



Qatar Insurance

Financial Results (FY 2025)

Gross Written Premiums (GWP)

9% ▲

QAR 9.9B

Net Profit Before the Impact of P/L: Tax, Two-Ten

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

THURSDAY Vol. XXXXVI No. 13684

March 19, 2026
Ramadan 30, 1447 AH

www.gulf-times.com 2 Riyals

Published in Qatar since 1978



YOUR SAFETY AND COMFORT ARE OUR PRIORITY

Stay home, stay connected. Activate your new home internet online in just a few taps.



Scan to activate

QATARI POLYDEX PRODUCT

أوريكس بوليدكس

ORYX POLYDEX

Durable waterproofing-performance for roof protection

سركي ماست انج انالافيشن في ريم

NATIONAL PAINTS FACTORIES CO., Doha - Qatar

44601602/3

Running Hotel Business For Sale

Furnished Hotel With License & Prime Location.

Serious Party Call Us:

33598672 / 30200166 / 52038746

HABARI REAL ESTATE

The Right Move in Real Estate

+974 3030 0880, +974 3341 9475

Family

العيد مع العائلة

EID WITH FAMILY

700+

Products On Offer

Ready to GUAC AND ROLL?

Only on talabat



Amir, Sultan of Oman exchange Eid greetings

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has exchanged greetings with Sultan Haitham bin Tariq of Oman ahead of the upcoming Eid al-Fitr. This followed a phone conversation the Amir received yesterday, with the two leaders sharing greetings and well-wishes on the occasion that marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan. **(QNA)**

Amir, Sri Lankan president discuss developments

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani yesterday received a phone call from Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake to discuss regional developments and bilateral concerns. President Dissanayake expressed his country's solidarity with Qatar, referring to ongoing Iranian aggression affecting Qatar and the wider region. The Amir reassured the Sri Lankan leader about conditions inside Qatar, particularly the well-being of the Sri Lankan community living in the country, and reiterated the government's commitment to the safety and welfare of all who live on Qatari soil. The two leaders also discussed broader regional challenges, including escalating military tensions and their potential impact on global energy markets and supply chains. Dissanayake highlighted the importance of international coordination to address these issues. The Amir emphasised Qatar's role as a reliable energy partner, stressing its commitment to maintaining stable supplies despite current challenges. Both sides underlined the need for intensified regional and international efforts to de-escalate tensions and promote stability, calling for diplomatic solutions to resolve the crisis. **(QNA)**

Mwani bolsters supply chains

Mwani Qatar announced the activation of an exceptional package of port tariff facilities aimed at supporting the logistics sector and facilitating operational activities across the country, with a focus on strengthening supply chains. In a post on its official X platform, Mwani Qatar said it has introduced amendments to selected port tariff items in response to the current exceptional circumstances affecting supply chains and the associated operational and logistical challenges. The company noted that the initiative aligns with the Ministry of Transport's strategy to support the private sector and enhance partnerships, underscoring its commitment to financial pressures on clients. **(QNA)**

RAMADAN THOUGHT

And to Allah belongs the Unseen of the heavens and the earth. And the matter of the Hour is not but as a twinkling of the eye, or even nearer. Truly, Allah Able to do all things. (Qur'an 16:77)

Prayer times

Fajr...4:22; Zuhr...11:42; Asr...3:08; Maghrib...5:47; Isha...7:17

Fasting times

Iftar today5:47pm

Qatar expels Iranian military attachés

By A Staff Reporter
Doha

GCC condemns attack → Page 2

Qatar has declared the military and security attachés at the Iranian embassy persona non grata and ordered them to leave the country within 24 hours, in a sharp and decisive diplomatic response to what it called repeated and blatant Iranian aggression against its territory and sovereign infrastructure.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs delivered an official note to the embassy of Iran during a meeting held yesterday between Director of Protocol Ibrahim Yousif Fakhro and Iranian ambassador Ali Salehabadi, demanding the immediate departure of both attachés and all staff of their respective offices within the stipulated deadline.

The ministry said the decision was a direct response to repeated Iranian targeting and flagrant aggression against Qatar, which it said violated Qatar's sovereignty and security in a flagrant breach of the principles of international law, UN Security Council Resolu-

tion No 2817, and the principles of good neighbourliness.

It warned unequivocally that any continuation of this hostile approach by the Iranian side would be met with additional and escalating measures by Qatar, in a manner that ensures the full protection of its sovereignty, security, and national interests. The ministry affirmed that Qatar reserves the right to take all necessary measures to protect its sovereignty and security in accordance with the provisions of international law.

Earlier, Qatar issued a sweeping and strongly worded condemnation of the attack on Ras Laffan Industrial City, which caused fires that resulted in significant damage to the facility. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the strike as a dangerous escalation, a flagrant violation of state sovereignty, and a direct threat to Qatar's national security and to

BREACH OF NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

The attack on Ras Laffan energy infrastructure is a flagrant violation of international law and national security.

24 HOURS

24-HOUR EXPULSION DEADLINE

Military and security attachés must depart Qatar within one day of the official notice.

DIPLOMATS DECLARED PERSONA NON GRATA

Qatar has terminated the legal status of Iranian security officials and their respective staff.

RIGHT TO SELF-DEFENCE INVOKED

Qatar reserves the right to respond to further aggression under Article 51 of the UN Charter.

Ballistic missiles intercepted, Ras Laffan area fire contained

The Ministry of Defence announced that Qatar yesterday came under attack by five ballistic missiles from Iran. In a statement, the ministry explained that the Qatar Armed Forces successfully intercepted four of the missiles, while one missile struck Ras Laffan Industrial City, causing a fire. The Ministry of Interior said Civil Defence initially brought the fire in Ras Laffan under control, with no injuries reported. This was unveiled in a post by the ministry on its official account on X platform. QatarEnergy confirmed that Ras Laffan Industrial City came under missile attack and that emergency response teams were immediately deployed to contain fires triggered by the strikes, which caused extensive damage. No fatalities have been reported. **(QNA)**

broader regional stability. In a statement, the ministry affirmed that despite Qatar's consistent policy of distancing itself from the ongoing war since its very outset, and its firm commitment to avoiding any form of escalation,

the Iranian side has continued to target Qatar and neighbouring countries in what it described as an irresponsible approach that undermines regional security and threatens international peace and stability. **To Page 3**



We have 9-month medical stockpile in place: minister

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

Qatar's health sector is fully primed to handle any emergency that may arise from the current regional situation, with a robust strategic stockpile of medicines and medical supplies sufficient for nine months, the Minister of Public Health has said. Speaking to Qatar Television, HE Mansoor bin Ebrahim al-Mahmoud said the sustained investment and overriding priority given to the health sector by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad

al-Thani had placed the country in a position of strength, with a flexible and highly capable health system ready to respond to any contingency at short notice. "The infrastructure of the health sector in the state, in terms of facilities and emergency centres, literally qualifies it for handling any contingency amid the current situation," the minister said. HE al-Mahmoud confirmed that all hospitals and health facilities across the country are operating around the clock, with dedicated operations chambers monitoring the situation and co-ordinating work on a 24-hour basis. **To Page 3**

Radiation levels in Qatar are within natural, safe thresholds

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change has confirmed that the radiation levels in the air and territorial waters of Qatar fall within natural and safe thresholds. It added that all recorded readings don't indicate the existence of any signs of concern. Posting on its official X page, the ministry highlighted that it is closely monitoring regional developments through national around-the-clock radiological monitoring systems. In addition, the ministry asserted its full readiness to handle any potential developments, in constant co-ordination with the authoritative agencies in the nation, calling on the public to obtain information from its approved official sources. **(QNA)**



Qatar's LNG reputation untouched by regional tensions, says expert

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

Qatar's three-decade track record as a dependable liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplier insulates it from the political turbulence gripping the region – and any disruption to its supply chain reflects the structural realities of the energy system, not diplomatic manoeuvring, a senior energy expert has said. "We should take into account the reputation of Qatar as a reliable supplier. I don't think what is happening today will affect the reputation of Qatar as a reliable supplier or will put it at risk," said, Dr Mohammed al-Hashemi, an energy expert. Dr al-Hashemi who has previously served as the vice-president of Strategic Relations at



ExxonMobil Qatar was speaking at a webinar on the topic "Navigating Iran War in the region: Qatar's Position and Strategic Perspectives", organised by Middle East Council on Global Affairs. "Reliability in the LNG industry is not about continuing at all costs," he explained. "It is about operating safely and responsibly under all conditions. And I think this is what Qatar was able to achieve over the past almost 30 years of its LNG production!" **To Page 3**



A market attendant arranges decorative gift trays and confectionery displays at a shop in Al Sadd, Doha, as preparations intensify for Eid al-Fitr. The festival, marking the conclusion of the holy month of Ramadan, has been announced for Friday, March 20, drawing brisk activity in neighbourhood markets as retailers ready festive sweets, ornaments and hampers for customers ahead of the celebrations. **PICTURE:** Noushad Thekayil

Eid day worshippers advised not to panic, pray indoors

The Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs issued a statement yesterday outlining a combination of guidelines for worshippers during Eid al-Fitr to ensure their safety and good organisation. The statement indicated that the authoritative agencies urge worshippers to adhere to the guidelines, in terms of never panicking upon hearing any national alert during the prayer and remaining inside the mosque. In case worshippers are outside the mosque when an alert is issued, they should either go inside the mosque or remain in vehicles as per the recommended posture from the authoritative agencies until the threat is eliminated, the statement read, adding that upon finishing the prayer sermon they should exit immediately in calm and tranquillity. The ministry called for people heading toward mosques to engage in Takbeer during Eid to avoid crowding and help ensure smooth entry and exit from the mosque, adding that should the mosque become overcrowded, it is essential to move to the nearest alternative mosque. **(QNA)**

Eid al-Fitr tomorrow

The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs' crescent moon sighting committee announced that today, March 19, will be the 30th and final day of the holy month of Ramadan, with Eid al-Fitr starting tomorrow. This follows the committee's statement after its meeting at the ministry's headquarters last evening, which corresponds to Ramadan 29, 1447 AH. The statement added that the crescent moon of the new month of Shawwal was not sighted last evening, which means that the first day of the blessed Eid al-Fitr in Qatar will be Friday, March 20, 2026. The committee extended its greetings to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, and His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani, along with Qatar's government, the Qatari people, and Muslims everywhere, on the advent of Eid al-Fitr. **(QNA)**

Eswatini minister meets Qatari diplomat

Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Kingdom of Eswatini Pholile Dlamini-Shakantu met with acting charge d'affaires at the embassy of the State of Qatar in the country Rashid bin Mohammed Isa al-Khulaifi. The meeting discussed bilateral co-operation relations and the developments in the region. **(QNA)**



Defence minister receives phone call from Malaysian deputy PM

HE Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Affairs Sheikh Saoud bin Abdulrahman bin Hassan al-Thani received a phone call yesterday from Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Rural and Regional Development of Malaysia Dato' Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. During the call, the two sides reviewed the latest security developments in the region, as well as avenues for enhancing bilateral co-operation and strengthening joint co-ordination under the current circumstances. **(QNA)**

Qatar's ambassador participates in Tunisian foreign ministers' meeting with GCC envoys



Ambassador of Qatar to Tunisia Zayed bin Saeed al-Khayarin participated in a meeting held by Minister of Foreign Affairs, Migration, and Tunisians Abroad Mohamed Ali Nafti with the ambassadors of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries accredited to Tunisia. The meeting reviewed the latest regional developments, particularly the Iranian attacks targeting the security and stability of GCC states. The ambassadors reaffirmed the GCC countries' firm rejection of these unjustified attacks, underscoring the need to uphold the principles of good neighbourliness and international law, and warning of their grave repercussions for regional security and stability. For his part, the Tunisian foreign minister expressed his country's keen interest in following developments in the region, reiterating Tunisia's commitment to supporting efforts aimed at enhancing security and stability, and promoting dialogue and peaceful solutions among all parties. The meeting concluded with an emphasis on the importance of continued co-ordination and consultation between the two sides to support regional security and further strengthen bilateral relations. **(QNA)**

Mali's minister receives copy of credentials of Qatar's diplomat



Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Mali Abdoulaye Diop received a copy of the credentials of E Ahmed bin Turki al-Subaie as ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary of the State of Qatar to Mali. **(QNA)**

Venezuela's FM meets Qatar's envoy



Venezuela Minister of Foreign Affairs Yvan Gil met with Qatar ambassador Salman bin Nabit al-Khulaifi. The meeting discussed bilateral co-operation relations between the two countries. **(QNA)**

UAE, Kuwait deplore attack on Ras Laffan Industrial City

The United Arab Emirates and Kuwait expressed its strong condemnation and denunciation of the Iranian attack targeting Ras Laffan Industrial City in Qatar, which resulted in significant damage. UAE Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan stressed in a statement that these attacks constitute a serious escalation and a violation of the principles of international law, affirming the UAE's full solidarity with Qatar and its absolute support for all measures it takes to safeguard and protect its security, the safety of its citizens and residents, and maintain its stability. A statement by the Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry stressed that this attack amounts to a flagrant violation of international law and the principles of good neighbourliness, posing a direct threat to the region's security and stability, as well as an unequivocal breach of Security Council Resolution 2817. The ministry underscored Kuwait's absolute rejection of Iran's engagement in hostile acts that have increased escalation and heightened tensions, actions that undermine the region's security and stability. The statement reiterated Kuwait's full solidarity with Qatar, confirming that it stands side by side with Qatar and supports it in all measures it takes to safeguard its sovereignty, security, and the safety of its establishments. **(QNA)**

Eid Mubarak

Wishing Qatar peace, prosperity, and joy.
Always here to keep you connected.
Vodafone Qatar



Qatar welcomes Eid al-Fitr truce between Afghanistan, Pakistan

Qatar welcomed the announcement of a temporary truce between Afghanistan and Pakistan on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr, considering this step a positive gesture that contributes to de-escalation and promotes calm between the two sides.

In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs affirmed Qatar's hope that this temporary truce will pave the way for a return to a sustainable ceasefire agreement, one that spares civilian lives and achieves security and stability. In this context, the ministry

praised the response of both parties to the calls made by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkiye to implement this truce, stressing that prioritising dialogue and peaceful solution is the best way to resolve outstanding disputes.

The ministry also reiterated Qatar's commitment to continuing its diplomatic efforts, in co-ordination with regional and international partners, to support de-escalation efforts and to enhance security and stability in the region. (QNA)

Shura Deputy Speaker stresses parliamentarians' role in conflict resolution

HE Deputy Speaker of the Shura Council Dr Hamda bint Hassan al-Sulaiti has stressed the role of parliamentary diplomacy in resolving conflicts and promoting global security and stability.

Speaking at an extraordinary meeting of the Executive Committee of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which was held virtually on Tuesday, Dr al-Sulaiti said parliamentarians, as representatives of their people, play a key role in advancing dialogue and peaceful solutions.

HE al-Sulaiti is vice-president of the executive committee representing the Arab Geopolitical Group.

In her address, she referred to the IPU's statement condemning the Iranian attacks against Qatar and other countries in the region since February 28 and called for concrete actions beyond statements of condemnation.

She also expressed her strong condemnation of Iran's continued military attacks using ballistic missiles, drones, and warplanes as a "flagrant violation" of national sovereignty, a direct threat to security and civilian safety, and a breach of international law, the UN Charter, and ethical standards. She also praised the positions of national parlia-



ments and parliamentary unions and organisations for their solidarity with Qatar, affirming that the country remained "firmly committed" to supporting diplomacy and mediation efforts.

The meeting agenda included current developments in international conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, and their impact on the IPU activities.

The meeting also addressed preparations for the 152nd IPU Assembly, scheduled to be held in Istanbul next April. (QNA)

Thani Humanitarian Foundation expresses gratitude to donors

THE leadership of Thani Humanitarian Foundation has expressed deep gratitude and sincere appreciation to all benefactors – individuals and institutions alike – for their support during the past period, affirming that this generous engagement reflects a deeply rooted social awareness of the importance of humanitarian work and an ingrained spirit of giving in Qatar.

In a statement, the Foundation's leadership said that the achievements realised on the ground would not have been possible without this generous support, which had a direct and tangible impact on numerous families and individuals in need. The assistance helped secure basic necessities, strengthened living stability, and eased the daily burdens weighing on beneficiaries – improving their lives and granting them greater peace of mind and dignity.

The Foundation noted that this sustained generosity enabled it to deliver humanitarian aid to those who deserve it with high efficiency and in a timely manner, through professional mechanisms that prioritise accuracy and speed – in keeping with the noble values underpinning Qatari society, foremost among them solidarity, compassion, and mutual support in times of need.

It added that donor contributions played a pivotal role in implementing a range of impactful initiatives spanning food support, direct financial assistance, social welfare programmes, and rapid



response to urgent humanitarian cases – creating a lasting positive impact and opening new horizons of hope for many beneficiaries.

The statement quoted the Foundation's leadership as saying: "At Thani Humanitarian Foundation, we take pride in the trust placed in us by our benefactors and deeply value this blessed generosity, which reflects the authentic character of Qatari society. We renew our commitment to always be worthy of that trust, through tireless efforts to design and implement sustainable humanitarian initiatives that create real, tangible impact and meet the needs of those most deserving."

