



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

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Amir performs Eid al-Fitr prayer

Wishes blessed Eid for Qatar, its people and residents

QNA
Doha

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani performed Eid al-Fitr prayers along with citizens at Lusail praying area yesterday morning. The prayer was also performed by His Highness the Personal Representative of the Amir, Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa al-Thani, HE Sheikh Jassim bin Khalifa al-Thani, HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani, HE the Speaker of the Shura Council Hassan bin Abdullah al-Ghanem, several of Sheikhs and ministers, members of the Shura Council, and a number of ambassadors and heads of diplomatic missions in the country.

Sheikh Dr Yahya Butti al-Nuaimi delivered the Eid sermon, in which he discussed the meaning of Takbeer, and that God Almighty is the Great, the Rich, the Strong, the King, in whose hand is the dominion of all things, and He is capable of all things.

He also pointed out that Eid al-Fitr this year comes amidst exceptional circumstances in the region, praising the sincere efforts made by the security services to protect the homeland and preserve its re-

sources in accordance with the supreme directives, and praying to God to protect our country, its Amir and people, and all Muslim countries from all harm, and to repel the schemes of the aggressors. He also affirmed that the signs of relief were near, that with hardship comes ease, and following distress comes relief.

Amir greets people of Qatar

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani expressed his wishes of a Blessed Eid al-Fitr to the people, residents of Qatar, and all Muslims in the world with goodness, prosperity, and blessings.

In a post on social media plat-

form X on his official account, His Highness the Amir said that he extended his congratulations to the Qatari people, residents in Qatar, and Muslims around the world on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr, praying that it returns with goodness, prosperity, and blessings for all. His Highness noted that this year's Eid arrives as the nation's men, foremost among them the armed forces and security agencies, remain vigilant, determined, and dedicated to safeguarding Qatar's security and stability, praying for the continued protection of the country and wishing Qatar ongoing prosperity, security, and peace. **Page 12**

Amir receives well-wishers on Eid

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani received yesterday morning a host of well-wishers on Eid al-Fitr at Lusail Palace. After the Eid prayer, His Highness received HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani, HE the Speaker of the Shura Council Hassan bin Abdullah al-Ghanem, Sheikhs, ministers, undersecretaries, members of the Shura Council, and citizens. His Highness the Personal Representative of the Amir, Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed

bin Khalifa al-Thani, HE Sheikh Jassim bin Khalifa al-Thani, and a number of dignitaries attended the reception. (QNA) **Page 12**

Amir exchanges Eid greetings with UAE president, discusses regional developments in phone call

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani received a phone call yesterday from President of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan. At the outset of the call, His Highness the Amir and the UAE president exchanged greetings and congratulations on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr, praying to Almighty Allah to return it to the two countries and their brotherly peoples, and to the Arab and Islamic nations, with goodness, prosperity, and blessings. During the call, they discussed developments in the region in light of the ongoing Iranian aggression against Qatar, the UAE, and several regional countries, and the serious repercussions resulting from it on regional security and stability, as well as its flagrant violation of state

sovereignty and the principles of international law. Both sides stressed the importance of an immediate cessation of all hostile acts, working to de-escalate, and intensifying regional and international efforts to find diplomatic solutions that ensure the security and stability of the region and safeguard the safety of its peoples and their resources, particularly with regard to the security of vital facilities and energy resources. His Highness the Amir and the UAE president also emphasized the need to enhance co-ordination and joint consultation on various developments in a way that contributes to supporting the foundations of regional security and stability and fulfills the aspirations of the peoples of the region for peace and development. (QNA)

Qatar condemns Israeli attack on military facilities in southern Syria

Qatar expressed its strong condemnation and denunciation of the Israeli attack targeting military facilities in southern Syria, considering it a flagrant violation of its sovereignty and a clear breach of international law and the Charter of the United Nations. In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) affirmed that the continuation of such practices in the region without deterrence reflects a serious disregard for international law and undermines the foundations of regional security and stability, noting in this regard that the international community's inability to curb and put an end to these violations has contributed to the worsening of the crisis facing the region. The ministry reiterated Qatar's firm position in standing alongside the Syrian Arab Republic, affirming its solidarity with its government and its support for all that would preserve its sovereignty and territorial integrity. (QNA)

QM announces reopening of museums and indoor venues

By A Staff Reporter
Doha

Qatar Museums (QM) announced the reopening of its museums and galleries to the public, welcoming visitors back to its indoor cultural venues across Doha from today (March 21), the second day of Eid al-Fitr.

During the Eid period, museums and galleries will be open daily to visitors until March 27, including on their regularly scheduled closing days. From the week following Eid, QM's regular opening hours will resume across all sites.

Museum indoor spaces such as galleries, cafes, and retail outlets are open in line with the approved operating schedule, while outdoor sites, including Heritage and Archaeological locations, remain temporarily closed.

The safety and well-being of visitors and staff remain Qatar Museums' highest priority. Appropriate measures are in place across all sites to support a safe and comfortable visit, with staff on hand to guide and assist visitors throughout their experience. QM continues to provide access to

National Museum of Qatar

art, heritage, and cultural experiences through its network of museums, galleries, and public art installations, welcoming audiences to engage with its programmes throughout the Eid period and beyond.

Visitors are encouraged to check QM's official website and social media channels for the latest information on opening hours, exhibitions, and visitor guidance. Museums and galleries generally operate from Saturday to Thursday, 9am to 7pm, and on Fridays from 1.30pm to 7pm, unless otherwise stated. However, some venues observe specific weekly closures. Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art is closed on Mondays. The National Museum of Qatar and the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum are both closed on Tuesdays, while the Museum of Islamic Art is closed on Wednesdays.

Uncertainty is not the enemy of entrepreneurship: fintech exec

By Peter Alagos
Business Editor

Turbulence, not calm, is the natural environment in which transformative businesses are built, a Doha-based fintech executive has said. Dr Devid Jegerson, the CEO of PayLater, Qatar's first licensed Buy Now, Pay Later (BNPL) platform, emphasised that "uncertainty is not the enemy of entrepreneurship," and further underscored that "it is the very environment in which great companies are built."

"Every transformative business in history was forged not in calm, but in turbulence. My message to every founder in Qatar right now is simple: your conviction is your competitive advantage. When the market is uncertain, the temptation is to wait. But the best founders move," Dr Jegerson told *Gulf Times* in an exclusive interview.

He continued, "They listen to their customers with radical honesty; they cut what doesn't

PayLater CEO Dr Devid Jegerson

work without ego, and they double down on what does. Qatar's fintech ecosystem is young enough to be agile and supported enough to be resilient. That is a rare combination. Use it."

Dr Jegerson pointed to three qualities of Qatar's startup community that stand out and provide confidence that it can overcome challenges and continue to thrive: grit, adaptability, and proximity to decision-makers.

On grit, Dr Jegerson noted that the founders he met in Qatar "are not tourists in entrepreneurship." He continued, "They are

building with long-term conviction, not just chasing a trend."

He further explained the second quality, saying, "Qatar's startup community has had to learn quickly, often without the playbooks that exist in more mature markets, and that has produced a sharpness of thinking that I find genuinely impressive."

"Third, and perhaps most importantly, proximity to decision-makers. Nowhere else in the region can a startup founder sit across from a central bank official, a sovereign wealth fund manager, and a government minister in the same week. That access, when used wisely, is a superpower. The community is learning to use it," he pointed out.

Asked what potential challenges or headwinds Qatar's fintech industry could face, Dr Jegerson said: "Geopolitical uncertainty creates friction in cross-border capital flows, and fintech is an inherently cross-border business – from banking partners to payment rails to investor relationships. **To Page 2**



Eid prayer at Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab mosque

Large numbers of worshippers gathered at the Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab mosque to mark the first day of Eid al-Fitr, as Qatar celebrated the end of the holy month of Ramadan. From the early hours, the mosque and its surrounding courtyards were filled with people arriving for the special Eid prayer, forming long rows that reflected a strong sense of unity and devotion. Following the prayers, scenes of warmth and tradition unfolded. Men embraced and exchanged greetings, offering well-wishes for peace and blessings. The gathering highlighted the importance of community, as people from different backgrounds came together to share the moment.

PICTURES: Thajudheen



Last-minute Eid shopping drives surge in markets

Markets and shopping malls across the country were bustling on the eve of Eid al-Fitr as families and individuals rushed to complete their final purchases ahead of the holiday.

The familiar annual scene reflected the festive spirit of Eid, with shoppers seeking clothing, gifts, perfumes, sweets, and other essentials for hospitality.

Commercial activity was vibrant in both traditional markets and modern retail centres, with Souq Waqif emerging as one of the busiest destinations.

The market drew large numbers of citizens, residents, and visitors, offering a shopping experience that blended heritage, celebration, and entertainment.

As the final hours before Eid approached, footfall increased noticeably.

Stores selling clothing, perfumes, shoes, gifts, and confectionery saw particularly strong demand, as many shoppers preferred to leave some purchases until the last minute.

Vendors noted that the night before Eid is among the busiest periods of the season, with sales often rising well above normal levels.

Shop owners said shopping trends extended beyond new outfits to include traditional perfumes, incense, dates, sweets, and Arabic and Qatari coffee – items closely associated with receiving guests during Eid.

Souq Waqif was especially lively, with walkways crowded by families moving between shops offering perfumes, traditional garments, handicrafts, sweets, and nuts.

Restaurants and cafés remained busy late into the night, as many visitors chose to continue their evening in the market after finishing their shopping.

Families made up the largest share of shop-



pers, with parents taking their children to choose Eid clothes in person, turning the outing into part of the celebration itself.

Children appeared particularly excited as they explored shops for new outfits, toys, and gifts, while some families paused to take photos.

Many shoppers said buying on Eid night carries a unique feeling – one that blends anticipation, excitement, and the joy of preparing for Eid morning.

Meanwhile, promotional offers and discounts introduced by several stores helped drive customer traffic.

Retailers rolled out special Eid deals on clothing, shoes, perfumes, and cosmetics, which merchants described as a key factor in boosting sales, particularly among bargain-seeking shoppers.

Demand also remained high for traditional items linked to the occasion, including Arabic perfumes, incense, and heritage clothing.

Authorities took measures to organise movement inside markets and ensure smooth traffic flow around busy commercial areas, helping provide a safe and comfortable shopping environment.

Some businesses also extended operating hours late into the night to accommodate the surge of last-minute shoppers.

The lively atmosphere extended beyond retail outlets.

Restaurants and cafés recorded strong visitor numbers, especially in Souq Waqif, where open-air dining areas remained full until late hours.

This continued activity highlighted the market's role not only as a retail hub but also as a key tourism and leisure destination.

Amid the current regional circumstances, shoppers also showed a high level of compliance with instructions issued by the Ministry of Interior.

Visitors followed movement regulations within markets and malls, observed public safety measures, and co-operated with security personnel stationed at key locations.

This contributed to smoother crowd movement, reduced congestion, and improved traffic flow around commercial districts.

Qatar sends 9th identical letter to UN and UNSC on Iranian aggression

Qatar has sent its ninth identical letter to United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the Permanent Representative of the US to the United Nations (UN) and President of the UN Security Council (UNSC) for the month of March, Michael Waltz, regarding the latest developments of the Iranian aggression on its territory.

The letter was sent by HE the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the UN Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani.

The letter noted that from the beginning of the attack on Qatar on February 28 until March 16, its air defence systems have intercepted several hostile aerial targets, pointing out that civilian injuries resulted from these heinous attacks.

It stated that all damages and losses resulting from the attacks will be assessed by the relevant authorities, noting that further updates would be provided as they become available.

The letter emphasised that these attacks by Iran continued even after the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2817 (2026), co-sponsored by 136 countries, which condemned in the strongest terms Iran's heinous attacks on Qatar and neighbouring countries, and demanded an immediate end to all such attacks.

It also reiterated Qatar's strong condemnation of this targeting and its full right to respond in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter, a right affirmed by Security Council Resolution 2817 (2026), in a manner commensurate with the nature of the aggression, in defence of its sovereignty and to safeguard its security and national interests.

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

Qatar submits official letter to ICAO on aviation status

Qatar, through its Permanent Office to the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), has submitted an official letter to the president of the ICAO Council, Toshiyuki Onuma, addressing the current status of air traffic and flight corridors in light of recent developments in the Middle East.

The letter stated that the aggressions launched against Qatar by Iran constitute a flagrant violation of state sovereignty and the provisions of the Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation.

It affirmed that Qatar reserves its full rights under international law.

The communication further detailed the impacts resulting from the closure of airspace and the subsequent disruption of passenger travel and air cargo movement through Qatar.

It outlined the procedures and measures taken by the state to assist passengers affected by flight disruptions, including the organization of evacuation flights and the provision of necessary services.

In its letter to the ICAO, Qatar emphasised the importance of accelerating the reopening of airports, given the region's standing as a global transit hub and its role as a major pillar in the international air transport sector. – **QNA**

Civil Defence contains fire in Birkat Al Awamir warehouse

The Ministry of Interior said that the Civil Defence had completely controlled a fire in a warehouse in the Birkat Al Awamir area, without any injuries being recorded. This came in a post the ministry made on X. It had earlier said that Civil Defence personnel were dealing with a fire in a warehouse in the area. – **QNA**

Over 2,000 Filipinos repatriated as embassy ramps up assistance

More than 2,000 stranded passengers and distressed overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) have returned to the Philippines since March 7, as the Philippine embassy in Doha intensifies efforts to monitor developments and assist affected nationals amid ongoing regional disruptions.

In an update posted on its official Facebook page, the embassy said it has been operating round the clock, co-ordinating closely with local authorities, diplomatic missions in Doha, Philippine embas-

sies across the region, and relevant government offices in Manila.

The repatriations were carried out through evacuation flights mounted by Qatar Airways, allowing affected Filipinos to return to Manila and other onward destinations.

Apart from repatriation efforts, the embassy detailed targeted assistance provided to stranded nationals.

At least 28 Filipinos were assisted in crossing the Qatar-Saudi border en route to Riyadh for onward flights, while three stranded

OFWs were helped to re-enter Qatar from Bahrain.

The embassy also facilitated the return of five distressed Filipino tourists to Manila.

Support has also been extended through the embassy's Migrant Workers Office, which has assisted at least 1,112 affected OFWs.

The assistance included arranging onward travel to the Philippines, as well as providing medical support and temporary accommodation.

In addition, at least 241 Filipinos received help in securing Saudi

entry visas, enabling them to continue their journeys despite travel disruptions in the region.

The embassy noted that several stranded Filipino transit passengers and temporary visitors have already departed for the Philippines.

Those who remain in Qatar are either being accommodated by their airlines or are under the care of their respective sponsors, with the embassy maintaining awareness of their situation.

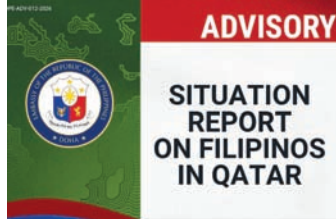
Filipinos holding Hayya or Family Visit visas whose travel plans

have been affected were advised to co-ordinate directly with their airlines to confirm outbound flights.

Stranded tourists requiring assistance have been urged to contact the embassy through its official e-mail or hotline.

