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Financial Results (FY 2025)

Gross Written Premiums (GWP)
9%
QAR 9.9B

Net Profit Before the Impact of Fair Value
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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Amir performs funeral prayer for martyrs

Seven martyred in military helicopter crash following technical malfunction



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani performed the funeral prayer for the martyrs of the nation who passed away while performing their national duty after a Qatar Armed Forces helicopter crash in the country's territorial waters. The prayer was held after Maghrib prayer at Imam Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab Mosque in Doha yesterday.

Also performing the prayer were His Highness the Personal Representative of the Amir Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani; His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani; His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa al-Thani; HE Sheikh Jassim bin Khalifa al-Thani; and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani.

It was also attended by HE the

Speaker of the Shura Council Hassan bin Abdullah al-Ghanem; a number of Their Excellencies the Sheikhs and Ministers; Turkish ambassador Dr Mustafa Goksu; senior officers and members of the Qatar Armed Forces and the Qatari-Turkish joint forces; and a large number of citizens and residents.

His Highness the Amir participated alongside the families of the martyrs in the funeral procession, and offered his condolences to the martyrs' relatives, seeking Allah's mercy upon the martyrs, to grant them paradise, and to inspire their families with patience and solace.

Earlier, the Ministry of Defence disclosed that a military helicopter crashed following a technical malfunction during routine duty, resulting in the martyrdom of all seven personnel on board.

The ministry announced in a statement on X that the crash occurred early yesterday, with search and rescue operations launched immediately to locate the crew and passengers. As operations concluded, the seventh and final missing victim, Captain (Pilot) Saeed Nasser Smeikh, a member of the Qatar Armed Forces, was confirmed martyred, bringing the total number of those lost to seven.

The six others confirmed martyred earlier were Captain (Pilot) Mubarak Salem Daway al-Marri, Sergeant Fahd Hadi Ghanem al-Khayarin, and Corporal Mohammed Maher Mohammed of the Qatar Armed Forces, as well as Major (Air Defence) Sinan Tastekin, a member of the Qatar-Turkiye Joint Forces, along with civilian collaborators Suleiman Cemra Kahraman and Ismail Anas Can, both Turkish nationals. **To Page 2**

MoD mourns the heroes

With profound sorrow and grief, the Ministry of Defence mourned the nation's martyrs, who lost their lives while carrying out their national duty, embodying the highest values of sacrifice in service to the country. In a post on its official account on X, the ministry extended its sincere condolences and deepest sympathy to their honourable families, praying for Almighty Allah to grant them His vast mercy and enable the loved ones to cope with the loss with patience and fortitude.

Arab nations, regional bodies rally behind Qatar, Turkiye

The Arab Parliament, Gulf Co-operation Council, Arab League, and a host of Arab nations have extended their condolences to Qatar and Turkiye following the martyrdom of seven personnel in a helicopter crash in Qatari territorial waters.

The Arab Parliament was among the first to respond, underscoring its full solidarity with both nations in their time of grief. GCC Secretary-General Jassem Mohamed Al-Budaiwi offered his personal condolences to the families of the fallen, who included service members of the Qatar Armed Forces and the Qatar-Turkiye Joint Forces.

Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed About Gheit likewise extended heartfelt sympathy to Qatar's leadership, government, people, and the families of the victims.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan took to the social media to offer his condolences to the families of the martyrs and to both the Turkish and Qatari peoples, noting that those lost had been carrying out a routine mission when the aircraft went down. **To Page 2**

Agriculture emerges as key pillar of national security investment

By A Staff Reporter
Doha

Qatar has given the agricultural sector key strategic importance despite the environmental challenges that make investment in this sector costly and unprofitable. The country has adopted investment in this sector as a strategic priority directly linked to its national security and the sustainability of its resources, a report by Qatar TV has stressed.

The report indicates that agricultural investment has become one of the main pillars of Qatar National Vision 2030, as it has witnessed a considerable quantum transformation over the past few years. Accordingly, agricultural production has moved from being just complementary to being a main player in meeting local needs and reducing dependence on imports.

Besides, the National Food Security Strategy 2030 entails raising vegetable self-sufficiency, increasing the productivity of arable land, and enhancing fish and meat production, while maintaining full sufficiency in some vital sectors, such as poultry and dairy products. **To Page 2**

Legal experts say attacks on energy hub violate law

By A Staff Reporter
Doha

Targeting Qatar's energy infrastructure, particularly Ras Laffan Industrial City, signals a dangerous escalation against critical facilities, with consequences that extend far beyond national borders and threaten the stability of global energy markets, legal experts have warned.

They stressed that Ras Laffan is not just an industrial zone but one of the world's most vital hubs for liquefied natural gas (LNG) production and exports. Any attack on the site would reverberate immediately across international markets and supply chains.

Experts note that such actions reflect a broader shift in modern conflict, where strategic economic assets are increasingly becoming primary targets. This trend raises serious concerns about global economic security. Repeated attacks, they caution, risk triggering uncontrolled escalation and weakening international

efforts to protect civilian infrastructure, particularly facilities tied to essential public needs. Under international law, civilian objects enjoy special protection, and targeting them under any circumstances constitutes a violation requiring a firm international response.

Lawyer Abdullah Al Nuaimi al-Hajri described the targeting of Qatar's energy sources and critical facilities as a grave breach of international law, warning that those responsible could face serious legal consequences. He noted that the UN Charter prohibits the use or threat of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, adding that such acts amount to aggression against sovereignty and international peace.

Even in times of armed conflict, he said, international humanitarian law imposes strict limits on targeting civilian objects, especially infrastructure essential to daily life, such as energy and gas facilities. Given Ras Laffan's global significance, any attack would threaten not only Qatar but also the broader world economy and international energy security. **To Page 2**

Abdullah Al Nuaimi Al-Hajri
"Targeting Qatar's energy sources and critical facilities is a grave breach of international law."

Ali Al-Khalifi
"Potential disruptions affecting around 17% of LNG export capacity highlight the scale of the risk."

Zainab Mohamed
"Energy installations are lifelines for both national and global economies and are afforded special protection."

Saad Al-Dossari
"Energy facilities are no longer merely economic assets but pillars of international stability."

GT GRAPHICS

Today's **GULF TIMES** includes a 24-page supplement on **Pakistan Day**

23RD MARCH

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Strong support empowers people with Down syndrome in Qatar

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

A number of key legal, institutional, and social steps have been taken by Qatar to enhance the lives of persons with Down syndrome and promote their rights as full members of society.

As the country marked World Down Syndrome Day, which falls on March 2, these efforts are considered an integral part of a broader disability-rights spectrum that treats persons with Down syndrome as full members of society, entitled to education, rehabilitation, health services, employment opportunities, family support, and community inclusion.