The Foundation concluded by affirming that this outpouring of giving embodies the highest meanings of humanity and reflects the spirit of compassion that distinguishes the community, noting that every contribution – however modest – leaves a meaningful mark on the lives of others and extends its reach across society as a whole.

Qatar's LNG reputation untouched by regional tensions, says expert

From Page 1

When asked about Qatar applying the measure of force majeure in the LNG production, the expert stated that it was not any political signalling.

He underlined "Structurally LNG is not a flexible commodity like oil. It is an infrastructure-bound, process-driven, technically constrained commodity. You cannot simply increase or decrease supply overnight for political signalling or for any such reasons."

"We are contractually bound in the LNG supply. People should understand the contracts of LNG markets that the LNG market is built on long-term agreements that define volumes and obligation. This is not a system designed for short-term political manoeuvring. It is a system of interdependence. Disruption affects producers, buyers, and the global market simultaneously. This is not any one-side leverage," he highlighted.

Dr al-Hashemi said that production, shipping, insurance, and more importantly, the maritime security, are needed for seamless supply of LNG.

"What we are discussing today and what we are witnessing here is quite different. It is not just about supply. It's about the integrity of the energy system itself, including production, shipping, routes, even things that usually doesn't come to mind when we are discussing those, like the insurance," he continued.

As for the topic of building pipelines to ship LNG out in a different way that doesn't have to go through the Strait of Hormuz, he said that it is technically impossible as it is related to various geographical areas.

"Basically, there is a kind of calculation that gets conducted because it depends how far it is to be and whether it is economically viable and feasible to ship it through pipelines. And of course, it is a process that takes a long time," he remarked.

Dr al-Hashemi said that expecting uninterrupted production under the current circumstances is simply unrealistic.

"This brings me to the core point. Framing a very responsible safety response as a diplomatic or political weapon against someone is not energy analysis. It is the reorganisation of energy

"We are contractually bound in the LNG supply. People should understand the contracts of LNG markets that the LNG market is built on long-term agreements that define volumes and obligation"

discourse, and it actually normalises attacks on critical global energy infrastructure," he added.

The online open discussion also included comments from Dr Majed bin Mohamed al-Ansari, adviser to the Prime Minister and official spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Rashid al-Mohanadi, a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs.

The session was moderated by Dr Cinzia Bianco, visiting fellow, European Council on Foreign Affairs.

Making up missed days of fasting

It is from the mercy of Allah and the easiness of the religion that we are allowed to break the fast if there is any danger, hardship or difficulty in it. Allah Says (what means): "...He (Allah) has chosen you and has not placed upon you in the religion any difficulty..." [Qur'an 22:78]

It is allowed for those who are (not chronically) ill and for travellers to break their fasts during Ramadan, but they must make up the days they missed. Allah Says (what means): "[Fasting for] a limited number of days. So whoever among you is ill or on a journey [during them] - then an equal number of days [are to be made up]..." [Qur'an 2:184]

Mu'aath, may Allah be pleased with him, said: "Verily, Allah made the fast obligatory upon the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam (may Allah exalt his mention), by revealing (what means): "O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you ... and for those who can fast [but do not] there is a 'ransom' payment..." At that time, whoever wished to do so would fast and whoever wished not to do so would feed a poor person, and that was sufficient for them. After that, Allah revealed another verse (what means): "The month of Ramadan in which the Qur'an was revealed ... Whoever is resident among you during this month is to fast." [By this verse,] fasting was established for those who were resident and healthy. A concession was made for the traveller and the sick, and the feeding of the poor by the elderly who could not fast was [left] confirmed." [Ahmad, Abu Dawood and Al-Bayhaqi]

If fasting during travel is not difficult, then it is better to fast. If fasting would be difficult then breaking the fast is better. Abu Sa'eed al-Khudri, may Allah be pleased with him, said: "We used to travel for war expeditions with the Messenger of Allah, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, during Ramadan. Some of us would fast and some of us would not fast, and the fasting person would not find fault with the one who was not fasting, and the person who was not fasting would not find fault with the person who was fasting. Then they thought that the person who had the strength would fast and that was better. And they thought that the person who felt weak would not fast and that was better." [Muslim]

If the person is ill during Ramadan, and is able to fast without difficulty, then he fasts. If he is unable then he breaks his fast.

If the ill person expects to recuperate from his illness, he waits until he recuperates and then he makes up for whatever days he did not fast. However, if he is not expected to recover, he breaks his fast and gives charity for each day that he does not fast. Allah Says (what means): "...And upon those

who are able [to fast, but with hardship] - a ransom [as substitute] of feeding a poor person [each day]..." [Qur'an 2:184]

As for the person who has reached an old age, at which he doesn't have the strength to fast, he may break the fast and give charity for every day that he did not fast. Ibn 'Abbas, may Allah be pleased with him, said: "It was permitted for the very elderly man (or woman) to feed a poor person for every day (that he did not fast), and he did not have to make up for the days." [Ad-Daraqutni and Al-Hakim]

Breaking the fast without a legitimate excuse:

Regarding the one who intentionally breaks the fast by having sexual intercourse with his wife during the daytime in Ramadan, then he has committed a great sin and violated the sacredness of this month, and must make up the fast for that day. In addition, he is required to free a slave if it is possible to do so, if not, he has to fast two consecutive months and if he is unable to do so, then he has to feed sixty poor and needy people.

The same is required of the wife as is required of her husband, if she freely consented (to having sexual intercourse).

However, if she was forced, then nothing is required of her according to the predominant opinion of the scholars may Allah have mercy upon them.

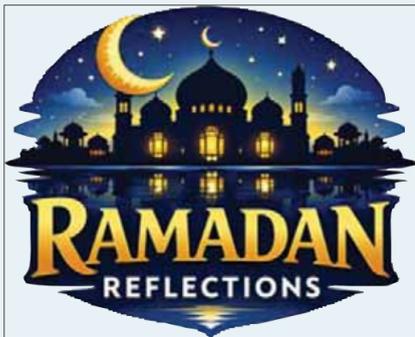
If one intentionally breaks his fast by eating or drinking without a legitimate excuse, then again he has committed a great sin and violated the sacredness of this month. Such a person has a severe threat awaiting him.

Prophet Muhammad, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Whoever breaks fasting of Ramadan without having a legitimate excuse or being ill, he cannot make up for that day, even if he undertakes a perpetual fast." [Al-Bukhari] Imams Ahmad, Ash-Shafi'i, Sa'eed Ibn al-Musayyib and Al-Sha'bi and others - may Allah have mercy upon them - declared that one should sincerely repent and seek the forgiveness of Almighty Allah and make up the day later.

On the other hand, a group of Muslim scholars believe that expiation is required for breaking the fast of any day of Ramadan without a legal reason. They say, one should fast for two months consecutively or feed 60 poor people as well as to make up the day later with any of both forms of expiation.

Vomiting, if done deliberately, invalidates the fast, and necessitates making up for the fast. However, if vomit overcomes one and exits without one's choosing, the fast is not nullified.

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



Qatar expels Iranian military attaches

From Page 1

The ministry stressed that Qatar has repeatedly and publicly called on all parties to refrain from targeting civilian and energy facilities, including those within the territory of Iran itself, in order to preserve the resources of the region's peoples and safeguard international peace and security. However, it noted that the Iranian side continues its escalatory policies, pushing the region toward the brink and drawing countries that are not party to the conflict into the crisis zone against their will.

The ministry said the attack constitutes a violation of UN Security Council Resolution No. 2817, renewing its call on the Council to assume its full responsibilities in maintaining international peace and security and to take the necessary and urgent

measures to stop these serious violations and deter those responsible for carrying them out.

The ministry also reiterated that Qatar reserves its right to respond in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter and the right to self-defence as guaranteed by international law, stressing that it will not hesitate to take all necessary measures to protect its sovereignty, security, and the safety of its citizens and residents.

The Gulf Co-operation Council also condemned the attack on Ras Laffan in the strongest possible terms. Secretary-General Jassem Mohamed Albudaiwi described the strike as a grave aggression representing a flagrant violation of all international laws and norms, and an unacceptable escalation reflecting a hostile Iranian approach that poses a direct threat to the security and stability

of the region and undermines regional peace. He underscored that targeting oil facilities and critical energy infrastructure is unacceptable and universally condemned behaviour, aimed at destabilising the security of GCC states, compromising the stability of global energy markets, and posing a direct threat to regional and global energy supply security.

Albudaiwi called upon the international community to fulfil its responsibilities by halting these repeated Iranian attacks and putting an immediate end to the irresponsible acts that imperil regional and global peace and security. He reaffirmed the GCC's full and unwavering solidarity with Qatar, pledging that the bloc stands as a united front in support of all measures Qatar takes to protect its security, safeguard its sovereignty, and maintain the safety of its vital facilities.

We have 9-month medical stockpile in place: minister

From Page 1

These command structures are tracking all relevant figures and data, covering hospital readiness, capacity planning, and the ability to absorb contingencies at varying levels of severity.

The country's health network comprises 26 hospitals spanning the public, private, and quasi-government sectors, underpinned by what the minister described as a world-class infrastructure built up steadily over the past several years.

A workforce of 60,000 health professionals, nurses, and practitioners is currently deployed across these facilities, working with what al-Mahmoud called a high degree of efficiency and professionalism.

Routine and essential care services have continued uninterrupted throughout the current crisis, the

minister stressed, including dialysis treatment, childhood vaccination programmes, and regular patient consultations at health centres across the country. He also confirmed that blood supply levels are sufficient and above the required threshold.

On trauma cases linked to the ongoing crisis, al-Mahmoud said that since the situation began, the injuries treated at medical institutions and health centres have been minor and superficial in nature, with patients discharged on the same day in all but one case. That remaining patient is in a stable condition and is expected to be discharged in the near future, he added.

Regarding the strategic medical stockpile, the minister explained that Qatar operates a combined system for medical supplies, with reserves held specifically to supply health insti-

tutions when needed. He confirmed the stockpile has not been drawn upon thus far and remains sufficient for nine months. Supply chains are being monitored constantly to ensure that hospitals can continue to import medicines and medical equipment without interruption, and he noted that co-ordination with fellow GCC states is in place, with no issues reported on that front.

Al-Mahmoud urged members of the public to rely solely on official sources for information and news, reiterating that the health sector is fully ready and operating as a key priority of Qatar's leadership. He also highlighted the close co-ordination between the health sector and other government agencies, including Civil Defence, describing the inter-agency response as highly professional and well-orchestrated.



Mideast war blocking vital aid to over 400,000 children: charity

AFP
Geneva

The Middle East conflict is obstructing key delivery routes for humanitarian supplies, delaying shipments of lifesaving aid for nearly half a million children far beyond the region, Save the Children said yesterday.

The charity warned that the war was disrupting key air, sea and land routes, with dire ripple effects on global aid supplies. Since US-Israeli forces

launched the war against Iran on February 28, Tehran has responded with attacks throughout the Middle East and threats that have nearly halted shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, through which one-fifth of global oil supplies normally passes.

Aid deliveries have been heavily impacted, with shipping costs soaring up to 50% in some cases as the shipments are rerouted, Save the Children said.

This has left lifesaving aid intended for at least 410,000 children and their families in crisis-ravaged Sudan, Afghanistan and

Yemen stuck in the Middle East.

"The escalating conflict is having grave ripple effects for children far beyond the region," Willem Zuidema, the NGO's head of global supply chains, said in a statement.

One shipment of medical supplies bound for Sudan is stuck in Dubai due to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the charity said. This was putting more than 90 primary health care facilities across Sudan at risk of running out of essential medicines, it added.

Those medical supplies included antibiotics, antimalarials,

deworming treatments and pain and fever medicines intended to support over 400,000 children in Sudan, it said.

The charity said it was exploring alternative routes to Sudan, including by road across Saudi Arabia to Jeddah and then by sea to Port Sudan.

This, it warned "could add US\$1,000-\$2,000 per container in costs".

'GRAVE RAMIFICATIONS'
Critical nutrition supplies intended to support 5,000 children and 1,400 pregnant and breast-feeding women in Afghanistan

had also been impacted, Save the Children said.

That aid had been meant to be shipped from India via Iran, but will now have to be flown in, "at a cost over over \$240,000 — more than the value of the supplies," it said.

The charity said it also had a shipment of medicines, including antibiotics, for around 5,000 children in Yemen, which remained stuck in Dubai.

"For the first time ever, Save the Children will transport these supplies via road, doubling the transport cost," it said.

Zuidema called on all parties to the conflict to "facilitate the safe passage of humanitarian assistance to children".

"There should be no barriers to life-saving supplies: exemptions should be put in place to allow humanitarian supplies, fertiliser, and food to be able to move through the Strait of Hormuz," he said.

"With global humanitarian needs already at record levels, further escalation of the conflict in the Middle East and wider region will have grave ramifications for crises across the world."



People gather for the funeral of Iranian security chief Ali Larjani and victims of the IRIS Dena warship at Enghelab Square, amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Tehran, yesterday. (Reuters)

Iran threatens region's energy targets after gas field is struck

Govt confirms killing of Iranian intelligence minister
Tehran strikes Israel after killing of security chief Larjani

Reuters
Dubai/Jerusalem/Beirut

Iran's huge Pars gas field was hit yesterday, a major escalation in the US-Israeli war, prompting Tehran to announce it would respond with attacks on oil and gas targets throughout the Gulf.

Oil prices shot up after the attack in a conflict that has already halted shipping from the world's most important energy-producing region and could now bring lasting damage to its infrastructure. Benchmark Brent crude prices rose around 5% to above \$108. Stock markets veered lower.

Pars is the Iranian sector of the world's largest natural gas deposit. Iran's Fars news agency reported that gas tanks and parts of a refinery had been hit, workers had been evacuated to a safe location and emergency crews were trying to put out a fire. State media later said the fire was under control.

The attack was widely reported in Israeli media to have been carried out by Israel with US consent, though neither country acknowledged immediate responsibility.

The Israeli military did not respond to requests for comment. The UAE has denounced the attack.

Iran listed an array of prominent regional oil and gas targets belonging to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and another Gulf state,



which it said were now "direct and legitimate targets" and should be evacuated at once before it struck them in the coming hours.

Previously during nearly three weeks of war, the US and Israel had held back from targeting Iran's energy production facilities in the Gulf, averting Iranian retaliation against the oil and gas industries of its neighbours.

Iran has already shut the Strait of Hormuz, which handles 20% of global oil and liquefied natural gas supply, but consuming nations are hoping the disruption will prove short-lived as long as production infrastructure is spared. Iran's warning was directed at Saudi Arabia's Samref Refinery and Jubail Petrochemical Complex, the UAE's Al Hosn Gas Field, and another Gulf state.

"The Israeli military also hit central Beirut, destroying apartment buildings in some of the most intense airstrikes on the Lebanese capital for decades, on Israel's other front in the war

it launched with the US against Iran. Israel killed Iran's intelligence minister Esmail Khatib yesterday, a day after killing powerful security chief Ali Larjani.

"No one in Iran has immunity and everyone is in the crosshairs," said Defence Minister Israel Katz. He and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had authorised the Israeli military "to target any senior Iranian official for whom an intelligence and operational opportunity arises, without the need for additional approval", Katz said.

It appeared to be the first time Israel has publicly stated that it would let the military target enemy officials without seeking special permission from political leaders.

In Tehran, thousands of people appeared in the streets for a funeral for Larjani and other slain figures. The crowd waved Iranian flags and carried portraits of the dead as a eulogist sang: "Martyrs are leading the way, they've become more alive, burning with

love." Iran retaliated by firing missiles at Israel, which Israeli authorities said killed two people near Tel Aviv. Tehran said it fired overnight on Tel Aviv, Haifa and Beer-sheba in Israel, and at US bases in Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Mojtaba Khamenei, Iran's new supreme leader, said those responsible for Larjani's death would pay for his blood.

Several loud bangs were heard in the Saudi capital Riyadh yesterday and some of its residents received phone alerts for the first time warning them of a hostile aerial threat, a Reuters witness in the city said. State TV said Saudi air defences had dealt with a "ballistic threat".

The attack on Iran's gas field threatens to worsen an unprecedented disruption to global energy supplies that has raised the political stakes for US President Donald Trump.

Diesel prices in the US have already risen above \$5 a gallon for the first time since the 2022 inflation surge that eroded support for his predecessor Joe Biden. Vice President JD Vance said the Trump administration would announce a "couple of things" in the next 24 to 48 hours to tackle rising gas prices.

US-based Iran human rights group HRANA said on Monday that an estimated 3,000-plus people had been killed in Iran since the US-Israeli attacks began on February 28. Authorities in Lebanon say 900 people have been killed there and 800,000 forced to flee their homes.

Iranian attacks have killed people in Iraq and across the Gulf states. Fourteen have been killed in Israel.

Iran's govt appears intact but degraded: US spy chief

Reuters
Washington

Iran's government has been degraded since the war began on February 28, but it appears to be intact and Tehran and its proxies remain capable of attacking US and allies' interests in the Middle East, US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard said yesterday.

