



Qatar Insurance
Financial Results (FY 2025)

Gross Written Premiums (GWP)

9%
QAR 9.9B

Net Profit Before the Impact of P&L Two Taxes

19%
QAR 874M

Net Profit Profit attributable to QIC shareholders

9%
QAR 791M

Earnings Per Share:

10%
QAR 0.188

qic-group.com

GULF TIMES



FRIDAY Vol. XXXXVI No. 13685

March 20, 2026
Shawwal 1, 1447 AH

www.gulf-times.com 2 Riyals

Published in QATAR since 1978

Eid Mubarak

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



ORIXIS POLYDEX
Durable waterproofing-performance for roof protection

QATARI PRODUCT
أوريكس بوليدكس
POLYDEX WATER PROOFING
44601602/3

Running Hotel Business For Sale

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

Celebrate Eid Where Happiness Lives.
Eid Mubarak
HABARI REAL ESTATE
CR No: 174849

Family فاميليا
EID FASHION
WITH FAMILY مع العائلة
5000+ Products On Offer
SUBSCRIBE TO OUR OFFER

Ready to **GUAC AND ROLL?**
Only on **talabat**

Leaders slam Ras Laffan attack in calls with Amir

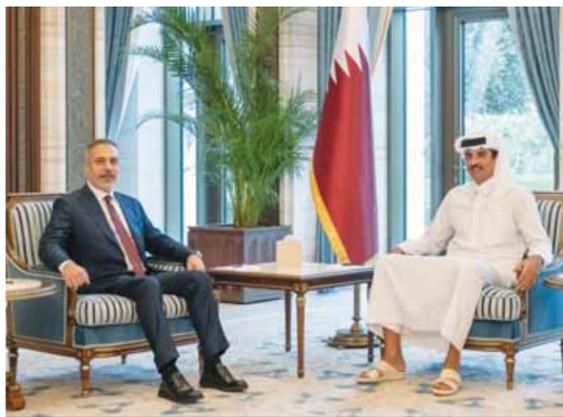
His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani received yesterday a phone call from Bahrain King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifah. At the beginning of the call, the Amir and the king exchanged greetings on Eid al-Fitr, wishing both countries continued progress and prosperity, and their brotherly peoples continued health and well-being. King Hamad also expressed his condemnation of the Iranian aggression on the Ras Laffan Industrial Area, expressing Bahrain's solidarity with Qatar in confronting the aggression. Discussion during the call also addressed regional and international developments of mutual interest, and efforts aimed at enhancing security in the region as well as ways to de-escalate tensions and contain the situation. The Amir received a phone call from Jordan's King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein. The two leaders exchanged Eid greetings, wishing both countries security and stability, and their brotherly peoples continued health and well-being. King Abdullah inquired about the situation in Qatar and affirmed Jordan's readiness to provide support in light of the continued Iranian aggression against Qatar and other countries in the region, and the resulting escalation that threatens security and stability in the region. **To Page 11**

6 countries flay energy attacks in joint statement

A joint statement issued by the leaders of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, and Japan condemned Iran's attacks on commercial vessels in the Gulf, on civilian infrastructure, including oil and gas facilities, and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. The statement, issued yesterday by the UK Prime Minister's Office, called on Iran to immediately cease its threats, mine-laying operations, and attacks using drones and missiles. The leaders of the six countries expressed their deep concern over the escalation of the war, calling on Iran to immediately stop its threats, mine-laying operations, drone and missile attacks, and other attempts to close the strait to commercial navigation, and to comply with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2817. **(QNA)**

EU decries attacks

The European Union (EU) has condemned Iranian attacks on energy facilities in Qatar, warning that such actions risk plunging the region into further chaos. Speaking on the sidelines of a European Council meeting in Brussels, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas said the attacks exacerbate ongoing military conflicts in the region. "We need to exit this war, not escalate it further," she stated. Kallas noted that she has been in contact with Iranian officials regarding the situation and stressed that the EU is working closely with the United Nations to secure safe maritime corridors, as oil, gas, and fertiliser exports through the Strait of Hormuz have been disrupted due to insecurity. She also emphasised that Europe is co-ordinating with partners to seek a resolution between the conflicting parties and bring an end to the ongoing hostilities in the region. **(QNA)**



Amir, Turkish FM review situation

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani met yesterday in his office at Lusail Palace with Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan. They discussed developments in the region, in light of the continued Iranian aggression against Qatar and a number of countries in the region, and the resulting escalation that threatens regional security and stability, representing a violation of international charters and norms. It also discussed ways to reduce escalation and contain tension through diplomatic channels and regional and international co-operation. The meeting also dealt with a number of regional and international issues of common interest, along with efforts to promote international security and stability. **(QNA)**

Amir, Sisi call for de-escalation



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi discussed, in a meeting held yesterday in the Amiri Terminal at Hamad International Airport, the latest developments in light of the continued Iranian aggression on Qatar and a number of countries of the region. The president reiterated full solidarity with Qatar, stressing its support for any measures Qatar may take to protect its sovereignty, security and the safety of its citizens. The Amir voiced his gratitude for Egypt's stance and fraternal solidarity,

appreciating the strength of the ties between the two countries. Both sides emphasised their rejection of any military actions that would expand the scope of the conflict, stressing the importance of intensifying regional and international efforts to reduce escalation, and working through diplomatic channels to maintain security and stability in the region. The Amir and al-Sisi exchanged Eid al-Fitr greetings, praying to Allah for more happy and blessed returns for the two countries and peoples. **(QNA) To Page 11**

Qatar warns escalation threatens global stability

By Ayman Adly & Peter Alagos
Staff Reporters

Ras Laffan strikes expose Iran's false claims of targeting US interests: PM

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani yesterday warned that Iran's ongoing missile and drone attacks on Qatar and neighbouring countries will only deepen regional instability and harm global interests, including Iran's own. Speaking at a joint press conference with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan at the Amiri Diwan, the Prime Minister said Iran's claim that its assaults were limited to US interests "is completely false and unfounded". He noted that soon after making those claims, Iranian forces targeted Qatar's LNG facilities in Ras Laffan, causing significant damage that is still being assessed and briefly interrupting production flows. Although most missiles were intercepted, some struck their targets. "Fortunately, there were no casualties, thanks to the precautionary measures and timely evacuations after ear-



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan at the press conference yesterday.

lier attacks," he said.

Describing the strikes as an assault on Qatar's economic lifeline, he said the LNG sector "is vital for our people and a source of support for humanitarian and development work around the world". He added that by hitting these facilities, Iran was not only attacking Qatar's livelihood but also depriving millions of less privileged people worldwide of crucial aid funded through Qatar's resources.

He underlined Qatar's consistent opposition to any regional aggression, saying the country "condemned the Israeli attacks on Iran's oil fields", and warned that such actions were "reckless and unacceptable". Qatar, he said, had made every effort to prevent a war involving Iran through diplomatic engagement, yet "Iran, surprisingly, turned against us and targeted our facilities from the second day of the conflict?" **To Page 3**

'Iran attacks disrupt 17% of gas export capacity'

Repair work may take 3-5 years, says al-Kaabi

HE the Minister of State for Energy Affairs Saad bin Sherida al-Kaabi, also the President and CEO of QatarEnergy, has revealed that Iranian attacks disrupted 17% of Qatar's liquefied natural gas (LNG) export capacity, causing losses estimated at approximately \$20bn in annual revenue and threatening supplies to Europe and Asia.

In an interview with Reuters, al-Kaabi stated that two out of 14 LNG processing units, in addition to one of the two gas-to-liquids (GTL) plants, were damaged by these attacks.

He indicated that repair work will halt the production of 12.8m tonnes of LNG annually for a period ranging from three to five years.

HE added: "It never crossed my mind, not even in my worst nightmares, that Qatar, Qatar and the region, would be subjected to such an attack, especially from a sisterly Muslim country during Ramadan, and in this manner."

He explained that QatarEnergy may be forced to declare 'force majeure' on long-term contracts of up to five years for the supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Italy, Belgium, South Korea, and China, due to the damage to the two processing units.

He said in this context: "I mean, these are long-term contracts, and we have to declare force majeure on them. We have already declared it, but for a shorter period. Now, it will be for as long as necessary."

He also noted that the American company ExxonMobil is a partner in the affected LNG facilities, holding a 34% stake in the S4 LNG processing unit and a 30% stake in the S6 unit. The minister added that the cost of constructing the damaged units is approximately \$26bn. He said, "To resume production, we first need the fighting to stop."

QatarEnergy had declared force majeure on its entire liquefied natural gas production after previous attacks on its production facility in Ras Laffan. **To Page 11**



Gulf Times wishes its readers a happy Eid

Cars crawl along the road near Doha's Corniche last night as residents head out for last-minute preparations ahead of Eid al-Fitr today. The brightly illuminated spiral minaret of Fanar Mosque rises prominently in the background, symbolising the festive spirit and spiritual culmination of Ramadan across the city. **PICTURE:** Noushad Thekayil
Safety guideline on Eid Prayer — Page 12

Many LNG facilities were attacked, says QatarEnergy

QatarEnergy confirmed yesterday that several of its Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) facilities were the subject of missile attacks early yesterday, causing sizeable fires and further extensive damage. These attacks were in addition to the previous attack on Ras Laffan Industrial City the day before that resulted in extensive damage to the Pearl GTL (Gas-to-Liquids) facility. The company said in a statement that emergency response teams were deployed immediately to contain the resulting damage, with no reported casualties. **(QNA)**

Impact of Attacks on Qatar's LNG Facilities

- 17% of LNG Export Capacity Disrupted
- \$20 Billion Annual Revenue Loss
- 2 LNG Units & 1 GTL Plant Damaged
- 12.8 Million Tons LNG Production Halted (3-5 Years)
- Force Majeure on LNG Supply to Italy, Belgium, S. Korea & China
- ExxonMobil 34% in S4 Unit, 36% in S6 Unit



We extend our heartiest greetings to

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

His Highness
Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani
Father Amir

His Highness
Sheikh Abdullah Bin Hamad Al Thani
Deputy Amir

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

EID AL FITR

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



Prime minister, deputy prime minister in talks with Turkish foreign minister

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met in Doha yesterday with Turkiye's Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan.

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

They also touched on enhancing co-ordination to tackle current challenges.

During the meeting, HE Sheikh Mohammed reiterated his condemnation of the Iranian attacks on Qatar's territory, stating that they are unacceptable under any pretext or justification.

He noted that Qatar has always been keen to distance itself from regional conflicts and has sought to facilitate dialogue



between Iran and the international community.

HE Sheikh Mohammed emphasised that the Iranian targeting of energy facilities constitutes a blatant violation of the principles of international law and a serious

threat to global energy security, the environment, and freedom of navigation.

He underlined the need to spare the region the consequences of these unjustified attacks and to work towards de-escalation to restore security and stability at both the



regional and international levels.

HE Sheikh Mohammed also expressed his appreciation for the unwavering support and solidarity of Turkiye with Qatar throughout various challenges, praising the fraternal relations between the two

countries and their ongoing co-ordination, particularly in the sphere of defence co-operation.

Fidan expressed his country's full solidarity with Qatar and condemned the unjustified Iranian attacks on its sovereignty and territorial integrity, emphasising that targeting vital infrastructure and civilian establishments constitutes a dangerous escalation and a blatant violation of the principles of international law.

HE the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Affairs Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman bin Hassan al-Thani also met Fidan yesterday.

They discussed the latest developments and security updates in the region, and aspects of co-operation and joint co-ordination in light of the current circumstances. - QNA

Qatar condemns threats issued by Iran against shipping and infrastructure

Qatar has strongly condemned Iran's attacks and threats against commercial shipping and maritime infrastructure, particularly in the Strait of Hormuz, as a "clear violation" of international law and the principles of freedom of navigation.

The statement was delivered by Qatar's ambassador to the UK and permanent representative to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Saud al-Thani, during the 36th extraordinary session of the IMO Council, dedicated to addressing the Iranian aggression against Gulf states and its implications for maritime navigation, including the potential closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

He reiterated Qatar's condemnation of the attacks targeting its territory, as well as those against the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states and Jordan, noting that such actions represent a violation of state sovereignty and a breach of the principles of the United Nations Charter.

He also welcomed United Nations Security Council Resolution 2817, which condemned these attacks, stressing the importance of upholding freedom of



navigation and adherence to international law.

The envoy highlighted that these attacks directly impact the safety and security of maritime navigation, endanger the lives of innocent seafarers, and threaten the stability of one of the world's most vital maritime corridors.

He warned that this could lead to serious repercussions for global trade, supply chains, and energy security. - QNA

Oman slams attacks on Saudi Arabia, targeting of Qatar and UAE energy facilities

Oman has condemned the attacks targeting energy facilities in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, as well as other attacks targeting Saudi Arabia.

In a statement issued yesterday, Oman's ministry of foreign affairs stressed the need to adhere to international laws and norms, and to refrain from targeting civilian facilities and global energy supplies.

It called for de-escalation, a cessation of military operations, and the prioritisation of diplomatic solutions to resolve disputes in a way that preserves stability and safeguards the interests of the region and the world at large.

Oman expressed its solidarity with the "brotherly" nations in the legitimate measures they are taking to preserve their security and stability, and called upon the United Nations Security Council to fulfill its responsibilities and take the necessary steps to end this war and its repercussions.

The statement emphasised that addressing the root causes of the conflict lies in dialogue, which is the best way to find solutions and achieve lasting stability in the region. - QNA

Qatar criticises Iran's targeting of Saudi, UAE energy facilities

Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has condemned in the strongest terms the Iranian targeting of energy facilities in Saudi Arabia and the UAE over the past two days, deeming it a blatant violation of international law and a serious threat to global energy security, navigation, and the environment. In a statement issued yesterday, the MoFA affirmed that Iran's attacks have crossed all red lines. - QNA

Qatar joins Nato meeting, reiterates condemnation of Iran attacks

Qatar has participated in a meeting of the Nato Council with the Istanbul Co-operation Initiative countries, held at the alliance's headquarters in Brussels.

The session was chaired by North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) Deputy Secretary-General Radmila Shekerinska.

Charge d'Affaires at Qatar's mission to the European Union and Nato, Sara bint Ahmed al-Mohannadi, represented the country at the meeting.

Addressing the meeting, she welcomed Nato's stance condemning Iranian attacks and expressing full solidarity with Qatar.

She said that Doha had warned, since the start of the war in Gaza, of the risk of escalation leading to wider regional tensions.

Al-Mohannadi stated that since February 28, Qatar had been subjected to "shocking and unexpected" Iranian attacks, undermining trust - particularly as they originated from a neighbouring country, adding that the strikes targeted not only military sites but also critical infrastructure, including energy facilities.

She reiterated that the attacks threaten global energy flows through the Strait of



Hormuz and disrupt international aviation supply chains, with wider economic repercussions.

Al-Mohannadi reiterated Qatar's strong condemnation of Iran's use of ballistic missiles and drones against its territory, calling

it a flagrant violation of sovereignty and a serious escalation threatening regional stability.

The country also affirmed its right to self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.

Al-Mohannadi added that Qatar had also condemned attacks targeting Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkiye, Azerbaijan and Cyprus.

She expressed full solidarity with these countries in safeguarding their sovereignty and security.

She stressed that such attacks undermine mediation and dialogue efforts long supported by Qatar and Oman, while welcoming UN Security Council resolution 2817, which condemns the strikes and reaffirms respect for sovereignty and civilian protection.

The diplomat also welcomed a statement by European Union leaders and foreign ministers emphasising de-escalation, regional security, freedom of navigation, and energy security, and underlined that Qatar's partnerships with the United States and other allies remain "firm and unquestionable". - QNA

Sheikha Alya joins launch of UN task force on Syria

HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani participated in the launch event of the "Breath of Freedom Task Force", which is concerned with removing the remaining elements of the chemical weapons programme of the former Syrian regime, at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

In her speech, she congratulated the Syrian Arab Republic and its permanent delegation to the United Nations on the occasion of the launch of the international task force led by Syria, dedicated to removing the remnants of

the chemical weapons programme.

HE Sheikha Alya indicated that Qatar is proud to join the international task force alongside Turkiye, Canada, France, Germany, the UK, and the US, voicing her eagerness to work actively with them to achieve the task force's core objectives.

