



Qatar Insurance Financial Results (FY 2025)

Gross Written Premiums (GWP)
9%
QAR 9.9B

Net Profit Before the Impact of Piller Two Taxes
19%
QAR 874M

Net Profit Profit attributable to QIC shareholders
9%
QAR 791M

Earnings Per Share:
10%
QAR 0.188

qic-group.com

GULF TIMES



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Egypt assures Amir of full support for Qatar

His Highness receives call from Sisi, ministerial visit

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani received yesterday a phone call from Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, in which the Egyptian leader reiterated his country's strong condemnation of the continuing attacks against Qatar.

Sisi reaffirmed Egypt's unwavering solidarity with Doha and pledged full support in safeguarding Qatar's security and sovereignty, while also expressing Cairo's readiness to extend all necessary forms of assistance.

The Egyptian president stressed the urgency of stepped-up efforts at this critical stage, calling for stronger joint Arab action to reinforce security and stability across the region.

The Amir welcomed Egypt's positions, underscoring Qatar's commitment to sustained coordination and dialogue on matters serving the shared interests of both nations and their peoples. The call also covered the latest regional developments amid the current escalation, as well as ongoing efforts to ease tensions, contain the crisis, and prevent the conflict from spreading further.

Earlier, the Amir had also received a verbal message from President Sisi on the same regional developments, conveyed in person by Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty, who visited His Highness the Amir at Lusail Palace. The minister opened the meeting by extending Sisi's warm personal greetings to the His Highness, wishing him good health and prosperity, and reaffirming Egypt's solidarity with Qatar.

His Highness the Amir, in turn, asked the minister to carry his greetings back to President Sisi, expressing appreciation for Egypt's consistent and supportive stance toward Qatar and its constructive role in bolstering regional stability.

Discussions during the meeting touched on the depth of fraternal ties between the two countries, avenues for further strengthening bilateral relations, and the broader regional situation in the wake of Iran's aggression against Qatar and neighbouring Arab states. The message also emphasised Cairo's

commitment to diplomatic solutions as the preferred path to preserving regional security. The meeting was attended by HE the Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani and HE the Chief of the Amiri Diwan Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Khulaifi.



The high-level exchanges between Cairo and Doha reflect a broader pattern of intensifying Arab diplomatic engagement following Iran's attacks on several Gulf states.

Egypt's proactive outreach — through both a direct presidential call and a ministerial visit in the same period — signals the weight

Cairo is placing on Arab solidarity at a moment of acute regional tension. The back-to-back contacts also underscore a growing consensus among Arab nations that a unified front and a commitment to diplomatic channels are essential to containing the crisis and preventing further escalation. (QNA)

Amiri Diwan notifies Eid al-Fitr holidays

On the occasion of Eid al-Fitr, the Amiri Diwan announced that the Eid holiday will be as follows: Eid holiday for ministries, other government agencies and public institutions starts on Tuesday, March 17, 2026, and ends on Monday, March 23, 2026. Employees are to resume work on Tuesday, March 24, 2026. Qatar Central Bank and financial institutions under its supervision, and the Qatar Financial Markets Authority and financial markets under its supervision, the Governor of Qatar Central Bank shall specify the start and the end of the holiday. (QNA)

RAMADAN THOUGHT



And whoever invokes (or worships) besides Allah, any other ilah (god), of whom he has no proof, then his reckoning is only with his Lord. Surely, Al-Kafirun (the disbelievers in Allah and in the Oneness of Allah, polytheists, pagans, idolaters) will not be successful. (Qur'an 23: 117)

Prayer times

Fajr...4.25; Zuhr...11.43; Asr...3.08; Maghrib...5.46; Isha...7.16

Fasting times

Iftar today5.46pm
Imsak tomorrow.....4.14am

Where Ramadan's final nights shine brightest



Crescent moons and golden stars line the boulevard at Katara Cultural Village in Doha, bathing the night in a warm, festive glow as Qatar bids farewell to the holy month of Ramadan and welcomes the joy of Eid al-Fitr. PICTURE: Thajudheen

Qatar intercepts a number of drones

The Ministry of Defence announced that Qatar was subjected yesterday to an attack involving a number of drones launched from Iran. In a statement, the ministry said that Qatar's Armed Forces had successfully intercepted all drones. (QNA)

Arab Media Council tells outlets to stick to official sources on Iran attacks

The Council of Arab Information Ministers issued a statement yesterday calling on Arab media to rely exclusively on official government sources when reporting on Iranian attacks against Arab nations. The council said this step is vital to countering misinformation about the nature and purpose of these strikes. The council said it is closely watching the

escalating situation in the region, citing military offensives, threats, and provocative actions by Iran against Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Jordan, and Iraq. It called on both public and private Arab media to work together to present accurate information drawn from official channels, helping to dispel false narratives circulating online.

Next-generation desalination boosts Qatar's water security

By Shaima Sheriff
Staff Reporter

Qatar is reinforcing its long-term water security through advanced desalination infrastructure, with the Facility E reverse osmosis desalination plant emerging as a key project supporting the nation's sustainability and development ambitions.

Florentina Canto Navarro, electrical manager for the Facility E reverse osmosis desalination plant project and senior industrial electrical engineer at Acciona, said large-scale desalination facilities remain essential for Qatar due to the country's limited natural freshwater resources.

"Large-scale desalination projects such as the Facility E reverse osmosis plant are crucial for Qatar's long-term water availability," Navarro said. "Currently, desalination plants provide the country's potable water supply, which makes such facilities strategic for the country's development."

According to Navarro, Facility E represents the next generation of desalination infrastructure, designed to combine large-scale production capacity with advanced operational technologies that operate efficiently under the challenging environmental conditions of the Gulf region.

"Facility E represents the next generation of desalination plants composing Qatar's infrastructure," she said. "It combines optimal production performance with advanced control and monitoring

systems that can operate at full load under GCC conditions."

The project also reflects a broader technological shift in Qatar's water sector, where reverse osmosis (RO) technology is increasingly replacing traditional thermal desalination due to greater efficiency and lower environmental impact.

"From my experience working in Qatar for the last 10 years, there has been a shift from traditional thermal desalination projects to reverse osmosis plants due to their major efficiency and environmental sustainability," Navarro noted.

Reverse osmosis technology significantly reduces energy consumption compared with conventional desalination systems, helping lower carbon emissions while maintaining high water production capacity.

"Reverse osmosis plants reduce power consumption a lot compared with traditional desalination methods," Navarro said. "They also produce significantly fewer CO emissions, making them both the most economical and the most sustainable solution."

Modern digital monitoring and automation systems are also being integrated into the Facility E project to enhance operational efficiency and reliability.

"These technologies allow operators to control energy use, chemical dosing and membrane performance in real time," Navarro explained. "This helps optimise plant operation, extend equipment lifespan and improve sustainability."

Navarro also highlighted the broader transformation of Qatar's infrastructure landscape over the past decade. **To Page 5**

In uncertain times, art speaks of resilience

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

While geopolitical tensions continue to shape the atmosphere across the Middle East, artists living in Doha say the moment has sharpened their creative focus, with many turning to art as a means of reflection, dialogue and emotional resilience. Across studios, classrooms and online platforms, artists in Qatar say creativity has become both a refuge and a response to the uncertainty surrounding the region. Rather than silencing artistic expression, many say the current climate has deepened their sense of purpose and strengthened their commitment to conveying messages of unity,

empathy and cultural solidarity. For multidisciplinary artist and art educator Mala Waseem, who has lived in Doha for 16 years, the situation has been both alarming and clarifying. "Conflict does not silence creativity, nor does it halt artistic work," she said. "On the contrary, it compels art to serve as a vessel for reflection." Mala, a Canadian-Pakistani, returned to Doha from Kuwait shortly before regional airspace closures, where she had been exhibiting alongside fellow artists from the Gulf. Despite the tense atmosphere, she said artistic work across the region has continued, with galleries and art platforms adapting to maintain engagement. "In Doha, many galleries continue to operate online and host open calls for both local and international

artists. Within my own creative space, working from home has allowed me to reflect more deeply on my practice and determine which themes and works require urgency," she said. For Mala, the moment has also strengthened her sense of responsibility as both an artist and an educator. Alongside preparing for upcoming exhibitions, she continues to teach art lessons online to students preparing for GCSE and IGCSE examinations. "Art education must provide both technical guidance and emotional resilience," she said. "Supporting the mental well-being of young artists during this time is something I take very seriously." Beyond the classroom, Mala believes artists representing Qatar



Muznah Hasnat

internationally carry an additional responsibility during times of regional tension. **To Page 12**



Mala Waseem



EID-AL-FITR MUBARAK



We extend our heartiest greetings to

His Highness
Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani
Amir of the State of Qatar

His Highness
Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani
Father Amir

His Highness
Sheikh Abdullah Bin Hamad Al Thani
Deputy Amir

and to all the honorable people of Qatar
on the occasion of

EID AL FITR

We hope for more returns of this memorable occasion and wish that Qatar
always enjoys security, welfare and prosperity under the wise leadership of
His Highness The Amir



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General Manager and all employees



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PM discusses regional issues with Egypt's foreign minister

Al-Khulaifi receives telephone call from China's special envoy

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met yesterday with Egypt's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Immigration and Egyptian Expatriates Dr Badr Abdelatty.

The meeting addressed the developments of the military escalation in the region and its serious repercussions on regional and international security and stability, along with ways to resolve all disputes peacefully.

It also discussed strengthening Arab co-ordination to confront current challenges.

During the meeting, HE Sheikh Mohammed reiterated the condemnation of the Iranian attacks on Qatar's territory, and that they are unacceptable under any pretext or justification, noting that Qatar has always been keen to stay away from regional conflicts and has sought to facilitate dialogue between the Iranian side and



the international community.

Dr Abdelatty called for de-escalation, reason to prevail, and a return to negotiations and diplomatic means to avoid further chaos.

HE the Minister of State at Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi meanwhile received a tele-

phone call yesterday from China's special envoy Zhai Jun.

During the call, they discussed regional developments and ways to resolve all disputes peacefully.

Zhai expressed his country's solidarity with Qatar. - QNA

Minister reviews operations at Abu Samra border crossing

HE the Minister of Municipality Abdullah bin Hamad bin Abdullah al-Attiyah, who is also chairman of the committee for follow-up on the implementation of food security policies, has praised the high level of readiness at the Abu Samra border crossing, saying that it represents one of the vital pillars for ensuring the smooth entry of goods and commodities into Qatar, contributing to enhancing the efficiency of food supply chains and supporting the stability of local markets.

The minister was on an inspection tour at the Land Customs Department at the border crossing, accompanied by General Authority of Customs (GAC) chairman Ahmed bin Abdullah al-Jamal, to review the workflow at the customs facilities and follow up on procedures related to monitoring and auditing shipments of imported food products.

HE al-Attiyah commended the role played by the GAC in facilitating procedures and accelerating inspection and clearance



processes for shipments.

He also praised the efforts of the Permanent Committee for the Management of the Abu Samra border crossing to ensure smooth workflow and operational efficiency.

The minister and the accompanying delegation inspected customs facilities at the cross-

ing, including customs inspection platforms for food commodities and X-ray screening mechanisms for trucks.

During a visual presentation delivered by the Land Customs Department, HE al-Attiyah was briefed on the role played by customs in securing the entry of goods and commodities into the country,

as well as the nature of co-operation and co-ordination with the relevant authorities concerned with food commodities, most notably the Ministry of Municipality, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, the Ministry of Public Health, and the Qatar General Organisation for Standards and Metrology. - QNA

Qatar's envoy joins appeal for Lebanon

Qatar's ambassador to Lebanon Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani has participated in the launch of an international appeal aimed at mobilising funding to address the country's growing humanitarian needs.

The appeal was held at the Grand Serail of Beirut (Government Palace) in the presence of Lebanon's Prime Minister Dr Nawaf Salam and United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, alongside ministers, ambassadors of donor countries, and representatives of international organisations and UN agencies. - QNA

Qatar sends urgent relief aid to over 40,000 displaced families in Lebanon

Qatar Charity (QC) announced yesterday that it has sent urgent relief aid to 40,500 displaced families in Lebanon, following the conditions they are experiencing as a result of military operations and shelling in a number of areas, particularly in southern Lebanon, the southern suburbs of Beirut, and some parts of the Bekaa Valley.

This aid, provided by the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD) through its partners, the QC and the Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS), aims to distribute more than 12,000 food baskets and



a range of basic non-food items needed by displaced families during these circumstances. - QNA

Qatar strengthens food security through local production, technology

Qatar has consistently strengthened its national food security system through a comprehensive strategy focused on advanced planning, diversified supply sources, and expanded local production.

The authorities, in particular the Ministry of Municipality, have been developing policies and programmes to enhance the resilience of the national food system and support farmers and local producers.

These efforts contribute to increasing levels of self-sufficiency in key food commodities and strengthening the country's ability to respond to global challenges.

These initiatives form part of a long-term national vision to build a sustainable food system capable of addressing challenges related to global supply chains, climate change, and rising food demand, while maintaining high product quality and stable prices for consumers.

In recent years, Qatar's agricultural sector has achieved significant progress, driven by the adoption of advanced technologies such as cooled greenhouses, modern irrigation systems, and smart farming practices.

These innovations have improved productivity and crop quality, resulting in notable growth in local vegetable production.

Farms in Qatar now meet 100% of domestic demand for cucumbers, zucchini, and eggplant during production seasons, 98% for tomatoes, and 42% for sweet peppers.

Plans are also underway to further increase agricultural output by providing farmers with modern technologies, technical guidance, and facilitation measures to improve farm development and productivity.

To strengthen the presence of local products in the market, Qatar has developed an integrated system for marketing domestic agricultural produce.

A key initiative in this regard is the Mahaseel Agricultural Services and Marketing Company, which provides effective marketing channels for local farms through an extensive network of approximately 115 sales outlets nationwide.

This network allows consumers to access fresh local produce directly from farms while boosting consumer confidence and encouraging farmers to expand production.

Local production has also expanded to include dairy products, poultry, and eggs.