"The regime in Iran appears to be intact but largely degraded by Operation Epic Fury," Gabbard said, referring to the US-Israeli military campaign against Iran, in her opening statement to the Senate Intelligence Committee's annual hearing on Worldwide Threats to the United States.

"Even so, Iran and its proxies remain capable of and continue to attack US and allied interests in the Middle East. If a hostile regime survives, it will seek to begin a years-long effort to rebuild its missiles and UAV (drone) forces," Gabbard said.

The 2-1/2-hour hearing was the first significant public appearance since the start of the war by Gabbard, who has kept a low profile for months.

The hearing identified China, Russia, North Korea and Iran as top adversaries, but largely focused on the Iran war, now in its third week. Lawmakers — including some of President Donald Trump's Republicans as well as Democrats — have said they want more information about a campaign that has killed thousands of people, disrupted the lives of millions and shaken energy and stock markets. Democrats in particular have complained that Congress has not been adequately informed about a conflict costing US taxpayers billions, and demanded public testimony rather than classified briefings held in the past two weeks. "The complete lack of clarity should matter to everybody," Democratic Senator Michael Bennet of Colorado said after a testy exchange with CIA Director John Ratcliffe about the US plan for eliminating the threat from Iran.

MAJOR RESIGNATION OVER THE WAR

The hearing with Gabbard, Ratcliffe, FBI Director Kash Patel and other intelligence officials also touched on the shock announcement on Tuesday that a top aide to Gabbard had resigned, citing the war.

Joe Kent, who headed the National Counterterrorism Center, is the first senior official in Trump's administration to resign over the conflict. The Office of the DNI oversees the counterterrorism center. "I cannot in good conscience support the ongoing war in Iran. Iran posed no imminent threat to our nation, and it is clear that we started this war due to pressure from Israel and its powerful American lobby," Kent wrote

to Trump. Ratcliffe said during the hearing that he disagreed with Kent. "I think Iran has been a constant threat to the US for an extended period of time and posed an immediate threat at this time," he said.

The threat assessment Gabbard presented to the committee added to confusion over Iran's nuclear programme. Some administration officials said in the run-up to the war that Iran was weeks away from developing a nuclear weapon, one of the reasons given for starting the airstrikes. In written remarks sent to the committee before the hearing, Gabbard said Iran's nuclear enrichment programme was obliterated in US and Israeli strikes in June, and Washington had seen no effort since to rebuild its enrichment capability. However, when she spoke to the senators, Gabbard said the intelligence community assessed Iran was trying to recover from damage to its infrastructure in July.

Republican Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas, who chairs the committee, praised Trump in his opening statement, saying his actions in Iran and elsewhere had made the world safer. Democratic Senator Mark Warner of Virginia, the committee's vice chairman, criticised the administration for failing to be clear about its motivation for what he called "a war of choice."

He also bashed Gabbard for investigating elections in the US, while the agency has cut staff involved in activity like monitoring Iran. Gabbard said the US intelligence community has identified no foreign threat to November's congressional elections. Questions have swirled around what Trump was told before he decided to join Israel in striking Iran. Ratcliffe told the hearing there had been "countless" meetings with Trump before the first strikes and that he briefs the president "10 to 15 times a week."

Sources familiar with US intelligence reports have said Trump was warned, for example, that attacking Iran could trigger retaliation against US Gulf allies despite his claims that Tehran's reaction came as a surprise.

Trump's assertion followed other administration claims that have not been backed by US intelligence reporting, such as that Iran would soon have a missile capable of hitting the US homeland and that it would need two to four weeks to make a nuclear bomb.

Trump was also briefed ahead of the operation that Tehran would likely seek to close the Strait of Hormuz, a major global shipping route for oil and gas, according to two other sources familiar with the matter.

Gabbard declined to comment on whether she had briefed Trump or was asked to brief him on the chance that Iran would strike adjacent Gulf nations.

Israel doubles troops in Hezbollah fight, searches homes in south Lebanon

Reuters
Eilon

Israel has more than doubled the number of troops along its border with Lebanon since March 1 and they are searching homes in southern Lebanese villages that the military has ordered evacuated, a senior Israeli commander said yesterday.

As Israeli warplanes pound Beirut in operations against Hezbollah that have become the deadliest spillover of the US-Israeli war on Iran, heavy smoke could be seen rising from villages in southern

Lebanon as troops fired artillery across the border.

Hundreds of thousands of Lebanese have fled southern Lebanon since Israel ordered people to clear the area south of the Litani River, viewed by Israel as a stronghold of Hezbollah. The group has been firing rockets toward Israel since joining the war in support of Iran on March 2.

"The plan is to make sure that Hezbollah does not have military infrastructure," said the commander, whose name was withheld by the Israeli military on security grounds. Speaking to Reuters in Eilon, an Israeli town

four kilometres from the border, the commander, who is responsible for infantry warfare in Lebanon, declined to say how many troops Israel had now deployed in the area.

Describing the military's fortifications inside Lebanon as "defensive positions", he said troops were searching "the villages to see if Hezbollah hid weapons or communications centres".

Asked if that included searching houses that residents had fled following Israeli orders, the commander said: "In some of the cases they hid their weapons in houses. We have no choice but to make

sure that house is not a military installation."

Hezbollah has publicly denied using civilian infrastructure to store weapons. It accuses Israel of destroying homes to prevent Lebanese from returning, something Israel denies. Many villages in southern Lebanon have been completely destroyed.

Two Israeli soldiers have been killed since the start of operations in southern Lebanon, the Israeli military says.

At least 968 people in Lebanon have been killed since the start of Israel's attacks, Lebanese authorities say.



Excavator cleans debris at the site of an Israeli strike, following an escalation between Hezbollah and Israel amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Zuqaq al-Blat district in central Beirut, yesterday. (Reuters)

War threatens region's dugongs, turtles and birds

AFP
Paris

From sea turtles to birds and the gentle dugong, the Arabian Gulf's diverse but fragile marine life is threatened by the bombs and oil of the war in the Middle East.

The ecosystem was already under pressure from climate change and maritime traffic before the United States and Israel launched their war on Iran at the end of February, leading to Tehran's region-wide retaliation.

More than 300 incidents involving environmental risks – including attacks on oil tankers – have been recorded in the region since the conflict broke out, according to a March 10 report by the Conflict and Environment Observatory, a UK non-governmental organisation.

The geography of the Gulf makes its ecosystem particularly vulnerable.

A semi-enclosed and shallow sea about 50 metres deep on average, it is connected to the Indian Ocean through the Strait of Hormuz. Its slow water renewal – every two to five years – limits the dispersion of oil or other pollutants.

The region hosts the world's second-largest population of dugongs – herbivorous marine mammals known as “sea cows” that are listed as vulnerable – with an estimated 5,000 to 7,500 individuals.

About a dozen species of marine mammals are also found there, including humpback

whales and whale sharks.

In total, more than 2,000 marine species have been recorded in the warm Gulf waters, including over 500 fish species and five types of sea turtles, among them the critically endangered hawksbill sea turtle.

There are also about 100 species of corals which, together with mangroves and seagrass beds, form essential breeding and nursery grounds for fish and crustaceans.

Greenpeace warned last week that dozens of tankers carrying around 21bn litres (5.5bn gallons) of oil were trapped in the Arabian Gulf.

“This is an ecological ticking time bomb,” said Nina Noelle, of Greenpeace Germany, who has been mapping oil tankers in the region.

Since March 1, nine incidents involving oil tankers, including attacks, have been reported to the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations centre (UK-MTO), eight of which were later confirmed by the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

Three additional attacks were claimed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, though these have not been confirmed by international bodies.

On land, Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said that Israeli strikes on Tehran fuel depots constituted “ecocide”, contaminating soil and groundwater and causing long-term risks to people's health.

“The wars in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrate how exposed the ecosystems of the Arabian

Gulf are to conflict pollution, whether this is from damage to on- or offshore oil facilities or through spills from attacks on shipping,” CEOPS director Doug Weir told AFP.

The Gulf War in 1991 triggered one of the largest marine oil spills linked to armed conflict, when retreating Iraqi forces deliberately opened oil valves in Kuwait and destroyed oil infrastructure.

It took decades to recover: up to 11min barrels of oil (1.75 billion litres) were released, contaminating 640 kilometres of Saudi coastline and killing more than 30,000 seabirds, according to several studies.

The studies, however, “largely showed minimal impacts on coral reefs”, said John Burt, biology professor at the Mubadala Arabian Center for Climate and Environmental Sciences at New York University Abu Dhabi.

“This is largely because oil floats, so the dispersal of oil remains on the surface and doesn't really interact with corals except in the most shallow areas,” Burt said.

“However, the same cannot be said for intertidal systems” such as salt marshes and mudflats that line the coast and are exposed at low tide, he added.

“Here, oil spills can have significant and medium-term impacts, if the spills become coastal,” Burt said.

Seabirds are especially at risk because oil destroyed the waterproofing of their feathers, leading to hypothermia and drowning.

Bombs are also a threat to the area's birds.

Their migration could be disrupted by the noise of explosions and by plumes of toxic smoke, as the Arabian Peninsula sits at the crossroads of major migratory routes linking Europe, Central Asia, Africa and South Asia.

“Sea mines and other explosive devices can cause acoustic disturbance impacting sea mammals and other animals, and blast damage to natural undersea structures such as reefs,” Weir said.

In 2003 and 2020, two studies published in Nature and in a journal of the Royal Society found links between the use of mid-frequency military sonar and whale strandings.



A Palestinian policeman manages traffic and monitors the streets in Gaza City, yesterday. (Reuters)

Israel steps up attacks on police in Gaza

Reuters
Cairo/Gaza

Israel has killed nearly a dozen Gaza police officers this week as it steps up attacks on a Hamas-run force that the fighters have used to re-establish governance in areas under their control, Gaza authorities say.

Hamas' nearly 10,000 police officers have emerged as a sticking point in talks to advance US President Donald Trump's plan for Gaza. Hamas wants them included in a new police force envisioned under the plan. Israel rejects involvement of any officers with Hamas affiliations.

Trump's plan calls for the fighter group to lay down its weapons and hand over governance to a committee of Palestinian technocrats who would manage Gaza's police as Israeli troops withdraw. Talks on disarming Hamas have been delayed by the US-Israeli war with Iran, Reuters has reported.

On the ground in Gaza, mostly unarmed officers dressed in navy police uniforms patrol the streets in the seafloor sliver of Gaza where Hamas retained control under an October ceasefire following two years of war.

Officers could be seen directing traffic and patrolling markets and tent encampments in Gaza City on Monday.

Ismail al-Thawabta, director of the Hamas-run Gaza government media office, said Israel had

killed more than 2,800 Gaza police officers since October 2023, when Hamas-led fighters stormed southern Israel. Dozens of officers have been killed since the ceasefire, including at least 10 since the start of the US-Israeli war with Iran, Thawabta said.

To try to avoid more losses, he said, “operational orders and precautionary measures” had been issued “to reduce risks to police personnel, including reorganizing movements and deployments.” He gave no further details. Israel says its attacks in Gaza that have struck and killed police officers have been aimed at eliminating threats to its troops from Hamas. Israeli troops remain deployed in the roughly 53% of Gaza under Israel's control.

In Israel's most recent attack, nine police officers were killed in an airstrike on a car in Zawayda in central Gaza on Sunday, Gaza medics said.

The bombed-out remnants of the car, stained with blood, were left on the street, surrounded by destroyed buildings.

The Israeli military said it had struck an armed Hamas cell that it said was planning to carry out an attack on Israeli troops, and that six people were killed. Neither Hamas nor the military responded immediately to a request for comment on the discrepancy in the death figures.

Hamas accuses Israel of targeting police officers who it says

are trying to maintain public security and stability in Gaza following the two-year war. Israel rejects this. Palestinian political analyst Reham Owda said Israel's attacks on Gaza police highlighted Israeli concerns about Hamas tightening its grip on Gaza in areas under its control.

“These strikes aim to disrupt Hamas' security efforts in the territory and convey a clear message that Israel will not accept any expanded security role for Hamas within Gaza,” Owda told Reuters.

Gaza's health ministry says at least 670 people have been killed by Israeli fire since the October ceasefire. Israel says four soldiers have been killed by fighters in Gaza over the same period.

Yesterday, an Israeli airstrike killed a local armed Hamas commander, Mohammad Abu Shahla, in Khan Younis in the south, Hamas and medics said, and overnight two men on a motorbike shot and wounded a senior Hamas police officer in Gaza City. Hamas blamed the attack on “Israeli collaborators.”

Israel did not immediately comment on the incidents.

Abdallah al-Araisha, a Palestinian living in a tent encampment in Gaza City, said the police had been helping to fight crime and protect people across Gaza, where most of the population of over 2mn is internally displaced.

“Without the police, we would be ruined,” Araisha said.



The region hosts the world's second-largest population of dugongs – herbivorous marine mammals known as “sea cows.” (AFP)

At least 80 insurgents killed as Nigerian troops repel base assault

Reuters
Maiduguri

Nigerian troops backed by air support repelled a coordinated assault by insurgents on a military base in the northeastern state of Borno, killing at least 80 fighters including senior commanders, the army said yesterday.

Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) fighters have intensified attacks on military bases in recent weeks in Borno, the epicentre of Nigeria's 17-year insurgency. Yesterday's assault followed multiple suicide bombings on Monday in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno, that killed at least 23 and left more than 100 wounded. The attacks on the northeast's most heavily defended city suggested that the militant groups have shifted tactics to counter intense government operations against them.

The pre-dawn attack targeted an army position in Mallam Fatori near the border with neigh-



Nigeria's Chief of Defence Staff General Olufemi Oluoyede (left) inspects the guard of honour at the Headquarters Theatre Command Joint Task Force in Maiduguri, yesterday during his visit after one of the deadliest attacks in the Borno state capital in years. (AFP)

bouring Niger, with insurgents advancing on foot and deploying armed drones, military task force spokesperson Sani Uba said in a statement.

Troops had anticipated the assault and mounted what Uba described as an “offensive-defensive” response, beating back the attack with ground fire and air support.

Nigeria's air force carried

out precision strikes, while allied Nigerian jets hit retreating insurgents. Four soldiers were wounded and evacuated for treatment, Uba said, adding that airstrike damage assessments were ongoing.

The military said three “high-profile” insurgent commanders were killed, though Reuters could not independently verify the claims.

Nigeria ride-hailing drivers protest pricing as fuel costs rise

Reuters
Lagos

Hundreds of Nigerian drivers who are signed up with ride-hailing services Uber, Bolt and inDrive protested yesterday in Lagos over low fares and high commissions while calling on the Lagos State Assembly to intervene and mandate higher pricing.

Nigeria is one of Africa's largest markets for app-based drivers, with roughly half operating in the commercial capital Lagos, a city of more than 20mn people, according to drivers' unions and transport regulators. The drivers said the platforms set fares too low while charging commissions of up to 30%, leaving them with little income at a time when petrol prices have surged following the Iran conflict that pushed up global oil prices.

“In the past year, most drivers, at least 90%, have worked without any gain and they are living in horrible and terrible conditions, and they are very unhappy,” said Ayodele Adedoyin Adetola, a union official who is signed up with inDrive. “And we say no to bad pricing on all



People hold placards as Nigerian ride-hailing drivers working with Uber, Bolt and inDrive protest in Lagos over low fares, urging the Lagos State Assembly to mandate higher rates amid surging petrol prices linked to the Iran conflict, in Lagos, yesterday. (Reuters)

the apps, be it inDrive, be it Bolt, be it Uber. We are tired of their bad pricing because we've been to them, we've explained to them, we've mailed them, we've explained that this pricing and the present economic rates are not matching.”

Sudanese artists cling to their craft in a displacement shelter

AFP
Port Sudan

At a school-turned-shelter in Port Sudan, rehearsal is a modest affair, but three years of war and the humble surroundings do little to dampen the sweet tunes rising from the two musicians.

With piles of bedding pushed to the side, the lone singer croons along to the melodies of a keyboardist – part of a group of some 120 Sudanese artists who fled the brutal fighting between the army and the Rapid Support Forces.

In the courtyard downstairs, actors, screenwriters, painters and directors work in the sunshine, before retreating to their dormitories at night.

“It's like our own little cultural centre,” says visual artist Mohira Fathi, who fled the central state of Al-Jazira with her husband and son.

But the El-Rabat centre is a far cry from the countless other shelters in the army's wartime capital of Port Sudan, where disease outbreaks and unrelenting hunger stalk tens of thousands.

Across the country, over 9mn people are internally displaced

and a record 33.7mn are in need of aid. Like everyone else, these artists came to the army's wartime capital of Port Sudan on the Red Sea exhausted, traumatised and destitute.

“When I arrived, there weren't even any fans to help with the sweltering heat. People were sleeping on mats on the floor, with no access to water,” musical troupe director Hossam al-Din al-Taheer told AFP.

Slowly, as the war dragged on, word spread of a makeshift artists' commune forming, and people started flocking to the school in the hopes that being around fel-

low artists would help keep their careers alive. “We didn't have instruments or costumes,” Taheer remembers, and artists had to take on odd jobs to earn a living, pooling their money together to buy a guitar here, a set of paints there.