Qatar's approach to this issue entails state policy, specialised service providers, and public awareness initiatives that in-

clude both Qataris and expatriates.

Over the years, the country has built a comparatively strong support system for such persons.

Accordingly, the country has ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the United Nations treaty records show Qatar's ratification was registered on May 13, 2008. Qatar has also frequently presented its disability-related policies across various international forums, calling for more global efforts to include such vulnerable categories of society and maintain their rights as full members of the community.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family has been playing a leading role in practically promoting the rights of these people.

The ministry's 2023 achievements report states that Qatar seeks to integrate

persons with disabilities into all aspects of comprehensive development and high-lights co-operation with the Ministry of Labour and Qatar Manpower Solutions Company "Jusour" to support employment for persons with disabilities.

The report noted that in 2023, the social affairs sector recorded 19,918 social security beneficiaries, helped 132 individuals obtain jobs, and reported that the needs of 222 persons with disabilities were met according to disability category.

While these are not limited to Down syndrome, they clearly indicate that disability support is part of an operational public-service system.

The Shafallah Centre for Persons with Disabilities' services for persons with Down syndrome are extensive.

It offers broad services to persons with intellectual and developmental disabili-

ties, enrolling eligible children from birth to age 18, and they can also benefit from these services until graduation at age 21.

The Centre provides early intervention programmes to help such persons improve their skills from an early age, leading to better outcomes.

It also adopts various therapeutic care programmes, family counselling, and workshops for caregivers to encourage the inclusion of persons with Down syndrome into society.

The Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) has been actively contributing to the effective care of people with Down syndrome; the HMC's Child Development and Rehabilitation Services identifies Down syndrome as one of the developmental conditions it supports.

Its medical consultation clinics specifically include care for "Down Syndrome

and other genetic syndromes associated with developmental disorders".

The HMC offers these people the necessary support and assistance, alongside their families, to enjoy an active life within the community through various rehabilitation and follow-up programmes provided by professional specialists.

Al Maha Specialised Paediatric Care Centre, which operates under Al Wakra Hospital at the HMC, provides appropriate care and assistance to more than 120 children with Down syndrome, combining therapeutic interventions with family training programmes.

Overall, the country promotes equal rights for all and provides special care for the vulnerable to help them integrate effectively and actively into society while enjoying their full rights and the due care for their special status.

EAA concludes 3rd 'Eid Gifts' drive for Palestinian and Syrian children

On the initiative of Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of the Education Above All (EAA) Foundation, the EAA in partnership with the Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) announced the distribution of brand-new Eid clothing to children in the Gaza Strip on the first day of Eid al-Fitr, as part of the third edition of the "Eid Gifts" campaign.

Aimed at bringing joy to children most in need, purchase coupons were distributed to beneficiary families, giving them the opportunity to choose the clothes their children like.

The distributions covered a total of 2,570 children from displaced and low-income families in three main hubs: the Gaza Governorate, Deir Al-Balah, and Khan Yunis.

In addition to the distribution in Gaza, the campaign's efforts extended to Jordan, where around 30,000 brand-new children's clothing items were provided and distributed to Palestinian and Syrian refugee children, reaching out to the most in need and bringing them the joy and warmth of Eid, in a reminder that they are not alone.

The distribution reflects the generosity and strong spirit of solidarity demonstrated across Qatar in support of vulnerable communities.

Contributions from individuals and companies helped provide children with new Eid outfits, offering moments of happiness and emotional comfort during the Eid.

The EAA Foundation and QRCS worked closely to ensure that assistance reached children efficiently, supported by co-ordinated logistics that enabled timely preparation and distribution.

"The 'Eid Gifts' campaign embodies a form of giving that has direct impact on children's lives," said EAA Foundation chief executive Mohammed Saad al-Kubaisi. "It is not simply new clothing, but a message of solidarity that brings joy and renewed hope."



The EAA Foundation and QRCS's 'Eid Gifts' campaign brought joy to more than 2,500 children in Gaza.



"We are deeply grateful for the support of the community in Qatar and for our partnership with the QRCS, which enabled us to reach children in Gaza and Jordan and bring happiness to their hearts on the first day of Eid," he said.

"We are proud to continue to partner with Education Above All Foundation in delivering the 'Eid Gifts' initiative, which reflects the solidarity of the community in Qatar and joint humanitarian efforts to support children in Gaza and Jordan," said QRCS managing director - secretary-general Ibrahim Hashem al-Sada. "We saw the impact of this initiative demonstrated in the children's happiness as they received their new Eid clothes, which emphasises the importance of sustained humanitarian collaboration to reach out to the most vulnerable people."

This year's campaign also received generous support from the private sector.

Apparel Group donated more than 14,000 brand-new cloth-



ing items, valued at QR1mm, in support of the campaign's objectives.

Snooun and talabat contributed through their apps by enabling

users to donate to support the campaign, expanding community engagement and making it easier for individuals to contribute.

For the second consecutive

year, Place Vendôme supported the campaign through a variety of promotional initiatives and by hosting a dedicated donation drop-off point.

Agriculture a key pillar of national security investment

From Page 1

Such targets would be realised by developing local production by adopting modern agricultural methods such as hydroponics and vertical farming, enhancing preparedness by building strategic reserves and stocks, in addition to early-response systems to address potential crises, and diversifying import sources while strengthening active international partnerships.

In the meantime, the local agricultural sector employs the latest, sophisticated methods and technologies to address the natural challenges involved, such as limited fertile arable land, water scarcity, and extreme heat.

Further, the government has been offering local farmers and producers the necessary support and technical expertise to encourage them to expand their businesses and continue production.

Such approaches have already succeeded in improving local production, with tangible outcomes: the local market enjoys a steady supply of locally produced products and vegetables sold to the public at comparatively low prices, and the local agricultural season is becoming longer year on year, including the hot summer months.

QFFD supports over 10,600 families stranded in Egypt

The Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD) provided shopping vouchers to benefit more than 10,600 Palestinian families stranded in Egypt, as part of ongoing humanitarian efforts to support families affected by the repercussions of the Israeli aggression on Gaza.

The QFFD said in a statement yesterday that this support aims to enable beneficiary families to secure the requirements of a decent life amid the loss of income sources and the absence of regular assistance, thereby alleviating the living burdens faced by these families outside their homeland.

The intervention represents an extension of Qatar's efforts and its steadfast position in standing alongside the people of Gaza and Palestine, reaffirming its continued humanitarian support for the Palestinian people under all circumstances. - QNA

Rational spending during Eid maintains family financial stability

Eid spending and expenses should be kept within the limits of the normal family budget and avoid unnecessary extravagance, entrepreneurship and social work advocate Ali Khamis al-Suwaidi has said.

