comes after Osaka announced last month it had received an unusual donation of 21kg of gold to pay for the maintenance of its ageing water system.

The donation worth \$3.6mn

was made in November by a person who had already given \$3,300 in cash for the municipal waterworks, Osaka Mayor Hideyuki Yokoyama told a press conference.

Work to replace water pipes in Osaka, a city of 2.8mn residents, have hit a snag as the actual cost exceeded the planned budget, according to local media.

Prime Minister Sanae Takaiuchi has said her "responsible and proactive" fiscal spending would include investment in infrastructure.

## Japan ready to join Trump's 'Golden Dome': report

Japanese premier Sanae Takaichi is expected to announce Tokyo's participation in the "Golden Dome" US missile defence system when she meets President Donald Trump next week, a report said yesterday.

Billed as a next-generation missile defence shield, the Golden Dome for America "will progressively protect our nation from aerial attacks from any foe", including through space-based interceptors and

sensors, Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth said last year.

Citing several unnamed government sources, Japan's *Yomiuri* daily said Takaichi is expected to discuss the initiative with Trump during their planned March 19 meeting in Washington, and convey to him Japan's intention to join. The aim is for the allies to jointly develop interceptors and a satellite network as a counterforce to hypersonic glide vehicles (HGV) pursued by China and Russia, the newspaper said. (AFP)



From left: Malaysia Deputy Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry, Sim Tze Tzin; Myanmar Union Minister, Wah Wah Maung; Philippines DTI Undersecretary, Allan Batarra Gepty; Thailand Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ekachat Seetavorarat; Timor Leste Vice-Minister of Commerce, Augusto Trindade; Vietnam Deputy Director General, Trade, Chi Viet Nguyen; AEM Chairperson and Philippines DTI Secretary, Maria Cristina Aldeguer Roque; Singapore Deputy Prime Minister, Kim Yong Gan; Brunei Darussalam Minister of Finance and Economy, May Fa'ezah Ahmad Ariffin; Cambodia Secretary of State, Rithi Pich; Indonesia Vice-Minister of Trade, Dyah Roro Esti Widya Putri; Lao Vice-Minister, Manothong Vongsay; and Asean Secretary-General, Kim Hounn Kao; pose during a group photo at the 32nd Asean Economic Ministers' Retreat in Manila, Philippines, yesterday. (Reuters)

# Asean urges immediate halt to Middle East war

Reuters  
Manila

Asean foreign and economic ministers yesterday called for an immediate halt to the war in the Middle East, and said the effects of surging oil prices and disrupted trade are already hitting Southeast Asia's economies.

Several members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) have begun rolling out measures to counter the economic impact, with governments moving quickly to conserve energy, stabilise domestic markets

and protect vulnerable sectors such as tourism.

"We expressed serious concern over the situation in the Middle East and its impacts in the region, and emphasised the importance of the immediate cessation of hostilities," Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Ma Theresa Lazaro told a press conference after a special meeting on the crisis, adding that Asean called on all parties to exercise the utmost self-restraint.

The Philippines, which is chairing Asean this year, convened the special meeting as concerns over the Iran conflict deepened. The ministers called

for global energy supply chains to be kept open and to activate regional mechanisms to mitigate the economic fallout.

Crude oil is trading near \$100 a barrel on worries about supplies, which have been heightened by the vow from Iran's new supreme leader to keep the Strait of Hormuz, the route for a fifth of global oil supply, closed.

"The escalating conflict has generated broader economic repercussions beyond the region, particularly through heightened volatility in global energy markets and disruption of key maritime and supply chain routes," the economic ministers of the

11-member bloc said in a statement after a separate meeting.

Lazaro said the Philippines, which is heavily dependent on imported fuel from the Middle East, was considering buying oil from Russia, but she did not elaborate.

The economic ministers warned that the region's exposure to global oil and LNG supply routes made it especially vulnerable to further shocks, adding that reinforcing supply chain resilience, accelerating renewable energy transitions and deepening regional cooperation would be essential to preserving economic stability.

## South Korea considering to boost coal, nuclear power

Reuters  
Seoul

South Korea is considering providing additional energy vouchers to subsidise vulnerable households if rising global fuel prices in the wake of the Middle East crisis push up electricity costs, the government said yesterday.

Asia's fourth-largest economy is also preparing to boost nuclear and coal-fired power generation in the event that oil prices remain high and liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplies are disrupted.

"The government will take all necessary measures to minimise the burden on the people, such as stabilising energy supply and demand, price management, and supporting people vulnerable (to rising energy costs)," Industry Minister Kim Jung-kwan said yesterday.

South Korea relies almost totally on imports for its energy, buying about 70% of its oil and 20% of its LNG from the Middle East, according to Korea International Trade Association data.

To reduce dependence on LNG, the Climate and Energy Ministry

said this week it would accelerate the restart of nuclear reactors under maintenance, with two units expected to come back online as soon as March and four more by mid-May.

It also said coal-fired power output could be flexibly increased during periods when the impact on air quality from fine dust was low, if LNG supply shortfalls materialised.

The government is considering expanding the current budget for energy vouchers for low-income and other vulnerable groups in a supplementary budget currently being drafted, a government official told Reuters.

South Korea already has in place last year's energy voucher budget of about 500 billion won (\$334.32 million), valid through May, and another roughly 500 billion won in this year's energy voucher budget.

The government will monitor the funds and consider additional support, the official said.

South Korea began capping domestic fuel prices at a maximum wholesale price for gasoline at 1,724 won (\$1.15) per litre yesterday to combat the rise in energy costs.

## S Korea says US vice-president welcomes Seoul's investment bill

South Korean Prime Minister Kim Min-seok met US Vice-President JD Vance in Washington on Thursday, where the two discussed the passage of a special bill enabling Seoul to implement a \$350bn investment pledge in the US, Kim's office said yesterday.

In a meeting at the White House, Kim told Vance the bill's approval in Seoul's parliament earlier in the day demonstrated the government's strong commitment to carrying out the investment agreement reached between the countries' leaders.

South Korea's National Assembly passed the legislation on Thursday, clearing the way for the country to move ahead with the pledge under a bilat-

eral trade arrangement.

According to a press release from Kim's office, Vance welcomed the bill's passage, saying it established the legal conditions needed to implement the investment deal, and called for continued close communication between the governments on the issue.

Kim said he hoped the law would help South Korean investment contribute to US manufacturing and job creation, while laying the foundation for broader co-operation.

He also said the passage provided momentum to accelerate implementation of agreements in security-related sectors, including nuclear-powered submarines, nuclear energy and shipbuilding. (Reuters)

## Cambodia approves draft law targeting cyberscammers

AFP  
Phnom Penh

Cambodia's government approved a draft law yesterday that will hand down harsh sentences against fraudsters running cyberscam operations, a minister told AFP.

Cambodia has emerged as a hotspot for crime syndicates running a multibillion-dollar fraud industry that sees scammers lure internet users globally into fake romantic relationships and cryptocurrency investments.