Now, Taheer conducts a small orchestra between piles of luggage. For filmmaker Mohamed Ali Ibrahim, “it's a blessing that all of these artists found each other in the same place.”

They share everything: food, money, mid-rehearsal coffees, living quarters separated only by fabric sheets, and every gig that comes their way.



Residents receive aid from World Food Programme (WFP) at Al-Omada neighbourhood of Omdurman, the twin city of Khartoum recently. (AFP)



Trump administration takes steps to curb energy cost hikes

AFP
Washington

US President Donald Trump's administration scrambled yesterday to rein in surging energy costs from war in the Middle East, temporarily waiving a century-old shipping law and easing Venezuela sanctions.

The moves came after oil prices rocketed following US-Israeli strikes on Iran on February 28. Tehran's retaliation brought commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz to a virtual halt, snarling energy supply chains.

Around a fifth of global crude oil and liquefied natural gas pass through the critical waterway during peacetime.

The disruptions have caused average US gasoline prices to jump by more than 27% since the start of the war, according to data from the AAA motor club.

This strains American household budgets further – with consumers already grappling with high costs of living – piling pressure on the Trump administration as key midterm elections approach.

For now, Trump's announcement of a 60-day Jones Act waiver would lift a ban on foreign-flagged vessels transporting cargo between US ports over this period.

The 1920 law was aimed at promoting American shipbuilding, but critics argue that it hampers



US President Donald Trump waves as he boards Air Force One at Dover Air Force Base yesterday in Dover, Delaware. (AFP)

free trade and has raised costs for consumers.

The move is “just another step to mitigate the short-term disruptions to the oil market as the US military continues meeting the objectives of Operation Epic Fury,” said White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt in a statement, referring to the US campaign against Iran.

“This action will allow vital resources like oil, natural gas, fertilizer and coal to flow freely to US ports for 60 days,” she added.

She vowed that the Trump administration “remains committed to continuing to strengthen our

critical supply chains.”

The US Treasury Department separately issued a license yesterday to authorise certain transactions between established US entities and Venezuela's state-owned oil company PDVSA.

“This license will benefit both the US and Venezuela, while supporting the global energy market by increasing the supply of available oil,” said a Treasury spokesperson.

The Jones Act requires that cargo transported by water within the US be moved on vessels that are US-built, US-owned and registered under the US flag.

Just a fraction of the world's

tankers comply with the Jones Act, said Colin Grabow, an associate director at the libertarian Cato Institute.

“So this is a dramatic expansion in the number of ships that are able to be used” in transporting goods within the world's biggest economy, he told AFP, referring to Trump's temporary waiver.

He said it is nearly five times as expensive to build a medium-range tanker in the US than in Asia, which could explain why there are not many such vessels globally.

Grabow believes the measure will bolster US supply chains, but warned that effects on prices could be limited if the war rages on.

“It can help mitigate some of the disruptions,” he said. But moving forward, it could be less about reducing costs than “slowing the rate of increase” from disruptions.

Josh Lipsky of the Atlantic Council told AFP that the shipping law waiver “is unlikely to have a significant impact on global energy markets and gas prices.”

“It's too small a move to sway the larger forces at play in the Gulf,” he cautioned, even though it could help cool costs in the northeast or southwest.

“The 60-day decision as opposed to the 30 we expected may signal a longer conflict however,” Lipsky added.

S&P Global analysts estimate that Jones Act deliveries can cost billions of dollars more than employing a foreign vessel.

US to require \$15,000 bond to visa recipients from 12 more countries

Reuters
Washington

President Donald Trump's administration will require citizens from 50 countries to post bonds of \$15,000 to apply for US entry, a State Department official said yesterday.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said 12 countries are being added to a list that already includes 38 other nations, largely in Africa.

The expanded visa bond programme, which requires those foreign nationals to pay \$15,000 for a B1 or B2 visa for business and tourism, goes into effect on April 2. The aim is to prevent visitors from overstaying their visas, the official said.

The new nations included in the visa bond programme are Cambodia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Grenada, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mongolia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Papua New Guinea, Seychelles, and Tunisia.

The official said bonds will be returned to visa recipients who return home in compliance with the terms of the visa and the bond, or do not travel in the first place.

Since taking office last January, Trump, a Republican, has

pursued a hard-line immigration policy, including an aggressive deportation drive, revocations of visas and green cards, and screens of social media posts and past speeches of immigrants.

Human rights groups have condemned Trump's immigration and travel-related policies, saying they curb due process guarantees and free speech. Trump and his allies say the policies seek to improve domestic security.

Last June, he issued a travel ban that fully or partially blocked citizens of 19 nations from entering the US on national security grounds.

The State Department official said the visa bond programme has reduced the number of people who overstayed their visas.

The 38 nations previously included are Algeria, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bangladesh, Benin, Bhutan, Botswana, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Cuba, Djibouti, Dominica, Fiji, Gabon, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Mauritania, Namibia, Nepal, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Togo, Tonga, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uganda, Vanuatu, Venezuela, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Trump nominee for Homeland Security chief grilled at fiery Senate hearing

AFP
Washington

Markwayne Mullin, US President Donald Trump's pick for Homeland Security chief, distanced himself from his fired predecessor Kristi Noem as he was grilled over immigration policy at a contentious Senate confirmation hearing yesterday.

Mullin, a senator from Oklahoma, clashed repeatedly during his appearance before the Senate Homeland Security Committee with Senator Rand Paul, the committee chairman and a fellow Republican.

Paul, who has had acrimonious relations with Mullin for years, told reporters after the three-hour hearing that he would vote against his nomination to head the Department of Homeland Security, the agency charged with carrying out Trump's immigration crackdown.

Republicans hold an 8-7 majority on the Senate panel and a simple majority is needed to advance Mullin's nomination to the full Senate for a confirmation vote.

A Democratic senator on the committee, John Fetterman, who has indicated he might vote for Mullin's confirmation, said during yesterday's hearing that he had an “open mind.”

The committee vote on Mullin's nomination is expected to be held today.

Noem was fired by Trump this month in part for her handling of the recent large-scale operation against undocumented migrants in Minnesota, during which federal immigration agents shot dead two protesters who were US citizens.

Mullin said one of his goals if confirmed would be to steer DHS and its flashpoint Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency away from the spotlight.



US Senator Markwayne Mullin, President Donald Trump's nominee to be Homeland Security secretary, testifies before a Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee confirmation hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, yesterday. (Reuters)

“My goal in six months is that we're not the lead story every single day,” Mullin said.

“I want to protect the homeland,” Mullin said. “I want to bring peace of mind. I want to bring confidence back to the agency.”

He said he would “love to see ICE become a transport” in deporting migrants rather than the “front line” in rounding them up in cities and towns around the country.

He said federal immigration agents would be required to have judicial warrants before entering homes or businesses unless they were pursuing a known felon.

Mullin also retracted remarks he made at the time in which he called one of the two Americans killed in Minneapolis a “deranged individual.” “I shouldn't have said that,” he said.

He also said the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which falls under DHS, should be “restructured” but not eliminated, as some in the Trump administration have proposed.

The hearing got off to a fiery start as Paul confronted Mullin about past comments the senator from Oklahoma had made about the senator from Kentucky.

Mullin, a burly 48-year-old former wrestler and mixed martial arts fighter, once called Paul a “freaking snake” and said he “understood” why he had been assaulted by a neighbour in 2017.

“Tell me to my face why you think I deserved it,” Paul asked Mullin.

“And while you're at it, explain to the American public why they should trust a man with anger issues to set the proper example for ICE and border patrol agents,” he continued.

“I just wonder if someone who applauds violence against their political opponents is the right person to lead an agency that has struggled to accept limits to the proper use of force,” Paul said.

Mullin declined to apologise to Paul for his past comments and, referring to the assault by his neighbour, said “I don't think anybody should be hit by surprise.”

“I did not say I supported it,” he said. “I said I understood it. There's a difference.”

Mullin, a staunch Trump supporter, was elected to the Senate from Oklahoma in 2022 after serving 10 years in the US House of Representatives.

US launches new era of drug war with Latin American allies

AFP
Washington

The US and allies in Latin America and the Caribbean have ushered in a new phase of anti-drug co-operation including extraditions, shared intelligence and security plans despite criticism from international organisations.

The joint initiative dubbed “Shield of the Americas,” largely modelled on the Salvadoran approach, was announced on March 8 by President Donald Trump and leaders from 16 nations at a Florida summit.

On Saturday, US authorities took custody of Uruguayan drug trafficker Sebastian Marsset following his capture in Bolivia – barely a year after he was added to Washington's list of most-wanted fugitives.

Marsset appeared before a judge on Monday following his swift expulsion by Bolivian authorities.

The collaboration has extended to other nations, with Ecuador recently carrying out an air strike on a Farc rebel training camp in a border area shared with Colombia.

Colombian President Gustavo Petro condemned the attack but his Defence Minister Pedro Sanchez told AFP co-operation exists with Ecuador, Venezuela and the US to quell such pockets of rebellion.

The FBI has opened a permanent office in Ecuador, whose government recently imposed curfews in the regions hardest hit by violence related to organised crime.

Last week Washington also announced the arrest, pending extradition, of a suspect accused of being one of the leaders of

“Los Piratas,” the Chilean affiliate of the Tren de Aragua gang.

The suspected drug kingpin, 40-year-old Venezuelan national Rafael Enrique Gamez Salas, could be deported to Chile in the near future.

The Trump administration is acutely aware of the conservative political shift that has swept through the region and is trying to accelerate its efforts before a new political cycle.

The growing collaboration also means suspects can be sent home from the US.

“The economic pressure from President Donald Trump, along with his veiled military threats, has compelled her to take action”

In January, the Department of Homeland Security announced the arrest of Chilean national Armando Fernandez Larios, a former military officer and agent of the DINA, the feared political police force of Augusto Pinochet's regime.

Larios, who pleaded guilty to the 1976 assassination of former Chilean minister Orlando Letelier in Washington, had been living in the US since the late 1980s.

After nearly four decades, he could soon be deported to his home country, a Department of Homeland Security spokesperson confirmed to AFP.

Brazil, Mexico and Colombia did not attend the Florida summit, but intelligence co-operation remains ongoing, according to their leaders and diplomatic sources in Washington.

Trump continues to exert pressure on Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, as shown by Mexico's operation that led to the death of kingpin Nemesio Oseguera, or “El

Mencho,” leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG).

“The economic pressure from President Donald Trump, along with his veiled military threats, has compelled her to take action,” observed Amanda Mattingly, a former diplomat and founder of ACM Global Intelligence.

In Brazil, the next chapter in a relationship marked by ups and downs could involve the official designation of two powerful criminal factions – the “Comando Vermelho” (Red Command) and the “Primeiro Comando da Capital” (PCC) – as terrorist groups.

Such a designation is a source of tension in the Brazilian government.

When questioned by AFP, a State Department spokesperson said Washington does not “anticipate possible designations” of the groups, but remains “committed to taking appropriate measures against foreign groups that engage in terrorist activities.”

The anti-drug campaign, which includes controversial elements such as attacks on suspected drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean, is sparking alarm in some parts of the region.

“These serial extrajudicial killings constitute a grave violation of the right to life,” said Ben Saul, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights, in hearings recently held by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in Guatemala.

But the State Department said the IACHR “lacks competence to examine issues regarding the interpretation and application of international humanitarian law” on such issues.

Leader of Ecuador's Los Lobos crime group arrested in Mexico City

A leader of Ecuador's Los Lobos crime group was arrested at Mexico City's international airport, authorities said yesterday, in what regional officials called a significant blow to criminal networks spanning Mexico, Colombia and Ecuador. Ecuador's Interior Minister John Reimberg identified the man as Angel Esteban Aguilar, who is wanted in connection with the 2023 assassination of Ecuadorean presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, a vocal critic of corruption and organised crime. The suspect, known by the alias “Lobo Menor,” was the subject of an Interpol red notice and is linked to drug trafficking, extortion

and homicide, Mexican Security Minister Omar Garcia Harfuch said in a post on X. Mexican authorities said they tracked him in real-time upon his arrival in the country, where he attempted to use a fake Colombian identity under the name Juan Carlos Montero. Reimberg said he had planned to flee to Mexico. Colombian President Gustavo Petro said the arrest followed a manhunt in Colombia and was a result of trilateral co-operation between Mexico, Colombia and Ecuador. “This result represents a significant blow against transnational organised crime and confirms the effectiveness of trilateral

co-operation between Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico in the fight against multi-crime networks,” Petro said, adding that the arrest was made for extradition purposes. Mexican authorities said they were communicating with the Colombian government over legal and immigration requirements. Petro described the suspect as one of Ecuador's most wanted criminals, with links to Mexican cartels and the leader of the largest dissident branch of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc), known by the alias Ivan Mordisco. Washington designated Los Lobos a foreign terrorist organisation in September last year. (Reuters)

Five people die in fire outside Olmecca refinery in Mexico

Reuters
Mexico City

Five people died outside Mexico's Olmecca oil refinery after “oily waters” around the perimeter caught fire, state-run oil firm Pemex said on Tuesday, the latest incident at the flagship project of former president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

One of those who died was a Pemex worker, the company said.

Pemex said it is working with authorities to determine the cause and that operations were unaffected.

“Due to heavy rains that caused oily water to overflow outside the Olmecca refinery, the liquid pooled and subsequently ignited outside the facility's perimeter fence,” Pemex said in a statement.

Olmecca is in the southern state of Tabasco in the Gulf port of Dos Bocas. It is among Mexico's largest refineries and began operations in 2024.

The refinery was built to reduce Mexico's dependence on imported fuel.

It was inaugurated in 2022 during the term of President Lopez Obrador, the predecessor and political mentor

of current President Claudia Sheinbaum.

The \$21 billion project, more than double the original budget, has experienced a series of operating problems including stoppages, and has failed to meet the production targets promised upon inauguration.

In January, the refinery produced 205,000 barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil, 77,520 bpd of gasoline and 78,500 bpd of diesel. Its maximum processing capacity is 340,000 bpd which the Lopez Obrador administration said would mean “energy sovereignty”.

US in talks with Brazil on critical minerals, signs Goiás state deal

Reuters
Sao Paulo

The US is in talks with Brazil to reach a deal on critical mineral supply chains, US Chargé d'Affaires Gabriel Escobar said yesterday, amid diplomatic tensions with the Brazilian federal government, which pulled out of the US embassy-sponsored forum on critical minerals last week.

"We have a proposal for a deal at the federal level. We are discussing it, we had some preliminary discussions, but we're still waiting," Escobar said after signing a separate agreement with the state of Goiás in a ceremony before the event.

Representatives for the government of Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva could not attend the Brazil-US Forum on Critical Minerals in Sao Paulo due to a clash with a prior engagement, a spokesperson said.

The US embassy-sponsored event, held at the American Chamber of Commerce in Sao Paulo, aimed to encourage networking between American investors and Brazilian firms looking to produce critical minerals. Citi and Anglo American were among the firms in attendance.

The US has been scrambling to get access to critical mineral reserves, especially rare earth supply chains currently dominated by

Chinese players.

Washington sees Brazil as a potential target for billions of dollars in investments, a US embassy spokesperson said, adding that \$600mn has already been invested by the Development Finance Corporation and the EXIM bank.

However, diplomatic tensions between Washington and Brasilia have cast a shadow over the embassy event.

Officials from Brasilia pulled out as bilateral relations soured after a hard-right US official last week asked to visit ex-president Jair Bolsonaro in prison, which Brasilia saw as an attempt to meddle in domestic affairs. Brazil barred the envoy's entrance, citing "falsification" of reasons for the visit.

Brazilian authorities received a proposal for a memorandum of understanding in February, three sources told Reuters. But it appeared to be a copy of a proposal sent to another country, including the wrong country's name, a source told Reuters. The mistake was later corrected.

Negotiations are underway with the office of the US Trade Representative, the sources said, and as part of a possible visit by Lula to Washington.

However, a meeting between Lula and President Donald Trump that was expected to take place in Washington this month, has been postponed amid the US-Israel conflict with Iran and diplomatic

friction between Brazil and the US.

Brazilian federal officials vented frustration in private at the US decision to sign the agreement with Goiás Governor Ronaldo Caiado, Lula's political opponent. The move was seen as an attempt to bypass the federal government, said one Brazilian official following the matter.

The deal establishes co-operation between the US and Goiás across several areas, such as mapping mineral potential, connecting local miners with US technology and improving regulations, the state government said in a statement.

Goiás has reserves of lithium, niobium and is the home of the only firm commercially producing rare earths in Brazil, US-backed Serra Verde.

The state government said the agreement aims to promote "value-added processing and manufacturing capabilities, including rare earth separation" in Goiás.

Making strides in domestic processing is a priority for Lula, according to a Brazilian foreign trade ministry official, who requested anonymity to discuss ongoing talks.

US officials see potential for billions of dollars in investment and have identified more than 50 mining projects in Brazil that could bolster international efforts to diversify supply, easing China's dominance in critical minerals.

