



Qatar Insurance
Financial Results (FY 2025)

Gross Written
Premiums (GWP)

9%
QAR 9.9B

Net Profit
Before the Impact of
Pillar Two Taxes

19%
QAR 874M

Net Profit
Profit attributable to
QIC shareholders

9%
QAR 791M

Earnings
Per Share:

10%
QAR 0.188

qic-group.com

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People enjoying their day at the National Museum of Qatar yesterday. **PICTURE:** Thajudheen

QM welcomes back visitors for Eid al-Fitr

By A Staff Reporter
Doha

Families and visitors flocked to the National Museum of Qatar and cultural sites across Doha, as Qatar Museums reopened its indoor venues to the public on the second day of Eid al-Fitr. The reopening, which takes effect from March 21, covers all of QM's major institutions, including the Museum of Islamic Art, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern

Art, and the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum. During the Eid period, all venues will remain open daily through March 27 – including on their otherwise regular closing days – before returning to standard operating hours the following week. Indoor spaces including galleries, cafes, and retail outlets are fully accessible, while outdoor heritage and archaeological sites remain temporarily closed. Staff are on hand across all locations to assist visitors, with safety

measures in place throughout. Standard opening hours across QM venues run Saturday to Thursday from 9am to 7pm, and Fridays from 1.30pm to 7pm. Regular weekly closures apply after the Eid period: Mathaf closes on Mondays, the National Museum of Qatar and 3-2-1 Museum on Tuesdays, and the Museum of Islamic Art on Wednesdays. Visitors can find the latest updates on QM's official website and social media channels. **Page 12**

Saudi expels Iran's military attache, four embassy staff

Reuters, AFP
Riyadh

Saudi Arabia informed Iran's military attache, his assistant and three members of the embassy staff that they must leave the kingdom within 24 hours after being declared persona non grata, the Saudi foreign ministry said yesterday, citing what it described as continued Iranian attacks on Saudi territory. Saudi Arabia has come under attack by hundreds of Iranian missiles and drones since the start of US-Israeli war on Iran, the vast majority of which have been intercepted, authorities said. The ministry said in a statement that continued Iranian attacks would lead to further escalation and have "significant consequences" for cur-

rent and future relations. On Wednesday, the Saudi foreign minister said the kingdom reserved the right to act militarily against Iran and any trust with Tehran had been shattered following recent attacks. Saudi Arabia and Iran re-established diplomatic ties in 2023 as part of an effort to calm tensions after years of enmity that saw them back opposing political and military factions in the region. The US-Israeli war on Iran and Tehran's subsequent attacks on Gulf neighbours have disrupted oil and natural gas exports from the Middle East and forced production stoppages. The United Arab Emirates said yesterday it faced aerial attacks from Iran after the country warned its neighbour against allowing attacks from its territory on disputed islands near the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

"UAE air defences are currently responding to incoming missile and drone threats from Iran," the defence ministry said in a statement explaining "the sounds heard are the result of the Air Defence Systems intercepting missiles and drones". The Tasnim news agency reported the Iranian military's operational command had warned the UAE "if any further aggression originates from its territory against the Iranian islands of Abu Musa and Greater Tumb in the Persian Gulf, Iran... will subject Ras Al Khaimah in the UAE to heavy strikes". Authorities in the northern emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, which shares its name with the UAE's sixth-largest city, said later yesterday the "sounds heard across parts of the city were the result of successful air defence interception operations".

Air, land transport ensure steady supply of goods

Surge in Eid holiday traffic without disruption

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

Qatar's Abu Samra border crossing is handling a surge in Eid holiday traffic without disruption, as authorities deploy expanded staffing, dedicated cargo lanes, and streamlined procedures to keep travellers and goods moving freely – even as regional tensions continue to weigh on commercial air routes. Speaking to Qatar TV, Major Mohamed Mubarak al-Buainain, Head of the Passports Department at Abu Samra, said the spike in traveller movement during Eid is expected, but this year authorities moved early to stay ahead of demand. Flexible operational plans were activated ahead of the holiday to ensure procedures remain swift and that neither inbound nor outbound travellers face unnecessary delays. To that end, the crossing has kept a sufficient number of lanes open to guarantee easy passage and quick processing. Separate, dedicated pathways have been assigned exclusively for commercial cargo, preventing congestion from spilling across different traffic streams. Processing efficiency on the freight side has also been significantly improved, cutting turnaround times and keeping supply



chains intact during one of the busiest periods of the year. On the ground, additional teams of trained personnel have been deployed at all entry and exit points, supported by advanced technology and up-to-date equipment to ensure procedures are both accurate and fast – without one coming at the expense of the other. In the skies, Qatar Airways has played an equally critical role. Despite restrictions on commercial flights caused by the ongoing regional escalation, the airline has kept cargo operations running at full capacity, maintaining a steady flow of imports into Doha. A significant portion of its fleet was redirected to freight operations, airlifting hundreds of tonnes of fresh food,

medicines, and medical equipment into the country to meet local demand. The results on the ground have been tangible. Qatar's local market has recorded no shortages, no price spikes, and no disruption to supply – a testament to the resilience of the country's logistics infrastructure, the effectiveness of government oversight, and the speed with which both public institutions and private operators adapted to the pressure. For consumers, the Eid shopping experience has remained entirely normal – shelves stocked, prices stable, and queues manageable – reflecting a level of preparedness that has kept daily life running smoothly despite the turbulence beyond Qatar's borders.

Mol advises compliance with vehicle noise limits

The Ministry of Interior (Mol) yesterday emphasised the importance of adhering to regulations governing the sound levels emitted by vehicles as part of its efforts to enhance public safety and preserve community tranquillity. In a statement, the ministry noted that all cars and motorcycles are treated equally in the application of sound level regulations, without any distinction between categories.

Compliance is based on the actual measurement of sound levels using approved technical devices. It pointed out that the maximum permissible sound level must not exceed 79 decibels (dB), in accordance with the technical standards approved by the Qatar General Organisation for Standards and Metrology. These standards take into account vehicle classification and type, and measurements are conducted

using approved technical equipment, including handheld measuring devices and specialised radars for detecting sound levels as well as passing the technical inspection (Fahes). The ministry affirmed that high-performance (sports) vehicles are subject to the same approved sound regulations, and differences in the nature of their sound do not justify exceeding the specified limit.

From virtual to viable, reshaping the scene

Qatar's Cloud Kitchen Revolution

Market Potential & Growth
13% Annual Growth Rate
Untapped Market Opportunity
Regulatory Support
Driving Success & Profitability
Tech-Enabled Operations
AI & Big Data
Digital Brand Identity
Scalable Business Model

By Santhosh V Perumal
Business Reporter

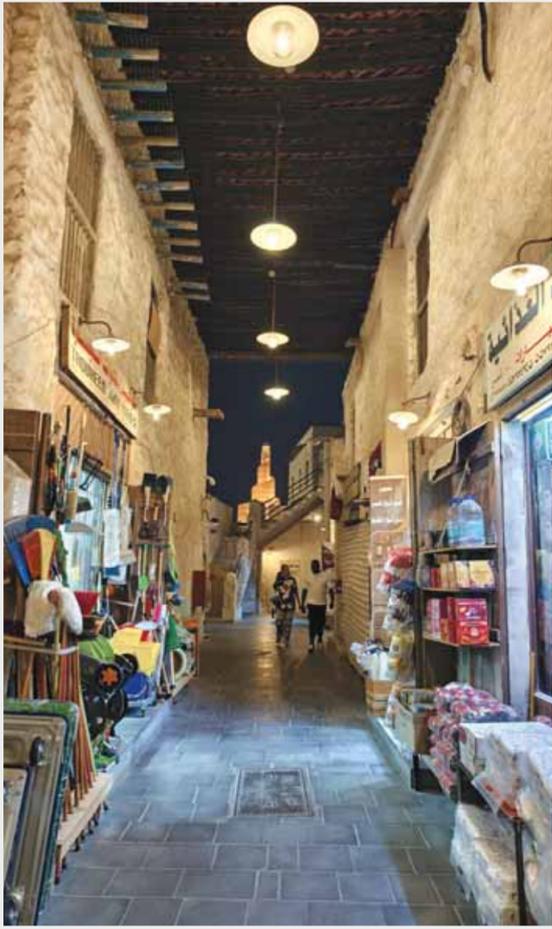
More than a year back, Qatar laid out procedures and strict guidelines for cloud kitchens, which have the potential to become a force to reckon with in the food service industry. However, more needs to be done in cloud kitchens - which have dynamic expansion path vis-a-vis traditional restaurants where growth is more gradual - through creating a brand identity that resonates across all digital touchpoints, leveraging the social media and reasonably investing in search engine optimisation and search engine marketing for better discoverability. Cloud kitchens, offering both opportunities and challenges to entrepreneurs, investors, and operators alike, have been revolutionised by the growing affinity for online food delivery services, which are poised to grow exponentially. "Rising demand for food delivery, lower capital investment requirements and favourable regulatory conditions help the

cloud kitchens to attain better significant growth in the coming years," said a top official of a venture capital. According to Euromonitor International, food delivery market in Qatar has been growing steadily, with food delivery services projected to expand at a compound annual growth rate of 13% over 2021-26. "The future looks bright for this growing sector as consumer preferences for convenience continue to drive demand," he added. The cloud kitchen industry, which is slated to play a pivotal role in the future of Qatar's food service industry, is growing, and it is not as saturated as in other countries such as India or the UAE. The market is still evolving, with players like Munch Cloud, Granary Deli, Waka Kitchens, KLC Virtual Restaurants, Food Zone, Talabat Kitchens and Kitopi expanding rapidly. Growing demand for food delivery, increased smartphone penetration, and changing consumer preferences make good recipe for the cloud kitchen model, which is inherently more scalable than traditional restaurants. **To Page 2**

Momentum builds for global push back on Hormuz security

The United States military yesterday said it had destroyed an Iranian underground weapons facility housing anti-ship cruise missiles and mobile launchers threatening commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, as a coalition of more than 20 nations pledged to restore safe passage through the vital waterway. Admiral Brad Cooper, head of US Central Command, said warplanes dropped 5,000-pound bombs on the coastal bunker, also destroying intelligence support sites and missile radar relays used to monitor ship movements. The strike, first announced on Tuesday, was described in full detail yesterday as thousands of Iranians marked Eid al-Fitr. The US statement was widely seen as an effort to steady rattled energy markets and reassure sceptical allies. It was swiftly followed by a joint declaration from more than 20 countries

– among them the UK, France, Germany, Italy, the UAE, Bahrain, South Korea and Australia – condemning what they called Iran's "de facto closure" of the Strait and vowing to contribute to efforts ensuring safe passage. "We express our readiness to contribute to appropriate efforts to ensure safe passage through the Strait," the group said, welcoming nations already engaged in preparatory planning. The signatories also condemned Iran's recent attacks on unarmed commercial vessels in the Gulf and strikes on civilian energy infrastructure, calling them unacceptable provocations against global trade. The G7 foreign ministers echoed that position, expressing readiness to take necessary measures to protect global energy supplies and standing firmly behind regional partners. **– AFP, Reuters**



Families, tourists celebrate Eid at timeless Souq Waqif

Souq Waqif remains one of Qatar's timeless and sought-after family destinations all year round. This Eid al-Fitr, the centuries-old market welcomed holidaymakers, drawing both the young and the not-so-young to its maze-like corridors highlighted by colourful shops and restaurants. A stroll along the souq's cobblestoned main walkway is already an experience. This tourist destination also offers a variety of local and international cuisine, clothing, spices, and a wide range of souvenirs, among others. The souq's "pet alley" is among its popular attractions. Children often enjoy interacting with cats, dogs, rabbits, hamsters and guinea pigs, turtles and fish, and various birds. **PICTURES:** Jayan Orma



A man sits looking at the *Gekrose* sculpture (2011) by late Austrian artist Franz West along the Corniche yesterday

Left: A man has his photograph taken as he poses along the Corniche yesterday. **PICTURES:** AFP

Eid joy shared with kith and kin across Qatar and beyond



Residents walk along the Corniche, on the second day of Eid al-Fitr.



Residents walk under the shade near and along the Corniche, on the second day of Eid al-Fitr.

Residents of Qatar have continued to celebrate the Eid holiday with joy, safety, and stability, sharing this happiness with family and friends outside the country by transferring funds to support them.

Many opt for online transactions, while others visit various exchange houses to provide timely assistance to their loved ones.

Despite regional tensions, the holiday spirit remains untouched, as people enjoy the stability and security Qatar offers.

Shopping malls are open and well-stocked with a variety of goods at normal prices.

The public is also responsibly adhering to safety instructions from authorities, demonstrating a high level of compliance with awareness messages urging caution and the avoidance of unnecessary gatherings in open areas as a precautionary measure against any unforeseen events.

Consequently, many people chose to spend the holiday at various outlets across the country, such as shopping malls and popular souqs, enjoying the relaxed and cheerful atmosphere of Eid.

Family gatherings and visits continue, with parents and older relatives eager to give children the traditional Eidyaa (small cash gifts), which is an integral part of the celebration in the region.

Qatari majlis remain open to receive family and friends, allowing for the exchange of good wishes for Eid and the revival of long-cherished traditions.

These majlis are crucial in sustaining values and customs, passing them down from generation to generation through practice rather than mere instruction.

The gatherings at Qatari majlis are a central feature of Eid and a vital aspect of social life, bringing families and friends together, renewing connections, and preserving cherished traditions.

This year, amid exceptional regional circumstances, their role feels even more significant.

They provide calm, reassurance, and a sense of continuity, helping people maintain the spirit of celebration.

Hussein al-Haddad notes that the majlis has remained open with arrangements suited to the current situation.

The Qatari describes it as more than just a place for greetings; it is a space where people can experience the essence of Eid through warm welcomes, shared memories, coffee, sweets, and the presence of children.

They also engage in balanced and reassuring discussions about regional events.

Dr Badr al-Hajri sees Eid majlis gatherings as an extension of human relationships in Qatari society rather than a mere social custom, providing people with a quiet space away from the pressure of constant news, where conversations from Ramadan through Eid help build collective understanding, calm, and emotional reassurance without losing the essence of the occasion.

Qatari researcher Mansour al-Ruwaili highlights the cultural and heritage value of majlis gatherings, especially those tied to popular memory.

He said they preserve identity, connect younger generations to the past, and show how society can balance awareness of present realities with commitment to Eid joy and traditions.

Together, these examples show that as long as majlis gatherings remain open, Eid in Qatar continues to live through its deepest social and cultural meanings.



From Page 1

From virtual to viable, reshaping the scene

Technology adoption, strong brand positioning, and cost optimisation will be the driving forces for profitability.

"Cloud kitchens that effectively leverage machine learning (ML), AI (artificial intelligence) and big data analytics will outperform competitors and offer stronger returns," the analyst said, adding investing in tech-enabled cloud kitchens is one of the most promising ways to ensure long-term success in a competitive market.

ML is increasingly becoming a key enabler in the operation of cloud kitchens, offering various ways to improve efficiency, customer satisfaction, and profitability.

"Data-driven insights, from customer preferences to demand forecasting, al-

low us to fine-tune operations, ensuring customer satisfaction and business profitability," an official of a leading food delivery app said.

Sensing the lack of clear regulatory guidelines, which was seen as a major challenge, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) put in place in July last year procedures for obtaining the commercial licence for cloud kitchens, a move that is seen to regulate the sector as well as to enhance innovation and support digital ventures in the food industry.

The targets are restaurants seeking expansion without opening new branches; entrepreneurs and investors in the food

sector; and delivery companies and food app providers.

Cloud kitchens eliminate the need for expensive real estate in prime locations, allowing entrepreneurs to operate with significantly lower upfront costs.

Rent is often one of the biggest expenses for a traditional restaurant, but cloud kitchens can operate from smaller, industrial-style locations in non-prime areas, making them financially attractive.

Restaurant rent can reach 15%-22% of revenue in prime locations, forcing many food businesses in Qatar shift to cloud kitchens, which eliminate expensive dining spaces.

"Multiple virtual restaurant brands under one roof target different customer segments without increasing operational costs," the analyst said. "This multi-brand strategy can lead to higher revenue per square foot, making the business model highly attractive from a return-on-investment perspective."