She added that this initiative represents a new phase in Syria, focusing on the safety, security and well-being of the fraternal Syrian people, as well as the complete and final removal of the threat of chemical weapons from Syria and the region alike. - QNA

Cote d'Ivoire prime minister meets Qatar's ambassador



Cote d'Ivoire's Prime Minister Robert Beugre Mame has met Qatar's ambassador to the country Mubarak bin Hussein al-Marri. During their meeting, both sides reviewed bilateral relations and discussed ways to enhance co-operation between Qatar and Cote d'Ivoire. - QNA

MOI calls for verifying of information, avoid sharing AI-generated videos

The Ministry of Interior (MOI) has urged the public to verify information and avoid the circulation or publishing of any artificial intelligence (AI)-generated videos, or news from unreliable sources via social media platforms using AI techniques, or unreliable news via social media.

The MOI stressed that such actions could threaten public safety and cause panic in the community.

The ministry said in a statement on X that the spread of false rumours or misleading content constitutes a legal violation that warrants accountability, calling on the public to rely only on official sources for information and to use social media responsibly to advance security and stability. - QNA

Qatar warns escalation threatens international stability

From Page 1

Despite this, the HE Sheikh Mohamed said that Qatar continues to "call for calm, de-escalation and dialogue", stressing that "wisdom must prevail" to prevent the region from plunging into a wider crisis.

He cautioned that escalating attacks are already threatening safe navigation through the Strait of Hormuz - a development with global economic repercussions.

The prime minister thanked Turkiye for its unwavering support and for standing firmly against these attacks.

He noted that both Turkiye and the UN Security Council have condemned Iran's actions and called for their immediate cessation.

"These unjustifiable aggressions will only widen the conflict and create more instability," he warned, adding that Qatar reserves "all rights to defend itself through legal and diplomatic means".

Highlighting the countries' close partnership, the prime minister said that Fidan's visit reflects "the deeply established Qatar-Turkiye relations that have withstood many challenges".

Reaffirming Turkiye's position, Fidan said that his country "strongly condemns the Iranian attacks" and expressed full soli-

arity with Qatar and other affected states.

He said that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been leading intense diplomatic efforts to halt the war through co-ordination with the US, Iran, and Gulf countries.

Fidan warned that the ongoing conflict distracts global attention from Israel's continuing aggression against Palestinians.

"This war overshadows the daily crimes of the occupation forces, allowing Israel to evade accountability," he said, adding that Israel is "the prime beneficiary of the current chaos".

The Turkish foreign minister revealed that a recent meeting in Riyadh brought to-

gether representatives from 12 countries to discuss ways to stop the hostilities (see lead story on this page).

"During the meeting, we even spoke with the Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi," he said. "We told him - while we are talking about de-escalation, your missiles are still flying. At least stop the attacks while we are speaking."

Fidan concluded by thanking the prime minister for his hospitality and diplomacy during such a critical period, praising him as "a man of peace who has eased many disputes through his mediation efforts in the region and beyond".



talabat to match customer tips for riders on Eid al-Fitr

Leading on-demand delivery platform talabat will match customer tips for riders today in celebration of Eid al-Fitr, doubling gestures of appreciation made through the talabat app. Customers who choose to tip their rider through the talabat app will have their contribution matched by talabat. At a time when many people in the community are looking for ways to show appreciation, this initiative offers customers a simple way to thank riders for their continuous efforts in delivering meals, groceries, and everyday essentials across Qatar. The initiative reflects talabat's ongoing commitment to supporting riders who play a significant role in keeping communities connected when they are needed most.

The one-day initiative doubles customer tips to thank riders supporting communities across Qatar

Moments of togetherness on Eid al-Fitr



Family members gather at home in Qatar, sharing quiet moments of togetherness as henna is carefully applied ahead of Eid al-Fitr – an age-old tradition that reflects joy, preparation, and the spirit of celebration. **PICTURE:** Thajudheen

MoCI issues circular to business owners

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) has issued a circular requiring all factory owners and commercial establishments, regardless of their activity, to establish electronic integration with the ministry's systems and to record inventory, sales, and service quantities.

The circular forms part of the ministry's efforts to enhance market oversight and strengthen the electronic monitoring framework.

Required procedures include linking systems to the ministry by transferring transaction data from Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems or their equivalents, and continuously recording inventory



quantities and updating the required data immediately upon any change. Under the circular, failure to establish electronic integration with the ministry, manipulation of records or documents – whether paper-based or electronic, failure to provide the required documentation, or submission of inaccurate data, constitutes a violation under Law No. (12) of 1972 on Compulsory Pricing and Profit Determination and its amendments. All factory owners and commercial establishments are urged to comply with the provisions of the circular to avoid legal action, and the circular takes effect from the date of issuance.

Israel reopens key Gaza crossing amid truce push

Israel reopened the Rafah crossing with Egypt yesterday after nearly three weeks to allow some wounded Palestinians to leave for treatment, after Gaza medics said Israeli strikes had killed four people in the enclave.

The Palestinian Red Crescent Society said that only eight Palestinians who were injured in Israeli attacks during the two-year war and 17 of their family members would be allowed into Egypt for medical treatment after the crossing reopened yesterday.

It was unclear how many would be let through back into Gaza.

Al-Qahera News, close to Egyptian intelligence, aired images of a small group of Palestinians, including patients treated in Egypt, preparing to re-enter Gaza.

Several ambulances were also seen waiting to receive patients arriving from the enclave.

Sources told Reuters earlier that the border opening resulted from recent talks that envoys from President Donald Trump's "Board of Peace" had with Hamas officials in Cairo in an effort to safeguard the Gaza ceasefire, which has been under serious strain since the United States and Israel started bombing Iran.

The crossing had reopened in early February after being largely shut since May 2024, in the early months of Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza.

Its reopening offered some relief to Palestinians who want to leave Gaza for medical care, or those who want to return after fleeing the fighting.

While Israeli attacks in Gaza declined in the days after the US and Israel launched attacks on Iran on February 28, according to residents, medics, and analysts, they have since started to rise again. – **Reuters/AFP**

No 'definitive time frame' for ending Iran war: Pentagon

AFP/Reuters
Washington

US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth (pictured) said yesterday that there is no "time frame" for ending the US-Israeli war against Iran, which was launched three weeks ago.

"We wouldn't want to set a definitive time frame," he told a news conference, adding that "we're very much on track" and that President Donald Trump will be the one to decide when to stop.

"It will be at the president's choosing, ultimately, where we say, 'Hey, we've achieved what we need to!'"

Hegseth also addressed a report that the Pentagon has requested more than \$200bn in additional funding from Congress to pay for the conflict.

"As far as \$200bn, I think that number could move. Obviously it takes money to kill bad guys," he said. "We're going back to Congress and folks there to ensure that we're properly funded for what's been done, for what we may have to do in the future."

The first six days of the war cost the US at least \$11.3bn.

That figure, from a closed-door briefing for senators, did not include the entire cost of the war, but was provided to lawmakers as they have clamored for more information about the conflict.

Hegseth said that the US objectives in its war against Iran have not changed since strikes started on February 28.

He also accused the media of stirring up concerns that the US risked being locked in an open-ended conflict with shifting priorities.

The US has carried out strikes against 7,000 targets inside Iran, and hit more than 40 Iranian mine-laying vessels and 11 submarines.

"Our objectives, given directly from our America-first president, remain exactly what they were on day one," Hegseth told reporters. "These are not the media's objectives, not Iran's objectives, not new objectives. Our objectives – unchanged, on target and on plan."

He spent several minutes in his opening statement criticising the press, accusing it of trying to convince the American public that it was "spinning toward an endless abyss, or a forever war, or a quagmire."

"Nothing could be further from the truth," he said.

Hegseth told reporters the objectives remained to destroy Iran's missile launchers, its defence industrial base and its navy, and to never allow Iran to get a nuclear weapon.

Reuters reported on Wednesday that sources said Trump's administration is considering deploying thousands of additional US troops to reinforce its operation in the Middle East.

Options for next steps include securing safe passage for oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, a mission that the sources said would be accomplished primarily through air and naval forces.

Securing the strait could also mean deploying US troops to Iran's shoreline, sources told Reuters.

Trump, asked yesterday whether he intended to put more troops in the region, told reporters that he was not putting troops "anywhere", but that if he



was going to, he would not tell journalists.

Top US military officer General Dan Caine, who spoke alongside Hegseth yesterday, provided details on weapons being used against Iran and its allied forces in the region.

Caine said that A-10 Warthogs – a type of aircraft designed for providing close air support – are "hunting and killing fast-attack watercraft" in the key Strait of Hormuz waterway, which Iran effectively closed to maritime traffic following the start of the war.

He also said that AH-64 Apaches are being used in Iraq to target Iran-aligned militia groups there, and that some US allies have begun using the attack helicopters to counter one-way drones launched by Tehran's forces.

Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the US military remained on track to achieve its objectives and the US was striking deeper into Iranian territory every day.

However, he acknowledged that Iran retained some missile capabilities.

"They came into this fight with a lot of weapons," Caine said.

That became evident when the US military said in a statement that a US F-35 aircraft conducted an emergency landing after flying a combat mission over Iran.

The military said the pilot was in stable condition. A US official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said it appeared the aircraft had been hit by Iran, but an investigation was underway.

Some 13 US troops have been killed so far in the war and about 200 have been wounded, the US military said, adding that most of the injuries have been minor.

Iran's attacks on energy infrastructure in response to Israeli attacks on its gas facilities marked the biggest escalation of the nearly three-week war, causing gasoline prices to surge and oil prices to rise further.

Reuters has reported that one of the locations where the Trump administration discussed sending ground forces was Kharg Island, the hub for 90% of Iran's oil exports, where the US carried out strikes last Friday, saying it had only hit military targets.

Hegseth, in the press conference, cited the strikes against Kharg Island as an example of how the US could control Iran's fate, warning Iran against targeting Arab countries.

"The United States military controls the fate of that country," he said.

Not our war: Palestinians mourn first dead after Iranian missile fire

By Louis Baudoin-Laarman
AFP

The blast struck without warning in the Palestinian town of Beit Awa, sending a hail of missile fragments through a beauty salon and killing four women inside.

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, the first Palestinian deaths in the Middle East war have sharpened a sense of helplessness as they find themselves ensnared in the crossfire of yet another conflict.

Issa Masalmeh was sitting nearby when a loud bang startled him to his feet around 9.30pm on Wednesday and he saw debris hurtling down from the sky.

"It fell without any warning. There was no alert," the 60-year-old resident told AFP.

He said metal shards tore through an area of some 200sq metres. The scene at the salon was horrific.

"The women who died, their bodies were torn apart," Masalmeh said.

Medics initially said three women died at the scene. A fourth, who was six months pregnant, succumbed to her wounds later in hospital.

They all were at the salon the day before the start of Eid al-Fitr.

Yesterday morning the coffins of the first three victims were carried out of a nearby hospital in Dura by members of the Palestinian security forces.

Draped in Palestinian flags they were loaded into ambulances to be taken to their final resting place.

"We are in a state of shock and incomprehension over why we



A woman comforts an injured girl as they mourn the death of the three women killed in Iranian missile attacks, at a hospital in Beit Awa town near the occupied West Bank city of Hebron. – **AFP**

are the ones paying the price for a situation we have nothing to do with," Fawzi Abu Leil, the mayor of Dura, told AFP. "It was so sudden and unexpected -- a tragedy and a massacre that no one can fathom."

As Israel and the United States carry out waves of devastating air raids across Iran, Tehran has hit back against Israel with barrages of missiles.

Palestinian authorities could not confirm if the shrapnel came from an Iranian missile or an Israeli interceptor used to shoot it down.

While in Israel there is a highly efficient system of alerts and a widespread network of shelters where residents seek refuge, those in the West Bank say they have little protection.

"The Israelis can avoid all of this because they have shelters," said Abu Leil. "In any conflict in the region, the Palestinian people are

the victims because we have practically nowhere to shelter."

Hours after the carnage, firefighters were still hosing away the blood from the mangled metal container that had housed the beauty salon.

Shrapnel scars pockmarked the walls.

Abdelrazek Masalmeh was coming to terms with the terrible scene of severed limbs he found after rushing there from his nearby home.

"It was a shock, a disaster," the 32-year-old neuroscience researcher told AFP.

Like others in the town, he was left angry and hopeless after death fell suddenly from the sky in a conflict far beyond their control.

"We are the victims. It's not our war," he said. "They should leave us alone and do what they want to each other... it should end."

Oil spill 'highly likely' after warship sank

The torpedoing of an Iranian frigate by a US submarine off Sri Lanka on March 4 is "highly likely" to have caused an oil spill, a British non-governmental organisation (NGO) has said.

The Conflict and Environment Observatory (CEOBS), an NGO that specialises in monitoring the environmental impact of conflict, identified a 20km-long oil slick on a satellite image taken by the European Copernicus programme the day after the IRIS Dena was sunk, killing at least 84 sailors.

"We assess it to be highly likely that the spill originated from the vessel, based on the timeline of events and its correlation with reporting from the area," Leon Moreland, a researcher at CEOBS, told AFP on Wednesday.

The slick appeared to have drifted eastward, reaching protected marine and coastal areas two days after the attack, according to CEOBS and satellite imagery seen by AFP yesterday.

The Sri Lanka Marine Environment Protection Authority (MEPA) launched cleanup operations on March 7 to remove hydrocarbon residues that had washed up on beaches on the southwest of the island. Investigations conducted by MEPA found that the

source of the oil slick was likely barrels of lubricant dumped at sea.

"This oil type has been identified as a piston-operated loose oil, not classified as a dangerous oil type," a MEPA spokesperson said at a press conference on March 8.

The oil slick was cleared by March 13, MEPA's chairman Samantha Gunasekera told AFP yesterday.

MEPA has not reported damage to marine fauna yet. Sri Lanka's coastal waters are home to rich biodiversity, including ecosystems – such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, and mangroves – that are particularly sensitive to hydrocarbon contamination.

"Local communities that rely on coastal fisheries may be indirectly affected through disruption to marine food chains and fish stocks," Moreland said.

The researcher said that regions affected by conflict face an elevated risk of oil spills.

The US and Israeli bombing of ports, oil depots, and vessels, along with retaliatory Iranian strikes on energy infrastructure in the Gulf and vessels near the Strait of Hormuz since the start of the Middle East war have increased the likelihood of "significant environmental incidents", Moreland added. – **AFP**

Sahel accounts for nearly half of all terror-related deaths: report

The Sahel region of Africa which has become the “global epicentre of terrorism” accounted for nearly half of all terrorism-related deaths for the third consecutive year in 2025, the *Global Terrorism Report* said yesterday.

The index, compiled by the Institute for Economics and Peace think tank, has ranked 163 countries for 13 years according to the impact of “terrorism” based on indicators such as the number of attacks, deaths, injuries and hostages.

It defines terrorism as “the systematic threat or use of violence, by non-state actors, whether for or in opposition to established authority”.

In 2024, more than half of the 7,555 deaths due to “terrorism” worldwide were recorded in the Sahel, a semi-arid

belt stretching along the Sahara desert’s southern rim from the Atlantic to the Red Sea.

The trend remained largely unchanged in 2025, with nearly half of the 5,582 deaths attributed to “terrorists” occurring in the Sahel, although the total number of victims in the region fell, the Australia-based think tank said.

“The Sahel has suffered a tenfold increase in terrorism fatalities since 2007”, when it accounted for only 1% of global terrorism-related deaths.

“The epicentre of terrorism has shifted from the Middle East and North Africa, into the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa,” the report said.

Burkina Faso was the most affected country in the world for two consecutive

years but was overtaken in 2025 by Pakistan.

“Deaths from terrorism in Pakistan are now at their highest level since 2013, with the country recording 1,139 terrorism deaths and 1,045 incidents in 2025,” the report said.

“This follows a sharp resurgence in terrorist activity driven in part by the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan in 2021,” the report said, also pointing to rising violence by the Pakistani Taliban movement and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), the most active separatist militant group.

Burkina Faso, meanwhile, saw the greatest decline in the number of deaths in 2025, falling 45% from the previous year, to 846, the report noted.

The reason was mostly an 84% reduction in civilian casualties rather than an improvement in security.