Largely concentrated in Southeast Asia, the global cyberscam industry has reached "industrial proportions", with estimates of its annual revenues as high as \$64bn, according to the

UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

Some of the hundreds of thousands of people carrying out scams in the region are trafficked and held against their will, while others work voluntarily.

The draft law — which aims to stamp out transnational cyberscam operations — was approved during a cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Hun Manet, Information Minister Neth Pheaktra told AFP.

He said the draft bill, which will be sent to parliament soon for approval, would "eliminate online scams from Cambodian territory".

Lawmakers from the ruling party dominate both houses of parliament, so the draft law is expected to pass easily.

"Cambodia is not a paradise or a safe haven for criminals," Neth Pheaktra said, adding that the gov-

ernment's crackdown on scammers will continue.

Ringleaders of cyberscam centres will face between five and 10 year imprisonment and a fine of up to 1bn riels (\$245,996) under the new law.

They will face 10-20 years and a fine of up to 2bn riels (\$491,992) if their operations are found to involve violence, torture, confinement, human trafficking, or forced labour, according to the draft law seen by AFP.

Cyberscam bosses will face 15-30 years or life imprisonment if their activities lead to one or more deaths, the draft law said.

For lower-level fraudsters, cyberscamming is punishable by 5 to 10 years in prison and a fine of up to 1bn riels if it is committed by an organised group and

with many victims, it said.

Last month, Hun Manet told AFP in a rare interview that scam centres were destroying his country's economy and giving the nation a bad name, vowing to "clean this out".

A 2024 report by the US Institute of Peace estimated the return on cyberscamming in Cambodia to exceed \$12.5bn annually — half the country's formal GDP — but Hun Manet denied the country was dependent on scams.

Chhay Sinarith, senior minister on the government's anti-cyberscam commission, told AFP this week that his country hoped to close all online scam centres by the end of April.

Since a government crackdown began in July, authorities have shut down around 250 scam



A general view shows seized equipment confiscated from cyberscam operation centres at the Commissariat of Phnom Penh Municipal Police in Phnom Penh on Wednesday. (AFP)

sites and 91 casinos, he said.

He added that more than 200,000 people have fled scam sites and left Cambodia, and that the country has deported around 10,000 foreign nationals.

The law enforcement push, which analysts have criticised as window-dressing, nabbed its biggest player with the January arrest of Chinese-born tycoon Chen Zhi, who was extradited to China.

## India tells LPG users to switch to piped gas wherever possible

Reuters  
New Delhi

India has asked liquefied petroleum gas consumers to avoid panic buying of LPG cylinders and shift to piped natural gas where possible, oil ministry official Sujata Sharma said yesterday.

India's crude oil, LPG, and liquefied natural gas supplies have been disrupted due to global shipping constraints after the US-Israeli war with Iran halted traffic through the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

"LPG is an issue of concern," said Sharma, a joint secretary in the federal oil ministry, adding the government is cracking down on black marketing and hoarding of LPG cylinders in co-ordination with states.

About 333mn households use LPG cylinders, and more than 150mn get gas supplies through pipelines. Sharma said about six mn LPG-consuming households could easily switch to piped gas use.

"We request them to avail piped gas connection to ease pressure on LPG," she said.

She also said that commercial and industrial consumers in major urban cities facing LPG short-

ages should contact their local city gas distribution company to arrange a piped gas connection.

India consumed 33.15mn metric tonnes of cooking gas last year, with imports accounting for about 60% of demand. About 90% of those imports came from the Middle East.

Panic buying had pushed daily LPG booking requests to about 7.6mn as of Thursday from around 5.5mn on March 1, with most bookings made online, Sharma said.

India has asked refiners to boost LPG production. Domestic LPG production has risen by 30% since March 5, she said.

The government has prioritised LPG supplies for households, followed by hospitals and educational institutions, while allowing commercial users to use alternative fuels such as biomass, coal and fuel oil.

India has asked Coal India, the country's top coal producer, to make coal available to small and medium enterprises and the hospitality sector, including restaurants and hotels, Sharma said.

To overcome the shortage, Indian ports are giving priority berthing to LPG carriers, said Rajesh Kumar Sinha, special secretary at the ministry of shipping.

# Sri Lanka to repatriate remains of 84 Iranians killed in US attack

Reuters  
Colombo

The bodies of 84 Iranian sailors killed in a US submarine attack on a warship off Sri Lanka's coast last week will be repatriated on a plane that an Indian source said will also stop in India to take home crew members from another ship.

Iranian warship IRIS Dena was sunk by a torpedo from a US submarine on March 4 while it was returning from a naval exercise in India amid the US-Israeli war on Iran.

Two other ships that also participated in the exercises sought shelter: the IRIS Lavan, which docked in India, and the IRIS Booshehr which docked in Sri Lanka.

A Sri Lankan court ordered this week that the bodies of the sailors killed in the attack, stored in a morgue in the southern port city of Galle's National Hospital, be handed over to the embassy of Iran.

The bodies will be repatriated on Friday by a special flight departing from Mattala International Airport in the southern part of the Indian Ocean island nation, Sri Lankan media reported, citing the Sri Lankan defence ministry.

"Arrangements are being made to transport the bodies of the Iranian crew from the hospital to the Mattala airport," a source in the Iranian embassy in Colombo told Reuters, without elaborating on when the flight would leave.

The bodies were later driven by truck through the city, escorted by a police vehicle.

Sri Lanka's health, foreign, and defence ministries did not respond to calls from Reuters seeking comment. The Sri Lankan navy said it was not involved in the trans-



Trucks carry bodies of Iranian sailors, who died following a submarine attack on Iranian military ship, IRIS Dena, off the coast of Sri Lanka, to an airport, in Galle, yesterday. (Reuters)

port and repatriation efforts.

An Indian official said that after the plane departs Sri Lanka carrying the bodies, India would allow it to land in India to pick up some of the 183 sailors from the IRIS Lavan, as well as some Iranian tourists stranded in India.

India's foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The source said it was not clear when the plane would land in India or take off.

Thirty-two survivors of the sunken ship are in Sri Lanka, as well as 208 crew members from the IRIS Booshehr.

The Sri Lankan foreign ministry is in touch with the Iranian embassy in Colombo about the crew, which in turn is consulting Tehran, the defence ministry had said.

Reuters reported last week that Washington was pressing Colombo to not repatriate the survivors from the two vessels.

## Indian PM unveils projects ahead of state elections

AFP  
New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Assam yesterday, announcing multi-billion-dollar investments as part of a tour of states heading into elections, including the key political battleground of West Bengal.

The Hindu nationalist leader is set to launch infrastructure projects in Assam — including land holdings to tea plantation workers, a dam project and a major train and road corridor — worth over \$5bn.

The northeastern state of about 32mn people is controlled by his right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Today, Modi will visit neighbouring West Bengal, a state of 105mn people led by his political rival Mamata Banerjee, of the All India Trinamool Congress party.