The rise of AI-driven analytics helps cloud kitchen operators track customer preferences, optimise delivery routes, and maintain consistency in food quality.

Qatar's regulatory landscape for food safety and hygiene is robust, which ensures that cloud kitchens operating in the country maintain the highest standards,

thereby fostering trust among consumers.

According to the MoCI, the location must be appropriate for the type of kitchen (segmented or multi-brand); a valid building completion certificate for the site, along with approval from the relevant authority; mandatory compliance with safety and protection requirements, such as civil defence, fire prevention, and industrial ventilation; presence of separate water, electricity, and sewage networks that ensure no impact on public health; site must not be directly connected to permanent residential units or used for residential purposes; and the trade name and commercial registration number must be clearly displayed on the kitchen's front facade.

Trump says US considering 'winding down' Iran conflict

Natanz nuclear facility attacked

Reuters
Dubai/Washington

President Donald Trump said the US was considering "winding down" its military operation against Iran, as Iran and Israel traded attacks yesterday and Iranian media said the nuclear enrichment facility in Natanz had been attacked.

In a social media post, Trump said the US was close to meeting its goals but insisted that other countries should take the lead in policing the Strait of Hormuz, the shipping lane whose near-closure threatens a global energy shock.

Trump and his administration have sent mixed messages about US goals throughout the war, now entering its fourth week, leaving traditional US allies struggling to respond.

Trump has suggested the war could wind down as the Iranian threat was being eliminated, while at the same time US Marines and heavy landing craft head to the region. "We are getting very close to meeting our objectives as we consider winding down our great military efforts in the Middle East with respect to the regime of Iran," Trump said on Truth Social.

"The Hormuz Strait will have to be guarded and policed, as necessary, by other Nations who use it - The US does not!" he added. "If asked, we will help these countries in their Hormuz efforts, but it shouldn't be necessary once Iran's threat is eradicated."

More than 2,000 people have been killed in Iran since the US and Israel attacked on February 28, while American voters appear increasingly concerned at signs the war could expand.

Energy price shocks are fueling inflation, hitting consumers and businesses hard - a major political liability for Trump as he seeks to justify the war to the US



Iranians attend the funeral ceremony of Iran's Revolutionary Guards spokesperson Ali Mohammad Naini, who was killed in US-Israeli strikes, in Tehran, yesterday. (AFP)

public before November elections in which he could lose control of Congress. Trump had also accused Nato allies of cowardice over their reluctance to help open the strait. Some allies have said they will consider it, but most say they are reluctant to join a war that Trump started without consulting them.

Iranian media said US-Israeli forces had attacked the Shahid Ahmadi-Roshan Natanz enrichment complex yesterday morning. Technical experts found no radioactive leaks had occurred and nearby residents were not at risk. Israel said it was unaware of such a strike while the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said it was investigating.

Iranian media later reported strikes on a passenger terminal in the southern port of Bushehr and an empty passenger ship at nearby Kharg Island.

The island, where Iran loads nearly all its oil exports, is seen as a potential target if Washington decides to hit Iranian energy or to use ground troops to seize it.

Iran said it fired drones at US bases in the UAE and Kuwait used to stage attacks on Iranian islands in the Gulf.

Israel also attacked Beirut, saying it was targeting the Lebanese Hezbollah fighters, part of the deadliest spillover from the war on Iran. Hezbollah fired on Israel in support of Tehran on March 2.

Defence Minister Israel Katz said Israel was "determined to continue leading the attack against the Iranian regime and to thwart its strategic capabilities until any security threats to Israel and US interests in the region are removed."

Israel also said it had attacked Tehran, Karaj, west of the capital, and the central city of Isfahan. Three members of a family were killed in a strike on a residential building in the city of Ramsar, Iranian media reported.

Air raid sirens in Israel warned of incoming missiles from early morning, sending millions to shelters as the blasts of interceptions rang out from above. There



Khalil Mirzahosseini, whose brother Mahdi is missing, gestures during an interview with Reuters at the site of a destroyed building that was damaged by a strike, in Tehran, yesterday. (Reuters)



Members of a Red Crescent rescue team work at a building that was damaged by a strike, in Tehran, yesterday. (Reuters)

were no immediate reports of casualties.

Iran fired two ballistic missiles towards the US-British military airport on the island of Diego Garcia, 3,800km away in the Indian Ocean but did not hit the base, the Wall Street Journal reported. A source at Britain's defence ministry said the attack had occurred before the government gave specific authorisation on Friday for

the US to use British military bases to carry out strikes on Iranian missile sites.

Natural gas prices in Europe surged as much as 35% this week after Israel hit Iran's biggest gas field and Iran responded by attacking neighbours' energy infrastructure. The European Union urged members to lower gas-storage targets and start refilling reserves gradually to curb demand, the Fi-

nanial Times reported on Saturday.

The Strait of Hormuz, conduit for around a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas supplies, has been effectively closed to most shipping. Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi told Kyodo news agency that Tehran was ready to let Japan-related vessels pass through the strait, which carries around 90% of Japan's oil imports.

Iranians mark Eid al-Fitr amid strikes

AFP
Tehran

Thousands of Iranians held Eid al-Fitr prayers yesterday to mark the end of the Ramadan fast, as Tehran reported a strike on its nuclear enrichment plant and Israel threatened intensified bombardment.

Iran's supreme leader traditionally leads Eid prayers but Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, who came to power earlier this month after his father was killed in a US-Israeli strike, has remained out of the public eye.

Instead, the head of the judiciary, Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, attended prayers at central Tehran's Imam Khomeini grand mosque, which was filled to overflowing, with worshippers flooding the streets outside.

The previous evening, airstrikes had darkened the mood as the city celebrated Nowruz, the Persian New Year.

"The atmosphere of the New Year was spreading through the city. Places like Tajrish or Golestan Shahrak, where I went, were full of well-dressed and beautiful women buying flowers," said Farid, an advertising executive, reached by AFP through an online message.

"The Israeli attacks happening exactly at the moment of the New Year were deeply upsetting. The thought that some people could

be dying right at the New Year dinner table was painful."

Iran's key ally Russian President Vladimir Putin sent greetings to Khamenei, "wished the Iranian people strength on overcoming these severe trials and emphasised that during this difficult time, Moscow remained a loyal friend and reliable partner of Tehran."

According to Iran's atomic energy organisation, the US and Israel targeted a plant at Natanz in Isfahan province, which hosts underground centrifuges to enrich uranium for Iran's disputed nuclear programme and was already damaged in last year's June war.

"Following the criminal attacks by the US and the usurping Zionist regime against our country, the... Natanz enrichment complex was targeted this morning," the organisation said, in a statement carried by the Tasnim news agency.

No leakage of nuclear materials was reported, it added.

The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Rafael Grossi, called for "military restraint to avoid any risk of a nuclear accident", but the UN watchdog confirmed that no increase in off-site radiation levels had been reported.

Asked about Natanz, the Israeli military said it was "not aware of a strike".

After three weeks of a con-



Iranians take part in Eid al-Fitr prayers at the Grand Mosalla mosque in Tehran, yesterday. (AFP)

flict that has sent world energy prices soaring, blocked the Strait of Hormuz oil export route and strained Washington's ties with its closest allies, US President Donald Trump said once again that he was thinking of pulling back. "We are getting very close to meeting our objectives as we consider winding down our great military efforts in the Middle East," Trump posted on social media.

The White House press secretary said the Pentagon was looking at four to six weeks to complete its mission.

Nevertheless, according to US media reports, Washington is deploying thousands more

marines to the Middle East, in a possible sign of a ground operation, and Iran continues to carry out strikes on both Israel and its oil and gas-rich Gulf neighbours.

After Iranian missile fire at Israel overnight, the Israeli military said it had carried out strikes on what it called "regime targets" in Iran's capital, which has been under bombardment since a US-Israeli attack started the war on February 28.

"This week, the intensity of the strikes to be carried out by the IDF and the US military against the Iranian regime and the infrastructure on which it relies will rise significantly,"

Defence Minister Israel Katz said. As concerns grow over oil prices and global supply shortages, the US Treasury said it was temporarily lifting sanctions on Iranian oil already loaded onto vessels.

The authorisation allows for the delivery and sale of Iranian crude oil and other petroleum products loaded onto ships before March 20 and will last through April 19.

As energy analysts and consumers count the cost of attacks on oil and gas facilities in the Gulf, including the world's largest liquefied natural gas hub, Trump slammed Nato allies as "cowards" and called on them to secure the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran has choked the channel, which is crucial for around a fifth of the world's crude oil and liquefied natural gas during peacetime.

"The Hormuz Strait will have to be guarded and policed, as necessary, by other Nations who use it - The US does not!" Trump said.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said Tehran had imposed restrictions on vessels from countries involved in attacks against Iran but would offer assistance to others.

The standoff has sent crude oil prices soaring, with a barrel of North Sea Brent crude up more than 50% over the past month and now comfortably more than \$105 a barrel.

Bahrain cites Patriot interception in incident

Reuters
Dubai/Washington

A Patriot air defence system was involved in the interception of an Iranian drone over a residential area of Bahrain on March 9, Bahrain's government said yesterday, an incident that the US military had characterised as a direct Iranian drone strike.

At the time, Bahrain said 32 civilians had been injured, including children who required medical treatment, and the US military said an Iranian drone had struck a residential neighbourhood.

Yesterday, a government spokesperson said the kingdom had been subjected to multiple Iranian drone attacks that day, and that the interception over the Sitra district had prevented a drone strike and saved lives.

"During this incident, the Patriot air defence system intercepted an Iranian drone aerially," they said.

"Had the Iranian drone impacted the residential area, it would have resulted in significant loss of life."

US Central Command at the time denied reports from Russian and Iranian media that a US Patriot missile had failed to intercept an Iranian missile or drone and instead inadvertently struck a residential area.

Hezbollah says clashing with Israeli troops in two Lebanon border towns

AFP
Beirut

The Hezbollah group said its fighters clashed with Israeli forces in two south Lebanon border towns yesterday, in the third week of the latest war between the foes.

Lebanon was pulled into the broader Middle East war when Hezbollah began firing rockets into Israel on March 2 to avenge the killing of Iran's supreme leader

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Israeli-US attacks. Israel has responded with heavy strikes across Lebanon and ground incursions in the border area, killing more than 1,000 people according to Lebanese authorities.

Hezbollah in a statement said that for four hours yesterday, its fighters had been engaging in "direct clashes with forces from the Israeli enemy army in the town of Khiam with light and medium weapons" and rockets.

The strategic town, located

around 40 kilometres inland, overlooks swathes of southern Lebanon as well as parts of northern Israel, and was the first point into which Israeli forces advanced after the start of the latest war.

In recent days, the movement has repeatedly said it has targeted Israeli forces and vehicles in Khiam and nearby, or clashed with Israeli soldiers there.

Hezbollah also said its fighters clashed with Israeli forces in the coastal border town of Naqura, home to the headquarters of

peacekeepers from the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon.

The group said Israeli soldiers "tried to penetrate... towards the Naqura municipality building", adding that its fighters fought them with light and medium weapons. Israel kept forces in five south Lebanon areas it deemed strategic despite a November 2024 ceasefire that sought to end the previous war with Hezbollah.

One of those positions was in Labbouneh, just around three kilometres from Naqura.



A picture shows damaged buildings and destroyed vehicles following an Israeli airstrike that targeted the Haret Hreik neighbourhood in the southern suburbs of the Lebanese capital Beirut, yesterday. (AFP)



European nations decry 'increasing settler terror' in West Bank

AFP
Jerusalem

Diplomats from 13 European countries and Canada yesterday slammed growing "terror" by settlers against Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, after a surge in deadly attacks.

Since the start of March, six

Palestinians have been shot dead in settler attacks in the West Bank, according to a tally of data from the Ramallah-based health ministry.

"We strongly condemn increasing settler terror and violence by the Israeli security forces inflicted upon Palestinian communities," said a joint statement from the diplomatic missions of countries including France, Spain and

Britain. "We are especially appalled by the killings of Palestinians over these past weeks. This violence by settler militias, aimed at taking over land and creating a coercive environment, forcing Palestinians to leave their homes, must end." The statement called on the Israeli authorities to "prevent and prosecute the lethal violence, raids and attacks". Israel's military chief Lieu-

tenant General Eyal Zamir on Wednesday criticised the increase in settler attacks in the West Bank, calling it "morally and ethically unacceptable".

Alongside roughly 3mn Palestinians, more than 500,000 Israelis live in settlements and outposts in the West Bank, which are illegal under international law.

While most Israeli settlers do not engage in violence, a small but

militant fringe has been linked to attacks on Palestinians.

More broadly, violence in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967, has risen sharply since the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel triggered the Gaza war. It has continued despite the ceasefire and spiked since the start of the war against Iran.

According to an AFP tally based on Palestinian health ministry fig-

ures, Israeli troops or settlers have killed at least 1,050 Palestinians — many of them fighters, but also scores of civilians — in the West Bank since the start of the Gaza war. Israeli troops last week shot dead two children and their parents in a car, Palestinian authorities said. The Israeli military and police said soldiers opened fire on a vehicle over a perceived safety threat, killing four people inside.

Eid celebrations in Iraq



Children play at an amusement park on Eid al-Fitr, in the eastern Sadr City, suburb of Baghdad, yesterday. (AFP)

Iranian missile strikes Israeli town housing nuclear facility

AFP
Dimona

Israel's military said an Iranian missile yesterday struck the southern town of Dimona, home to a nuclear facility, with medics reporting around 30 people wounded.

AFP TV footage from the scene showed a large crater gouged into the ground next to piles of rubble and twisted metal.

Surrounding buildings had their windows blown out and facades heavily damaged as emergency workers combed through the site.

Iranian state TV said a missile attack on the town in the Negev desert was a "response" to an earlier strike on its own nuclear site at Natanz. The Israeli army said there was a "direct missile hit on a building" in Dimona and it was reviewing how the impact happened despite air defence interceptors being fired.

Magen David Adom first responders said their teams treated 33 people injured at a number of sites, including a 10-year-old boy with shrapnel wounds who was in serious condition but "fully conscious".

It said a woman of around 30 was in moderate condition, while 31 others were lightly injured by shrapnel or hurt on their way to shelters. Fourteen people were



An Israeli soldier uses a torch to inspect the damage after Iranian missile barrages struck Dimona, amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in southern Israel, yesterday. (Reuters)

also treated for shock. The organisation, Israel's equivalent of the Red Cross, released a video of a residential building ablaze in the town.

"There was extensive damage and chaos at the scene," paramedic Karmel Cohen said in a statement.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released a message wishing "a speedy recovery to those injured as a result of the fire from Iran."

Images shared by Israeli media showed an object hurtling out of the sky at high speed before crashing into the town.

Israeli police released pictures of officers in a building with a large

hole blown in the wall. Israel has maintained a policy of ambiguity about its nuclear programme, and the Dimona plant officially focuses on research.

The casualties in Dimona came after Iranian authorities said the nuclear facility at Natanz in the Islamic republic was struck in the US-Israeli bombing campaign.

Israel's army had earlier told AFP that it was "not aware" of the strike on Natanz, suggesting it could have been carried out by the US.

Iran has fired repeated barrages of missiles at Israel daily in retaliation for the US-Israeli attacks that started on February 28.

security media unit. "An officer was martyred," the Iraqi intelligence agency said in a statement, condemning the strike as a "terrorist attack carried out by rogue elements".

No group immediately claimed responsibility. An officer was also wounded in the attack, according to a security official and an emergency services source.

The attack occurred in the affluent Mansour neighbourhood, during celebrations marking Eid al-Fitr.

Earlier, an Iraqi security official told AFP the attack targeted a "telecommunications tower" used by the National Intelligence Services, which cooperates with US advisors deployed in Iraq as part of an international anti-militant coalition.

He later said the targeted build-

ing houses a unit responsible for monitoring and tracking the recent strikes and rocket fire across the city. Another drone, filming the operation, crashed into a private members' sports club popular with the Iraqi elite and foreign diplomats, according to the same source.

Late yesterday, a drone fell onto a home in southern Baghdad, according to a security source, who said that four people were wounded.