The embassy added that emergency consular and labour-related services continue to operate as usual.

While local authorities have confirmed that the situation remains under control and that Qatar's security environment is stable, the embassy advised Filipinos



'Uncertainty not the enemy of entrepreneurship'

From Page 1

"Heightened risk perception can slow international investor appetite and complicate correspondent banking relationships," Dr Jegerson said. "There is also the question of consumer confidence: in times of uncertainty, people become more conservative with their financial behaviour, which affects transaction volumes and credit uptake."

At the same time, he also offered a counter-perspective: "Every major regional disruption in recent history has also accelerated fintech adoption, because it forces individuals and businesses to seek more resilient, flexible,

and digital-first financial tools."

"People who never thought they needed a digital payment solution quickly discover its value when traditional channels are stressed," Dr Jegerson stated.

"Adversity, paradoxically, is often a fintech accelerant."

On how stakeholders can work together to ensure resilience, he outlined three priorities.

Dr Jegerson said that resilience is built through diversity and depth, not through any single intervention.

"First, diversification of payment rails and banking partnerships, so that no single point of failure can take down the system," he said. "Second, open

dialogue between fintechs and regulators – not just compliance reporting, but genuine partnership in scenario planning."

"The Qatar Central Bank has shown willingness to engage constructively with the industry, and that relationship must be deepened," he added.

"Third, a shared commitment to consumer financial literacy and trust," Dr Jegerson continued. "Consumers who understand and trust digital financial products are far more resilient in a crisis than those who have been underserved by opaque systems."

"The entire ecosystem benefits when customers are informed, protected, and loyal," he added.

Endowments Directorate launches 'Joy of Eid' initiative

The General Directorate of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs has launched the "Joy of Eid" initiative to celebrate Eid al-Fitr by distributing 5,000 gifts to children across 20 major Eid prayer mosques in different areas of Qatar.

The initiative aims to spread happiness among children and strengthen the social impact of endowments (waqf).

According to Director-General engineer Hassan bin Abdullah al-Marzouqi, the pro-



gramme reflects efforts to activate the role of waqf during religious occasions and promote positive social values.

The Family and Childhood Waqf Fund supported the initiative, highlighting its role in promoting family stability, child development, and community solidarity. – **QNA**



Eid al-Fitr marked by quiet resilience and indoor celebration

By Shaima Sherif
Staff Reporter

Many residents across Qatar marked Eid al-Fitr with calm indoor celebrations amid ongoing regional tensions, expressing gratitude for safety and security while embracing the festive spirit in malls and family spaces.

At Doha Festival City, families, friends, and visitors gathered to mark the occasion in their own ways, highlighting how the State's preparedness and security measures have reassured the public during a sensitive period.

Mall-goers noted that while traditional travel plans and outdoor festivities were limited, the essence of Eid remained intact.

Wendy, a resident in Doha, shared that her usual Eid routine involves travelling or dining with family, but this year was different.

"Normally for Eid, I either travel or have dinner with my parents, but today I decided to hang out with my friends," she said. "It's a little bit different from last year because we can't travel and stuff. It's unfortunate, but it's still a good Eid. Eid Mubarak."

Echoing a similar sentiment, Khadija al-Masri highlighted the



Kaylee (left), Imani, and Hayley (right).

reassuring atmosphere across the country.

She noted that "the atmosphere

in Qatar is very nice... and security is stable", adding that the celebrations did not feel significantly different.

She said that indoor venues have provided enjoyable alternatives.

"It's true that the outdoor area is closed, but the indoor atmosphere was enjoyable," al-Masri said. "We pray that this hardship will be lifted from the whole country soon."

For many, the day remained centred around simple joys.

Najla described the celebrations briefly but positively, stating: "Al-hamduillah, everything is good, and we are happy."

Younger residents also embraced the occasion with enthusiasm.

Kaylee, celebrating Eid for the first time, said her day included breakfast outings and shopping.

She reflected on the temporary nature of alerts, noting that "once the warning comes, you look out, and once it passes, everything feels normal again", adding she was happy the day felt largely uninterrupted.

Similarly, Imani shared that she began her day with breakfast and receiving Eidiya before heading out with friends.

While acknowledging the regional situation, she emphasised enjoyment and togetherness.

"It's a bit different this year because of what's going on in the Gulf, but I had a lot of fun," she said, encouraging everyone to "stay safe".



Warmth, joy, togetherness on first day of Eid al-Fitr

Worshippers fill mosques across Qatar as the country marks the first day of Eid al-Fitr, ending a month of fasting and reflection. The spirit of unity extends beyond the prayer halls, as light rain eases the morning rush, with wet roads reflecting Doha's skyline and steady holiday traffic. Along the Corniche and in public parks, families and friends gathered early to enjoy the celebrations. Children played on the rain-fresh grass while parents relaxed nearby, and many stopped to take photos of the skyline under cloudy skies. The cooler weather brought a calm, refreshing feel to the celebration. Friends took photos together, sharing smiles and laughter, while traditions continued, with elders greeted and perfumes exchanged as a sign of respect and hospitality. Across the country, Eid is an occasion that is both religious and social, bringing together prayer, family, and community. Despite the grey skies, the day was filled with warmth, connection, and gratitude, as people in Qatar celebrate renewal, kindness, and shared joy. **PICTURES:** Naushad Thekkayil



'War has aged us': Lebanon's kids aren't alright

By Nader Durgham
AFP

Forced by yet another war in Lebanon to flee his home for the second time in just two years, and mourning lost relatives and friends, Hassan Kiki said he feels much older than 16.

"War has aged us... we have lived through what no one else has," the teen from south Lebanon told AFP in Beirut.

"I miss my school, my friends... I lost two cousins and two friends in a massacre in Shehabiyeh," he added, referring to a deadly Israeli strike in his town that killed at least seven people on March 11.

Kiki is among more than a million people Lebanese authorities have registered as displaced since the country was drawn into the Middle East war on March 2.

On that day, the Iran-backed group Hezbollah launched rockets towards Israel to avenge the killing of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Israel, which never stopped

bombing Lebanon despite a 2024 truce that sought to end the last war with Hezbollah, responded with widespread strikes, ground operations along the border, and an evacuation warning for swathes of the country.

For many young Lebanese caught in the crossfire, their formative years have been jeopardised by repeated conflicts and crises.

"My childhood is gone," said Kiki. "Material losses can be made up for, but people do not come back."

Since 2019, Lebanese have been battling a financial crisis that has locked them out of their bank deposits, while the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic made life even harder for everyone.

Beirut's port exploded the following year in one of the world's largest non-nuclear blasts, destroying swathes of the Lebanese capital, and killing more than 220 people.

The first time Zahraa Fares experienced war was in 2024, when she was just 14.

"We were still discovering what



A displaced girl from Tyre prays in front of a grave at a cemetery in Sidon, Lebanon, on the day of Eid al-Fitr, following an escalation between Hezbollah and Israel amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran. - Reuters

we like to do, what activities we enjoy, how we like to spend our days, then we were displaced... and could not do anything", said the now-16-year-old, who escaped the southern city of Nabatiyeh.

Fares, who said that she now feels "mentally crushed", found relief in an acting workshop in Beirut's Lebanese National Theatre intended to support war-af-

fected youth like herself.

Wassim al-Halabi, a 20-year-old Syrian who fled the war in his country nine years ago and is still living in Lebanon, has found himself stuck in another conflict.

Working in a restaurant since the 2024 war forced him out of university, Halabi said he was "starting from zero to be able to stand on my two feet again, but war started again".

"Our dreams are now on hold until the war ends."

Lebanese authorities said on Thursday that Israeli strikes have killed more than 1,000 people since March 2.

The toll includes 118 children.

"Cumulative trauma, cumulative adverse experiences and ongoing instability and unpredictability certainly put these children at higher risk... of developing psychiatric disorders and negative mental health outcomes," Evelyn Baroud, a child and adolescent psychiatrist told AFP. "Witnessing violence, physical assaults, killings, forced displacement, losing one's home, loss of a parent, all of these carry a very high risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder."

Lebanon has been mired in conflicts and crises for decades, the worst of which was the 15-year civil war that erupted in 1975 and which divided the country into warring sectarian fiefdoms.

For many years since the end of that war, which killed 150,000 people and left 17,000 more miss-

ing, bitter political divisions continued to plague Lebanon.

The war also saw an Israeli invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon until 2000.

While young Lebanese grew up hearing stories of war from their parents, they never expected to have to live through one themselves.

"My mother used to tell us about how they would be displaced, hear airstrikes, but I was not able to properly imagine it," Fares said. "I used to ask myself 'how could they shelter in a school?' but now I see it with my own eyes."

At a gathering in Beirut to express solidarity for victims of the war, 18-year-old Laura al-Hajj wondered: "Why do I have so many concerns at my age?"

"We carried burdens that are much bigger than us, and beyond our age... I now just worry about being alive tomorrow."

Hajj said she feels like "from generation to generation, we are all living through wars".

"No child should have to go through what we went through."

Tunisian anti-racism activist sentenced to 8 years in prison

Tunisian anti-racism activist Saadia Mosbah, in prison for nearly two years on financial misconduct charges, was sentenced on Thursday to eight years behind bars, her lawyer told AFP.

The 66-year-old had been at the forefront of defending sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia, particularly after a 2023 speech by President Kais Saied in which he denounced "hordes of illegal migrants" as a demographic threat.

Mosbah, the head of the Mnemty anti-racism association, was arrested in May 2024 and investigated over money laundering, media reported at the time.

The case comes as Tunisia faces pressure over increased migration flows from across Africa in recent years, with the country becoming a key transit point for migrants seeking to reach Europe in recent years.

- AFP/Reuters

Al-Sharaa 'working to keep country out of regional war'

Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa said yesterday that he is working to keep his country away from conflict, against the backdrop of the Middle East war, stressing that his government is on good terms with all regional countries.

In a speech delivered after the Eid al-Fitr prayer in the presidential palace in Damascus, Sharaa said: "We are calculating our steps with extreme precision and working to keep Syria away from any conflict."

"It is important to remember that Syria has always been an arena of conflict and strife during the past 15 years and before that, but today it is in harmony with all neighbouring countries regionally and internationally," he said.

Still, Syria is not free from violence: yesterday Israel's military said it had struck Syrian army camps in response for what it called attacks against the Druze community in the southern Sweida province. - AFP

UAE 'dismantles' network funded by Iran, Hezbollah

United Arab Emirates security authorities have dismantled a "terrorist network" allegedly funded and operated by Lebanon's Hezbollah and its backer Iran, arresting its members, the state news agency said yesterday.

It said that the network, which had been operating under a fictitious commercial cover, was involved in "money laundering, financing terrorism and threatening national security".

Lebanon's foreign ministry strongly condemned what it described as a "terrorist plot" against the UAE, denounced Hezbollah's alleged involvement, and offered co-operation by Lebanese authorities to ensure those responsible are held accountable.

Hezbollah denied yesterday what it called "fabricated" accusations by UAE authorities, saying it has no presence or operational networks in the country and rejected the claims as baseless. - Reuters/AFP



Kuwait refinery hit as Iran marks New Year under shadow of war

Reuters/AFP
Dubai/Washington

Firefighters battled another blaze at a Kuwait oil refinery yesterday after a fresh drone attack from Iran where millions were marking the country's New Year with muted celebrations under the shadow of war.

Despite calls for an end to targeting Gulf energy infrastructure by European leaders on Thursday, Kuwait reported a fire for the second time this week at its giant Mina Al-Ahmadi refinery, a day after a direct hit on Qatar's vital Ras Laffan facility.

Iranian authorities vowed to retaliate after an Israeli strike on Wednesday damaged its South Pars gas field, which draws on the world's biggest known gas reserve and is vital for domestic supplies.

The escalating damage to Gulf energy infrastructure has led to fears of lasting damage to oil and gas supplies, even as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu indicated an end to the fighting could be close.

"We are winning and Iran is being decimated," the Israeli premier said at a press conference on Thursday, claiming Tehran no longer had the capacity to manufacture ballistic missiles.

"This war is ending a lot faster than people think," he added in comments that also suggested a "ground component" would be needed to overthrow the government.

Iran's leaders, despite an Israeli assassination campaign and three weeks of bombardment, have vowed to end the conflict on their own terms.

"Our missile industry deserves a perfect score... and there is no concern in this regard, because even under wartime conditions we continue missile production," Iran's Revolutionary Guards spokesman Ali Mohammad Naini was quoted as saying by the Fars news agency.

Moments after his message was shared by the agency, the Revolutionary Guards said he had been killed in an airstrike.

Tehran suffered a new wave of Israeli bombardment yesterday, dashing hopes of a truce as the country celebrated the new year spring festival Nowruz and Muslims in the Gulf and elsewhere marked the end of Ramadan.

The Israeli army also targeted a northern region around the Caspian Sea, a popular holiday destination that has so far been largely spared attacks.

Sixteen Iranian cargo vessels were sunk in ports on the Gulf "following the American-Zionist air attack", Iran's Tasnim agency reported.



A rainbow arcs above buildings as Iranians celebrate the spring holiday of Nowruz in Tehran. -AFP

"We assume and hope that there will be no attacks on the first day of the new year," Hoda, a resident in Saveh south of Tehran, had told AFP on Thursday.

In Tehran's markets, shoppers were out in force buying new clothes and gifts, although side-walks were less packed than usual for this time of year, with many people having fled north, AFP correspondents said.

Huge banners bearing images of Nowruz, which begins officially in the evening, have replaced portraits of the country's late leader Ali Khamenei who was assassinated on the first day of the war on February 28 by Israel.

As the war heads towards its fourth week, Iran retains a stranglehold over the strategic Strait of Hormuz through which a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) usually flows.

As concerns grow over the conflict's economic fallout, President Emmanuel Macron said France planned to talk with permanent members of the UN Security

Council about establishing a framework to secure navigation in the Strait of Hormuz – but only after fighting had stopped.

On Thursday President Donald Trump repeated a call for major US allies and others, none of which were consulted or advised on the war, to help secure the safety of shipping.

Germany, Britain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Japan and Canada pledged in a joint statement to join "appropriate efforts to ensure safe passage through the Strait".

Prospects of a truce have not been helped by the sense that Israel and the US are pursuing different goals and strategies.

"The Israeli government has been focused on disabling the Iranian leadership," US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard said on Thursday. "The president said that his objectives are to destroy Iran's ballistic missile-launching capability, their ballistic missile production capability and their navy."

Khamenei says enemy is being 'defeated'

AFP
Tehran

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei said yesterday that Iran was defeating the enemies of the Islamic republic and had struck a "dizzying blow" in the war against the US and Israel, in a defiant written message to the nation for the Persian New Year, Nowruz.

The long statement, published on his Telegram channel and official Iranian media, was the latest such message from Khamenei after he succeeded his father Ali Khamenei who was killed in an airstrike at the start of the war on February 28.

However, almost two weeks into his tenure, the younger Khamenei has yet to issue a video or even audio message to Iranians, with state media and officials alluding to him being wounded in the strike that killed his father.

"At the moment, due to the

particular unity that has been created between you our compatriots – despite all the differences in religious, intellectual, cultural and political origins – the enemy has been defeated," said Khamenei.