The Al Qaeda-affiliated Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, known by its Arabic acronym JNIM, which is the main religious militant group active in Burkina, has shifted its strategy to target soldiers rather than civilians in its attacks.

Niger, listed fifth in 2024, climbed to third place with an increase in “terrorism” incidents in 2025 and surpassing Mali and Syria with 703 deaths, more than half of which were civilians.

Nigeria rose to fourth place on the index, with 750 people killed in 2025, up 46% from the previous year.

“This marks the highest death toll since

2020, driven by internal instability as well as ongoing conflict between ISWAP and Boko Haram,” the report said.

Mali saw a decline in deaths, now ranked fifth on the index, with 341 killed last year compared to 604 in 2024.

The report attributes most attacks in the Sahel to the Islamic State group and JNIM.

It also highlighted the expansion of the religious militant groups to west Africa’s coastal countries, particularly Benin, which has shot up to 19th place on the index from 26th.

Other organisations such as ACLED, which monitors conflict-related casualties worldwide, report higher figures for religious militant-related deaths in the Sahel. — AFP

As Israel expands strikes on Beirut, delivery drivers steer clear of danger

By Nazih Osseiran and Emilie Madi
Reuters

Lebanese food courier Hamza Hareb now keeps his distance if he spots a car with tinted windows while on a delivery run in Beirut.

Hezbollah is rumoured to use such cars, and Hareb wants to steer clear of any Israeli strikes targeting the armed group.

Israel has expanded its air campaign to new parts of Beirut in recent days, hitting apartments and downing entire buildings in strikes that it says are targeting Hezbollah, which pulled Lebanon into the regional war on March 2 by firing into Israeli territory.

On Wednesday, Israel struck different neighbourhoods in the heart of Beirut, leaving mounds of rubble hundreds of metres away from government buildings, restaurants and roads usually clogged with traffic.

As residents of the capital stay home in fear, they are ordering delivery for dinner — and drivers like Hareb are navigating a maze of risks to make it happen.

“Of course, we are afraid. That is ever-present,” said Hareb, one of 3,000 couriers in Beirut who work for Toters, among Lebanon’s most popular delivery apps.

Like most gig workers, Toters drivers are paid per delivery.

For many, the job is an economic lifeline in the heavily indebted country, which is suffering from years of economic crisis and political instability following a financial collapse in 2019.

“You don’t know when the strikes will come, so we have adapted to everything,” Hareb said.

Israel sometimes issues evacuation warnings before striking, telling residents to leave the area.

However, three of Wednesday’s four strikes on Beirut came without notice.

“Right now they’re increasingly striking without warning, and of course this is instilling a sense of fear among us (since) we spend most of our time out in the street,” Hareb told Reuters.



Hamza Hareb, who works as a delivery driver for the Toters delivery app, rides his scooter in Beirut. — Reuters

Right: Marie Katanjian sits on her scooter in Beirut. — Reuters

If Beirut is rocked by an unexpected strike, drivers pull over to figure out which neighbourhood was targeted and how to amend their routes if needed.

If an evacuation warning is issued, drivers pass it on through work channels so colleagues can avoid targeted areas.

Toters’ director of operations Roland Ghanem said that the company did not deliver to neighbourhoods that fall within Israel’s evacuation orders and has barred drivers from using risky routes near possible targets.

“These drivers navigate into uncertainty... just to make sure that others can still have access to food and basic needs,” Ghanem said. “They understand that behind every order, there is a family that has been displaced, or an elderly person that cannot go to the store and get some food, or just a regular person trying to get through the day.”

Israeli strikes have killed nearly 1,000 people and displaced another million across Lebanon, according to Lebanese authorities.

For some drivers, the war has hit close to home — literally.

Mahmoud al-Benne, 34, had to flee his home in Beirut’s southern suburbs earlier this month when Israel issued a blanket evacuation order for the entire area and began bombing it heavily.



However, he still needs to work. “Whether you are displaced or not displaced, you need to earn money,” Benne said. “You have responsibilities. We are in a state of war, but at the end of the day we want to work.”

Marie Katanjian stands out among her colleagues as a rare female delivery driver.

Her husband delivers for Toters and she was inspired to do the same.

“We have to work in this situation because we have families. We’re helping each other out, hand in hand,” she said.

Still, she’s yearning to drive safely through her city’s streets again.

“We want the war to end, so we can take a breath.”

Drone attack from Sudan leaves 17 dead in Chad

Reuters/AFP
N’jamena

A cross-border drone attack from Sudan killed 17 people in Chad, including mourners attending a funeral service, the Chadian government and local sources said yesterday, and the country’s president vowed to retaliate for any further attacks.

The border town of Tine was struck on Wednesday afternoon as mourners gathered at a house for the funeral of a dead relative that involved reading the Qur’an, a local resident said.

There were two explosions and casualties included mourners and children who had been playing nearby, said the resident, who declined to be identified for security reasons.

Local government sources said that it was not immediately clear who was behind the attack.

The conflict in Sudan between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which began in April 2023, has periodically spilled into Chadian territory, causing casualties and property damage.

Sudan’s army and the RSF issued statements blaming each other for the attack.

Sudan’s army offered “sincere condolences and deepest sympathies to the families of the victims” and to Chad’s government and people.

The United Nations resident and humanitarian co-ordinator for Chad, Francois Bataingaya,

also condemned the attack, saying that despite appeals to the warring parties in Sudan, “innocent people continue to be targeted”.

Chad closed its eastern border with Sudan last month after clashes linked to the war killed five Chadian soldiers.

In a statement issued early yesterday, the government said Chad had strengthened its security presence at the border and could potentially carry out operations on Sudanese territory.

Following a security meeting held yesterday with Chad’s defence minister, the army ordered the evacuation of 2,500 people living in villages along the border, a local official said.

The army intends to entrench itself along the border and take control of border crossings, the official said.

The office of Chad President Mahamat Idriss Deby said in a statement late on Wednesday that he had ordered the army to retaliate against any attack from Sudan.

Two local government sources had earlier put the toll at 16 killed and 10 wounded.

A military source said all the dead and injured were civilians.

Nearly 1,400km (870 miles) long and located in a desert region, the border between Chad and Sudan remains porous and difficult to control.

The civil war in Sudan has killed tens of thousands of people and displaced more than 12mn, nearly 1mn of them to Chad, according to the UN.

Dubai Porsches land on Kenya island due to war in the Middle East

AFP
Lamu, Kenya

Thousands of high-end cars being shipped from Japan and destined for Dubai have been dropped off on the Kenyan island of Lamu, port authorities said, as the Mideast war provides a boost to African shipping hubs.

Kenyan media showed dozens of gleaming Porsches parked in a warehouse on Lamu, an island paradise and Unesco World Heritage Site that the government is developing into another major transport hub.

The Porsches were among more than 4,000 vehicles that had to be unloaded since last week from two ships belonging to Italy’s Grimaldi Group.

The last ship left Japan’s Yokohama on February 24, four days before the United States and Israel launched the war against Iran, leading to a shutdown of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.

The destination port of Jebel Ali in Dubai was hit

by Iranian air strikes on March 1.

Lamu is expecting another container ship with 5,000 vehicles next week, according to local port officials.

“There are still ships with cargo that are destined for the Gulf, but since the situation there has deteriorated, those ships are more or less just wandering or drifting at sea,” Abdulaziz Mzee, manager of the Port of Lamu, told local media on Wednesday.

“It is not something to celebrate, because people there are suffering and facing difficulties, but at the same time it is a commercial blessing,” he added.

The cars will remain at the port until the situation stabilises, Mzee said.

Kenya Ports Authority said on X that Lamu was “geared up for a spike” in traffic due to the war.

Lamu’s port was first announced in 2012 as part of a \$23bn regional transport corridor linking South Sudan and Ethiopia to the Kenyan coast and began operation around 2021.

Kenya port authorities say it is set to become Africa’s leading deep-water transshipment hub.



Vehicles offloaded from the Grande Florida Palermo, a vessel operated by Grimaldi Lines, are parked in Kenya’s Lamu Port after it was diverted while transporting 3,800 cars from Japan and originally destined for Jebel Ali Port, Dubai. — Reuters

Heavy rainfall in Malawi kills 13

AFP
Lilongwe

Four days of heavy rainfall in Malawi have claimed at least 13 lives, with some killed by collapsing walls or while trying to cross flooded rivers, officials said yesterday.

The largely rural southern African country was pummelled by rains that caused flooding between Sunday and Wednesday, the disaster management department said.

After preliminary reports, “the department has recorded 13 deaths and 35 injuries”, it said.

The worst-affected area was the southern district of Chikwawa, where three people were killed and three evacuation camps had been set up, it said.

The district borders central Mozambique, which has also seen heavy rain, with disaster management officials warning of flooding.

More rainfall is expected in aid-dependent Malawi over the next few days, the weather service said. As an agriculture-dependent economy, Malawi is vulnerable to climate shocks, which have included a drought in 2024 and a devastating cyclone the year before that killed more than 1,000 people.

Madagascar cabinet hopefuls to undergo lie detector tests

Madagascar is putting candidates for the new cabinet through lie detectors before finalising appointments, the interim president said yesterday.

The new line-up would be announced early next week, said Colonel Michael Randrianirina, who dismissed the previous prime minister and cabinet 10 days ago with no explanation.

“We have decided to use a polygraph,” the 52-year-old leader told local media. “It is with this polygraph that the background integrity checks will be carried out.”

Youth-led demonstrations against water and power shortages in September last year snowballed into a protest movement that ended after former president Andry Rajoelina fled the island nation.

Randrianirina, whose army unit had sided with the protesters, was sworn in as interim president in October and has pledged to call new elections by late 2027.

“We’re not looking for someone who is 100% clean, but over 60%,” the colonel said. “That way, Madagascar will finally be able to develop.” — AFP

At least 18 migrants drown off Comoros

Seventeen bodies have been recovered from a boat carrying African migrants that was found on the coast of Comoros, the Indian Ocean archipelago’s interior minister said yesterday.

Authorities said they believed the migrants were attempting to reach Mayotte, a French territory located between Mozambique and Madagascar.

The vessel was discovered late on Wednesday after residents of the coastal town of Mitsamiouli heard cries for help and alerted police, a local hospital director told Reuters.

Comoros Interior Minister Mohamed Ahamada told a press conference that nine bodies had been recovered early yesterday, in addition to eight recovered overnight.

He said 30 people on board the boat had survived. The hospital director gave a death toll of 18 and said survivors reported that they were from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo).

Minister Ahamada told reporters that most of the

migrants were from the DR Congo.

They had been dropped offshore and many did not know how to swim, a young man who helped with the rescue told AFP.

“We were watching the Barca-Newcastle match when we heard screams coming from the beach,” said a man from Mitsamiouli, which is about 40km from the capital Moroni, who helped with the rescue.

“We hurried over there. We found men, women, children. They said they thought they had arrived in Mayotte,” he said. “The smuggler had dropped them off on a sandbank a few metres from the beach and there they could still touch the bottom. The problems began when they tried to reach the shore, even though many of them didn’t know how to swim.”

Migrants often attempt the dangerous crossing to Mayotte, which — though the poorest of France’s overseas territories — offers access to the French welfare system. — Reuters/AFP



Mullin clears US Senate panel vote

AFP
Washington

US senators advanced President Donald Trump's pick to lead the Department of Homeland Security in a knife-edge committee vote yesterday, after a combative hearing exposed concerns about his temperament and policy agenda.

The Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee voted 8-7 to approve Senator Markwayne Mullin's nomination to lead the powerful agency responsible for carrying out Trump's high-profile immigration crackdown.

Republican leaders are eyeing a full Senate vote as early as next week, where he is expected to get an easier ride than he did in the committee.

The panel's Republican chairman Rand Paul had opposed the nomination, citing what he described as Mullin's "anger issues" and past inflammatory remarks. That left Mullin needing a Democrat to break ranks, and Pennsylvania centrist John Fetterman obliged.

The hearing on Wednesday — the only formal hurdle before a floor vote — quickly turned tense, with Paul confronting Mullin over past comments and questioning his temperament.

Mullin previously called Paul a "freaking snake" for breaking with Republicans on key votes, while Paul has accused the nomi-



Markwayne Mullin testifies during his confirmation hearing to be the next Homeland Security Secretary in the Dirksen Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill on Wednesday. (AFP)

nee of effectively excusing a 2017 assault in which the chairman was severely injured by a neighbour.

Mullin denies this — saying he only sought to explain, not justify, the attack on Paul.

Democrats pressed Mullin over his record and the administration's immigration policies, expressing scepticism about his promises to chart a less controversial course than outgoing Secretary Kristi Noem, who was ousted after federal agents shot dead two American protesters during migrant round-ups in Minnesota.

Mullin sought to reassure lawmakers by pledging a lower-profile approach to running the department, saying his goal was to avoid dominating headlines.

"My goal at six months is that we're not in the lead story every single day," he told senators. "My

goal is for people to understand we're out there, we're protecting them."

He also signalled openness to requiring judicial warrants for immigration enforcement operations — a potential shift from current policy and a key demand from Democrats in ongoing funding negotiations.

But those assurances did little to ease opposition.

Several Democrats said they would need to see concrete legislative changes before taking Mullin at his word, particularly as the department remains partially shut down amid a standoff over immigration enforcement.

DHS has been without full funding for more than a month and is grappling with mounting operational strain, including disruptions at airports.

Venezuelan student freed after 10 months in US immigration custody

AFP
New York

Democrats and activists celebrated yesterday the release of a US high school student from Venezuela who spent 10 months in custody after his arrest by immigration officials enforcing President Donald Trump's mass deportation plans.

Dylan Contreras, 21, was detained last May after attending an immigration hearing at a New York City court and then transferred to a detention facility in Pennsylvania, sparking a widespread backlash.

Immigration officials said Contreras, who left Venezuela in 2024 seeking US asylum, was in the United States illegally. His lawyers refute this and argue he was denied due process.

The circumstances of his release are unclear and his asylum case is still pending. "It's really terrible being in there," Contreras said of his detention during a news conference in Manhattan.

"There are all kinds of people who truly didn't deserve to be in there, and with this case I want to keep fighting for them, because that's what needs to be done."

"Everything we've gone through is unfair," added Contreras, who attended a New York school for migrants above the traditional age limit.

Wearing a baseball cap of the New York Knicks basketball team, he was joined by his mother, as well as the city's leftist mayor Zohran Mamdani and Democratic state Governor Kathy Hochul.

"He belongs in New York City. This city has been missing him, and we are so grateful that you are home. This is your home," Mamdani told Contreras.

"And as Dylan has reminded us, this is but a glimpse into something that is affecting so many across the city, across the state, and across this country," he added.

Hochul called Contreras's arrest "reprehensible and disgusting." "He was thrown away like a piece of garbage into a prison in

Pennsylvania," she told reporters. "This day has to be replicated over and over and over until everyone is reunited with their loved ones."

Immigration enforcement has become a major flashpoint between Trump's Republicans and Democrats.

Protests have erupted in recent months across the United States and, adding to tensions, immigration officials shot dead two US citizens during demonstrations in Minneapolis in January.

"The cruel immigration policies sweeping our nation do not protect us," said Shani Adess, vice-president at New York Legal Assistance Group, which represents Contreras.



Mayor of New York Zohran Mamdani, next to Dylan Contreras, a high school student who was recently released from federal custody, speaks during a press conference at Middle Collegiate Church in New York City yesterday. (AFP)

Trump calls for Japan, Nato to 'step up' on Iran as oil prices bite

Reuters
Washington

President Donald Trump yesterday urged Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi to "step up" as he pressed allies for more support over the war with Iran and rising oil prices, while defending the secrecy of the campaign by invoking Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

Trump, who greeted Takaichi with hugs at the White House, heaped praise on the leader of Washington's closest ally in East Asia during an Oval Office meeting where the expected topics of discussion included tense relations with China and the billions of dollars Tokyo is committing to US investments favoured by Trump.

But Trump defiantly defended an Iran operation that took US allies by surprise and also used the meeting to renew pressure on US allies from Asia to Europe. The Republican president has asked for more ships to clear mines and escort tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, largely closed by Iran in the conflict, despite saying the US doesn't need any help.

"I expect Japan to step up because, you know, we have that kind of relationship and we step up for Japan," Trump said. "We don't need much. We don't need anything. I mean, honestly, we don't need anything from Japan or from anyone else. But I think it's appropriate that people step up."