The source said earlier in the afternoon another drone crashed into residential buildings north of the city's airport, wounding four people including a woman.

Since the start of the war, pro-Iran armed groups have carried out several drone strikes against the US embassy and a logistics centre at the international airport.

From Gaza to Lebanon, doctor races against time to treat war-wounded children

AFP
Beirut

During almost three weeks of war in Lebanon, British-Palestinian doctor Ghassan Abu-Sittah has had no respite, telling AFP he has been working "against the clock" to save children wounded in Israeli bombardment.

At the American University of Beirut Medical Center, one of the capital's main hospitals, his paediatric intensive care unit has been receiving critical cases from across the country and desperate parents praying for their children's survival.

This week, Israeli strikes hit densely populated central Beirut areas not far from the hospital, with three badly wounded children pulled from the rubble.

Among them was an 11-year-old girl who had "metal shrapnel in her abdomen, and partial amputation of the foot", said Abu-Sittah, a plastic surgeon specialising in conflict injuries.

"She's now in a stable condition," added the doctor, who lives near the hospital and rushes there for emergencies.

Israeli strikes have pummeled Lebanon since Hezbollah fired rockets into Israel on March 2 to avenge the killing of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Israeli-US attacks.

Lebanese authorities say that 118 children have been killed and 370 others wounded.

Abu-Sittah said he had seen "partial limb amputations, brain injuries, shrapnel in the face, shrapnel in the eye, penetrating abdominal shrapnel, a lot of fractures, a lot of broken bones, a lot of soft tissue damage... and all of this in one child."

Such wounds mean "lots of surgeries", he added, dark rings under his eyes.

He recalled three sisters who were brought to the hospital around a fortnight ago.

"Their injuries are so bad, I have to take them to the operating room every 48 hours... to get rid of more of the dead tissue and clean the wounds so that at some stage, they're ready for the reconstructive surgery," he said.

Born in Kuwait to a Palestinian refugee father from Gaza and a Lebanese mother, Abu-Sittah has dedicated his life to treating wounded civilians in the region.

War is the "endemic disease" of the Middle East, said Abu-Sittah. But "you never get used to" children suffering, he said.

"A child should never become faceless, they never become numbers." His first experience of conflict was as a medical student in 1991 after the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait during the first Gulf War, and treating the wounded would soon become his mission.

He graduated in the United Kingdom and over the decades has worked repeatedly in Gaza and Lebanon, as well as in Iraq and Yemen.

After Palestinian group Hamas's October 2023 storming of Israel sparked war in Gaza, Abu-Sittah spent more than a month in the Palestinian territory. Lebanon this time is "a kind of small



British-Palestinian plastic and reconstructive surgeon Ghassan Abu-Sittah poses during a photo session in the Lebanese capital Beirut. (AFP)

version of Gaza", Abu-Sittah said.

While the death toll in Lebanon is far lower, health facilities and workers in the country have paid a heavy price, with the health ministry saying 40 health workers have been killed and 119 wounded.

ONGOING CARE

Abu-Sittah said four hospitals in Beirut's southern suburbs had been forced to evacuate, "one of which has a big intensive care unit for children", amid persistent Israeli bombardment of the area.

He said some badly wounded children have died because they were not transferred in time from parts of the country where health facilities are less equipped than those in Beirut.

"The Israelis are targeting the ambulances, and so moving kids from one hospital in Nabatiyeh or in the Bekaa is very dangerous," he said, referring to a city in south Lebanon and to east Lebanon's Bekaa valley area.

"It can only happen during the day, and it takes a long time," he added.

The Israeli military has accused Hezbollah of using ambulances "for military purposes", an accusation Lebanon's health ministry has described as "a justification" for crimes "against humanity".

In 2024, the doctor created the Ghassan Abu-Sittah Children's Fund, which aims to provide medical care in Gaza and Lebanon and ongoing support to wounded children after they leave hospital.

Abu-Sittah said his youngest patient in Lebanon now was a four-year-old boy whose parents and three siblings were killed, and who will need major long-term physical and psychological support after suffering a head wound and an amputated foot.

"Who's going to look after them when they go home?" Abu-Sittah said.

Many wounded children "come from poor backgrounds who don't have the means to manage all of this", he added.

"It's not just the body that's destroyed, it's the family unit that's destroyed."

Trump's peace board 'hands Hamas disarmament proposal'

Reuters
Jerusalem

Donald Trump's Board of Peace has presented Hamas with a written proposal on how it could lay down its weapons, two sources said, a step the Palestinian fighters have thus far refused to take as the US president pushes on with his plan for Gaza's future.

The proposal, first reported by NPR, was submitted to Hamas during meetings in Cairo over the past week, one of the sources said.

The talks were attended by Nikolay Mladenov and Aryeh Lightstone, the two sources familiar with the matter said. Mladenov is the Trump-appointed Board of Peace envoy to Gaza. Lightstone is a US aide to Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff.

Trump's Gaza plan, to which Israel and Hamas agreed in October, sees Israeli troops withdrawing from Gaza and reconstruction starting as Hamas lays down its weapons.

Mladenov on Thursday said that serious efforts were underway to bring relief to war-torn

Gaza, with a framework agreed by the mediators that could advance reconstruction in the enclave, much of which lies in ruins.

"It is now on the table. It requires one clear choice: full de-commissioning by Hamas and every armed group, with no exceptions and no carve-outs. In this season of hope, may those responsible make the right choice for the Palestinian people," Mladenov said on X in a post for the Eid al-Fitr holiday.

Representatives of Hamas were not immediately available for comment yesterday, the second day of the holiday.

Talks on disarmament had been placed on hold at the start of the US-Israeli war on Iran which began on February 28.

AMNESTY OFFER MAY BE ON THE TABLE

US officials have said that Hamas could be offered amnesty in any deal under which they agree to lay down any heavy weaponry and light arms including rifles.

Sources close to Hamas say the group would likely refuse to give up their rifles for fear of attacks by rival militias in Gaza, some of which have backing from Israel. Hamas and its rivals have staged

deadly attacks on one another since the October ceasefire.

One of the sources said much would depend on what is acceptable to Israel, which demands the group's complete disarmament.

Some of Hamas' prominent officials have outright rejected any disarmament over the past few months.

Israel has shown no sign of withdrawing its troops who are in control of around half of Gaza's territory, with Hamas keeping a firm grip on the other half of the enclave and its 2mn population, most of which has been rendered homeless by two years of devastating war.

The source said that amnesty and targeted investments in Gaza were being offered as incentives for Hamas, but said that it was unclear whether the Board of Peace would have funds to pay for it.

Trump garnered some \$7bn in pledges in February from countries, including some in the Gulf, before those same countries came under attack by Iran in a widening Middle East war. The source said that only a small amount of those pledged funds had actually been provided, without specifying sums.

Drone attack against Iraqi intelligence services kills one in Baghdad

AFP
Baghdad

An Iraqi officer was killed yesterday in a drone attack targeting an Iraqi intelligence services building in a residential Baghdad neighbourhood, the agency said, as the Middle East war reverberates across the country.

Iraq has been unwillingly drawn into the conflict with strikes targeting Iran-backed groups, which in turn have claimed near-daily attacks on US interests, mostly in Iraq but also across the wider region.

At around 10:00 am local time (0700 GMT) the Iraqi National Intelligence Service was attacked in a drone strike, said Saad Maan, head of the Iraqi government's se-

Eid al-Fitr gatherings in Cape Town



Girls and women attend an Eid al-Fitr prayer, in Bo-Kaap, Cape Town, South Africa, yesterday. **Right:** Children pose for photos after the Eid al-Fitr prayer, in Bo-Kaap. (Reuters)



South Africans attend march for 'sovereignty' after US pressure

AFP
Johannesburg

Thousands of South Africans marched yesterday to demand respect for their nation's sovereignty after months of pressure from US President Donald Trump on issues from trade to race relations. Trump has clashed repeatedly with South Africa's government, hitting the country with high tariffs, berating President Cyril Ramaphosa in the Oval Office over discredited claims of a "white genocide", and boycotting a G20 summit in Johannesburg last year.

Marking Human Rights Day in South Africa — the anniversary of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, when apartheid police opened fire on a crowd of black protesters — Ramaphosa's party called for marches "in defence of our sovereignty and democratic gains".

The marches come 10 days after South Africa summoned US Ambassador Brent Bozell just a month after his arrival in the country for "undiplomatic remarks".

"We cannot, therefore, have a white old man, who looks like he's deranged, tell us in our country, what to do in South Africa," African National Congress Secretary General Fikile Mbalula said yesterday.

Named as one of the favourites in the race for the ANC presidency — and thus potentially the country's leadership — at the December 2027 congress, he was speaking to thousands of supporters gathered near the iconic Hillbrow communications tower.

Crowds dressed in green and yellow — the ANC's colours — flooded the wide avenues lined with skyscrapers in the centre of the country's economic capital. Another march was organised later that day in Cape Town.

"We want to defend our country," said demonstrator Siyanda Moloi, a 34-year-old construction worker.



Supporters march during the "People's March," led by the African National Congress (ANC) in defence of the country's sovereignty and democratic gains in Johannesburg, yesterday. (AFP)



Supporters gather before the "People's March," led by the African National Congress (ANC) in defence of the country's sovereignty and democratic gains in Johannesburg. (AFP)

"I think they will get the message. You have to respect our president, our laws, our policies."

The US ambassador said it was hate speech for black South Africans to use a controversial apartheid-era chant, "Kill the Boer" — a word for the country's white Afrikaner population.

"I don't care what your courts say, it's hate speech," Bozell had said in some of his first public remarks in South Africa.

The ANC manifesto convening the rallies said "The principle of national sovereignty is under attack from foreign and domestic forces."

Following in Ukrainian Presi-

dent Volodymyr Zelensky's footsteps, Ramaphosa was ambushed during a White House press conference when Trump showed him video montages and photos containing a mix of inaccuracies and falsehoods about alleged attacks on white South Africans.

The Trump administration has also clashed with Ramaphosa's government over South Africa taking US ally Israel to the International Court of Justice for allegedly committing genocide in its war in Gaza.

Last year, Trump slapped 30-percent tariffs on most South African exports — the highest for sub-Saharan Africa.

The US Supreme Court recently overruled Trump's tariffs policy. But South Africa is among 60 countries facing a US trade investigation that could lead to further tariffs.

"They hate us," said demonstrator Noxolo Skomolo, a 53-year-old real-estate agent.

"We are protecting our constitution. We don't want them to bully us. This is our land and our country."

Trump has also criticised South Africa's racial justice policies, enacted to address historic inequalities left by the legacy of colonial rule and apartheid — but condemned by the American leader as discriminatory against whites.

The call to march condemned a "severe attack" on those policies. "Lies are being told about countries in order to justify punitive economic measures and direct foreign interference in domestic politics," it said, without naming the US.

March 21 marks the anniversary of the massacre in Sharpeville, south of Johannesburg, where at least 69 people were killed by security forces for demanding an end to the pass laws that limited black people's movement under white-minority rule.

US drones deployed to Nigeria alongside troops for intelligence

Reuters
London

The US military has multiple MQ-9 drones operating in Nigeria alongside 200 troops to provide training and intelligence support to the military, which is fighting militants across the north, US and Nigerian officials told Reuters.

The troops are not integrated within Nigerian units on the frontline and the drones are collecting intelligence and not carrying out airstrikes, officials from the two countries said. However, the US deployment, which follows US airstrikes targeting militants in northwest Nigeria in late 2025, shows the US getting back involved in tackling Islamic State and Al Qaeda-linked insurgencies that are spreading across West Africa.

The US military previously had a \$100 mn drone base in neighbouring Niger with about 1,000 troops monitoring militants across the Sahel region, but that was closed in 2024 after the Niger junta requested their departure, part of a broader rejection of western military support by countries in the Sahel region. An assault by suicide bombers on a northeastern Nigerian garrison town this week showed how a 17-year insurgency there can still strike urban centres.

Meanwhile, militants have stepped up their attacks in the northwest, near the border with Benin and Niger, where a long-running banditry crisis risks mutating into another operating zone for militants. A US defence official said the drones had been deployed alongside troops at the request of the Nigerians to collect intelligence. "We see this as a shared security threat," the official said.

Major General Samaila Uba, director of defence information at Nigeria's Defence Headquarters, confirmed that the US was operating assets from Bauchi airfield in the northeast.

"This support builds on the newly established U.S.-Nigeria intelligence fusion cell, which continues to deliver actionable intelligence to our field commanders," he told Reuters. "Our US partners remain in a strictly non-combat role, enabling operations led by Nigerian authorities."

"IDENTIFY, TRACK AND RESPOND"

Uba said the timeline for the US deployment in Nigeria would be determined in agreement by both sides. MQ-9 drones, which are sometimes known as Reaper drones and can loiter at high altitude for more than 27 hours, can be used for both intelligence gathering and airstrikes.

Neither Uba nor the US official would comment on specific cases where US intelligence had led to the Nigerians targeting militants, but Uba said that US forces were helping Nigeria "identify, track and respond to terrorist threats". Late last year, Reuters reported that aircraft based in Ghana had been conducting intelligence gathering flights for the US military over Nigeria.

PERSISTENT THREAT

The US — which has had a long partnership with Nigeria's military, providing training and selling weapons — said it carried out airstrikes in the northwest on Christmas Day to stop the targeting of Christians in the region.

Nigeria's government and experts on the conflict have rejected claims of a concerted anti-Christian campaign, saying it oversimplifies a complex crisis.

It was not immediately clear who carried out the March 16 attack on the garrison town.

Uba said it was still being investigated, adding that both Boko Haram militants and ISWAP, an Islamic State-allied faction, remain a persistent threat, adapting their tactics over time.

"We continue to assess that these organisations will seek opportunistic targets and may attempt to demonstrate relevance through high-visibility attacks," he said.

Kenya, Uganda open rail extension burdened by Chinese debt

AFP
Nairobi

The presidents of Kenya and Uganda met near their shared border yesterday to mark the multi-billion-dollar, long-delayed extension of a Chinese-built railway that has left Kenya heavily in debt.



Attendants react during the construction launch of the Kisumu-Malaba Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) line in Kisumu, yesterday. (AFP)

The Standard Gauge Railway, built from 2013 to 2019, connects the Kenyan port of Mombasa to its capital Nairobi, and on to the lake town of Naivasha, but China refused further lending before it could be extended to Uganda as planned.

Kenya now spends roughly \$1bn a year servicing Chinese debt, most of it borrowed to build

the railway. That is far more than the line generates in revenue -- around \$165mn last year -- even if passenger and cargo numbers have been growing strongly over the past year.

A report by Kenya's auditor general last year found more than \$260mn had been wasted just on penalties and interest from late debt payments.

Yet despite the controversy over the cost, Kenya has been keen to finish the line.

Kenyan President William Ruto said the rail link will "define generations", speaking at a ceremony in grand pomp and circumstance with his Ugandan counterpart Yoweri Museveni in Kisumu, near the Kenya-Uganda border.

Ruto argued the line would slash logistics costs that "undermine competitiveness" in east Africa.

If the ambitious building schedule is to be believed, the line is due to reach Kisumu by June 2027. The next phase will then take the line to Malaba, a town on the border.



Kenyan President William Ruto (right) and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni unveil a commemorative plaque during the construction launch of the Kisumu-Malaba Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) line in Kisumu, yesterday. (AFP)

"Cargo takes an average of 80 hours to move from Mombasa to Malaba and more than 100 hours to reach Kampala," the Ugandan capital, Ruto said.

"We cannot build prosperity on inefficiency."

Museveni said the line would reduce the inefficiencies in his own country's infrastructure.

"The railway is part of the ra-

tionalisation of our transport system, especially on the Uganda side, which is irrational and wasteful," the veteran leader told the ceremony.

Ruto broke ground on the next phase in Narok County on Thursday, arguing that it will create jobs and reduce road congestion.

"We have thought through this project (and)... its finance," he

insisted. Treasury estimates say the overall cost will be more than 500bn shillings (\$3.9bn), according to Kenya's Business Daily.

Kenya is not taking more cash from Chinese banks this time -- instead borrowing against future cargo taxes -- though it is partnering with Chinese transport firms to build the new phase.