During the visit, he is expected to inaugurate "road infrastructure, railways, port and shipping"

projects worth roughly \$2bn, which his office says are aimed at "accelerating economic growth".

State elections this year will be held in the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, both under opposition parties, as well as the smaller coastal territory of Puducherry. Of these regions, only Assam is currently under full BJP control.

The Election Commission is expected to announce polling dates later this month, with voting widely anticipated to take place in April and May.

Modi visited Tamil Nadu earlier in March, a south-eastern state with some 72mn people, where he unveiled investments of more than \$600mn, including in a petroleum-related manufacturing project, roads and railways. He also visited Kerala, with around 33mn people, where he unveiled a \$1bn worth of projects, as well as Puducherry. Past elections in West Bengal and Kerala have seen violent political clashes in the run up to polls.

## Airlines seek government support during Iran crisis

Reuters  
New Delhi

India's biggest airline IndiGo is asking the government to cut fuel taxes and, along with rival Air India, pressing New Delhi to get private airports to lower some charges, three sources told Reuters, as conflict in the Middle East adds to the carriers' financial pain. IndiGo and Air India are facing a double whammy as the Iran war makes it difficult for carriers to use Middle East airspace at a time when Indian airlines are already banned from Pakistan's airspace due to diplomatic tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad.

That has left the two carriers facing high-

er costs on their international network as they are forced to take longer routes, with IndiGo flying to the UK via Africa and Air India adding a stop on some flights to North America.

The airlines are lobbying the Indian government to provide financial relief, specifically related to aviation-related taxes and charges, said the three sources, all of whom are familiar with the matter.

IndiGo is seeking tax relief on aviation turbine fuel, which makes up 30-40% of an airline's expenses but attracts a federal tax of 11% and additional state levies that can be as high as 29%, said two of the sources.

IndiGo, Air India and India's civil aviation ministry did not respond to requests for comment. IndiGo had a domestic market

share of 63.6% in January, while Air India Group controlled 26.5%.

IndiGo and Air India also sought the rationalisation of some charges at privately-owned airports, like fees levied on passengers, arguing they were higher in some cases than at state-run airports and must be reduced, said the sources.

The country's two biggest international carriers did not operate 64% of their 1,230 scheduled flights to the Middle East, Europe and North America from February 28, when the US and Israel launched their campaign against Iran, to March 9, Cirium data shows.

Air India has also asked the Indian government to reduce local taxes on premium economy tickets to just 5% from 18%, said one of the sources.

## UK says allies should keep pressure on Russia after US eases sanctions

Britain and its partners should maintain collective pressure on Russia through sanctions, a Downing Street spokesperson said yesterday, joining a chorus of European criticism of the US after Washington eased sanctions on Russian oil. "It's obviously a decision for the US, but our position is clear. All partners should maintain pressure on Russia and its war chest," the spokesperson for Prime Minister Keir Starmer told reporters. The US has issued a 30-day waiver for countries to buy sanctioned Russian oil and petroleum products stranded at sea, in order to stabilise global energy markets roiled by the Iran war.

But European allies criticised the move, which risks complicating Western efforts to deprive Russia of revenue for the war in Ukraine.

The spokesperson said that Western sanctions had deprived the Russian state of at least \$450 billion since the start of the war in Ukraine, adding "our sanctions are working". (Reuters)

## Friday prayers at Nakhoda mosque



Men offer prayers along a street outside Nakhoda mosque during Jumat-ul-Vida, the last Friday of the holy fasting month of Ramadan, in Kolkata, yesterday. (Reuters)

## Nepal sells half-filled gas canisters due to ME war

AFP  
Mumbai

Nepal has started selling half-filled cooking gas cylinders to curb hoarding and panic buying, officials said yesterday, following import disruptions caused by the Middle East conflict.

The landlocked Himalayan nation of 30mn relies almost entirely on India for its fossil fuel needs.

About 90% of India's liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) passes through the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic chokepoint where maritime traffic has largely stalled.

As supplies tighten, New Delhi has prioritised households, transport, and other essential sectors such as hospitals.

Nepal, however, said it still has

sufficient gas but has reduced cylinder volumes to stretch the available supply.

"A decision was made to begin selling half-filled cylinders," government's Nepal Oil Corp spokesman Manoj Kumar Thakur told AFP. "Our supply remains intact but the war in the Middle East, and news of shortages, has caused resourceful consumers to buy more than they need," he added.

"This has meant that people who only have a single cylinder in their homes are not getting to buy. This way, our supply will reach more households."

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he spoke with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on Thursday, emphasising that "unhindered transit of goods and energy" remains a top priority for New Delhi.

## White House 'balancing act' for Irish PM Martin's annual US trip

AFP  
Dublin

Ireland's prime minister Micheal Martin headed to the US yesterday for an annual St Patrick's Day trip under pressure to talk tough to US President Donald Trump amid the Iran war.

Cultural and trade meetings dominate the four-day agenda which begins today in Philadelphia, but attention will focus on an Oval Office one-on-one with Trump on Tuesday.

Last year's encounter came just days after Trump's infamous White House slanging-match with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

A fragile ceasefire in Gaza and looming US trade tariffs added to the nerves then for the usually calm Irish veteran leader. This time the US-Israel war in Iran will loom large.

With conflict raging in the Middle East, the stakes ahead of the 65-year-old centrist Martin's pow-wow with Trump appear even higher this year. Apart from historical ties, there are tight links between the two countries. A host of US tech and pharma giants have their European headquarters in the Emerald Isle.

Three American titans — Apple, Microsoft, and drug maker Eli Lilly — contributed an estimated half of Ireland's corporate tax take in 2024.

The taoiseach, or prime minister, faces another "balancing act" said Gail McElroy, a po-

litical scientist at Trinity College Dublin.

"Ireland relies heavily on US investment, yet we are also a militarily neutral country that champions the rule of international law," McElroy told AFP. "Many in the Irish government view (the Middle East conflict) with deep unease," she said.

Some government critics at home have urged Martin not to meet Trump, or at the very least to speak out over the Middle East conflict.

Last weekend Irish President Catherine Connolly called the attacks on Iran a "deliberate assault on international law".

The 68-year-old, a long-time critic of the US, has kept a low profile since taking over the mostly ceremonial role in November.



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer is greeted by his Irish counterpart Micheal Martin (right) ahead of a plenary session at Fota house in Cork, Ireland, yesterday, as part of a two-day UK-Ireland summit. (AFP)

**CHAIRMAN**

Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Attiyah

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka

**Deputy Managing Editor**

Kamran Rehmat

- ✉ P.O.Box 2888, Doha, Qatar
- ✉ editor@gulf-times.com
- ☎ 44350478 (News),
- ☎ 44466404 (Sport),
- ☎ 44466636 (Home delivery)
- ☎ 44350474
- 📘 facebook.com/gulftimes
- ✉ twitter.com/gulftimes\_Qatar
- 📷 instagram.com/gulftimes
- 📺 youtube.com/GulftimesVideos

**GULF TIMES**

# Who might the US be talking to in Cuba?

US President Donald Trump has said repeatedly the United States is in talks with high-level Cuban representatives, and that Cuba is eager to reach a deal to defuse tensions between the two neighbours that have deepened the island's economic crisis. The Cuban government has denied any official talks are under way, but has yet to explicitly deny press reports that US officials were in talks with Raul Guillermo Rodriguez Castro, the grandson of former Cuban President Raul Castro, who is 94 and still wields great influence.