First international aid convoy arrives in crisis-hit Cuba

AFP
Havana

The first shipment of international aid for crisis-hit Cuba has arrived in the country in the shape of five tonnes of medical supplies, official sources said yesterday.

A delegation of around 100 European activists arrived overnight at Havana airport with the aid, which will be distributed to hospitals, the sources said.

Cuba has been mired in an economic crisis exacerbated by the sudden suspension of oil supplies from Venezuela in January after the US ousted president Nicolas Maduro, a Cuba ally.

The island nation of 9.6mn was already battling the effects of the US fuel blockade against the island.

The aid activists from several European and Latin American countries as well as Türkiye belong to the Nuestra America ("Our America") flotilla who are out to show their solidarity with the Cuban people.

All told, humanitarian organisations and public figures plan to deliver 20 tonnes of aid to the island by air and sea to help Cuba through its worst economic crisis in three decades exacerbated by the US capture of Maduro and the cut-off in oil shipments from Venezuela.

US President Donald Trump has threatened retaliation against



Members of the international convoy Our America (European Convoy to Cuba) arrive at a children's hospital in Havana yesterday. (AFP)

any country sending oil to the Caribbean island.

Official Cuban media said another convoy was leaving Chile yesterday with "medicines, supplies and food to help Cuba cope with the tightening of the energy blockade imposed by the US."

Additionally, a group of 140 people – including doctors, lawyers, labour leaders and activists – will be flying from Miami, Florida, to Havana on Friday to deliver 2.8 tonnes of medical supplies to clinics and hospitals, according to the pacifist group CODEPINK, one of the operation's organisers.

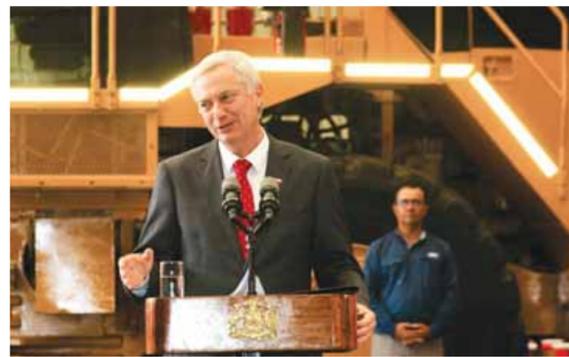
A flotilla from Mexico is also expected to reach Havana by the

end of the week.

Separately, leftist activists are also planning to hold a solidarity event along the Havana waterfront.

Among expected attendees are Pablo Iglesias, a former Spanish politician and founder of the left-wing party Podemos, Irish punk-rap group Kneecap, Brazilian climate activist Thiago Avila and leftist British Parliamentarian Jeremy Corbyn, according to a statement by organisers.

In their statement, organisers quoted Corbyn as saying that the US had blockaded Cuba for six decades and "now the Donald Trump administration is intensifying" it.



Chile's President Jose Antonio Kast speaks during his visit to the Industrial and Mining Training Center (CEIM) in Antofagasta. (AFP)

Chile's Kast scraps dozens of environmental protections

AFP
Santiago

The government of Chile's new President Jose Antonio Kast has halted 43 environmental protection decrees signed by his left-wing predecessor Gabriel Boric, the environment ministry said Tuesday.

Among the suspended measures that were awaiting implementation are a regulation limiting thermal power plant emissions, the creation of several national parks, and an order to safeguard Darwin's frog, a tiny, endangered amphibian species found in southern Chile and Argentina.

The ministry withdrew the decrees – signed between 2023 and 2026 by the Boric administration – while they were still under review by the comptroller general's

office, one step prior to their entry into force, according to a document reported by the media and confirmed by the government.

"We want to create the best possible public policy regarding full employment, always respecting the environment," Kast said when asked by reporters about the scrapping of the decrees.

The decision was made last Thursday, a day after the 60-year-old, far-right leader took office.

In a statement, the environment ministry said the action aimed to ensure that authorities were in compliance with current technical and regulatory standards, "standard practice" for the start of a new administration.

"I understand there is concern," Kast said. "But I would invite you to look at what the public needs: growth, environmental protection, but above all, jobs. And this is in line with that."

Colombia, Ecuador examine possible border breach

Reuters
Bogota/Quito

Explosions in cocaine labs near the border with Ecuador killed 14 people in January, Colombia's Defence Minister Pedro Sanchez said yesterday, when asked to clarify accusations by Colombian President Gustavo Petro that an Ecuadorean security operation resulted in more than two dozen deaths in the area.

Sanchez said Colombian and Ecuadorean authorities are examining together whether sovereignty has been violated and that a bomb found in Colombia seemed likely to belong to Ecuador's armed forces.

Petro this week suggested Ecuador had bombed Colombian territory, leaving behind 27 charred bodies, though he provided no further evidence or information.

Ecuadorean President Daniel Noboa flatly denied the accusation, saying his country had bombed drug traffickers within its own territory and the locations were hideouts for narco-terrorism groups of mostly Colombian origin.

Twelve people in the border province Narino were killed on January 22 and two others died days later, Sanchez said, when asked by journalists about the figure of 27 dead given by Petro.

"The information we have at this moment is that those people



An explosive device is pictured on the ground at Vereda El Amarradero, Narino department, Colombia near the border with Ecuador. (AFP)

died after being burned alive. The site where they died was a cocaine laboratory, and the causes and who was behind it are under investigation. Two other people died under similar conditions at another site on January 24," he said.

respond technically, with due importance given to that case."

Sommerfeld reiterated that operations carried out by Ecuador take place in Ecuadorean territory and said her country was open to dialogue to resolve the impasse. Ecuador's defence ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Petro on Tuesday reposted an image from Colombian state-run television station RTVC that it said showed one of the bombs, a dark green cylinder lying in foliage. Yesterday, he added in a new post that the bomb, which Sanchez said had been disarmed, was found just over the border near a site bombed by Ecuador and was fired from a low-flying plane.

Ecuador on Sunday launched a two-week-long security operation in four provinces on or near the Pacific coast to beat back gang violence. It has repeatedly held operations on its Colombian border, a major hub for trafficking of drugs that are then smuggled north to the US by sea.

Ecuador has said its anti-drug trafficking operations are supported by allied countries, including the US. Noboa had repeatedly courted the backing of US President Donald Trump for his anti-crime initiatives. Noboa raised duties on Colombian goods to 50% last month, claiming the neighbour was not doing enough to fight drug trafficking, and Colombia said it was considering a reciprocal measure.

Eight killed during Rio police operation

AFP
Rio de Janeiro

At least eight people died yesterday during a police operation against organised crime in Rio de Janeiro, including one of Brazil's most-wanted drug lords, authorities said.

Around 150 members of the city's elite BOPE military police unit, backed by two armoured vehicles, deployed in several favelas in the touristy Santa Teresa neighbourhood targeting a prominent narco-trafficker.

"A major armed confrontation ensued," leading to the death of the target, Claudio Augusto dos Santos, 55, identified as a key figure within one of Brazil's largest criminal groups, Comando Vermelho (Red Command), said military police chief Marcelo Menezes Nogueira.

Dos Santos had at least eight outstanding arrest warrants for kidnapping, drug trafficking, and homicide, Menezes Nogueira told a press conference.

He described Dos Santos as "a ruthless and bloodthirsty drug trafficker" who had 135 criminal charges on record.

Police also killed six other suspected criminals.



Firefighters walk past a bus allegedly burned by drug traffickers during a police operation in Rio de Janeiro, yesterday. (Reuters)

The eighth victim was a local resident who had been taken hostage along with his partner, who survived, Menezes Nogueira said.

In retaliation for the police operation, a bus was set on fire on a major avenue in downtown Rio, and barricades were erected using other vehicles, AFP journalists witnessed.

Menezes Nogueira said that Red Command members were behind the actions

which caused traffic chaos in the city centre.

Rio de Janeiro has long battled territorial control by criminal factions and residents are weary of violence and chronic insecurity.

In October last year, the biggest police operation in Brazil's history saw officers clash with heavily armed gang members in military gear. At least 117 suspected criminals and four police officers were killed.

Rights organisations slammed the raid, which President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva called a "massacre."

Polls, however, show that the majority of Brazilians approved of the operation and, as October elections loom, security has become the main concern for voters in the country.

Also yesterday, Brazilian police launched a separate operation across 15 states targeting organisations linked to drug and arms trafficking.

The police operations come as local media reports Lula's government is lobbying Washington not to designate Red Command and the powerful First Capital Command (PCC) as terrorist organisations.

Brasilia considers the organised crime factions to be criminal and not terrorist organisations.

Venezuela's acting president replaces defence minister

Venezuela's acting President Delcy Rodriguez said yesterday that General Gustavo Gonzalez Lopez will replace General Vladimir Padrino as defence minister, a position Padrino has held for more than 11 years.

The change is the most important yet in Rodriguez's cabinet and marks the demotion of a long-time powerbroker who controlled Venezuela's sprawling military.

In a post on Telegram, Rodriguez thanked Padrino for his service and loyalty to the homeland, and said he would be given new responsibilities. Rodriguez in January appointed Gonzalez Lopez as the new head of the presidential guard and the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence.

Gonzalez Lopez, who has been sanctioned by the US and EU along with at least half a dozen other high-ranking officials for rights violations and corruption, served as Venezuela's domestic intelligence director until mid-2024. Later that year, he began working with Rodriguez as head of strategic affairs at state oil company PDVSA, which she previously oversaw as energy minister. Padrino, who has also been sanctioned

by the US over alleged drug trafficking and his support for ousted President Nicolas Maduro, once directed the ceremonial section of the presidential guard under deceased President Hugo Chavez. But his star fully rose under Maduro, who made him defence minister in late 2014.

Sources have told Reuters Padrino was likely to be replaced and had been kept in his position after the US capture of Maduro to ensure stability in the military, where some 2,000 generals control disparate groups of poorly paid troops, as well as huge business interests. Padrino, who appeared on state television soon after Maduro's capture to say Venezuela would resist foreign troops and whose military was preparing 'guerrilla-style' attacks to confront an invasion, has instead worked with Rodriguez to comply with US demands on oil, mining and the release of some people classed as political prisoners.

Despite the US intervention, Venezuela's repressive apparatus remains intact, the UN said last week. Venezuela's government has always denied human rights violations against civil society and its political opposition, as well as accusations of corruption within the military. (Reuters)



Chinese tourists ditch Japan for third month running

AFP
Tokyo

Chinese visitors to Japan tumbled 45.2% in February from a year earlier, official data showed yesterday, as the fallout from the countries' diplomatic spat bit for the third month running.

Previously, Chinese travellers were the biggest source of tourists to Japan, contributing to a boom in the land of cherry blossoms and Mount Fuji that was fuelled by a weak yen, making shopping cheap. But in January, South Korea overtook China as the largest contingent, a trend that continued in February, with visitors from the

country jumping 28.2% to 1.1mn. That compared with 396,400 visitors from mainland China last month, the Japan National Tourism Organisation said.

By comparison, 18 countries and regions set new records for the number of their nationals who visited Japan in February – including South Korea, Taiwan and the US, data showed.

The number of visitors from Hong Kong also shot up by 19.6% compared to last year.

While February is typically the low season for travel to Japan, this year, due to the timing of Lunar New Year, the number of visitors shot up, the tourism group said, noting a particular

uptick from East Asia.

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

China, which regards the democratic island as part of its territory and has not ruled out force to annex it, was furious over the comments.

It summoned Tokyo's ambassador and warned Chinese citizens against visiting Japan.

The number of Chinese visitors to Japan already tumbled 45% in December and nose-dived 60.7% in January.

Instead, other countries, including South Korea, received an

increase in the number of Chinese visitors.

In January, 418,703 visited South Korea, up from 364,460 the same month last year, according to the Korea Tourism Organisation.

The number of Chinese visitors to Thailand edged up 4.24% on average during the January-February period compared to the same period last year.

Japan's cherry blossom season will be in full swing in late March and early April, but some local media reports suggest the decline in the number of Chinese visitors will continue.

Contacted by AFP, one hotel in the Tokyo Bay area said the number of Chinese guests "had halved



A visitor walks past scaled replicas of the US Capitol and Mount Rushmore, at the theme park Window of the World, in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, China, yesterday. (Reuters)

since November" and that will likely continue in March and April, although a handful of other hotels said they have seen no significant impact from the souring ties between Tokyo and Beijing.

Japan, US to discuss joint rare earths development: Takaichi

AFP
Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said yesterday she would discuss joint development with the US of deep sea rare earths off a remote Pacific island when she meets President Donald Trump this week.

Tokyo last month succeeded in retrieving sediment containing rare earths – 17 metals used in everything from electric vehicles to hard drives and missiles – from ocean depths of 6,000 metres (about 20,000 feet) on a test mission close to Minamitorishima island.

Japan and the US, as well as many other countries, are seeking to curb dependence on China for the valuable minerals.

"We discussed resources development when President Trump visited Japan in October last year, and since February Ja-



Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi (left) and Finance Minister Satsuki Katayama attend a budget committee session of the House of Councillors at Parliament in Tokyo yesterday. (AFP)

pan and the US have begun concrete discussions on cooperating regarding development of marine mineral resources," Takaichi told parliament.

"The rare earths in waters around Minamitorishima are one of the targets of this effort... I expect it

will also be taken up in the upcoming Japan-US summit meeting," scheduled for Thursday, she added. "We will be discussing the specifics of what such cooperation should look like."

The sediment containing rare earths was collected by a deep-sea scientific drilling boat called the Chikyu that set sail in January for Minamitorishima, where surrounding waters are believed to contain a trove of valuable minerals.

The mission came as Beijing ramped up pressure on Japan after Takaichi suggested in November that Tokyo may react militarily to an attack on Taiwan, which China has vowed to seize control of by force if necessary.

It blocked exports to Japan of "dual-use" items with potential military uses, fuelling worries in Japan that Beijing could choke supplies of rare earths.

China has long used its dominance in rare earths for geopolitical leverage, including in its trade war with Trump.

The US last month unveiled a critical minerals partnership with the European Union and Japan, after a gathering in Washington amid growing concerns about China's dominant role in the sector.

China says in contact with US over Trump visit, no timeframe set

AFP
Beijing

China said yesterday that it was in contact with the United States about a postponed visit by Donald Trump, but was tight-lipped about a timetable after the US leader said he would make the trip in five or six weeks.

The visit, which was originally set to start March 31, has been highly anticipated given the powers' strategic and commercial rivalry that has been exacerbated by Trump's aggressive tariff campaign.

"Both China and the United States will continue to maintain communication regarding President Trump's visit to China," Lin

Jian, a spokesman for China's foreign ministry, told a news conference.

The visit, which was months on the making, has been disrupted by the war in the Middle East.

Trump said on Tuesday that the high-stakes trip would take place in "five or six weeks".

He suggested on Sunday that the date of his trip could depend on whether China assists in unblocking the Strait of Hormuz, which has been effectively closed off by Iran in retaliation for US-Israeli strikes on Tehran.

Trump confirmed a day later the likelihood of a delay, but instead cited the need to remain in the United States due to the war.

China has never publicly confirmed any date for the visit, in line with its usual practice.

China blasts Australia, New Zealand over rights concerns

AFP
Sydney

China condemned Australia and New Zealand yesterday for "colonial-style arrogance" and poor treatment of Indigenous people after a joint statement by the two nations raised concerns over Beijing's rights record.

In comments sent to AFP, a spokesperson for Beijing's embassy in New Zealand said the comments by Australia and New Zealand's defence and foreign ministers were "marked by bias, misinformation, and inexplicable colonial-style arrogance".

The spokesperson accused the two countries of overlooking the "root cause" of the current war in the Middle East, triggered by joint US-Israeli strikes on Iran on February 28.

And they accused New Zealand and Australia of staying silent on their "own poor records concerning human rights and ethnic minority issues".

Tuesday's joint statement, issued after meetings in Canberra, saw ministers from both countries condemn Iran's attacks on its neighbours.

It also condemned Beijing's treatment of minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, and stifling of freedoms in the southern semi-autonomous city of Hong Kong.

Beijing's mission in Wellington in response accused Canberra and Wellington of "double standards".

While minorities in China enjoyed "harmony", it said, the international community was "well placed" to "form a fair judgment regarding the treatment of Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in those countries".

China makes energy security 'reunification' offer to Taiwan

Reuters
Beijing

China offered yesterday what it said would be energy stability to Taiwan if it agreed to Beijing's rule, part of a campaign by China to convince the island of the benefits of "reunification", which it has long rejected.

Governments around the world are scrambling for alternative energy supplies during the Middle East War and severing of shipping lanes through the vital Strait of Hormuz.

Taiwan, which had received a third of its LNG from Qatar and sources no energy from China, has said it has secured alternative sup-

plies for the months ahead, including from the United States, the island's main international backer.

Chen Binhua, a spokesperson for China's Taiwan Affairs Office, told reporters in Beijing that "peaceful reunification" would bring better protection of Taiwan's energy and resource security with a "strong motherland" as its backing.

"We are willing to provide Taiwan compatriots with stable and reliable energy and resource security, so that they may live better lives," he said, responding to a question about Taiwan's energy supplies during the war in the Middle East.