China lent Kenya \$9.7bn between 2000 and 2019, according to the Chinese Loans to Africa Database by Boston University, with around half of that going to the railway.

It stopped lending from 2020 to 2023 as Kenya struggled to make repayments, at a time when China revised its broader lending strategy in Africa.

Kenya considers the railway extension crucial for strengthening trade through east and central Africa, hoping to reach landlocked countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan and the mineral-rich Democratic Republic of Congo.



Former FBI chief Robert Mueller dead at 81

AFP/Reuters
Washington

Robert Mueller, the former Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director who led a politically explosive investigation into Donald Trump, has died aged 81, triggering a gloating response yesterday from the US president.

His death was reported by MSNOW and a *New York Times* journalist who posted a statement attributed to the Mueller family.

No cause of death was given for Mueller, a decorated Vietnam War veteran who led the FBI in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US.

The *New York Times* last year reported that Mueller had Parkinson's disease.

Trump responded quickly on Truth Social, writing: "Robert Mueller just died. Good, I'm glad he's dead. He can no longer hurt innocent people!"

Mueller led the FBI for 12 years, starting just days before the September 11, 2001 Al Qaeda attacks on the United States, during which time he built up the bureau's counterterrorism mission.

After his tenure at the FBI, he was summoned back to public service by a senior Justice Department official four years later as a special counsel to take over an inquiry into Russia's election meddling after Trump fired then-FBI chief James Comey.

Mueller conducted a 22-month investigation that produced indictments against 34 people, including several Trump associates as well as Russian intelligence officers and three Russian companies, and a series of guilty pleas and convictions.

Mueller ultimately stopped short of a criminal indictment of the Republican president, bitterly disappointing many Democrats.

During his career as a prosecutor and FBI chief, Mueller displayed a patrician manner and sometimes wooden personality – just about the opposite of the bombastic Trump.

He was known by some as "Bobby Three Sticks" because of his full name – Robert Mueller III – a moniker that belied his formal bearing and sober approach to law enforcement.

His Russia inquiry, detailed in a 448-page 2019 report, laid bare what Mueller and US intelligence agencies have described as a Russian campaign of hacking and propaganda to sow discord in the US, denigrate 2016 Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and boost Trump, the Kremlin's preferred candidate.

Russia denied election interference.

"First, our investigation found that the Russian government interfered in our election in sweeping and systematic fashion," Mueller said during 2019 congressional testimony.

"Second, the investigation did not establish that members of the



This picture taken in 2019 shows then-Special Counsel Robert Mueller speaking on the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election, at the US Justice Department in Washington, DC. - AFP

Trump campaign conspired with the Russian government in its election interference activities," he said.

"We did not address 'collusion,' which is not a legal term. Rather, we focused on whether the evidence was sufficient to charge any member of the campaign with taking part in a criminal conspiracy. It was not," Mueller added.

In analysing whether Trump had committed the crime of obstruction of justice, Mueller looked at a series of actions.

These included Trump's attempts to have the special counsel fired and to limit the scope of the investigation as well as the president's efforts to prevent

the public from knowing about a 2016 meeting at Trump Tower in New York between senior Trump campaign officials and Russians.

Mueller pointedly did not exonerate the president, as Trump claimed.

"Based on Justice Department policy and principles of fairness, we decided we would not make a determination as to whether the president committed a crime," Mueller told lawmakers.

"The president was not exculpated for the acts that he allegedly committed," he added.

Mueller was named by the Justice Department's No. 2 official, Rod Rosenstein, to take over the Russia investigation.

The investigation, according to the report, unearthed "numerous links" between the Russian government and Trump's campaign and said the president's team "expected it would benefit electorally from information stolen and released through Russian efforts", referring to hacked Democratic e-mails.

Mueller, a longtime Republican, faced unremitting attacks by Trump and his allies on his integrity as they tried to discredit the investigation and the special counsel himself.

Trump used social media, speeches and comments to news media to assail Mueller, accusing him of running a politically motivated, "rigged witch hunt", going "rogue", surrounding himself with "thugs" and having conflicts of interest.

"It's all a big hoax," Trump said in 2019.

"Absolutely, it was not a hoax," Mueller told the congressional hearing, noting the numerous charges arising from the probe.

Trump's former campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, was convicted in 2018 on eight charges of financial wrongdoing and pleaded guilty to two others, receiving a 7-1/2-year prison sentence.

Longtime Trump adviser Roger Stone was convicted in 2019 of seven counts of lying to Congress, obstruction and witness tampering and sentenced to more than three years in prison.

Trump later used his executive clemency power to pardon them.

Trump's former national security adviser, Michael Flynn, entered a guilty plea to lying to the FBI. Trump also pardoned Flynn.

The Democratic-led House of Representatives at the time twice impeached Trump after Mueller had finished his work, though those actions did not grow out of the special counsel's findings.

Appointed by Republican president George W Bush to head the FBI, Mueller took over as its director one week before the September 11 attacks on the US by Al Qaeda militants using hijacked planes that killed about 3,000 people.

Democratic president Barack Obama later extended Mueller's appointment.

By the time Mueller left the position, his tenure was exceeded only by J Edgar Hoover's 48-year stint.

Mueller was credited with transforming the premier US law enforcement agency after Congress and an independent government commission determined that the FBI and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had failed to share information before the September 11 attacks that could have helped prevent them.

Mueller revamped the FBI into an agency centred on protecting national security in addition to law enforcement, putting more resources into counterterrorism investigations and improving cooperation with other US agencies.

Mueller and his wife, Ann, had two daughters.

Justice Dept seeks to drop criminal case tied to police killing of Breonna Taylor

Reuters
Washington

The US Justice Department (DOJ) has moved to drop a criminal case against two former police officers in Louisville, Kentucky, who were accused of falsifying a search warrant that led colleagues to fatally shoot Breonna Taylor, a black medical worker, in 2020.

In a court filing, DOJ lawyers said they no longer wanted to pursue the case following an internal review triggered by a federal judge's decision to twice downgrade the most serious charge from a felony to a misdemeanor.

A judge must approve the dismissal.

Joshua Jaynes, a former Louisville Police Department detective, and Kyle Meany, a former Lou-

isville sergeant, were accused of depriving Taylor of her civil rights by making false and misleading statements on an affidavit used to justify the search of Taylor's home.

The move is the latest by President Donald Trump's administration to undo civil rights and police misconduct cases started during Democratic president Joe Biden's term, including those tied to high-profile killings by law enforcement.

Taylor's killing was condemned in street demonstrations that year as part of a larger protest movement over racism and policing.

"Kyle is incredibly grateful for today's filing. He is looking forward to putting this matter behind him and moving forward with his life," Michael Denbow, a lawyer for Meany, said in a statement.

Attorneys for Jaynes did not immediately respond to requests for comment.



This picture taken on July 21 last year shows protesters, law enforcement members, and members of the press gather in front of the Gene Sander Federal Building in Louisville, Kentucky, on the day of the sentencing of former Louisville police officer Brett Hankison for violating the rights of Breonna Taylor, who was shot and killed by police officers in March 2020. - Reuters

Taylor was killed in March 2020 during a botched police raid after officers investigating a man Taylor had previously dated executed a no-knock warrant at her home.

Her boyfriend, who was carrying a legally owned firearm, shot at police, prompting them to fire back 22 times into the apartment.

Police found no drugs in the apartment. Taylor was unarmed.

Jaynes and Meany were not part of the team that went to Taylor's apartment.

An indictment accused them of filing an affidavit despite knowing they did not have legal justification for the search.

Both pleaded not guilty.

Judge: Pentagon restrictions on press unconstitutional

AFP/Reuters
Washington

A federal judge has ruled that the Pentagon's press access overhaul, which saw accreditations from a host of prominent media outlets withdrawn, violated the constitution.

The lawsuit by the *New York Times* in Washington, DC, federal court alleged that policy changes by the Defence Department last year gave it free rein to freeze out reporters and news outlets over coverage that the department did not like, in violation of the Constitution's protections for free speech and due process.

The government disputed that characterisation and said the policy is reasonable and necessary for national security.

US District Judge Paul Friedman said in his ruling that he recognised the importance of protecting troops and war plans but that it was "more important than ever that the public have access to information from a variety of perspectives about what its government is doing" in light of President Donald Trump's recent "incursion" into Venezuela and war with Iran.

Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said on social media that the government disagrees with the decision and will seek an immediate appeal.

Elements of the Pentagon policy are "unlawful because they violate the First and Fifth Amendments of the United States Constitution", Friedman said.

US media including the *Times* and Fox News, and a host of international news outlets such as AFP and AP, declined to sign the new policy in mid-October, resulting in the stripping of their Pentagon credentials.

Of the 56 news outlets in the Pentagon Press Association (PPA), only one agreed to sign an acknowledgment of the new policy, according to *The Times'* lawsuit.

Reporters who did not sign surrendered their press passes.

It was the latest in a series of measures by President Donald Trump and top officials against journalists and outlets that are often derided as "fake news" when their reporting displeases the administration.

The ruling striking down the policy comes amid the US-Israeli bombing campaign against Iran that began on February 28.

The court said that while national security must be protected, it was vital for the public to have information in light of the US war with Iran and its recent intervention in Venezuela.

"It is more important than ever that the public have access to information from a variety

of perspectives about what its government is doing – so that the public can support government policies, if it wants to support them; protest, if it wants to protest," the ruling said. "And decide based on full, complete, and open information who they are going to vote for in the next election."

New York Times spokesman Charlie Stadlander said the ruling enforces constitutionally protected rights for the free press and "reaffirms the right of *The Times* and other independent media to continue to ask questions on the public's behalf?" "Americans deserve visibility into how their government is being run, and the actions the military is taking in their name and with their tax dollars," he said in a statement on Friday.

The PPA hailed the ruling and demanded the "immediate reinstatement" of accreditations for journalists who refused to sign on to the new policy.

The new policy, enforced in October last year, was the latest in a series of moves restricting journalists' access to information from the Defence Department, the nation's single largest employer, with a budget in the hundreds of billions of dollars a year.

The department had announced earlier last year that eight media organisations including *The Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN, NBC and NPR had to vacate their dedicated office spaces in the Pentagon, alleging that there was a need to create room for other – predominantly conservative – outlets.

It also required journalists to be accompanied by official escorts if they go outside a limited number of areas in the Pentagon – another new restriction on the press.

And in January, Trump said he would sue what he has called the "failing" *New York Times* over an unfavourable opinion poll, after initially filing a \$15bn defamation suit last year.

He has fired off multiple defamation lawsuits against media companies, including the BBC, CNN, the *Wall Street Journal*, CBS and ABC.

Some have ended in multimillion-dollar settlements.

The Associated Press has a pending lawsuit against Trump administration officials over its removal from the White House press corps after the news agency decided to continue using the Gulf of Mexico's established name, while acknowledging Trump's executive order calling on US institutions to refer to it as the Gulf of America.

The AP said that the decision was illegal viewpoint-based discrimination, while the government countered that it had wide discretion over press access decisions for non-public spaces.

Rains threaten Hawaii dam, thousands told to evacuate

Officials in Hawaii have ordered some 4,000 people living near an ageing dam on the island of Oahu to evacuate the area immediately, following severe rains that have battered the region.

The century-old Wahiawa dam, located in the north of Hawaii's third largest island, which is home to the state capital Honolulu, "is at imminent risk of failure", the local emergency management agency warned.

There is "potential life-threatening flooding" in areas below the dam, it added.

"LEAVE downstream area NOW!" it said, recommending that people carpool to ease traffic congestion.

Hawaii Governor Josh Green said torrential rains have caused "serious flooding" and brought water in the reservoir to dangerous levels, prompting authorities to issue the alert.

"Lots of people had to evacuate. We've evacuated the whole region now," he said on social media.

Much of the US state, a remote archipelago in the Pacific Ocean, remains under a flood watch or warning, according to the National Weather Service, which reported particularly dangerous conditions in northern Oahu. - AFP



This handout photo released by the Honolulu Fire Department via Facebook shows the remains of a house against a bridge in Waiialua on northern Oahu. - AFP

Peru's crowded presidential race zeroes in on organised crime

AFP
Lima

For the 35 candidates vying to be Peru's next president, the question of how to beat back organised crime could be what it takes to break out ahead of the pack.

The record number of presidential hopefuls aiming to become the South American country's ninth head of state in a decade are campaigning amid a growing security crisis.

Homicides in Peru rose from about 1,000 in 2018 to more than 2,600 last year, and reported extortions surged from 3,200 to over 26,500 during the period, according to police data.

The rising crime rates coincide with the growing presence of international criminal groups, who compete with local gangs in extortion rackets and contract killings amid a perceived climate of impunity.

"Even the police are corrupt," Karen Santiago, a 29-year-old engineer, told AFP.

More than 27mn voters will be able to cast a ballot for president on April 12, along with choosing 130 deputies and 60 senators.

If no presidential candidate wins 50% of the

vote, a runoff election in June will pit the top two candidates against each other.

Far-right candidate Rafael Lopez Aliaga, who leads in opinion polls, has suggested building penal colonies in the Peruvian rainforest using "a natural fence made of shushupes" – otherwise known as South American bushmaster pit vipers.

"They will take care of security," he told Latina Television.

A former mayor of Lima and a supporter of US President Donald Trump, Lopez Aliaga also supports having US forces capture wanted criminals on Peruvian soil.

Second-place candidate Keiko Fujimori, daughter of Peru's former president Alberto Fujimori from 1990 to 2000, said she wanted detained criminals to earn their sustenance while incarcerated.

"We will force prisoners to work for their food, for their protein," she told the press.

Carlos Alvarez, a comedian and TV presenter who is polling among the top five candidates, said he believed Peru must withdraw from the American Convention on Human Rights in order to "apply the death penalty to hitmen".

"Those wretches don't deserve to live," he

told AFP during a tour of the port of Callao, near the capital Lima.

Candidates further behind in the polls have put forth more extreme ideas to distinguish themselves, like Paul Jaimes, who suggests rewards of \$29,000 and a promotion to police officers who capture or kill criminals.

Left-wing candidate Ronald Atencio, meanwhile, has revived the memory of paramilitary groups in Peru.

"We are going to form an annihilation squad against crime" with 500 elite police officers, Atencio told a recent business forum, though he clarified they would not conduct "extrajudicial executions".

Public security experts have sounded the alarm over some of the campaign initiatives.

"The punitive proposals like the ones mentioned are not effective for combating organised, transnational crime," Erika Solis, a criminologist at the Catholic University of Peru, said.

For Javier Llaque, the former head of Peru's National Penitentiary Institute, the solution is not "more laws" but rather "tougher sentences, changes to what already exists. We just have to act, but in a strategic manner".

"Candidates shouldn't try to be the toughest sheriff," he said.

Airports rush to feed unpaid TSA workers as belts tighten

By Doyinsola Oladipo and David Shepardson
Reuters

As government funding for the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) remains frozen in Congress, airports are running food drives and accepting donations for security screeners enduring their second stretch without pay in the last six months.

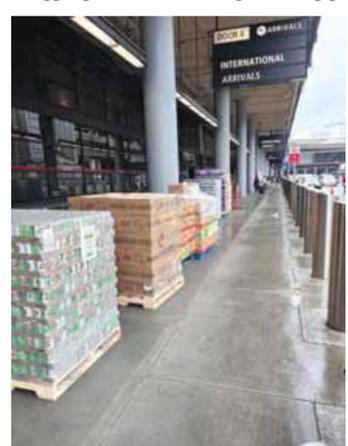
Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers scrimped and pinched pennies during last year's 43-day government shutdown, and many of those 50,000 workers are still paying off debts as the current funding lapse for the TSA's parent agency, the DHS, has stretched to five weeks.

Those workers are days away from missing a second full paycheck, but are being pressured to show up as screening times at some airports stretch on for hours.

"The 43-day shutdown in the fall, a lot of TSA officers didn't get paid for 50 days. So they're not recovered from that and that was only two or three months ago," said Kimberly Kraynak-Lambert, trustee of Pittsburgh's local chapter of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) union, which represents government workers.

Airports and officials are scrambling to help TSA staffers make ends meet to forestall a sharp rise in absences from screeners, who earn an average of \$61,000 annually, according to federal data.