If talks are taking place, they come at a time when Washington has tightened its economic sanctions on Cuba by imposing a near-total oil blockade, and after the US captured Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro on January 3, removing a crucial Cuban ally from power.

Raul Castro fought alongside his older brother Fidel in the revolution that toppled a US ally in 1959 and served as his brother's loyal defence minister for decades. He ascended to the presidency, first on an interim basis when Fidel got sick in 2006, then took over definitively when Fidel retired in 2008. With Fidel's death in 2016, Raul assumed the mantle as the single unifying leader among those loyal to the Cuban revolution. He still wields influence even after stepping down as president in 2018 and as leader of the Communist Party in 2021, since then carrying the honorific title army general.

## The Trump administration has been having secret, high-level conversations with several people in Raul Castro's inner circle

Known as "El Cangrejo" or "The Crab," because of his hand, Rodriguez Castro, 41, is widely seen as one of his grandfather's closest confidants. As former bodyguard to Raul Castro, he was at his grandfather's side, sometimes dressed in the military uniform of the Interior Ministry, throughout Raul Castro's presidency. He has been reported to hold the rank of lieutenant colonel.

The Cuban government did not immediately respond to a query about Rodriguez Castro's biography or possible role in negotiations. Axios, citing three unnamed sources, reported on February 18 that Rodriguez Castro was in secret talks with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. "The Miami Herald," citing unnamed sources, reported on February 26 that officials close to Rubio met with Rodriguez Castro on the sidelines of a regional Caribbean Community conference in St Kitts and Nevis.

The Trump administration has been having secret, high-level conversations with several people in Raul Castro's inner circle, similar to the discussions held in Venezuela before the US captured Maduro in a military raid earlier this year, US Representative Mario Diaz-Balart told the "Miami Herald".

Rodriguez Castro is the son of Raul's daughter Deborah Castro Espin and the late General Luis Alberto Rodriguez Lopez-Calleja, who was head of the military business conglomerate GAESA. During Raul Castro's presidency, GAESA assumed control of the state's most important businesses including hotels, banking, logistics and retail. Rodriguez Lopez-Calleja died of a heart attack in 2022 at age 62. Media reports suggest Rodriguez Castro may have taken a role in his late father's company. That lineage places Rodriguez Castro at the intersection of Cuba's political leadership and its most powerful economic institution, making him a potentially significant go-between for Washington.

Rodriguez Castro has never spoken publicly nor given interviews. If "El Cangrejo" is acting as a back-channel connection between Havana and Washington, he would be playing a similar role to that of his uncle and Raul Castro's son, Alejandro Castro Espin, who conducted then-secret negotiations marking a major shift by Washington toward Cuba during Barack Obama's presidency. — Reuters

**To Advertise**

✉ gtadv@gulf-times.com

**Display**

☎ 44466621  
☎ 44418811

**Classified**

☎ 44466609 ☎ 44418811  
☎ gtcad@gulf-times.com

**Subscription**

✉ circulation@gulf-times.com

© 2026 Gulf Times. All rights reserved

## French connection



France's President Emmanuel Macron welcomes Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky before a meeting at The Elysee Presidential Palace in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

# Low layoffs anchoring US labour market; conflict poses a threat

By Lucia Mutikani  
Reuters

The number of Americans filing new applications for unemployment benefits fell last week, suggesting labour market conditions remained stable even after the economy shed jobs in February, but the US-Israeli war against Iran poses a downside risk. For now, the low level of layoffs evident in the report from the Labour Department on Thursday should give the Federal Reserve room to keep interest rates unchanged for some time as the conflict in the Middle East drives up oil prices and threatens to fan domestic inflation, economists said. The war has raised oil prices by at least 20% since it started.

"The low and steady level of initial jobless claims suggests the big drop in nonfarm payrolls in February was a blip, not the start of a trend," said Michael Pearce, chief US economist at Oxford Economics. "We think the evidence is consistent with labour market conditions stabilising before the fallout of the Iran war hits the economy." Initial claims for state unemployment benefits slipped 1,000 to a seasonally adjusted 213,000 for the week ended March 7. Economists polled by Reuters had forecast 215,000 claims for the latest week. Claims have been tugged in a 199,000-232,000 range this year amid low layoffs. The government reported last week that nonfarm payrolls decreased by 92,000 jobs in February, the sixth decline since January 2025 and the second largest.

The drop was blamed on harsh winter weather, a strike by healthcare workers and payback following outsized payroll gains in January, as well as a general hesitancy by businesses to increase headcount because of uncertainty from import tariffs and integration of artificial intelligence into some work roles. The US Supreme Court struck down President Donald Trump's sweeping tariffs, which he pursued under a law meant for use in national emergencies. But Trump responded to the ruling by imposing a 10% global tariff, which he said would rise to 15%. The Trump administration said it was launching two trade investigations into excess industrial capacity in 16 major trading partners and into forced labour.

Soaring oil prices and stock market volatility would weigh on consumer spending and undercut demand for workers, economists warned. The US central bank was expected to keep its benchmark overnight interest rate unchanged in the 3.50%-3.75% range next

## Soaring oil prices and stock market volatility would weigh on consumer spending and undercut demand for workers, warn economists



A US Air Force B-1 Lancer bombers carrying Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM) are prepared for take off, from RAF Fairford in south-west England. Fairford is one of two bases, along with the Diego Garcia facility in the Indian Ocean, that the UK has given the US permission to use for "specific defensive operations into Iran" to destroy Iranian missiles at source. (AFP)

Wednesday. Economists see the window for rate cuts closing, with financial markets anticipating a single reduction this year in September. Stocks on Wall Street fell as oil prices surged to nearly \$100 a barrel.

The dollar advanced against a basket of currencies. US Treasury yields rose. The number of people receiving unemployment benefits after an initial week of aid, a proxy for hiring, dropped 21,000 to a seasonally adjusted 1.850mn during the week ended February 28, the claims report showed. The so-called continuing claims could be declining as some people exhaust their eligibility, limited to 26 weeks in most states.

Continuing claims also do not include recent college graduates, who are experiencing long spells of unemployment, because they have limited or no work history, disqualifying them from claiming jobless benefits. The unemployment rate increased to 4.4% in February from 4.3% in January.

### SINGLE-FAMILY HOUSING STARTS FALL

Other news on the US economy was mixed, with the housing market still mired in weakness and the trade deficit contracting in January. Single-family housing starts, which account for the bulk of homebuilding, dropped 2.8% to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 935,000 units, the Commerce Department's Census Bureau said in a separate report.