Trump's pleas for help have received a lukewarm response from some allies caught off guard by Trump's audacious campaign in Iran, now in its third week.

Asked why he had not told allies about his war plans, the US president cited Japan's December 7, 1941, attack on the US naval base in



US President Donald Trump meets with Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington yesterday. (AFP)

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, which drew Washington into World War Two.

"We wanted surprise," Trump told a Japanese journalist. "Who knows better about surprise than Japan? Why didn't you tell me about Pearl Harbor?"

Takaichi's eyes widened, her grin vanished and she shifted in her chair next to Trump after his comment.

Takaichi said she came prepared to discuss specific strategies to calm global energy markets. Ahead of the meeting, Japan joined leading nations in Europe in a joint statement, saying they would take steps to stabilise energy markets and were ready to join "appropriate efforts" to ensure

safe passage through the strait.

But it was not clear that she was prepared to supply minesweeping vessels that could expose her pacifist nation to a bloody Middle East conflict.

"They are really stepping up to the plate," Trump said of Japan, "unlike Nato."

Takaichi condemned Iran's attacks in the strait, said Iran must never be allowed to obtain a nuclear weapon and said she believed only Trump could achieve peace. She also said the global economy was about to take a hit due to the turmoil in the Middle East.

Takaichi's long-scheduled White House visit has been aimed at burnishing the decades-old

security and economic partnership between Washington and its closest East Asian ally, but there have been concerns among Japanese officials that Trump would press her to do more than she can on Iran.

Takaichi has sought to move Japan away from a pacifist constitution imposed by Washington after World War Two, but with the Iran war unpopular at home, she has so far not offered to assist in clearing the strait.

She told the Japanese parliament on Monday that Japan had received no official request from the US on Iran but was checking the scope of possible action within the limits of its constitution.

Trump says US is not putting troops in Middle East region

US President Donald Trump yesterday suggested he was not looking at deploying soldiers to the Middle East with the Iran war heading towards a fourth week. "I'm not putting troops anywhere," Trump said in response to a reporter who asked whether he was planning to send more service members to the region. "If I were, I certainly wouldn't tell you. But I'm not putting troops. We will do whatever is necessary." Reuters reported on Wednesday that the Trump administration is considering deploying thousands of US troops to reinforce the Iran operation, citing a US official and three people familiar with the matter. Thirteen US troops have been killed since Iran launched strikes against US military bases following the start of the conflict on February 28. (Reuters)

Trump administration says not weighing oil export ban

President Donald Trump's administration is not considering a ban on oil exports, a US official told AFP yesterday, as the government scrambles to contain surging energy costs due to the war in the Middle East. "Oil and gas export restrictions are not under consideration," a Trump administration official said. Washington has been looking to ease energy costs in recent days as soaring costs filter down to consumers. (AFP)

Mexico invites Spain's king to the FIFA World Cup opening match

Reuters
Mexico City

Mexico has invited Spain's King Felipe VI to attend the World Cup opening match, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said yesterday.

Mexico's government representative for the 2026 FIFA World Cup Gabriela Cuevas sent invitations to all the countries with which Mexico has diplomatic relations, and among those invited was the king of Spain, Sheinbaum told a daily press conference.

The monarch's invitation was initially reported by Spanish media and emerged after Felipe VI unexpectedly acknowledged abuses in his country's colonial past on Monday.

At its height in the 16th to 18th

centuries, Spain ruled one of the largest empires in world history, spanning five continents including much of Central and Latin America, and practised forced labour, land expropriation and violence against Indigenous people.

The king's comments came shortly after a speech by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Munich last month, in which Rubio criticized a decline of "great Western empires" and said Washington did not want allies "shackled by guilt and shame."

Sheinbaum said on Tuesday that the king's comments were a conciliatory gesture on the king's part, but "it wasn't everything we would have wanted."

Sheinbaum did not invite the Spanish king to her 2024 inauguration after the monarch declined to apologise for colonial-era abuses.

US military not preparing for Cuba invasion, says senior US general

Reuters
Washington

The US military is not rehearsing for an invasion of Cuba or actively preparing to militarily take over the island, the top general overseeing American forces in Latin America told lawmakers yesterday.

But the US stands ready to address any threats to the US embassy, defend its base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and aid US government efforts to address any mass migration from the island, if needed, General Francis Donovan, head of US Southern Command, said.

Donovan's remarks came during

a Senate hearing focused on President Donald Trump's increasingly muscular use of the US military in Latin America, where his administration has re-asserted the idea that the region falls into Washington's zone of influence.

Trump has launched military strikes on suspected drug boats and is expanding counter-narcotics alliances with pro-Washington governments in Latin America, even carrying out joint operations with Ecuador on the ground there earlier this month.

In January, US special forces seized Venezuela's then-President Nicolas Maduro in a raid on his Caracas compound and whisked him to New York to face drug-trafficking charges.

Donovan, who was the No 2 at Special Operations Command at the time of the raid, made a surprise visit to Venezuela for security talks last month shortly after taking over the Latin America post.

Trump said on Monday that he expected to take Cuba "in some form" and that "I can do anything I want" with the neighbouring country, which sits about 90 miles (180km) south of Florida's Key West. But so far, US efforts appear aimed at creating economic leverage over the island.

Trump has piled tremendous economic pressure on Cuba by halting all Venezuelan oil shipments to the island, which has been forced to carry out severe en-

ergy rationing. Much of its economy has ground to a halt. On Monday, Cuba's electric grid collapsed, leaving the country of 10mn people without power.

Asked whether the US was conducting any military rehearsals that involve seizing, occupying, or otherwise asserting control over Cuba, Donovan said: "US Southern Command is not."

He was then asked whether he knew of any US military command doing so, and Donovan responded: "No."

Questions about US next steps come as Cuba and the US have opened talks aimed at improving their largely adverse relations, which have reached one of the most contentious moments in the

67 years since Fidel Castro overthrew what had been a close US ally.

In the hearing, Donovan noted that Guantanamo Bay had suffered storm damage and needed fresh investment, along with other Caribbean locations that US officials have long said suffered from under-investment over the past two decades, when the US military's focus was on combating militant groups like Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

"I won't pull any punches, it's in rough shape," Donovan said of Guantanamo Bay.

"Because of the hurricane damage, we're down to one working pier and one refuelling pier. I believe (the base) is a pivotal point

for any operations in the Caribbean," he added.

Donovan said the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the US Coast Guard, would be in the lead in any mass migration event from Cuba, which experts have long warned could follow a collapse of the Communist government in Havana. But he left open the possibility of setting up a camp at Guantanamo Bay for any overflow of migrants.

Asked about what US forces were prepared to do if there were a security threat to Americans in Cuba, Donovan responded: "If it developed into a physical security threat to the US embassy or the base at Gitmo, we would put US troops to defend American lives."

Independent Hong Kong panel starts hearing into devastating inferno

Reuters
Hong Kong

Human factors rendered ineffective almost all the fire safety measures at the site of a Hong Kong blaze that killed 168 people in November, the lead lawyer for a panel led by a judge that is investigating the inferno said yesterday.

The Independent Committee set up by Hong Kong leader John Lee to recommend preventive measures began hearings into the Asian financial hub's deadliest fire in decades at the high-rise Wang Fuk housing complex in the precinct of Tai Po.

"Only by confronting past mistakes can the city become safer,"

said the lawyer, Victor Dawes, as he detailed evidence regarding the blaze in the complex of eight blocks that were under extensive renovation.

CCTV images and videos shot by the public before and during the blaze, including scenes of construction workers smoking at the site, were played for the committee to review yesterday.

"My family member has passed away, it's been hard to watch so many videos, it's like witnessing the whole process," said a former resident, Phyllis, who lost her mother in the fire and received the videos before the hearing.

Phyllis, who gave only one name, told reporters she wanted to know the cause of the fire. Other resi-



A Wang Fuk resident arrives at the venue where an independent committee conducts evidential hearings for the deadly fire at the apartment in Tai Po last November, in Hong Kong, China, yesterday. (Reuters)

dents said they wanted to know why the fire alarms never sounded.

In 2024, authorities told residents that fire risks were "rela-

tively low" following their complaints about fire hazards posed by the renovations, the city's Labour Department said earlier.

Dawes detailed five major problems, among them the shutting down of fire alarms in seven blocks and the removal of staircase and corridor windows to give access to scaffolding for workers, allowing smoke and flames to enter residents' escape routes.

Fire hydrants and hose reels were shut off and non-flame-retardant netting was used, Dawes said.

He added that cigarette butts were suspected to be the cause of the blaze, according to a report by an inter-departmental task force. Residents' repeated complaints about workers smoking had not been taken seriously by authorities, he added.

Investigators found numerous butts on the scaffolding and

platforms and in light wells.

Dozens of residents and members of the public arrived early on Thursday to attend the proceedings at a public conference hall in Central.

Judge David Lok, who chaired the hearing, said they aimed to find the causes of the fire and the extent of the problem of bid-rigging by contractors and developers across city building projects.

Dawes said the panel received nearly 1 million files including photographs, videos and documents.

Some in the Chinese-ruled city had launched an online petition calling for an independent investigation and accountability, while authorities warned of severe punishment for those who tried to politicise the disaster.

Thai PM Anutin wins landmark re-election in parliament vote

Reuters
Bangkok

Thailand's Anutin Charnvirakul sailed through a parliamentary vote yesterday to become the first re-elected prime minister in two decades, a fresh mandate that could bring rare stability for the turbulent politics of the southeast Asian nation.

The Bhumjaithai Party's Anutin led from the start in rout of his biggest rival, Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, leader of the progressive People's Party and the surprise runner-up last month in an election it had been widely expected to win.

Anutin won the backing of 293 of parliament's 499 members yesterday, more than twice the 119 votes Natthaphong secured.

He offered no immediate comment on his victory, but headed into a meeting on energy security.

"Thailand has no issues and is able to still buy oil," Anutin said after the meeting. "We will ensure public confidence." Earlier, dressed in Thai traditional attire in his party's hue of blue, a beaming Anutin had greeted a succession of allies in parliament, shaking hands and posing for photographs.

In a stunning turnaround for a party that had struggled to make its mark in Thai politics, Bhumjaithai decisively won last month's election, riding on a wave of nationalism unleashed by military clashes with neighbouring Cambodia last year.

Much of Anutin's success comes



Thailand's caretaker Prime Minister and Bhumjaithai Party leader Anutin Charnvirakul (centre) is applauded by fellow party members after the new parliament elected Anutin as prime minister yesterday. (AFP)

from his opportunism in seizing on the decline of the once dominant Pheu Thai party, first by abandoning its coalition government and then manoeuvring swiftly to form his own after a court sacked a second prime minister in the space of just over a year.

Bhumjaithai's coalition pact with the politically bruised Pheu Thai and a crew of small parties stood firm in Thursday's vote, as Anutin comfortably reached the necessary threshold of 51%.

Earlier, Anutin, 59, had pledged to immediately start forming a cabinet and resolving Thailand's problems.

"Your voices are equally heard," he told lawmakers from outside his alliance. "I'm ready to accept suggestions... We all have the same

goals — the wellbeing of the people."

Staunch royalist Anutin weathered two decades of upheaval in tumultuous Thai politics by strategically positioning his party between elites warring in an intractable power struggle to ensure its role in successive coalition governments.

He now has his first clear mandate to lead a country with a long-stuttering economy shackled by massive household debt and facing headwinds from trade uncertainty and the fallout of the US-Israeli war on Iran. A political veteran and son of a former cabinet minister who once ran his family's construction firm, Anutin is a former deputy premier, interior minister and health minister who served as Thailand's Covid-19 tsar.

China for end to Gulf war, offers to ease SE Asia energy crunch

Reuters
Beijing

China called for an end to conflict in the Gulf and said the safety of waterways should not be disturbed yesterday, adding that it was ready to work with Southeast Asia to address energy shortages as oil markets reel from supply shocks.

While the US-Israeli war on Iran has allowed China to cast itself as the more reliable superpower, analysts say it is wary of global energy market uncertainty, not least because it needs the resources it has been stockpiling since the late 2000s to power the manufacturing sector underpinning its economy.

Assisting Southeast Asia's 700mn people would be welcome relief to the region's oil importers, after an order by Beijing earlier this month to ban Chinese exports of diesel, gasoline and jet fuel. China is also curbing exports of fertilisers, which rely on oil and gas refining byproducts, to pro-

"China hopes to develop very positive, healthy, and very consistent relations - particularly energy relations - with everybody"

tect its domestic market.

"The situation in the Middle East has disrupted global energy security," said Lin Jian, spokesperson at the Chinese foreign ministry, told a regular news conference when asked if Southeast Asian nations had reached out to China for help.

"The countries involved should immediately cease military operations to prevent regional instability from having a greater impact on global economic development," Lin said, adding that the safety of waterways should not be "disturbed", without naming the Strait of Hormuz.

"China is willing to strengthen co-ordination and co-operation with Southeast Asian countries to jointly address energy security issues," Lin added.

The crisis could create new openings in countries where China had struggled to gain a foot-

hold, said Wang Jin, senior fellow at the Beijing Club for International Dialogue, a think tank under the purview of China's foreign ministry.

The Strait of Hormuz's closure also highlights the relative reliability of renewable energy, compared with reliance on Gulf fossil fuels, including nuclear power and other green energy sectors in which Beijing is a world leader, Wang said.

"China hopes to develop very positive, healthy, and very consistent relations - particularly energy relations - with everybody," Wang added.

Philippine Energy Secretary Sharon Garin met with the Chinese ambassador to the Philippines on Tuesday to discuss co-operation in energy, a departure from the two countries' arguing over maritime rights in the South China Sea.

China, UK have responsibility to maintain peace: China FM

China's foreign minister told his British counterpart yesterday that the two countries had a responsibility to maintain international peace and security, and renewed calls for a ceasefire in the Middle East.

Beijing is a partner of Iran, which has been targeted by US-Israeli attacks since last month, but has also criticised Tehran's strikes against Gulf states housing US military bases.

In a phone call, China's Wang Yi told British Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper that their countries

should "consistently take actions conducive to peace", according to a readout from Beijing's foreign ministry.

They should work together to "prevent further damage to the international order and the erosion of the foundations of global peace", Wang told Cooper.

A "prolonged conflict yields no winners", Wang said.

Cooper visited Saudi Arabia last week on the UK's first ministerial visit to the region since the start of the war. (AFP)

Japan rejects US assessment of its shift on Taiwan

Reuters
Tokyo

Japan rejected a US assessment that its stance on how it might react to a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan marked a "significant shift" yesterday, an issue that could cloud an leaders' summit between Tokyo and Washington.

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's comments late last year that a hypothetical attack on Taiwan could bring about a military response from Tokyo drew a furious response from Beijing, which views the island as its own territory.

While Takaichi has maintained her remarks were in line with Japan's longstanding policies, an annual report by US intelligence agencies on Wednesday said they sharply departed from the rhetoric of previous Japanese leaders.

"The assessment that there has been a major shift is not accurate," Japan's top government spokesperson Minoru Kihara told a press briefing yesterday.

Tokyo's position of judging a so-called "existential crisis situation" — which Takaichi was being quizzed on in parliament when she made her November remarks on Taiwan — is consistent with the past, he added.

The differing views could cast a pall over Takaichi's summit with US President Donald Trump on Thursday, already complicated by his demands for Japan and other allies to send escort ships to the Strait of Hormuz, largely closed by the Iran war.

Relations between China and Japan have plunged to their lowest in over a decade since Takai-

chi's remarks, with Beijing urging its people not to travel to Japan and choking off some key exports.

The US assessment said that China was likely to intensify such coercive actions through 2026, aimed at punishing Japan and deterring other countries from making similar statements about their potential involvement in a Taiwan crisis.

The report concluded that China does not currently plan to invade Taiwan in 2027 and seeks to control the island without the use of force.

The Pentagon late last year said the US military believed China was preparing to be able to win a fight for Taiwan by 2027, the centenary of the founding of its People's Liberation Army, and was refining options to take Taiwan by "brute force" if needed.