He described the current war against Israel and the United States as the third war that the Islamic republic has experienced over the last 12 months, after the June 2025 12-day conflict with Israel but also nationwide protests at the start of this year which Tehran blamed on Israel and the US.

By showing unity and resolve, Iranians had "dealt him (the enemy) a dizzying blow so that he now starts uttering contradictory words and nonsense", Khamenei said in the message which was also read out on Iranian state television.

He said that Israel and the United States had the "illusion" that if Ali Khamenei and other military leaders were killed, they would create "fear and despair"

and "realise the dream of dominating Iran and then dividing it". Ali Khamenei and over a dozen top security and other officials have been killed in the conflict so far.

Mojtaba Khamenei also said that Iran and its allied forces in the region were "in no way" behind attacks on Oman and Turkey during the war, instead blaming "deception by the Zionist enemy" in reference to Israel.

He accused Israel, which Iran does not recognise, of "using false-flag tactics to create division between the Islamic Republic and its neighbours" and warned "such actions may also occur in other countries".

Khamenei described the 12-day war as a "serious miscalculation" on the part of Israel, which he said had wanted to "overthrow the Islamic system" in Iran.

He predicted that Iranian's "unity will certainly become stronger and more solid, and your enemies will become humble and less powerful" in the coming year.

Trump calls Nato allies 'cowards' for refusing clarion call

AFP/Reuters
Washington

US President Donald Trump has branded Nato allies "cowards" for not heeding his demand for military assistance against Iran to control the Strait of Hormuz shipping route.

Trump has recently veered between saying that Washington needs no help to secure the vital waterway for oil tankers, and then lashing out at other countries for failing to help.

"Without the U.S.A., NATO IS A PAPER TIGER!" Trump posted on his Truth Social network.

"They didn't want to join the fight to stop a Nuclear Powered Iran. Now that fight is Militarily WON, with very little danger for them, they complain about the high oil prices they are forced to pay, but don't want to help open the Strait of Hormuz, a simple military maneuver that is the single reason for the high oil prices.

"So easy for them to do, with so little risk. COWARDS, and we will REMEMBER!"

The 79-year-old Republican, a long-term sceptic of the Western military alliance, has launched a series of diatribes against the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) in recent days.

On Thursday, six major international powers, including Britain, France, Germany and Japan said that



they were ready to "contribute to appropriate efforts" to secure the Strait of Hormuz.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz made clear that this presupposed an end to combat.

French President Emmanuel Macron said after a European Union summit in Brussels that defending international law and promoting de-escalation was "the best we can do," adding: "I have not heard anyone here express a willingness to enter this conflict – quite the opposite."

However, they have not formally committed to any mission to work in the crucial waterway – while other allies such as Germany and Italy have ruled out doing anything before a truce in the Middle East war.

None of the countries Trump has called on to help was consulted before the US-Israeli mission started.

An effective Iranian blockade has paralyzed commercial shipping through the crucial maritime choke-point, which in peacetime sees a fifth of global crude oil and liquefied natural gas pass through it.

Global oil prices have spiked as a result of the war, which erupted on February 28 when the United States and Israel began bombing Iran, leading Tehran to retaliate with strikes across the Gulf region.

US 'to deploy thousands of additional troops to Middle East': sources

The United States military is deploying thousands of additional Marines and sailors to the Middle East, three US officials told Reuters yesterday, as the US-Israeli war on Iran reached the three-week mark.

No decision had been made to send troops into Iran itself, two of the officials told Reuters, but they will build up the capacity for potential future operations in the region.

The deployments of the USS Boxer, an amphibious assault ship, along with its Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) and accompanying warships, come after Reuters reported that President Donald Trump's administration was considering deploying thousands of US troops to reinforce its operation in the Middle East.

Trump told reporters on Thursday that he was not putting troops "anywhere", but that if he were to do so, he would not tell journalists.

The sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss future deployments, did not say what the role of the additional troops would be.

One of the officials said the troops were departing the West Coast of the United States about three weeks ahead of schedule.

The expeditionary unit has about 2,500 Marines.

The White House referred questions to the Pentagon, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The additional deployments will add to the 50,000 US troops already in the Middle East and would bring two MEUs to the region.

The first MEU, which was dispatched from the Indo-Pacific, is expected to arrive in the Middle East next week.

The units can be used for a number of reasons, including carrying out strikes using the aircraft on board the ships, or being deployed on land.

The aircraft carrier Ford, which suffered a laundry room fire, is heading for repairs at Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete.

The official told Reuters that the Navy would be sending the aircraft carrier Bush to replace the Ford, which has been at sea for more than nine months.

Sources had previously said the US military was preparing for possible next steps in its campaign against Iran, which began on February 28.

Those options, Reuters has reported, include securing the Strait of Hormuz, potentially by deploying US forces to Iran's shoreline. The Trump administration has also discussed options to send ground forces to Iran's Kharg Island, the hub for 90% of Iran's oil exports, Reuters has reported.

Any use of US ground troops – even for a limited mission – could pose significant political risks for Trump, given low support among the American public for the Iran campaign and Trump's own pre-election promises to avoid entangling the US in new Middle East conflicts.

A Reuters/Ipsos poll that closed on Thursday found that some 65% of Americans believe Trump will order troops into a large-scale ground war in Iran and just 7% support that idea.

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

In a sign that the war could continue for some time, a US official told Reuters that the Pentagon had asked the White House to approve a request of more than \$200bn to Congress to fund the conflict. – Reuters

'We were attacked': Hormuz sailors in perilous waters

By Agatha Cantrill and Peter Catterall
AFP

"We were attacked," wrote a sailor in the Strait of Hormuz, the crucial waterway blocked for weeks since US-Israeli strikes triggered a war with Iran, in a group chat seen by AFP yesterday.

The conversations in Chinese on the messaging app WeChat – provided by a worker whose ship has been stuck in the Gulf since the conflict started – paint a vivid picture of the perils now facing sailors there, who hail from around the world.

The virtual paralysis of the Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping lane from the oil-rich Gulf, has shaken global markets, raising fears of a prolonged spike in energy costs.

The sailor posted that he was stuck on the "Ocean Pretty", a bulk carrier sailing under a Barbadian flag that he said was hit by gunfire and rocket launcher attacks on Thursday while trying to pass through the strait.

AFP could not verify the sailor's report that the ship was attacked.

"Fortunately, no crew members were injured," the sailor wrote, whose identity was not revealed in the private group.

Other sailors in the conversation chimed in, one writing: "You guys are really stubborn".

"Crossing the seas... it's just lucky that no one was hurt," another posted.

"We're just hard-headed," the original sailor replied.

The messages convey a sense of camaraderie in the international logistics network that fuels the modern economy.

The damaged ship is now "stuck" in waters near the southern Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas, "waiting to be inspected", he posted.

The MarineTraffic ship tracking site showed the ship's position off Bandar Abbas yesterday.

"We didn't receive any warning at all" about the purported attack, the sailor said.



This file picture shows cargo ships in the Gulf, near the Strait of Hormuz, as seen from northern Ras al-Khaimah, near the border with Oman's Musandam governance last week. -Reuters

As the Middle East war approaches its fourth week, US President Donald Trump and other top officials in his administration are struggling to explain how the predicament will end.

"Any news on when the strait will reopen?" a sailor in the WeChat group asked.

"What kind of question is that?" snapped another. "No one can answer."

Of the small trickle of ships that have passed through the strait in recent days, 10% are Chinese-owned or flagged, said Bridget Diakun, an analyst at data company Lloyd's List Intelligence.

The sailor on the Barbadian-flagged vessel wrote that they also had three Chinese flags raised while attempting to pass through the strait.

"Don't believe the 'Wu Jing holding a national flag' thing," he wrote, referring to a scene from a 2017 film in which the actor safely guides an evacuating truck through a war zone by raising a Chinese flag.

"If it's not absolutely safe, don't set sail," another wrote.

Elsewhere in the conversation, sailors weigh the odds, motivated by potential bonuses received from their companies if successful.

"If the company gives you 500,000, would you go?" asked one, without specifying the currency.

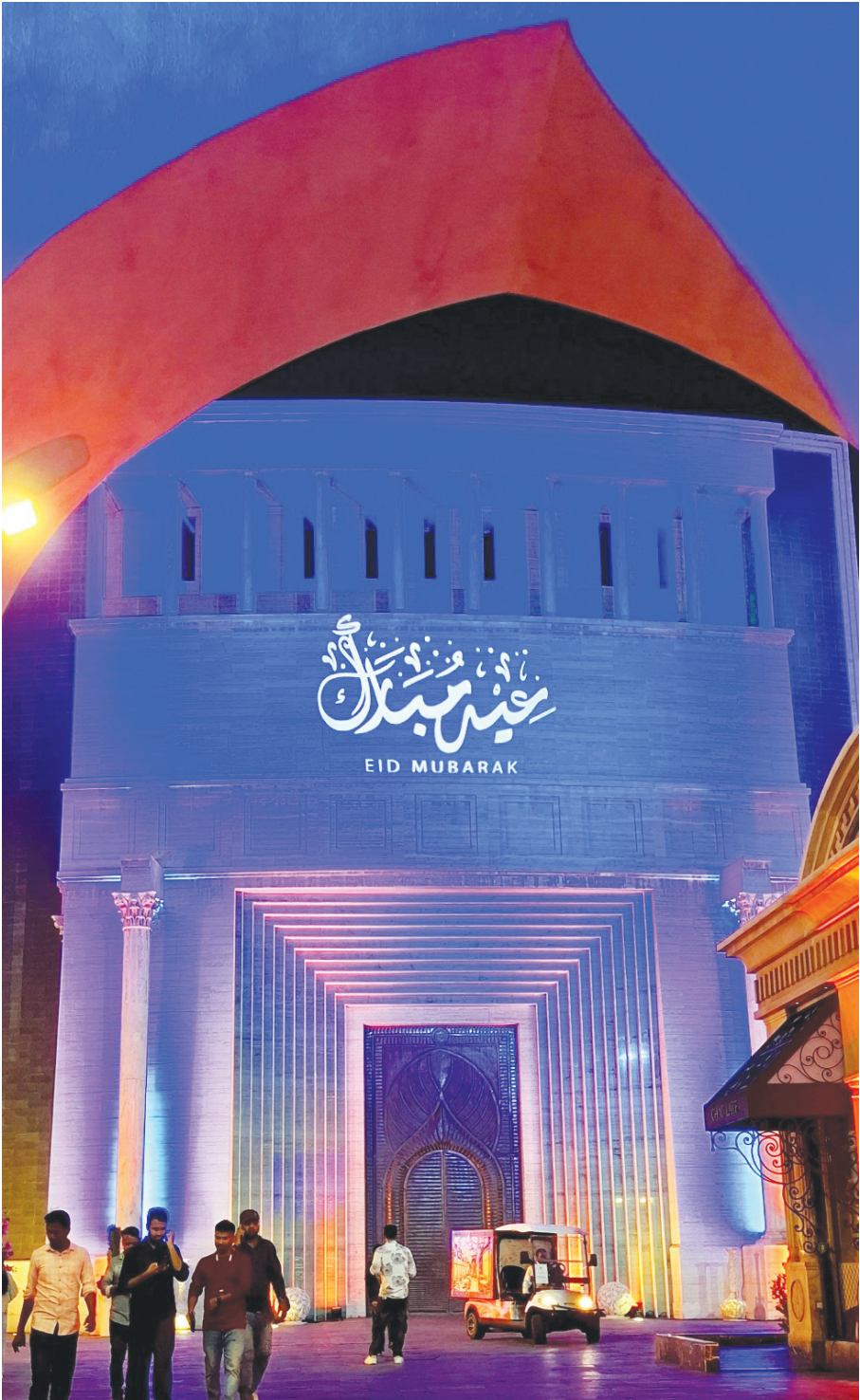
"Brother, you need to stay alive to spend that money," another replied.

"Anyone stubborn enough to rush through this has issues," said another.

Katara all lit up for Eid al-Fitr festivities

Katara Cultural Village came alive on the first day of Eid al-Fitr, as visitors gathered to celebrate the end of Ramadan in a vibrant, festive setting. The destination was illuminated with colourful lights and large “Eid Mubarak” displays, creating a lively atmosphere in the evening. Decorative arches, glowing crescents, and hanging light installations lined the streets, while families and groups of friends strolled through the area, taking photos and enjoying

the celebrations. The blend of traditional design and modern lighting added a distinctive charm, turning Katara into a visual highlight of Eid festivities in Qatar. Visitors paused at iconic spots to capture memories, while others explored the cultural spaces, plazas, and walkways that buzzed with activity. The festive decorations reflected the spirit of the occasion, combining joy, creativity, and a strong sense of community. **PICTURES:** Thajudheen



Chad plans to send 800 security personnel to Haiti, official says

Reuters
N'djamena

Chad intends to deploy 800 police officers and gendarmes to Haiti this year to participate in an international force to help Haiti's police fight powerful armed gangs, a senior Chadian police official told Reuters. The Chadian forces are expected to arrive by June after receiving training from “European and American partners”, said the official, who requested anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media. Dominican Republic Foreign

Minister Roberto Alvarez said this week that the UN-backed Gang Suppression Force would reach its full capacity of 5,500 by October and that Kenyan police who deployed to Haiti under an earlier model of the force should withdraw gradually. Alvarez, who spoke after a meeting with US officials, said the forces from Chad were being trained in the US, though a State Department spokesperson denied that. “We thank the Government of Chad for their pledged contribution to the Gang Suppression Force... Chadian troops are not training in the US,” the spokesperson said. The Gang Suppression Force was

introduced as a larger successor to the Kenyan-led Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission, but no significant deployments have arrived since its approval last September. The force is currently made up of mostly Kenyan police, as well as smaller numbers from a handful of countries in Central America and the Caribbean. Chad told the UN in October 2023 that it was willing to contribute troops and police to the MSS, without specifying numbers or a timeline. At the time, the UN also received similar pledges from Benin and Bangladesh.