Investments in modern farms and food production projects have significantly increased self-sufficiency levels in several food products, contributing to market stability and reducing reliance on imports.

The government continues to support these sectors by creating a favourable investment environment and encouraging private-sector participation in food-security projects, helping to diversify production sources and enhance long-term sustainability.

At the same time, Qatar's fisheries sector is expanding as part of efforts to increase domestic fish production and promote aquaculture.

The Aquatic Research Centre produces around 1mn fish fingerlings annually to replenish fish stocks and support aquaculture initiatives.

The Aquatic Research Centre also produces approximately 40 tonnes of fish and 20 tonnes of shrimp every year, contributing to the sustainable use of marine resources and strengthening national food security.

More broadly, the country places strong emphasis on maintaining strategic reserves of essential food commodities to ensure supply stability.

Qatar has developed an advanced grain storage system with a capacity of approximately 320,000 tonnes, providing a critical safeguard against potential global market fluctuations or supply disruptions.

These strategic reserves are continuously monitored and reviewed, and recent efforts have increased the national food stockpile to cover up to 18 months of domestic demand.

Zakat Affairs Department moves on funneling Zakat al-Fitr to beneficiaries

The Zakat Affairs Department at the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs has embarked on its annual plan to funnel Zakat al-Fitr contributions to eligible recipients in a timely manner, according to the guidelines put out in Islamic Sharia, and ultimately to materialise the aims of this Islamic ritual: enriching the lives of the needy and bringing joy to their homes as Eid al-Fitr approaches.

Zakat Affairs Department director Mal Allah Abdulrahman al-Jaber underscored the importance of ensuring the timely distribution of Zakat al-Fitr, consisting of the staple food items commonly used in the local community, following the Sunnah of the Prophet.

He said that the department prepares and packages these essential food items into dedicated food parcels for distribution to eligible families.

The department has set an integrated plan to ensure Zakat al-Fitr reaches eligible recipients within the Sharia Zakat banks.

The official said the process begins by calculating the number of beneficiaries and verifying that they are indeed eligible.

Al-Jaber added that food parcels are then prepared based on precise criteria, ahead of the distribution process, which is carried out by onsite work teams to ensure these items reach recipients before Eid prayer, in realisation of the Sharia aim of this blessed ritual.

He noted that work teams are focused on ensuring that the distribution process is accomplished according to the highest standards of organization and accuracy, delivering parcels to homes in collaboration with professional delivery companies. - QNA

QF's Awsaj Academy students continue remote learning

As learning shifted to remote education in light of the current circumstances in the region, Qatar Foundation (QF) schools have continued to ensure the continuity of the educational process, focusing on providing a flexible learning environment that supports the needs of all students, including those with disabilities and learning difficulties.

At Awsaj Academy, part of QF's Pre-University Education (PUE) and dedicated to supporting students with disabilities and learning difficulties, classrooms have transitioned into virtual spaces that allow students to continue learning and interacting with their teachers and peers.

Omar Alsharhan, a sixth-grade teacher at the academy, explains that the transition to remote learning required a lot of flexibility and planning, particularly as he teaches students with learning difficulties and autism, in addition to one student with a physical disability.



Omar Alsharhan

"It was important that students continued to feel that the learning environment was familiar to them, even if it had moved to the screen," he said. "That is why I focused on building a clear routine for each lesson, with simple instructions and visual support to help them follow the class with confidence."

Alsharhan emphasises that maintaining student engagement is a key factor in the success of online learning, noting that the diversity of learning styles among

students requires varied activities and teaching approaches.

"Each student learns differently, so I make sure lessons are interactive and varied," he said. "Some students respond well to visuals, while others prefer short activities or direct questions that encourage participation."

"I present information step by step, using visual examples and short instructions so that tasks remain clear and manageable," the teacher added. "The goal is for students to feel capable of learning and participating without feeling overwhelmed."

Alsharhan also highlights that the role of the teacher extends beyond academic instruction to include emotional support, especially as most of the students are between 11-12 years old.

"At this age, students are very aware of what is happening around them, even if they do not always express it clearly," he stated. "That is why I make sure to reassure them

and create an environment where they feel stable and confident, while giving them space to express their feelings. Feeling safe helps them continue learning."

For Alsharhan, one of the most rewarding aspects of this experience has been seeing students continue to make progress despite the challenges.

"What makes me happiest is seeing a student who usually needs a lot of support begin to participate and answer questions with confidence," he said. "These moments show that learning can continue and that students are capable of succeeding even in unusual circumstances."

"This experience reflects QF schools' commitment to providing inclusive education that places students' needs at the heart of the learning process and ensures that opportunities for learning and support continue for all students, even during exceptional times," Alsharhan said.

UDST introduces early acceptance opportunity for high-achievers

The University of Doha for Science and Technology (UDST) has announced the launch of its Early Acceptance initiative for the Fall 2026 semester, offering outstanding high school students the opportunity to secure a place at the university before completing their final examinations.

Prospective students interested in the Early Acceptance opportunity are encouraged to submit their applications online through the UDST's official website udst.edu.qa

Through this initiative, high-achieving students currently enrolled in their final year of high school can apply for Early Conditional Admission based on their academic performance in Grade 11 and the first semester of Grade 12.

Students who meet the eligibility criteria may receive an early admission offer, allowing

them to reserve their seat in their chosen programme while they complete their final high school examinations.

While the specific requirements vary by programme of study, students are expected to demonstrate strong academic performance and high overall averages on their school transcripts.

Once admitted through early acceptance, students must complete their final examinations and meet the university's official admission requirements to confirm their place before the start of the academic semester.

The deadline to apply for Early Acceptance for Fall 2026 is April 20.

UDST president Dr Salem al-Naemi highlighted the importance of this initiative in supporting ambitious students: "At UDST, we are committed to empowering talented students

and recognising academic excellence early on."

"Our Early Acceptance provides motivated students with the confidence to plan their academic journey while continuing to focus on achieving strong results in their final year of school," he said.

The UDST offers over 80 programmes across its five colleges: the College of Engineering and Technology, the College of Business, the College of Computing and Information Technology, the College of Health Sciences, and the College of General Education.

The University's applied learning model combines classroom instruction with hands-on experience in advanced laboratories, industry projects, and real-world simulations, preparing students to graduate career-ready and highly competitive in the job market.

Ooredoo Qatar launches Eid Device Festival 2026

Ooredoo Qatar has announced the launch of the Eid Device Festival 2026, a limited-time seasonal campaign offering special pricing on a wide range of smartphones and smart devices.

Running for two weeks starting on March 11, the campaign highlights the iPhone 17 series, available at special Eid pricing, with 1,000 additional Nojoom Points for customers purchasing eligible models during the promotional period.

Customers can also benefit from savings of up to 80% on selected devices and accessories, including selected iPads, smartwatches and Apple accessories.

The Eid Device Festival 2026 will be available across Ooredoo and Starlink stores, as well as through the Ooredoo eShop, ensuring customers can access the offers conveniently across physical and digital channels.

"Eid is a time of celebration and connection, and we are pleased to mark the occasion with special offers that make it easier for our customers to get the latest devices," said Ooredoo Qatar senior marketing and communications director Sabah Rabiah al-Kuwari. "Through the Eid Device Festival, we are combining attractive pricing with additional Nojoom rewards to deliver meaningful value and enhance the overall customer experience."

Ukraine seeks funds, technology in return for drone help: Zelensky

Reuters
Kyiv

Ukraine wants money and technology in return for helping Middle Eastern nations that have sought its expertise as they defend against Iranian kamikaze drones, President Volodymyr Zelensky said, after Kyiv sent specialists to the region.

He told reporters that three teams were sent to the Middle East to conduct expert assessments and demonstrate how drone defences should operate.

Earlier this week he said teams were sent to a number of Gulf Arab countries, as well as a US military base in Jordan.

"This is not about being involved in operations. We are not at war with Iran," Zelensky said.

He said that more fundamental, long-term drone deals could be negotiated with Gulf countries and what Ukraine will get in return for the assistance still needed to be discussed.

"For us today, both the technology and the funding are important," Zelensky said.

Gulf states have expended large quantities of air-defence missiles to counter Iran's Shahed drones.

Kyiv downs Russian drones every night using an array of weaponry including cheaper, smaller drones or jamming equipment.

Zelensky raised concerns about the effect of a protracted Middle Eastern conflict on Ukraine's own supplies of air defence missiles.

"We would very much not like the United States to step away from the issue of Ukraine because of the Middle East," he told reporters.

The latest round of peace talks between Moscow, Kyiv and Washington, which had been due to take place in the UAE, was postponed after US and Israeli airstrikes on Iran triggered a war in the region two weeks ago.

Iran warns against wider war as Trump asks allies to escort ships

AFP/Reuters
Tehran/Dubai/Jerusalem

Iran has warned countries against getting involved in its war with the United States and Israel, after President Donald Trump urged world powers to escort oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz chokepoint in the Gulf.

Tehran also sent a stern message to its Arab neighbours, telling them that the Islamic republic has what its foreign minister called "ample evidence" that US bases on their territories were being used to launch attacks.

"This war will end when we are certain that it will not be repeated and that reparations will be paid," Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told Arabic-language news platform Al-Araby Al-Jadeed.

"We experienced this last year: Israel attacked, then the United States," he said, recalling Israel's 12-day air war in June last year, which briefly drew in US forces for a night of strikes on Iranian nuclear sites.

Energy prices have soared across the world since Iran re-



Iranians clear debris from damaged homes in Tehran. - AFP

sponded to the new US-Israeli campaign by threatening shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, which usually sees passage of 20% of global oil and gas exports to the global market.

Trump responded by urging "China, France, Japan, South Korea, the UK and others" to send ships to escort tankers, while the US military continues to pound drone, boat and missile launch sites in Iran on the north shore.

However, the countries he

demolished" much of the island and warned of more, telling NBC News on Saturday that "we may hit it a few more times just for fun".

The comments marked a sharp escalation from Trump, who had previously said the US was targeting only military sites on Kharg, and dealt a blow to diplomatic efforts to end a war that has spread across the Middle East and killed more than 2,000 people, most in Iran and Lebanon.

"Iran wants to make a deal, and I don't want to make it because the terms aren't good enough yet," Trump told NBC News.

Araghchi, in a separate interview with the US network CBS's *Face the Nation*, denied that Tehran was asking for a deal.

"We are stable and strong enough. We are only defending our people," he said. "We don't see any reason why we should talk with Americans, because we were talking with them when they decided to attack us."

More than 1,200 people have been killed by US and Israeli strikes, according to Iranian health ministry figures that could not be independently verified.

As global markets reel, Trump has doubled down, telling NBC News in a weekend interview that he thought Tehran was keen to come to the table but that the US was fighting on to force better terms.

With the US-Israeli war on Iran in its third week, the US president said that US strikes had "totally

Iran arrests 500 'for giving information to enemies'

Iran has arrested 500 people accused of sharing information with enemies, the Islamic Republic's police chief said yesterday, as Israeli and US fighter jets continue to strike new targets in the country.

Half of those cases had involved serious incidents "including people who provided information for hitting targets and individuals who took footage of strike locations and sent them", Ahmadreza Radan said, without going into detail on when the arrests took place.

Earlier, Iranian media reported dozens of arrests in several regions yesterday.

In northwestern Iran, the semi-official Tasnim news agency said 20 people were arrested on accusations by the provincial prosecutor's office of sending location details on Iran's military and security assets to Israel.

In northeastern Iran, which has remained relatively untouched by air strikes, Tasnim reported the arrest of 10 people, with some accused of collecting information on sensitive locations and economic infrastructure. - Reuters

UN force in Lebanon says peacekeepers fired upon

AFP
Beirut

UN peacekeepers said yesterday that they were fired upon "likely by non-state armed groups" in south Lebanon, while a Hamas source said an Israeli strike killed an official from the Palestinian group.

Israel said no direct talks were planned with Lebanon to end the latest war with group Hezbollah, which has been raging for two weeks.

The statement came a day after a Lebanese official said Beirut was preparing a delegation to negotiate with Israel.

Lebanon was dragged into the Middle East war on March 2 when Iran-backed Hezbollah attacked Israel in response to the killing of Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in US-Israeli strikes, with Israel launching air raids on the neighbouring country and troop incursions into border areas.

Lebanese authorities said the death toll in Israeli attacks rose to 850, while more than 830,000 people have registered as displaced, including some 130,000 staying in collective shelters.

Driving rain piled more misery yesterday on displaced people, hundreds of whom have been sleeping rough or in tents near central Beirut's seafloor.

Coffee shop owner Nader, 42, displaced from Beirut's southern suburbs, said he had rebuilt his home after the previous Israel-Hezbollah conflict in 2024 and feared it had again been destroyed.

"Here we have nothing and the situation is very bad with the heavy rains and wind - it's very cold, lots of babies are sick and we can't protect them," he told AFP.

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) said its peacekeepers were fired upon three times yesterday, "likely by non-state armed groups" in the country's south, two days after a different position was hit by fire that Lebanon's official National News Agency (NNA) had blamed on Israel.

The NNA reported Israeli strikes on the country's south and east yesterday, while Hezbollah claimed a series of attacks on sites in Israel and on Israeli troops in south Lebanon.

The group also said its fighters fired an "advanced missile" at the Palmachim air base south of Tel Aviv.

The NNA said Israel struck "an apartment in a residential building" in a northern district of the coastal city of Sidon, killing one person and causing a fire.

An AFP correspondent saw damage to an apartment building as the army cordoned off the area while rescue teams fought a blaze and residents rushed into the street, some carrying belongings.

The Hamas source, requesting anonymity, said official Wissam Taha was killed.

Israel has repeatedly struck Hamas targets in Lebanon in recent years, including during previous hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah that erupted over the Gaza war, and after a 2024 ceasefire.

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun has proposed direct negotiations with Israel, but Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar responded yesterday with a "no" when asked whether Israel was set to hold such talks.

Israeli Energy Minister Eli Cohen instead called for the cancellation of a US-brokered 2022 maritime border deal with Lebanon,

We call on all parties to de-escalate, cease hostilities: UNIFIL

Spokesman for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Dany Ghafari, has called on all parties to de-escalate and return to a cessation of hostilities in southern Lebanon.