The report was delayed by last year's shutdown of the federal government. The drop in homebuilding likely reflected inclement weather as single-family

housing starts tumbled 33.3% in the Northeast and fell 4.6% in the South, among the areas slammed by heavy snow and frigid temperatures in January.

Single-family starts dropped 6.5% year-on-year.

Homebuilding has been hampered by tariffs, including on lumber and vanity cabinets, as well as worker shortages amid an immigration crackdown and higher mortgage rates. Mortgage rates mostly fell this year, but have recently been rising in tandem with Treasury yields. Homebuilder sentiment is depressed and a glut of unsold new homes remains, combining with slowing house price inflation to discourage builders from ramping up construction.

Single-family building permits fell 0.9% to a rate of 873,000 units in January. They decreased 11.6% from a year ago. "We continue to expect that the already-elevated supply of new homes for sale and poor affordability will limit the upside new construction activity this year," said Veronica Clark, an economist at Citigroup. "Residential investment in GDP is unlikely to be a substantial contributor to growth." Residential investment, which includes homebuilding, has contracted for four straight quarters. Trade could add to gross domestic product growth this quarter. The trade gap contracted 25.3% to \$54.5bn in January, the Bureau of Economic Analysis and Census Bureau said in a third report. Tariffs have caused extreme volatility in the trade data.

Trump has defended the tariffs as necessary to address trade imbalances and protect US industries. But a manufacturing rebirth remains elusive, with

100,000 factory jobs lost since January 2025. The goods trade deficit with China was little changed at \$12.5bn in January, but the gap with the European Union narrowed \$5.0bn to \$6.1bn.

Overall exports jumped 5.5% to an all-time high of \$302.1bn in January. The increase was the largest since October 2021. Goods exports soared 8.1% to \$195.5bn, mostly boosted by nonmonetary gold and other precious metals. Capital goods exports increased \$5.4bn to an all-time high, driven by computers, civilian aircraft and computer accessories. Exports of other goods were the highest on record.

But consumer goods exports decreased \$2.8bn to the lowest level since October 2022, pulled down by pharmaceutical preparations. Imports fell 0.7% to \$356.6bn. Goods imports slipped 1.0% to \$277.3bn, dragged down by a \$3.3bn decrease in consumer goods, mostly pharmaceutical preparations.

Imports of automotive vehicles, parts and engines fell as did those of industrial supplies and materials amid a decline in nonmonetary gold. But capital goods imports jumped \$3.4bn to a record high, driven by computers and telecommunications equipment, likely linked to AI and data-center construction.

The goods trade deficit narrowed 17.6% to \$81.8bn in January. Trade made a negligible contribution to the economy's 1.4% annualised growth pace in the October-December quarter. "In normal times, these reports might have been one or two filler pieces in the overall economic picture jigsaw puzzle but are of little significance in the current climate," said John Ryding, chief economic advisor at Brean Capital.

## How Qatar demonstrated a model of crisis leadership

From Page 1

Citizens and residents were encouraged to report any irregularities, strengthening co-operation between consumers and regulatory authorities.

Yet the effectiveness of any national response ultimately depends on public behaviour. In this case, community awareness and solidarity played a decisive role. Residents across the country responded with calm, responsibility, and a strong sense of collective support for state institutions.

The timing of the crisis during the holy month of Ramadan added another layer of unity and reflection. Prayers for the safety of Qatar and the wider Gulf region became common in mosques and homes, while appreciation for members of the armed forces and security services who worked to protect the country grew.

Observers note that this social cohesion helped transform what could have been a moment of widespread anxiety into one of shared resilience.

For al-Hajri, the lesson goes beyond the immediate events. She believes Qatar's experience highlights the broader importance of trust between governments and the communities they serve. "The most prominent truth remains that a nation's strength is not measured solely by its military or economic capabilities, but also by its ability to protect its people and build trust between the state and society," she said.

During a period that tested regional stability, Qatar's coordinated response, combining transparency, institutional co-operation, and public awareness, clearly demonstrated how leadership and community confidence can work together to navigate uncertainty.

## 'Russia oil waiver won't help end war'

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday that a US decision to ease sanctions on Russian oil was not helping to end the conflict in Ukraine as he sought reassurances of support in Paris amid the war in the Middle East. Oil prices have surged since the US and Israel launched strikes on Iran, indirectly benefiting Russia, and Kyiv is concerned that the war is diverting attention from Ukraine. "There is nothing good for Ukraine in the war in the Middle East. It's understandable that the attention of the world is moving to Middle East," he told students at the Sciences Po university in Paris. The US said on Thursday it would temporarily waive sanctions on Russian oil at sea.

"This single easing by the US could provide Russia with around \$10bn for the war. It certainly does not help (to achieve) peace," Zelensky

told a joint news conference with French President Emmanuel Macron. The Iran conflict has also raised questions about the immediate supply of weapons — notably air defences — from Western partners to Ukraine, as Gulf Arab states draw down their own air-defence stocks to repel daily attacks from Tehran. Zelensky said this will exacerbate Ukraine's acute shortage of air defence missiles. This week he said Gulf states had used more PAC-3 Patriot air defence missiles against Iranian strikes in a few days than Kyiv had received from Washington over four years. Zelensky has not specified the source of his figures. The European Union has yet to agree on a proposed 90bn euro loan that would, in part, provide Kyiv with funding to purchase weapons. Ukraine hopes the loan will be in place by mid-April. (Reuters)

## Russia says it could sell power to Kyiv from Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant

Reuters  
Moscow

Russia intends to control the relaunch and operation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant when it is safe to do so but it would be willing to discuss selling electricity to Ukraine, the head of its state nuclear corporation said yesterday.

The comments by Rosatom chief Alexei Likhachev highlighted the gulf between Moscow and Kyiv on the status of the plant, which Russian forces captured in the first weeks of the war in 2022.

The fate of the plant in southern Ukraine is one of the key points at issue in peace talks. US President Donald Trump has proposed American ownership or management of Ukrainian nuclear plants, including Zaporizhzhia.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in December that the US had proposed joint trilateral operation of the plant, with an American chief manager. He said Kyiv was proposing Ukrainian-US use of the plant, with the US determining how to use 50% of the energy produced.

The plant's six reactors are currently shut down and being kept cool to ensure safety, but Russia's Likhachev said preparations were being made to restart them when security conditions allowed.

He said Russia had issued operating licences for two of the units, a third was coming soon, and licences for the rest were also being prepared.

"We are ready to restart work,

the necessary equipment is ready," Likhachev told reporters after a meeting with Rafael Grossi, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"As soon as the opportunity arises, we will begin starting up and operating the station under IAEA supervision," he said.

Likhachev described a scenario in which Rosatom would operate the plant but "commercial aspects can be viewed multilaterally".

"Under certain conditions there could be discussion of supplying electricity, including to Ukraine," he added.

With 6 gigawatts of capacity, the plant could also be used to power data centres, Likhachev said. "Here, we may well have new partners...we are talking about the US, among others."