African airlines face soaring costs as jet fuel supply dwindles

Reuters
Cape Town/London

Airlines are grappling with soaring jet fuel prices as the US-Israeli war on Iran has caused a supply shortage — leaving consumers facing surcharges and airlines struggling to manage volatile costs as the fuel gets scarcer. Africa is among the most exposed regions to both supply disruptions and higher prices. Around 70% of jet fuel and kerosene imports to the continent flow via the Strait of Hormuz, according to financial and commodities analytics firm S&P Global. Since the conflict began in late February, shipping of fuel from refineries in the Middle East through the Strait of Hormuz has almost ground to a halt, removing roughly a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas supplies from the market. “You fly to airports across Southern, West and East Africa and you negotiate prices on arrival,” Jannie de Klerk, executive director of flight operations at South Africa's National Airways Corp, a charter business which also includes air ambulance services, told Reuters. “By the time you get there, the price has changed. If the war continues, availability will become a problem. The instability of (jet

fuel) prices makes it very challenging to move around.” De Klerk cited a recent return flight from Lanseria to Cape Town via St Helena to collect a medical emergency patient, where jet fuel prices jumped by six rand (\$0.355) a litre to R24/litre within 10 hours between the outbound and return legs. “We now have to be very careful of how far ahead you quote for jobs otherwise you can quote short and lose money instead of making money,” he said. Jet fuel prices in north-west Europe have surged to record highs near \$239 a barrel since the conflict began, according to LSEG data. Asian jet fuel prices are approaching \$200 a barrel, close to recent records. African carriers feel those increases more acutely than most. Jet fuel typically accounts for between 30% to more than 40% of operating costs, compared with a global average of 20% to 25%, according to the African Airlines Association. South African low-cost carrier FlySafair said in a statement jet fuel usually makes up 50% to 55% of its direct operating costs. The company does not hedge its fuel purchases. At current prices, it estimates an additional cost of about R35,000 per flight hour (\$2,071) for each of its 37 Boeing 737-800 in operation, which can do up to 165 flights a day. The airline said coastal airports in South

Africa saw jet fuel prices rise by 70% in a single week. The price shock comes as physical stocks across Africa are thinning. The Board of Airline Representatives of South Africa said domestic jet fuel stocks are sufficient for about three to four weeks. Kenya had around 50 days of jet fuel stocks as of March 10. The Zambian government said the country has 10 days of jet fuel stocks, warning against panic buying and hoarding by industry players. Airlink Chief Executive de Villiers Engelbrecht said the airline has enough fuel for the remainder of March and April, but uncertainty grows beyond that. “Shock price adjustments tend to be more immediate, while stock shortages are more predictable and, in theory, easier to manage,” Engelbrecht said. Airlines have begun taking defensive measures. FlySafair and other carriers globally have introduced temporary fuel surcharges, although FlySafair declined to disclose the size of the levy. NAC has added clauses to contracts allowing it to pass on fuel surcharges if prices change en route. Airlink will not impose a levy on existing ticket holders but will continue to adjust fares. If necessary, it will also consider cutting the capacity of flights to reduce direct variable costs, Engelbrecht said.

Mauritius deputy prime minister quits after disagreement with PM

Reuters
Port Louis

Mauritius' Deputy Prime Minister Paul Berenger said yesterday he had resigned over what he described as Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam's failure to appoint a finance minister, a post that Ramgoolam doubles in. Berenger and his Militant Mauritian Movement (MMM) are the main allies of Ramgoolam's La-

bour Party in the ruling Alliance du Changement that won elections in November 2024, unseating the incumbent in a vote dominated by a high cost of living crisis. Berenger told a news conference yesterday that the government had yet to put in place some of its campaign pledges and this, and a failure by Ramgoolam to appoint a stand-alone finance minister, had prompted him to resign. The risk of a downgrade by ratings agency Moody's and the possibility of Mauritius being in-

cluded on a regional Southern and Eastern Africa anti-money laundering grey list also contributed to his decision, Berenger said. Ramgoolam's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Berenger said he spoke with Ramgoolam late on Thursday and informed him of his intention to quit. He formally submitted his resignation after the news conference. His exit will not lead to the collapse of Ramgoolam's government.



Brazil’s Bolsonaro still in ICU

AFP
Brasília

Former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro remains in intensive care a week after being hospitalised with pneumonia but is showing gradual improvements in his health, his doctors said yesterday.

Bolsonaro, who turns 71 today, was rushed to hospital a week ago from the Papuda prison in Brasília, where he is serving a 27-year sentence for an attempted coup.

The far-right leader, who governed Brazil from 2019-2022, was diagnosed with bilateral bacterial pneumonia.

His doctors said he “maintains good clinical and laboratory progress,” but that no discharge is scheduled yet.

The infection is a result of stomach contents entering his lungs instead of his esophagus — one of many complications he has suffered since he was stabbed in the abdomen during a 2018 campaign event.

Last year Bolsonaro was jailed for his role in a botched coup attempt after his 2022 election loss to President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

His lawyers this week made a new request to have him serve his sentence under house arrest — a petition the Supreme Court has denied on multiple occasions.

Brazil’s new finance minister to delay divisive tax plans, sources say

Reuters
Brasília

Brazil’s new Finance Minister, Dario Durigan, plans to adjust the ministry’s communication strategy and postpone tax measures, including rules on crypto taxation, as the country heads into a presidential election this year, two sources familiar with the matter told Reuters. Durigan, who took office yesterday after Fernando Haddad stepped down to run for Sao Paulo governor, intends to prioritise microeconomic legislation while delaying divisive fiscal plans to avoid losing political capital in Congress, the sources said.

A planned public consultation on crypto taxation, which followed a central bank regulation equating crypto movements to foreign exchange operations, has been put on hold.

A proposal to end tax exemptions on investment securities such as credit letters, which failed to advance in Congress last year, may be deferred to a new presidential mandate starting in 2027.

“It remains on the radar. But it needs to be handled carefully, because tempers are running high in Brasília,” one of the sources said. Durigan’s legislative priorities will include big tech economic regulation, financial institution crisis management rules, and the Redata data centre investment programme.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva asked Durigan, 41, to be the “new face of Brazil’s economy,” emphasising economic development, a favourable business environment and productivity gains, according to the sources.

Economic progress this year is crucial for the 80-year-old leftist leader, who will seek in October a fourth non-consecutive term as president.



Dario Durigan and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. (Reuters/File photo)

Colombia’s Petro scrutinised in US criminal investigations, source says

Reuters
Bogota/Washington

Colombian President Gustavo Petro is being examined in criminal investigations by two US federal prosecutors’ offices, a source familiar with the matter told Reuters yesterday.

Petro is not the focus of either investigation, but his conduct has surfaced in narco-terrorism and drug trafficking investigations being handled by the US Attorney’s offices in Manhattan and Brooklyn, New York, the source said.

“There are not ongoing investigations that are squarely focused on him,” the source told Reuters.

The New York Times first reported that US prosecutors were scrutinising Petro. According to the Times, the probes involve prosecutors focused on international

narcotics trafficking, along with agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration and Homeland Security Investigations.

The report said investigators are examining, among other things, Petro’s possible meetings with drug traffickers and whether his presidential campaign solicited donations from traffickers.

The investigations are in the early stages and it is unclear whether they will result in charges, the Times said.

Colombia’s presidency did not immediately respond to requests for comment, while a spokesperson for the US attorney’s office in Manhattan declined to comment and the Brooklyn office did not immediately respond.

The Times reported that there was no indication that the White House had a role in initiating the investigations.

Tensions between the two countries have been unusually strained in recent months, with US President Donald Trump lashing out against Petro by accusing him of being a “sick man” who enabled cocaine trafficking from South America to the US.

While Colombian traffickers are the top producers of the drug, the nation is also one of the key allies of the US in fighting the drug trade in the region.

Petro shot back at Trump’s allegations, highlighting the long-standing security work between the two countries and alleging that it was US demand for the drug that fuelled the market. The two leaders appeared to reconcile in February in a White House meeting. Trump described Petro as “terrific” and Petro added that he had asked Washington to focus on the “kingpins” of the drug trade.

US-backed air strikes leave Ecuador border communities in fear

AFP
Lago Agrio, Ecuador

US-backed crackdown on drug cartels along the Ecuador-Colombia border has sparked accusations that security forces bombed farms, burned homes and detained and abused villagers.

Sixty-six-year-old Jose Pena hid in the bushes as two Ecuadoran military helicopters thudded overhead.

Then came the “boom!” — an explosion he says “shook everything” and pulverised the farm where he worked.

Ecuador’s interior minister told AFP the March 6 strike was months in the making, and it targeted a camp run by Border Commandos guerrillas.

The group is among several fighting for smuggling routes linking the coca fields of southern Colombia to pubs and clubs in the US and Europe.

In the last few years, an alphabet soup of cartels and other criminal enterprises have transformed Ecuador into a major cocaine transshipment point, turning it from one of the safest countries in Latin America into among its most deadly.

Despite the government’s insistence its targets were part of an illicit and murderous network, residents tell a different story.

AFP visited the remote border zone and saw three buildings reduced to rubble, their scorched zinc roofing twisted among the debris.

Dead animals lay scattered. A lemon tree was charred, and an avocado tree had shed all of its fruit. There was no sign of drug production or trafficking.

Locals say Ecuadoran soldiers burned three homes days before the bombing, apparently to ensure no one was inside.

Community leader Vicente Garrido pointed to the wreckage, including dead chickens and two dogs killed in the blast, saying farmers had lost everything and been abused.

“These are homes where we farmers live,” he said.

Gilson Vargas, 26, said he was arrested with four coworkers, blindfolded, kicked and threatened before being flown to a military base and held for hours.

Residents kept videos of men kneeling with covered faces before being bundled into a helicopter.

Neighbors who protested

were dispersed by shots fired into the ground. Lawyer Lina Maria Espinosa said her clients reported torture, including near-drowning and electric shocks.

One man showed wrist wounds he said came from restraints. AFP could not verify when or how the injuries were sustained.

In another village, locals said small aircraft dropped bombs on March 3, leaving a large crater on a nearby farm.

Ecuador’s government and prosecutors did not directly answer questions on alleged abuses or damaged homes.

But the strikes are part of Operation Total Extermination, a US-backed offensive by President Daniel Noboa against armed groups that move drugs along the 600km (370-mile) border with Colombia to Pacific ports.

Human Rights Watch has flagged abuses since Noboa declared an internal armed conflict. His government rejects the claims.

The operation has angered Colombian President Gustavo Petro, who recently alleged an unguided bomb fell into Colombia from Ecuador. Soldiers later destroyed the device, which residents said landed not far from a home.

Venezuelan president replaces senior commanders



Venezuela’s interim President Delcy Rodriguez (centre) during a meeting with outgoing Defence Minister Padrino Lopez (2nd left) and the new Defence Minister General-in-Chief Gustavo Gonzalez Lopez (2nd right) at the Miraflores presidential palace in Caracas. Venezuela’s interim president said on Thursday that she had replaced all her senior military commanders, the latest in a flurry of reforms since the United States ousted Nicolas Maduro. Delcy Rodriguez announced the changes in a social media post a day after firing the long-serving defence minister, who had been close to Maduro, and replacing him with a former intelligence chief. “I announce the designation of the renewed Military High Command,” said Rodriguez. (AFP)

Cuba rejects suggestions on president’s term in US talks

Reuters
Havana

Cuba yesterday rejected any suggestion that its political system or the term of its president were subject to negotiation in talks with the US, following reports that Washington sought to remove Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel from power.

“I can categorically confirm that... the political system of Cuba is not up for negotiation, and of course neither the president nor the position of any official in Cuba is subject to negotiation with the US,” Vice-Foreign Minister Carlos Fernandez de Cossio told a press conference. Cuba acknowledged a week ago that it had entered talks with the US government as an oil blockade imposed by US President Donald Trump pushes the Communist-run nation deeper into economic crisis, and as Trump has said he can do “anything I want”

“I can categorically confirm that... the political system of Cuba is not up for negotiation, and of course neither the president nor the position of any official in Cuba is subject to negotiation with the US”

with Cuba, a sovereign neighbour.

USA Today, citing two sources with knowledge of the Trump administration’s plans, reported before Cuba’s announcement that Trump was preparing an economic deal with Cuba that would relax trade restrictions but include an “off-ramp” for Diaz-Canel.

The New York Times, citing four people familiar with the talks, later reported that the Trump administration was seeking to push Diaz-Canel from power with two years remaining on his term as president and five years left as leader of the Communist Party.

Both reports said the US proposal would leave untouched the family of former presidents Fidel and Raul Castro. Fidel Castro died in 2016 but Raul Castro, 94,

remains highly influential eight years after handing the presidency over to Diaz-Canel, 65.

Such a deal would resemble what has happened in Venezuela, where the US deposed President Nicolas Maduro on Jan. 3. Rather than attempt to install an opposition government, the US has co-operated with Acting President Delcy Rodriguez, who ascended when US forces whisked away Maduro in an early morning raid.

But authority in Cuba is spread widely among senior Communist Party leaders, other government officials and the armed forces, unlike the concentration of power that characterised the Castro years from the start of the 1959 revolution until Diaz-Canel’s term began in 2018.

De Cossio, who has led the foreign ministry’s office on US relations, declined to offer further details of the bilateral discussions, leaving unanswered the questions of where and when they are taking place.

But he did say there were plenty of topics of mutual interest, including trade between the two countries that has been severed by the comprehensive US economic embargo against Cuba.

He also mentioned longstanding economic compensation that each country seeks. Cuba has claims against the US for damages caused by the embargo, while there are 5,913 claims from Americans whose properties were nationalised in Cuba after the 1959 revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power. “These are very complex issues that can be discussed, but they require dialogue,” de Cossio said. “They require sitting down and are legitimate matters.”

Mexican volunteers load boats with aid for Cuba

Volunteers in Mexico loaded a fleet of modest boats bound for Cuba with rice, baby wipes and other supplies in a growing grassroots effort to help the island as it grapples with the fallout of a US squeeze on oil imports that has led to power outages and a worsening economic crisis.

At a port in the southeast Mexican state of Yucatan, less than 800km (497 miles) across the Gulf of Mexico from Havana, several dozen people hoisted boxes out of cars and trucks alongside a hand-painted banner declaring: “Let Cuba Live.”



Activists load a boat participating in the Nuestra America Convoy flotilla carrying essential goods to Cuba in Progreso, Yucatan state, Mexico, on Thursday. (Reuters)

“At the beginning we felt like we were going against the tide, trying to get enough aid,” said Marisela Vega, one of the volunteers. “And suddenly it overflowed. When everyone started finding out, little by little they responded more and more.”

Beans, baby formula, shampoo, and feminine pads have been donated, said Vega. Medications also have been purchased through donations. The boats were expected to depart on Friday

as part of “Nuestra America Convoy”, or “Our America Convoy”, a non-government initiative that is urging volunteers worldwide to send essential goods — especially food, medicines and energy supplies such as batteries and flashlights — to a single collection site in Cuba by Saturday, in direct response to measures taken

by US President Donald Trump at a time of extreme tension between Washington and Havana. Trump this week said he might soon have the “honour of taking Cuba”, amid talks with the Cuban government. Mexico, a key supplier of fuel before the US ban on deliveries, has sent humanitarian aid to Cuba. (Reuters)

Chicago sues Trump administration over \$3.1bn in frozen transit funding

By David Shepardson
Reuters

The Chicago Transit Authority sued President Donald Trump's administration yesterday in a bid to undo a White House decision to freeze \$3.1bn in funding for rail projects in the third most-populous US city, calling the suspension an unlawful act of political retaliation.

According to the lawsuit, the US Transportation Department and its Federal Transit Administration already have withheld at least \$9.5mn from the city's public transit agency since October in grants previously approved by the federal government under Democratic former President Joe Biden.

Chicago has the second-largest US public transportation system, with about a million rides taken daily. The transit agency called the frozen grants crucial to modernise and expand the "L", Chicago's system of elevated and underground trains.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Chicago, represents the latest

legal battle between the Republican president's administration and Democratic-governed cities and states.

The suit, filed in U.S. district court in Chicago, said the federal government is attempting "to hold hostage billions of dollars in federal grants for crucial infrastructure projects in the City of Chicago." The suit among other things called the administration's action "arbitrary and capricious" in violation of a federal law called the Administrative Procedure Act.