China, South Korea vow to maintain supply chain stability as ties improve

Reuters
Beijing

Chinese and South Korean officials meeting in Beijing vowed to jointly maintain supply chain stability and deepen trade ties, official statements showed yesterday, as bilateral relations warm amid geopolitical shocks from the Iran War and US trade policies. Beijing has been seeking stronger ties with Seoul, whose president called for a full restoration of bilateral relations in a visit to China in January.

China is willing to deepen cooperation in trade and investment with South Korea and jointly safeguard industrial and supply chain stability, Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentao said in a meeting with Seoul's Minister of Trade, Industry and Resources

Kim Jung-Kwan, a Chinese statement said. "In the event of logistics delays or raw material shortages, the two countries will immediately activate communication channels... and coordinate a joint response," said a readout of the meeting released by the South Korean ministry.

The two countries will also "improve predictability" in supply chains involving critical items such as rare earths and permanent magnets, it said. China's willingness to boost trade ties with South Korea stands in contrast to its rupture with Japan, the other major East Asian economy whose prime minister's remarks about Taiwan late last year triggered Beijing's ire.

Kim and China's industry minister, in a separate meeting on Wednesday, called for advancing cooperation in the fields of semiconductors, lithium batteries and the silver economy, according to official readouts.

China-ruled Macau approves national security law allowing closed-door trials

Reuters
Hong Kong

Lawmakers in Macau, a city under Chinese rule, unanimously approved a bill yesterday that allows court proceedings to be held behind closed doors when deemed necessary to protect national security interests. The city enacted its first national security law in 2009 and tightened it with amendments in 2023. Last July, leading democrat Au Kam San was arrested for alleged collusion with foreign forces to endanger national security, the first known arrest under that law.

The new legislation stipulates that judges must refer cases to the city's Committee for Safeguarding National Security if they believe national security may be at risk during a public hearing.

The committee has the ultimate

authority to decide whether the matter pertains to national security and order that hearings be held behind closed doors. Its decisions are final, not subject to appeal or judicial review.

The law will take effect a day after its publication in Macau's official gazette.

The Macau government said the approval had demonstrated the successful implementation of the principle of "patriots governing Macau".

Unlike in Hong Kong, which saw big social movements challenge Chinese Communist Party rule in 2014 and 2019, the democratic opposition in the former Portuguese colony has always existed on the fringes amid tight Chinese control.

After Au's arrest last year, rights groups have called for his unconditional release and urged authorities not to suppress peaceful criticism.

Philippine jeepney drivers protest on pay cut

Reuters
Manila

The ripple effects of the war in the Middle East are hitting home hard for Philippine jeepney driver Toni Prado, whose daily earnings have been gutted by soaring fuel prices. He was one of thousands of jeepney drivers who took to the streets across the country yesterday to protest a more than doubling of local diesel prices after global oil prices surged because of the US-Israel war on Iran.

"We are losing our income. What we earn just goes to paying for diesel," said Prado.

"Before I could earn at least 1,000 pesos (\$16.65) for three trips, now I only take home 200 pesos," said the father of four.

"How can I support my children? How can I send my daughter to school? How do I pay for elec-

tricity, water, and food?"

The Philippines relies heavily on Middle Eastern oil, and the surge in fuel prices is threatening to stoke inflation in the consumption-driven economy. Like many of its Southeast Asian neighbours, Manila has taken steps such as shortening the work week and providing fuel subsidies to counter the impact of rising costs. This week, Congress granted the president emergency powers to suspend or reduce fuel taxes.

Mody Floranda, who heads the transport group leading the national strike, said those measures were not enough, and called for the repeal of a law that stripped the government of its authority to control fuel prices.

Drivers said the pain of surging diesel prices was compounded by the suspension of a fare hike that could have provided some relief. Jeepneys, which were original-

ly created from abandoned U.S. military jeeps after World War Two, are a vital mode of public transport across the Philippines.

Reggie Manlapit, who has been a jeepney driver for two decades,

said he needs to work longer hours but still gets less pay.

"Because of what's happening, we work longer hours and we're lucky if we can take home 200 pesos," he said.



Jeepney drivers and activists display placards during a protest in support of a jeepney drivers' strike in Manila yesterday. (AFP)

Tech giants reject India's Aadhaar preload plan

Reuters
New Delhi

India's government privately proposed in January that firms like Apple, Samsung and Google consider pre-installing its biometric identification app Aadhaar on phones, a move opposed by a group representing the smartphone giants, industry letters show.

The tussle over preloading state-run apps has become a recurring flashpoint between Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government and tech firms, with the Aadhaar request one of six that Indian IT industry body MAIT has pushed back against, according to the letters.

Aadhaar is a unique 12-digit identity number tied to an individual's fingerprints and iris scans, held by nearly 1.34bn residents. It is widely used for verification purposes in banking and telecom services, as well as for faster airport entry.

While the government maintains that the system is safe and secure, it has faced persistent criticism from privacy advocates, including for data leaks where personal details of hundreds of millions of holders surfaced on the dark web.

According to an internal e-mail sent by MAIT on January 13, the government's Aadhaar body UIDAI asked the IT ministry in January to engage Google, Apple, and leading smartphone manufacturers to explore pre-installing the new version of its Aadhaar app.

The request, while not an outright order, drew opposition from companies concerned that pre-installations raise production costs and risks creating functional issues for users, according to the MAIT documents.

Apple and Samsung in particu-



A woman goes through the process of finger scanning for the Unique Identification (UID) database system, also known as Aadhaar, at a registration centre in New Delhi. (Reuters/File Photo)

lar both had concerns with the proposal due to questions over safety and security, two industry sources said. The companies did not respond to Reuters requests for comment.

UIDAI believed the pre-installation would allow citizens to "readily access essential Aadhaar functionalities without the need for separate downloads" and "enhance its reach and accessibility", according to an e-mail sent from MAIT to its members in January.

MAIT's member companies, however, were of the view that pre-installation "would not drive greater public good", and that such mandates would require companies to maintain separate production lines for India and export markets, one of its January documents showed.

It also argued that no other country apart from Russia mandates pre-installation of government apps on mobile phones.

The new Aadhaar app, launched in January, allows users to update

their personal details, manage profiles of their family members, and lock biometric details to prevent misuse.

The pre-installation proposal "shows and evidences a greater amount of government desire of controlling smartphone usage from the very beginning," said Apar Gupta, founder of the Internet Freedom Foundation, a New Delhi-based digital advocacy group.

"It is clearly problematic." It was not immediately clear whether the proposal is still being pursued by the government or if it was dropped.

In a statement to Reuters, MAIT said its internal communications are confidential, and use of such material in reporting "risks distorting the true context of industry discussions" and is likely to undermine its advocacy efforts.

UIDAI CEO Bhuvnesh Kumar, India's IT ministry, and Google did not respond to requests for comment.

In December, New Delhi faced criticism from opposition parties and activists over an order mandating smartphone makers to pre-install a telecom security app, forcing the government to roll back its decision within days.

The letters reviewed by Reuters on the latest proposal show growing discontent among smartphone companies against app pre-installation requests by the Indian government.

MAIT also wrote to Indian IT ministry official Ravinder Kumar Meena on March 10, opposing the government's request for pre-installation of another app, Sachet, a disaster alert service.

Referring to the request to pre-install Aadhaar and five other government apps in the letter, MAIT said that in each instance the industry "has been consistent in its recommendation against pre-installation".

Meena did not respond to a request for comment.

Ex-Sri Lanka leader linked to Airbus deal

AFP
Colombo

The former chief of Sri Lanka's main state-owned airline has admitted to paying the country's ex-president Mahinda Rajapaksa nearly half a million dollars in kickbacks to wave through purchases of 10 Airbus planes, a court heard yesterday.

Rajapaksa, who served as the island nation's president from 2005 to 2015, and his once-powerful family are the subject of several high-profile corruption allegations, which they deny and call politically motivated.

The case heard at Colombo Chief Magistrate's Court yesterday chiefly centred on accusations against Kapila Chandrasena, the former CEO of national carrier SriLankan Airlines.

Representatives for the bribery commission told the court that Chandrasena had admitted to paying Rajapaksa 60 million rupees in three instalments in 2013, while he headed the airline.

The alleged transactions occurred as the airline sought to seal a \$2.3bn deal with Airbus for 10 planes, which required approval from Rajapaksa's cabinet.

Chandrasena disclosed the alleged kickbacks, worth \$461,000 at the time, in a statement to the commission after his arrest last week, its representatives said.

A spokesman for Rajapaksa denied the allegations and cast doubt on the commission's independence.

"You cannot rely on a statement from the main accused," Manoj Gamage told AFP.

"This is a political vendetta, and we will resist it."

Chandrasena is accused of conspiring to accept \$16 million from Airbus, though he allegedly only received around \$1.7 million.

The court heard that the money went into a Singapore bank account, from which he paid Rajapaksa and also sent 20 million rupees (then around



Former president Mahinda Rajapaksa (AFP/File Photo)

\$154,000) to the then-aviation minister Priyankara Jayaratne. Chandrasena remains in custody and has not commented publicly on the case. Jayaratne has not commented.

SriLankan Airlines is saddled with debt, with estimated accumulated losses of 596 billion rupees at the end of March last year. Attempts to sell the airline have so far failed to attract a buyer.

Chandrasena was previously arrested and released on bail in a separate case in 2020. At the time, the US, Britain and France named him in a joint investigation into Airbus business deals.

Earlier that year, a French court approved a fine of \$4 billion to be paid by the European aircraft manufacturer to France, Britain and the US to settle the probes.

Investigators in Britain accused Airbus of failing to prevent people associated with the company from bribing directors or employees of SriLankan Airlines to "obtain or retain business or advantage".

In June 2025, Nishantha Wickramasinghe, who was chairman of SriLankan Airlines when the carrier contracted to buy the aircraft in 2013, was arrested in an unrelated corruption case. Wickramasinghe was accused of bankrolling Rajapaksa, who is his brother-in-law, in his failed bid for re-election. That case is still pending.

Nigeria 'challenged by terrorism', president says on UK state visit

AFP
London

Nigerian President Bola Tinubu talked of how his country is "challenged by terrorism" as he met Prime Minister Keir Starmer yesterday as part of his state visit to the UK.

Starmer welcomed Tinubu to Downing Street for talks on the second and last day of the first state visit by the leader of Africa's most populous nation to Britain in 37 years.

"What we are facing is not a small challenge. Currently the entire world is challenged," Tinubu said at the top of their meeting.

"Nigeria is not immune, Britain is not immune," Tinubu added, noting that Nigeria was "challenged by terrorism" and the "conflict from climate change".

The Nigerian president arrived in Britain on Tuesday, the day after suspected suicide bombings killed at least 23 people in north-eastern Nigeria.

The west African nation has been roiled by an insurgency since 2009, which US President Donald Trump has claimed amounts to a "genocide" of Christians - sparking a diplomatic crisis between Washington and Abuja, which denies the allegations.

Britain and Nigeria remain major partners in trade, aid and defence. Nigeria is a former British colony and London is home to a huge Nigerian diaspora.

"The long and shared history between our countries is obvious and much valued by us," said Starmer.

"Our ambition is to go even further than we have already gone with our two countries," he added.

The meeting came after British Steel announced it had secured a £70-million (\$94-million) contract for port redevelopments in Nigeria, one of its biggest ever export orders.

The agreement, with Hitech Construc-



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer greets Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu on the steps of 10 Downing Street in central London yesterday, ahead of their meeting on the second day of a two-day state visit to the United Kingdom by Nigeria's president. (AFP)

tion Africa Ltd, will see British Steel supply 120,000 tonnes of steel, sparking an increase in production at its site in Scunthorpe, in northern England.

Tinubu and his wife were treated to a state banquet hosted by King Charles III and Queen Camilla at Windsor Castle, west of London, on Wednesday night.

Earlier in the day, they had a carriage ride and inspected a ceremonial guard of honour.

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

Britain to focus reduced aid budget on conflict-hit countries

Reuters
London

Britain said yesterday it would scale back international aid funding across much of Africa and prioritise countries affected by conflict, highlighting the impact of last year's decision to cut development spending and use the money on defence instead. Prime Minister Keir Starmer, under pressure from US President Donald Trump to ramp up defence spending, stunned humanitarian charities in February 2025 when he said the aid budget would be cut to 0.3% of gross national income (GNI) from 0.5% to fund an increase to the defence budget.

Setting out the first round of spending allocations affected by that decision, Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper

said funding for Sudan, Ukraine, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories would be protected.

Britain plans to spend approximately 1.4 billion pounds (\$1.86 billion) each year in the places with the highest humanitarian need over the next three years.

"That does mean that direct bilateral aid funding for other countries will be reduced," Cooper told parliament, adding the government would phase out bilateral aid to G20 countries, except for Türkiye, which hosts a large refugee population.

She said aid to Africa and the Middle East would be reduced, noting that while countries such as Somalia and Yemen remained priorities, they would face cuts to direct grants.

Cooper said the approach would be based on "partnership not paternalism", shifting Britain's role from donor to in-

vestor, with a focus on sharing expertise instead of grants so countries can build capacity and thrive without aid.

Support for women and girls will remain a priority, Cooper said, adding that around 6 billion pounds would be invested to help those most affected by climate change.

Britain was the fourth largest international aid donor in 2024, giving nearly \$18 billion, according to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The US tops the ranking, followed by Germany and European Union institutions.

Britain's overseas development spending was cut to 0.5% of gross national income (GNI) from 0.7% by the previous Conservative government during the pandemic. Starmer had pledged to restore the budget to 0.7% ahead of his 2024 election victory.

UK pumps extra funding into BBC World Service as conflicts escalate

Reuters
London

Britain said yesterday it would increase funding for the BBC World Service over the next three years, citing the growing need to provide international audiences with impartial news at a time of conflict and media blackouts around the world.

The foreign office used to fund all of the World Service before the rules were changed in 2014 to make the broadcaster shoulder most of the cost, and a committee of lawmakers warned last week that uncertainty around the funding was worrying. The previous funding agreement

had been due to run out at the end of March. Britain's foreign office pledged 11 million pounds (\$14.6 million) per year for the next three years, representing an 8% increase on the previous year's allocation.

The BBC World Service is funded through a licence fee paid by British households which watch live television, while about 30% of the funding comes from the foreign office.

Foreign minister Yvette Cooper said the extra funding is in the country's interests to support security and promote UK values around the world.

The BBC World Service has a global weekly audience of more than 300 million people, making it one of Britain's most important cultural ex-

ports, providing news via radio, television and online in 43 languages. Over 70% of the BBC World Service audience is in countries with no or low media freedom.

The BBC said it launched an emergency radio service in Iran in February, in addition to existing BBC Persian digital and TV channels, ensuring accurate, timely news reaches the Iranian people.

"In a world of rising disinformation, the BBC World Service provides hundreds of millions with journalism they can trust and rely on," said Cooper in a statement. "It offers clarity, accuracy and an independent voice where reliable information is increasingly difficult to access."

Nepal investigating burning of Xi Jinping's book at university

Nepal is investigating how some copies of a book authored by Chinese President Xi Jinping were burned at a university in the east of the country after the Chinese embassy expressed concern over the incident, officials said yesterday. Yuvaraj Kattel, chief district officer of Morang where the incident took place last Saturday, said a five-member panel had been given 15 days to find out how copies of Xi's book *The Governance of China* were burned at the district's

Manmohan Technical University (MTU).

Beijing is a major trading partner and donor, and has invested in infrastructure such as airports, roads and health in Nepal, a natural buffer between China and India, both of which jostle for influence in the Himalayan nation.

The Governance of China is a multi-volume collection of Xi's speeches and writings outlining his political philosophy and vision for government. (Reuters)

Myanmar junta touts surrender of rebel fighters

AFP
Mandalay

More than 500 Myanmar opposition guerrillas surrendered to the junta, the military said yesterday, with AFP journalists witnessing a disarming ceremony that one resistance faction suggested was a propaganda stunt.

Myanmar has been consumed by a civil war since 2021, when the military swept aside the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in a coup.

A kaleidoscope of rebel factions have entered the fray including battalions of pro-democracy fighters formed after the putsch and ethnic minority armies which have long resisted central rule.

AFP journalists in central Mandalay city saw hundreds of personnel assembled on a military base in the grounds of the ancient Royal Palace before a table stacked with guns, bullets and weapon magazines.

"You went there because you didn't know any better, but now you have regained your conscience," head of Myanmar's Central Command, Brigadier General Aung Htay, told

the assembled ranks.