He said that 7,500 UNIFIL troops representing 48 countries are carrying out their duties south of the Litani River (southern Lebanon) in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, noting the continuation of military escalation and exchanges of fire across the Blue Line since March 2.

Ghafari said that there have been more than 800 deaths and over 1,900 injuries in Lebanon since the start of the latest Israeli escalation that began on March 2, pointing to the displacement of more than 800,000 people, in addition to around 120,000 people staying in shelters.

He affirmed that UNIFIL forces are carrying out tasks to monitor and record violations and submit reports to the Security Council, in addition to facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance and protecting civilian populations.

Ghafari condemned attacks targeting UNIFIL forces in southern Lebanon, adding that a shooting incident targeting the UN peacekeeping forces occurred during the recent escalation, and calling on all parties to fulfill their obligations to ensure the safety and security of peacekeepers at all times.

He added that, according to the Security Council decision, UNIFIL's mandate has been renewed for a final time, with its mission ending on December 31, 2026, and withdrawal beginning during 2027. - QNA

adding that "a vague promise" of improved security for Israel under the deal "was not fulfilled".

Gems from the Treasure of the Qur'an

The Messenger of Allah, Muhammad, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam (may Allah exalt his mention), said: "The best amongst you are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it." [Al-Bukhari]

What is the Qur'an?

The Qur'an is the Book of Allah, which He chose to be the final of the Heavenly Books.

He, the Merciful and Most High, revealed it to the Prophet Muhammad, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, as the source for the Last Religion and a guidance for mankind.

Its revelation was a turning point for humanity; it was the power that changed the world, shifted the flow of history, saved and reformed humanity, so much so that the entire existence appeared as if it had been recreated anew.

The Qur'an is the strongest evidence in support of the Prophet Muhammad, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, and his greatest sign.

It is the proof of his prophethood and trustworthiness.

Allah, the Most Exalted, says in the Qur'an (what means): "They (unbelievers) want to extinguish Allah's light with their mouths. But Allah will perfect His light, even though the unbelievers may detest it. It is He who has sent His messenger with guidance and the Religion of Truth, so that he may exalt it over all religions, much as the pagans may dislike it." [Qur'an 61:8-9]

The Qur'an is the guidance that mankind needs to achieve freedom, happiness and success, in this life and the next. The Qur'an is a complete and comprehensive book. It deals with the issues Man needs, not only for salvation in the Hereafter, but also to achieve peace, justice and prosperity in this world. These issues are discussed in the Qur'an in three main categories: Theology, Fables and Wisdom, Islamic Law (or Shari'ah).

Thus, it provides the basic principles, vision and knowledge necessary for planning and leading a good life. All this is packaged in a very comprehensive approach to living that combines the pursuit of worldly affairs as well as those of the Hereafter. Allah Almighty says in the Qur'an (what means): "And seek by the wealth provided for you by Allah the eternal abode (the Hereafter) but do not forget and (and forsake) your share of this world. Be kind and good (to others) just as Allah was kind and good to you. And desire not corruption in the land. Indeed, Allah does not like corrupters." [Qur'an 28:77]

The Qur'an has an inimitable style and format that has never been seen or experienced in any other book or methodology. The richness of its text and the discourse it offers are unprecedented and unmatched in their eloquence, proficiency, fluency, conformance and harmony. Not only is the Qur'an a linguistic masterpiece and magnum opus par excellence, it is indeed a

miracle in the fullest sense of the word.

Those reciting it never become weary of it and those who ponder upon its meanings do not doubt it; rather, they always discover fresh insights and knowledge.

It guides those seeking guidance and increases those who believe in it in faith.

Its first parts resemble its latter parts and it can only be likened to itself in its unparalleled beauty.

The Qur'an is free from contradictions and those who understand the Arabic language and contemplate upon its chapters and verses will find harmony between its various parts.

Allah, the Most High, says (what means): "Why do not they contemplate the Qur'an? And if it were from other than Allah, they would have found in it numerous discrepancies." [Qur'an 4:82]

Indeed, every time the disbelievers tried to raise issues of contradictions in the Qur'an, Muslim scholars proved beyond doubt that no part of the Qur'an belies or contradicts another.

The reason is that what may appear as a "contradiction" in the Qur'an is actually what the Qur'an calls Muhkam (clear) and Mutashabih (unclear) verse.

This is actually a part of the Qur'an's textual strength and miraculous composition.

The Qur'an restores soul calmness

The Islamic Medical Sciences Organisation declared the striking results of a study conducted by Dr Ahmad al-Qadhi over a group of volunteers from America who were subject to a recitation of the Holy Qur'an.

A trace of a tranquilising effect was recorded at a whole rate of 97%.

Although many of these volunteers do not know Arabic, yet involuntary physiological changes that led notably to alleviate the acuity of tension they had before were observed in their nervous systems.

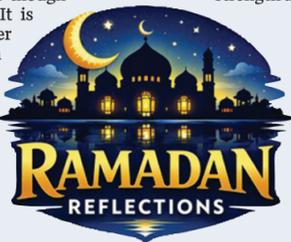
Furthermore, an experiment of EEG (electroencephalogram) during Qur'an rehearsal revealed that while listening to Qur'an, the encephalic waves moved from the fast pattern of vigilance (12-13) wave/second to the slow pattern (8-18) wave/second; indicating the state of deep calmness.

Non-Arabic speaking persons felt reassured, quiet, and content during the process of listening to Qur'anic verses, in spite of their inability to understand the meanings.

This is one of the miracles of the Holy Qur'an.

The Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, revealed that miracle when saying: "No people assembled in one of the houses of Allah (mosques), and recite and study the Book of Allah (among themselves), except that tranquility would prevail over them, mercy would encompass them, the angels would surround them, and Allah would make a mention of them in the presence of those near Him (angels)." [Muslim]

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



Next-generation desalination boosts Qatar's water security

From Page 1

Having worked on projects in Qatar throughout her career at Acciona, Navarro said that the country has evolved from a phase of rapid urban development to a more strategic, sustainability-driven approach to infrastructure planning.

"In previous years, many projects focused primarily on urban growth," she said. "Today, the approach is more aligned with strategic planning and sustainability."

Navarro also pointed to Qatar's multicultural engineering environment as one of the country's key strengths in delivering large-scale infrastructure projects.

"One remarkable aspect of working in Qatar is the collaboration between many nationalities, international engineering companies and local institutions," she said. "This creates a highly skilled ecosystem capable of delivering complex projects efficiently."

For Navarro, working on projects such as Facility E is both technically challenging and personally rewarding.

"What I enjoy most is seeing how ideas, designs and



Florentina Canto Navarro

calculations gradually take shape and become reality," she said. "After some time, you see all parts of the project assembled and finally producing water from scratch, knowing you were part of that process."



A child cries as mourners carry the bodies of a Palestinian family, the parents and their two children, who were killed in an Israeli raid, during their funeral in Tammun town near Tubas, amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in the occupied West Bank, yesterday. (Reuters)

Israeli troops kill two children and parents in West Bank

AFP
Tammun

Distraught Palestinians mourned over the bodies of four members of a family, including two children, who the Palestinian health ministry said were shot dead yesterday by Israeli forces in the occupied West Bank.

The Israeli military and police said troops had opened fire on a vehicle over a perceived safety threat, killing four people inside.

"Four martyrs from one family arrived at the Turkish Public Hospital in Tubas after the occupation army shot at them in Tammun," the Ramallah-based Palestinian health ministry said.

It said the hospital received the bodies of a 37-year-old man, his 35-year-old wife and two boys aged five and seven, adding that all had gunshot wounds.

In Tammun yesterday, AFP photos showed dozens of family members gathering to mourn the dead. Women wept over their loved ones wrapped in Palestinian flags and kuffiyeh scarves, as one man lifted a child's body above the crowd.

"My mother screamed one last time and then fell silent, while my father recited the Shahada (declaration of faith) before he died," said Khaled Ali Bani Odeh, one of two children who survived.

"They pulled me out (of the car) and started jumping on my back. Then they took me to a corner and asked me what happened and who was with me in the car.

"I told them it was my father and mother. They said I was lying and started beating me," the 11-year-old told journalists in the presence of relatives at the funeral



Mustafa, who was injured but survived after Israeli soldiers fired on the vehicle carrying his parents and two siblings, is comforted during the funeral of his family in the occupied West Bank's northern town of Tammun, yesterday. (AFP)

of his parents and two siblings.

The Israeli military did not offer an immediate response to his allegations, but confirmed the deaths.

The military and police said in a joint statement that during an operation in Tammun, "a vehicle accelerated toward the forces, who perceived an immediate threat to their safety and responded with gunfire".

"As a result, four Palestinians who were in the vehicle were killed," it said, adding that the incident was under review.

In a statement posted on X, the Palestinian foreign ministry strongly condemned the killings, which it said were "not isolated" incidents, but "part of a comprehensive and systematic aggression" towards the Palestinians by Israel.

The Palestinian news agency Wafa reported that the couple's two other children, aged eight and 11, were wounded by shrap-

nel after Israeli forces opened fire on their vehicle early yesterday morning. Violence in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967, has risen sharply since the October 2023 Hamas storming of Israel. There has also been a spike in deadly attacks by Israeli settlers in the West Bank since the start of the Iran war, Palestinian authorities and the UN have said, with at least six Palestinians killed since the start of March.

Palestinian officials said that Israeli settlers shot dead a Palestinian man on Saturday in an attack on the village of Qusra, while two other local residents were injured.

The military yesterday confirmed that "as a result of gunfire by one of the Israeli suspects, a Palestinian civilian was killed, and additional Palestinian civilians were injured and evacuated to receive further medical treatment".

Gaza ministry says Israeli strike on police vehicle kills nine

AFP
Gaza City

Gaza's Hamas-run interior ministry said an Israeli air strike on a police vehicle yesterday killed nine officers in the centre of the Palestinian territory, updating an earlier hospital toll of eight.

The strike came as a Hamas delegation was due to meet with Egyptian officials in Cairo, according to a source from the Palestinian movement.

Gaza's civil defence agency had also reported another four people killed in an earlier Israeli strike. When asked by AFP about both incidents, the Israeli military said it was looking into the reports.

The Gaza interior ministry, which operates under Hamas authority, accused the Israeli military of committing a "heinous crime this afternoon when it targeted a police vehicle carrying several officers and personnel in the central governorate".

"The attack resulted in the killing of nine officers and personnel," it said in a statement, listing the victims, among them the police chief for the central governorate, Colonel Iyad Abu Yousef.

Earlier, the Al-Aqsa hospital in Deir el-Balah said it had received the bodies of "eight martyrs" killed in the strike on the town of Zawaida in central Gaza.

Hamas condemned the incident, saying: "This treacherous crime reflects the true face of the occupation and its exposed policy aimed at continuing the war of genocide and deepening the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip."

Violence has persisted in the war-shattered Palestinian territory despite a ceasefire which



Palestinians inspect the site of an Israeli strike that targeted a police vehicle in Zawaida in the central Gaza Strip, yesterday. (AFP)

came into effect on October 10, with both Israel and Hamas regularly accusing each other of violations. Earlier yesterday, Gaza's civil defence agency — which operates as a rescue force under Hamas authority — said an Israeli strike killed four people in the Nuseirat refugee camp in the centre of the territory.

In a statement, Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem condemned the bombing as "a blatant violation of the ceasefire agreement".

The latest deaths came as a Hamas source told AFP that a delegation in Cairo had met with Bulgarian politician Nickolay Mladenov, named high representative for Gaza under US President Donald Trump's Board of Peace.

The board was established after the Trump administration, with longtime mediators Qatar and Egypt, negotiated a ceasefire to halt two years of devastating war in Gaza.

The Cairo delegation, headed by Hamas official Nizar Rayyan, "demanded an immediate halt to all violations and called on Israel to implement the second phase of the ceasefire agreement

and open the Gaza crossings", the source said.

At the start of the joint US-Israeli strikes on Iran on February 28, Israel announced the closure of all crossing points into Gaza as a "security" measure.

But on Sunday, it said it would partially reopen the Rafah crossing on the border between the Palestinian territory and Egypt.

"The Rafah Crossing will reopen for movement in both directions starting this coming Wednesday (March 18), for limited movement of people only," Cogat, the Israeli defence ministry agency in charge of civilian affairs in the Palestinian territories, said in a statement.

It had previously reopened the Kerem Shalom crossing in the territory's south to allow for the "gradual entry of humanitarian aid". Gaza's health ministry, which operates under Hamas authority, says at least 663 Palestinians have been killed since the start of the truce.

Media restrictions and limited access in Gaza have prevented AFP from independently verifying casualty figures or freely covering the fighting.

Kenya FM flies to Moscow to halt Russian army press-ganging

AFP
Nairobi

Kenya's foreign minister took off for a visit to Moscow yesterday in a bid to put a stop to the Russian army's forced conscription of Kenyan citizens to fight in Ukraine.

Musalisa Mudavadi is set to meet several members of the Russian government, including his Kremlin counterpart Sergey Lavrov, today and tomorrow, according to a Kenyan foreign ministry statement.

Mudavadi will bid to secure the repatriation of Kenyans currently stranded in Russia after being lured to the country with promises of well-paid civilian work, only to be press-ganged into fighting for the Russian army in Ukraine. AFP is among

the outlets to have recently reported on Moscow's forced conscription of Kenyans sent to the front line with limited training. The east African country's intelligence services estimate that more than 1,000 Kenyans have perished as a result, according to a report seen by AFP.

Besides the press-ganging issue, Mudavadi will also seek to negotiate an agreement allowing Kenyans easier access to the Russian job market.

According to the foreign ministry statement, Nairobi's top diplomat's outreach to the Kremlin "will include a push for the facilitation of the affected Kenyans through a safe process for their repatriation".

"Mudavadi's talks with the Russian top government officials will seek to address the situation that surrounds Kenyans who

may have been voluntarily or involuntarily drafted in the Russian military.