Speaking to Qatar TV on the occasion of the Eid al-Fitr holidays, he emphasised that expenses for special occasions should remain carefully calculated and aligned with normal financial capacity.

Unplanned or excessive spending, al-Suwaidi warned, often leads to financial strain in the weeks that follow.

He noted that overspending on gifts, sweets, banquets, and other preparations can quickly inflate costs - expenses that could be avoided through proper budgeting.

While the Eid is a joyful and meaningful celebration, al-Suwaidi stressed that it should still be approached with financial discipline and treated as a temporary occasion rather than a reason for unchecked spending.

He advised families to plan ahead by determining how much they can reasonably spend without affecting essential monthly obligations.

Careful planning, al-Suwaidi continued, allows households to meet their responsibilities comfortably even after the holidays.

He underscored the importance of financial foresight, encouraging people to avoid exceeding their means and to set aside savings for unexpected expenses.

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Amir performs funeral prayer for martyrs

From Page 1

The Ministry of Interior, in a separate statement posted on its official X account, also confirmed that all bodies had been recovered as search and rescue operations concluded.

Specialised teams had conducted intensive operations throughout the day to locate the final missing person.

Both ministries extended their deepest condolences and sincere sympathies to the families of the martyrs, praying that Almighty God grants them His vast mercy, and gives their families and loved ones patience and solace. - QNA

Arab nations, regional bodies rally behind Qatar, Turkiye

From Page 1

Among Arab states, Saudi Arabia expressed its solidarity with the families of the martyrs and with the governments and peoples of both Qatar and Turkiye, extending its sincere wishes for everyone's safety and well-being.

Oman affirmed its solidarity with its brethren in this grievous loss, praying that the souls of the deceased rest in God's vast mercy and that their families be granted patience and solace.

Kuwait also expressed sympathy and solidarity with both Qatar and Turkiye, while Bahrain affirmed its solidarity with the two nations and prayed for mercy for the martyrs and comfort for their families.

The United Arab Emirates extended its most profound condolences to the families of the victims and to the governments and peoples of both countries.

Iraq offered its sincere sympathies to the families of the fallen and to the two nations.

Jordan affirmed its full support for Qatar and Turkiye in this tragic loss.

Egypt confirmed its solidarity with both governments and peoples, praying that God grant the bereaved strength and comfort.

Syria likewise affirmed its full solidarity with Qatar and Turkiye, extending heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims.

Pakistan, too, joined the chorus of condolences, with its ministry of foreign affairs affirming full solidarity with the two brotherly nations during this difficult time.

All condoling parties prayed that the martyrs be granted God's vast mercy and that their families bear the loss with patience and solace. - QNA

MoI warns against spreading rumours

In a post by the Ministry of Interior (MoI) on its official account on X platform, the MoI has reminded the public to refrain from spreading rumours or unverified information and called on them to verify the accuracy of news, before sharing it and to rely on official channels for accurate information. - QNA

Legal experts say attacks on energy hub violate law

From Page 1

Lawyer Ali al-Khalifi said that the targeting of Qatar's energy facilities marks a dangerous turn in the conflict, placing vital infrastructure directly in harm's way and endangering the arteries of the global economy.

He pointed out that potential disruptions affecting around 17% of LNG export capacity, amounting to tens of billions of dollars in annual losses, highlight the scale of the risk and

its impact on global economic stability.

A recovery period that could stretch over several years, al-Khalifi added, underscores the urgent need for decisive international action to ensure accountability and prevent recurrence.

Lawyer Zainab Mohamed said that the attacks reflect a troubling shift in the threats facing critical infrastructure and signal a change in how strategically important civilian facilities are treated.

Energy installations, she emphasised, are

lifelines for both national and global economies and are afforded special protection under international law.

Targeting them not only constitutes a direct violation, Mohamed added, but also sets a dangerous precedent for similar actions elsewhere, exposing the global economy to unprecedented risks.

Lawyer Saad al-Dossari described such attacks as a serious departure from established legal norms, underscoring how conflicts are increasingly moving beyond tradi-

tional battlefields to target the foundations of the global economy.

Energy facilities, he said, are no longer merely economic assets but pillars of international stability due to their direct role in securing global supply.

Ras Laffan's position as one of the world's leading LNG production and export centres gives it immense strategic importance, making any threat to it an immediate concern for international markets and one that, al-Dossari stressed, demands a firm global response.

Iran threatens to retaliate against region's energy, water after Trump ultimatum

● Threats add to worries in global markets
● Tehran says Strait open to all but 'enemies'

Reuters
Tel Aviv/Jerusalem/Washington

Iran said yesterday it would strike the energy and water systems of its Gulf neighbours in retaliation if US President Donald Trump follows through with a threat to hit Iran's electricity grid in 48 hours, escalating the three-week-old war.

The prospect of tit-for-tat strikes on civilian infrastructure could deepen the regional crisis and further rattle global markets when they reopen today morning. Air raid sirens sounded across Israel from the early hours of yesterday, warning of incoming missiles from Iran, after scores of people were hurt overnight in two separate attacks in the southern Israeli towns of Arad and Dimona.

The Israeli military said hours later that it was striking Tehran in response. Trump threatened overnight to "obliterate" Iran's power plants if Tehran did not fully reopen the Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours, barely a day after he talked about "winding down" the war. He made the new threat as US Marines and heavy landing craft are heading to the region. But while attacks on electricity could hurt Iran, they would be potentially catastrophic for its Gulf neighbours, which consume around five times as much power per capita. Electricity makes their gleaming desert cities habitable, and most of them produce nearly all of their drinking water by purifying it from the sea.

Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf wrote on X that critical infrastructure and energy facilities in the Middle East



Motorists drive past a giant billboard with a portrait of Iran's slain supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (centre) at the Vallsar Square in Tehran, yesterday. (AFP)

could be "irreversibly destroyed" should Iranian power plants be attacked.

Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guards said it would also mean the shipping lane where a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas normally transits along Iran's southern coast would remain shut.

"The Strait of Hormuz will be completely closed and will not be opened until our destroyed power plants are rebuilt," the Guards said in a statement. More than 2,000 people have been killed during the war the US and Israel launched on February 28, which has upended markets, spiked fuel costs, fuelled global inflation fears and convulsed the postwar Western alliance.

'TICKING TIME BOMB OF ELEVATED UNCERTAINTY'
"President Trump's threat has

now placed a 48-hour ticking time bomb of elevated uncertainty over markets," said IG market analyst Tony Sycamore, who expects stock markets to fall when they reopen today.