It said the administration's purported justification of the freeze – to ensure nondiscrimination in federal transportation funding programs – "is pre-textual, and the freeze was instead based on political retaliation."

The Department of Transportation did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The funding that has been frozen was to go toward modernising century-old track structure and some stations on two rail lines and extend one of them by 5.5 miles (8.9km).

The suit said that "absent federal reimbursement, CTA (Chicago

Transit Authority) cannot afford to pay its liabilities to its contractors and vendors that continue to accrue" and the agency "has undertaken extraordinary measures to enable work to continue despite the absence of federal funding. That includes issuing new bonds, extending lines of credit and incurring non-recoverable costs."

The Department of Transportation suspended funding for some transit projects in various locales around the US at the start of a government shutdown last fall after Trump vowed to go after projects in Democratic-led states. The Chicago lawsuit is the latest to challenge these actions.

New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority also sued the administration this week after the government withheld nearly \$60mn from a \$7.7bn subway project.

Last week, a federal appeals court ruled that the administration must keep making payments on the \$16bn New York Hudson Tunnel Project after the Department of Transportation suspended more than \$200mn in payments to it.

Trump administration sues Harvard

AFP
Washington

The Trump administration filed a lawsuit yesterday against Harvard University, accusing the institution of allowing a "hostile environment" toward Jewish and Israeli students during pro-Palestinian demonstrations on campus from 2023-2025.

President Donald Trump has launched an offensive against major American universities, accusing them of giving free rein on their campuses to pro-Palestinian movements in the face of the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip, action which he equates with antisemitism.

In February, the Department of Justice (DOJ) filed a similar lawsuit against the University of California, Los Angeles.

In its new complaint, the DOJ said Harvard "faculty and leadership turned a blind eye to antisemitism and discrimination against Jews and Israelis," accusing the university of failing to enforce its own rules against pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli protesters.

"Harvard let anti-Israeli demonstrators occupy its libraries. Harvard allowed an anti-Israeli encampment to persist for twenty days in violation of university policy," said the lawsuit, filed in a Massachusetts court.

"Harvard fostered and continues to foster a campus climate where hostile antisemitism and anti-Israeli conduct thrives," it said.

In a statement responding to the lawsuit, Harvard said it "cares deeply about members of our Jewish and Israeli community and remains committed to ensuring they are embraced, respected, and can thrive on our campus."

The university said it had taken "substantive, proactive" steps to address the root causes of antisemitism and had "enhanced training and education on antisemitism for students, faculty, and staff."

It also has launched programs to "promote civil dialogue and respectful disagreement inside and outside the classroom," the university said. "Harvard's efforts demonstrate the very opposite of deliberate indifference."

In its lawsuit, the Trump administration asked the court to

declare Harvard in violation of its contract with the federal government and, consequently, to release it from its obligation to pay millions of dollars in federal funds to the university and to demand the return of money already given.

The move is the latest salvo in the Trump administration's offensive against the prestigious and oldest US university.

In September a federal judge, acting on a complaint filed by Harvard, ordered the government to rescind its freeze on \$2.6bn in funding to the university.

At the time, Trump indicated he was close to reaching an agreement under which Harvard would pay approximately \$500mn, earmarked primarily for professional training.

However, in February the president said on his Truth Social network that he was now seeking \$1bn in damages from Harvard.

This announcement, which was not immediately followed by action, came after a New York Times article stating that Trump had abandoned his initial request for \$200mn from Harvard in the face of university resistance.

Security concerns grow around FIFA World Cup

Reuters
Washington

Intelligence briefings reviewed by Reuters have warned of the potential for extremists and criminals to target the World Cup at a time when hundreds of millions of dollars of approved security funds have been delayed, causing US preparations to fall behind.

The previously unreported briefings from US federal and state officials and FIFA, the international federation overseeing the World Cup, outlined the risk of extremist attacks, including attacks on transportation infrastructure and civil unrest related to President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown.

The soccer World Cup, one of the globe's biggest sporting events, will be held in June and July this year across three countries – the United States, Canada and Mexico.

While security at such events is always intense, US law enforcement officials have been on especially heightened alert since the start of the war on Iran and have raised concerns over retaliatory threats.

Officials working to prepare for the World Cup in the US have increasingly sounded alarms in recent weeks over a stalled \$625mn in federal security grants for the event that were part of a Republican-backed spending bill passed in July 2025. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, tasked with distributing the money, said in November that it was expecting to allocate the funds no later than January 30.

Following inquiries by Reuters this month after officials and organisers complained that they had still received nothing, FEMA announced on Wednesday that it had awarded the grants, saying the money would "bolster security preparations."

With the first matches kicking off in Mexico on June 11 and then the US and Canada the next day, states and cities hosting the events are deep into planning, including how to safeguard from possible attacks. The delayed funding and threat warnings have compounded an already complex process, multiple officials involved told Reuters.

The grant money distribution process normally takes months,



Signage of FIFA World Cup 2026 at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport in Atlanta, Georgia, US, yesterday. (Reuters)

and efforts to buy technology and equipment can take even longer, according to Mike Sena, president of the National Fusion Center Association, which represents a network of 80 information centres across the US that facilitate federal, state and local intelligence sharing.

"It will be extremely tight," he said. A December 2025 intelligence report from New Jersey looking at potential threats to matches in the state – which will include the final – flagged recent domestic attacks, disrupted terror plots and a proliferation of extremist propaganda. The report also noted the possibility of spontaneous gatherings related to tensions between countries.

Another intelligence report, dated September 2025, described an online post appearing to encourage attacks on railroad infrastructure during the World Cup that said there were "plenty of opportunities for us to knock it off the tracks" and highlighted matches on the West Coast of the US and Canada. The documents were obtained through open records requests by the transparency nonprofit Property of the People.

Democrats have blamed outgoing US Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem for delaying the release of the money. Under Noem's leadership, DHS also withheld hundreds of millions of dollars in homeland security funds last year from a dozen Dem-

ocratic-led states and Washington, DC, while pressing them to increase immigration enforcement.

In response to a request for comment, White House spokesman Davis Ingle faulted Democrats for the delayed funding, citing disagreements over immigration enforcement tactics.

"The president is focused on making this the greatest World Cup ever while ensuring it is the safest and most secure in history," Ingle said in a statement. "The Democrats need to stop playing games."

Trump's immigration crackdown has already cast a pall over the event and raised concerns about the presence of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers. Since Trump took office in January 2025, masked immigration agents have rounded up suspected immigration offenders in US cities and detained some tourists at airports.

That has coincided with a Trump-era dropoff in overall international visitors, according to US Commerce Department data. Early signs have however indicated still strong appetite for flight bookings and ticket sales for the tournament. In a FIFA weekly intelligence briefing dated January 28, analysts warned that anti-ICE activism in US cities in response to immigration enforcement could lower the barriers "to hostile actions by lone actors or extremist elements."

Trump has also placed full or partial travel bans on nationals of more than three dozen countries, including Iran, which is in talks with FIFA to move its matches to Mexico due to its current conflict with the US. Three other countries whose fans face Trump travel bans – Haiti, Ivory Coast and Senegal – have also qualified for the tournament.

Several World Cup and state officials have said "FIFA Fan Festival" events are a particular concern. The events allow large numbers of people to watch matches together on open-air screens.

A Fan Festival event that had been planned in Liberty State Park in Jersey City for the duration of the tournament was cancelled unexpectedly last month and replaced with smaller gatherings.

New Jersey Governor Mikie Sherrill said at the time that many smaller events would allow more people in the area to enjoy the experience. Security concerns also factored in the decision, a person familiar with the planning said.

US Representative Nellie Pou, a Democrat representing a district in New Jersey that includes MetLife Stadium, one of the sites where games will be played, said that each of the World Cup's 104 matches would be equivalent to a Super Bowl. "Local government, local law enforcement, will certainly have their hands full," Pou said.

Two dead in US strike on alleged drug-smuggling vessel in Pacific

AFP
Washington

US forces carried out a strike on an alleged drug-smuggling vessel in the eastern Pacific Ocean, leaving two people dead and a survivor who was rescued, officials said yesterday.

US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) announced the Thursday strike in a post on X the following day, saying it hit a "low-profile vessel (that) was transiting along known narco-trafficking routes in the Eastern Pacific and was engaged in narco-trafficking operations."

SOUTHCOM described the strike as "lethal" but did not give a death toll, saying only that the Coast Guard was "immediately" notified to search for three survivors.

A Coast Guard spokesperson later said the services was "notified by SOUTHCOM of a report of three individuals in distress in the Pacific Ocean."

A Coast Guard cutter "arrived on scene and recovered two deceased individuals and

one survivor from the water," the spokesperson said, adding that it "transferred all persons to the Costa Rican Coast Guard."

The United States began targeting alleged smuggling boats in early September and the latest strike brings the death toll from the campaign to nearly 160.

President Donald Trump's administration insists it is effectively at war with what it calls "narco-terrorists" operating in Latin America.

But it has provided no definitive evidence that the vessels it targets are involved in drug trafficking, prompting heated debate about the legality of the operations.

International law experts and rights groups say the strikes likely amount to extrajudicial killings as they have apparently targeted civilians who do not pose an immediate threat to the United States.

Washington has deployed a large force in the Caribbean, where its forces have in recent months struck alleged drug-smuggling boats, seized oil tankers and carried out a stunning raid on the Venezuelan capital to capture leftist leader Nicolas Maduro.



This screen grab obtained from a video released by the US Central Command on their X account yesterday shows a strike on an alleged drug-smuggling vessel in the eastern Pacific Ocean. (AFP)

Mexican president condemns deaths of migrants in US custody

Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum yesterday condemned the deaths of three Mexican nationals after they were taken into custody by US immigration authorities this year.

"This can't be happening," Sheinbaum told reporters, referring to the death of a 19-year-old at a detention centre in Florida on Monday and two others who died earlier this year.

"The report says the young man killed himself," Sheinbaum said. "Nonetheless, we want a full investigation."

Royce Perez Jimenez was reported dead by US Immigration and Customs (ICE) at Glades County Detention Center in Florida. The cause of death was "presumed suicide" but remained un-

der investigation, ICE said.

Other Mexicans reported dying while caught in President Donald Trump's crackdown on illegal immigration included a 48-year-old man in California in March and a 34-year-old in Georgia in January.

The Mexican government said Thursday that "these deaths are becoming unacceptable" and that officials "won't hold back in using available legal and diplomatic tools to defend the rights" of Mexicans abroad.

"We're going to use all measures to make our protests and support the family in everything they need," Sheinbaum said.

At least 30 migrants died in US detention centres last year, the highest number since 2004, a year after the creation of ICE. (AFP)

US, Germany, Canada disrupt botnets that infected millions of devices

Reuters
New York

Law enforcement agencies in the United States, Germany and Canada have carried out an operation to take down infrastructure used by four major botnets that infected more than 3mn devices worldwide.

The US Department of Justice (DOJ) said in a statement on Thursday the malicious networks – Aisuru, KimWolf, JackSkid and Mossad – were used to launch

distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, with some Department of Defense websites among the targets.

German police said yesterday law enforcement agencies had identified two suspected administrators of the botnets who will now face legal consequences.

"Searches were conducted at their residences in Germany and Canada, and extensive evidence was seized," it said in a statement. "In addition to numerous data storage devices, cryptocurrencies worth tens of thousands of dol-

Botnets used IoT devices like webcams and routers; Botnets targeted Department of Defense websites, among others; German police identified two suspected administrators facing legal consequences

lars were also confiscated."

Most infected devices were part of the so-called Internet of Things, or web-connected appliances like webcams, digital video recorders, or Wi-Fi routers, according to the US DOJ.

Operators of the botnets car-

ried out hundreds of thousands of DDoS attacks, targeting computers and servers around the world, including IP addresses owned by the Department of Defense Information Network. In some cases, they demanded payments from their victims, according to the statement.

German police said devices could be compromised without the knowledge of their owners, and those with no security updates or weak passwords were especially at risk.

"Furthermore, resources of the Kimwolf botnet were rented out as a so-called residential proxy network. This allowed third parties to use the infected devices as an anonymisation layer for a fee, without the knowledge of the actual owner," police said.

"Today's disruption of four powerful botnets highlights our com-

mitment to eliminate emerging cyber threats to the Department of Defense and its warfighters," said Kenneth DeChellis, a special agent in charge at the Department of Defense Investigative Service.

The DOJ statement listed nearly two dozen major tech companies that helped the operation, including Amazon Web Services, Google, PayPal and Nokia, and the PowerOff team of the European Union's law enforcement agency, Europol, whose operation against cybercriminals focusing on DDoS attacks has been running since 2017.



S Korea parliament passes bill stripping prosecutors of investigative powers

Reuters
Seoul

South Korea's parliament passed a sweeping legal reform bill yesterday that will strip prosecutors of investigative powers, a move that the government argues will curb the risk of political abuse of one of the country's most powerful state bodies.

The legislation will create a new agency that will exclusively handle indictments and prosecution and spin off the investigative function to a separate agency.

The landmark vote formalises the separation of powers that President Lee Jae Myung and his liberal Democratic Party say is needed to prevent political abuse of unchecked prosecutorial power.

The push by liberals to break up the prosecution service gained momentum after Yoon Suk-yeol,

its former head, was accused by political rivals of using the institution to gain the presidency and persecute opponents.

The conservative Yoon's short-lived martial law declaration in December 2024 became, for many reform advocates, the final argument for dismantling the institution that made him.

The bill's passage caps a decades-long fight in South Korean politics to break up the prosecution service. Reform calls mounted as prosecutors were accused of targeting political enemies while protecting insiders, with liberals arguing that such concentrated power invited abuse and weakened democratic accountability.

Park Eun-jung, a former prosecutor and lawmaker from the liberal Rebuilding Korea Party, said the point of the reform was to correct "a shameful history of prosecutors changing the stand-

ard of the law to suit their political advantage."

But critics, including the conservative opposition, who had sought to block the vote with a filibuster, say the overhaul risks weakening checks on investigators and turning reform into a tool of the incumbent government.

Choi Jin-a, a law professor at Korea University, said the bill would strip away the means to guarantee the prosecution service's political neutrality and independence, "making prosecutors and police even more beholden to political power."

Supporters say ending the prosecution's monopoly is precisely the point.

"In democracy, no function is controlled by one group, and power works for the people through dispersion and checks," said former Democratic Party lawmaker Choe Kang-wook.

S Korea car parts factory fire leaves 55 injured, 14 missing

A fire broke out around lunchtime at a car parts factory in the South Korean city of Daejeon yesterday, injuring 55 people, including 24 seriously, while 14 others were unaccounted for, fire authorities said.

The South Korean government activated a centralised disaster management system for the large-scale accident after President Lee Jae Myung ordered the mobilisation of all available resources to deal with the fire and save lives.

More casualties are feared, with 14 people missing. Phone data showed their locations near where the fire broke out, but officials said search efforts were hampered after the building partially collapsed in the blaze.

Many employees were believed to have been in a second-floor break room when the fire started, fire authorities said. Some people were in-



Heavy smoke rises following a fire at a car parts plant in Daejeon, South Korea, yesterday. (AFP)

jured after jumping from the building to escape, officials added.

As of about 6pm local time, roughly 80% of the fire had been contained, authorities said.