"The engagement is focused on a broad co-ordinated government action to protect Kenyans abroad, by ensuring that they work in a safe working environment and live dignified lives away from home," the statement said.

In late February, South Africa managed to secure the repatriation of 15 of its citizens who had asked for help from the government, claiming to be trapped in the eastern Donbas region after being lured into fighting for Russia by deceit.

Similar revelations have caused an uproar in Kenya, with Mudavadi's deputy, Abraham Korir Sing'Oei, denouncing Russia's "unacceptable" use of Kenyans as "cannon fodder".

Uganda opposition leader leaves country after disputed vote

Reuters
Kampala

Ugandan opposition leader Bobi Wine said he has temporarily left the country after two months in hiding in the wake of a presidential election in January that kept long-time leader Yoweri Museveni in office.

Wine, whose real name is Robert Kyagulanyi, disputed the outcome of that contest, alleging fraud, and had been in hiding since fleeing his home in Uganda's capital Kampala.

In a five-minute video message posted on X on Saturday, Wine said he had left the country for "critical engagements outside Uganda", without specifying where he was or what the engagements were.

"At the right time I will come back and continue with the cause," he said. The pop star-turned-politician has said his campaign was constrained by security forces blocking his rallies and arresting his supporters.

In the message published on Saturday, Wine said security forces had erected roadblocks and conducted raids to try to find him.

Uganda's government and military did not immediately respond to requests for comment on Wine's message. Uganda's military chief, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, who is also Museveni's son, has



File photo of Robert Kyagulanyi, also known as Bobi Wine. (Reuters)

stated in social media posts that the military is looking for Wine, though it is unclear why or what crime he might be charged with.

Wine said on Saturday that Museveni had "usurped the will of the people".

He said that while outside of Uganda he would engage international allies and later return to continue what he called a push for freedom and democracy.

Museveni, 81, has ruled Uganda since 1986 and has repeatedly won elections that opposition groups and rights organisations say were marred by intimidation and violence, accusations the government denies.

Congo Republic's Sassou seeks new term amid subdued turnout

Reuters
Brazzaville

Congo Republic voted in a presidential poll yesterday which is expected to extend the rule of President Denis Sassou Nguesso, one of Africa's longest-serving leaders, with a visibly thin turnout underscoring a lack of suspense over the outcome.

Sassou faces a weak field of challengers, with two of the country's best-known opposition leaders in prison and others in exile. Several opposition parties boycotted the election, saying the process lacked credibility.

More than 3.2mn Congolese were registered to vote, although analysts and civil society groups predicted turnout to fall below the nearly 68% recorded in 2021, when Sassou won his previous five-year mandate with 88.4% of the vote.

Polling stations in the capital, Brazzaville, had short lines or no lines at all, a Reuters witness said.

After casting his ballot in Brazzaville, Sassou told reporters he hoped the enthu-



People wait to vote during the presidential election at a polling station in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo, yesterday. (Reuters)

siasm he said he had seen on the campaign trail would be evident in the final turnout figure.

"We remain hopeful that what I heard throughout the campaign will materialise today," he said.

Voting was due to end at later, with counting starting immediately after. Provisional electoral results are expected 48 to 72 hours after polls close.

Sassou seized power in the oil-producing nation in 1979 and has governed almost con-

tinuously since, except for a five-year hiatus in the 1990s.

He was running against six little-known candidates, none seen as serious contenders, with electoral bodies dominated by figures aligned with the ruling Congolese Labour Party.

"The opposition is fragmented and lacks a strong, emblematic figure," said Remadji Hoinathy of the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies. "There may be fatigue among voters, but that will not affect Sassou's chances."

Madagascar anti-graft chief named prime minister

Reuters
Antananarivo

Madagascar's president Michael Randrianirina said yesterday he had appointed anti-corruption chief Maminiana Rajaonarison as prime minister, days after dismissing the last premier along with the entire cabinet.

Randrianirina, who seized power in October and promised a string of reforms, said the new prime minister would lead the government "on a clean path" and restore hope. There was no immediate comment from Rajaonarison.

"That integrity you have is what I expect from you as prime minister. Show that the country needs people of integrity - people who cannot be swayed and who cannot be bought," the president said in his address on state television.

He did not give any reasons when he dismissed former prime minister Herintsalama Rajaonarivelo and all other ministers on Monday.

Randrianirina has led what he calls a "Refoundation" since taking power, following a political transition that saw the collapse of the previous government.

US, Ecuador sign trade deal cutting tariff rates

AFP
Quito

The US and Ecuador have agreed to reduce tariff rates between the two nations, officials said, as countries seek to navigate US President Donald Trump's sweeping tariff campaign.

The agreement was signed on Friday in Washington by US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer and Ecuador's Minister of Production, Foreign Trade and Investment Luis Alberto Jaramillo following 10 months of negotiations.

The two countries had unveiled a framework in November to slash tariffs on a number of goods after Trump imposed a range of global reciprocal tariffs last year.

The US is Ecuador's leading trade partner. Ecuadorian exports to the US totalled \$6.8bn in 2025, while imports amounted to \$9.1bn, according to the Central Bank of Ecuador.

Ecuador has pledged to "reduce or eliminate tariffs in key sectors" for the US, including health products, motor vehicles and some ag-

ricultural products, according to the White House.

Friday's deal also eliminates customs surcharges levied on products from the South American nation. It includes several other stipulations, including allowing the US to "export critical minerals and energy resources" from Ecuador.

Ecuador's President Daniel Noboa, a Trump ally, said Friday the agreement benefits 53% of the nation's non-oil exports and "opens the door for new Ecuadorian products to reach" the market.

"Ecuador had two paths: stay still or go seek better conditions. We chose the second," Noboa wrote on X.

US Trade Representative Greer said in a statement Friday: "President Trump is unlocking commercially meaningful market access for American farmers and manufacturers, opening Ecuador's market of over 18mn consumers to US agricultural and industrial exports."

In February, the US Supreme Court ruled that the president had exceeded his authority in tapping emergency economic powers to impose tariffs on virtually all countries.

Top narco trafficker Marset handed to US after Bolivia arrest

AFP
Santa Cruz

Notorious Latin American narco trafficker Sebastian Marset, who eluded police for years, was handed over to US authorities after his arrest Friday in Bolivia.

Marset, a Uruguayan national who was on the US most-wanted list, was passed to agents of the US Drug Enforcement Administration at Santa Cruz airport, then put on a US airplane, state television showed.

"The arrest and deportation were carried out pursuant to a court order issued by the US justice system," Marco Antonio Oviedo, a senior minister, told reporters.

The kingpin was arrested in an upscale neighbourhood of Santa Cruz, Bolivia's economic capital, in an operation that mobilised hundreds of police officers, an AFP journalist witnessed.

Four other people were also arrested in the raids which come just days after Bolivia and 16 other countries joined an anti-cartel military alliance launched by US President Donald Trump.

The US State Department's International Narcotics bureau welcomed Marset's arrest on X, citing it as proof that "the Shield of the Americas is making our region safer and stronger."

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

The soccer-mad 34-year-old laundered the proceeds of his drug enterprise by purchasing and sponsoring lower-level professional soccer teams across Latin America and Europe — and even put himself in the starting lineups.

He was imprisoned in his native Uruguay for drug trafficking between 2013 and 2018 and later moved around South America, living a time in Bolivia and also Paraguay.

Both those countries had also issued warrants for his arrest.

The US issued a reward for his capture last year after what



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

it called "the largest and most consequential organised crime investigation against cocaine trafficking in Paraguayan history."

Marset is accused of leading a criminal network that imported more than 16 tonnes of cocaine into Europe.

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

Head of Bolivian police Mirko Sokol told reporters Friday more raids are planned in coming days, and hinted at corrupt cops without naming more accomplices.

"We have information on many people who have collaborated with Marset. It is very like-

ly that there are police officers among them," Sokol said.

A *Washington Post* profile from 2024 said Marset paid \$10,000 in cash to wear the number 10 jersey worn by football icons Pele, Maradona and Messi during his teams' games.

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.

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

Bolivia's centre-right President Rodrigo Paz thanked "international organisations from various neighbouring countries

and the continent" on Friday for their co-operation in his capture.

Paz has sought to boost ties with the US since winning office last year in elections that ended two decades of socialist rule begun under Indigenous coca farmer Evo Morales.

Bolivia's is the world's third largest producer of cocaine, which is made from coca leaves.

Marset is the second Latin American narco boss to be killed or captured in under a month.

Last month, one of the US and Mexico's most-wanted men, Nemesio "El Mencho" Oseguera, was killed by the Mexico military during an arrest raid.

US intelligence contributed to his capture.

Machado denounces 'selective' amnesty

AFP
Caracas

Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado on Saturday accused the Caracas government of "selective justice" under its amnesty programme, saying her own lawyer had yet to be released.

The amnesty law was passed by interim leader Delcy Rodriguez under pressure from Washington after US forces captured former leader Nicolas Maduro in January and took him to New York to face drug trafficking charges.

It aims to turn the page on nearly three decades of state repression, and mark an early milestone in the post-Maduro transition.

But Machado, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year, said her close ally and lawyer Perkins Rocha has been in custody since August 2024, when scores of people were arrested after Maduro's contested re-election. Rocha, 63, remains under house arrest and is required to report in to authorities every three hours. His

amnesty request has been denied, Machado posted on X.

"To selectively deny amnesty is repression. The regime led by Delcy Rodriguez wants to prolong the terror by breaking the morale of those fighting for democracy and freedom in Venezuela," she wrote.

"Perkins Rocha and all political prisoners must be fully released. Not ex-prisoners, not defendants: FREE!"

NGOs have also criticised the amnesty law as insufficient and being unfairly applied. The law covers people detained in events such as a failed 2002 coup against ex-leader Hugo Chavez and various cycles of protests between 2004 and 2024, as well as for criticism posted on social media or messaging services.

The government claims that more than 7,000 people have been granted full freedom, including prisoners in jail and those on parole.

The NGO Foro Penal said this month that while 690 political prisoners had been released since Maduro's ouster, around 500 remain behind bars.

Mass turtle release at Jau National Park



Riverine communities and scientists release Amazonian turtles (*Podocnemis expansa*) at Jau National Park, located in the Anavilhanas archipelago on the Rio Negro in the Amazon rainforest, Amazonas state, Brazil. Around 1,500 turtles were released in the environment as part of a programme to assist the reproduction of the species. (AFP)

Ex-leader Bolsonaro shows improvement

AFP
Rio de Janeiro

Former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro showed signs of improvement yesterday on his third day in intensive care, according to the hospital where he is being treated for pneumonia he developed while in prison.

The far-right leader who governed Brazil from 2019 to 2022 has been serving a lengthy sentence since September at the Papuda prison in Brasilia for an attempted coup.

On Friday he was urgently transferred to DF Star Hospital with high fever, a drop in oxygen saturation, sweating and chills.

The hospital said in a statement yesterday that the patient "showed clinical stability and improvement in renal function," which had deteriorated on Saturday.

However, Bolsonaro also showed a rise in markers that detect inflammation, which prompted doctors to expand his antibiotic therapy.

There are no immediate plans to release him from intensive care.

The clinic said Bolsonaro's lung infection stems from a process called bronchoaspiration, in which gastric material like food is inhaled into the respiratory tract rather than the esophagus.

It has been a frequent problem for Bolsonaro since he was stabbed in the abdomen in 2018 while campaigning to become president.



Brazilian Senator Flavio Bolsonaro, son of former president Jair Bolsonaro, speaks to the press after visiting his father, who had been admitted to the DF Star Hospital. (AFP)

The attack has led to numerous operations and other health problems, including persistent hiccups and vomiting, which doctors said was the direct cause of his current lung infection.

Last year Bolsonaro was sentenced to 27 years in prison for his role in a botched coup attempt after his 2022 election loss to Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the current president.

Bolsonaro's lawyers have asked that he be allowed to live under house arrest but the Supreme Court has rejected these requests.

"They are playing with my father's life," his son Flavio Bolsonaro said Friday as he left the hospital.

Cuba releases prisoners, confirms talks with US

AFP
Havana

Cuba's communist authorities on Friday began a prisoner release negotiated with the Vatican and confirmed that talks were underway with the US amid intense pressure from President Donald Trump.

The Justicia 11J rights group said it had been able to confirm the release of two people jailed for taking part in major anti-government protests on July 11, 2021.

Cuba said Thursday that it would release 51 prisoners after talks with the Holy See, which has in the past acted as mediator between Havana and Washington.

Havana has described the prisoner releases as a "goodwill" gesture to the Vatican.

AFP witnessed the arrival home of Adael Leyva Diaz, 29, who was serving a 13-year sentence, and Ronald Garcia Sanchez, 33, sentenced to 14 years. Both live in the Havana suburb of Arroyo Naranjo.

According to Justice 11J, which

tracks arrests since the 2021 protests, there are at least 760 political prisoners behind bars in Cuba.

The unusual show of clemency came hours after President Miguel Diaz-Canel confirmed that his government was in talks with the US.

Trump has said Cuba will be "next" on his agenda after Iran and the US overthrow of Cuba's top ally, Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela.

Speaking to AFP, a White House official on Friday repeated Trump's claim that Cuba is a "failing nation" and that a deal would

its government "would be very easily made."

The Republican leader has placed the impoverished island under a US oil blockade, strangling its fuel supply on the basis of what he called the "extraordinary threat" posed by Cuba to the US.

This comes on top of a six-decade-old US trade embargo. During a meeting with top Cuban officials, broadcast live on national television, Diaz-Canel said Havana was negotiating with Washington, but gave little away about the nature of the talks.