There was no immediate response to the comments from Taiwan's government, which rejects Beijing's sovereignty claims and says

only the island's people can decide their future.

China has long offered the island "one country, two systems" autonomy if it agrees to be brought under Beijing's control, which no major political party in Taiwan supports.

In October, China's official Xinhua news agency mapped out what it said were the advantages Taiwan would enjoy after "reunification", including economic support, but said the island had to be run by "patriots".

China has never renounced the use of force to bring Taiwan under its control.

China, the world's top oil importer, last week banned fuel exports until at least the end of March, in an attempt to pre-empt domestic shortages, sources said, curbing exports that last year totalled \$22bn.

Samsung Electronics workers for May strike

AFP
Seoul

Tens of thousands of Samsung Electronics workers said yesterday they will strike in May over a wage dispute, raising concerns over chip production.

The firm is one of two South Korean chipmakers, along with SK hynix, now crucial suppliers of advanced memory chips for booming AI infrastructure demand.

The announcement is a blow to South Korea's bid to join the United States and China as one of the world's top three AI powers.

Samsung announced last month that it had begun mass production of next-generation high-bandwidth memory chips, HBM4s, seen as a key component for scaling up the vast data centres driving the rise of artificial intelligence.

More than 66,000 of nearly 90,000 unionised workers took part in a vote on whether to strike, the association of three unions said in a press release.

"Of those who voted, 93.1 percent voted in favour," it said. "This result makes clear that the



The logo of Samsung Electronics is seen at the company's store in Seoul, South Korea. (Reuters/ File Photo)

vast majority of Samsung Electronics workers reject the company's current proposal as failing to uphold the management principle of "People First" it said.

The unions' demands include a seven-percent wage hike, the removal of a cap on bonuses and a more transparent performance-based bonus system.

The will of the workers was a "strong warning to the leadership", it added.

Samsung told AFP it remained "committed to reaching a smooth agreement" with the unions.

Long staunchly anti-union, founder Lee Byung-chul once vowed never to allow unions "until I have dirt over my eyes". He died in 1987. Samsung Electronics' first labour union was formed in the late 2010s.

Indonesian military detains four soldiers over acid attack

AFP
Jakarta

The Indonesian military detained four soldiers yesterday suspected of links to an acid attack that maimed a rights activist who criticised the armed forces' growing influence, an official said.

Andrie Yunus, deputy co-ordinator of KontraS, was riding a motorbike last week when he was approached by two men on a scooter, one of whom threw acid at him, according to the group.

He suffered injuries to his face, an eye, hands and torso.

The military police has detained four soldiers from the armed forces' intelligence unit suspected of involvement in the assault, commander Yusri Nuryanto said.

An internal investigation into the attack had found "irregularities" that led to the detentions, Yusri said, without giving further details. "We are still investigating the motives of the four alleged perpetrators," he told a press conference.

The soldiers, identified by their initials NDP, SL, BHW and ES, will be held at a maximum security facility in Jakarta, he added.

Separately, Jakarta police released CCTV footage yesterday showing the faces of two people suspected of attacking Andrie.

They had the initials BHC and MAK, police official Iman Anuddin said. Their links to the four soldiers are unclear.

On Monday, police said that CCTV footage showed four suspects on two scooters had followed Andrie before the attack.

Lawmakers agreed on Wednesday to form a special committee to oversee the handling of the case, according to member of parliament Habibuokhman, who like many Indonesians uses only one name. Andrie has been a vocal critic of moves to increase the influence of the military in the Indonesian government and had recently recorded a podcast on the issue when he was attacked.

UN rights chief Volker Turk said last week he was "deeply concerned" by the "horrific" attack and called for accountability.

Human Rights Watch says Indonesia "has undergone further democratic backsliding, crack-downs on protests, media censorship, and intimidation of activists" under President Prabowo Subianto, an ex-general in office since 2024.



Tricycles are parked along a street in Manila on Tuesday. (AFP)

Philippines puts brakes on transport fare hike

AFP
Manila

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos yesterday put the brakes on a public transportation fare hike announced just a day earlier, promising the country's commuters free rides instead.

The archipelago nation, which imports nearly all of its crude oil from the Middle East, has been scrambling to deal with eye-watering price increases triggered by the US-Israeli war with Iran.

"In my opinion... now is probably not the time to raise fares for the people"

Since hostilities erupted, the Philippines has instituted a four-day workweek for civil servants, distributed cash handouts to tricycle drivers, and seen its sole refinery open discussions to buy Russian oil.

On Tuesday, the country's transportation regulator announced fare hikes across an array

of public transport, with rides in jeepneys, used by millions of Filipinos every day, set to jump about eight percent.

"In my opinion... now is probably not the time to raise fares for the people," Marcos said yesterday in walking back the increase, citing the ongoing Middle East war.

Instead, Marcos said he had ordered the country's transportation department "to launch free rides all over the Philippines" along with discounts on light rail systems and toll roads.

Marcos did not specify which

forms of public transport would be made free.

In a statement that followed shortly, the transportation department said it would suspend the fare hikes in line with the president's request while "preparing" programmes, including free rides.

Mody Floranda, president of a local jeepney drivers' union, told AFP that his group was unhappy with the decision.

"We are dismayed that the president of our country had ruthlessly recalled what his government has granted to us," he said.

UK PM leads efforts to halt deadly meningitis spread

AFP
London

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer yesterday led urgent calls for young people who visited a club at the centre of a deadly meningitis outbreak to come forward, as the number of cases rose.

Starmer told parliament the outbreak centred on Canterbury, in southeastern England, had left two dead and others were seriously ill in hospital.

Health experts were working to identify the close contacts of those who had contracted the life-threatening condition, Starmer said.

He asked "anyone who attended Club Chemistry on March, 5, 6th or 7th to come forward, please, to receive antibiotics".

All the cases linked back to that club in the university city, Health Minister Wes Streeting said earlier.

The number of cases being probed by UK authorities rose in the past 24 hours from 15 to 20.

Those who died have been identified as a 21-year-old university student and an 18-year-old school student.



Students wearing face masks queue up to get vaccinated at the University of Kent in Canterbury, south-east England yesterday, following an outbreak of meningitis. (AFP)

The focus of public health measures so far has been the University of Kent in Canterbury, which has around 18,000 students, some of whom are among those hospitalised.

One of the cases involved a pa-

tient who had been living in Kent, but who was taken ill in London, amid fears the disease could spread as students head home for their Easter vacation.

Meningitis is a potentially deadly infection affecting the protec-

tive membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord. It is most common in young children, teenagers and young adults.

It can progress rapidly and is spread through prolonged close contact.

"As of 5pm on 17 March, nine laboratory cases are confirmed and 11 notifications remain under investigation," bringing the total to 20, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) said in a statement, an increase of five.

Students at the university have been queueing this week for preventative antibiotics with four centres open in Canterbury.

A targeted meningitis B vaccination programme was also due to begin, authorities said, with the jab initially being offered to 5,000 University of Kent students living on campus.

The programme could be extended, the UKHSA added.

Family doctors nationwide have been told to prescribe antibiotics to anyone attending their surgeries who visited Club Chemistry between March 5-7 and to University of Kent students "if they have been asked to seek preventative treatment".

Britain, Rwanda in court clash over migrant deal

AFP
The Hague

Britain and Rwanda crossed swords at an international court yesterday, with Kigali seeking more than £100m it says London still owes from a scrapped deal to deport migrants. Officials from the two countries clashed in the oak-panelled Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague, set up in 1899 to settle contractual disputes between nations.

Representing Rwanda, Justice Minister Emmanuel Ugirashebuja said his country "regretted" having to drag Britain to the court to recover "the substantial sums of money of which Rwanda has been deprived".

"However, the United Kingdom's intransigence... has left Rwanda with no other choice to vindicate its rights," Ugirashebuja told the three-judge panel.

The two nations are already at loggerheads after Britain slashed aid to Rwanda, accusing it of supporting M23 rebels in the

Democratic Republic of Congo.

In 2022, former prime minister Boris Johnson sealed a deal with Kigali to send migrants arriving in Britain via "dangerous or illegal journeys" in small boats or lorries to Rwanda. But the scheme hit legal and political obstacles from the start, with the UK Supreme Court eventually slapping it down as illegal.

When Keir Starmer became prime minister in July 2024, he declared the plan "dead and buried" on his first full day in office, dismissing it as a "gimmick".

Then interior minister Yvette Cooper called it "the most shocking waste of taxpayers' money I have ever seen".

During the two years before the scheme was scrapped, only four people actually went to Rwanda, according to the current UK government, all voluntarily. According to the UK government website, about £290m has already been paid to Rwanda, but Kigali argued in its pre-hearing submissions to the PCA that two annual payments of £50m were still outstanding.

King Charles greets Nigerian president for first state visit

AFP
Windsor

King Charles III ceremonially welcomed Nigerian President Bola Tinubu at Windsor Castle yesterday in the first state visit by the leader of Africa's most populous nation in nearly four decades.

Tinubu has made less formal visits to Britain several times in his tenure and the two countries remain major partners in trade, aid and defence. London is also home to a massive Nigerian diaspora.

King Charles and Queen Camilla greeted the president and his wife in Windsor, west of London, on a sunny afternoon as artillery fired salutes.

The Nigerian president and his wife earlier chatted with heir-to-the-throne Prince William and his wife Catherine at a hotel in Windsor.

The party then rode in carriages to the historic Windsor Castle, followed by cavalry in red and gold livery.

At the castle entrance, Charles and Tinubu inspected a guard of honour in traditional bearskin hats.

Later in the afternoon the king and queen were to show the president and first lady items from the

Royal Collection reflecting the ties with Britain as the colonial power in charge of Nigeria until 1960.

These include a Yoruba beaded throne presented to Queen Elizabeth II during an official visit in 1965.

They were also to view photographs of a Yoruba woman known as Sarah Forbes Bonetta, who became a protegee of Queen Victoria after being captured as a slave and taken to Britain by a naval captain.

Queen Victoria became godmother to her daughter and paid for her schooling.

In the evening, Charles and Tinubu were set to give speeches at a lavish state banquet.

Nigeria's presidency said the visit signalled a "renewed chapter" and reflected a shared commitment to "advancing trade and strengthening diplomatic ties".

Calling the visit "historic", London announced Nigerian companies including banks are expanding operations and creating hundreds of jobs in Britain, strengthening it as a global hub for African business.

Likely on the agenda are issues ranging from major Nigerian port renovations backed by Britain as well as trade, which reached £8.1bn (\$11bn) in the year to September 2025, an 11.4% year-on-year increase.



Britain's Queen Camilla, Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Britain's King Charles and Nigerian First Lady Oluremi Tinubu pose for a photo in the Grand Corridor, during Tinubu's state visit to the Britain, at Windsor Castle, in Berkshire, yesterday. (Reuters)

Today, Tinubu is expected to meet British Prime Minister Keir Starmer as well as members of the Nigerian community abroad, according to the official schedule.

Missing from the official schedule is the traditional meeting between the visiting head of state and the British opposition.

Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch, who is of Nigerian de-

cent, has repeatedly publicly criticised the country she was raised in over corruption and violence.

The last Nigerian state visit to the UK took place in 1989, although Tinubu was received by Charles in September 2024.

Before the death of his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, in 2022, Charles also visited Nigeria four times as Prince of Wales.

UK security adviser was not part of final US-Iran talks, says spokesperson

Britain's national security adviser, Jonathan Powell, was not part of final talks between the US and Iran before the US and Israel launched strikes against Tehran, a spokesperson for Prime Minister Keir Starmer said yesterday.

Britain's *Guardian* newspaper reported on Tuesday that Powell had attended the talks and judged the offer made by Tehran on its nuclear programme significant enough to prevent a rush to war. "These negotiations were bilateral between the US and Iran, facilitated by Oman.

Jonathan was not present in the talks in Geneva and was not part of talks in the residence," the spokesperson told reporters, after being asked about the report which said Powell was present in the building at Oman's ambassadorial residence in Geneva. "No team of British officials participated in the negotiations. The UK supported the approach Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner took and their efforts in pursuit of a negotiated solution," the spokesperson said, referring to the two White House envoys. (Reuters)

UK scraps AI copyright plans after outcry by stars

Britain's government yesterday backtracked on planned changes regarding copyright and AI after an outcry from musicians including pop legend Elton John.

The Labour administration had intended to allow firms developing AI models to use creators' content freely unless the rights holders opted out. John had branded the plans "criminal" and more than 1,000 musicians including Kate Bush and Damon Albarn released a silent album last year in protest.

"We have listened," technology minister Liz Kendall said in a

written statement to parliament yesterday, confirming the government had dropped its stance. She added, however, that the government "no longer has a preferred option" for what to do instead. The development comes as countries grapple with how to take advantage of artificial intelligence without endangering the creative industries.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer has previously said the UK government needs to "get the balance right" with copyright and AI while noting that the technology represented "a huge opportunity". (AFP)

Ukraine seeks release of citizens arrested in India over drone activity

Reuters
New Delhi

Ukraine has asked New Delhi to release six of its citizens arrested in India last week for allegedly entering a restricted border state without permits, and crossing into neighbouring Myanmar to train anti-junta ethnic groups in drone warfare. Indian authorities arrested the six Ukrainians as well as one US citizen on the night of March 13 at three different airports.

According to a court order from Monday remanding the seven in police custody until a hearing on March 27, they are accused of travelling illegally to India's northeastern state of Mizoram, crossing into Myanmar, and training anti-junta ethnic armed groups in drone warfare, as well as illegally importing large consignments of drones from Europe to Myanmar via India.

Mizoram borders Myanmar's Chin State and the country has been engulfed in civil war and a humanitarian crisis since its military overthrew the elected government of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi in a 2021 coup.

The probe of the six Ukrainians and the American is being led by the National Investigation Agency, India's main counter-terrorism body.

In a statement released late on Tuesday, Ukraine's foreign ministry said that there were "no established facts proving the involvement of the said Ukrainian citizens in unlawful activities on the territory of India or Myanmar". Its ambassador to Delhi, Oleksandr Polishchuk, met Sibi George, a senior Indian foreign ministry official, and handed over a note of pro-

test "demanding the immediate release of the Ukrainian citizens and access to them," the statement added. The meeting took place on Monday, according to a spokesperson at the Ukraine embassy in Delhi.

"We draw attention to the fact that there are certain restricted-access zones in India for foreign nationals, entry to which is possible only with special permits," the statement said.

"At the same time, proper marking of such areas on the ground is often absent, which creates a risk of unintentional violation of the established rules."

A US embassy spokesperson said the embassy was aware of the situation but "for privacy reasons, we cannot comment on cases involving US citizens."

The Indian foreign ministry and a Myanmar government spokesperson did not respond to Reuters requests for comment. The Delhi court order did not name the Myanmar-based ethnic armed groups that the group allegedly met.

Citing an investigation update, it said the accused were suspected of offering support to "proscribed Indian insurgent groups by way of supplying weapons and other terrorist hardware and training them, thus affecting national security and interests of India".

Indian officials have said that militant groups that took refuge in Myanmar and fought in its civil war returned in 2024, fuelling a months-long deadly ethnic conflict in India's northeastern state of Manipur.

India requires foreigners to obtain entry permits for some northeastern border states that have a history of ethnic tension and security volatility.

Sri Lanka asks EV owners to unplug at night

AFP
Colombo

Sri Lanka has urged electric vehicle owners to stop charging their cars at night, saying the surge in demand is forcing the country to burn more coal and diesel to keep the power grid running.

In an address to the nation, President Anura Kumara Disanayake said electric cars were adding an extra 300 megawatts of demand at night, straining the grid.

"Electric car owners charge their vehicles when they return from work. This is placing an additional burden on the grid, and we are compelled to operate all our generators to meet this surge," he said on Tuesday night.

Much of the electricity at night is generated by a 900-megawatt coal power station and another



Commuters wait for public transport along a deserted road in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

1,000 megawatts from diesel — a far cry from the clean-green image EVs might hope to project.

Sri Lanka, still waiting for large-scale battery storage, currently has no way to bottle its abundant daytime solar power.

"Charge your car during the

day when we have excess electricity from solar," Disanayake said, adding that authorities plan to introduce tariffs shortly to curb night-time charging.

The South Asian country has seen a surge in electric cars since a five-year ban on vehicle im-

ports was lifted in February last year.

More than 10% of all vehicles imported since then have been fully electric.

Faced with an energy crisis following the war in the Middle East, Sri Lanka has begun rationing fuel. It has also imposed a four-day working week starting Wednesday in a bid to conserve fuel.

Disanayake said the country was unable to secure two shipments of 90,000 tonnes of crude oil due to the Middle East war.

However, he said Colombo was in talks with "friendly states" including neighbouring India and Russia to purchase refined products.

Yesterday, streets were relatively free of traffic, with train and bus stations empty, as schools, government offices and banks closed in response to the government's energy-saving drive.

Nepal's 'icefall doctors' fix Everest route for spring season

AFP
Kathmandu

Highly skilled mountaineers known in Nepal as "icefall doctors" have begun fixing ropes and ladders on Mount Everest to prepare for the coming spring climbing season, officials said yesterday.