Oil prices jumped on Friday, ending the day at their highest in nearly four years.

Markets already under severe strain from blockaded shipping were further rattled last week when Israel attacked a major gas field in Iran, and Tehran responded with strikes on neighbours Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and another Gulf state, raising the prospect of damage hindering energy output even if tankers resume sailing.

Iranian attacks have effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz, causing the worst oil crisis since the 1970s. Its near-closure sent European gas prices surging as much as

35% last week. "If Iran doesn't fully open, without threat, the Strait of Hormuz, within 48 hours from this exact point in time, the US of America will hit and obliterate their various power plants, starting with the biggest one first!" Trump posted on social media around 7:45 p.m. EDT (2345 GMT) on Saturday. Iranian media quoted the country's representative to the International Maritime Organisation as saying the Strait remains open to all shipping except vessels linked to "Iran's enemies".

Ali Mousavi said passage through the waterway was possible by co-ordinating security and safety arrangements with Tehran.

Ship-tracking data shows some vessels, such as Indian-flagged ships and a Pakistani oil tanker, have negotiated safe passage through the Strait. But the vast



A drone view shows a damage in a residential neighbourhood, following a night of Iranian missile strikes which injured dozens of Israelis, amid the US-Israel conflict with Iran, in Dimona, southern Israel, yesterday. (Reuters)



People inspect the site of an Iranian missile strike in Dimona, Israel, yesterday. (AFP)

majority of ships have remained holed up inside. Iran's Khatam al-Anbiya military command headquarters said yesterday if the US hit Iran's fuel and energy infrastructure, Iran would attack all US energy, information technology and desalination infrastructure in the region.

Striking major Iranian power plants could trigger blackouts, crippling everything from pumps and refineries to export terminals and military command centres.

IRAN EXPANDS RISKS

The US and Israel say they have seriously degraded Iran's ability to project force beyond its borders with their three weeks of intensive air strikes. But Tehran fired its first known long-range ballistic missiles with a range of 4,000km on Friday towards a US-British Indian Ocean military base, expanding the risk

of attacks beyond the Middle East. An Iranian strike also landed near Israel's secretive nuclear reactor about 13km southeast of the city of Dimona.

The war has been taking place alongside a confrontation on a separate front between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah, backed by Iran, with Israel saying yesterday its troops had raided a number of the armed group's sites in southern Lebanon.

Pope Leo appealed for an end to the conflict. "The death and suffering caused by this war are a scandal to the whole human family," he said.

A Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted last week found 59% of Americans disapprove of US strikes against Iran, while 37% approved. The war has become a major political liability for Trump ahead of November elections for Congress.

Israel to advance ground operations in Lebanon after striking key bridge

AFP
Beirut

The Israeli military announced it was expanding its ground campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon, warning of a lengthy operation, after Beirut condemned what it called Israel's flagrant violations of Lebanese sovereignty.

Israeli forces were ordered earlier yesterday to destroy bridges they said were used by the Hezbollah group to cross the Litani River, and Lebanese official media reported Israeli raids in several areas of the south.

An AFP correspondent saw smoke billowing from a bridge that was hit outside the city of Tyre.

"The operation against the Hezbollah organisation has only begun... This is a prolonged operation," Lieutenant General Eyal Zamir said in a statement.

"We are now preparing to advance the targeted ground operations and strikes according to an organised plan," he added.

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun had earlier warned the bridge attacks "represent a dangerous escalation and flagrant violation of Lebanon's sovereignty, and are considered a prelude to a ground invasion."

Lebanon was pulled into the 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 an Israeli-US strike.

Israel has sent troops into Lebanon and carried out extensive airstrikes, while Hezbollah has launched rocket barrages.

Israel's military said yesterday it began "a wide wave of strikes" against Hezbollah infrastructure in southern Lebanon.

According to Lebanon's state-run National News Agency (NNA), three strikes on the bridge near Tyre "caused extensive damage, rendering it unusable". It later reported a fourth strike occurred.

Aoun "condemned Israel's targeting and destruction of infrastructure and vital facilities in



Smoke rises after an Israeli strike on a bridge, following an escalation between Hezbollah and Israel, amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, near Qasmiyeh, Lebanon, yesterday. (Reuters)



People try to light a fire next to tents at a temporary encampment for displaced people, following an escalation between Hezbollah and Israel, in Beirut, Lebanon, yesterday. (Reuters)

southern Lebanon, particularly the Qasmiyeh bridge over the Litani River and other bridges."

"Targeting bridges over the Litani River... is an attempt to sever the geographical link between the area south of the Litani and the rest of Lebanon's territory," he added.

The NNA also reported that Israeli forces were "blowing up a number of houses in the town of Taybeh" near the border with Israel.

Earlier yesterday, Israel said rocket fire from Lebanon killed a civilian, but later announced it was investigating whether "the incident involved fire originat-

ing from IDF soldiers". Two Israeli soldiers had previously been killed in southern Lebanon, according to the military.

Lebanon's health ministry said four people were killed yesterday in two strikes in the south, while authorities have reported 1,029 dead in three weeks of conflict and more than 1mn displaced.

Hezbollah claimed responsibility for a series of attacks mainly against Israeli troops in northern Israel and in southern Lebanon, where Israeli soldiers have been carrying out ground incursions.

The group said it targeted

troops in Naqura, near the western side of the border with Israel, as the NNA reported "Israeli incursions" and heavy bombing of the area.

Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz said he and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had instructed the military "to immediately destroy all the bridges over the Litani River that are used for fighters' activity, in order to prevent Hezbollah fighters and weapons from moving south".

The Litani River runs around 30 kilometres north of the Israeli border.

Earlier this week, Israel attacked two bridges spanning the Litani, also alleging they were being used by Hezbollah.

Katz said the military was also instructed to "accelerate the demolition of Lebanese houses in the contact villages in order to thwart threats to Israeli communities".

Lebanon's state-run National News Agency also reported at least one strike on the Bekaa Valley in the country's east.

Hezbollah said its fighters repeatedly targeted Israeli soldiers and vehicles in or near the border town of Taybeh, as well as in or near the strategic town of Khiam, where the group has repeatedly said it has targeted Israeli forces in recent days.

On Saturday, Hezbollah said its fighters clashed with Israeli forces in Khiam and in the coastal town of Naqura.

The group also claimed attacks on northern Israel on Saturday, including targeting an air defence system in Maalot-Tarshiha, where Israeli public broadcaster Kan 11 reported three people were lightly wounded.

The Israeli military said it killed a fighter on Saturday who was the "commander of the special forces in Hezbollah's Radwan Force", referring to the group's elite unit.