# Allies reaffirm commitment to defend the High North

AFP  
Bardufoss, Norway

German, Canadian and Norwegian leaders yesterday reaffirmed their commitment to Arctic security, which has come under strain, while visiting troops at a large Nato exercise.

"We are fully prepared, individually and collectively, to defend the Arctic and the High North," Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney told a press conference in Bardufoss, a military town located above the Arctic Circle where Nato's Cold Response exercise is taking place.

"What this operation is about, this training exercise, is to further build those capabilities, against Russia, against any external threat," he said alongside German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere.

The High North has long been shielded by the concept of "Arctic exceptionalism" — the notion that the region had its own set of unwritten rules of co-operation which were immune to geopolitical rivalries.

But regional dynamics between Russia and the West have deteriorated since the start of the war in Ukraine and due to US President Donald Trump's threats to take over Greenland.

"To say that a country can take land from another country is unacceptable," Stoere stressed.

Asked whether they trusted the US to honour commitments to guarantee security in the High North, the three leaders, after a brief muffled laugh, said they did.

Stoere noted that security in the Arctic "is also homeland security for the United States".

"We believe that it is self-interest," he said. Around 25,000 troops from 14 countries including the US are taking part in the Cold Response exercise in Norway, held every two years and aimed at training together in extreme winter conditions.

This year's gathering has been impacted by the war in the Middle East, with France redirecting its aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to the eastern Mediterranean.

"We are ready to defend... what we are call-



From left: German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere and Canadian Prime Minister, Mark Carney hold a press conference during the Nato Cold Response military exercise near Bardufoss, in Arctic Norway, yesterday. (Reuters)

ing the High North," Merz told reporters.

"We will... not allow Moscow to test Nato on its eastern flank and here in the north," the German head of government said earlier in the day during a visit to the rocket launch site Andoya Space.

Nato chief Mark Rutte was also scheduled to visit Cold Response on March 18.

Faced with Nato's manoeuvres in its vicinity, Russia has asserted its presence.

The Norwegian military said Wednesday it had scrambled F-35 fighter jets on two consecutive days this week to intercept Russian military aircraft in international airspace north of Norway.

"There is nothing unusual or dramatic about such Russian flights, and Russia has the right to conduct these missions," the military said.

"The Russian flights are most likely intended to gather situational awareness of allied activity in connection with Cold Response 2026," it added.

Moscow has also announced that it would be conducting missile tests near the Norwe-

gian waters of the Barents Sea, as it has done during previous exercises.

Warming three to four times faster than the planet, the Arctic is attracting increasing interest as the melting sea ice opens up greater access to resources — such as oil and gas, minerals and fish — as well as new shipping routes.

During their visit to Andoya Space, where German group Isar Aerospace hopes soon to launch another of its Spectrum rockets, Merz and Stoere announced stronger co-operation between the two countries in the space sector.

A working group will explore a bilateral partnership in areas where Europe is seeking to strengthen its autonomy, such as space-based surveillance, satellite communications and rocket launches.

"We have relied on other nations for far too long. Now it's Europe's moment," Merz said.

"Norwegian and German space industries complement each other. Germany has a broad industrial base, Norway has technology and established research communities, and we have important geography," Stoere said.

## Pakistani air strikes cause civilian casualties in Kabul, Taliban say

Reuters  
Kabul

Pakistan bombed the fuel depot of private airline Kam Air near Afghanistan's Kandahar airport, the ruling Taliban said yesterday, stepping up the neighbours' worst conflict in years, despite China's efforts to mediate.

The overnight strikes also hit residential areas in Kabul, killing four people and wounding more than a dozen. In eastern Nangarhar province late yesterday,

a mortar shell that Afghan officials said was fired by Pakistan hit a house in the Momandara district, killing a woman and a child, a provincial spokesperson said.

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said the air strikes in Kabul had killed at least four civilians and injured 14 in the Pul-e-Charkhi area, including women and children.

Pakistan's Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said in a post on X that the strikes were part of the ongoing operation dubbed "Ghazb lil Haq," targeting what it

described as militant camps and "terrorist support infrastructure" in Kabul, Paktia and Kandahar.

Dozens of sites were struck across Afghanistan, he added, denying that "any civilian population or infrastructure" had been targeted.

The strikes on the depot, which Afghan administration spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said supplies fuel to civilian airlines and UN aircraft, threaten to spark further hostilities between two countries that neighbour Iran.

## Poland presses on with EU defence plan despite president's veto

Reuters  
Warsaw

Poland's government yesterday pushed ahead with a European Union defence-funding programme despite the president vetoing the scheme, amid a row over debt and the role Brussels should play in the security of the deeply divided country.

Pro-European Prime Minister Donald Tusk's government says the EU's Security Action for Europe (SAFE) scheme provides cheap financing and is essential to Poland's security in the face of what it views as a rising threat from Russia.

However, opposition-backed President Karol Nawrocki on

Thursday vetoed a bill intended to implement SAFE in Poland, saying the scheme would leave future generations with large debts and allows the EU to infringe on Poland's sovereignty.

The bill would have created a mechanism to spend the 43.7bn euros (\$50 billion) in EU loans Poland was entitled to under the programme.

"Given the unprecedented and rapid deterioration of security in Europe, Poland must urgently and significantly increase its military investments," said a government resolution backing the scheme yesterday, which authorised ministers to sign the loan agreements despite the veto.

The head of the president's

chancellery Zbigniew Bogucki accused the government of circumventing the law.

Government ministers, meanwhile, lashed out at Nawrocki's veto, saying it would delay vital defence investment.

Warsaw is the biggest beneficiary of SAFE but nationalist opposition party Law and Justice (PiS) has labelled it a German plot to meddle in Polish affairs, which would saddle the country with debt and limit its flexibility on arms purchases.

European Commission spokesperson Thomas Regnier said Brussels would not interfere in domestic debates, but that it remained committed to Poland's plan.

"We need Poland on board for European security," he said.

## Italy weighs options as damaged Russian LNG tanker drifts in the Mediterranean

Reuters  
Rome

Italian authorities are weighing how to deal with a Russian liquefied natural gas tanker left adrift in the Mediterranean after what Moscow described as a Ukrainian drone attack, sources said yesterday.

Russia's transport ministry said the Arctic Metagaz, carrying LNG from the Arctic port of Murmansk, was attacked last week by Ukrainian naval drones launched from the Libyan coast. Kyiv has not claimed responsibility.

Libya's maritime rescue agency initially said the tanker had sunk, but the vessel has remained afloat and is now drifting between Italy and Malta, around 30 nautical miles off the small Italian island of Linoza, the Italian navy said.

"The situation is under control. The ship is in international waters and the navy, a tugboat and an environmental response vessel are escorting it," said Filippo Mannino, mayor of Lampedusa, which includes Linoza.

Two Italian sources said it was still unclear how much LNG and fuel remained aboard the tanker. The 30 crew members were evacuated after

the attack, which the sources said occurred south of Malta.