Cuba frees 14 held over July 2021 protests: NGO

An NGO said Saturday that Cuban authorities had released 14 people detained after massive anti-government protests in July 2021, a day after saying just two people had been freed. Their release, confirmed by the Miami-based Cubalex, is part of a "good will" prisoner release negotiated with the Vatican, which has often acted as a mediator between Havana and Washington. The unusual show of clemency came hours after President Miguel Diaz-Canel confirmed that his government was in talks with the US. The first prisoners were freed

Friday as Cuban authorities confirmed that talks were also underway with the US amid intense pressure from President Donald Trump. The rights group Justicia11J, for its part, said that as of Friday Cuba counted "at least 760 political prisoners," including 358 who took part in the July 2021 protests, which sparked a government crackdown and hundreds of arrests. The Caribbean island's communist authorities have accused Washington of orchestrating the protests in a bid to overthrow the one-party government. (AFP)



US mayors push back against data centre boom as AI backlash grows

AFP
Austin

Data centres were supposed to be a gift. In cities across the US, more and more mayors are treating them like a problem.

With the midterm election season approaching, big tech's promise of a windfall of jobs and tax revenue has given way to talk of polluting gas turbines, strained power grids and a growing sense that the AI revolution is being built on the backs of regular citizens.

The issue has grown large enough to reach the White House, where President Donald Trump this month assembled big tech companies to demand that they bear the exorbitant cost of powering the new data centres breaking ground in communities across the nation.

"Most talk has been, 'hey, this is the future, this is economic development, we need to go as far and as fast as we can,'" Tim Kelly, the mayor of Chattanooga, Tennessee, told AFP on the sidelines of the South by Southwest (SXSW) conference in Austin, Texas.

"I wouldn't say I necessarily disagree with that, but I think now it's starting to get interesting," he added.

At the top of many people's minds is Elon Musk's xAI, which has gone the farthest and at dizzying speed in building AI infrastructure in Memphis and neighbouring Mississippi.

To meet its massive energy demands, xAI has been running at least 18 methane gas turbines at its South Memphis site — sometimes without permits — accused of pumping out pollutants in predominantly Black neighbourhoods already burdened by industrial pollution.

This week, Mississippi's environmental regulator gave its green light to the gas generators at a site despite fierce local resistance.

Microsoft, Google, Meta and Amazon are also scouring the country to build out the sprawling windowless concrete structures,

driven by the insatiable computing demands of AI.

Phoenix has become a prized destination, thanks to generous tax incentives, low regulation and the construction of new semiconductor plants.

But Mayor Kate Gallego says the local population is growing tired of seeing data centres multiply in their communities, straining water supplies and a power grid that are already at breaking point.

"When you suddenly have transmission equipment in your front yard, that, for many people, does not make it more desirable," she told a SXSW audience.

Her frustration with the industry goes beyond power lines. Arizona's largest utility, APS, says it cannot accommodate all the demand — if every data centre seeking to locate in its service area were approved, electricity demand would reach 19,000 megawatts, more than double the grid's record peak.

"We are in constant battle with our utility provider," said Larry Klein, the mayor of Sunnyvale, in the heart of California's Silicon Valley.

Gallego said she often discovers a tech company has arrived in town only by checking the utility's latest list of biggest customers — the result of non-disclosure agreements that leave citizens in the dark until it is too late.

"There's a real spectrum of companies — some are proud to be your partners, and others would just prefer you not even acknowledge that they're there," she said, pointing to Microsoft and Google as more transparent operators.

Mayors warn that the data centre issue is becoming a symbol of Americans' growing doubts about AI more broadly.

An NBC News poll released this month found 57% of registered voters saying the risks of AI outweighed its benefits, compared with just 34% who said the opposite.

"I'm not a Luddite," Kelly said. "But I do think these are the right conversations to figure out how we manage this."



Icelandic Prime Minister Kristrun Frostadottir, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo gather at the government's representative building in Oslo, yesterday. (Reuters)

Canada and Nordics focus on military procurement

Reuters
Oslo

Canada and the five Nordic countries said yesterday they have agreed to deepen co-operation in military procurement and other areas, in the latest push by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney to build new global alliances.

Carney has sought closer ties with China and Middle Eastern countries as well as India and Europe as he tries to reduce his country's dependence on the US and forge a trading order led by what he calls middle-power countries.

The push has found enthusiastic partners in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland — all countries with relatively small populations, export-led economies and military forces that cannot match the bigger powers on their own.

"The old world order is gone and will

probably not come back," Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen told reporters after a meeting of the six nations' premiers in Oslo.

"So we have to build something new and it has to be a world order that is built on the values that we represent," she said.

Frederiksen, who faces a tough re-election battle this month, praised Carney for his speech at the Davos World Economic Forum in January that called for what he called "middle powers" to join forces.

"People in Denmark — and I guess the same goes for the rest of the Nordic countries — have been talking about it; they have been reading your speech," she said.

In a joint statement, the countries said they aimed to work more closely together on defence procurement.

"We all agree that if we individually spend that money or we spend it in an unco-ordinated way, it's not going to be value for taxpayers. It also will not protect our people as much as

we should," Carney told reporters.

"We will still do a lot of procurement with the US... but in all cases looking to procure much more in partnership," Carney said.

The group reiterated their support for Ukraine, international trade, building green economies and enhancing Arctic security.

All have territories in the polar region and have condemned US President Donald Trump's push to take over Greenland, a Danish autonomous territory.

Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said the effort showed the middle powers coming up with concrete proposals for co-operation.

"This is not about building new institutions. This is about what Prime Minister Carney calls a variable geometry," he told Reuters.

"So... in certain areas we go together, we deepen co-operation with different participants," he added, citing Australia, Japan and South Korea as other possible partners.

Trump, Starmer discuss Hormuz blockage in war

US President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer spoke yesterday about the "importance" of reopening the Strait of Hormuz, currently blocked by Iran, the UK leader's office said. "The leaders discussed the ongoing situation in the Middle East and the importance of reopening the Strait of Hormuz to end the disruption to global shipping, which is driving up costs worldwide," a Downing Street spokeswoman said in a statement. On Saturday, Trump urged other countries such as China, France, Japan, South Korea and Britain to send warships to help the US secure the strait. Iran's military is effectively blocking the crucial waterway in retaliation for US-Israeli strikes, aiming to damage the world economy and pressure Washington as oil prices soar. Starmer also "expressed his condolences for the American service personnel who have lost their lives during the conflict", the statement said.

Afghan asylum-seeker dies in ICE custody, US advocacy group says

An Afghan immigrant who previously worked with the US military in Afghanistan and later sought asylum in the US died this weekend in Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody less than 24 hours after being detained in Texas, a US veteran-led advocacy group said yesterday. Mohammad Nazeer Paktyawal, who was living in a Dallas suburb with his wife and six children while his asylum case remained pending, was arrested by federal agents outside his apartment on Friday

morning while taking his children to school, the group AfghanEvac's president Shawn VanDiver said in a statement. Paktyawal died of unknown causes on Saturday, VanDiver said. Paktyawal, 41, is at least the 12th person to die in ICE detention this year under US President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown. Last year, 31 people died after being detained by ICE, a two-decade high. ICE has played a central role in Trump's policy of mass deportations. The US Department of Homeland Security, which

includes ICE, said it needs more time to respond to a Reuters request for comment.

According to VanDiver, Paktyawal's family was told that he was taken to a hospital in Dallas on the night of his arrest and was still alive the following morning, but died shortly after. AfghanEvac called for an immediate investigation. "It is highly unusual for an otherwise healthy 41-year-old man to die less than a day after being taken into government custody," VanDiver said.

Football clinic in Mexico City



This aerial view shows thousands of attendees to a world-class football clinic at the Zocalo square in Mexico City yesterday, aimed at setting a new Guinness World Record. (AFP)

Venezuela leader urges US to lift all sanctions

AFP
Caracas

Venezuela's interim leader Delcy Rodríguez asked US President Donald Trump on Friday to totally lift the sanctions imposed on her country, as the countries begin to restore diplomatic ties.

American officials are seeking greater access to Venezuela's oil and mineral wealth since a US military operation ousted leftist leader Nicolas Maduro January 3.

The US Treasury began imposing sanctions in 2014 that have crippled Venezuela's economy, which saw inflation soar to 475% in 2025.

Its oil infrastructure has also suffered from years of under-investment, with the country currently producing only a few mn barrels per day despite having the world's largest oil reserves.

But since January, the US has eased a seven-year-old oil embargo on Venezuela and issued licenses allowing a handful of multinationals to operate in the country under certain conditions.

On Friday, the US also authorised imports of fertiliser

from Venezuela, as the US-Israel war against Iran drives up prices of the key agricultural commodity.

"Unilateral coercive measures against the Venezuelan people also affect people across Latin America," Rodríguez said during a meeting with a Colombian delegation in Caracas.

"It affects the economy of Colombia, the economy of Venezuela, and our people," she said.

The talks in Caracas aimed to mark a thaw in relations between the two South American neighbours, with Rodríguez now pushing Colombian rebels back across the border.

The Trump administration has pressed both sides to tackle groups operating across the border like the National Liberation Army, or ELN, a leftist guerrilla group deeply involved in the drug trade.

"This is a problem we have as countries and we are determined to make progress together," Rodríguez said.

Her predecessor Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores were taken by US forces to New York to face trial on drug trafficking charges. They have pleaded not guilty.

US airline CEOs urge Congress to end standoff, pay airport security officers

Reuters
Washington

The chief executive officers of major US airlines urged Congress yesterday to move quickly to end a 29-day partial government shutdown that has forced 50,000 airport security officers to work without pay, warning it could further disrupt US air travel.

Absences by Transportation Security Administration officers have already disrupted travel at some major airports over the last week, raising alarm as the busy spring break travel season continues.

"Too many travellers are having to wait in extraordinarily long — and painfully slow — lines at checkpoints," the CEOs of American Airlines, United Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Southwest Airlines, JetBlue Airways, Alaska Air and others wrote in an open letter to Congress. "First, leaders should immediately come together to reach an agreement to fund the Department of Homeland Security. Then they need to act so this problem never happens again," they added.

Last fall, a 43-day government shutdown led to widespread flight disruptions and the FAA ordered a 10% flight cut at major airports. "Once again air travel is the political football amid another government

shutdown," the CEOs wrote. The group of airline executives — which also includes senior executives at cargo carriers FedEx, UPS and Atlas Air — called for legislation to ensure during future government shutdowns all critical government aviation personnel are paid.

Senators from both parties failed on Thursday in competing efforts to fund the TSA, which said last week that more than 300 officers have quit since the shutdown began.

The Homeland Security Department's funding lapsed on February 13 after Congress failed to reach a deal on immigration enforcement reforms demanded by Democrats.



TSA agents assist travellers in Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in Arlington, Virginia. (AFP)

India arrests another suspect in Bangladesh uprising leader's killing

AFP
Kolkata

Indian police said yesterday they had arrested a Bangladeshi man for allegedly helping two fellow nationals, accused of murdering a popular student leader in Dhaka, enter India illegally.

Sharif Osman Hadi, a vocal India critic who took part in Bangladesh's 2024 mass uprising, was shot by masked assailants in Dhaka on December 12 and later succumbed to his injuries at a hospital in Singapore.

West Bengal police named Faisal Karim Masud and Alamgir Hossain as the prime suspects in the killing and said they allegedly

fled Bangladesh through the Ha-luaghat border with India shortly after Hadi's attack. India arrested the pair on March 8 and they remain in police custody.

Yesterday, West Bengal's Special Task Force Superintendent Indrajit Sarkar told AFP that Philip Sangma had been arrested on suspicion of helping Masud and Hossain enter the state of West Bengal through its porous border.

Sangma was "held on Saturday for facilitating the illegal entry of the two prime suspects in the murder of Bangladeshi youth activist (Sharif Osman) Hadi," Sarkar said, adding that he appeared in a district court on Saturday before being remanded to police custody for a week.

Hadi's death set off violent

protests in Bangladesh, with angry mobs torching several buildings including two major newspapers deemed to favour India, as well as a prominent cultural institution.

The killing further strained ties between India and Bangladesh that had frayed since former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled the pro-democracy uprising and sought refuge in India.

India's foreign ministry has said it rejects "false narratives" about New Delhi's involvement in Hadi's killing.

In a sign of a potential thaw, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated the Bangladesh Nationalist Party for winning the first parliamentary elections since Hasina's exit.

Pro-Palestinian group protests in London



Protesters hold placards at an annual protest, this year a static protest, held by pro-Palestinian group in central London yesterday. (AFP)

North Korea conducts test of nuclear-capable rocket launchers

AFP
Seoul

North Korea tested nuclear-capable rocket launchers, state media reported yesterday, a day after Seoul detected the launch of around 10 ballistic missiles.

The test comes after South Korean and US forces kicked off their springtime military drills, due to run until March 19.

North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un oversaw the testing on Saturday of the multiple rocket launcher system (MRLS), the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

It said the test involved 12 600mm-calibre ultra-precision multiple rocket launchers and two artillery companies.

Kim said the drill gave Pyongyang's enemies, within the 420 kilometres (around 260 miles) striking range, a sense of "uneasiness" and "a deep understanding of the destructive power of tactical nuclear weapon", KCNA reported.

The rockets battered an island target in the East Sea of Korea more than 360km away, KCNA said yesterday.

Kim praised the MRLS as a "very deadly yet attractive weapon".

Photos released by state media showed several rockets blasting off large vehicles into the air.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and his daughter Kim Ju-ae observing a training exercise of North Korean Army's 600mm-calibre ultra-precision multiple rocket launchers, at an undisclosed location in North Korea. (AFP)

Another picture shows Kim and his daughter Ju-ae watching the launch from afar, flanked by a military official. Ju-ae has long been seen as next in line to rule the country, a perception stoked by a string of recent high-profile outings.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said it had detected multiple launches on Saturday from the North into the East Sea, also known as the Sea of Japan.

Seoul's presidential Blue House condemned the launches as a "provocation that violates United Nations Security Council resolu-

tions" and urged Pyongyang to immediately stop such acts.

The launches came hours after South Korean Prime Minister Kim Min-seok said that US President Donald Trump thinks a meeting with Pyongyang's Kim would be "good". The Trump administration has pushed in recent months to revive high-level talks with Pyongyang, eyeing a possible summit with Kim this year, potentially during Trump's visit to Beijing set for late March.

After largely ignoring these overtures, Kim said recently that the two nations could "get

along" if Washington accepted Pyongyang's nuclear status.