"You all have experienced it firsthand. Living in the jungle is nothing like you see in movies or what other people say," he said. "A person in the light can live in freedom without any fear."

The mixed-gender ranks wore mismatched camouflage and drab uniforms - many stamped with the logo of the Mandalay People's Defence Force (PDF), considered one of the most powerful pro-democracy battalions.

"There is no case of our PDFs surrendering to the Myanmar military in those kinds of numbers," a Mandalay PDF spokesman said, suggesting the event was for propaganda purposes.



Having hope in Allah The Almighty

There are certain deeds that should never be neglected, which affect the heart permanently. Yet, just some people, due to their weakness in faith, may be careless and may not perform them regularly.

One deed of the heart is to have constant hope in the kindness, generosity and favours of Allah The Almighty. One should be optimistic and never lose hope in the bounty of Allah The Almighty, which He bestows on whom He wills. However, this hope should be coupled with a reason, or means, for one to feel that it will be realised. Thus, one should keep performing good deeds that give one the opportunity to harbour hope in the generosity and kindness of Allah The Almighty, for if these means are not present, then it is mere wishful thinking on one's part.

Hope is not for a person who is lazy and does not endeavour to remain upon the path of those who strive and exert great efforts. Such a person is just like someone who wants to grow plants and see them bearing fruit, without bothering to cultivate or water the seeds. Is this person equal to another, who digs the soil, plants the seeds and waters them carefully and regularly? Only the latter can realistically hope that his plants will grow fruitful. This is also the case regarding hope for the bestowal of the mercy and bounty of Allah The Almighty.

Allah The Almighty Says (what means): [It [i.e. Paradise] is not [obtained] by your wishful thinking nor by that of the People of the Scripture.] [Qur'an, 4: 123] Moreover, it was said, "Faith is not wishful thinking, but rather, it is what is instilled in the heart and proven by good deeds."

Hope is necessary for those who are heading towards Allah The Almighty, because if a devout worshiper loses hope, then he is heading for ruin. A sincere Muslim hopes that Allah The Almighty will forgive his sins and that He will enable him to rectify a fault in himself. He hopes that Allah The Almighty will accept his good deeds and hopes to draw closer to Allah The Almighty. Thus, hope is one of the most important means that one must possess in order to continue his journey towards Allah The Almighty with steadfastness, especially during the age of trials and tribulations we now live in.

Hope is a means of steadfastness. It is the complete opposite of despair, and to feel despair is to give up on the mercy of Allah The Almighty, which is a sin in itself, as Allah The Almighty Says (what means): [And despair not of relief from Allah. Indeed, no one despairs of relief from Allah except the disbelieving people.] [Qur'an, 12: 87] This was the advice of Prophet Ya'qoob, may Allah exalt his mention, to his sons.



How does one achieve hope?

- By remembering the past favours of Allah The Almighty on you.
- By remembering the promise of great rewards from Allah The Almighty, and remembering His generosity and kindness towards his slaves, especially when his slaves do not even ask Him for them and are unworthy of receiving them. The slave will continue receiving all these blessings and favours as long as he remains upon the straight path.
- By remembering the bounties of Allah The Almighty with regards to one's faith, body, and life in general.
- By remembering the great mercy of Allah The Almighty and that His mercy precedes His wrath, and that He is the entirely Merciful, the especially Merciful; that He is Kind and Compassionate. Thus, acquiring hope in Allah The Almighty can be achieved by knowing His Names and Attributes.

Those whose hearts are alive recognise the fallacy of this world, and realise that this life is like a field in which they plant seeds for the Hereafter. The similitude of the heart is like that of the earth. Just as the earth must have seeds sown in it for it to yield fruits, the heart requires acts of obedience to make it flourish and remain

alive. Just as the earth requires continuous attention, watering, digging, and so on, the heart requires continuous attention; it is enlivened by its obedience to Allah The Almighty. Just as the earth needs maintenance like removing harmful weeds from around the plants, the heart needs to be purified from doubts and desires, lest they ruin the fruits of one's acts of obedience, which have been irrigated with the water of servitude.

It is rare for one to benefit from his faith if his heart is full of evil, just as seeds cannot grow in saline water or a swamp. The slave's hope can be compared to that of a farmer's. Only if a farmer seeks good, fertile soil, sows quality seeds in it, waters it and takes good care of it, can he then wait for the favour of Allah The Almighty. This is real hope.

On the other hand, if the farmer were to implant his seeds in a swampy, slanted area where water cannot reach, it would be ridiculous of him to expect any result or hope for anything to grow there. Also, if the farmer were to plant good seeds in good soil, but it is above ground level and on a hilly slope so that water cannot reach it; he certainly cannot hope for plants to grow there, but he might indulge in wishful thinking.

Hope means waiting eagerly for results

after one has exerted all efforts and employed all possible means available to them. Therefore, one should exert oneself in performing acts of obedience and worship and then wait for the bounties from Allah The Almighty to make him steadfast, to protect him from deviating until he dies, and to guard him from misguidance until he leaves this world and meets a Lord Who is pleased with him.

The person with hope is someone who has been consistent in his acts of obedience and fulfils the implications of faith. He hopes that Allah The Almighty will not cause him to stray from the straight path; he hopes that Allah The Almighty will accept his good deeds and not reject them; he hopes that Allah The Almighty will reward him doubly. This is a person who can be said to have exerted all possible efforts, and who can then hope for the mercy of his Lord.

Conversely, someone who habitually indulges in immoral acts, fails to water his heart with obedience, and does not curb his pleasures and lusts, and then hopes for the forgiveness and mercy of Allah The Almighty, is a deceived fool. Allah The Almighty Says (what means): [And there followed them successors who inherited the Scripture [while] taking the commodities [i.e. unlawful gains and pleasures]

of this lower life and saying, 'It will be forgiven for us.'] [Qur'an, 7: 169]

In the Qur'an, Allah The Almighty tells us what the ungrateful disbeliever said, whom Allah The Almighty blessed with a garden: (what means): {I do not think the Hour will occur. And even if I should be brought back to my Lord, I will surely find better than this as a return.} [Qur'an, 18: 36] This was a case of wishful thinking on his part.

Hope is a cure that two types of people require:

1. Those who have reached the state of despairing from the mercy of Allah The Almighty, to the point that they have given up worshipping Him, concluding that it is fruitless and useless.
2. Those whose fear has overwhelmed them to the point that they have caused harm upon themselves and their families; such fear transgresses the limits permitted in Islam, and thus these people must correct themselves and be balanced by also having hope in Allah The Almighty.

Talking to some people about hope can cure and motivate them; however, it does not cure those deceived sinners who think that they possess hope, but in fact are only wishful thinkers because they wish for the forgiveness of Allah The Almighty whilst not doing enough acts of worship. Talking about hope with such people would only cause an increase in their transgression and make them stray even further. The only way to help them is to severely admonish them into refraining from sinning – which is a very important point that we must all pay attention to.

Some of the scholars said, "The person admonishing others should be kind and look to the areas of weakness and disease in people and address them, aiming to cure each person according to his level and situation; but nowadays, one should not address matters from the hope perspective, but rather exaggerate in terrifying them. The admonisher should only mention the virtues of having hope and how one can attain it in order to attract the hearts." Thus, one should scare people, but not to the level of making them feel despair, as 'Ali, may Allah be pleased with him, said, "The true scholar is the one who does not make people give up on the mercy of Allah, nor make them feel secure from His wrath."

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



Excellence in faith

In one of the great prophetic narrations which included few, yet very comprehensive words, the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam (may Allah exalt his mention), clarified one of the means for salvation, and a sign of the excellence of Islam. This narration gives the believing slave a tool by which to measure himself and realise how close or far he is from the straight path.

Abu Hurairah, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that the Messenger of Allah, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "It is from the excellence of (a believer's) Islam that he should shun that which is of no concern to him" [At-Tirmithi].

This narration contains many great meanings which a believer should understand and apply. It is one of the principles and foundations of good manners, and thus some scholars considered it to constitute one-third or one-fourth of the religion of Islam.

Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim, may Allah have mercy upon him, said: "The Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, summed all the aspects of piety and devoutness in this narration. He outlined for the slave what to do and what to shun, and it is an indication to the first pillar of soul purification, namely, shunning what does not concern the person, which leads to the second pillar, and that is busying oneself essentially with what concerns him"

He, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, clarified that shunning that which does not concern the person is a means to attain excellence in religion. This means, that people, in reality, are of two categories, those who are excellent in Islam and those who are not. The one who applies Islam inwardly and outwardly is the one who has reached the level of excellence, as Allah says (what means): "And who is better in religion than one who submits himself to Allah while being a doer of good and follows the religion of Abraham, inclining toward truth? And Allah took Abraham as an intimate friend." [Qur'an: 4:125].

On the other hand, the one who does not apply Islam inwardly and outwardly is the one whose degree of commitment to Islam is low, and one of the signs of this in him is that he busies himself in that which does not concern him.

The following verse is proof substantiating the meaning of the narration, in which Allah Says (what means): "And they who turn away from ill speech" [Qur'an: 23:3]. "... ill speech" is any-



thing from falsehood, and that includes association, other minor sins and all useless speech, actions and concerns. Furthermore, busying oneself with that which does not concern him is included in the definition of "ill speech"

There are other prophetic narrations which highlight the virtue of excellence in religion, such as the narration of Abu Hurairah, may Allah be pleased with him, in which he reported that the Messenger of Allah, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "When one of you reaches the level of excellence in faith, then every good deed is multiplied for him ten times up to seven hundred times; and each sin is recorded as only one, until he meets Allah" [Muslim].

The saying of the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam: "... that which is of no concern to him" means, that which does not benefit him in his worldly life or the Hereafter, and this includes things that are prohibited, disliked, doubtful, and excess permissible matters which one does not really need.

The measure by which one knows whether something is of his concern or not, is Islamic teachings and not ones desires.

Many people decide to abandon enjoining good and forbidding evil under the pretext that this is interfering with people's privacy and personal life. They would do so claiming that it is not a person's concern to intervene in other people's affairs, basing their argument on an incorrect understanding of this very narration.

Abu Bakr As-Siddeeq, may Allah be pleased with him, said: "O you people! You recite and misinterpret the follow-

ing verse (which means): 'O you who believe! Take care of your own selves. If you follow the (right) guidance [and enjoin what is right (Islamic Monotheism and all that Islam orders one to do) and forbid what is wrong (polytheism, disbelief and all that Islam has forbidden)] no hurt can come to you from those who are in error' [Qur'an:5:105] But I have heard Messenger of Allah, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, saying: "When people see an oppressor but do not prevent him from (doing evil), it is likely that Allah will punish them all." [Abu Dawood & At-Tirmithi]

In another narration he, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Never that evil is committed and people do not prevent it, though able to do so, but Allah will overwhelm them with punishment"

One other thing that one must concern himself with is the affairs of other believers and their issues, because he who does not worry about the affairs of his fellow Muslims is not one of them.

The need to understand this narration, its implications and applications intensifies in times like ours, when people's commitments and personal obligations have increased and priorities are mixed up.

The implementation of this narration is the first practical step toward reforming oneself and those under his guardianship and care which leads to achieving excellence in religion. This happens by concentrating on that which is beneficial and staying away from all that is not ones concern.

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

Keeping up the good work

In Ramadan, people pray, fast, perform 'Umrah (the minor pilgrimage), spend in charity, supplicate and recite the Qur'an, yet the question remains: have any of these good deeds been accepted? Allah The Almighty Says (what means): {...Indeed Allah only accepts from the righteous [who fear Him].} [Qur'an 3: 27] Fudhaalah Ibn 'Ubayd would say, "If I knew that Allah had accepted from me (something) as minor as a seed's weight of good deeds, then that would be more beloved to me than possessing this world and all that it contains." Our righteous Salaf (predecessors) would exert extra efforts in worship and then rebuke themselves and doubt that their deeds were even accepted by Allah The Almighty. They were described by Allah The Almighty as (what means): {And they who give what they give while their hearts are fearful} [Qur'an 23:60] They would be far more concerned about the acceptance of the deeds than the amount of good deeds they performed.

What good is left for those who miss out on the virtue of Ramadan? What greater disaster is there for them, than being deprived of the mercy and forgiveness of Allah The Almighty in this month? Moreover, the pious people from whom Allah The Almighty accepts righteous deeds have one distinctive trait, which is refraining from sinning after the end of Ramadan.

Many people think that since they have performed scores of good deeds they can rely on these deeds, believing that they have enough good deeds in their record. However, the genuine pious people are those who continue to be devout worshippers even after the conclusion of the month. When Allah The Almighty describes the devout believers and worshippers, He does not restrict their devotion and obedience to a limited period; rather, He describes them to be this way always, not only during Ramadan.

He Says (what means): {Certainly will the believers have succeeded: They who are during their prayer humbly submissive. And they who turn away from ill

speech. And they who are observant of Zakaah. And they who guard their private parts.} [Qur'an 23: 1-5]

Muslims are commanded to be devout worshippers until death. Allah The Almighty Says (what means): {And worship your Lord until there comes to you the certainty [i.e., death].} [Qur'an 15: 99] One must persevere in worshipping Allah The Almighty and being obedient to Him. This may be the reason why it was legislated for us to fast six optional days in the month of Shawwaal (which directly follows the month of Ramadan) and this was made equivalent in reward to fasting for the whole year, because the reward is multiplied tenfold. Therefore, the 30 days in Ramadan are equal to 300 days, while the six that follow in Shawwaal are equal to 60 more days – which constitutes a full year, in terms of reward.

Many people are deceived by the acts of worship they perform during Ramadan. They exert great efforts in completing the whole Qur'an once in Ramadan – with some even completing it several times – and praying the Taraweeh (voluntary night prayers). Others might wait in the Masjid after the end of one prayer till the time of the next one, and be engaged in mentioning Allah The Almighty from the Fajr (morning) prayer until sunrise (the reward for which is like that of performing a Hajj and an 'Umrah). However, although they perform all these deeds, they are not inwardly sincere and their intentions may become corrupted and impure. Shaytaan (Satan) may whisper to them, making them feel that, having performed all these good deeds, they have accumulated mountains of rewards, and that their balance is therefore very high. This makes them become arrogant and they may start slackening in their worship.

However, if one recalls a single verse from the Qur'an, such thoughts and feelings would immediately cease. It is the Saying of Allah The Almighty (which means): {And do not confer favour to acquire more.} [Qur'an 74: 6]

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

**CHAIRMAN**

Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Attiyah

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka

Deputy Managing Editor

Kamran Rehmat

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

GULF TIMES

How does the Iran war affect fertiliser supplies, prices and food security?

As the US-Israel war with Iran enters its third week, analysts warn it is severely disrupting fertiliser markets and endangering food security for developing countries in the near term.

Here is how the conflict is affecting fertiliser costs, trade flows and output: Fertiliser production is energy-intensive, relying heavily on natural gas as a feedstock, with energy making up as much as 70% of production costs.

As a result, much of the world's fertiliser is made in the Middle East, with one-third of global trade in it passing through the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow shipping route along Iran's coast that has largely been shut since the conflict began.

Some 20% of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas also transits the Strait, and its near closure, combined with missile and drone strikes across the Gulf, have forced regional energy facilities to halt output. That has, in turn, shut fertiliser plants in the Gulf and beyond, just as farmers across the Northern Hemisphere prepare for spring planting, leaving little margin for delays.

About half the world's food is grown using fertiliser, so prolonged supply disruptions would have major implications for food availability, according to Argus analyst Marina Simonova. In some countries, fertilisers account for up to 50% of the cost of grain production, and the UN's food agency has warned that many low income countries were already suffering from food insecurity prior to the war.

About half the world's food is grown using fertiliser, so prolonged supply disruptions would have major implications for food availability

The most important fertilisers near term are nitrogen-based products like urea because, by and large, if a farmer doesn't apply them for one season, yields will likely be hit. This is less so the case with other key products, like those based on phosphate and potassium. The global market for urea was already struggling with tight supplies prior to the current conflict, with Europe forced to cut output due to the loss of cheap Russian gas and China restricting fertiliser exports including urea in order to ensure domestic supplies.