Fire officials said the car parts supplier that owned the fac-

tory was Anjun Industrial, which said on its website it makes engine valves and is a supplier for Hyundai Motor and Kia Corp, among others. Officials at Anjun were not immediately available for comment. (Reuters)

South Korea flags uncertainty from Middle East energy crisis

Reuters
Seoul

South Korean authorities said yesterday that Iranian attacks on Qatar's energy facilities raise uncertainty, but downplayed concerns about disruption to its liquefied natural gas (LNG) supply.

State-owned QatarEnergy said it will have to declare force majeure on long-term contracts for up to five years for LNG supplies bound for Italy, Belgium, South Korea, and China after the Iranian attacks knocked out 17% of LNG export capacity. South Korea is the world's No 3 LNG importer after China and Japan, using gas for power generation, manufacturing and heating.

Last year, it imported 47.77mn metric tonnes of the fuel, of which 7.16mn metric tonnes was from Qatar, according to data from analytics firm Kpler.

Qatar is South Korea's third-biggest source of LNG after Australia and Malaysia.

"Given that the share of imports from Qatar is relatively low (at around 14% in 2026) and alternative supply sources are available, there are no issues regarding gas supply and demand," South Korea's Industry Ministry said in a



South Korea is the world's No 3 LNG importer after China and Japan; Qatar is S Korea's third-biggest source of LNG

statement, without elaborating on the potential alternative sources.

"However, as uncertainty has been growing, we plan to closely monitor supply, demand, and price trends and respond accordingly," State-run Korea Gas Corp (KOGAS) said yesterday it has inventory levels of LNG exceeding mandatory reserve requirements. "KOGAS has sufficient capabilities to respond to supply and demand crises," it said in a statement.

The government would prioritise managing LNG supplies

by increasing coal and nuclear output, while reducing reliance on gas-fired power generation, Democratic Party lawmaker Ahn Do-geol said earlier this week.

Gas-fired power made up 27% of the country's electricity output in 2025, with the rest mostly from coal, nuclear and renewables.

Limits capping coal power output would be lifted, Ahn said, while maintenance work at six nuclear reactors would be completed early to boost nuclear utilisation. Asian LNG buyers have been seeking replacement

LNG supply since the US-Israeli war on Iran halted tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz and disrupted supplies from Qatar.

Kogas is unlikely to face difficulties replacing Qatari volumes with spot purchases, said Alex Siow, lead Asia gas analyst at analytics firm ICIS, as it is less price sensitive compared to other buyers.

He added that South Korea had already moved to increase coal-fired generation, while a new nuclear power plant coming online in the second half of the year will also help.

N Korea's Kim, daughter try out new battle tank



Kim Jong-un and his daughter Kim Ju-ae aboard a tank at the Pyongyang Training Base No 60 on Thursday. (AFP)

AFP
Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and daughter Ju-ae tried out the country's new battle tank in large-scale military drills, state media reported yesterday, in the latest sign that she was being groomed as his heir.

Photos released by state media showed a chuffed-looking Kim sitting on top of the moving tank in his trademark leather jacket as the teenage Ju-ee's head popped out of a hatch during the exercises on Thursday.

The drills at the Pyongyang Training Base No 60 involved armoured units firing anti-tank missiles while rear sub-units targeted simulated enemy drones and helicopters, clearing the way for infantry and tanks, the Korean Central News Agency said.

According to KCNA, the tank possesses advanced mobility, firepower, and defensive systems, including protection against missiles and drones.

"Watching with great pleasure the tanks violently make a charge, shaking the earth, he (Kim) expressed satisfaction that the ma-

jestic scene of tanks imposingly advancing forward represents the inherent bravery and pluck of our army," the agency reported.

The drill comes amid heightened regional tensions, following recent North Korean missile tests and just-concluded springtime military exercises by South Korea and the United States.

In February, South Korea's national intelligence service said that Ju-ae, thought to be in her early teens, has been clearly "designated as a successor" to her father.

This perception has been stoked by a string of recent high-profile outings including watching a test of nuclear-capable rocket launchers last weekend and firing a pistol last week.

Ju-ae was publicly introduced to the world only in 2022 when she accompanied her father to an intercontinental ballistic missile launch.

Before then, the only confirmation of her existence was from former NBA star Dennis Rodman, who visited the North in 2013.

Ju-ae has drawn attention for her taste in luxury fashion, appearing in Gucci sunglasses and wearing a Cartier watch.

Vietnam sees petrol prices shoot up overnight

AFP
Hanoi

The cost of petrol rose more than 20% in Vietnam yesterday after the government announced an overnight hike amid fears of oil and gas shortages caused by the Middle East war.

Southeast Asian countries have borne the brunt of surging diesel prices following strikes against energy infrastructure in Iran and the Gulf states.

Just before midnight Thursday, the Vietnamese government announced an increase in the price of 95-octane gasoline by 20% from the weekend to 30,690 Vietnamese dong (\$1.20) per litre, while diesel was hiked nearly 34 percent to 33,420 dong.

The increase takes the prices of regular oc-

tane 95 and diesel in the manufacturing hub to more than 50 and 70% higher, respectively, since the conflict began in late February.

Vietnam's trade ministry said in a statement posted online that the hike was a result of the conflict in the Middle East, Iran's control of the key Strait of Hormuz and the Russia-Ukraine war, which have influenced global fuel prices.

The government said Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh had held phone talks asking for fuel support from several countries including Qatar, Kuwait, Algeria and Japan.

The aviation authority has warned of a possible reduction in domestic flights because of potential fuel shortages.

But state media quoted officials as saying the country can ensure enough oil and gas for domestic consumption until the end of April.

A Hanoi resident told AFP on Friday that the price hikes had reduced the traffic flow on the

capital's normally busy roads.

"The traffic seems to ease as I think many cannot afford this continuous hike in the fuel cost like myself" office worker Minh Anh said after catching a train to work.

"Ordinary people like myself are the end sufferers of this fuel crisis," she told AFP.

Neighbouring Laos on Thursday ordered all schools nationwide to cut their week to three days starting next week, as fuel shortages and higher prices disrupted transport and daily life across the landlocked country.

In Myanmar, prices at the petrol pump increased about 30% from Thursday into Friday.

AFP journalists saw long queues of vehicles at a petrol station near Mandalay as motorists rushed to fill their tanks.

Thailand also saw prices of fuel shoot up this week, as the government announced higher diesel rates on Wednesday.

Philippines accuses China of target tracking on ship

AFP
Manila

The Philippines said yesterday that a Chinese navy ship directed its fire control radar towards one of its vessels in the disputed South China Sea this month, slamming the "provocative" move.

The specialised radar provides precise targeting coordinates to a ship's weapons systems.

Chinese and Philippine ships regularly clash in the crucial waterway, which Beijing claims nearly in its entirety, despite an international ruling that its assertion has no legal basis.

The latest alleged incident took place on March 7 near the flash-point Sabina Shoal, a fish-rich area about 150km (90 miles) from the Philippine island of Palawan, the Philippine Navy said in a statement.

The BRP Miguel Malvar was

patrolling the area when "a PLA Navy vessel, with bow number 622 ... approached and later directed its fire control radar toward the Philippine Navy ship," the Philippine Navy said yesterday.

"This was an alarming and provocative action that created unnecessary risk and could have led to misinterpretation and misunderstanding at sea," the statement added.

The Chinese Embassy in Manila did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The two countries traded statements earlier this month claiming sovereignty over the Scarborough Shoal, a traditional fishing area for Filipino fishermen now controlled by China.

In October, Manila accused a Chinese ship of deliberately ramming one of its government vessels after first deploying water cannon in the South China Sea's disputed Spratly islands chain.

Myanmar parliament to start process to select new president on March 30

Myanmar's parliament will start the process to elect a new president on March 30, officials said yesterday, a vote many analysts expect will be won by the head of the junta that seized power in a coup in 2021.

Following a controversial election that was won by a military-backed party, the military and each of the upper and lower houses of the parliament will nominate a presidential candidate.

After a vetting process, the parliament will elect one of the three as president, officials of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw said at an event that was broadcast by state media. The other two candidates will serve as vice presidents.

The officials did not say how long the process to vet candidates would take, or when the vote for president would be held. Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing is widely expected to become the

Southeast Asian country's president.

Independent analyst Htin Kyaw Aye said he expected the general to step down as head of the military before March 30, as the country's constitution says a civil servant cannot be a presidential candidate.

"Since Min Aung Hlaing aspires to the presidency, he must step down from his current role as Commander-in-Chief to be eligible with 2008 constitution," the Thailand-based analyst said.

He said the military and the army-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party would continue to dominate the country's politics after the phased election held in December and January.

"This is not a transition to democracy, but rather a transformation from a military-clad dictatorship to a civilian-clothed one," he said. (Reuters)

Indian activists, journalists set for court fight over Modi’s privacy law

Reuters
New Delhi

Transparency activists and journalists are taking the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to India’s top court over its new privacy law, arguing the legislation will have a “chilling” effect on journalism and enable officials to withhold information of public interest.

Four lawsuits are due to be heard in the Supreme Court on March 23, following criticism from media and activists that Modi’s government is diluting a 20-year-old Right to Information (RTI) law that is similar to the Freedom of Information Act in the US. Modi’s government has also faced criticism of curbing dissent through a stringent content removal regime. The government has denied the allegations and says it only orders removal of unlawful content and the RTI law continues to follow a principle of “maximum disclosure and minimum exemptions.” The latest controversy sur-

rounds a one-line amendment to the RTI law that came into force in November with the new privacy law, called the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, and excludes any “personal information” from release. Previously, the law allowed officials to release such information in “public interest”.

The lawsuits argue the change to the law should be quashed, because it would allow the government to deny the release of critical information of public interest, and undermine constitutional principles.

Anjali Bhardwaj, one of India’s most prominent transparency activists who is among those challenging the law, told Reuters the new law could, as an example, allow the government to block the release of the names of contractors or officials involved in allegedly substandard projects.

The change is “a death knell for participatory democracy, and ruinous to ideas of open governance,” RTI activist Venkatesh Nayak said in his court filing, reviewed by Reuters.

India’s law ministry and the Department of Personnel and Training, which has responsibility for the RTI law, did not respond to Reuters queries on the challenges.

IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw told parliament last year the changes would “not restrict the disclosure of personal information” and “balances individuals’ privacy rights with the right to information.”

India’s ranking in the Canada-based Centre for Law and Democracy’s tracker has fallen from two in 2013 to nine currently, with researchers citing “blanket exceptions” in the RTI law for security agencies as one of the reasons.

India’s privacy law also introduced fines of up to \$27mn for social media, technology firms and others that did not comply with the regulations, without providing an exemption for journalists.

Media groups say without that exemption reporters will need to satisfy a provision requiring consent which, in the case of reporting, means seeking permission

from each individual or a company that is the subject of an article.

The Editors Guild of India has said the law could have an effect of “chilling newsgathering and hindering accountability journalism.”

In Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, India ranked 151 out of 180 countries last year, with the group citing “violence against journalists, highly concentrated media ownership, and political alignment” among its concerns. The country was ranked 106 out of 167 countries two decades ago. New Delhi-based journalists’ group, The Reporters’ Collective, is among those challenging the law in the Supreme Court, saying in its court filing it would hamper effective reporting.

Britain and Australia exempt journalists from similar laws. The group told the court in its filing the Indian law would “force citizens and journalists to self-censor to avoid massive penalties.”

The proceedings in such cases can typically last several months before there is a final ruling.

Indian gas tankers getting ready to sail through Hormuz

Reuters
New Delhi

Two Indian-flagged liquefied petroleum gas tankers are preparing to sail through the Strait of Hormuz in coming days after a pause in voyages, with no crude oil tankers having transited the waterway in the past 24 hours, according to shipping data and sources.

Hundreds of vessels have dropped anchor since Tehran threatened to attack ships attempting to leave the Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz, through which about 20% of global oil and liquefied natural gas flow.

The two tankers were currently anchored in Gulf waters, according to data from Kpler and shipping sources.

According to market assessments from sources yesterday, based on available data, there had been no voyages over the past 24 hours by crude tankers through the waterway, with one empty crude oil tanker, hit with US sanctions, returning towards Iranian waters on March 18, separate Kpler data showed.

The Indian-flagged LPG tankers Pine Gas and Jag Vasant, which are anchored near the United Arab Emirates hub of Sharjah within the Gulf, broad-

cast that they were preparing for a voyage, MarineTraffic ship-tracking data showed yesterday.

Rajesh Kumar Sinha, special secretary with India’s federal shipping ministry, said immediate details were not available, when asked yesterday if the vessels were preparing to sail.

A trade source familiar with the matter said the two LPG tankers could potentially set sail today.

India’s foreign ministry spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, said separately yesterday that the country was “in favour of safe and unhindered movement” of India’s fleet of 22 vessels which were inside the Gulf, adding that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was talking to other leaders about their safe passage.

The Jag Vasant was chartered by BPCL and the Pine Gas by IOC. The two Indian refiners did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Last week, Iran allowed two Indian-flagged LPG carriers to sail through the strait, sources told Reuters.

Ship-tracking data showed a Pakistan-bound oil tanker passing through Hormuz in recent days, indicating that some countries are able to negotiate safe passage for their vessels despite the US-Israeli war with Iran.

IRA victims drop civil court claim against Gerry Adams

AFP
London

Three victims of IRA bombings in England yesterday dropped their civil claim for damages against former Irish republican leader Gerry Adams, whom they had sought to hold personally responsible for orchestrating the blasts.

The trio — who were injured in IRA bomb blasts in the 1970s and 1990s — had also sought to prove beyond reasonable doubt that Adams was a senior member of the Irish Republican Army.

But on the last day of the two-week trial, their lawyer Anne Studd told the High Court in London that the parties had reached an agreement.

The three bomb victims had sued Adams for a symbolic one pound in damages.

“The parties have agreed... that the claim is discontinued,” said a statement read by judge Jonathan Swift.

Adams, the former president of Sinn Fein, the IRA’s former political wing, was not in court yesterday, having attended earlier in the week.

Three people died in the three bombings — in London in 1973, and in London and Manchester in 1996 — and scores more were injured.

The three claimants alleged that Adams was a senior IRA figure for



Former Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams speaks at a press conference in Belfast as a High Court lawsuit against Adams over IRA bombings has been withdrawn by claimants, in Belfast, Northern Ireland, yesterday. (Reuters)

more than 25 years who “acted with others in furtherance of a common design to bomb the British mainland”.

“These allegations are untrue. I was never a member of the IRA or its Army Council,” Adams said in his witness statement.

“I do not defend all the IRA actions,” added Adams, who has always denied being a member of the IRA.

He also “categorically” denied involvement in the attacks.

“To be clear, I had no involvement in or advance knowledge” of the bombings,” he said.

It was the first time the 77-year-old — who has been embroiled in several legal spats over his role

in the Troubles — testified in an English court.

More than 3,500 people were killed during the Troubles, the three-decades-long violent sectarian conflict over British rule in Northern Ireland that ignited in the late 1960s. The unrest came to an end following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

After the court announcement, Adams said in a message posted on social media that he “welcomed” the decision to drop the claim.

“I attended the civil case out of respect for them... This decision brings to an emphatic end a case that should never have been brought,” he said.