Rebecca Wolf, president of AFGE Local 1127, who represents TSA officers at 47 airports across several western US states, said struggling workers are taking on side gigs



Pallets of food donations to help feed families of unpaid TSA workers are lined up in front of a terminal at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, in SeaTac, Washington. - Reuters

like making Amazon deliveries or driving for Lyft and Uber.

"Many have gone and applied for food stamps within their states," she said. "I have a couple of officers in one of my states that they're actually sleeping in their car and one has been evicted already."

The DHS acknowledged the screeners' hardships, with a spokesperson saying that "Democrats must reopen DHS now".

The union is alerting members nationwide to food drives and free pantries for groceries.

Airports like Minneapolis-St Paul and Phoenix are accepting donations such as gasoline gift cards, food, or essentials like baby goods.

Seattle-Tacoma's airport has opened a food pantry, while at Dallas Fort Worth International, supervisors are bringing food to checkpoints twice a week.

Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson Airport is giving out vouchers for one free meal per shift as TSA officers "continue to show up every day to protect millions of travelers, even as they face uncertainty at home", said Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens, in a statement.

Screeners are also getting free parking and public transport passes.

It is unclear when funding will be restored.

Democrats in Congress in February agreed to fund most of the government in exchange for withholding funds from the DHS following the high-profile killings of two US residents in Minnesota by immigration authorities.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune told reporters on Friday that a bipartisan group of senators have narrowed the remaining issues in the DHS funding talks, but it is not clear when they will reach a deal.

"A Transportation Security Officer selling plasma to keep the lights on is unconscionable. Tens of thousands of families turning to food banks because Congress refuses to do its job is a national disgrace," said Everett Kelley, national president of the AFGE.

Officials have noted that small US airports may have to shut due to a shortage of security screeners.

So far, 366 TSA officers have quit their jobs since the shutdown began, according to the DHS.

Workers presenting letters from the DHS to creditors asking for late fees to be waived or for payments to be deferred are finding less leniency this time around, said Kraynak-Lambert of Pittsburgh's AFGE 332.

Union officials say workers who call in sick must show proof with a note from a doctor.

"We can expect TSA job shortages to continue and grow as a result of the shabby treatment these workers have endured," said Cathy Creighton, director at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labour Relations.

Trump threatens to put ICE agents in airports

Reuters/AFP
Washington/New York

US President Donald Trump has threatened to deploy Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to US airports if congressional Democrats do not immediately agree to fund airport safety.

"I will move our brilliant and patriotic ICE Agents to the Airports where they will do Security like no one has ever seen before," Trump wrote in a social media post.

Transportation Security Administration (TSA) personnel are set to miss a second full paycheck on March 27 amid a partial government shutdown now in its 36th day as lawmakers clash over funding for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the parent agency for the TSA and ICE.

TSA officers have called in sick in recent weeks as paychecks have dried up.

The shortage of security agents has led to travel disruptions at major airports.

ICE agents are not specifically trained for airport security, which is the TSA's domain.

The ICE has played a central role in the Trump administration's immigration crackdown, drawing criticism from many Democrats, civil liberties advocates and immigration advocacy groups.

The agency, along with Customs and Border Protection (CBP), has deployed agents over the past few months to multiple areas as part of the crackdown, most recently to Minnesota in an operation that resulted in agents fatally shooting American citizens Renee Good and Alex Pretti.

Their deaths sparked a backlash and led the Trump administration to adopt a more targeted approach in Minnesota.

Trump this month fired Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem amid growing criticism of the administration's immigration tactics.

The US Senate is considering the nomination of Senator Markwayne Mullin, an Oklahoma Republican, as the next DHS secretary.

Trump has said that his immigration policies are intended to curb illegal immigration and improve national security.

In his initial post yesterday announcing the move, Trump took a dig at the Democrat-run state where Minneapolis is located, saying that if deployed to airports, ICE agents would immediately arrest illegal immigrants who have "totally destroyed... the once Great State of Minnesota".

Last year, the American Civil Liberties



Passengers wait in long TSA lines as a partial government shutdown continues, at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport in Atlanta, Georgia. - Reuters

Right: US President Donald Trump gestures as he steps from Air Force One upon his arrival in West Palm Beach, Florida. - Reuters



Union (ACLU) said that the TSA had provided lists of airport travelers to the ICE, calling the move a break from the TSA's prior practices.

Tech tycoon Elon Musk has meanwhile offered to pay security personnel at US airports.

"I would like to offer to pay the salaries of TSA personnel during this funding impasse that is negatively affecting the lives of so many Americans at airports throughout the country," he posted on X yesterday.

The TSA comprises about 65,000 employees, according to its website.

Various estimates put its annual payroll at somewhere between \$2.5bn and \$3bn.

More than 300 TSA employees have already left the agency since the shutdown began on February 14, according to the DHS, while US media reported unscheduled absences had more than doubled.

Some officers are taking on second jobs or relying on donations, union officials say, while several major airports are collecting gift cards and stocking food pan-

tries for TSA staff struggling without pay. "Numerous employees have reported to me that their bank accounts are at zero or negative," Johnny Jones, a Dallas-based official in the government workers' union AFGE, told USA Today.

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



This picture taken on March 4 shows Elon Musk arriving at a federal court in San Francisco, during his trial in a civil case for allegedly manipulating Twitter's stock price prior to his purchase of the company in 2022. - AFP

US jury finds Musk misled Twitter shareholders

AFP/Reuters
San Francisco

A federal jury in California has found that tech tycoon Elon Musk misled Twitter shareholders, driving down the company's share price as he was poised to buy it in a \$44bn deal.

The verdict in the class action securities lawsuit means the world's richest person could be ordered to pay billions of dollars, according to damages calculated by jurors.

Minutes after the judgment was announced, the entrepreneur's lawyers informed AFP that their client will appeal the decision, characterising it as a "setback".

After a three-week trial in a San Francisco federal court - which included in-person testimony from Musk - the jury found that two tweets posted in May 2022 by the Tesla and SpaceX chief executive contained false statements responsible for a plunge in Twitter's share price.

Investor Giuseppe Pampena had filed the suit on behalf of people who sold Twitter shares between mid-May and early October 2022.

Musk acquired the social media platform in late October 2022 and later renamed it X.

Jurors agreed that Musk violated a securities rule that bars false and misleading statements that sink a stock price, in this case that of Twitter, the verdict form showed.

Damages have yet to be calculated but Francis Bottini, a lawyer for the shareholders, estimated they could total about \$2.5bn.

"Musk's status as the world's richest man is not a free pass," he said in a statement. "If you're able to move markets with your tweets you're responsible for the harm you cause to investors."

Musk, who has a near-constant presence on X, did not immediately react to the verdict.

The judgment marks a rare legal defeat for Musk, often dubbed "Teflon Elon" for his ability to emerge unscathed from lawsuits he is expected to lose.

His lawyers, in fact, reminded AFP of this track record, noting that a Texas court cleared him just that same day in a separate defamation case.

In 2023, a jury in the same San Francisco federal court cleared him within hours of similar charges brought by Tesla shareholders, following his 2018 tweets claiming he had the funding to take the automaker private.

The civil complaint in California accused Musk of driving down Twitter's stock price to gain leverage to renegotiate the purchase price or get out of the deal

completely, causing people who sold shares to lose money.

Musk tweeted at one point during the process that the acquisition deal was on hold until Twitter executives could prove the percentage of "bots" - fake accounts run by software instead of real users - was as low as the social media platform claimed.

The plaintiffs contended that these statements were part of a scheme designed to pressure the board of directors into accepting a price lower than his initial offer - at a time when Tesla's share price was falling, meaning Musk would have to sell more of his shares to finance the deal.

Michael Litrak, a lawyer for Musk, countered that the billionaire's concern about bots was real, and that speaking out about the problem did not show Musk committed or intended to commit fraud.

Musk abandoned his effort to get out of buying Twitter in late 2022 after the company took him to court to uphold the contract.

Musk has since merged the social media platform with his artificial intelligence startup xAI and his private space exploration firm SpaceX.

Forbes magazine early this month estimated Elon Musk's net worth at \$839bn, a figure based primarily on his stakes in his portfolio of companies including Tesla and SpaceX.

Cuba beckons, but Miami entrepreneurs mostly cautious

Havana announced this week that it would allow Cuban emigrants to invest to address the communist island's severe economic and energy crises.

However, in Miami, the epicentre of the diaspora, entrepreneurs are generally reluctant.

"I don't think a single businessman, not a single Cuban in exile, will invest in this island where there is no legal security," said Ivan Herrera, director of the Univista insurance company, calling the initiative "a huge scam".

The entrepreneur, whose grandfather was a political prisoner for 12 years before fleeing to Miami, refuses to invest under what he calls the "criminal" government.

This opening by Havana, a serious breach in the island's anti-capitalist system, comes as the Cuban economy teeters on the brink of collapse.

The shortage of essential goods is worsening daily, and power outages have multiplied since President Donald Trump's administration cut off Venezuelan oil supplies.

Carlos Saladrigas, president of the human resources company Regis HR Group and the think tank Cuba Study Group, viewed the move as a step in the right direction, but said that Cuban authorities needed to resolve many unanswered questions to attract investment.

"Reintegrating the diaspora into the country's economic life is essential for Cuba's future," he said.

"But behind their words lies an entire legal framework that needs to be reformed," Saladrigas said.



Boxes of medical supplies from the Nuestra America Convoy sit on carts awaiting check-in and loading at Miami International Airport in Miami, Florida, ahead of the delegation traveling to Cuba with humanitarian aid. - AFP

rigas said. "The government has to say: 'We are going to discard traditional socialism and a centrally planned economy and adopt market-based measures'".

Hugo Cancio, owner of the digital media outlet OnCuba and Katapul, an online supermarket that allows the purchase and delivery of

products in Cuba, was more enthusiastic.

"Of course I would invest in Cuba, and I would do so with great pleasure," he said. "Do you know why? Because it's not just an investment; I would be helping to rebuild my country."

However, Pedro Freyre, a Cuban-American lawyer specialising in the island's regulatory framework, considers Cuba an "extremely risky" investment destination.

He justified this view by citing a dysfunctional banking system, a highly unstable currency, the absence of the rule of law guaranteeing private property, the failure of the centrally planned economy, and "completely dilapidated" infrastructure.

"It's very difficult to say to yourself, 'I'm going to take the money I've saved my whole life to open a McDonald's on the Malecon (Havana's famous seaside promenade) when I don't know if there's electricity, water, or if the Malecon is going to collapse into the sea,'" he said.

Adding to these obstacles is the fact that, under the American embargo imposed since the 1960s, Washington must allow its residents to conduct business on the island.

Herrera hoped to be able to invest "when there is a free Cuba", to support his compatriots who lack housing, infrastructure, sanitation, and electricity.

"Here in Miami, people and very large companies built the city while we arrived with nothing," he said. "In the same way, we can build and rebuild Cuba." - AFP

Hundreds of dogs and cats rescued from Los Angeles animal shelter

AFP
Los Angeles

Hundreds of dogs and cats were rescued on Friday from an animal shelter north of Los Angeles in potentially the largest such operation in US history, officials said.

The animals were found living in poor conditions at a facility in Lake Hughes, 70 miles (110km) north of Los Angeles.

US media identified the shelter as Rock N Pawz.

More than 70 workers with the Los Angeles County Department of Animal Care and Control were involved in the rescue, along with members of animal welfare organisations.

The organisation originally reported 700 animals were res-

cued during the operation, later modifying the total down to 316 - 250 dogs and 66 cats - after performing an in-house count.

The animals had been housed in cages with sporadic feeding and no water as the region was experiencing a major heatwave, said Marcia Mayeda, the department director.

"She had been taking in more animals than she could properly care for," Mayeda said at a press conference at the scene, referring to the shelter owner. "This resulted in a very negligent and dangerous situation for the animals, who needed to be removed for their safety."

The animals in serious condition were taken to veterinary centres, while others went to shelters for monitoring and treatment.



Eid al-Fitr in Indonesia



Devotees listen to a preacher's sermon after attending the Eid al-Fitr prayers at city hall in Surabaya, Indonesia, yesterday. **Right:** Devotees attend Eid al-Fitr prayers, marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan, in Jakarta yesterday. (AFP)



Iran ready to let Japanese vessels transit Hormuz, Kyodo reports

Reuters
Tokyo

Iran is ready to let Japanese-related vessels pass through the Strait of Hormuz, a vital artery for global oil supplies, Kyodo news reported, citing Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi.

Tehran has started talks with Tokyo, including with Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, about possibly opening the strait, Araqchi told the Japanese news agency in a phone interview on Friday.

Japan's foreign and trade ministries and the Prime Minister's Office did not pick up calls from Reuters yesterday seeking comment on the report.

"Iran is, of course, ready to support the passing of Japan-related vessels through the Strait of Hormuz," if Japan seeks its reopening of the strait, Araqchi told Kyodo.

Japan gets around 90% of

its oil shipments via the strait, which Tehran has largely closed during the US-Israeli war on Iran. A spike in global oil prices sparked by the war, which enters its fourth week yesterday, has prompted Japan and other countries to release oil from their reserves.

Japan's actions are limited under its postwar pacifist constitution, but 2015 security legislation allows Japan to use force overseas if an attack, including on a close security partner, threatens Japan's survival and no other means are available to address it. Araqchi, a former ambassador to Japan, said Tokyo has a friendly relationship with Tehran, expressing hope that it would play a role in ending what he called unjustifiable and illegal "invasion" of his country.

The US does not seem ready to open conversations, Araqchi said, adding that Iran wants an end to the war, not a ceasefire, and is seeking a commitment that it would not be attacked.

Two nuclear power plants 'meet conditions' to restart: Taiwan

AFP
Taipei

Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te said yesterday two nuclear power plants "meet the conditions for reactivation", as the energy import-dependent island moves to strengthen its domestic power generation capacity.

Taiwan relies almost entirely on imported fossil fuels to meet its energy needs, in particular its critical semiconductor sector, and the Middle East conflict has unsettled global supply lines.

Lai's Democratic Progressive Party has long pushed for a "nuclear-free homeland", partly fuelled by concerns about nuclear safety after Japan's Fukushima disaster in 2011.

"The international community needs low-carbon electricity, and we must also consider the electricity required for computing power in the era of artificial intelligence"

Nuclear power provided a significant chunk of the island's electricity supply for about four decades before the last reactor was shut down.

Opposition parties say continued supply is needed for energy security.

Taiwan shut down its last operating reactor at the Ma'anshan, commonly known as the third nuclear power plant, in southern Pingtung county in May last year, in line with the ruling party's policy to phase out nuclear power by 2025.

Another one, known as the second nuclear power plant was decommissioned in 2023 after

its operating permit expired.

Lai said at a business event yesterday the "second and third nuclear power plants meet the conditions for restarting", without specifying what the requirements are.

He said state utility Taipower, which operated the plants, would submit restart applications to the Nuclear Safety Council by the end of the month for review.

The council will consider safety issues and whether there is public consensus on restarting the plants during the review, he added.

Deputy economic minister Ho Chin-tsang said at a parliament

session on Friday that the Ma'anshan plant could restart as early as 2028, although he did not provide a timeline for the second plant.

"The international community needs low-carbon electricity, and we must also consider the electricity required for computing power in the era of artificial intelligence," Lai said.

He assured the public that Taiwan's oil and natural gas supplies are sufficient for March and April. "May is also almost problem-free, just a little short. In June... additional oil and gas purchased from the US will come to Taiwan."

Taiwan's legal requirements mandate 90 days of oil reserves and 11 days of natural gas reserves.

Lai said the island currently holds more than 100 days of oil and 12 to 14 days of gas.

South Korea factory fire death toll rises to 14

AFP
Seoul

Fourteen people were killed in a fire in a car parts factory in South Korea that also injured 59 others, authorities told AFP yesterday, updating a previous toll of 11 fatalities.

Fire crews were initially unable to enter the factory in the central

city of Daejeon to look for survivors due to the risk of the building collapsing.

The response was also hampered by sodium stored at the site, which can explode if improperly handled, according to South Korea's Yonhap news agency.

Around 170 workers were at the plant when the fire broke out at about 1:00pm (0400 GMT) Friday, according to Yonhap.