QatarEnergy has halted output at the world's largest urea plant after shutting down gas output following attacks on its LNG facilities. In India, a massive global urea market, three urea plants have cut output as LNG supplies from Qatar have plummeted. India, home to nearly a fifth of the world's population, buys more than 40% of its urea and phosphatic fertilisers from the Middle East, and recently agreed to buy 1.3mn tonnes of urea, some of which might not arrive on time.

Bangladesh has shut four of its five fertiliser factories, while Australia's Wesfarmers has warned of possible shipment delays, including for urea. Brazil is almost 100% reliant on urea imports, nearly half of which transits the Strait of Hormuz. In the US, farmers are reporting empty shop shelves, with the country about 25% short of fertiliser supplies for this time of year.

Globally, urea exports are set to fall to about 1.5mn metric tonnes in March, compared to 3.5mn without China's supplies, or 4.5 to 5mn with China, according to Scotiabank.

Urea export prices in the Middle East have jumped about 40% to just above \$700 per metric tonne last Friday from just under \$500 before the war, according to Argus. In the US, fertiliser prices have surged as much as 32% since the conflict began. Analysts say prices for nitrogen-based fertilisers like urea could roughly double if the war drags on.

Given the Middle East's dominant market share, no producer can quickly make up for the lost supply, according to Chris Lawson, analyst at CRU. Russia, the world's largest fertiliser exporter, is facing supply disruptions due to Ukraine drone strikes, while China, despite ample capacity, is restricting exports, he said. — Reuters

To Advertise

gtadv@gulf-times.com

Display

44466621 44418811

Classified

44466609 44418811

gtcad@gulf-times.com

Subscription

circulation@gulf-times.com

© 2026 Gulf Times. All rights reserved



Iran war energy shock sparks global push to reduce fossil fuel dependence

- **After Covid-19, Ukraine invasion, third energy crisis of the 2020s triggers reassessment of supply vulnerabilities**
- **Renewables, EV dominance insulates China from oil price shock**
- **Politicians in Japan, Europe and Taiwan seek nuclear power revival**

By Anna Hirtenstein and Kate Abnett
Reuters

The energy shock from the Iran war has policymakers around the globe rethinking ways to reduce long-term dependence on oil and gas imports, with proposals to expand nuclear energy and renewables, grow strategic stockpiles and domestic production, and diversify foreign sources of supply.

Iran's closure of the vital Strait of Hormuz shipping lane, after the US and Israel attacked on February 28, marks the third time this decade that an international energy shock has forced governments to reckon with the risks of a world dependent on the free flow of vast quantities of petroleum to fuel its economic engine. It has also stoked the view that the fossil fuel age must end, after pushback in recent years to ongoing efforts to mitigate climate change.

"The issue of energy security has never been as acute as now. Until a few weeks ago, markets took Gulf resources for granted. That will not be the case going forward," said Geoffrey Pyatt, who was assistant secretary of state for energy resources under Joe Biden and is now a senior managing director at US consultancy McLarty Associates. The world's biggest energy consumer nations are now back at the drawing board: Europe last week unveiled new financial guarantees for atomic power after decades of closing nuclear plants. Other major importers are planning to source fuel from a broader array of suppliers to hedge their risk.

In a timely article about a potential blockage to Hormuz, a department within China's state planner, which shapes the country's economic strategy, said on the first day of the war that the country should accelerate its renewable energy transition, as well as expand its emergency reserves and source more energy from alternative suppliers.

"Not only China, but around the world," governments "will reconsider their energy supply lines and production systems and perhaps pay more attention to nuclear and clean energy," Wang Jin, senior fellow at the Beijing Club for International Dialogue, a think tank under the purview of the foreign ministry, told Reuters. China is already the world's leading source of clean energy technologies.

In the shorter-term, big consumer nations have opted for a record-sized coordinated release of emergency stocks, along with requests by governments - particularly in Asia - for consumers to conserve energy.

Around 20% of world oil and liquefied natural gas supply has been blocked after Tehran effectively locked down Hormuz - the main artery for Middle East fossil fuels headed to world markets. The International Energy Agency has called it the worst disruption to global energy supplies in history. Global crude oil prices have surged to above \$100 a barrel.

The crisis follows two previous major energy upsets of the 2020s: Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine led Europe to slash its dependence on Russian imports; and the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic that triggered a sudden, massive decline in world demand for fossil fuels followed by a rebound that world's top producers were ill-prepared to meet. Both shocks contributed to a sustained rise in inflation.

ASIAN DEPENDENCE

Asia sources the vast majority of its oil and



International energy shock has forced governments to reckon with the risks of a world dependent on the free flow of vast quantities of petroleum to fuel its economic engine. (Reuters)

LNG imports from the Middle East, making it the region most affected by both higher prices and physical supply disruption caused by the Iran conflict. Cuts to oil and gas shipments have led refineries in Singapore and Malaysia to reduce output and petrochemicals firms in Japan and Taiwan to cut supply to customers.

The issue has revived support in some corners for nuclear energy as a way to reduce regional reliance on power fueled by natural gas and other fossil fuels. In Taiwan, economy minister Kung Ming-hsin said on March 11 the island is considering restarting its last nuclear station, which closed in May, after the main opposition party lambasted the government following the start of the Iran conflict for phasing out nuclear power. Around one-third of Taiwan's LNG supply comes from Qatar, whose production has been cut by the fighting.

Tokyo had already been discussing the restart of reactors idling since the 2011 Fukushima disaster, as Japan looks to reduce the country's large dependence on energy imports. But politicians have called on Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi to do more to boost the industry since the start of the Iran war.

Taiwan's economy ministry said the use of nuclear power must be premised on ensuring nuclear safety. Taiwan will continue the expansion of renewable energy and natural gas storage facilities to increase safety reserves, it said. Japan's industry ministry did not reply to a request for comment.

In China, the world's top buyer of Iranian oil, refiner Sinopec has cut processing runs at its refineries in the country by 10%. Beijing has also banned fuel exports to help avert domestic shortages. China has, however, been relatively insulated from the crisis due to its ample emergency oil reserves and high rate of electrification, with EVs representing more than half of its domestic new car sales and its grid more than 50% powered by renewable energy sources.

In the US, by comparison, EVs are less than 10% of the market, while renewable power is around a quarter of the nation's electricity generation. Jin, of the Beijing Club think tank, said China saw the Iran crisis as an opportunity to create new avenues for co-operation, and that Beijing sought friendly, stable energy relations with all producers.

China's foreign ministry declined comment and the National Development and Reform Commission did not respond to a request for

comment. Government officials and company executives in Japan, Taiwan, Bangladesh and Pakistan have said they also plan to diversify their import sources and buy LNG on the spot market, instead of relying on long-term contracts from the Middle East.

"A STRATEGIC MISTAKE"

The cost of the EU's fossil fuel imports, meanwhile, has risen by 6bn euros since the start of the war, putting massive upward pressure on the continent's power prices. Being "completely dependent on expensive and volatile imports" of fossil fuels puts Europe at a structural disadvantage to other regions, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in a March 10 speech, while putting forward a new program to offer a 200mn euro guarantee for private investments in innovative nuclear technologies.

Reducing the share of nuclear in the overall mix of power supplies in Europe over the past 25 years "was a strategic mistake," von der Leyen said. EU member states led by Germany had shut down nuclear plants in recent decades amid worries about accidents and radioactive waste, reducing generation to a 15% share of the trade bloc's total from about a third in 1990.

To shield residents and businesses from spiking power costs, the European Union is drafting changes to its carbon market to try to curb CO2 prices, alongside state aid measures like subsidies and tax breaks.

RUSSIAN PERKS

The United States is less concerned about domestic supply shortfalls, given it is the world's largest oil and gas producer and sources only a small amount of its imports from the Middle East. But its government is focused heavily on ways to tame global energy prices while conducting the war.

Consumer price inflation is a key vulnerability for President Donald Trump and his Republicans leading into November's midterm elections. As part of efforts to do that, the Trump administration has eased sanctions on Russia to allow other countries to purchase more Russian oil, marking a partial reversal of Washington's previous efforts to curb Moscow's oil revenues to fund the war in Ukraine.

The Iran crisis may also prompt a reassessment of western sanctions on Russian LNG, according to analysts, as the EU and Asian importers struggle from the loss of supply since the onset of the conflict. LNG makes up 45% of the EU's total gas imports, up from 20% in 2021, before the 2022 Ukraine war led European nations to replace Russian pipeline gas. "EU politicians are back on the backfoot," said a gas trader at Vitol, a commodity trading house. "This looks like 2022 all over again."

The EU's ambitious plans for green energy could eventually limit its exposure to disruptions like the one triggered by the Iran war. But it also risks triggering a new dependency on China, said Bart Groothuis, a member of the European Parliament and vice-chair for the delegation for relations with Iran.

"We will not be subjugated to the will of Vladimir Putin and his gas anymore, or geopolitical instability in the Middle East," Groothuis said. "We're building new dependencies and new problems inside our energy infrastructure by building dependencies, total dependencies, on Chinese hard and software."

'Iran attacks disrupt 17% of gas export capacity'

From Page 1

QatarEnergy adds: Providing an update on the damage to the facilities at Ras Laffan Industrial City, HE Saad bin Sherida al-Kaabi said "I am relieved to confirm that no-one was injured by these unjustified and senseless attacks, which weren't just an attack on Qatar but attacks on global energy security and stability. This was an attack on all of us who stand for development and human progress that is sustained by a fair, reliable, and secure access to energy."

The attacks damaged two liquefied natural gas (LNG) producing Trains 4 and 6 totaling 12.8 million tons per annum (MTPA) of production, representing approximately 17% of Qatar's exports. Train 4 is a joint venture between QatarEnergy (66%) and ExxonMobil (34%), and Train 6 is a joint venture between QatarEnergy (70%) and Exxon-Mobil (30%).

The minister said: "The damage sustained by the LNG facilities will take between three to five years to repair. The

All fires at Ras Laffan area contained

The Ministry of Interior announced that the Civil Defense had fully contained all fires in the Ras Laffan Industrial Area without any injuries being recorded, with cooling and security operations continuing at the sites. The ministry added that the explosives unit of the Internal Security Force (Lekhwiya) was carrying out its duties in handling any hazardous materials. (QNA)

impact is on China, South Korea, Italy and Belgium. This means that we will be compelled to declare force majeure for up to five years on some long-term LNG contracts."

The attacks also targeted the Pearl GTL (Gas-to-Liquids) facility, a production sharing agreement operated by Shell, that converts natural gas into high-quality cleaner burning drop-in fuels and produces base oils used to make premium engine oils and lubricants, and paraffins and waxes.

Air quality near Ras Laffan, elsewhere within normal limits

The Ministry of Interior has said air quality levels in areas near Ras Laffan Industrial City, Al Dhakhira and Al Khor remain within normal limits, citing ongoing monitoring by the Civil Defense Council. A ministry statement said all recorded readings fall within approved standards, with no breaches of national air quality limits detected. The update comes as part of the council's continued assessment of

the overall situation and its review of preparedness levels across key sectors. Authorities also confirmed that the national air quality monitoring network remains fully operational, with environmental surveillance continuing around the clock. The council stressed it is fully prepared to respond to any developments, in coordination with relevant agencies across Qatar. (QNA)

"The damage caused to one of the two trains at Pearl GTL is being assessed and is expected to be offline for a minimum of one year" al-Kaabi added. It should be noted that there will be a loss of associated product production due to this outage as follows:

- Condensates: 18.6mn barrels which is around 24% of Qatar's exports
- LPG: 1.281 MT which is around 13% of Qatar's exports
- Naphtha: 0.594 MT which is around

- 6% of Qatar's exports
- Sulfur: 0.18 MT which is around 6% of Qatar's exports
- Helium: 309.54 MCF which is around 14% of Qatar's exports

In conclusion, the minister paid tribute to the Qatari military and security forces and to the energy sector emergency response teams whose courage and extraordinary professionalism ensured the situation was contained quickly and safely.

Amir, Sisi call for de-escalation

From Page 1

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani, HE the Chief of the Amiri Diwan Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Mubarak al-Khulaifi, and a lineup of Their Excellencies senior officials attended the meeting.

On Egypt's side, the meeting was attended by Minister of Foreign Affairs, Immigration and Egyptian Expatriates Badr Abdelatty, Chief of the President's Office Major General Ahmed Ali, and a lineup of Their Excellencies members of HE the President's accompanying delegation.

Earlier, HH the Amir received Egyptian president upon his arrival at Hamad International Airport in Doha.

The Egyptian president was accompanied by a senior delegation for the visit. The welcoming party included HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani and HE the Amiri Diwan Chief Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Khulaifi. At the conclusion of the visit, HH the Amir led the farewell ceremony as Sisi and his accompanying delegation departed, with HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and HE the Chief of the Amiri Diwan also present to bid farewell. (QNA)

Leaders slam Ras Laffan attack in calls with Amir

From Page 1

HH the Amir expressed his gratitude to the king for Jordanian support and commitment to preserving regional stability.

The call also touched on a several regional and international issues of common concern, and discussed efforts aimed at consolidating stability and achieving regional and international peace.

In his call with HH the Amir, French President Emmanuel Macron discussed developments in the region, following the attack on Ras Laffan Industrial City, and the dangerous escalation it represented.

In this regard, Macron stressed the importance of immediate cessation of military escalation targeting civilian infrastructure, particularly energy and water facilities, emphasising the need to protect civilians and their basic needs, and to safeguard energy supplies from the repercussions of this military aggression.

HH the Amir said that the continued targeting of vital facilities posed a direct threat to regional and international stability. HH the Amir renewed the call to immediately end escalation, intensify international efforts to contain tensions, and work through diplomatic channels to ensure the crisis does not expand.

HH the Amir also received a phone call from King Felipe VI of Spain, who expressed his condemnation of the Iranian attack denouncing these actions and emphasising Spain's support for Qatar in confronting this aggression.

The call also addressed regional and international developments, discussing efforts to de-escalate tensions and contain the situation, as well as ways to enhance security and stability in the region, in accord-

ance with international principles and joint diplomatic efforts.

HH the Amir received a phone call from British Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

They discussed regional developments and the resulting dangerous escalation that threatens regional and international security and stability.

Starmer voiced his condemnation and dismay at the targeting of the Ras Laffan Industrial City, stressing that these actions are unacceptable and constitute a flagrant violation of international conventions and norms. He emphasised UK's full commitment to Qatar's security, and the need for de-escalation and a swift return to the negotiating table.

The call also included discussions on ways to reduce escalation through diplomatic channels, and intensify international efforts to prevent the conflict from spreading and to ensure stability in the region.

HH the Amir received a phone call from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as well, who extended Eid greetings.

Modi condemned the Iranian aggression against the Ras Laffan Industrial City, expressing India's solidarity with Qatar in addressing the aggression, and appreciating Qatar's role as an international mediator that contributes to strengthening regional and international peace and security.

Modi also expressed his thanks to HH the Amir for Qatar's care for the Indian community residing in the country.

HH the Amir thanked Modi, praising the strong relations between the two friendly countries.

The call also discussed a host of regional and international issues of mutual concern.

Heavy rain, strong winds kill 18 in Karachi

AFP
Karachi

Heavy rain and strong winds left at least 18 people dead in Pakistan's financial capital Karachi, city authorities and rescue services said yesterday.

Thirteen people died when a wall collapsed on Wednesday, while five people, including two women, were killed elsewhere in the city.

Abdul Wahid, a local resident, described the scene where the 13 died as "complete chaos" when the storm hit.

"It rained heavily, there were strong winds, so these people were taking shelter by the walls to save themselves and then the wall collapsed on them," he told AFP.

Another local resident, Muhammad Sufiyan, gave a similar account. "They were waiting for the wind to calm down so they could cross... and go back to their homes," he said.

"The wall fell on top of them and there



Residents stand near the debris of a collapsed wall following heavy rain and strong winds in Karachi yesterday. (AFP)

was a lot of damage... Some animals were also killed." Light to moderate rain fell across Sindh province, of which Karachi is the capital, but was heavier in some areas, meteorologists said. Rain in March is common in Punjab province in east-central Pakistan but unusual in Sindh, which is in the southeast.

"This kind of extreme weather event hasn't happened for a long time," Pakistan Meteorological Department's senior offi-

cial Ameer Hyder Laghari told AFP. Pakistan, where 45% of people live below the poverty line, is among the countries most vulnerable to climate change, with limited resources dedicated to adaptation. While South Asia's seasonal monsoon brings rainfall that farmers depend on, climate change is making the phenomenon more erratic.