Adams became president of

Sinn Fein in 1983 and was elected as an MP from 1983 to 1992 and again from 1997 to 2011, though in line with the party’s policy of abstentionism he never took his seat in the British parliament.

He then sat in the Irish parliament between 2011 and 2020.

He stepped down as leader of Sinn Fein in 2018. Although interned twice in the 1970s, Adams has never been found guilty of IRA membership.

In 2020, he had convictions for attempting to escape jail quashed by the UK Supreme Court.

Last year, he won a libel case in Dublin against the BBC over a report containing allegations he was involved in killing a British spy.

Sri Lanka declined ground access to two US combat aircraft, president says

Reuters
Colombo

Sri Lanka declined permission for two US combat aircraft to land at a civilian airport earlier this month, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake told parliament yesterday.

The US had requested permission for the two aircraft to land at the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport in the southern part of the country from March 4-8, Dissanayake told lawmakers.

“They wanted to bring two warplanes armed with eight anti-ship missiles from a base in Djibouti,” he said during a statement.

“We turned down the request to maintain Sri Lanka’s neutrality,” he added to applause from parliamentarians. The US had made the request on February 26. The same day Iran requested three of its ships to make a goodwill visit to Sri Lanka from March 9-13 after participating in an Indian naval exercise. That request was also denied.

The US and Israel launched attacks on Iran on February 28, leading to a regional war that has severely restricted energy supplies and rattled markets.

“We were considering this request. Had we said ‘yes’ to Iran, we would have had to say ‘yes’ to the US as well,” he added. Sri Lanka’s navy rescued 32 Iranian crew off IRIS Dena on March 4 after it was torpedoed by a US submarine, in an attack that killed at least 84. A second ship, IRIS Booshehr, and its crew were rescued by the Sri Lankan navy after it developed technical issues just beyond the island nation’s territorial waters.

US Special Envoy for South and Central Asia Sergio Gor is currently visiting Sri Lanka and met Dissanayake on Thursday.

Sri Lanka, which is recovering from a severe financial crisis that peaked in 2022 and was caused by a shortfall of dollars, faces a supply squeeze linked to the US-Israeli war on Iran.

The US is Sri Lanka’s largest export market while Iran is one of its key tea buyers.

Eid al-Fitr prayer at Birmingham



A drone view of people attending the Eid al-Fitr prayer, which marks the end of Ramadan, in Small Heath Park, Birmingham, Britain yesterday. (Reuters)

UK foreign minister warns Iran against ‘directly’ targeting British bases

Britain’s Foreign Minister Yvette Cooper warned her Iranian counterpart in a phone call “against targeting UK bases, territory or interests directly”, a foreign office statement said yesterday. The statement was response to one issued by Iran’s foreign ministry in which it said Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told Cooper in the call on Thursday that any US use of British bases would be seen as “participation in aggression” against the Islamic republic. Cooper told Araghchi “the defensive UK operations in the region were a response to the Iranian aggression against Gulf partners”, the UK foreign office said, adding: “She made clear that the UK wants to see a swift resolution to this conflict.” (AFP)

Scottish police arrest Iranian trying to enter naval base

AFP
London

Scottish police yesterday said they arrested two people attempting to enter a Royal Navy base where Britain’s nuclear submarines are based, as UK media identified one detainee as an Iranian man.

“Around 5pm (GMT) on Thursday, 19 March, 2026, we were made aware of two people attempting to enter HM Naval Base Clyde,” Police Scotland said in a statement sent to AFP.

“A 34-year-old man and 31-year-old woman have been arrested in connection and enquiries are ongoing,” the police added, without providing additional details.

The pair “unsuccessfully attempted” to enter the naval base, known as Faslane, a Royal Navy spokesperson said.

“As the matter is subject to an ongoing investigation, we will not comment further.”

Faslane houses the UK’s Trident nuclear deterrent, four submarines armed with Trident ballistic missiles. That has made it the target of regular anti-nuclear protests. Earlier in March, the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament organised a demonstration outside the naval base.

The UK has allowed the US to



A general view of HM Naval Base Clyde at Faslane, north-west of Glasgow, Scotland. (AFP/File Photo)

use two of its military bases — in Fairford in southwest England and Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean — for operations in Washington’s war against Iran, which the British government insists are purely “defensive”.

UK police, the domestic MI5 intelligence service and members of parliament have long warned about a growing threat of Iranian espionage in Britain.

In October 2025, MI5 chief Ken McCallum said British security agencies had tracked “more than

20 potentially lethal Iran-backed plots” in the previous year.

UK Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper on Thursday warned her Iranian counterpart by phone “against targeting UK bases, territory or interests directly”, according to a foreign office statement.

It came after Tehran issued a statement saying Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told Cooper in the call that allowing the US to use British bases would be seen as “participation in aggression” against the Islamic republic.

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GULF TIMES

How Trump’s
Hormuz push tests
Japan’s pacifist limits

US President Donald Trump’s call for allies to send warships to escort oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz has revived questions about how far pacifist Japan can go to support its closest ally in a conflict. Here are the narrow legal options available to Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and the past precedents that could shape her decision.

After its defeat in World War Two, Japan adopted a US-drafted constitution that renounced the use of force to settle international disputes. Within those limits, however, Takaichi can deploy Maritime Self-Defence Force vessels on law-enforcement operations overseas. The clearest example is an anti-piracy mission off Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden, which Japan joined in 2009 after revising legislation to allow Japanese warships to protect vessels of all nationalities.

Following Trump’s request, Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi told parliament on Monday that a similar policing action could be considered “if further measures by the SDF are deemed necessary.” But that framework is designed for policing, not combat. Applying it to operations where Japanese forces could confront a state actor such as Iran would be legally problematic.

In a significant step back from its post-war pacifism, Japan passed security laws in 2015 allowing it to use force overseas in limited circumstances. That is permitted only if an attack, including on a close security partner, threatens Japan’s survival and no other means are available to address it.

Trump’s call for allies to escort oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz challenges Japan’s pacifist constitution. Prime Minister Takaichi faces narrow legal options, balancing law enforcement roles with strict conditions for using force overseas. Past deployments offer guidance, but international law concerns add complexity to any decision.

The laws permit a broader use of force than possible in anti-piracy operations, but the legal threshold for invoking them is far higher. Takaichi would need to argue that the disruption to energy supplies caused by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz constituted an existential threat, a case likely to face stiff political and public opposition.

The legislation has never been used and Takaichi this week said Japan would prioritize diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions in the Middle East.

Past Japanese operations in and around the Middle East offer Takaichi a guide, and underscore how Tokyo has kept within its legal limits. During the 1991 Gulf War, Japan contributed money rather than personnel, a decision criticised by the US and other nations as ‘chequebook diplomacy’. After hostilities ended, it dispatched minesweepers to the Arabian Gulf, marking the SDF’s first ever overseas deployment.

“Japan’s poor response during the Gulf War remains a scar in the national consciousness. So I suspect her (Takaichi’s) government is looking hard for some way to show the flag,” said Michael Green, a professor and chief executive of The United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney.

After the September 11 attacks in 2001, Japan sent MSDF vessels to the Indian Ocean to refuel and support US-led operations in Afghanistan. That mission ran for eight years but did not involve combat or escort missions.

In 2004, Japan sent about 600 ground troops to Iraq for reconstruction work, along with aircraft to help transport supplies and personnel. The soldiers were only allowed to use force as a last resort, and were guarded by Dutch and Australian troops during their two-year stint.

In 2019, after attacks on tankers that Washington blamed on Iran, Japan diverted a destroyer and patrol plane from anti-piracy operations near Somalia to gather intelligence in the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden. However, they stayed outside the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Gulf.

Japan also faces a separate legal question: whether the US military action is in line with international law. Under the United Nations Charter, the use of force is generally prohibited unless authorised by the UN Security Council or justified as self-defence against an armed attack. For a country that has long been a staunch supporter of international law, that uncertainty could further limit how far Tokyo is willing to go. Legal experts are divided over whether the US strikes on Iran meet that threshold and Takaichi has so far declined to say what Japan’s position is. — Reuters

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Eid in San Diego



A woman tends to children as worshippers attend Eid al-Fitr prayers at the Islamic Center of San Diego in San Diego, California. Reuters

Nigel Farage declares war on the old order in his blueprint for Britain

By Elizabeth Piper
Reuters

The old world is over. This is Nigel Farage’s time. That’s the message pressed by the Reform UK leader and his allies who are betting that the powerful brand of populism that drove his successful Brexit campaign a decade ago can carry him all the way to 10 Downing Street.

“The world is changing,” Farage told Reuters as Reform starts fleshing out its party’s proposed policies, which include carrying out mass deportations, ditching international human rights treaties and slashing overseas aid.

He contrasted the comparatively warm welcome he’d received at the annual gathering of political and business leaders in Davos this year with the hostility he recalled in the past. “I would say a third of the delegates I met there were genuinely interested in who I was, what I was, what I was trying to do,” he added. “And next year it will be 50%.”

Reform is riding high in UK opinion polls, with a significant lead over Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s governing Labour. The support has bolstered Farage’s case that the party, which has existed in its current form for five years, could win power at the next election, due by 2029.

Farage said Reform’s plans would rip up what he sees as the orthodoxy of a liberal establishment responsible for “a progressive, woke ideology” that has left Britons ashamed of their country. He compared himself to his friend Donald Trump, as well as Hungarian leader Viktor Orban and Argentina’s Javier Milei, as figures bringing “very, very big changes” to the world.

Traditional politicians are being left in the dust, Farage said in an interview at the launch of Reform’s manifesto for Wales in the city of Newport on March 5. “Keir Starmer is stuck in a mindset that is 15 years out of date,” the 61-year-old added. While Farage is a highly divisive figure in Britain, his campaigning and political acumen have seen him forge, from the crucible of the 2016 Brexit referendum, one of the most potent of the patriotic populist movements sweeping the globe.

He and Reform nonetheless face a stiff challenge to convince voters they are ready to lead the country, having little prior experience of government and counting only eight lawmakers in Britain’s 650-seat parliament. Inflammatory rhetoric, such as talk of an “invasion” of illegal migrants, as well as allegations of racism that have led to several members being ejected, have turned off some voters who fear a Reform government would stoke division.

A former leader of Reform in Wales was also jailed in November for taking bribes to make pro-Russian speeches, offences condemned by the party as “reprehensible, treasonous and unforgivable.” “Reform’s biggest strength is also its biggest weakness - namely, Nigel Farage,” said Tim Bale, professor of politics at London’s Queen Mary university.

“He’s adored by those who are absolutely determined to vote Reform but hated by those determined to vote against it - and disliked and distrusted by far too many who might otherwise be tempted to move in its direction.”

Reform’s growing policy list, compiled here by Reuters from public statements and conversations with Farage and 10 current and former advisers, also includes plans to scrap diversity initiatives and net-zero targets, maximise oil and gas production, take the axe to Britain’s civil service and transform the country into a crypto hub.

Critics have described the agenda, which Reform says should be a fully developed policy platform by the end of the year, as little more than an echo of the programme pursued by the US Trump administration - a characterisation that Farage rejects. Reform’s policies are underpinned by “simple values”, Farage said,



Reform UK party leader Nigel Farage speaks during a party press conference in central London on March 17, 2026. (AFP)

- Farage’s Reform UK, leading in polls, fleshes out agenda
- Policies include mass deportations, reducing overseas aid
- Farage: Party will rip up establishment, ‘woke’ ideology
- Polarising leader and party face big task to convince voters

focused on “family, community, country”.

Labour has long accused the party of flip-flopping on issues including Britain’s public health service. “Reform don’t have a proper policy platform. Their ideas don’t make sense,” a Labour official said.

FARAGE ‘HAS INSTINCTS NOT IDEOLOGY’

Like their boss, Farage’s advisers often speak in epochal terms about the sweeping away of liberal elites clinging onto the “rules-based international order”.

“You need to be asking: What is your new destination?” said Alan Mendoza, Reform’s chief adviser on global affairs. “Because the old, the old world, has gone. It’s over.”

The party’s new head of policy, James Orr — a philosophy professor at the University of Cambridge and friend of US Vice-President JD Vance — spoke of Farage’s ability to connect with voters.

“I’m hesitant to use the word philosophy about Nigel,” the 47-year-old told Reuters at a private members’ club in London’s wealthy Mayfair area. “He has instincts, not ideology.”

Orr’s dismissal of elites stems from bruising experiences around the Brexit referendum, which saw Britons vote to leave the European Union by 52% to 48%.

When doing post-doctorate research at the University of Oxford in 2016, he describes being the “only out-of-the-closet Brexiteer” among academics at his college. By contrast, his stance was backed by “the porters, the butlers, the maintenance department and the gardeners and the groundsman”.

Farage has indeed branded himself a man of the people leading a people’s revolution. Despite his eurocepticism, it was in Brussels that he met two of his biggest political influences — Beppe Grillo, the comic who co-founded Italy’s anti-establishment 5-Star Movement, and his social media guru Roberto Casaleggio.

“Grillo weaponised social media and Nigel gets it,” said a former adviser who has been close to Farage since the beginning of his political career and requested anonymity to speak freely.

“For a man who has never really turned on a computer in his life, he really gets it.”

The main opposition Conservative Party, like traditional rival Labour, dismisses the idea of Reform coming up with coherent policymaking. The Conservatives have been outflanked by Farage on the right, losing many voters to Reform and seeing some of their most high-profile figures defect.

“Reform are not serious people and they are not going to solve any of your problems,”

Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch told a party forum on March 7. “Reform have absolutely no idea what they want Britain to look like in the 2030s.”

FARAGE ON TRUMP AND MAGA

Reform figures also stress their close relations with American decision-makers could prove an asset in government. “With this administration, I happen to know most of the members of cabinet on a personal basis and have for many, many years,” Farage told Reuters. He said he agreed with Trump on big issues, such as global security, recognising “Iran is the bad actor in the Middle East” and understanding “China wants to take over and dominate our lives”.

On controlling borders and producing energy at home, he added, the pair are aligned.

Farage bristles, though, when asked whether he is copying Trump’s MAGA movement. “To some extent they copy what we were doing back in the run-up to the referendum,” he said. “I have always gone for bells and whistles and fireworks and fun, and whilst we believe in what we’re doing, we have a good time as well.”

Orr, Reform’s policy chief, said Vance “hates what the technocrats and the elites have unleashed on Europe and Britain” and the US simply wants Europe to stand on its own two feet on security.

One source with knowledge of Reform’s operations said officials close to Farage often visit Washington to try to raise money and drum up business support for the party. The officials are targeting those British businesses and business owners that oppose the UK tax regime and have largely quit the nation, the source told Reuters on condition of anonymity to speak freely. They hold dinners and events to draw people in and attend conferences to target “high earners” who have moved abroad.

That strategy helped Reform raise 5.5mn pounds (\$7.3mn) in the fourth quarter of last year, taking the party’s total take of cash donations to 18mn pounds in 2025, according to Electoral Commission data. At least two-thirds of that money, which dwarfed Labour’s 8.1mn pounds, came from donors who live abroad, the data shows.