"We can confirm the latest death toll has risen to 14, with no one reported missing," an official from the interior ministry's department that handles fires and other disasters told AFP.

Officials have not said what may have caused the fire, which spread rapidly. A witness told Yonhap about hearing an explosion.

Fire crews could be seen shooting water onto the site from cranes while a thick column of black smoke filled the sky in images released by Yonhap.

The fire was extinguished by yesterday afternoon.

President Lee Jae Myung visited the site and met bereaved families, promising to provide full support for victims and their families, Yonhap said. "The government will thoroughly investigate the cause of the incident and prepare fundamental measures to prevent such tragedies," Lee wrote on X.

Wealthy South Korea has a patchy record on labour safety, with more than 10,000 worksite deaths between 2000 and 2024, according to official statistics.

Vietnam elects 18 non-Communist Party MPs

AFP
Hanoi

Vietnam announced yesterday that 18 non-Communist Party members were elected to its 500-seat parliament, calling the result "a meaningful expansion of democracy".

The National Assembly is the country's top legislative body, but serves mainly to ratify decisions made by the ruling Communist Party.

Voters cast their ballots on Sunday and official results yesterday showed only 18 elected deputies were not members of the Communist Party, up from 14 in the last election five years ago.

Vice-Chair of the Committee for Deputy Affairs Ta Thi Yen called the increase "modest", adding "it marks a meaningful expansion of democracy and representation within the National Assembly".

The government said more than 99% of 76mn voters had cast their ballots — a typically

high official turnout.

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

Among the new parliament's first tasks when it sits next month

will be to confirm senior leaders already selected by the party at its twice-a-decade congress in January.

Top leader To Lam was reaffirmed as general secretary, but he is widely expected to become president as well — a post that requires approval by lawmakers.



Nguyen Thi Thanh (left), Permanent Vice-Chairwoman of the National Election Council, attends a press conference announcing the results of the elections, at the National Assembly Building in Hanoi yesterday. (AFP)

Trump's Mideast muddle could play into Xi's hands at planned summit

AFP
Beijing

China will be in a stronger position to extract concessions from Donald Trump when the US president finally visits Beijing after becoming entangled in his Middle East war, analysts say.

Trump had been due in the Chinese capital at the end of this month for talks with President Xi Jinping, but has delayed his trip by several weeks to deal with the fallout from the war.

His decision last month to join Israel in strikes on Iran has plunged the Middle East into violence, pushed energy prices to years-long highs and seeded fears of global supply shortages due to Iran's effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

With Trump struggling to define how the intervention will end and traditional allies reluctant to

back him, the US leader may come to China needing a diplomatic win.

"A show of US force that was meant to intimidate Beijing has instead served to puncture the illusion of US omnipotence," said Ali Wynne, a senior adviser focusing on US-China ties at the International Crisis Group think-tank.

"Unable to reopen the Strait of Hormuz alone, Washington now needs its principal strategic competitor to help it manage a crisis of its own making," Wynne said.

Trump said on Tuesday he expects to travel to China in "five or six weeks". The prospective summit would aim to formalise a truce on tariffs that Trump and Xi shook hands on at a meeting in South Korea in October.

But Trump's weakened position could help Beijing argue for deeper tariff cuts and limit Washington's ability to push for change on other trade issues like access to critical minerals.

New leverage

Top Chinese and American trade officials held what they called "constructive" talks in Paris last weekend that were seen as setting the stage for a Xi-Trump summit.

Any chances of major breakthroughs on trade "seem limited", according to Dan Wang, a director on Eurasia Group's China team, with bilateral trust low after years of disputes over trade, technology and rights.

New US trade investigations into excess industrial capacity in 60 economies including China have also drawn Beijing's ire.

The Chinese leader will benefit from more strategic leverage over Trump as the war drags on — at least in the near term, analysts told AFP.

Beijing has so far ignored Trump's call for help in reopening the Strait of Hormuz, a vital artery for global oil and gas shipments.

Nor has it relaxed its tight control on exports of rare earths, an industry that China dominates

and provides certain critical minerals needed in US weaponry.

US military demand for certain "heavy" rare earths far exceed commercial needs, Jason Bedford, visiting senior research scholar at the National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute, told AFP.

They are used for equipment including drones, jet fighters, missile guidance systems and radar, said Bedford.

While the size of US military stockpiles is a "closely guarded secret", he said, "in theory, (China) could certainly disable new weapons production".

The absence of announcements on Hormuz or rare earths suggests "no concrete results were made during the trade talks" in Paris, said Wang of Eurasia Group.

Xi and Trump "have other chances to meet this year", but "the prospects of getting breakthroughs beyond lower tariffs seem limited", she told AFP.

'Not reliable'

China could also calibrate its actions to make Trump's domestic position shakier at a time when a majority of Americans already oppose military action in the Middle East.

Trump and his negotiators "want China to buy US agricultural products, which is important to the midterm elections for the Republicans", said Wu Xinbo, director of the Center for American Studies at Shanghai's Fudan University.

"If you cannot stabilise relations with China, you have to face some big challenges," Wu said.

Any Xi-Trump summit is unlikely to succeed in changing either side's broader geostrategic aims.

On Thursday, the Trump administration announced that it is considering easing certain sanctions targeting Iranian oil to curb rising prices — a move experts say could benefit China.

China is believed to be the main

buyer of sanctioned Iranian oil, making it Tehran's "main economic lifeline", Henry Tugendhat, a China expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said at a forum on Wednesday.

Beijing also has "no incentive" to stop selling weapons to Iran as long as the US continues to provide arms to self-ruled Taiwan, Tugendhat said.

On the streets of Beijing this week, locals were circumspect about a visit from the US president.

"Trump's personality is that he changes every day," a 50-year-old IT worker surnamed Huang told AFP.

"Even if he comes, he may have reached agreements with you, but he will change his mind," he said.

"He is not reliable."

Still, Trump's willingness to come to Beijing is a positive sign for 32-year-old finance worker Yang, who said: "I think the US still hopes to maintain a positive and friendly attitude towards China."

Bangladesh rushes to secure \$2bn loan

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh is pushing to secure loans of around \$2bn from multilateral agencies for tackling energy security concerns amid soaring global fuel prices driven by the Mideast war.

The government has already taken several measures to curb fuel consumption, including halting production at most fertiliser factories.

The government has now adopted a three-pronged approach to ensure sustainable energy supply, the prime minister's finance and planning advisor Rashed Al Titumir said Saturday.

"Part of that is securing loans," Titumir told AFP. "The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has committed \$1.3bn, while the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has pledged \$500mn as budget support," Al Titumir said, adding the government was pursuing the loans for early disbursement.

The government may also approach the World Bank.

"As we want to keep foreign currency reserves intact, we have limited options other than seeking loans," Al Titumir said.

The government is also exploring alternatives for sourcing energy from "North America, South America or Africa".

"We are exploring all available options for alternative energy sources," Al Titumir said.

Bangladesh – which imports 95% of its oil and gas needs – has not raised electricity and fuel prices despite the global surge.

Most crude fuel is sourced from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, while around 35% of gas supply also comes from the Middle East.

An attack on a site at Qatar's Ras Laffan LNG hub could disrupt gas supply, given the country's reliance on the facility.

Since the outbreak of the Mideast war, authorities have taken several measures to curb fuel consumption.

These include setting limits on fuel purchases, halting production at most fertiliser factories, deploying police to patrol filling stations, and using the navy to escort LNG shipments.

Himalayan glaciers melting twice as fast, threatening billions: report

AFP
Kathmandu

Himalayan glaciers that provide a vital source of fresh water for around two bn people are melting twice as quickly as in 2000, a report warned yesterday.

The Hindu Kush-Himalayan range, which stretches from Afghanistan to Myanmar, holds the largest reserves of ice and snow outside the Arctic and Antarctica and feeds at least 10 major Asian river systems that underpin

water, food and energy security across the continent.

But a third of that ice is in zones highly vulnerable to rapid warming.

The average rate of ice loss in the region has nearly doubled from about 34cm (13 inches) per year before 2000 to 73cm annually since, according to two studies released by the Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD).

"This isn't a distant problem, it's a crisis unfolding in real time," ICIMOD director general Pema

Gyamtscho said.

"We must scale up monitoring and invest in adaptation now."

The region has lost up to 27m (89 feet) of ice thickness since 1975, the studies said – with about 12% of its glacier area disappearing between 1990 and 2020.

Rising temperatures mean glaciers are "unable to regain their mass," lead author Farooq Azam told AFP.

He urged cuts to black carbon emissions, released by the burning of fossil fuels, waste and other materials, that accelerate melting.

India confident of meeting summer power demand

Reuters
New Delhi

India does not expect the Middle East crisis to affect its ability to meet soaring power demand this summer, as the country has lined up coal and renewable capacity to make up for any gas supply issues, a senior government official said yesterday.

Although gas accounts for only around 2% of India's total power generation, the South Asian country uses about 8 gigawatts (GW) of gas power during peak-demand periods or heat waves.

"We are quite hopeful that this (Middle East) crisis is not going to impact us in terms of meeting demand," India's Power Secretary Pankaj Agarwal told Reuters on the sidelines of a power industry event.

The US-Israeli war on Iran has hit gas supplies, forcing suppliers to declare force majeure notices to customers and leaving India, the world's second-largest liquefied petroleum gas importer, facing its worst cooking gas crisis



A general view of electricity pylons in Mumbai, India. (Reuters/File photo)

in decades as shipments through the Strait of Hormuz have been almost halted.

India is expecting a 4GW coal power plant in the western state of Gujarat to be restarted and additionally has a lot of wind energy projects on the verge of supplying electricity to the grid, Agarwal said.

There is enough solar power available to meet the peak day

time power demand of 270GW and the government is also working on speeding up completion of battery energy storage projects to meet evening demand, he added.

"About 2.5 gigawatt hours of battery storage is already under commissioning, and we hope that gets commissioned very fast," Agarwal said.

Meanwhile, India has produced

1bn metric tonnes of coal for a second successive year, the coal ministry said on Saturday, which could be enough to meet summer power demand.

India has asked its domestic coal-based utilities to be prepared for supplying uninterrupted power in the absence of gas supplies, Reuters reported earlier this month.

India blocks release of Oscar-nominated Gaza film

AFP
New Delhi

India has blocked the release of *The Voice of Hind Rajab*, a film about the killing of a five-year-old Palestinian girl by Israeli forces, the movie's distributor told AFP yesterday.

The Oscar-nominated documentary by French-Tunisian director Kaouther Ben Hania recounts the real-life death of Hind Rajab in Gaza last year as her family attempted to flee during Israel's war with Hamas.

Manoj Nandwana of Jai Viratra Entertainment, the film's Indian distributor, said a member of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) told him that the film's theatrical release would "hamper India's relations with Israel".

"After screening it for the board it was clear to me that they would not clear it for release in India," Nandwana told AFP yesterday, adding that he was not officially notified of the denial.

"The film has been released all over the world including in Israel. Why is it bad or sensitive for Indians?" Nandwana asked. "It's strange."

The film was, however, screened at an international film festival in the eastern Indian city of Kolkata in November last year,

Nandwana said.

New Delhi has expanded ties with Israel in defence, agriculture, technology and cybersecurity while balancing diplomatic interests in the Middle East and historically supporting Palestinian statehood.

Last month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Israel for two days – the first trip by an Indian premier in over two decades – just days before Israel and the US began a campaign of airstrikes on Iran.

Parliamentarian Shashi Tharoor from the opposition Congress party said blocking the film was "disgraceful".

"In a democracy, screening a film is a reflection of our society's freedom of expression and has nothing to do with government to government relations," he said in a post on X.

"This practice of banning films or books because of the offence they might cause to foreign countries must stop immediately. It's unworthy of a mature democracy."

The Voice of Hind Rajab was nominated for Best International Feature at this year's Oscars but lost to the Norwegian family drama *Sentimental Value*.

Last year, the film won the Silver Lion grand jury prize at the Venice Film Festival where it left audiences in tears at its premiere.

India PM speaks to Iran president

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a post on X yesterday that he had spoken with Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian. Modi condemned attacks on critical infrastructure in the Middle East region, while also reiterating the importance of ensuring that shipping lanes remain open and secure. "Appreciated Iran's continued support for the safety and security of Indian nationals in Iran," Modi added. (Reuters)

Iran 'unsuccessfully' targeted Diego Garcia

AFP
London

Iran was "unsuccessful" in targeting the joint UK-US Indian Ocean military base at Diego Garcia, a UK official source confirmed to AFP yesterday, after the Wall Street Journal reported Tehran fired two ballistic missiles at it.

Diego Garcia, which is around 2,500 miles (4,000km) from Iranian territory, is one of the two bases the UK has allowed the United States to use for "defensive operations" in its war against Iran.

On Friday, the UK government said it would allow Washington to use its bases in Diego Garcia and Fairford in southwest England to target Iranian "missile sites and capabilities being used to attack ships in the Strait of Hormuz".

The UK official source confirmed that Iran's "unsuccessful targeting of Diego Garcia" took place before Friday's announcement.

The source did not confirm additional details about the attack.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Friday, citing US officials, that while neither of the two ballistic missiles hit their target, the launch suggests that Tehran has missiles with longer ranges than previously thought.

The Pentagon declined to comment. One of the missiles failed in flight, and the other was targeted by an interceptor fired from a US warship, though it was not clear if the missile was hit, the WSJ reported.

"Iran's reckless attacks, lashing out across the region and holding hostage the Strait of Hormuz, are a threat to British interests and British allies," a UK Ministry of Defence spokes-

person said Saturday.

"This government has given permission to the US to use British bases for specific and limited defensive operations."

Iran has "always had missiles of that sort of range that we've known about, maybe not declared," former UK Royal Navy commander and defence expert Tom Sharpe told AFP.

The attack "shows that they can still move these mobile launchers around, undetected, spin up and fire without being struck," said Sharpe, adding however that they would not be a "game changer" in the war.

US President Donald Trump has been critical of UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer's response to the war against Iran, initially refusing to be involved before allowing Washington limited use of the two bases.

American forces have stationed bombers and other equipment at Diego Garcia, a key hub for Asia operations, including the US bombing campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Trump has also slammed Britain's decision to hand back the Chagos Islands to Mauritius after holding it since the 1960s. Under that agreement, the UK would maintain a lease for the base on Diego Garcia, the largest of the islands.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told his UK counterpart Yvette Cooper on a Thursday phone call that any US use of British bases would be considered "participation in aggression," according to Tehran's foreign ministry.

In turn, Cooper warned Araghchi "against targeting UK bases, territory or interests directly," according to a UK foreign office statement.

Two charged over attempt to enter UK submarine base

An Iranian man and a Romanian woman have been charged after attempting to enter Britain's nuclear submarine base in Scotland, Police Scotland said yesterday.

The two, who British media have called suspected Iranian spies, were arrested on Thursday.

The charges come three weeks into the US-Israeli war on Iran. While Britain has not taken part in the attacks on Iran, the country's

forces have downed Iranian missiles and drones in the Gulf region.

HM Naval Base Clyde is located on the west coast of Scotland and is key to Britain's security, hosting the country's nuclear-armed submarine fleet, as well as its attack submarines.

Police Scotland said the Iranian man, 34, and the Romanian woman, 31, are due to appear at Dumbarton Sheriff Court on March 23. (Reuters)

Minecraft to come to life with UK theme park

Britain is to welcome the world's first Minecraft roller-coaster and attractions with the opening of "Minecraft World" in 2027, the studio behind the video game announced yesterday.

"Merlin Entertainments and Mojang Studios have today announced Minecraft World, the world's first fully immersive Minecraft theme park land," the Sweden-based video game developer and UK theme park company said.

The £50mn (\$66.6mn) project will be part of the Chessington World of Adventures Resort, a theme park complex southwest of London.

It will be inspired by the "biomes, mobs and items" of the beloved Minecraft universe, according to a press release, and will feature a coaster, "block built playscapes" and themed retail and dining.

The attraction builds on the popularity of one of the best-selling video games of all time

in which players build a three-dimensional world.

Minecraft was first made available on computers in 2011 and has since been released on mobile phones and several gaming consoles.