One source said all options were being considered, but the preferred solution would be for the vessel's manager, Russia-based LLC SMP Techmanagement, to hire a specialised company to tow it to safety.

Italy does not want the tanker to dock at one of its ports, the source said, describing it as a "ticking time bomb filled with gas".

It added that the drone appeared to have struck the ship above the waterline. The hull was still holding, although photos showed a gaping hole on the port side, with the stern sitting lower in

the water than the rest of the ship.

A spokesperson for Italy's Civil Protection agency said the vessel was being monitored and was not heading towards Italian waters.

The boat got as close as 22 nautical miles to Malta's coast earlier this week, but now appeared to be drifting away, and was reported about 61 nautical miles offshore by Thursday.

Malta's transport authority warned other ships to keep at least five nautical miles away from the Arctic Metagaz at all times. Prime Minister Robert Abela said Malta's government was ready to act if necessary, without giving details.



A Russian LNG tanker, Arctic Metagaz, damaged earlier this month and currently adrift without crew, floats in international waters in the Mediterranean Sea between Malta and the Italian islands of Lampedusa and Linoza, yesterday. (Reuters)



## Qatar study highlights relationship between red meat intake, iron status among adults

By Joseph Varghese  
Staff Reporter

A new study conducted by Qatar University (QU) has shed light on the relationship between red meat intake, iron status, and metabolic health among adults in Qatar.

The study *Red Meat Consumption, Iron Status, and Cardiometabolic Risk in Qatari Adults* was conducted by a team of researchers from the QU and included principal investigator Prof Reema Tayyem, Dr Hana Mousa, Dr Nadine Abdel-Razzaq and Yasmeen Khial, a master's student from the Department of Human Nutrition of the QU's College of Health Sciences.

The research was conducted to better understand the health impacts of red meat consumption in the local population.

It was carried out in collaboration with the Qatar Biobank and supported by the Qatar Precision Health Institute and the QU.

The study highlights the importance of understanding how dietary habits influence blood health, particularly given that red meat is a major source

of haeme iron (also spelt heme; a highly bioavailable form of iron derived from animal-based foods), which is vital for red blood cell production and preventing anaemia.

However, excessive consumption of red meat may increase saturated fat and iron levels in the blood – factors linked to higher risks of cardiovascular and metabolic diseases.

The researchers analysed data from more than 13,700 Qatari participants – approximately 5,800 males and 8,000 females.

Participants were categorised into three groups based on their red meat intake: low consumers (once per month), moderate consumers (2-4 times per month), and high consumers (five times or more per month).

Blood analyses were conducted to assess iron biomarkers, cholesterol, glucose, and blood pressure.

The results revealed that high red meat consumption significantly enhances iron status among the Qatari population.

Frequent intake is associated with a marked increase in ferritin levels and a modest improvement in haemoglobin, particularly among males, who exhibit higher haemoglobin concentrations than females.

By contrast, females show age-related declines in ferritin despite higher consumption.

Total iron-binding capacity and serum iron appear to be largely unaffected by red meat intake, highlighting ferritin as the most reliable biomarker of iron status.

Notably, frequent consumption in males is linked to elevated cholesterol levels, whereas other metabolic parameters, such as glucose and triglycerides, show minimal dietary influence.

Vitamin D levels remain sufficient across all con-

sumption categories.

The researchers have concluded that moderate red meat intake (2-4 times per month) may help maintain healthy iron levels while avoiding adverse effects on cholesterol.

They recommend a balanced dietary approach that includes a variety of protein sources such as fish, poultry, and legumes to promote long-term metabolic health.

"Moderation is key," Prof Tayyem emphasised. "Red meat provides valuable nutrients like iron and protein, but it should be consumed in balance with other food sources. Our findings highlight the need for culturally tailored dietary guidelines that promote both nutritional adequacy and disease prevention."

Building on these findings, the research team plans to expand their study to include longitudinal data that track changes in participants' dietary patterns and health outcomes over time.

Future studies will also explore the genetic and lifestyle factors influencing the relationship between red meat consumption and cardiometabolic diseases in Qatar.



Red meat provides valuable nutrients like iron but it should be consumed in moderation.

## Eid shopping picks up as stores see rising footfall

By A Staff Reporter  
Doha

As Eid al-Fitr approaches, markets and shopping malls are seeing a noticeable increase in activity as shoppers prepare for the holidays, buying clothing, gifts, sweets, and food.

Shopping has been proceeding at a normal pace across the country despite the current circumstances, supported by the availability of goods, stable market conditions, and intensified monitoring efforts to ensure products remain accessible to consumers.

Families are traditionally keen to prepare for the festive occasion, which is closely tied to long-standing social customs.

Demand typically rises for clothing, perfume, and gifts, while stores selling sweets and nuts experience particularly strong sales during the days leading up to the holidays.

Grocery stores are also seeing higher demand for seasonal items such as dates, chocolates, and traditional sweets associated with Eid celebrations.

Several shoppers said that retail activity remains steady and that essential goods are widely available.

They noted that both food and non-food products are available in sufficient quantities, which helps reassure consumers as they complete their holiday preparations.

Shoppers also pointed to the wide range of options available in the market and the promotional offers launched by many re-

tailers during this period.

These discounts provide consumers with opportunities to purchase necessities at reasonable prices, particularly as demand tends to rise in the final days of the holy month.

Major shopping malls have continued to roll out seasonal promotions to attract customers during Eid.

Discounts cover a variety of products, including clothing, footwear, perfumes, accessories, and food items.

Retailers say that sales have begun to improve as the holiday draws closer.

According to a number of shop owners, consumers often prefer to finalise their purchases in the final days of Ramadan, leading to increased footfall in markets and malls.

Competitive promotional campaigns among stores are also contributing to stronger retail activity.

In the meantime, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) has confirmed that local markets are well stocked with consumer goods across various outlets, and that supply chains are operating normally thanks to ongoing co-ordination among authorities, suppliers, and retailers, helping maintain market stability and ensure the continuous availability of essential products.

Officials added that the ministry is



Shoppers browse clothing items at a retail store in a shopping mall as families prepare for Eid al-Fitr, with demand for garments and gifts rising in the final days of Ramadan.

closely monitoring the market movement and stock levels to ensure readiness for the surge in demand ahead of Eid, while verifying that sufficient quantities of goods are available in stores and warehouses.

Further, the concerned authorities have stepped up inspection campaigns across retail outlets nationwide to ensure clear price displays in stores and compliance with market regulations.

Authorities are also looking out for violations such as commercial fraud or price manipulation.

Alongside traditional shopping, online retail continues to serve as an alternative option for many consumers.

Numerous retailers now offer online



purchasing with home delivery services, giving shoppers greater flexibility to choose when and how to buy their holiday necessities.

## Alaraby 2 continues to present a variety of programmes as part of Ramadan schedule

Throughout the holy month, Alaraby 2 offers a varied lineup of programmes blending culture and entertainment, reflecting the richness and spirit of the Ramadan experience.