The team has reached the base camp before starting work on the treacherous Khumbu Icefall, a con-

stantly shifting maze of crevasses and ice blocks that forms the gateway to the world's highest peak.

"Our team of eight have reached the base camp and begun their work," Lama Kazi Sherpa, chair of the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee, which oversees route-setting, told AFP.

As tradition dictates, the group began with a sacred ceremony at base camp to seek divine blessings before stepping onto the mountain.

This year, authorities increased the permit fee for the spring season from \$11,000 to \$15,000 for climbers aiming to scale the 8,849-metre (29,032-foot) summit.

Authorities also tightened rules to reduce pollution, requiring each climber to bring back at least two kilograms (4.4 pounds) of waste to Camp 2 and enforcing the use of "poo bags".

Camp 2 is a broad glacial valley above the Khumbu Icefall where

climbers often spend several days to acclimatise for higher altitudes.

Expedition operators in Kathmandu are also gearing up for the season, although they anticipate some impact from the travel chaos caused by the Middle East war.

"Flight disruption may affect some of the climbers but we don't expect a big impact," said Dambar Parajuli, president of the Expedition Operators Association.



CHAIRMAN

Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Attiyah

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka

Deputy Managing Editor

Kamran Rehmat

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



Mystery AI model in works: Is this DeepSeek's latest blockbuster?

A powerful artificial intelligence model that appeared anonymously on a developer platform last week has sparked speculation that Chinese startup DeepSeek may be quietly testing its next-generation system ahead of an official launch.

The free model, called Hunter Alpha, surfaced on the AI gateway platform OpenRouter on March 11 without any developer attribution and was later described by the platform as a "stealth model."

During tests conducted by Reuters, the Hunter Alpha chatbot described itself as "a Chinese AI model primarily trained in Chinese" and said its training data extended to May 2025, the same knowledge cutoff point reported by DeepSeek's own chatbot. When asked about its creator, however, the system declined to identify its developer. "I only know my name, my parameter scale and my context window length," the chatbot said.

Neither DeepSeek nor OpenRouter has identified the model's creator and they did not respond to requests for comment. Hunter Alpha's profile page describes it as a 1-trillion-parameter model, meaning it was trained using roughly one trillion adjustable values that determine how the system processes language and generates responses. Models with more parameters generally require significantly more computing power to operate.

The system also advertises a context window of up to one million tokens, a measure of how much text an AI model can process or remember during a single interaction. A token roughly corresponds to a short piece of text, such as part of a word.

The free model, called Hunter Alpha, surfaced on the AI gateway platform OpenRouter on March 11 without any developer attribution and was later described by the platform as a "stealth model"

"The combination that stood out was Hunter Alpha's 1 million token context paired with reasoning capability and free access," said Nabil Haouam, an engineer who builds AI agent systems. "Most frontier models with that context window come with real cost at scale," he added.

Those specifications resemble expectations in local media for DeepSeek's next-generation V4 model, which Chinese outlets have reported could launch as early as April. DeepSeek, like many of its Chinese competitors, is well-funded, though it has

an unusual structure given its parent company is a quantitative hedge fund rather than a tech conglomerate.

While the overlap does not establish a direct connection, it has intensified speculation among developers that the anonymous system could be an early test version of the upcoming release by DeepSeek. "The chain-of-thought pattern is probably the strongest signal," said Daniel Dewhurst, an AI engineer who analysed the model after its release, referring to how the AI model reasons.

"Reasoning style is hard to disguise and tends to reflect how a model was trained."

Hunter Alpha's scale and memory capacity also match specifications that have circulated for DeepSeek V4 since early this year, he said. Still, some developers cautioned that the evidence linking the model to DeepSeek was inconclusive.

"My analysis suggests Hunter Alpha is likely not DeepSeek V4," said Umur Ozkul, who runs independent AI benchmark tests, citing differences in token-related behaviour and architectural patterns when compared with DeepSeek's existing systems. He said speculation connecting the model to DeepSeek was understandable given the timing and capabilities advertised.

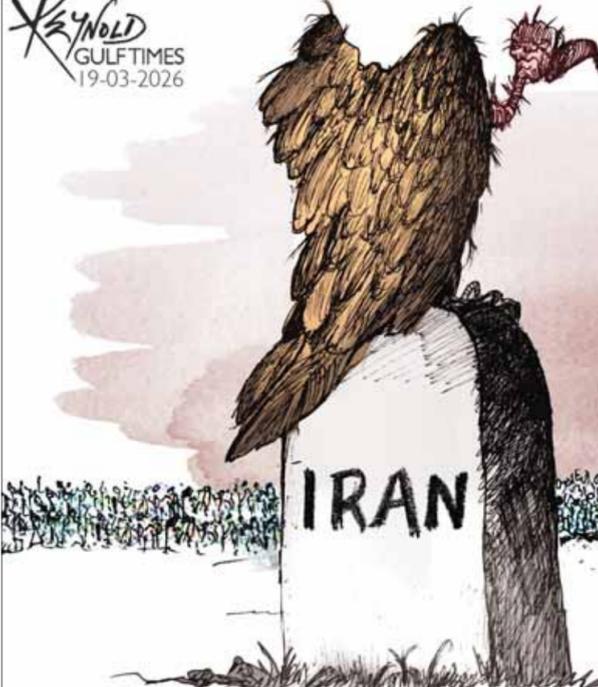
Anonymous model launches are not unusual, as platforms like OpenRouter allow developers to send queries to dozens of AI models through a single interface, making them a popular testing ground for new systems. An anonymous model called Pony Alpha appeared on OpenRouter in February before Chinese firm Zhipu AI confirmed it was part of its GLM-5 system five days later.

A notice on Hunter Alpha's profile page said all prompts and completions for the model "are logged by the provider and may be used to improve the model," underscoring the industry-wide practice of using stealth model launches for unbiased feedback.

The model was adopted rapidly after appearing on the platform and processed more than 160 billion tokens as of Sunday, according to OpenRouter statistics.

Much of the activity came from software development tools and AI agent frameworks like OpenClaw, which allow AI systems to autonomously plan tasks and interact with external software. — Reuters

REYNOLD
GULFTIMES
19-03-2026



POST-OPERATION REVIEW

Wealth tax pledge stirs equality debate ahead of Danish polls

- Critics say wealth tax could harm businesses and investment
- Business leaders warn of capital flight, economic impact
- Supporters say it could strengthen democracy, tax fairness

By Louise Rasmussen
Reuters

The wealth tax on which Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen is campaigning ahead of a March 24 election may appear modest: a 0.5% levy set at such a high threshold that barely 20,000 Danes — one in 300 residents — will pay it.

But if the intent was to trigger a divisive, nationwide debate about equality and wealth in the small northern European country that could help the social democrat emerge as leader of a new left-leaning alliance, it may be doing its job.

According to political analyst Noa Redington, the proposal reflects a broader pivot by Frederiksen and her Social Democratic Party, which has lost left-leaning voters after going into coalition with the centre-right and introducing tough asylum reforms.

"We still remember that we come from the left, that in our heart, we are red," he said of the signal sent out by a tax aimed at raising some \$1bn to fund school reforms allowing for smaller class sizes.

EUROPE'S LATEST RIFT OVER EQUALITY AND GROWTH

Variants of taxes on the assets of the rich have in recent months been championed by left-leaning politicians in France, Italy, Britain, Switzerland, New York and elsewhere as they seek to address anger at inequality and to rally their voter bases. Quentin Parrinello, of the EU Tax Observatory research institute, said tax justice was becoming a growing issue.

"You have an increasing number of countries that are faced with difficult choices... And there's a question that lingers at the end: who needs to foot the bill?"

While it is too early to say how the wealth

tax plan will shape Tuesday's general election, a Voxmeter survey on March 17 showed Frederiksen and potential left-wing allies have recently gained support and could even make it over the line to secure a majority.

An opinion survey for the Danish Trade Union Confederation showed Danes split down the middle on the levy, while a Mols-Bjerre Consultants survey for daily Borsen showed 42% in favour, primarily supported by those intending to vote for leftist parties.

OPPOSITION FROM BUSINESS

Danish captains of industry, from shipping group Maersk's chair Robert Maersk Uggla to LEGO CEO Niels Christiansen, are resolutely opposed, warning it could push job- and growth-creating entrepreneurs abroad.

"I think there is a good chance Denmark will become poorer," Martin Thorborg, CEO of Danish accounting software firm Visma Dinero, told Reuters of the consequences of a tax he would expect to have to pay. "If we make Denmark poorer, there may well be less inequality, but this will affect the weak in our society more than the rich," he said.

Other countries have tougher wealth taxes. In Norway, for example, individuals pay 1% on net wealth between 1.76 mn and 20.7mn crowns (\$182,000-\$2.1mn) and, since 2022, 1.1% above that. About 12% of the population paid it in 2023. To be sure, if the 0.5% tax was implemented on Danish fortunes above 25mn crowns (\$3.86mn), it would come on top of Denmark's inheritance tax, an exit tax and Europe's highest top marginal income tax rate at 60.5%.

Yet, that has not stopped Denmark's richest 1% garnering a growing share of the country's wealth — up from 26.4% in 2020 to 29.8% in 2023 and 2024, according to Statistics Denmark.

Indeed, on a broader metric, more than half of all Danish household wealth is concentrated

within the top 10% of households, making Denmark the third least-equal country in the OECD club of advanced economies after the United States and the Netherlands.

LESSONS FROM NORWAY'S LEVY

Denmark's Social Democrats abolished an existing wealth tax in 1997, and in 2022, under Frederiksen, the party voted against a progressive wealth tax proposal. Critics, including members of Frederiksen's outgoing grand coalition formed in 2022, still say it is the wrong approach.

"If we are to do more — and we must, in order to take care of some of the most vulnerable members of society — then the solution is not to make Denmark poorer," Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen, leader of the right-leaning Liberal Party, said in a debate with Frederiksen on Sunday. Parrinello, of the EU Tax Observatory, argued that wealth taxes encouraged ordinary citizens to pay their own taxes if they restored trust in the tax system and showed that the rich were paying a fair share.

"Is democracy about one person, one vote, or is it about one dollar, one vote, and those with more dollars have more rights and more rights to pay less tax than us?" he said.

US economist Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize laureate, on Tuesday threw his weight behind the proposal, urging European governments to follow suit. "Does anybody think that if you tax Bill Gates by 0.5% he will stop working? Or Jeff Bezos? No — they are going to go on doing exactly what they are doing."

The experience of Norway — with a wealth tax dating back to 1892 — offers fodder for both sides of the argument. Data from conservative think-tank Civita show 261 residents with assets above 10mn crowns left Norway in 2022 and 254 in 2023. But despite the exodus, revenue from the wealth tax has gradually risen to a not-trivial 0.6% of national output.



A pedestrian walks past posters for candidates in the upcoming Danish elections, in Copenhagen, Denmark. (Reuters)

To Advertise

✉ gtadv@gulf-times.com

Display

☎ 44466621
☎ 44418811

Classified

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

Subscription

✉ circulation@gulf-times.com

Pakistan, Afghanistan to pause fighting for Eid

Reuters
Kabul/Karachi

Pakistan and Afghanistan said they were pausing their military operations against each other yesterday for Eid al-Fitr, a surprise move two days after a drug rehab centre in Kabul was hit in the deadliest strike in months.

The Afghan Taliban government has said that more than 400 people were killed and 265 wounded in the air strike that took place on Monday night, just as people and staff at the centre were praying.

The casualty numbers shared by authorities have not been independently verified. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said yesterday that 143 people were killed and 119 wounded in the attack.

Pakistan rejected the Taliban's statements about the strike, saying it had "precisely targeted military installations and terrorist support infrastructure".

Pakistani Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said Islamabad was pausing the military operations due to Eid, which marks the

Pakistan and Afghanistan's pause follows requests from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkiye

end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan and is set to be celebrated at the end of this week.

The pause, he said in a post on X, was on Pakistan's own initiative and at the request of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkiye. The pause would take effect at midnight on Wednesday and last until midnight on March 23.

"Pakistan offers this gesture in good faith and in keeping with the Islamic norms," he said, adding that operations would resume with renewed intensity if there was any cross-border attack, drone attack or any "terrorist incident" inside Pakistan.

The Afghan Taliban followed with a similar announcement soon.

Kabul was calling a temporary halt to defensive operations on the occasion of Eid and also at the request of Saudi Arabia, Turkiye and Qatar, Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a post on X.

Afghanistan would respond to any aggression in the event of any threat, he added.

Tarar also said that 707 people have been killed so far in Pakistan's action against Afghanistan. Both sides have regularly claimed to have inflicted heavy damage on the other and independent verification has not been possible.

Afghanistan and Pakistan have fiercely disputed the target of the air strike.

Afghan authorities said the attack had clearly targeted a well-known rehabilitation centre, a former Nato military base named Camp Phoenix that had been converted into a civilian facility about a decade ago.

Pakistan has said it hit Camp Phoenix, a "military terrorist ammunition and equipment storage site". It added that secondary detonations visible after the strikes indicated the presence of large ammunition depots there.

Yesterday, the Pakistani military said in a statement that the facility targeted was also being used as a site to store drones, equipment to launch drones, and "reportedly also housed SCUD

missiles of the Soviet era". "We also know that the site was used for training of suicide bombers," it said, adding that intelligence confirmed that the site was used as a drug rehab centre a few years ago. The Pakistani military did not provide evidence to back its accusations and there was no immediate response to them from the Afghan Taliban.

Afghan minister says 'we do not want war'

Afghan Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani indicated yesterday that Afghanistan preferred diplomacy to resolve a conflict with neighbouring Pakistan that saw hundreds killed in a strike on Kabul this week.

"We do not want war," he told mourners at a mass burial of some of the victims of Monday night's strike on a drug rehabilitation centre. "But the situation has come to this, so we are trying to solve the problems through diplomacy." (AFP)

One killed as cable car plunges down Swiss mountainside



A gondola lying on the snow after it detached and crashed, rolling several times in Titlis-Engelberg ski area in Engelberg, central Switzerland, yesterday morning.

AFP
Geneva

One person was killed yesterday morning when a cable car suddenly detached amid strong winds and plunged down a snowy slope at a Swiss Alpine ski resort, police said.

The dramatic incident happened at the Engelberg ski resort, high up in the Alps in central Switzerland.

Videos from witnesses to the accident published by the Blick and 20Minutes online news sites showed a small cabin that had detached and violently toppled down a snowy slope.

"At the time of the accident one person was alone in the gondola. This person sustained fatal

injuries," Senad Sakic, with the regional police in Nidwalden canton, told reporters.

He said preliminary information indicated that "a gondola on the Hittlis Express cable car from Engelberg towards Stand crashed shortly after the Trubsee middle station", he said.

The Rega rescue service confirmed to AFP that it had sent a helicopter response crew to the area, without providing more details.

Police would not comment on the cause of the accident, saying this was being investigated.

Media reported that strong winds might have been the cause, with Switzerland's Met Office indicating that winds of up to 93km (58 miles) an hour had been lashing the area when the accident happened.

Macron reveals name of Europe's largest warship

AFP
Indret, France

President Emmanuel Macron yesterday announced that France's next nuclear-powered aircraft carrier will be called "France Libre" (Free France), as the country looks to reinforce its status as a major maritime power.

Once completed, the warship, which is set to replace the country's sole aircraft carrier — the Charles de Gaulle — and due to enter service in 2038, will be the largest warship ever built in Europe.

Macron said the vessel was being named after the French Resistance movement that General de Gaulle led against the Nazi occupation of France during World War II.

"I wanted our future aircraft carrier to follow in the footsteps of General de Gaulle. His life, his destiny," Macron said at a shipyard in the western town of Indret, near Nantes, where the vessel's two nuclear reactors will be built.

"Our new aircraft carrier will be named France Libre," he added.

"This name honours the memory of the men and women who stood up against barbarity."

Macron in December announced the start of construction of the new aircraft carrier, a project estimated to cost 10bn euros (\$11bn).

He told French troops in the



French President Emmanuel Macron looks at the model of a ship named "France Libre" as he gives a speech during a visit to the construction site of Naval Group Nantes-Indret in Indret, western France, yesterday. (AFP)

United Arab Emirates at the time that "in an age of predators", France "must be strong in order to be feared".

He reiterated that sentiment yesterday. "To remain free, we must be feared. To be feared, we must be powerful," he said.

Ahead of the ceremony, Macron posted a 30-second video highlighting some of France's proudest moments and technological achievements.

Set to rousing music, the video featured footage of the Charles de Gaulle, submarines, troops, jets streaking in the air, high-speed trains, and France's astronaut

Sophie Adenot, who has been in space since mid-February.

"France is wild", read the white letters splashed in English across the clip.

In recent weeks, the president has repeatedly underscored France's maritime ambitions.

He said last week that Paris and its allies were putting together a mission to help reopen the Strait of Hormuz, a vital waterway for the world's oil and liquefied natural gas supplies.

Iran has effectively closed the strait since the US and Israel began the war on the Islamic republic late last month, sending global

oil prices up by more than 40%.

But the French leader has ruled out any action until hostilities there cool. France's most recent aircraft carriers have all been named after French statesmen including Georges Clemenceau and Ferdinand Foch.