Last year, monsoon rains in Pakistan killed more than 1,000 people.

Price rises due to Iran war dampen Eid in Pakistan

Preparations for the end of Ramadan were in full swing at a beauty salon in the Pakistani Punjab, with customers getting haircuts, eyebrow-threading and henna tattoos.

In Multan's markets, crowds of women young and old shopped for colourful bangles, shoes, new clothes, make-up and sweet treats.

But in Multan and elsewhere in Pakistan, the ripple effects of the US-Israeli war against Iran were being felt.

"It feels very different because inflation has risen so much due to the ongoing war.

Every poor person is distressed. It is affecting them deeply," said make-up artist Rozina Amjad.

Chaand Raat or the Night of the Moon – the eve of Eid al-Fitr – used to be "lively", Amjad told AFP, adding: "Now that charm is gone. It's not like it used to be."

Pakistan is reliant on oil and gas from the Gulf but since war broke out last month, fuel supply pressures have seen prices rise at the pump and government austerity measures.

Rising oil prices have pushed up costs across the board, affecting purchasing

power before the most important festival in the Muslim calendar.

Suriya Muslim, a 35-year-old housewife, said she had already done her shopping and just needed to finish her beauty routine at the salon before preparing for guests at her home.

But she feared that her family may have to cut back this year on the customary visits to relatives and friends.

"Due to the war in Iran, the rise in prices has greatly affected our budget. All essential items for Eid have become very expensive," she added. (AFP)

EU summit fails to rally Orban behind stalled Ukraine loan

Reuters
Brussels

European Union leaders failed to convince Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban yesterday to lift his blockade on a vital 90-billion-euro (\$103bn) EU loan to Ukraine, officials said.

"They tried. They failed," one European official said of the efforts by other EU leaders to convince Orban at a summit in Brussels.

EU leaders agreed to the loan in December but Orban, who has cordial ties with Russia and has clashed with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, has blocked its implementation, citing a dispute over a war-damaged pipeline.

Orban's stance has angered other EU leaders as Kyiv could run short of money in weeks if it does not receive new funding and his U-turn has called into question the credibility of the European Council, the EU's highest decision-making body.

"It was intense, a lot of pressure on Orban that (EU summit) decisions are respected by all," another European official said after the leaders discussed the Ukraine loan.

A third European official, referring to Orban, said: "Discussion was tough and rough, but Viktor is still not budging." A fourth said: "Everyone is increasingly angry with Orban."

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss confidential discussions between leaders.

Orban, who faces an election next month, reiterated after the discussion that he was not backing down.

"It was a tough debate, but we stood our ground," he wrote on X.



Members of the European Council pose for a family photo with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at a European Union leaders' summit in Brussels, yesterday. (Reuters)

"As long as Zelensky does not lift the oil blockade, they will not receive any money from Brussels."

Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico also criticised Ukraine over interrupted supplies through the Druhba pipeline.

The pipeline, which carries Russian oil through Ukraine to Hungary and Slovakia, was damaged by a Russian attack in January, officials say. Ukraine says it will take some time to repair. Hungary says it is already ready to operate.

"Relations between the EU and Ukraine, as well as mutual Slovak-Ukrainian relations, are not and cannot be a one-way ticket," Fico said.

In a video address to the leaders which was posted on X, Zelensky said the loan was "critical" for Ukraine. "It is a resource to

protect lives," he said.

Orban, a nationalist ally of US President Donald Trump, has often clashed with Brussels and mainstream EU politicians but had not previously reneged on a deal agreed among EU leaders, diplomats say.

"We have to be clear: Hungary's veto is unacceptable, the extra support for Ukraine has to be delivered as quickly as possible," Dutch Prime Minister Rob Jetten told reporters.

"He's using Ukraine as a weapon in his election campaign, and it's not good," Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said, referring to the April 12 election in Hungary and accusing Orban of betraying fellow EU leaders.

Many EU officials are particularly exasperated by Orban's veto as Hungary secured an opt-out

from paying for the costs of the loan, along with the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever raised the prospect that the EU may have to wait until after Hungary's election to implement the loan.

With Russia's war on Ukraine in its fifth year, Kyiv faces a ballooning budget deficit and has said there are no alternative financing options if the EU loan remains blocked.

Ukraine's government spends the bulk of its revenues on defence and depends on foreign financial aid to pay pensions, public sector wages, and other social spending.

If the loan is not approved soon, the government will have to start cutting expenditure and resort to printing money, political analysts said.

Italy, Germany rule out military aid without truce

• Six allies say ready 'to contribute to' ensuring safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz

AFP
London

Six major international powers said yesterday they were ready "to contribute to" ensuring safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz, though two stressed that any initiative would take place post-ceasefire.

Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the Netherlands said yesterday they were ready "to contribute to appropriate efforts to ensure safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz".

The grouping said they "welcome the commitment of nations who are engaging in preparatory planning", as they condemned "in the strongest terms recent attacks by Iran on unarmed commercial vessels in the Gulf".

But Italy and Germany both made clear later yesterday that they were not talking about any immediate military help, but rather a potential multilateral initiative after a ceasefire.

The declaration came as an effective Iranian blockade of the strait has paralysed commercial shipping through the crucial maritime chokepoint, which in peacetime sees a fifth of global crude oil and liquefied natural gas pass through it.

The war, which erupted on February 28 when the US and Israel began bombing Iran, has led Tehran to retaliate with strikes across the Gulf region.

Twenty-three commercial vessels, including 10 tankers, have reported incidents or having been attacked.

The situation has left around 20,000 seafarers stranded on ap-

proximately 3,200 vessels west of the strait, according to the International Maritime Organisation.

"We express our deep concern about the escalating conflict," the allies' joint statement said.

"We call on Iran to cease immediately its threats, laying of mines, drone and missile attacks and other attempts to block the Strait to commercial shipping," it added.

"Freedom of navigation is a fundamental principle of international law, including under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

"The effects of Iran's actions will be felt by people in all parts of the world, especially the most vulnerable."

US President Donald Trump has urged other world powers, and Nato, to help reopen the Hormuz Strait to commercial shipping.

But they have rebuffed his call in the short term while insisting they were open to discussions and planning.

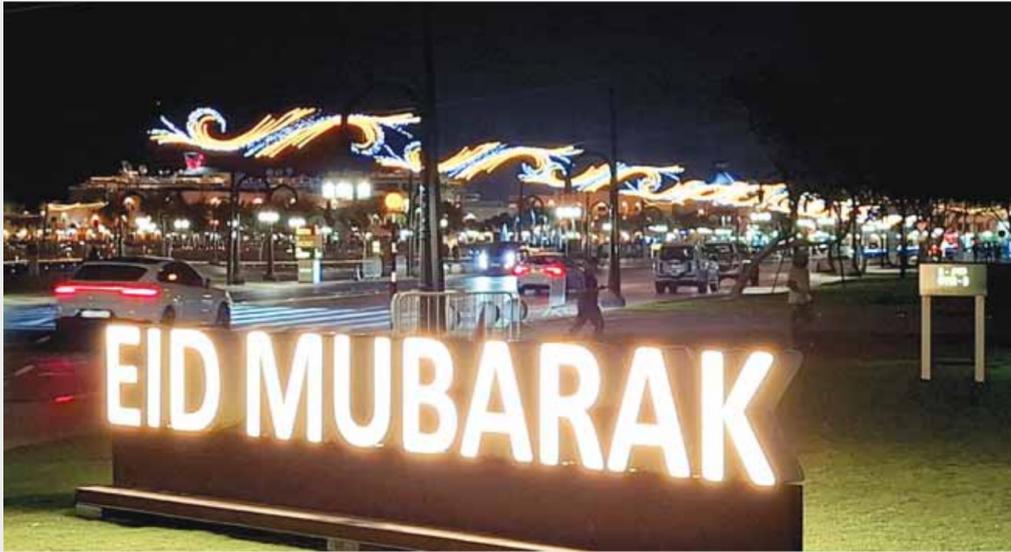
Italy's Defence Minister Guido Crosetto said the statement by the six countries should not be seen as a "war mission".

"No entry into Hormuz without a truce and a comprehensive multilateral initiative", for which "it is right and appropriate for the UN to provide the legal framework", he said in a statement.

And in Berlin, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said that any German military involvement "would depend on the situation after a ceasefire... and whether we could participate within the framework of an international mandate".

Military involvement would also require approval by the German parliament, he added.

Eid fervour across the nation



Doha's skyline and streets shine with crescents, stars and festive lights as Qatar prepares to mark Eid al-Fitr from today (March 20), even as regional tensions continue to cast uncertainty across daily life. Along the Corniche and busy avenues, illuminated installations offer moments of calm and continuity, drawing families and residents outdoors. The decorations reflect a quiet resilience, celebrating faith, community and tradition despite the backdrop of unease. As Ramadan ends, the city's bright night lights show both celebration and a strong sense of hope, unity, and the true spirit of Eid. **PICTURES:** Thajudheen



Eid al-Fitr: Safety and Organisation Guidelines

ARRIVAL AND PREPARATION

Engage in Takbeer for Crowd Management
Worshippers heading towards mosques should engage in Takbeer to help avoid crowding and ensure the smooth entry of all attendees.

Managing Overcrowded Mosques
If a mosque becomes overcrowded, it is essential to move to the nearest alternative mosque to maintain safety and organisation.

DURING THE PRAYER AND ALERTS

PRAY EXCLUSIVELY INDOORS
The ministry stresses the criticality of never praying outdoors; all worshippers must remain inside the mosque building.

Attendance and Communal Obligation
It is recommended to minimise the presence of children and women as Eid prayer is a Fard Kifayah (communal obligation).

Response to National Alerts
In the event of a national alert, worshippers must not panic and should remain inside the mosque for protection.

Protocol if Outside During an Alert
Worshippers outside when an alert sounds should immediately enter the mosque or remain in their vehicles in the recommended posture until the threat is eliminated.

ORDERLY DEPARTURE

Exit Calmly
Upon the conclusion of the prayer sermon, worshippers should exit the premises immediately while maintaining calm and tranquillity.



In times of tension, pets lean on owners for reassurance

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

From keeping pets indoors to maintaining strict routines and sharing advice online, pet owners in Qatar are adopting new strategies to ease animal anxiety as ongoing regional tensions bring sudden loud noises and disruptions into daily life.

Across homes in Doha and surrounding areas, the impact of repeated alerts and distant explosions is felt not only by residents but also by the animals that share their spaces. Dogs and cats, often more sensitive to sound, are reacting in ways that have prompted owners to rethink daily habits, home setups, and even their own emotional responses.

For Arlene Ramirez, who cares for two senior Maltese dogs named Porsche and Mercedes, the changes have become part of a routine shaped by experience. She said her dogs have grown familiar with the sound of alerts and now instinctively respond when they hear them. "By this time, they are aware of the alarm already. Whenever they hear it, they know where we need to go—to our safe space, which is our living room," she said.

There, Ramirez focuses on keeping the environment calm. She pets or carries her dogs, offering reassurance through physical closeness. Over time, she has learned that her own behaviour plays a crucial role in how her pets react. "I noticed that if I panic, they panic as well. They feel the aura that you emit on chances like this, so I just try to stay as calm as possible," she said.

This awareness that pets often mirror human emotions has become a common experience among owners coping with the current situation. In the absence of understanding, animals rely on tone, body

language, and routine to interpret what is happening around them.

Maria Clara Lisboa-Ward, who has two rescue dogs, Rocco and Mumu, has taken a more structured approach by modifying her home environment. She introduced white noise through a sound machine to help mask sudden loud sounds and moved the dogs' beds away from windows to safer areas inside the house. "We also ensure to give them tons of cuddles and reassurance when we can hear explosions so they feel protected," she said.

Her dogs are also crate-trained, which has proven to be a valuable tool. "They consider crates their 'safe space', which is helpful when we want them to move into an area where they feel calm and for when we're not home," she explained.

Despite these measures, Lisboa-Ward said the emotional weight of the situation remains difficult. "We feel prepared, but it still feels sad. We don't mind feeling anxious for ourselves, but it's horrible knowing that they don't understand what is happening."

That sentiment resonates with many owners, particularly those who have witnessed their pets show signs of distress. Michelle Alcazar, who has three cats – Cookie, Snowy, and Mocha – and a dog named Rocky, said her dog is especially sensitive to sound. "Before we hear the loud booms, he is already on alert mode," she said. During the early days of heightened tension, Rocky would tremble and stay close to the family for comfort. The response was immediate: closeness and reassurance. "We hugged him and allowed him to sleep beside us," Alcazar said.

Her cats, however, have reacted differently. While generally calm, they have sought more physical closeness than usual. "They are all staying in our room and cuddling more than before, so we just let them be," she said.

For Alcazar, maintaining routine has been key. Feeding times, play schedules, and daily interactions remain consistent, even during moments of uncertainty. "We try to keep everything normal for them as if nothing is happening, and we feel that it's working," she said.

That sense of normalcy, she added, benefits not only the pets but the household as a whole. "The extra hugs also feel relaxing for us and my family."

Pet responses, however, are far from uniform. Peter Cruz, who owns two cats named Meow-meow and Maki, described a stark contrast between the two. Maki is highly sensitive to the sounds of explosions, while Meow-meow remains largely unaffected. "Maki will immediately hide under the bed once the government sounds an alert on the mobile phone. She stays there until she feels safe to come out," Cruz said. To comfort her, the family relies on simple methods. "We just talk to her and reassure her. A simple hug is enough," he said.

Meow-meow's reaction, or lack of it, offers a different perspective. "Even when the windows rattle after a loud explosion, she is nonchalant," Cruz added. "That gives us a sort of comic relief." Other pets appear similarly resilient.

Shareen Das, who owns a cat named Romeo, described him as confident and largely unfazed by the disturbances. Still, she has taken precautions to ensure his safety. "I keep him indoors at all times, especially during loud noises. But he is very inquisitive, when he hears any noise, he jumps on the window to see what's happening," she said.

Romeo responds best to familiar presence. "He calms down when his dad is around," Das said, noting that emotional stability within the household helps maintain his composure. Apart from individual homes, a broader sense of community is

emerging among pet owners. Many are turning to neighbourhood groups and online platforms to exchange advice, share experiences, and prepare for potential emergencies.

Ramirez said these conversations often include practical information about relocating pets if necessary. "We share information on what documents and procedures are needed to relocate pets," she said. Lisboa-Ward also highlighted the importance of these networks. "We have a group for pet owners in our neighbourhood, and everyone has been very helpful and supportive," she said.

Alcazar echoed this, noting that reminders to prioritize pets in emergency situations are frequently shared. "Mostly reminding us not to leave our pets behind in case things get more serious," she said. At the same time, some owners report less reliance on community support, choosing instead to manage situations independently based on their pets' specific needs.

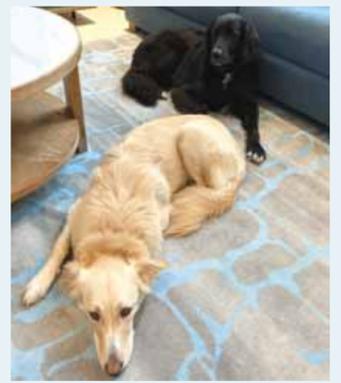
Daily care routines, including grooming, have also been affected, though not uniformly. While some initially faced challenges due to limited service availability, many have adapted by shifting to home-based care or mobile options.

Ramirez continues to use a mobile grooming service that comes directly to her home, while Alcazar said both in-home and salon services remain accessible. Lisboa-Ward noted that although grooming services were initially harder to secure, they have adjusted by bathing their dogs at home.

For Das, grooming has not been an issue. "I can do everything for him, and his dad is a professional cat groomer," she said. Despite these adjustments, it is learnt that one consistent theme stands out: the deep emotional connection between pets and their owners.



Shareen Das with Romeo.



Rocco and Mumu.

In many cases, efforts to calm pets have also provided comfort to people themselves. The act of maintaining routines, offering reassurance, and staying composed has become a shared coping mechanism.



Porsche and Mercedes.



Meow-meow and Maki.



Michelle Alcazar with Rocky.



Cookie and Snowy.