The US and South Korea's springtime military drills, dubbed "Freedom Shield", will involve about 18,000 Korean troops and run until March 19.

Kim's comment on the rockets suggested it was in response to the ongoing exercise, Hong Min, a senior analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification, told AFP.

"The launch pattern... is closely synchronised with the schedule" of the joint drills, he said.

"This suggests the weapons system is being operated as a means of nuclear deterrence and practical demonstration" against the alliance.

This week, Kim Yo-jong, a powerful confidante of her brother Kim Jong-un, said the joint drills "may cause unimaginably terrible consequences". She went on to say the drills were taking place at "a critical time when global security structure is collapsing rapidly and wars break out in different parts of the world".

Pyongyang has condemned the US-Israeli attack on Iran as an "illegal act of aggression", claiming it shows the "rogue" nature of the United States.

North Korea also recently carried out missile tests from the naval Choe Hyon destroyer, claiming the country was in the process of "arming the Navy with nuclear weapons".

One-party Vietnam holds parliamentary election

AFP
Hanoi

Voters in Vietnam cast their ballots yesterday for members of the National Assembly, the country's top legislative body that serves mainly to ratify decisions by the ruling Communist Party.

The southeast Asian nation of 100mn is both an economic success story, boasting 8% growth last year, and a repressive one-party state that often jails its critics.

Out of 864 candidates for the 500-seat parliament, only 65 are not members of the Communist Party — down from 74 in the last vote five years ago.

Patriotic red-and-yellow banners fluttered from lamp-posts and traffic lights in the capital Hanoi while on social media, many users posted photos of their voting certificates, showing they had upheld their civic duty.

But in a country where major policies and projects are decided by senior cadres, many citizens feel lukewarm about going to the polls.

"These elections have been the same for years. I don't know so much about those who I voted for," grocery store employee Nguyen Thi Huong said in Hanoi.

"But who cares. I think they have higher education now so they will do something good for the country and for the people," the 52-year-old added.

State media said more than 99% of 79mn eligible voters had cast their ballots as of Sunday evening — a typically high official turnout.

Polling stations were scheduled to officially close at 7:00pm (1200 GMT), with results not expected for at least a week.

Among the new parliament's first tasks when it sits next month will be to confirm senior leaders already selected by the party at its twice-a-decade congress in January.

Top leader To Lam was reaffirmed as general secretary, but

Out of 864 candidates for the 500-seat parliament, only 65 are not members of the Communist Party

he is widely expected to become president as well — a post that requires approval by lawmakers.

"As more or less a window-dressing institution, there won't be any big surprises at the vote," said Nguyen Khac Giang of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore.

"However, top personnel selections — particularly the prime minister and the president — will carry significant implications for the ongoing reform process," he added.

Lam has implemented dramatic changes in nearly two years at the helm, slashing bureaucratic red tape and pushing major infrastructure investments as he aims to boost economic growth.

The party rallied around his bold vision at the January congress, electing several of Lam's allies to its highest decision-making body.

Aside from his reappointment as general secretary, however, the party did not publicly announce the other main "pillars" of Vietnam's collective leadership structure.

The president, prime minister and head of the national assembly will all be confirmed by lawmakers' votes.

Lam would be the first person to have secured the top two jobs at a party congress, rather than stepping in following a holder's death.

After voting Sunday morning in Hanoi, Lam said on live television that the election aimed "to choose the most prestigious people to continue leading the country to more development".

First-time voter Nguyen Kim Chi, 18, said she cast her ballot in the capital for "all the young" candidates.

"I know top positions are already set," she added, "but I still hope my votes count."

Seoul 'closely monitoring' Trump call to send warships to Hormuz

AFP
Seoul

South Korea said yesterday it was paying close attention to US President Donald Trump's call for Seoul and other countries to send warships to help protect oil supplies passing through the Strait of Hormuz.

Since US-Israeli forces launched a war against Iran on February 28, Tehran has responded with attacks and threats that have nearly halted shipping in the strait, through which one-fifth of global oil supplies normally passes.

After earlier vowing that the US Navy would begin escorting tankers through the waterway, Trump said on social media on Saturday that "Many Countries" would also send warships to keep it open, naming South Korea and Japan among others.

But after a senior Japanese official said on Sunday that Tokyo maintained a high threshold for such a move, Seoul also refrained from making any explicit commitments.

"We are closely monitoring President Trump's remarks on social media and will carefully consider the matter in close consultation with the United States," a South

Korean presidential official told AFP.

Seoul was "comprehensively considering and exploring various measures... to ensure the safety of energy transport routes", the official said.

Like other Asian economies, South Korea relies heavily on energy imports, including through the Strait of Hormuz.

The war has already prompted Seoul to impose a fuel price cap to ease pressure on its energy supply, the first such measure since 1997.

Trump also mentioned China, France and Britain by name in his post, saying he hoped countries "that are affected by this artificial constraint will send Ships to the area".

Japan says bar high for sending warships to protect Gulf oil lane

A senior Japanese policy adviser said yesterday the threshold is "extremely high" for Tokyo to send its warships to help protect a shipping lane for oil in the Middle East, hours after US President Donald Trump's call for other countries to do so.

Two weeks after the US and Israel attacked Iran, the Gulf region remained in the grip of the conflict, sending oil prices soaring as Iran has choked off the vital Strait of Hormuz and attacked Gulf energy facilities.

After earlier vowing that the US Navy would "very soon" begin escorting tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, US President Donald Trump called for reinforcements on Saturday from countries including Japan.

The world's number-four economy is the fifth-biggest importer of oil — 95% of it from the Middle East and 70% passing through the Strait of Hormuz, which is now effectively closed.

"I regard the threshold as extremely high" for sending Japanese navy ships to the region under existing Japanese laws, Takayuki Kobayashi, the policy chief of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), said yesterday on the public broadcaster NHK's political debate programme.

"Legally speaking, we do not rule out the possibility, but given the current situation in which this conflict is ongoing, I believe this is something that must be considered with great caution," he said.

Sending its Self-Defence Forces abroad is politically sensitive in the officially pacifist Japan, as many voters support the US-imposed, war-renouncing 1947 constitution.

Last week, Takaichi said at a parliament session "nothing has been decided" over whether to send Japanese warships to the Middle East to escort tankers. Takaichi is expected to visit Washington this week to hold talks with Trump, in which a range of issues including security in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as the Iran war, will likely be discussed.

Kobayashi said he would like to see Takaichi "ascertain what President Trump's true intentions are" over his call for reinforcements.

He said he expected the leaders to discuss how Tokyo and Washington "can work closely together to ensure that there would be no vacuum in the security framework of East Asia" as US troops are reportedly being sent to the Gulf from their bases in Japan and South Korea. (AFP)

Chinese, US trade delegations meet in Paris

AFP
Beijing

Officials from China and the US met for trade talks in Paris yesterday, state media said, less than three weeks before President Donald Trump's expected summit with Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping.

US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent was meeting Chinese Vice-Premier He Lifeng to hash out trade issues between the world's two largest economies before Trump's expected official visit to China at the end of the month.

China's state broadcaster CCTV said the talks, which the US side said would last for two days, were being held at the OECD headquarters in Paris.

The diplomatic engagements come at a tumultuous time for the global economy, with energy markets sent spinning by the impact of the US-Israeli war with Iran.

Beijing is a close partner of Tehran and has condemned the killing of Iran's former supreme leader, but it has also criticised

Iranian strikes against Gulf states.

Trump, in social media posts on Saturday, called on China and other countries to send ships to the Strait of Hormuz to ensure that the vital shipping lane, through which about a fifth of world oil supplies pass, stayed open.

China's foreign ministry has not yet responded to a request for comment on Trump's request. South Korea said yesterday it was "closely monitoring" Trump's remarks and a senior Japanese official said that Tokyo maintained a high threshold for such a move.

China's commerce ministry said in a statement on Friday that officials in Paris would "conduct consultations on economic and trade issues of mutual concern", without giving further details about the content of the talks.

Bessent, who was to be accompanied by US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer, said in a statement on Thursday that "economic dialogue" between the countries "is moving forward".

China and the US fought a bruising trade war for much

The diplomatic engagements come at a tumultuous time for the global economy, with energy markets sent spinning by the impact of the war

of 2025, with reciprocal tariffs reaching triple digits at one point and export restrictions threatening to wreck global supply chains for critical minerals.

China's exports to the US fell 11% in the first two months of the year compared with the same period in 2025, data showed this week, although overall exports surged by almost 22%.

Tensions between the two economic titans cooled after Trump met Xi in Busan, South Korea, in October, but new US probes into Chinese industrial overcapacity and forced labour announced on Wednesday threaten more instability.

The new trade investigations into excess industrial capacity target China and other key partners.

China's commerce ministry

criticised the probes as "a typical act of unilateralism that severely undermines the international economic and trade order".

Washington has also launched trade investigations into 60 economies — including China — to look for "failures to take action on forced labour", the US Trade Representative office said.

The latest probes will likely take months, but could justify new tariffs after the US Supreme Court struck down Trump's sweeping global duties in February.

Asked on Friday about the US investigation into forced labour, China's foreign ministry said it "opposes all forms of unilateral tariff measures".

"The so-called forced labour is entirely a lie fabricated by the US side," ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun said.

The Paris gathering, which is due to last two days, is seen as setting the stage for Trump's expected visit to China later this month.

Washington has said Trump will visit China from March 31-April 2, although Beijing has yet to confirm those dates in line with its usual practice.



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Airline hedging strategies fall short as jet fuel price surges

As a sharp rise in oil prices rattles global transport markets, airlines face an additional threat: the price of jet fuel has risen far faster than crude prices.

Even airlines that use hedging contracts to protect against sudden spikes in oil prices are rapidly announcing fare hikes, fuel surcharges and capacity cuts as they grapple with an unprecedented jump in refining margins since the start of the US-Israeli war on Iran.

Jet fuel prices normally move in tandem with oil prices, but they have doubled since the Iran conflict, far outpacing a one-third rise in crude prices, casting a shadow over margins and rattling carriers around the world. "It's a dramatic increase," Cathay Pacific Airways Chief Financial Officer Rebecca Sharpe said in Hong Kong after reporting earnings on Wednesday. "Our hedging is on crude oil rather than jet fuel. And therefore, while we do have some protection from that hedging, obviously, it's not protecting against the jet fuel price in totality."

Major carriers in the US and China have no hedging contracts in place, leaving them fully exposed to jumps in the fuel price, which aviation expert Hans Joergen Elmaes said historically tended to remain elevated for months in events of unrest like the Middle East crisis.

"Traditionally, the history is low-cost carriers that carry the most price-sensitive customers. They're the ones that get squeezed the most in this environment," said Nathan Gee, Bank of America's head of Asia Pacific transportation research.

Low-cost carriers among the most exposed as price-sensitive, analyst says

Hedging remains a double-edged sword. While it can shield airlines from sudden spikes in fuel costs through the use of derivative contracts, it risks losses when prices fall, exposing carriers to above-market rates in swaps — a certain type of hedge contract that has burned some carriers in the past. In Europe, where hedging is common, a sustained 10% increase in jet fuel prices could hit budget airline Wizz Air's operating profit by as much as 31% this year, according to J P Morgan, with impacts between 3% and 10% for Air France KLM, Lufthansa, British Airways-owner IAG and Ryanair.

Wizz, which flagged a 50mn euro (\$57.74mn) hit from the Middle Eastern conflict, has hedged 83% of its jet fuel needs through March, but is only 55% covered in the year through March 2027. Its CEO Jozsef Varadi told Reuters last week that the company was well protected.

In Asia, jet fuel prices were about \$21 a barrel higher than oil before the conflict, but the refining margin widened to as much as \$144 on March 4 and remained unusually high at \$65 as of Wednesday. "That's what blew out last week and that's where everyone is less protected," said BofA's Gee.

Air New Zealand and Australia's Qantas Airways do not even fly to the Middle East and are more than 80% hedged against crude oil for the half-year ending in June, but they have already lifted fares to protect margins.

BofA said Asian airlines' 2026 net profits could drop by an average of 6% for each \$10 per barrel increase in refining margins for 90 days, assuming no pricing offsets.

Many Asian airlines had no hedging or only hedged against the Brent oil price benchmark, with Singapore Airlines and Virgin Australia standouts with more protection against jet fuel price rises, industry analysts said.