Israel has warned residents of swathes of south Lebanon to evacuate and has said it wants to create a buffer zone in Lebanon to protect residents of northern Israel.

WHO says war at 'perilous stage' with strikes around N-sites

AFP
Geneva

The Middle East war has reached a "perilous stage" with strikes around nuclear sites in Iran and Israel, the World Health Organisation warned yesterday, as it called for maximum restraint.

An Iranian ballistic missile ripped open residential buildings and left dozens wounded late Saturday in the southern Israeli town of Dimona. Dimona hosts what is widely believed to be the Middle East's only nuclear arsenal, although Israel has never admitted to possessing nuclear weapons, insisting the site is for research.

Iran said the strike was in response to an earlier attack on its nuclear site at Natanz, which hosts underground centrifuges used to enrich uranium for Iran's disputed nuclear programme, and was damaged in the June 2025 war. "The war in the Middle East has reached a perilous stage" with the strikes on Natanz and Dimona, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom

Ghebreyesus said on X.

"Attacks targeting nuclear sites create an escalating threat to public health and environmental safety," he said.

"I urgently call on all parties to exercise maximum military restraint and avoid any actions that could trigger nuclear incidents. Leaders must prioritise de-escalation and protect civilians."

Tedros said the International Atomic Energy Agency was looking into the strikes, and "no indications of abnormal or increased off-site radiation levels have been reported".

The war erupted on February 28 when the US and Israel began their attacks on Iran, with Tehran in turn striking targets in Israel and Gulf nations.

Lebanon was drawn into the conflict when Hezbollah attacked Israel.

Since the war began, the WHO has provided training to its own staff and to other UN personnel across 13 countries to help them respond to public health threats in the event of a nuclear incident, said Tedros.

Three strikes target Iraqi group

Three strikes targeted an influential pro-Iranian armed group in its stronghold south of the capital late yesterday, while another targeted a US diplomatic and logistic centre at Baghdad International Airport, AFP reported from Baghdad.

The US diplomatic and logistics hub is located in the international airport complex, which has been repeatedly targeted since the start of the war in the Middle East on February 28. It was targeted eight times overnight, and an Iraqi security source - who spoke anonymously citing sensitivities - said on Saturday that there had been several waves of American departures from the facility to the airport.

Pro-Iran armed groups have claimed responsibility for attacks on US interests in Iraq and across the region, while strikes have also targeted these groups. Late yesterday, three strikes targeted the former paramilitary coalition Hashed al-Shaabi, also known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), which is part of Iraq's regular armed forces but also includes some pro-Iranian groups. An official with the influential pro-Iranian Kataeb Hezbollah said the three strikes had targeted them. "Units of the PMF were targeted by drone strikes and airstrikes, with three strikes in different locations," said a statement from a local emergency crisis cell, saying there were no wounded as the positions were deserted.

Late yesterday, a security official also reported another attack on the US logistics centre at the airport, saying that four explosions were heard near the site.



Israeli airstrikes kill four in Gaza camp



People gather around a destroyed Palestinian police jeep that was targeted by an Israeli airstrike in Nuseirat refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip, yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Cairo

An Israeli airstrike on a police vehicle yesterday killed three people in the middle of the Nuseirat camp in the central Gaza Strip, health officials said, hours after another person was killed in a strike on northern Gaza.

Medics and police sources said the three men killed in Nuseirat were members of the Hamas-led police force.

Ten people were also wounded

in the attack, medics said.

Earlier yesterday a separate airstrike killed one person – identified as a leader of one of Fatah's armed groups – and injured an unknown number of others in the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood in northern Gaza.

The Israeli military said it was checking on the two incidents.

While Israeli attacks in Gaza declined in the days after the US and Israel launched attacks on Iran on February 28, according to residents, medics and analysts, they have since begun to rise again. Israeli fire has killed doz-

ens of Palestinians since the outbreak of the Iran war, Gaza health officials say. In Gaza there have been regular outbreaks of violence since a ceasefire went into effect in October following two years of devastating war triggered by Hamas-led storming of Israel in October 2023.

The territory's health ministry says that at least 680 people have been killed by Israeli fire since the October ceasefire. Israel said four soldiers were killed by fighters in Gaza in the same period.

Israel and Hamas have traded blame for truce violations.

Israeli settlers burn buildings in attacks on West Bank villages

AFP
Jalud

Palestinian residents said yesterday that Israeli settlers torched buildings and cars in attacks on several villages in the occupied West Bank, with Israel's army condemning "violence of any kind" after the fact.

The reported arson late Saturday came in the midst of a spate of killings of Palestinians by Israeli settlers in the West Bank since the start of the Middle East war.

AFP journalists saw the charred remains of a house and several vehicles in the village of Fandaquimiya, southwest of Jenin. In the village of Jalud, a medical centre had been torched and Hebrew graffiti daubed on the mosque.

Hassan al-Zoubi, whose home in Fandaquimiya was destroyed, said that some 200 assailants had come from the nearby settlement of Homesh. "They set the house on fire right before our eyes using Molotov cocktails, throwing them through the windows," Zoubi said.

The Palestinian news agency Wafa said several Palestinians were injured in the attacks.

The Israeli army said soldiers had been "dispatched to several Palestinian villages... following reports of Israeli civilians committing acts of arson against structures and property, as well as engaging in disturbances in the area".

"The security forces condemn violence of any kind and will continue to act to maintain the security of residents and public order



A Palestinian man inspects the remains of his burnt-out family home following a reported attack by Israeli settlers in the village of Fandaquimiya, southwest of Jenin, in the occupied West Bank, yesterday. (AFP)

in the area," the military said in a statement.

The incidents came after the army said an Israeli civilian died Saturday when a Palestinian vehicle reportedly "hit an Israeli vehicle". Since the start of the US-Israeli war with Iran, 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.

The Palestinian presidency condemned the recent "terrorist attacks carried out by Israeli colonist gangs" in the West Bank.

"These assaults constitute a serious escalation for which the Israeli occupation government bears full responsibility," it said.

Diplomats from 13 European

nations and Canada on Saturday decried "increasing settler terror", and said the violent attempts to seize Palestinian land "must end".

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

Violence in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967, has risen sharply since the October 2023 Hamas storming of Israel. According to an AFP tally based on Palestinian health ministry figures, 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.

64 killed in attack on Sudan hospital: WHO

AFP
Geneva

A strike on a hospital in Sudan killed 64 people and wounded 89 others, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said, with 13 children counted among the dead.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the attack on Friday hit El-Daein Teaching Hospital in the state capital of East Darfur, adding that "enough blood has been spilled" and it was time to stop the nearly three-year conflict ravaging Sudan.