Construction of the future warship's hull is expected to begin in the western port city of Saint-Nazaire in 2031.

France is one of the two countries in the world that operate nuclear-powered aircraft carriers. The US has 11 such vessels.

The Charles de Gaulle was commissioned in 2001 and is the largest warship ever built for the French Navy.

The new warship will be much larger than the 42,000-tonne 261m-long Charles de Gaulle.

It will weigh nearly 80,000 tonnes and be approximately 310m long. With a crew of 2,000, it will be able to carry 30 fighter aircraft as well as combat drones.

"In the future, the aircraft carrier will be more than just an aircraft carrier," said the Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Nicolas Vaoujour.

The project represents a formidable undertaking, officials say.

"We cannot simply reproduce a tool that was designed halfway through the last century," said armed forces chief of staff Fabien Mandon.

Germany vows to double data centre capacity by 2030

AFP
Berlin

Germany yesterday pledged to double its data centre capacity by 2030 as Europe's top economy looks on nervously at the power of American tech giants.

"By 2030, we aim to at least double our data centre capacity and quadruple our capacity for artificial intelligence and high-performance computing," said Digital Minister Karsten Wildberger.

"Without a massive increase in capacity, we will not be able to keep pace in the global race for AI," he told a press conference.

"Every new data centre in Germany strengthens our digital sovereignty," he added.

Spooked by a lack of big European tech champions to compete with US giants, EU leaders have scrambled to build out digital infrastructure and pushed "digital sovereignty" as an alternative to reliance on US technology.

The worries have only grown as US President Donald Trump's administration has taken a more confrontational tone with EU

leaders on issues from trade to defence.

Harald Wehnes, professor of computer science at the University of Wuerzburg, praised the government's strategy but told AFP that building out capacity did not by itself guarantee digital sovereignty.

"Computing power is the raw material of the digital age. Those who lack their own will inevitably outsource innovation and control over their data abroad, running the risk of becoming a digital colony," he said.

"But a Google or Amazon Web Services data centre in Frankfurt is still subject to US law," he added.

"Real sovereignty only comes once operators are fully subject to European law."

Speaking alongside Wildberger, Economy and Energy Minister Katherina Reiche said the government would speed up approval procedures and try and provide cheap energy as part of the strategy.

"This strategy is based on the belief that data centres are about more than just digital policy," she said. "It is industrial policy. It is energy policy. It is infrastructure policy."

Spain's Sanchez tells Zelensky Iran war will not derail support

Reuters
Madrid

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said yesterday that the crisis in the Middle East would not distract from his country's support for Ukraine in its battle against Russia, as the two countries signed co-production agreements for battle material including drones, radar and missiles.

"We cannot deny that the crisis in the Middle East is monopolising conversation and precisely for that reason, I want to say to the government of Ukraine that nothing and no one will make us forget what is happening in Ukraine," Sanchez said. "We will keep our support for the Ukrainian people with the same intensity."

Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine more than four years ago, while the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran is now in its third week, with no end in sight.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in a post on



Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez (right) meets with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky at the Moncloa Palace in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

social media channel X that as well as seeing Sanchez, he had met with Spanish engineering and technology group Senar Aerospace & Defence to sign agreements to cooperate on missiles and air defence manufacturing as well as discussing a potential joint project on long-range drones.

"We discussed production ca-

pabilities and bolstering Ukraine's air defence," he said. "Strengthening air defence and protecting lives are our top priorities. Ukraine has new developments and is ready to scale them up."

In a statement, Senar confirmed the agreements were with Ukrainian missile and autonomous system manufacturers Fire Point, Luch and Radionix.

Zelensky urges EU to unblock 90bn-euro loan for Ukraine

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky yesterday urged the European Union (EU) to overcome a veto by Hungary on a 90bn-euro (\$103bn) loan vital for his country.

Zelensky, during a visit to Madrid to meet Spanish Prime Minister Pedro

Sanchez, said he considered that the "main issue" of an EU summit that will be held today and tomorrow in Brussels.

"We are really counting on the countries and the EU to find ways to resolve this issue," he said.

Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban — Russian President Vladimir Putin's closest ally in the EU — has been blocking the EU loan to Kyiv, in part because of a pipeline that supplies his country with Russian oil that has been closed in Ukraine. (AFP)

Ukraine strikes Russian aircraft plants, says Kyiv

Reuters
Kyiv

Ukraine's military struck two Russian plants producing and repairing military transport and cargo planes in the Ulyanovsk and Novgorod regions, the Ukrainian General Staff said yesterday.

It said in a statement that the attack on the Aviastar plant, part of Russia's United Aircraft Corporation, in the city of Ulyanovsk, was carried out on March 16.

The plant produces Ilyushin-76MD-90A military transport planes, Ilyushin-78M-90A refueling planes, and provides maintenance for "Ruslan" cargo planes, and is located about 800 kilometers (about 500 miles) from the Ukrainian border.

Ukraine's military said the hangars and parking areas were hit and some of the planes were damaged.

The attack on the 123rd aircraft maintenance plant in the city of Staraya Russia in the Novgorod region took place one day later, the Ukrainian General Staff said.

It said on the Telegram app that the facility provided a full cycle of repairs and modernisation for heavy transport planes, including Ilyushin-76, Ilyushin-78, and L-410.

Ukraine's military said a hangar used to service Ilyushin-76 and L-410 transport planes had been hit. Reuters was unable to verify the report independently.

"Striking such targets directly reduces the enemy's ability to restore and sustain combat-ready aircraft," Ukrainian drone forces said on X.

EU signs defence deal with Iceland

AFP
Brussels

The European Union (EU) signed a defence pact with Iceland yesterday, ahead of an August referendum in the North Atlantic island on resuming the country's EU membership talks.

The agreement aims to strengthen security cooperation, particularly in the Arctic, which has become of increasing strategic interest as sea ice melts with global warming.

"In the current volatile security context, this important milestone for the EU and Iceland brings an impulse to their already deep relations," the 27-nation EU said in a statement.

The deal was signed in Brussels by EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas and Iceland Foreign Minister Thorgerdur Katrin Gunnarsdottir.

It is the last in a series of accords Brussels recently inked with countries including Canada, Britain, India and others.

Iceland's government proposed this month that a refer-

endum be held on August 29 on resuming the country's EU membership talks, which were shelved in 2015.

US President Donald Trump's push to take over Greenland has sparked concern in nearby Iceland. Its defence is currently provided by the United States and Nato, as it has no military of its own.

The island nation already has access to the EU's single market as a member of the European Economic Area, a vast free trade zone also including Switzerland and Norway.



Swift evacuation measures and community support ensure safety in designated areas

By Shaima Sheriff
Staff Reporter

Authorities in Qatar implemented swift evacuation measures in designated areas, providing safe accommodation and clear guidance, while community support played a key role in ensuring residents' safety and reassurance. Residents who received official notifications were guided to move to safe zones, with authorities prioritising

ing safety and minimising disruption.

For Aaliya Abbas Kazi, a resident affected by the evacuation, the clarity of communication was a key factor in managing the situation. "The fact that authorities informed us and asked us to move to a safe zone was very important," she said. "At that moment, safety was the only priority."

Families were relocated to designated accommodation, where many residents were provided with shelter. She noted that the evacu-

ation process, while sudden, was handled in an organised manner, allowing residents to move quickly out of affected areas. "Evacuation is not easy at any point," she said. "You are asked to leave your home without knowing when you will return."

Despite the uncertainty, residents highlighted the visible security measures across the country, which contributed to a sense of reassurance. "You could see patrol cars, security presence and helicopters at night," she said. "It made us feel protected."

Kazi also lauded the broader community support during the period. In one instance, she recalled how a local supermarket assisted her family after they were prompted to leave their home. "We had already done our shopping when we were asked to evacuate," she said. "They kept our items, removed perishables, and later arranged delivery for us. That kind of support makes a difference."

She added that such experiences reflected the sense of unity and cooperation within the community.

"Whether you are from a different background or nationality, you feel supported here," she said. After a short period, residents were allowed to return to their homes, bringing relief and gratitude. "When we went back, we didn't feel fear, we felt thankful," she said. "It made us more grounded."

Kazi emphasised the importance of following official information during such situations.

"There is a lot of misinformation that can create unnecessary anxiety," she said. "It is important



Aaliya Abbas Kazi

to follow official sources and guidance." She added that preparedness remains key. "Precaution is always better than cure," she said. "Listen to the authorities and follow the instructions given."

Artists in Qatar channel tensions, uncertainty into meaningful work

"Art is not created in isolation; it reflects society. During sensitive times, I feel more conscious of what I communicate and how it may be received. There is a responsibility to be thoughtful, to avoid adding noise or division, and instead contribute meaningfully" Qatari artist Muna al-Bader

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

In studios and creative spaces across Qatar, uncertainty brought on by regional tensions is quietly transforming into expression, as artists channel anxiety, reflection and hope into works that seek to unite communities rather than divide them. While political developments continue to dominate headlines across the region, a different kind of response is taking shape away from press conferences and official statements. Inside galleries, workshops and home studios, artists are processing the moment in ways that are less visible but no less important; through creativity that speaks to shared human emotions.

For a number of artists in Qatar, the current situation has not only influenced what they create, but also how they think and feel about their work. "Uncertainty sharpens awareness; it makes you more observant, more introspective. At times, it fuels expression, pushing ideas to the surface with urgency. At other times, it can be mentally heavy, slowing creativity."

"But even in stillness, something is forming. Art, in that sense, becomes both a reaction and a refuge," Qatari artist Muna al-Bader told *Gulf Times*.

Broader experience

Her words echo a broader experience among creatives grappling with the emotional weight of regional tensions. For some, uncertainty fuels a stronger drive to create, while for others it makes concentration more challenging. Yet even in moments of stillness, many believe the creative process continues to unfold quietly beneath the surface.

This mix of pressure and inspiration is not new. Historically, periods of uncertainty and conflict have often influenced art, shaping movements, styles and themes. In Qatar, however, the response has largely remained thoughtful and measured, focusing on connection rather than confrontation. Artists say this is partly due to a growing awareness of their role in society.

"Art is not created in isolation; it reflects society. During sensitive times, I feel more conscious of what I communicate and how it may be received. There is a responsibility to be thoughtful, to avoid adding noise or division, and instead contribute meaningfully," al-Bader said.

That sense of responsibility does not necessarily mean taking a political stand. Many artists in Qatar believe they have a choice in how they respond, and that response can take different forms. "I don't believe artists have an obligation to respond directly to political events, but they do have a choice. Some artists engage explicitly, while others respond more subtly through themes of humanity, identity or resilience. Both are valid. What matters is authenticity," she said.



Banan Soliman

Instead of focusing on politics, many artists are choosing to explore emotions that people across cultures can relate to – fear, hope, uncertainty and resilience. In doing so, they are helping create space for people to process what they are experiencing. "People often struggle to put emotions like fear or uncertainty into words. Art provides a language beyond words. Whether through visual art, music or storytelling, it allows people to reflect, connect and even heal," al-Bader pointed out.

This role of art as a "bridge" is especially important in Qatar, where people from many different countries and backgrounds live together. With such diversity, shared spaces that encourage understanding and dialogue become even more valuable during times of tension.

"Qatar's diversity is one of its greatest strengths. Art can unify by highlighting shared human experiences rather than differences. Exhibitions, public art and cultural initiatives can bring people together in neutral, creative spaces where dialogue happens naturally and respectfully," al-Bader added.

Cultural sector

Over the years, Qatar has invested heavily in its cultural sector, developing museums, galleries and public art programmes that attract both local and international audiences. Institutions and cultural



Muna al-Bader

hubs have played a key role in creating platforms where artists can share ideas and engage with the public.

In the current climate, artists say these institutions are responding carefully and thoughtfully.

"Artists and cultural institutions in Qatar tend to respond with balance and awareness. There is a focus on preserving cultural identity while also promoting dialogue and inclusivity. Many initiatives emphasise unity, heritage and collective resilience rather than direct commentary," al-Bader said.

This approach reflects a broader belief that art does not need to be loud to be effective. Instead, its strength often lies in its ability to shape how people think and feel over time.

"Art plays a subtle but powerful role. It doesn't resolve conflict directly, but it shapes perception. It encourages people to see beyond headlines and narratives, to connect on a human level," al-Bader stressed.

For some artists, the current situation has not changed their direction but has instead strengthened the messages they have been exploring for years. Qatari-based artist and public health leader Banan Soliman said her work has long focused on emotional well-being, a theme that became especially important during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I began focusing on this during the Covid period in 2020, when many people around the world were ex-



One of Muna al-Bader's work.

periencing uncertainty and emotional strain. At that time, I created work intended to give people hope, resilience and the strength to move forward," she said. Her background in public health has shaped how she views art, not just as expression but as something that can influence people's feelings.

"I've always paid attention to how the emotional atmosphere around people affects their well-being," she said. "Art can shift that atmosphere. The current situation has reinforced that intention even more," Soliman said. Today, her work continues to focus on helping people reconnect with themselves, especially during stressful times.

"More than ever, I feel the desire to create work that brings people back to themselves, back to stillness, back to truth," she said. One direction she has been exploring is faith-based art. In 2025, she created an exhibition titled "Light upon Light," inspired by a Qur'anic verse about divine light, and she is currently preparing a second edition for 2026. Through this work, she aims to remind people of values such as compassion, unity and the importance of human life.

"At the end of the day, we are one human family. Reminders like this help us reconnect with compassion and responsibility toward one another," she said.

Her message to people living through uncertain times is clear: "Stay calm and compassionate in times of fear. Stay connected to your inner light." Like al-Bader, Soliman believes that art cannot solve political conflicts. However, she sees it as an important tool for building understanding.

"Creative expression allows people to encounter different perspectives in a way that invites reflection rather than confrontation. It helps people see each other beyond positions or sides," she said. This ability to shift perspectives, even in small ways, can have a lasting impact.

"In that sense, art supports empathy, dialogue and social cohesion. Sometimes that shift in perspective matters more than we realise," Soliman noted.

Across Qatar, this quiet work continues. In galleries, workshops and community spaces, artists are responding to uncertainty not with division, but with creativity that brings people closer together.

From barbers to riders, workers bear Eid surge

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

As Qatar's government employees began their Eid al-Fitr holiday on March 17, daily life did not slow; it simply shifted. Across Doha and other locations, another workforce moved into high gear. Retail clerks, delivery riders, baristas, barbers, drivers and security guards are now facing one of the busiest stretches of the year, ensuring that the Eid break unfolds smoothly despite a backdrop of regional tension.

This contrast between those on leave and those working through the holiday highlights a familiar yet often overlooked reality in Qatar's labour landscape: the "holiday gap." While public sector employees benefit from official breaks, large segments of the private and service sectors operate on a different timetable. For them, Eid is not a pause, but a peak.

Ramadan's final days and the approach of Eid typically trigger a surge in consumer activity. Malls extend their hours, restaurants stay open late into the night, and neighbourhood services, from tailoring to grooming, see a sharp rise in demand. This year has been no exception.

Despite heightened regional tensions, residents have continued preparations with notable enthusiasm. In districts such as Matar Qadeem, known for its



dense cluster of barbershops, queues spill onto sidewalks. Inside, barbers work at a relentless pace.

Raju, a barber in the area, described the past week as unusually intense, even by pre-Eid standards. "Customers keep coming, even during weekdays. Everyone wants a fresh look before Eid," he said. "Sometimes we want to take a break too, but what can we do? We have families to feed."

His experience reflects a broader pattern. During quieter months, barbers may spend hours waiting for clients. In the days before Eid, weeks' worth of demand is packed into a short period, turning quiet hours into a nonstop rush of activity.

Coffee shops, tea stalls, and restaurants remain packed well into the evening, past midnight. Delivery riders weave through traffic delivering meals and last-minute purchases. Security guards maintain



round-the-clock vigilance in residential towers, malls and office buildings.

Eugene, a barista at a major coffee chain, said Ramadan has already stretched staffing capacity. "I still have pending days off I haven't taken because of the workload," he noted. "Now we're being asked to work through Eid as well."

Such accounts are common during peak seasons. Workers often accumulate compensatory leave, known informally

as "offsets", or receive overtime pay, depending on company policies.

Under Qatar's Labour Law, employees are generally entitled to either additional pay or alternative rest days. In practice, however, the ability to take that time off later can depend heavily on operational demands.

This year's Eid preparations come with added complexity due to regional tensions, affecting travel plans and, for some, spending. However, on the ground, the impact so far appears minimal. Shops remain crowded, cafes are buzzing, and barbershops are full.

If anything, these routines show how resilient people are. In uncertain times, familiar traditions – haircuts before Eid prayers, late-night karak tea, and last-minute shopping – become even more meaningful. And sustaining those rituals depends heavily on workers who remain on duty.

Security guards, often the most overlooked among essential workers, describe their schedules as largely unchanged. Whether Eid or an ordinary weekday, shifts must be covered. "We just continue," a guard at an office building along C-Ring Road said.

As families gather, gifts are exchanged, and celebrations unfold, a parallel workforce keeps the system running: brewing coffee, delivering meals, trimming hair, and monitoring buildings.