Cathay's Sharpe said many airlines lacked jet fuel hedging because it was a far smaller market and more costly to hedge than oil. "The market is very thin and it makes it very expensive," she said. "Fuel prices can be highly volatile and we don't have a crystal ball as to what the future will bring." (Reuters)

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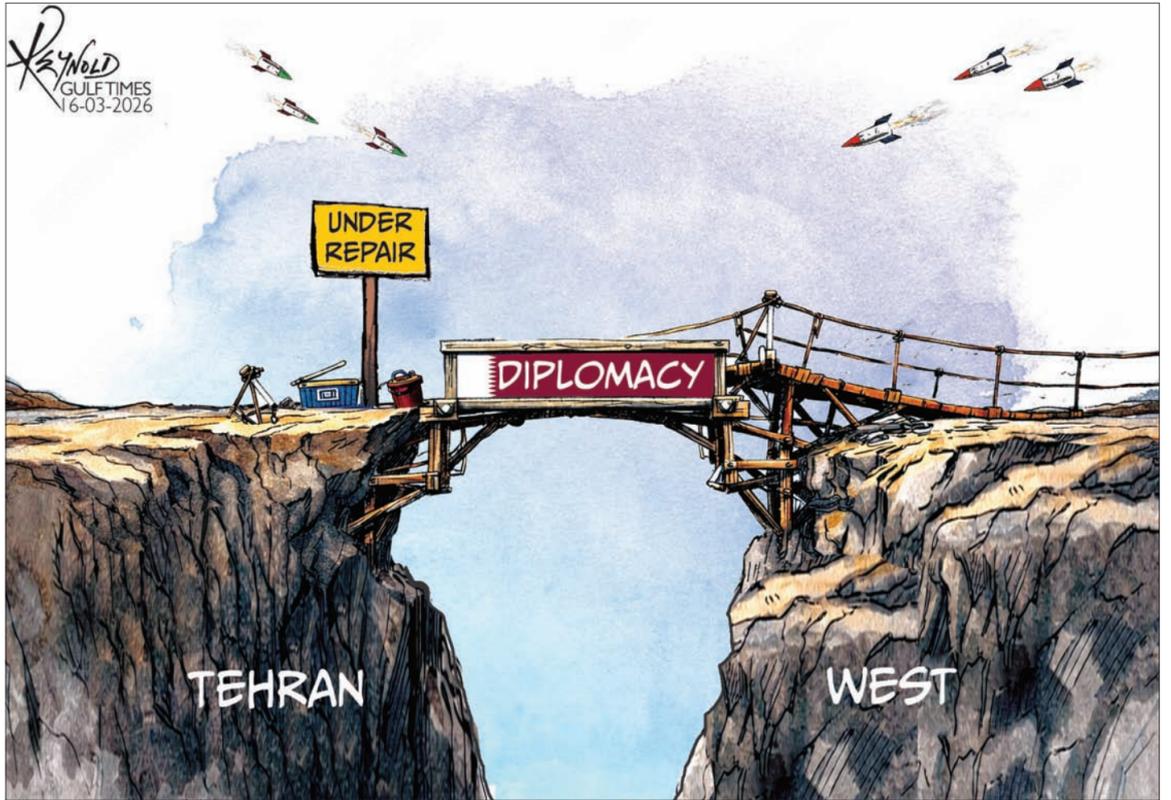
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Globe-trotting Carney turns to allies as economic pressures build in Canada

- PM boosts nation's Arctic defence amid tariffs
- Davos speech surges Liberal Party poll lead over rivals

By Laura Dhillon Kane and Brian Platt
Bloomberg

Standing in a desolate, snow-covered field 200 miles above the Arctic Circle, Mark Carney looked at ease.

He chatted with Germany's chancellor and Norway's prime minister as they observed a Nato exercise — troops on cross-country skis and snowmobiles zipping across the ice to battle a simulated Russian threat.

The former central banker came to power a year ago touting his experience at handling crises. At the time, Canadians were in shock over Donald Trump's tariffs and threats against the country's sovereignty. Carney promised to shield them from those pressures and won an election. He announced a rapid increase in military spending, partly to bolster the country's fragile Arctic defences.

Carney's attendance at Friday's Nato exercise in Bardufoss, Norway, was a small demonstration of his foreign policy in action. But the limits of his influence were also evident. The Trump administration had just launched another tariff probe targeting 60 economies, including Canada, and eased sanctions on Russian oil, a move opposed by Carney and other allies.

Speaking at a news conference alongside Germany's Friedrich Merz and Norway's Jonas Gahr Støre, Carney insisted the US remains a trusted partner in northern security. But Canada will stand on its own two feet. "We will do that by very large investments," he said, and "in partnership with our closest allies, very much including Norway and Germany."

Carney's first year in office has been a feverish period of globe-trotting, including trips to Mexico, China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, South Africa, Singapore, Malaysia and Ukraine, as well as a meeting with Trump at the White House. He's visited the Gulf states and nearly every major European country. The constant travel is aimed at expanding Canada's trade alliances in response to Trump's punishing tariffs on autos, metals and lumber, and at rebuilding ties with countries that Justin Trudeau's government pulled away from.

Nothing Carney did in his first year of diplomacy had quite the global impact of his speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, where he urged countries to stop pretending the rules-based order remains intact. "Middle powers must act together because if you are not at the table, you are on the menu," he said in a speech that raised hackles at the White House.

The Davos address also punched through at home. About 81% of Canadians agreed with the sentiments in the



Mark Carney in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. PICTURE: David Kawai/Bloomberg

speech, according to a poll by Nanos Research conducted for Bloomberg News in early March. The effect has been to strengthen Carney's hand domestically. Surveys show his Liberal Party has opened up a double-digit lead over the Conservatives. In last year's election, the Liberal margin of victory was a little over two points.

David Coletto of the pollster Abacus Data said he has "no doubt" the Davos speech boosted Carney's support. "You could draw a line just before and after, and you see a significant three to four point bump in his approval, in the Liberals' numbers — and even optimism about the direction of the country," he said.

Still, that success comes with a mixed record on some of the issues that helped bring him to power.

Carney won the election by convincing people he was the best leader to square off with Trump. He promised he could reach a broad new deal with the US covering security as well as trade. Yet he's been unable to get even a limited agreement to lower any of the tariffs that are crushing parts of Canada's manufacturing sector.

The economic fallout may be

arriving. Trade data released this week showed Canada's exports of motor vehicles and parts falling to the lowest level in more than four years. In February, the country recorded its largest monthly job loss since January 2022. "No sense sugar-coating this one — this is simply a brutal result," Bank of Montreal chief economist Doug Porter wrote of the jobs report.

Carney's promised economic transformation is progressing slowly despite his pledge to build projects "at speeds not seen in generations." He's spoken approvingly of big plans — a new oil pipeline to the west coast and a massive carbon capture system, among other things — but most haven't advanced beyond the planning stages.

Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre is making the case that the prime minister's economic diversification strategy is failing.

"Mark Carney's idea that he's going to replace the American market with China or other overseas markets for automobiles is an illusion," Poilievre said Friday in Windsor, Ontario, a border city that hosts a Stellantis NV assembly plant and a Ford Motor Co engine plant. "Almost all of our automobile exports go to the US. There is no replacing that market."

Carney, speaking to reporters yesterday in Norway, said he never promised to get US tariffs removed. "I promised the best deal for Canada." Mexico and Canada have relative low effective tariff rates on their goods going into the US because of an exemption for most things shipped under the continental trade agreement known as USMCA.

'Overwhelming Advantage' Coletto, the pollster, said public opinion shows Canadians generally place the blame for economic turmoil on the US president, not Carney. When asked who's best placed to deal with Trump, the Liberals score a 40-point advantage over the Conservatives in Abacus Data's polling.

"It's the one issue out of everything where they have an overwhelming advantage over the Conservatives right now, and they've had that basically since the day Mark Carney got this job," Coletto said.

The sense that Canada and the world are in a state of crisis has also helped Carney solidify the Liberals' position in parliament. Since November, he's convinced four opposition lawmakers — three Conservatives and one New Democrat — to "cross the floor" and join his Liberals, an unusual feat in modern Canadian politics.

Next month will see three special elections to fill vacant federal districts. If the Liberals win at least two, they'll hold a majority of seats in the House of Commons, giving Carney and his cabinet more latitude to govern as they want — and a longer runway before they have to face voters again.

"He enters his second year with an incredible amount of political capital, and a lot of wind behind his back — even as, to keep that analogy, there's incredible headwinds facing Canada," Coletto said.



An auto carrier drives by government buildings in Ottawa.

Kazakhstan votes on constitution overhaul

Kazakhs began voting yesterday in a constitutional referendum that authorities brand as democratising – though several proposed amendments appear to strengthen presidential powers in Central Asia's richest country.

The vote on changing around 80% of the country's basic law has been pushed by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who seeks to balance the resource-rich former Soviet republic's ties between the European Union, Russia and China.

More than half of the country's approximately 12.5m registered voters had cast their ballots by 2pm local time (0900 GMT), according to electoral authorities.

After 2022 protests over the cost of living escalated into riots and left 238 people dead, the president pledged to liberalise the political system to build a "just Kazakhstan".

Announcing the amendments in February, he said: "Kazakhstan is once and for all moving away from a super-presidential form of rule and transitioning to a presidential republic with a strong parliament."

Tokayev, a Soviet-educated former diplomat who speaks fluent Chinese, said his proposals would essentially create a "new system of state governance" that would "allow for the redistribution of power" and "strengthen the checks and balances system".

However, several proposals indicate the opposite: the president would be able to appoint top officials such as the heads of the central bank, the intelligence services and the constitutional court.

The positions currently require approval from the Senate, the parliament's upper chamber, which would be abolished under the amendments.

Instead, a new single-chamber assembly, the Kurultai, would be created.

However, the head of state would be able to dissolve it and rule by executive orders if the parliament refuses to approve presidential nominees to key posts twice.

The amendments provide for a further tightening of freedom of speech, stating that it must not "undermine the morality of society or violate public order", according to the draft text.

Demonstrations – already rare in Kazakhstan – could also face further limitations.

The sweeping constitutional overhaul was proposed just a month ago and then rushed through a hasty two-week campaign that saw little criticism.

International observers say that elections in Kazakhstan are often predictable and tend to ratify decisions taken by the leadership, as across much of post-Soviet Central Asia.

Tokayev brands himself as a reformer seeking to break with the country's authoritarian past, but rights groups say democratic institutions remain tightly controlled.

To boost turnout and support for the referendum, authorities have involved famous athletes and mobilised workers in mining and oil industries – two important sectors in the Kazakh economy.

Several critics of the reforms have been summoned by police or briefly detained, while journalists who published independent opinion polls have been fined. – AFP

French voters pick mayors in test of political mood ahead of 2027 polls

AFP/Reuters
Paris

French voters cast votes yesterday to pick mayors and councillors in elections widely seen as a barometer of France's political mood ahead of the high-stakes 2027 presidential race.

Mayors lead nearly 35,000 municipalities in the country, from major cities to villages with only a few dozen residents.

Local results can shape national momentum, especially so close to a presidential election, which opinion polls show the far-right National Rally (RN) could potentially win.

Voting started at 8am (0700 GMT) and ended at 8pm with preliminary results to be released shortly after. In many medium to large cities there will be a second round on March 22.

By 5pm, voter turnout was less than 49%, up from the roughly 39% at the same stage in the last mayoral elections in 2020, which were held during the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, but lower than the 55% turnout in 2014.

Marine Le Pen's ascendant far-right party views next year's contest as its strongest chance yet to take power, with centrist President Emmanuel Macron constitutionally barred from running again.

While nearly 90% of France's communes are small rural constituencies where local

elections are traditionally depoliticised, the races could nonetheless reveal key trends and dynamics, said political scientist Nonna Mayer.

"In large towns, national issues will matter more, and they can give some hints on the electoral dynamic of the main parties," Mayer, who is affiliated with Sciences Po university and scientific research centre CNRS, told AFP.

Who wins cities like Paris, Lyon, Marseille and Nice will matter, she added.

Clarisse Bremaud, a 26-year-old exhibition producer, was among the voters trickling in and out of a polling station in central Paris.

"For me it's important to take part in every election," she told AFP. "I feel it's even more crucial today with what's happening in France – particularly with the evolution of politics in France and the world."

Historically, France's major cities have been governed either by centre-left parties or the right-wing Republicans.

By contrast, Le Pen's far-right National Rally, the hard-left party of firebrand Jean-Luc Melenchon and Macron's centrists have struggled to establish a strong local footprint.

The National Rally (RN), which currently governs only one major city of more than 100,000 inhabitants, Perpignan, hopes to strengthen its local presence by capturing urban centres such as Toulon and Marseille, France's second largest city.

At a polling station in Marseille, construction worker Serge said he was neither worried nor hopeful about the RN.

"They are not worse than the others. It won't change anything. Nothing changes, and that is the problem," said the 61-year-old, who declined to give his last name, adding that security is a priority for him in this election.

A strong performance would mark an important milestone in the RN's longstanding effort to gain broader acceptance in the political mainstream.

The anti-immigration party sees the elections as an opportunity to show it can govern at the local level.

"France's recovery begins this Sunday," RN chief Jordan Bardella, 30, told voters, urging them to turn out en masse.

In one of the highest-profile contests, former prime minister Edouard Philippe is hoping to keep his seat as mayor of the northern port city of Le Havre, a role he has held since 2014.

A loss by 55-year-old Philippe, seen by some as the strongest candidate to take on Le Pen or Bardella, in the 2027 polls, will deplete his political capital.

All eyes are also on the battle for Paris, where Rachida Dati, a combative former culture minister and one-time protégé of now convicted ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy, hopes to wrest control of the city from the left, which has run the French

capital for the last quarter-century.

Dati goes neck-to-neck with left-wing candidate Emmanuel Gregoire, 48, and the loss of Paris would be a blow to the Socialist Party ahead of the presidential campaign.

"I had zero hesitation on who to pick," Anne Torregrossa, a 65-year-old civil servant, told AFP in Paris, adding her priorities included "the environment, civil liberties, and living together in harmony", though she declined to reveal her choice.

Many mayoral candidates have distanced themselves from political parties, reflecting voters' exasperation with the elites and the paralysis that has gripped the country ever since Macron called snap elections in 2024.

"Turnout will tell us about the health of French democracy," said Mayer, the political scientist, pointing to "political distrust and disaffection".

The week between the two rounds is expected to see political parties negotiating deals with rivals and joining forces against strong opponents.

"The pattern of tactical voting will offer a preview for next year," said Mujtaba Rahman, Europe director at risk analysis firm Eurasia Group.

He said the election results would indicate whether a strategy to contain the far right was "dead or might still be revived".

A second round of voting will be held in all cities where no single list wins more than 50% of the vote.



Political move

A pedestrian walks past campaign posters for the Lille mayoral candidates during the first round of France's 2026 municipal elections in Lille, northern France. – AFP

Left: A woman votes at a polling station in Almaty during a referendum on a new constitution. – Reuters



The Hungarian flag is seen as supporters of the opposition Tisza party attend a march during Hungary's National Day celebrations, which also commemorates the 1848 Hungarian Revolution against Habsburg rule, in Budapest. – Reuters



Prime Minister Viktor Orban is seen after his speech at a rally organised by Hungary's ruling Fidesz party in Budapest. – AFP

Moldova issues oil spill alert after Russia strike on Ukraine

Moldova has triggered an environmental alert following a fuel spill in the Dniester River triggered by a Russian military strike in Ukraine, the government said yesterday.

Authorities have "declared a state of environmental alert in the Dniester River basin for 15 days, effective March 16, 2026", the CNMC government crisis management centre said in a statement.

The fuel spill is thought to have been caused by a Russian attack on the Dniester Hydroelectric Power Plant in Ukraine on March 7.