The hospital "was struck, killing at least 64 people, including 13 children, two female nurses, one male doctor, and multiple patients", he announced on X.

Sudanese rights group Emergency Lawyers reported that the hospital was hit by an army drone strike.

The paramilitary Rapid Support Forces dominate the vast Darfur region in western Sudan, while Sudan's army is in control of the east, centre and north.

Tedros said eight health staff were among the wounded in Friday's attack, which damaged the hospital's paediatric, maternity and emergency departments.

The hospital is now non-functional "due to the extensive damage", he said, which resulted in a "critical interruption of essential medical services".

Tedros said the WHO was supporting local health partners to help fill urgent gaps by scaling up capacity at other health facilities, including by increasing capacity to treat the injured, and deploying trauma care supplies and essential medicines.

RSF-controlled El-Daein has been regularly attacked by the Sudanese army, which is trying to push the paramilitaries back towards its Darfur strongholds and away from Sudan's central corridor.

Its most recent strike on the city's market earlier this month set fire to oil barrels that burned for hours.

In a statement carried by the official news agency SUNA, the Sudan Armed Forces said it "adheres to international norms and laws". The army added that "attacking service and health facilities is a persistent practice and a daily activity of this terrorist militia", referring to the Rapid Support Forces.

The WHO's Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care (SSA) counts and verifies such attacks, but it does not attribute blame as it is not an investigative agency.

The United Nations' humanitarian office in Sudan said it was "appalled by the attack".

To the repeated condemnation of the UN, hospitals have been a regular target throughout the war, which erupted in April 2023.

As a result of Friday's tragedy, the total number of people killed in attacks on health care in the conflict has now passed 2,000.

The WHO's SSA site showed 2,036 people have now been killed in 213 such attacks.

"Beyond the devastating human toll, attacks on health care have immediate and long-term consequences for communities already in desperate need of both emergency and routine medical services," said Tedros.

"Health care should never be a target. Peace is the best medi-

cine," he said. The SSA figures show attacks on health care in Sudan are growing deadlier by the year.

In 2023, 64 attacks caused 38 deaths, and the following year, 72 attacks led to 200 deaths.

In 2025, 65 attacks caused 1,620 deaths – 82% of reported deaths from attacks on health care worldwide.

The WHO's SSA said Friday's strike involved "violence with heavy weapons" and affected not just the hospital, staff and patients but also supplies and storage.

Near-daily drone strikes are now a hallmark of Sudan's brutal war, killing dozens at a time, mostly in the southern Kordofan region.

UN rights chief Volker Turk this month said he was "appalled" after more than 200 civilians were reported killed by drone attacks within an eight-day period.

"Parties to the conflict in Sudan continue to use increasingly powerful drones to deploy explosive weapons with wide-area impacts in populated areas," he said.

Across the country, the war has killed tens of thousands and driven more than 11mn people from their homes.

It has fuelled what the UN describes as the world's largest displacement and hunger crises, with more than 33mn people in need of humanitarian aid.

"Enough blood has been spilled. Enough suffering has been inflicted," said Tedros.

"The time has come to de-escalate the conflict in Sudan and ensure the protection of civilians, health workers, and humanitarians."

From bats to bonds: Uganda's inspiring 'cricket grannies'

AFP
Jinja

Giggles and songs ripple across a field in rural eastern Uganda where elderly women swing cricket bats as a way to reshape what ageing, health and sports can look like in later life.

The so-called "cricket grannies" are bound together by a growing love of a game they initially knew nothing about but is now helping them manage age-related health conditions, stress and loneliness.

Clad in floor-length dresses and mostly barefoot, the women, aged 50 to 90, gather weekly at a playground in Jinja district, about 80 kilometres from the capital, Kampala.

Each swing draws cheers from teammates as the women turn Saturday morning practice into a lively spectacle.

"With the exercises I've been doing, my legs used to hurt, but they no longer do," Jennifer Waibi Nanyonga, 72, told AFP.

"I spent the whole of last year without seeing a doctor for my back, yet it had previously been paining me," added the grandmother of 29.

The initiative began in 2025 with just 10 grandmothers in the remote village of Kivubuka and has since grown more than tenfold.

The programme was initially aimed at children, but when cricket coach Aaron Kusasira realised their caregivers had little knowledge of the game and often kept them from joining, he decided to involve the elderly women, too.

"We come here, we jog, we move around, we do some stretches," Kusasira, 26, said.



The cricketing grannies tackle age-related health conditions, stress, and loneliness. (AFP)



The programme has helped encourage grandparents to let children play. (AFP)

roughly \$27bn per year, and will continue to rise if activity levels are not improved.

FRESH START

Beyond physical activity, cricket has also fostered a sense of community among the Ugandan grannies.

"When at home, you have no company and spend your time buried in your thoughts," said an elderly woman who only gave her first name, Patricia.

For others, the weekly meetings have proved cathartic.

"When I arrive here and see my friends, we get together and talk about our problems, we counsel each other," said Jennifer Waibi Nanyonga.

"By the time we return home, everyone is lighter and with a fresh start," she added.

For coach Kusasira, training the women has been a win-win, giving him the opportunity to coach children in the area without opposition.

"From the kids to the elders, provided I see the smiles... it's enough. I know that is a day well spent," he said.

Torrential rains in Kenya kill 81 in March: officials

AFP
Nairobi

Torrential storms that have triggered flash floods in Kenya have killed at least 81 people this month, authorities said yesterday, as rain continued to pound much of the country.

"The cumulative number of fatalities has unfortunately risen to 81," national police spokesman Muchiri Nyaga said in a statement. "Additionally, flash floods have swept through several areas, displacing approximately 2,690 families and causing widespread destruction of infrastructure and

property." The capital Nairobi is the hardest-hit region, with 37 people killed, he said.

On Friday night, authorities called on residents to evacuate several slum neighbourhoods downstream from the Nairobi dam, warning of an imminent risk of flooding as rising water levels threatened to breach the dam embankment, according to local media.

The dam has held so far. Two people drowned overnight in floods in the town of Kiambu, just outside the capital, police said.

Two also died as landslides hit the western village of Kasaka,

burying numerous homes, reportedly private broadcaster Citizen TV.

The rain is forecast to continue until tomorrow. Authorities called for "extreme caution".

The March rains have repeatedly turned Nairobi streets to raging rivers, flooding thousands of homes and businesses.

Critics have called for the resignation of Nairobi Governor Johnson Sakaja, who had vowed to improve the capital's drainage and road infrastructure when he took office in 2022.

Scientists say human-caused climate change is increasing the probability, length and severity of extreme weather events.