Mendoza, Reform’s global affairs adviser, said Britain must prove its utility to Washington, investing “serious money into defence” and showing “you’re willing to play a larger role”, if it wishes to maintain a serious security relationship. That would combat what he said was a belief in the Trump administration that Britain was “a weak and feeble country”.

France boards tanker linked to Russian shadow fleet

Reuters
Paris

The French Navy seized an oil tanker yesterday in the Western Mediterranean that President Emmanuel Macron said belonged to Russia's shadow fleet, a network of vessels that enables Moscow to export oil despite Western sanctions.

Local officials told Reuters earlier yesterday that the navy had boarded a Mozambique-flagged oil tanker named Deyna that was suspected of flying a false flag. The ship had been sailing from the Russian port of Murmansk.

Western sanctions imposed on Russia for invading Ukraine and aimed at cutting its oil revenue have led to the rise of a shadow fleet of tankers helping Moscow keep its crude exports flowing.

"The war involving Iran will not deflect France from its support for Ukraine, where Russia's war of aggression continues unabated," Macron wrote in a post on X.

"These ships, which circumvent international sanctions and violate the law of the sea, are war profiteers. They seek to reap profits and finance Russia's war effort." While European sanctions remain in place, the US has temporarily eased sanctions on the sale of Russian oil as the Middle East war disrupts oil supplies and boosts prices.

The Russian embassy in France did not immediately reply to a request for comment, but Moscow has previously called the seizure of its tankers or vessels carrying its cargoes an act of piracy.

A Western military source said



A French Navy helicopter hovers over the Deyna vessel, which is supposed to be a member of the Russian shadow fleet, during an operation in the Western Mediterranean Sea yesterday. (Reuters)

the tanker was carrying Russian crude oil.

Shadow fleet vessels typically have opaque ownership structures and have raised concern about environmental risks, with poorly regulated, ageing tankers prone to spills, mechanical failures and leaks, threatening marine ecosystems.

They usually sail without top-tier Western insurance or safety certification cover, and often have unknown insurers or assessors of the vessels' seaworthiness – both required for ocean-going commercial ships, shipping and insurance industry sources familiar with the matter have said.

The operation was carried out with British allies, the French

Mediterranean prefecture said.

Britain's Defence Minister John Healey said in a post on X that its armed forces had supported the French operation, saying that "disrupting, deterring and degrading Russia's shadow fleet – and starving Putin's war machine of funds – is a priority for this government" and its allies.

At the prosecutor's request, the vessel was escorted to an anchorage point for further inspection, the French military said.

"These inspections will likely focus on vessel documentation, including flag state registration and P&I Club insurance, with particular scrutiny on any discrepancies or evidence of falsified documents," a

maritime security source said.

The source added that recent public statements by French authorities suggested a more assertive posture, indicating a realistic possibility that this case could escalate further. "Should material irregularities or violations be identified, French authorities may proceed with the formal seizure of the vessel," the source said. It was the second such interception by France in recent months. In January, France stopped the oil tanker Grinch between the southern coast of Spain and the northern coast of Morocco on suspicion that it was part of the Russian shadow fleet. The French navy assisted Belgium in a third operation earlier in March.

Attacked Russian vessel drifting toward Libya: Italian authorities

AFP
Rome

A Russian tanker that was badly damaged in an attack in the Mediterranean last week is drifting without crew towards the Libyan coast, Italy's civil protection service said yesterday.

Russia has accused Ukraine of trying to blow up the Arctic Metagaz, which was carrying a consignment of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Russia to Egypt when it was hit on March 3.

Italian officials said there was no sign that the fuel used to power the tanker had leaked, but they were unable to comment on the fate of the gas consignment.

The ship, whose 30 crew abandoned it, faced US and European Union sanctions as a suspected part of Russia's "shadow fleet" of vessels carrying Russian oil and gas in contravention of international sanctions.

Ukraine has not commented on the case but Italian authorities are among Mediterranean nations nervously watching the ship's movements. Salvage experts have been waiting in Malta.

Russia has said vessel was carrying about 700 tonnes of fuel as well its gas consignment

when it was hit. Libya's port authority has said the ship was carrying 62,000 tonnes of LNG intended for Egypt.

"At this stage, we have no information that the fuel has started to disperse," the civil protection service's press chief, Pierfrancesco Demilito, told a news conference.

He said the tanker was currently in international waters but in Libya's search and rescue zone about 53 nautical miles north of Tripoli and heading south.

According to the official, it was not possible to say how much gas was on the tanker but he said it was "potentially dangerous" because of the risk of an explosion.

The ship, though still afloat, "is severely damaged and even towing it is a complex operation", Demilito said.

"It has a large lateral breach and is not a very stable vessel at the moment, even if it is not showing any imminent signs of sinking."

Images taken by AFP on Sunday showed the tanker much further north from the location given by the Demilito. Some parts had been blackened and seriously damaged by explosions and fire. There were two holes on each side.

Swiss will not export war equipment to US during Middle East conflict

AFP
Geneva

Switzerland decided yesterday it will not authorise the export of war materiel to the US during the Middle East conflict, in line with its long-standing principle of military neutrality.

Switzerland has already refused US requests for flights over its territory since the war erupted on February 28 when the US and Israel began attacks on Iran.

Following that decision, yesterday the Swiss government looked at applying neutrality to exports to states involved in the war.

"The export of war materiel to countries involved in the international armed conflict with Iran cannot be authorised for the duration of the conflict," said a government statement.

"Existing licences and exports of other goods will now be regularly reviewed by an inter-

departmental group of experts, particularly with regard to their compatibility with neutrality.

"Exports of war materiel to the USA cannot currently be authorised," and existing US licences will now face regular review, it said, whilst adding that Switzerland has not issued war materiel export licences to Israel or Iran for years.

Since the conflict started, no new licences have been issued for exports of war goods to the US, Bern said.

Existing US licences "have been determined to be of no relevance to the war at present and can therefore continue to be used", the statement said.

Nevertheless, an expert group drawn from the foreign, defence and economy ministries will regularly review developments in exports of the goods in question to the US, and assess whether any action is required.

Swiss neutrality traces its roots back to 1516 and has been internationally recognised since 1815.

Germany eases arms exports restrictions for Gulf states

Germany has simplified the export of certain air and naval defence equipment to the Gulf states and Ukraine to ensure deliveries arrive rapidly, said the economy ministry yesterday. "Iran's indiscriminate attacks on the Gulf states have resulted in an urgent need for military equipment, particularly for air defence," said Economy Minister Katherina Reiche. "With the new, temporary licence, we are adapting our arms export control procedures for the export of urgently needed arms to these countries to meet these new requirements," she added.

In addition to Ukraine, the new general export licence, valid for six months, applies to exports to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. Under the new regulation, exporters are permitted to export goods without first having to submit an individual application to the BAFA office for export control, said the ministry. The regulation, which stipulates that the companies must register and deliver monthly reports, applies to goods for air and naval defence, including the disposal of sea mines, it said. (Reuters)

Eid al-Fitr prayer in Saint-Denis



People attend the Eid al-Fitr prayer, marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, at Stade Auguste-Delaune in Saint-Denis, near Paris, France, yesterday. (Reuters)

Zelensky vows Ukraine will infiltrate Russia's Max app

AFP
Kyiv

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday that Kyiv was working on infiltrating Russia's state-backed Max messenger, as Moscow urges citizens to ditch foreign platforms over security concerns.

Russia has been throttling both

WhatsApp and Telegram, the country's two largest messengers, for months as it pushes people to move to its home-developed Max service, an alternative without encryption that has raised concerns it could be used for domestic surveillance.

Zelensky said both Ukrainian and Russian special services "work through" Telegram to recruit people and promote narratives about

the war, triggered by Moscow's 2022 invasion.

"With the restrictions on Telegram in Russia, it will certainly be more difficult to transmit signals to their society," Zelensky told journalists yesterday.

"Nonetheless I had a report about their new network, Max. We'll get to Max as well," he said, without elaborating.

Russia has blamed Ukraine for

a number of sabotage attacks, including assassinations of military figures in Moscow, saying Kyiv recruited people through messenger apps with the promise of cash in return for carrying out the hits or providing intelligence.

Russia has restricted access to Max to only its citizens with a Russian phone number and those from other countries it deems friendly to the Kremlin.

EU chief promises carbon scheme tweaks

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen on Friday promised tweaks to Europe's flagship carbon market scheme but stopped short of announcing the overhaul sought by some countries complaining about high costs for industry. Speaking after an EU leaders summit where high energy costs sparked by the Middle East war were high on the agenda, von der Leyen said the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS), which Italy and others want to see significantly reformed, was "working" but needed updating.

The European Commission president told an early morning press conference that changes in the works included "a more realistic trajectory" for cutting emissions and the allocation of "free emission allowances" -- currently set to be phased out by 2034 -- "beyond 2035".

Thursday's summit came as Europe weighs how to blunt the impact of the growing energy shock triggered by the Middle East crisis, with the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz and strikes on key oil and gas sites roiling world markets.

Designed to help tackle climate change, the ETS caps greenhouse gas emissions and allows companies to trade allowances within that cap, obliging heavy polluters to buy permits.

But critics, including some within European industry, argue that the system contributes to high energy bills, as gas-fired plants need to pay up to cover their planet-warming emissions.

Von der Leyen also said Brussels would help industry's green transition with a 30-billion-euro (\$35-billion) "ETS investment booster" financed with revenue from the carbon trading system. (AFP)

Spanish airport becomes parking lot for planes

Reuters
Teruel

An airport in a dusty and remote corner of rural Spain has once again become a parking lot for aircraft stranded in Europe, this time due to the war with Iran, which has forced countries to close their airspace and airlines to reroute flights.

State-owned Teruel airport in eastern Spain, which normally serves as one of Europe's largest aircraft maintenance and storage hubs, had around 140 planes park there over two years during the Covid pandemic.

Now its dry, salt-free climate, which lends itself to preserving planes, is being sought again by

airlines whose timetables have been scrambled and are facing risks to jet fuel supplies because of the conflict in the Middle East.

It is expected to receive about 20 aircraft, including 17 Qatar Airways planes by the end of today, according to a schedule seen by Reuters.

A former military base in Aragon province, which has become a byword for the rural depopulation known as the Empty Spain phenomenon, Teruel airport habitually receives two aircraft a day.

Yesterday, around 10 wide-body jets -- the world's biggest commercial aircraft -- were due to arrive, the majority operated by Qatar Airways.

A Qatar Airways A380 landed mid-morning after departing from London. Two of the airline's A350s and a Boeing 787 had landed by late

afternoon. Qatar Airways did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment on its plans.

"It's not normal," said Alejandro Ibrahim, general manager of the terminal. "Companies are revising their fleets and routes and looking for safer places to park their planes, and Europe fits the bill."

Just a few people, mainly pilots and crew, could be seen leaving the industrial airport, located 300km (185 miles) from Madrid, yesterday morning.

With capacity for 250 wide-body and up to 400 narrow-body aircraft, Teruel is one of Europe's largest storage facilities.

"We've acted as a refuge and supported global air transport," Ibrahim said.

Since Teruel does not handle

passengers, planes can sit without issue on the tarmac, he said.

The airport's operators cannot say how many more planes could arrive as the war continues, though several Middle Eastern airlines that fly regularly to Europe are among its regular clients.

"We're working week to week because there's no clear horizon and it really depends on the companies... how this could all develop in the coming months," he said.

What is preferable for business are the quick-turnaround maintenance contracts that are the airport's usual work, he added.

"What we would like is for (the conflict) to end, because our important business is aircraft maintenance. The more planes fly, the greater activity our airport has."

Amir performs Eid prayer with people at Lusail grounds

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani performed Eid al-Fitr prayers along with citizens at Lusail praying area yesterday morning. Sheikh Dr Yahya Butti al-Nuaimi delivered the Eid sermon, in which he discussed the meaning of Takbeer, and that God Almighty is the Great, the Rich, the Strong, the King, in whose hand is the dominion of all things, and He is capable of all things. He also pointed out that Eid al-Fitr this year comes amidst exceptional circumstances in the region, praising the sincere efforts made by the security services to protect the homeland and preserve its resources in accordance with the supreme directives, and praying to God to



protect our country, its Amir and people, and all Muslim countries from all harm, and to repel the schemes of the aggressors. He also affirmed that the signs of relief were near, that with hardship comes ease, and following distress comes relief. (QNA)



Amir greets well-wishers on Eid at Lusail Palace

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani received yesterday morning a host of well-wishers on Eid al-Fitr at Lusail Palace. His Highness the Personal Representative of the Amir, Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa al-Thani, HE Sheikh Jassim bin Khalifa al-Thani, and a number of dignitaries attended the reception. (QNA)



Residents celebrate Eid with fervour despite shadows of regional tensions

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

Nationals and residents celebrated Eid al-Fitr in great spirits and greeted everyone on the occasion despite the shadows of the ongoing conflicts across the region. Complying with the directives of the authorities, prayers were held indoors at mosques across the country as part of the precautionary measures aimed at ensuring the safety and security of everyone. Morning prayers were held indoors at various mosques, where people greeted one another and exchanged Eid greetings, avoiding any outdoor activities. There were clear instructions from the competent authorities on how to attend the mosques to avoid overcrowding, as well as to minimise the presence of children and women. Following the instructions, the faithful gathered at the mosques to take part in the prayers and maintained all the calm and poise. Worshippers across Qatar gathered in the spirit of solidarity, resilience, gratitude, and unity, sharing the joy and spirit of Eid al-Fitr. Meanwhile, the Education City Mosque hosted the Eid al-Fitr prayer, bringing together worshippers from across Qatar's community to mark the end of the holy month of Ramadan and to reflect, and demonstrate gratitude and unity. The prayer was attended by community members of all ages, with the gathering being hosted at Qatar Foundation's Minaretein Centre in co-ordination with the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. Though public gatherings and celebrations were avoided as the public complied with government instructions, the festival spirit could not be dampened. It was very much evident among the people as they extended Eid greetings in many ways. Most families stayed home and spent time with their dear ones, while many shared their joy with friends and relatives through messages and phone calls. Some families in the immediate neighbourhood gathered indoors to celebrate the occasion, sharing pleasantries and food. Another common way of greeting each other was the social media



Eid prayers at Education City Mosque



The inside area of Education City Mosque.

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Worshippers exchange Eid greetings.



Worshippers embrace each other on the occasion.

platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, among others, to contact a group of people through video call and share the joy. This helped everyone who could not meet each other on the occasion to greet and stay connected. Though at the same place and country and a few kilometers apart, they ignored all the inconvenience and kept the spirit of togetherness and warmth using modern technologies. A longtime resident, Faisal Mohamed, said that it was the second time in his 24 years in Qatar that he could not visit and meet his brother during the Eid. He said: "My brother works here in Qatar and our families meet at our residence on every occasion especially

during Eid. It was during Covid-19 that we had to keep ourselves away for the first time. Now, due to regional tensions, once again, we had to keep ourselves from meeting and greeting each other in person. We know it is important to comply with the government instructions and we have no regrets about it." "We had a group call in the morning and greeted all our families and friends over the screens. This is not what we do during the Eid. But we know we have to act according to the prevailing situations and therefore avoided the travel all the way from Al Khor to Doha," said another resident Ahmed Ghafoor.