"A Minecraft Movie" proved a box office hit last year, becoming the most successful film adaptation from a video game in North America and generating memes and TikTok trends that went viral worldwide. (AFP)

UK meningitis outbreak cases rise to 34: official

AFP
London

just over a week ago, and has resulted in several other young people being hospitalised.

The epicentre is believed to be a three-floor nightclub called Club Chemistry, with authorities urging clubgoers who were at the venue from March 5-7 to come forward and receive medication.

"As of 12:30pm on 20 March 2026, UKHSA has been notified of 23 confirmed and 11 probable cases of invasive meningococcal disease with epidemiological links to Canterbury, Kent," the health body said in a statement.

It added that a majority of the confirmed cases were group B meningococcal disease (MenB), caused by the meningococcal bacteria.

Bacterial meningitis is rarer and deadlier than the viral type.

Babies have only been routinely vaccinated against MenB since 2015 in the UK.

Kent council's public health director Anjan Ghosh on Friday warned that "small household, sporadic clusters" could appear in other parts of the UK as students who have travelled home

could "incubate" the bug.

But he said these would be "containable" and stressed the risk of infection between individuals is low.

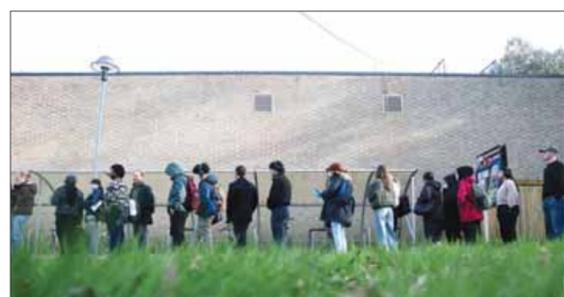
One case linked to the outbreak has been reported in France. The French health ministry confirmed Wednesday that a person who had attended the University of Kent was hospitalised in stable condition.

Meningitis is most common

in young children, teenagers and young adults.

Initial symptoms include headache, fever, drowsiness and a stiff neck – but those are symptoms of various illnesses and can hamper prompt diagnosis.

Meningitis can progress rapidly, with another sign often being a rash, and is spread through prolonged close contact, including kissing or the sharing of vapes or drinks.



People, mainly students, queue to receive Meningitis B vaccinations at a sports centre on the University of Kent campus, following an outbreak of meningitis cases in Kent, in Canterbury, Britain, on Friday. (Reuters)

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GULF TIMES

Don't panic, don't capitulate: Global investors try to see beyond Iran war

The scale and duration of this month's energy and inflation shock are still guesswork. But global investors are clearly reluctant to throw in the towel on stocks and bonds, despite the Iran war and a dour first quarter for returns. Two basic factors explain the relative resilience of financial assets during a turbulent March.

The first is simply that history suggests these conflicts and related oil supply disruptions are often temporary. If you think this one will be too, you keep close tabs on the themes that were booming beforehand — an artificial-intelligence frenzy and brisk earnings and GDP growth.

A second is that world stock markets have endured long periods of crude prices above \$100 a barrel before without collapsing — unless there were related sharp rises in interest rates, as in 2022, or a bigger financial crisis in the background, as in 2008. Of course, relying on history repeating itself could be an epic miscalculation.

Energy experts are insistent that the Gulf's critical Strait of Hormuz has never been effectively closed to oil shipments before. Around 20% of world oil and liquefied natural gas supply has been blocked after Tehran effectively locked down Hormuz. Nobody knows how this pans out or how long it lasts.

Iran's trump card in this existential battle for its leadership is the oil shock itself — spreading the costs of war across the Gulf and the rest of the world, targeting energy and shipping to raise the price of escalation until pressure for a deal builds. The real danger is not the oil price itself but what it does to inflation — and therefore rates.

But, oil prices aside, the year's scorecard for financial markets as we near the end of the first quarter gives little sign of the seismic geopolitics of the past three months. Gold's 15% year-to-date gains appear to reflect the anxiety, but it's done little or nothing since the Iran attacks on February 28. Other traditional "havens" such as US Treasuries are flat, and typical "safety" trades like German bunds or Japan's yen are slightly in the red for the year.

Previously outperforming asset markets got sideswiped by Iran this month, though many remain well ahead for the year. South Korea's Kospi stock benchmark has had a wild ride — surging almost 50% for the year at one point, only to halve that before recovering to stand some 40% ahead for 2026.

Similarly, emerging-market stock indexes have lost 4% this month, but remain up 6% for the year.

Japan's Nikkei followed suit, with a hefty 8% loss this month that still leaves it up 5% for 2026. Europe and US equities are marginally in the red in the first quarter overall. The dollar has been one of the very few global prices to rise in March, enlivening an otherwise flat year. So what should investors do?

Citi Wealth's Chief Investment Officer Kate Moore advises holding your cards on a running assumption the conflict ends within weeks — even while acknowledging the risks to that view.

What you don't do is switch back and forth on the frenetic headlines, Moore and her team told clients — advising them to keep a six-month horizon on your dashboard. "Investors should remain focused on long-term positioning rather than attempting to trade short-term market moves."

HSBC Private Bank's CIO Willem Sels talks of building portfolio resilience with a plan to "diversify our diversifiers across sectors, geographies and asset classes" and avoid being swayed by "excessively pessimistic or exuberant narratives." Also keeping tuned to a six-month horizon, Sels reckons a picture of impressive global growth, AI and overall earnings endures — even as the interest rate cycle turns and the Federal Reserve is done easing. Avoiding concentration and dollar risk may mean spreading exposure beyond American assets — something that could weigh on the dollar in turn.

For all investors, though, the time factor on the Iran war remains the game changer. A conflict measured in months rather than weeks may be enough to upend all the resilience you can muster. — Reuters

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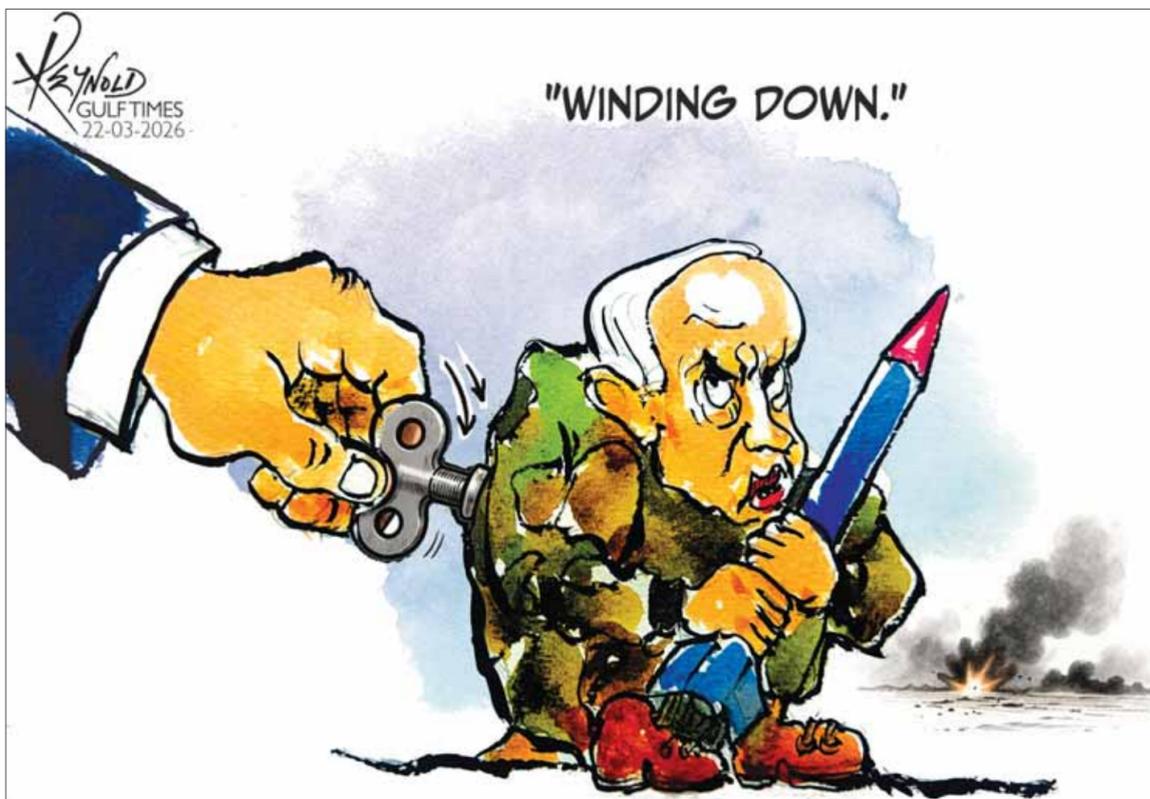
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Solar lights in Johannesburg provide South African women safer nights

- Energy inequality plagues the poor in South Africa
- Private solar roll-out brings sense of safety for women
- Experts warn private sector must not replace government

By Kim Harrisberg
Thomson Reuters Foundation

Student Lebogang Mangane grew up in South Africa's coal mining heartland that still produces most of the country's electricity, but her own streets rarely had any lighting so she never felt safe to walk anywhere after dark.

Now, she beamed when she spoke about the thousands of solar lights that flood the roads of inner-city Johannesburg, including the Marshalltown neighbourhood where she works and studies. Since July 2024, more than 2,000 solar lights sponsored by corporates, banks and educational institutions have been installed throughout various inner-city areas where roughly tens of thousands of pedestrians and commuters travel each day.

Mangane said these lights keep her safe from crime, but also remind her that energy can be clean and accessible to everyone. "We only experienced coal pollution, not the electricity made from coal," said the 27-year-old business student and entrepreneur. "These solar lights have become something of a symbol for us as women, that we can be safe and light up safety for others," she said from the Maharishi Invincibility Institute, an educational institution where she both studies and works.

South Africa is one of the world's top coal producers, but in 2021 it was also the first country to accept the Just Energy Transition Partnership deal in which richer nations pledged cash to accelerate the shift from coal to renewables, while protecting local employment.

The solar lights that make Mangane feel safe, however, are rolled out by Jozi My Jozi, a coalition of private businesses, civil society organisations and government working to boost Johannesburg's inner-city revival. Jozi My Jozi sees its many initiatives as a way of supporting South Africa's resource-strapped government.

"(Government) understands there are gaps in terms of issues of service delivery, infrastructure and maintenance and they are

willing for us to help them," said Innocent Mabusela, the head of Jozi My Jozi.

Some 85% of inner-city residents do not feel safe walking at night, according to a paper by the research group Gauteng City-Region Observatory. After a gold rush in the late 1800s, central Johannesburg boasted grand public buildings and luxury hotels, but decades of state neglect and the exodus of wealthy residents and businesses have left the inner-city crime-ridden and crumbling.

"Johannesburg used to be well lit, but because of cable theft and the challenges of load shedding (power cuts), most of the lights in the inner city were not working," said Mabusela.

The city estimates that 45% of power outages are due to copper cable theft by criminal syndicates that are responsible for shoot-outs with and assaults of security personnel.

The solar lights are less susceptible to theft as they do not contain significant amounts of copper and would require an elevated platform to access them, said Mabusela.

The coalition is now looking into similar solar projects across the country that could be funded with carbon credits, as well as the possibility of creating jobs through constructing and maintaining the solar lights.

It is estimated that more than 10mn households across South Africa live with energy poverty — the lack of "safe, stable and affordable" electricity access, according to the Alternative Information and Development Centre research group.

"SEE CRIMINALS APPROACHING"

South Africa experiences some of the world's highest levels of gender-based violence, with the murder rate of women five times higher than the global average, according to the South African Medical Research Council, a research organisation.

"These streets were once creepy and scary. When it turned dark it was a jackpot for criminals," said Mangane, adding that, anecdotally, muggings have decreased.

"Now the shops stay open later, some until

10pm. We can collect deliveries at night which is something we couldn't risk in the past," she said.

Other women working and studying in the inner-city agree, while noting that better lighting alone is not enough to improve security. Research shows that street lighting does reduce crime, particularly if combined with other security strategies such as camera surveillance, findings published on the CrimRxiv criminology research hub showed. "Same as here, our local councillor has also put up solar lights where I live so it is much better, now we can see criminals approaching," said Bongwiwe Zulu, a 20-year-old student who lives in the south of Johannesburg. "But we still walk in a group to catch transport because of safety in numbers," she said.

POWER PARTNERSHIPS

Solar lights also reduce carbon emissions, said Mabusela. South Africa committed to cutting carbon emissions to between 350mn and 420mn tonnes by 2030, down from 442mn in 2020, on the way to net zero. "Clean energy initiatives should be coming from everywhere — all stakeholders have a role to play," said Julia Taylor, a researcher at the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies at the University of Witswatersrand. But she said private projects should not excuse state negligence.

"It is positive that solar lights are providing electricity in under-served areas, but does this mean the government is not being held to account for services it is mandated to provide?" she asked. City Power Johannesburg, the city's energy supplier, did not reply to requests for comment on the solar partnership.

Many women in the inner city who spoke to the Thomson Reuters Foundation agree — clean, safe and accessible energy needs to be tackled urgently for the sake of all South Africans.

"There is privately funded security and solar panels in the wealthy suburbs, but no matter where you live in the city this is something we all deserve," said Maharishi student Londiwe Molefe.



Johannesburg boasted grand public buildings and luxury hotels, but decades of state neglect and the exodus of wealthy residents and businesses have left the inner-city crime-ridden and crumbling. South Africa experiences some of the world's highest levels of gender-based violence, with the murder rate of women five times higher than the global average, according to the South African Medical Research Council, a research organisation. (AFP)

Qatar forces 'neutralised nearly all ballistic and cruise missiles'

Decades of modernisation pay off as GCC states intercept near-total missile barrages

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter



Rashid al-Mohanadi, a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs.

Qatar's air defences neutralised nearly all ballistic and cruise missiles fired at the country during the ongoing regional conflict, with interception rates reaching as high as 100% for certain threat categories — a performance that has put to rest long-standing criticism of Gulf military spending, according to a leading defence analyst.

"Ballistic missiles against Qatar were intercepted at a rate of 95% to 96%, cruise missiles at 100%, and fighter jets — in the rare cases they were deployed — were neutralised entirely," said Rashid al-Mohanadi, a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs and a specialist in Gulf security and defence.

Al-Mohanadi was speaking at an online panel discussion titled 'Navigating the Iran War in the Region: Qatar's Strategic Perspectives', organised by the Middle East Council on Global Affairs, where he offered a detailed operational assessment of how Gulf militaries have performed under live fire conditions.

He noted that similar results

were recorded across other Gulf states, all of which had long identified Iranian missile capabilities as a primary threat and prepared accordingly. The one category that posed a genuine operational challenge was the suicide drone — specifically the Shahid.

Early operational data puts interception rates for these systems at between 70% and 80%, a gap al-Mohanadi attributed to the relatively limited counter-drone solutions currently available to Gulf forces. Even so, he argued the numbers reflect well on the region's adaptability. "It shows that with modernisation, Gulf armed forces have demonstrated a high level of adaptability to emerging threats," he said.

That modernisation, he added, has been decades in the making. Following the Kuwait and Iraq conflicts, Gulf militaries embarked on a sustained two-dec-

ade overhaul of their capabilities — an investment that critics long dismissed as prestige spending driven by prestigious purchases rather than genuine strategic need. Al-Mohanadi pushed back firmly on that characterisation.

"I think the events of the last two weeks show that this criticism is simply not true. Gulf defence strategists planned for the worst-case scenario. What has happened is precisely that scenario, and they defended their countries extremely well."

The expertise demonstrated by Gulf armed forces, he explained, stems from the continuous evolution of techniques, tactics and procedures across different weapons systems — and in some cases the introduction of entirely new ones. "It is a far cry from previous assessments of Gulf armed forces as palace militaries," he said. "The modernisation that began post-Kuwait and post-Iraq has been going on for about two decades, and it has actually paid off."

He also dismantled one of the most widely circulated narratives of the conflict — the idea that Gulf states were burning million-dollar Patriot missiles to knock down cheap Shahid drones. "We keep hearing that a \$50,000 Shahid is being shot down by a \$4mn Patriot. As a defence analyst and someone who worked in the defence industry, I can tell you that

is totally ludicrous," he said. In reality, most Shahid drones are brought down by small interceptors or, in many instances, by 50-calibre rounds fired from air platforms — ammunition that costs only a few dollars per shot.