Residents carry their belongings as they walk through a flooded area in West Nyakach, Kisumu County, yesterday. (AFP)

Airports rush to feed unpaid TSA workers as belts tighten

Reuters
Washington

As government funding for the US Department of Homeland Security 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 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 Department of Homeland Security, has stretched to five weeks.

Those workers are six 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 Kravak-Lambert, trustee of Pittsburgh's local chapter of the American Federation of Government Employees 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 like making Amazon deliveries or driving for Lyft and Uber.

"Many have gone and ap-



TSA desks sit empty as travellers stand in long lines at Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport yesterday in Atlanta, Georgia. (AFP)

plied 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."

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 travellers, 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 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

has 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 DHS.

Workers presenting letters from DHS to creditors asking for late fees to be waived or for payments to be deferred are finding less leniency this time around, said Kravak-Lambert of Pittsburgh's AFGE 332. Union officials say workers who call in sick must show proof with a note from a doctor.

Records shattered as US heatwave moves eastward

AFP
Washington

A record-breaking heatwave afflicting the western half of the US moved eastward Saturday toward the centre of the country, bringing unseasonably warm temperatures to places that were at freezing or below just a week prior.

Dozens of cities from California to Colorado recorded their highest temperatures ever for the month of March, according to the National Weather Service Weather Prediction Center.

On Saturday, areas that saw new records for the highest temperatures in March included 92F (33.3C) recorded in Kansas City, Missouri, and North Platte, Nebraska.

Topeka, the state capital of Kansas, broke its March record Saturday with a high of 95F (35C), weather officials said.

In Wyoming, the least populous US state, all-time March temperatures were set in capital Cheyenne at 83F (28.3C).

On top of the monthly all-time highs, the heatwave reached several other temperature milestones.

For instance, in Chanute, Kansas, temperatures went from a record low of 13F (-10.5C) on March 16 to a record high of 91F (32.8C) just four days later.

And in Phoenix, Arizona, one of the hottest cities in the US, the daily low was a balmy 70F (21.1C) on Saturday, the earliest in the year such a level had been reached, the weather agency said. Cities recording all-time daily highs Saturday included Denver (86F), Grand Island, Nebraska (98F) and Midland, Texas (98F).

On Friday the heatwave had brought temperatures up to 44.4C (112F) in several areas along the southern California-Arizona border, a national US record for March.

The National Weather Service issued an extreme heat warning for the same desert areas on Saturday, as well as a red flag warning - indicating high wildfire risk - for much of the central Plains states of Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma.

Scientists say there is overwhelming evidence that current heatwaves are a clear marker of global warming, a process driven chiefly by the burning of fossil fuels.

With winter in the northern hemisphere officially ending on Friday - the first day of astronomical spring - the soaring temperatures were wreaking havoc on wildlife in the West.

Many plants and trees are already blooming, and vegetation is growing at a fantastic clip, fuelled by heavy rains in December and January.

Trump administration touts plan for ICE agents at airports

Reuters
Washington

US President Donald Trump's border czar said yesterday that having immigration agents bolster short-staffed Transportation Security Administration teams will speed up airport lines, but the union for TSA workers said that doesn't solve what they see as the underlying problem of pay.

In appearances yesterday news shows, US border czar Tom Homan and Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy argued that Immigration and Customs Enforcement personnel can help with airport security screening, starting on Monday, even though they have not been specifically trained for it.

"When we deploy tomorrow, we'll have a well thought-out plan to execute," Homan said on CNN's *State of the Union* programme.

Tens of thousands of TSA agents have been working without pay for weeks because of an impasse between Democrats and Republicans in Congress over funding the US Department of Homeland Security, the parent agency of ICE and TSA.

Trump announced on Saturday that ICE agents would be sent to airports unless Democratic lawmakers agree to fund DHS. Democrats have criticised the department's immigration operations



People wait in long TSA security lines at John F. Kennedy International Airport yesterday in New York. (AFP)

that have killed US citizens and sparked public outrage, demanding a change in rules.

Some 10% of TSA employees have been absent from work in recent days, with the rate even higher at major airports in Atlanta, New York City and Houston, leading to lengthy lines for passengers trying to get to their gates. Hundreds of TSA agents have simply resigned, according to their labour union and TSA.

"ICE will do the job far better than ever done before!" the president, a Republican, wrote yesterday morning in a social media post.

Details of how ICE agents would help with the lines were

scant, although Homan told CNN a plan would be in place by the end of the day "to move those lines along."

Homan and Duffy, in separate interviews, had different ideas about how the ICE agents might be deployed. Homan said he doubted ICE agents would operate X-ray baggage and passenger screening machines because they did not have experience. Duffy, in contrast, said ICE agents "know how to pat people down, they know how to run the X-ray machines."

The labour union representing TSA workers criticised Trump's decision, saying their members spend months in training learning to detect explosives and weapons.

"Our members at TSA have been showing up every day, without a paycheck, because they believe in the mission of keeping the flying public safe," Everett Kelley, National President of the American Federation of Government Employees, said in a statement. "They deserve to be paid, not replaced by untrained, armed agents who have shown how dangerous they can be."

Unlike TSA employees, the government has continued to pay ICE agents through a separate funding provision while lawmakers debate whether ICE funding should be tied to new rules and procedures.

Democrats have said new rules are needed after masked ICE agents fatally shot two US citizens in the streets of Minneapolis earlier this year, who had come out to protest or observe Trump's unprecedented deportation surge in Minnesota.

Hakeem Jeffries, a New York Democrat and the minority leader in the US House of Representatives, told CNN that his caucus is open to a separate funding agreement for TSA employees while lawmakers debate measures to "get ICE under control." But there has been little movement on an actual deal so far, especially in the Senate.

"We have an obligation to not fund an agency that is acting this lawlessly," Senator Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat, told NBC's *Meet the Press* programme.

US may 'escalate to de-escalate' against Iran: Treasury chief

AFP
Washington

The United States may need to "escalate" its attacks against Iran to be able to wind down the war, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said yesterday, after President Donald Trump gave seemingly contradictory trajectories for the US military campaign.

Trump on Saturday threatened to "obliterate" Iranian energy plants if Tehran did not fully open the pivotal Strait of Hormuz, just a day after saying US objectives were "very close" and that he was considering "winding down" the war.

Asked on NBC's "Meet the Press" if Trump was winding down or escalating the war, Bessent said: "They're not mutually

exclusive. Sometimes you have to escalate to de-escalate."

"This is the only language the Iranians understand," he argued.

Iran's threats against shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, through which about a fifth of global gas and oil supplies flows, have caused energy prices to soar around the world.