Leading the schedule is the daily cooking show *Sirr Al-Wasfa*, which marks the return of chef Lubna Alabed to the channel.

Airing exclusively on Alaraby 2, the programme features a selection of flavourful dishes with a distinctive Ramadan touch.

In each episode, Chef Lubna shares the secrets behind preparing both traditional and contemporary recipes that grace Iftar and Suhoor tables.

Designed to offer a simple and enjoyable cooking experience, the programme helps viewers prepare a variety of dishes with ease, making *Sirr Al-Wasfa* a daily companion for families as they prepare their Ramadan meals.

The channel also airs the

documentary series *Mudan Wa Ma'athin*, which takes viewers on a visual and spiritual journey through some of the world's most prominent Islamic cities.

Each episode highlights a different city through its historic mosques, towering minarets, and architectural landmarks, revealing the stories behind their construction and evolution over time, as well as their role in shaping the cultural and social identity of Muslim communities.

The series presents this exploration through engaging visuals and accessible insights suitable for a broad audience.

Meanwhile, the programme *Ramadan Fi Koul Makan* offers a window into the diversity of Ramadan traditions around the world.

The show explores how different communities observe the holy month across various cultures and countries, documenting the spiritual and family customs that define

Ramadan in those societies.

It also captures the vibrant atmosphere of streets and markets before Iftar.

It highlights some of the most popular Iftar and Suhoor dishes in each country, offering a journey that celebrates the rich cultural diversity of Ramadan shaped over centuries of traditions and customs.

Alaraby 2 programmes director Mohamed Osama said: "This year's schedule aims to provide balanced content that appeals to a wide range of viewers during the holy month."

He added that "the channel has focused on delivering programmes that reflect the spirit of Ramadan and the diversity of Islamic cultures through a mix of documentary, cultural, and entertainment programming, alongside daily shows that remain close to viewers' everyday lives."

In addition to Alaraby 2's satel-



Chef Lubna Alabed

lite broadcast, audiences can also watch the channel live and access episodes on demand through the Alaraby Plus application.

## Qatar sends 8th identical letter to UN, UNSC on Iran's aggression

Qatar has sent its eighth identical letter to United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, and the US's Permanent Representative to the UN and president of the UN Security Council (UNSC) for the month of March, Michael Waltz, regarding the latest developments of the Iranian aggression on its territory.

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 territory, stating that "the Ministry of Defence of the State of Qatar announced on Tuesday, March 10, 2026, that the State of Qatar was subjected to an attack on Tuesday afternoon with five ballistic missiles from the Islamic Republic of Iran, and that our armed forces successfully intercepted all five ballistic missiles without any casualties."

"The Ministry of Defence also announced on Wednesday, March 11, 2026, that the State of Qatar was subjected to an attack on Wednesday with nine ballistic missiles and a number of drones from the Islamic Republic of Iran, and that our armed forces successfully intercepted all the drones and eight ballistic missiles, with one missile falling in an uninhabited area."

The letter added that all damage and losses resulting from the attacks will be assessed.

The letter reiterated Qatar's strong condemnation of this attack and its full right to respond in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter, and 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 UNSC. – QNA

## Guiding the future: Structured career counselling gaining ground in Qatar

By Shaima Sherif  
Staff Reporter

As Qatar advances towards a knowledge-based economy, structured career counselling is emerging as a vital tool helping young people align education choices with national development goals and evolving labour market needs.

With emerging sectors such as technology, sustainability and entrepreneurship expanding across the country, experts say that informed career guidance is increasingly important to help students navigate opportunities and develop the skills needed for the future workforce.

At the forefront of this effort is the Qatar Career Development Centre (QCDC), founded by Qatar Foundation (QF), which works to support young people in making informed academic and professional decisions.

QCDC executive director Saad Abdulla al-Kharji said that the centre's mission is closely aligned with Qatar's long-term national development priorities.

"The QCDC is positioned around a straightforward national contribution: helping people, especially youth across Qatar's education tracks and stages, make informed education and career decisions that translate into stronger readiness and higher participation in a diversified economy," he said.



Saad al-Kharji

Career development, al-Kharji explained, must be approached as a collaborative ecosystem that connects education institutions, employers and policymakers.

"Career development should not operate in isolation from national priorities or real workplace demand," he added, noting that co-ordination between sectors ensures guidance remains responsive to evolving labour market needs.

A key component of modern career guidance is experiential learning.

Programmes such as "My Career – My Future" provide students with workplace exposure, enabling them to better understand professional environments before making long-term academic decisions.

"Students want to understand what these sectors actually look like day-to-day, which skills are required, and how their education choices translate into real opportunities," al-Kharji said.

The shift reflects a broader transfor-

mation in how career readiness is understood.

Beyond academic achievement, employers increasingly value transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability and problem-solving.

"High grades alone do not automatically translate into workplace readiness," al-Kharji said. "Employers are looking for graduates who can translate knowledge into action and adapt to changing expectations."

Alongside institutional efforts, students themselves are navigating the balance between personal interests and national workforce priorities.

For Aayra Khalid, a senior honour student at Qatar University, majoring in English linguistics, early guidance came not from formal counselling programmes but from teachers who recognised her academic strengths.

"I had always been stuck between journalism, media studies, international relations, and psychology," she said. "With the help of my teachers, English linguistics was highlighted as a field that could open doors across many of these areas."

Studying in Qatar's rapidly developing environment also shaped her professional outlook.

"Being in Qatar highlighted the importance of language, identity and communication in nation-building," Khalid said. "My aspirations evolved from a general



Aayra Khalid

interest in language studies to contributing to research that connects education, media and society."

She believes universities in Qatar provide strong support systems through advising services, career counselling and networking opportunities.

"The structural support is available and accessible, but students need to take the initiative to use it," she added.

For younger students, career awareness is beginning even earlier.

Safoora Sajid Patel, a Grade 12 student at MES Indian School who plans to pursue medicine and specialising in cardiology, said that counselling sessions and career workshops helped clarify the academic pathway required for her ambitions.

"Through counselling sessions and university guidance, I gained clarity about the entrance requirements and the commitment needed for a medical career," she said.

While career counselling has improved significantly in Qatar, Patel believes further exposure to global opportunities could help students make more informed choices.

"Students benefit greatly when they are exposed to a wide range of possibilities because it helps them make more confident decisions," she said.

Experts note that parents and teachers continue to play a crucial role in guiding young people's decisions.

Family expectations can motivate students to aim high, but aligning them with personal interests is important for long-term success.

Ultimately, early career awareness helps students understand how education translates into real opportunities.

"Early career awareness is not career pressure; it is career literacy," al-Kharji said. "It helps young people see education as a pathway that builds skills, values and work habits."

As Qatar continues investing in human capital and education reform, structured career guidance is expected to become an increasingly important pillar of the country's development.

"Career counselling shapes leaders by shaping decision-makers," al-Kharji said. "When young people learn how to understand themselves and interpret opportunities, they gain the confidence and judgement needed to build their future."