On Iran's broader missile strategy, al-Mohanadi argued that the ballistic missile model — once effective against less sophisticated adversaries — has largely broken down when tested against modern Gulf militaries. "Iran had the hypothesis of using ballistic missiles for tactical objectives. It worked when targeting targets in Iraq. But when facing modern Gulf militaries, that model totally breaks down," he said, though he acknowledged the psychological effect of such strikes on civilian populations remains a real and ongoing factor.

Looking ahead, he urged Gulf defence planners not to be complacent. Ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and fighter jets, he argued, are fundamentally relics of the 20th century. The real frontier lies in counter-drone technology capable of handling high-velocity swarm attacks. "More sophisticated counter-drone solutions dealing with high-velocity swarm techniques would be the forward-thinking priority for Gulf defence actors," he said — and investment in that space, he stressed, should define the region's next strategic chapter.

Russia stands by Iran: Putin

Reuters
Moscow



Russia's President Vladimir Putin. (Reuters)

Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Iranian leaders on Nowruz and said Moscow remained a loyal friend and reliable partner to Tehran, the Kremlin said yesterday.

The extent of Moscow's support for Iran, though, is in dispute. Some Iranian sources have said that they have had little real help from Moscow in the biggest crisis for Iran since the US-backed Shah was toppled in the 1979 revolution.

Putin sent congratulations to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on the Iranian new year, the Kremlin said.

"Vladimir Putin wished the Iranian people to overcome the harsh trials with dignity and stressed that in this difficult time Moscow remains a loyal friend and reliable partner of Tehran," the Kremlin said. Russia says the US and Israeli attacks on Iran have thrust the entire Middle East into the abyss and triggered a major global energy crisis, while of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as a "cynical" murderer.

Politico reported that Mos-

cow proposed a quid pro quo to Washington: the Kremlin would stop sharing intelligence with Iran if Washington ceased supplying Ukraine with intelligence about Russia, but the United States rejected the idea. The Kremlin has dismissed the report as fake.

Russia was deprived of an ally when the United States toppled Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, though Moscow has benefited from the high oil prices triggered by the US and Israeli attacks on Iran, a strategic partner.

The published strategic partnership does not contain a mutual defence clause, and Russia has repeatedly said that it does not want Iran to develop an atomic bomb, a step that Moscow fears would trigger a nuclear arms race across the Middle East.

2 skiers killed, five hurt in Italy avalanche

Two skiers died and five others were injured yesterday when an avalanche rumbled down on them in the Italian Alps, in the Tentino-Alto Adige region, the mountain rescue service said.

The service's operation centre received an alert around midday (1100 GMT) that a dozen skiers were caught up in the avalanche, a spokesman said.

"Six helicopters were dispatched" and nearby hospitals notified, he said. Dozens of rescue personnel, as well as firemen and law enforcement participate in the search-and-rescue effort.

A total of 25 skiers were on the mountainside where the avalanche occurred, broken up into several groups, but most of them escaped the brunt of the slide of snow, rocks and ice. (AFP)

Tens of thousands of Czechs rally against Babis government

AFP
Prague

Tens of thousands of Czechs filled a large plain in Prague to rally against the government of billionaire Prime Minister Andrej Babis yesterday, slamming it for "arrogance of power".

Babis, in office since last December, leads a three-party nationalist cabinet comprising his catch-all ANO party, the far-right SPD and the right-wing euro-sceptic Motorists.

He already faced a rally with tens of thousands of protesters in February. The Million Moments for Democracy movement organising Saturday's protest has slammed the government for "playing down" threats from Russia invading Ukraine since 2022.

It put the number of protesters on the Letna plain in Prague's broader centre at over 200,000.

AFP could not immediately verify this figure.

The movement has also challenged the government's plans to gain control over public media in the EU and Nato member of 10.9mn people.

"The arrogance of power is growing and extreme politicians are taking our country hostage," it said on Facebook.

On a sunny afternoon, protesters also criticised Babis and Tomio Okamura, the SPD chairman and parliament speaker, for retaining their immunity as lawmakers to avoid trial in criminal cases.

Babis is facing EU subsidy fraud



People take part in a rally organised by The Million Moments for Democracy Association as they protest against Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis and his government yesterday in Prague. (AFP)

charges, while Okamura has been charged with inciting hatred.

"I don't like the way the government behaves, the arrogance of power, and how it sets completely different moral standards, this is hard to swallow," protester Anna Bittner told AFP.

Marek Perutka, a conservationist carrying a Ukrainian flag, criticised the government's foreign policy as it has refused to provide military aid to Ukraine as it battled a Russian invasion.

The government has also trimmed defence spending below two percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in the 2026 state budget, which means it will fail a quota set by NATO.

"It is doing everything to drag us towards Russia and, together with Hungary and Slovakia, to dent the EU," Perutka told AFP.

The Million Moments for Democracy brought more than 200,000 protesters to a rally against Babis during his first

stint as premier in 2019.

In February, it organised a large rally in Prague's historic centre in support of President Petr Pavel, a former Nato general.

Pavel got embroiled in a dispute with the Motorists as he refused to appoint their candidate Filip Turek as minister. Turek had been accused of rape and criticised for misogynistic and racist remarks.

In mid-February, scores of Czech cities and towns held smaller rallies in support of Pavel.

In Finland, divers learn to explore icy polar waters

AFP
Kilpisjärvi

In a square hole carved out of the thick ice, two divers vanished into the depths of an Arctic lake, leaving nothing but bubbles at the surface.

Returning 45 minutes later, Marta Lukasik tapped her fist on the top of her head — a diver's signal that means "I'm ok".

On the frozen Lake Kilpisjärvi, just below the tree line at the intersection of the Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian borders, 12 divers were taking a course to learn how to dive in polar regions so they could carry out scientific research.

"Just wow, every small thing you see in the water... Just wow," said Lukasik, a 41-year-old oceanology PhD student who works as a diving inspector on fish farms in Norway, mesmerised by the experience.

For 10 days, the international group from different professions and backgrounds learnt vital skills below the 80cm (30 inches) of ice covering the lake.

According to Erik Wurz, co-

ordinator of the programme run by the Finnish Scientific Diving Academy which is part of the University of Helsinki, there is a critical need for skilled people who can conduct research in demanding polar environments.

Climate change is warming and transforming the Arctic and Antarctic at a faster rate than the rest of the planet.

"There's still a lot of questions to be covered in the polar regions and access is very limited," said Wurz, stood next to two large holes cut into the ice and a pitched wind shelter.

"The number of scientific divers that can go under the ice is even more limited," he added, estimating there to be only around 100 to 200 people globally.

Teamwork

Wearing dry suits to fend off the 2 degrees Celsius cold in the water, the divers arrived on snowmobiles at the site, located close to the University of Helsinki's biological station at the foot of the Saana mountains.

Ruari Buijs, 21, checked his course mates at the "base Alpha

hole to make sure they were ready to dive, before helping them slide into the water with steel gas cylinders on their backs and torches attached to their arms.

"I think the most important thing is definitely teamwork," noted Buijs, who studied marine biology and oceanography at the University of Plymouth in Britain, as the divers disappeared.

"For instance... if there's low visibility, there's always a line back," he said, indicating a yellow, 50m (165-foot) safety line in his hand, the other end tethered to the diver underwater.

A light attached to a steel tank flickered in the clear water — a sign post for the divers if they become disoriented.

With only two holes for entry and exit, the biggest challenge for the divers was "the overhead environment they are getting into", Wurz said. "They are going into an ice cave."

'Critical point'

The day's task was to practice drilling a sample of the ice sheet, so-called "ice coring", explained

Caroline Chen, 23 — a Canadian trained scientific diver and research assistant at the University of Hamburg.

"Sometimes you bump your head, I'm still getting used to this," she said.

In this "safe setting", the divers were training to be "confident when they are deployed to Antarctica" or any polar expedition where they would not have the luxury of warm buildings and showers nearby, Wurz said.

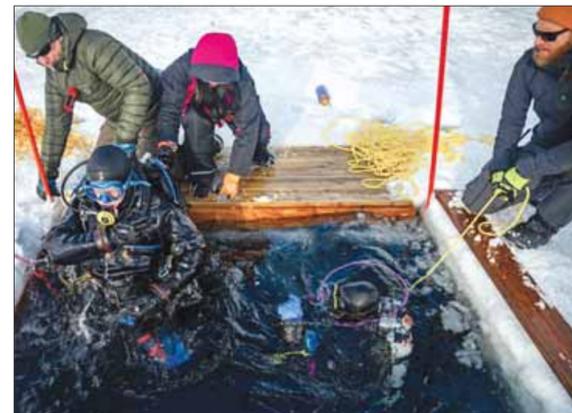
Have finished the course, Wurz joined an expedition to the Antarctic research station Scott base, 1,350km (840 miles) from the South Pole.

"We are at a really critical point in time because the polar regions are changing very fast," Wurz said.

"There are huge areas of shelf ice breaking off... that has not happened before at such a fast rate," he added.

An AFP review of US data showed in March that Arctic sea ice is headed for one of its smallest winter peaks on record due to human-induced warming.

"We need to get samples and re-



A participant in the Polar Scientific Diving program is lifted out of the water by colleagues after a 45-minute-long diving session, at the Kilpisjärvi Biological Station in Finland. (AFP)

liable data from these regions because they are the fastest changing on the planet in the warming ocean," Wurz said.

Still beaming after her dive, Lukasik described how the sun piercing through layers of snow and ice had created rays in the water.

"You need to be a little crazy to

go into that environment," Buijs said with a smile.

"I think it's the second most hostile environment known to man, apart from the vacuum of space," he said, adding that he hopes to work as a marine biologist on the islands around Antarctica.

"It's like a whole new world, and I would love to explore that."

Residents visit museums on second day of Eid

Qatar Museums (QM) opened on the second day of Eid al-Fitr providing the public an opportunity to visit the galleries of the iconic museums of the country. People visited the museums without being overcrowded, following the safety and security directives due to the regional tensions. The National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) was a sweet spot for visitors as many of art lovers decided to visit the fantastic galleries of the museum and spend some quality time admiring its various collections. Other museums in the country also received good number of visitors as the residents came out to enjoy their Eid holidays.

PICTURES: Thajudheen



Greenhouses fuel local agriculture production

Qatar is undergoing a rapid agricultural transformation that has turned large areas of its land into what can be described as an "open factory" for the production of high-quality vegetables.

Such progress is being driven by a modern agricultural base of 1,068 active farms, with greenhouse cultivation serving as the backbone of production. These technologies have enabled the country to overcome harsh climatic conditions and maintain year-round output.

According to a report by Qatar TV, this agricultural expansion has emerged as a critical pillar of national food security at a time when global supply chains continue to face volatility. Some officials stressed that the Qatari farms now produce a broad range of crops, including cucumbers, tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, and other varieties.

The average weekly farm production ranges between 7 and 10 tonnes, all of which is directed to the local market. Agricultural planning in Qatar follows a seasonal approach that covers all periods of the year, reducing vulnerability to international disruptions, particularly through the direct government support provided for essential production inputs.

The report also noted a growing momentum in mushroom cultivation. Farms operating in this segment are working at full production capacity to supply around 8.4 tonnes per week, equivalent to around 1,200kg per day. Despite challenges linked to importing raw materials from Europe and rising shipping and customs costs, producers are maintaining reserve stocks to ensure uninterrupted output.

A separate sector report issued by Qatar Development Bank (QDB) further underlines this upward course. It states that policy measures and government support have enabled the agricultural sector to expand steadily over recent years. The value of agricultural production recorded a compound annual growth rate of 7.33%, while government initiatives helped increase the number of farms and generate more employment opportunities across the sector.



The report estimates that Qatar's greenhouse market reached around QR435mn in 2020 and is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 14.6% between 2020 and 2026. This projected expansion is linked to government initiatives designed to encourage the establishment of new greenhouse facilities.

In terms of crops, greenhouses in Qatar are classified by crop type, with fruits and vegetables representing the dominant category and accounting for roughly two-thirds of the market. In 2020, greenhouse production reached 28,373 tonnes of cucumbers and 22,461 tonnes of tomatoes.

Together, these two crops represented 83.7% of total greenhouse output that year. Seedling crops also constitute an important segment, with the report projecting a compound annual growth rate of 14.8% between 2020 and 2026. Flowers and ornamental plants also form a notable category of greenhouse agriculture, with roses, gladioli, chrysanthemums, and other varieties being produced locally for landscaping and decorative use.

The report explains that gutter-connected greenhouses dominate Qatar's greenhouse market because they cover larger areas and offer greater energy efficiency. These structures consist of a series of gable- or gothic-shaped arches connected by a shared gutter at the lowest roof edge.

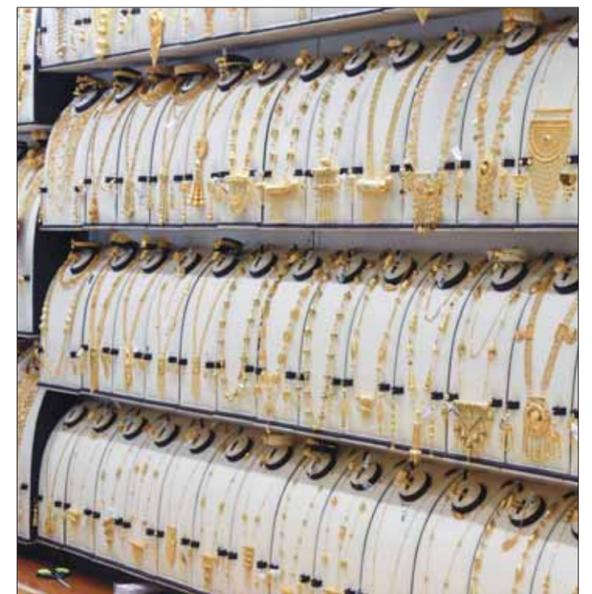
They typically provide water-saving advantages when extend-



ed over more than 20,000 square feet. Utilities such as water supply, electricity, and computerised systems are centralised in these installations, reducing both set-up and maintenance costs. Their design also minimises exposed wall area, lowering the energy required for cooling and heating and making them particularly suitable for Qatar's environment.

However, standalone greenhouses are independent structures that offer more basic growing space. Since they do not require wall attachment, site preparation and construction costs are relatively lower. Yet, their usefulness is limited by smaller cultivation areas, which can affect efficiency and productivity.

Eid drives strong local demand for gold, jewellery



Ahead of the Eid holidays, Qatar's gold markets have been witnessing a vibrant increase in activity that reflects the deep connection between society and its long-standing customs and traditions.

In particular, the Gold Souq saw strong demand from both citizens and residents for gold jewellery, as people prepare to celebrate a religious and social occasion associated with joy, family ties, and social connection. Despite the notable high prices of gold over the recent months, consumer demand has remained considerably good. Many shoppers continue to regard gold as the ideal choice for such occasions, both socially and economically. Gold vendors in various places across the country said that sales have increased by up to 30% compared to the same period last year, an indication of robust local demand and sustained consumer confidence in gold as a valuable asset.

Accordingly, gold shops have been experiencing one of their busiest periods of the year, with customers moving between display windows showcasing the latest designs, while traders explain details related to purity, weight, and pricing, and offer guidance to help buyers choose items suited to their needs and budgets.

They have expressed optimism about the Eid season, noting that traditional Qatari and Bahraini gold sets continue to top sales due to their strong cultural value. At the same time, modern jewellery, including white gold and diamond pieces, is gaining popularity among younger buyers seeking contemporary and elegant designs. Traders further noted the wide variety of products available in the market, catering to different tastes and purchasing abilities, from luxury



Despite the notable high prices of gold over the recent months, consumer demand has remained considerably good

pieces to symbolic gifts at accessible prices.

Ibrahim al-Ameri, who has been working in gold trade for more than 20 years, said the rise in global prices has not significantly affected purchasing decisions. He explained that for many citizens, gold is not only an ornament but also a long-term investment. He added that women are increasingly turning to modern designs, particularly white gold and diamonds, in line with changing fashion trends.