Ukrainian authorities first reported contamination in the river on March 10 near Lyadova and other settlements, calling the incident a "manifestation of Russia's environmental aggression".

The pollution quickly moved downstream into Moldova, where emergency teams have installed absorbent barriers and urged residents to follow official guidance while the situation remains unstable.

Moldovan authorities have urged several communities not to drink, cook with or otherwise use water from the Dniester River until further notice, and in some areas water supply has been suspended.

The amount of fuel spilled is not known, but Ukrainian authorities have described the incident as a "large-scale leakage".

Romania deployed a 10-member emergency team to the area on March 14 with specialised equipment and materials after Moldova formally asked the EU for assistance.

Environment Minister Gheorghe Hajder has accused Russia of being "solely responsible for the pollution". – AFP

Hungary's feuding parties stage big rallies

Reuters/AFP
Budapest

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban sought yesterday to mobilise voters for what he called a "historic" vote on April 12, while opposition supporters hoping to end the nationalist leader's 16-year rule turned out in droves at a rival rally.

Huge crowds joined rival marches in Budapest yesterday, as both Orban and Magyar push allegations of foreign interference just four weeks before tightly fought elections.

Tens of thousands of people attended both rallies, according to AFP journalists on site.

Orban faces what could be his toughest bid for re-election after three years of stagnation, a surge in the cost of living and a pro-EU rival seen by many as a viable alternative.

Both Orban's right-wing Fidesz and centre-right challenger Peter Magyar's Tisza used Hungary's March 15 national day for a show of force as the campaign enters a pivotal stage.

Most surveys put Tisza ahead by a wide margin.

Orban has cast the vote as a choice between war and peace, accusing his rivals of plotting to drag Hungary into the war raging in neighbour-

ing Ukraine since Russia's February 2022 invasion, accusations which the opposition denies.

Dismissing his rival's poll lead, Orban said Fidesz should aim to exceed its 2022 election landslide.

"We must win not like we did four years ago but better. We need not as many votes as four years ago but more," he said. "We must score a historic victory, because the next government will have a historic responsibility."

Orban said his supporters' rally was the largest of its kind, filling a main square outside parliament.

Opposition supporters thronged a majestic avenue stretching from near the Danube River to Heroes' Square in one of the largest rallies against Orban, exposing deep rifts in Hungary.

A Fidesz supporter called Orban "Europe's best politician" while some attending Magyar's rally wondered if they had a future in Hungary if Orban gets re-elected.

"There is unrest all over the world, and here in our little country we want to preserve peace, calm and security. And Viktor Orban ensures that for us," said Sandor Pista, 60, who came from the southern university town of Pecs.

Orban has long been at loggerheads with the EU over a range of issues, including Ukraine.

Defying Brussels, he has maintained cordial

ties with Moscow, refuses to send weapons to Ukraine, and says Kyiv can never join the EU.

While most polls have shown a Tisza lead, Fidesz points to surveys showing it on course to victory, though its opponents say these have mainly been conducted by institutes with financial or personal ties to the ruling party.

Magyar has dismissed Orban's campaign as laughable "propaganda", but Tisza has trodden cautiously on Ukraine, saying that it opposes any fast-track EU accession for Kyiv and that it would put the issue to a binding referendum if it wins power.

Magyar, speaking in a venue where Orban shot to fame in 1989 by calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops from the country, said Hungary's place was squarely in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato).

"Holding on to power at all costs. It is all that matters to him now," Magyar said of Orban. "Provoking with war, threatening with war, stoking war. This is his ultimate weapon against the Hungarian people."

Some opposition supporters also thought the election would be a watershed moment.

"I think this country cannot bear four more years of Fidesz rule," Noemi Szemerszki said.

Pakistan forces hit military facilities in Afghanistan

Pakistan said yesterday that its forces had attacked military facilities in southern Afghanistan, as well as "terrorist hideouts", in the latest strikes between the two sides.

Security sources said troops "effectively destroyed technical support infrastructure and equipment storage facility in Kandahar", which is home to the Taliban administration's supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada.

Another strike targeted a tunnel in Kandahar purportedly used by the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban militant group or TTP, which Islamabad blames for a wave of strikes, they added.

The military later said that four civilians – all brothers – were killed when Afghan shelling hit a house in Bajaur, on the Pakistan side of the border. Another person was seriously injured.

Both sides maintain they do not target civilians. Independent verification of deaths and injuries is difficult to obtain, given the hard-to-reach locations.

Local residents in Kandahar told AFP that they saw jet planes flying over the city and heard explosions during the night.

"Military planes flew over the mountain where there is a military facility, and an explosion followed," one said, adding flames could be seen.

An air strike was also heard in Spin Boldak, southeast of Kandahar, residents said, while authorities in the eastern border province of Khost said there were clashes on Saturday night.

Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told AFP that the strikes caused some damage to a drug rehabilitation centre and an empty container in Kandahar.

"The places they are talking about are far away from these two places," he added. – AFP

QRCS improves access to food for vulnerable families in Syria

QNA
Doha

The Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) has launched a humanitarian project in Syria, as part of its ongoing efforts to alleviate the suffering of those affected by the continuing humanitarian crisis.

The project aims to empower the most vulnerable Syrian families in villages and towns of Idlib and Aleppo governorates and their surrounding rural areas by improving their access to food amidst worsening food insecurity.

Implemented in co-operation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), the project targets the provision of essential food assistance to the most needy families. It will benefit 6,125 families, comprising a total of 30,625 individuals including displaced families, low-income families, older persons, and persons with disabilities.

Field teams have begun distributing comprehensive food baskets that contribute to meeting



nutritional needs and improving the food security of the beneficiary families.

The food baskets contain grains, legumes, oils, sugar, and other food items that help meet daily needs and provide a regular source of food for the beneficiary families.

The Qatar Red Crescent reaffirmed its commitment to continuing its humanitarian efforts in Syria, working alongside its local and international partners to make a difference in the lives of the affected populations and enhance the resilience of the communities most in need.



First-year pre-medical students at Weill Cornell Medicine – Qatar (WCM-Q) in February explored Qatar's rich biodiversity during a field trip to the mangrove forest at Jazirat Bin Ghannam, also known as Purple Island.

Divided into three groups, the students visited the island on three separate days, where they identified and collected invertebrates and observed how local flora and fauna have adapted to the environment.

Under the supervision of Dr Kuei-Chiu Chen, a professor of biology at WCM-Q, the students collected invertebrate animals. They brought the specimens to WCM-Q's state-of-the-art laboratory. There, they will process the tissue samples and extract deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) sequences

WCM-Q students study biodiversity on Purple Island



from selected genes, which will then be used to identify the species.

The students identified various marine invertebrates, including clams, snails, crabs, sponges, moss animals, segmented worms, sea stars, and shrimp, all of which lack a backbone. To minimise the impact on the animal population, each pair of students collected only one specimen.

In addition to marine life, the students studied plant species found on the island, including gray mangrove, *Zygodium qatariense*, and glaucous glasswort, all of which are adapted to the dry environment near the sea and can tolerate salt.

The students also learned about sea lavender, a plant with purple flowers that blooms in spring. Additionally, they learned

about the desert hyacinth, a parasitic plant with yellow flowers that lacks chlorophyll.

The annual field trip was part of the biology class, the first in a sequence of three laboratory classes, during which students were introduced to DNA barcoding as a method for identifying species.

Dr Chen said: "This was an opportunity for the students to see the diversity of organisms in their natural habitat and observe how animals and plants interact with each other. We used this opportunity to collect samples and connect outdoor activities with benchtop laboratory procedures, using technology to understand species diversity. We introduced the students to a technique called DNA barcoding. Using this technique, students can learn about species identification."

Talking about her experience,

student Noof al-Malik said: "The Purple Island trip was truly a remarkable experience where we were able to connect classroom theories to the wonders of nature. Along with our amazing guides, the biology team, we learned about the interconnectedness of biology, evolution and even Qatar's history."

Another student, Minu Kim, said: "The trip to Purple Island was filled with the excitement of observing and interacting with the complex ecosystems thriving there and the joy of exploring the beauty of the island with peers and tutors. The trip allowed me to engage directly with ecosystems that once seemed dull in textbooks, making learning far more vivid and meaningful."

The collection of invertebrate specimens was approved by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change.

QRCS to implement humanitarian projects in several countries

The Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) is continuing to implement a package of humanitarian projects in several countries as part of a Ramadan campaign for the year 1447 AH, aimed at supporting communities affected by crises and disasters and improving their living conditions.

The QRCS guide has outlined the implementation of 25 water and sanitation projects across 10 countries, benefiting approximately 3,669,846 people, at a total cost of QR39,815,845.

These projects include drilling artesian wells, installing solar-powered water pumps, constructing water tanks and water stations, operating mobile tankers to distribute clean drinking water in camps and orphanages, and building sanitary latrines.

The assistant secretary-general for Relief and International Development at the QRCS, Mohammed Badr al-Sada, said that providing clean water is a priority for affected communities.

The QRCS also plans to implement 12 projects to support

QRCS has outlined the implementation of 25 water, sanitation projects across 10 countries, 12 projects to support education in 8 countries

education in eight countries, benefiting 24,230 boys and girls, at a total cost of QR12,967,250.

These projects include maintaining and repairing schools, constructing and equipping classrooms, providing school supplies and backpacks, and sponsoring students.

As part of multi-sector projects, the plan encompasses nine projects to support orphans and the elderly in four countries, benefiting more than 56,300 people, at a cost exceeding QR21,977,500, through the provision of food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare services to the targeted groups. (QNA)



In uncertain times, art speaks of resilience

From Page 1

"The artist must stand as a voice of resilience. Creativity should reflect endurance, empathy and the shared values of our community," she said.

Artists often respond differently to political developments, she noted. Some engage directly with current events, while others remain more detached in their work. Yet throughout history, art has frequently served as a record of the struggles and emotions of societies experiencing conflict.

Mala points to figures such as Pablo Picasso, Otto Dix and Käthe Kollwitz, whose works captured the realities of the First and Second World Wars.

"Their creations continue to resonate as powerful testimonies of human endurance," she said. "Art carries meaning beyond its immediate moment. It offers future generations insight into the emotions and resilience of societies under strain."

While artists may approach these themes differently, many agree that creativity can provide communities with a structured language for processing fear, anxiety, and uncertainty.

"In times of geopolitical tension, art must serve with clarity and purpose. Through exhibitions, workshops and lessons, art provides a space where communities can transform uncertainty into dialogue," Mala said.

This perspective is shared by Pakistani artist Muznah Hasnat, who says the current atmosphere has deeply affected her creative process.

"As an artist, I am very sensitive to my environment. During times like this, it becomes difficult to concentrate. At the same time, art becomes a way to process those emotions," she said.

For Muznah, the canvas often becomes a space to translate emotional responses into visual expression.

"My work reflects hope, resilience and faith. Through colours and strokes, art allows people to express emotions that may otherwise remain unspoken," she said.



She believes artists have a responsibility not only to express personal feelings but also to promote values that strengthen communities during challenging times.

"I feel it is my utmost responsibility to reflect peace and humanity through my art," she said.

In Qatar's multicultural society, artists say creativity plays a unique role in bringing people together. The country's diverse population, representing dozens of cultures and nationalities, creates fertile ground for artistic exchange and collaboration.

"Art has no boundaries. For me, Qatar is like a colourful palette where many colours blend together to create a beautiful landscape," Muznah said.

Mala, meanwhile, agrees that art can serve as a bridge between communities, especially during periods of regional strain. She points to the growing role of digital platforms and virtual events in sustaining artistic engagement. Residents and artists, she said, remain informed and reassured through government communication and public safety measures, while art platforms continue to offer opportunities for connection.

"Artists and students have participated in online workshops, exhibitions and creative forums where healthy conversations and shared projects provide both focus and relief," she said.

Virtual lessons and seminars have helped young artists remain connected and continue developing their skills, while also offering a sense of stability during uncertain times.

"These initiatives nurture creativity



but also provide emotional support," Mala said. "Art becomes a bridge that brings people together from different backgrounds."

Artists and cultural institutions across Qatar have also demonstrated resilience in adapting to the current situation. According to Mala, many art programmes transitioned smoothly to online platforms, ensuring that students continued receiving instruction without interruption.

"The response has been marked by calmness, patience and a commitment to continuity," she said. At the same time, many artists have used the period of relative isolation to deepen their creative exploration. Working from home has offered an opportunity for reflection and introspection, allowing artists to focus more intensely on conceptual development.

Mala herself has channelled the current atmosphere into a new body of work exploring themes of unity and collective identity. Her recent series, *Necklace of Narratives*, takes the form of a pearl necklace in which each pearl represents an individual, while the necklace itself symbolises family and community.

"The thread connecting the pearls becomes a metaphor for solidarity," she said. "It reminds us that strength lies in unity."

During the recent tensions, she created a paper-cut collage inspired by the warp and weft of fabric – the intersecting threads that create woven textiles. Onto this surface, she painted the pearl necklace, naming the piece *Warp and Weft: A Necklace of Narratives*.

"Life, much like fabric, is woven through cycles of growth



and endurance," she said. "As individuals we are pearls, but together we form a necklace bound by shared purpose."

Through her work, Mala hopes to convey a message of resilience to audiences across the region.

"Even in times of uncertainty, our collective journey continues," she said. "Art reminds us that we are connected and capable of weaving strength from fragility."

Muznah similarly finds herself drawn to themes of unity and compassion in her recent work. "The situation has made me think more about hope and resilience," she said. "Through my work, I hope to remind people that beauty and compassion still exist even during difficult times."

Ultimately, artists say creativity has the power to foster understanding and stability during periods of geopolitical tension. By encouraging reflection and empathy, art can help soften divisions and create spaces where communities engage with one another constructively.

"Art creates dialogue. It preserves cultural identity while encouraging people to share experiences and perspectives," Mala said.

In a region often shaped by complex political dynamics, artists believe creativity can offer something essential – a reminder of shared humanity.

"Art cannot remove conflict. But it can help societies process it, understand one another and continue moving forward together," she said.