Bessent, as part of efforts to abate market turmoil, has temporarily lifted US sanctions on Iranian and Russian oil that had already been loaded onto ships.

But the move has produced some backlash, with critics saying it will provide funding to Iran at the same time that the US-Israeli conflict is ongoing.

Asked on NBC about the contradiction, Bessent defended the move as helping alleviate pressure on US partners and lower the price Iran can receive for its oil.

"That Iranian oil was always going to be sold to the Chinese. It was going to be sold at a discount... So which is better? If oil prices spiked to \$150 and they (Iran) were getting 70% of that, or oil prices below 100?"

The spike in crude prices has also seen costs at the pump across the United States quickly rise, creating potential political risks for the president just months before the midterm elections.

Bessent yesterday refused to put a timeline on when Americans should expect prices to moderate, while arguing that the electorate will agree that removing Iran's nuclear threat will be worth the temporary costs.

"I don't know whether it's going to be 30 days. I don't know whether it's going to be 50 days. I don't know whether it's going to be 100 days," he said.

US has 'plenty' of funds for Iran war: Bessent

Reuters
Washington

The US government has "plenty of money" to fund the war against Iran, but is requesting supplemental funding from Congress to ensure the military is well supplied in the future, US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said yesterday.

Bessent, speaking on NBC News' "Meet the Press" programme, also ruled out pushing for any tax increases to fund the war. The US military's request for \$200bn in additional funding for the Iran war faces stiff opposition in Congress, with Democrats and even some Republicans questioning the need after large defence appropriations last year. Bessent defended the request without confirming the amount. President Donald Trump has not yet sent a request for the Senate and House of Representatives to approve the sum and his admin-

istration has made clear that the number could change.

"We have plenty of money to fund this war," Bessent said. "This is supplemental. President Trump has built up the military, as he did in his first term, as he is now doing in his second term, and he wants to make sure that the military is well supplied going forward."

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth said last week that the extra money was needed "to ensure that we're properly funded for what's been done, for what we may have to do in the future." He dismissed a question about possible tax increases as "ridiculous" and said that was "not at all" under consideration. Early indications suggest that the war will be the most expensive for the US since the long conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Administration officials told lawmakers that the first six days of the Iran war had cost more than \$11bn. The Republican-led Congress has

already approved record funding for the military since Trump began his second term in January 2025. Last month, he signed into law the Fiscal 2026 Defense Appropriations Act with about \$840bn in funding. And last summer, over opposition from Democrats, the Republican-led Congress passed a sweeping tax cut and spending bill that included \$156bn for defence.

Bessent also defended the Trump administration's moves in recent days to lift sanctions on Iranian and Russian oil. Doing so, he argued, would allow other countries besides China - including Japan and South Korea - to purchase the oil, while preventing oil prices from spiking to \$150 per barrel and reducing the overall revenues Iran and Russia would receive. He said a Treasury analysis showed that the maximum extra amount of oil revenue Russia could get would be \$2bn.

Trump reposts video mocking Starmer on Truth Social

AFP
London

US President Donald Trump shared a video on his Truth Social network yesterday of a TV comedy skit showing a terrified British Prime Minister Keir Starmer hoping to dodge a phone call with the American leader.

The skit, aired on the premiere of the new British version of Saturday Night Live - adapted from the

long-running US show - shows Starmer, played by George Fouracres, panicking inside 10 Downing Street at the prospect of a call with Trump.

Starmer turns to a fake David Lammy, his deputy prime minister, and says, "What if Donald shouts at me?"

When Trump picks up the phone, Starmer immediately hangs up, asking why it is so difficult to talk to "that scary, scary, wonderful president".

"Sir, just be honest and tell him we can't send any more ships to the Strait of Hormuz," Lammy says - the vital shipping lane effectively blocked by Iran since the US-Israeli attacks that started the Middle East war.

"I just want to keep him happy, Lammy. You don't understand him like I do - I can change him," Starmer says.

Trump did not post any comment alongside the video.

The US leader has repeatedly

railed against Starmer since the start of the war, accusing him of not doing enough to support the US.

"This is not Winston Churchill that we're dealing with," Trump said earlier this month, after Starmer initially declined to let US warplanes use UK bases to strike Iran.

"I'm disappointed with Keir," Trump has also said, slamming Starmer's "big mistake".

"I like him, I think he's a nice man, but I'm disappointed."

US Senate advances Homeland Security nomination of Mullin, paving way for confirmation vote

US President Donald Trump's nomination of Republican Senator Markwayne Mullin of Oklahoma to be the next head of the US Department of Homeland Security yesterday advanced towards final confirmation after the Senate voted 54-37 to limit debate on the appointment.

The confirmation vote could come sometime today. If approved, as expected, Mullin would replace Secretary Kristi Noem, whom Trump fired on March 5.

Mullin's confirmation was all but assured on Thursday when the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee voted to send it to the full chamber despite opposition from the panel's chair, Senator Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican.

If confirmed, Mullin, a member of the Cherokee Nation, would be the second Native American to serve as a cabinet member. (Reuters)



Cuba scrambles to restore power after new blackout

AFP
Havana

Cuban authorities scrambled yesterday to restore power to the island after the second nationwide blackout in less than a week, as the grid struggles due to an ageing infrastructure and a US oil blockade.

Some parts of Havana began to have electricity again, a day after the energy ministry reported a "total disconnection" of the national electric system in the country of nearly 10mn people.

The outage comes as Cuba's communist government has faced growing pressure from US President Donald Trump, who imposed the de facto oil blockade in January and mused this week about "taking" the Caribbean island.

A top Cuban diplomat said the country's military was "preparing these days for the possibility of military aggression."

"We truly hope that it doesn't occur," Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Carlos Fernandez de Cossio told NBC's *Meet the Press* in an interview taped before the blackout and aired yesterday.

He said Havana was willing to talk with the US but discussing changes to its political system was off the table.

"Cuba has no quarrel with the US. We do have the need and the right to protect ourself. But we are willing to sit down," Fernandez de Cossio said.

There have been seven nationwide blackouts since 2024, making life more difficult for Cubans who fear food will spoil in refrigerators, among other problems in a country in economic crisis.

"The truth is, it gets harder every day to live with this situation," Alina Quinones, a 48-year-old nurse, told AFP as she headed to the Havana hospital where she works after barely sleeping.

She had no power, Internet or



Sunrise over the city as Cuba begins efforts to restore power after its grid collapsed for the second time in a week amid a US oil blockade that has dealt a major blow to the island's already ailing energy infrastructure, in Havana, yesterday. (Reuters)

phone connection, making it impossible to reach relatives in Matanzas, a city east of the capital.

"Imagine, without sleep, my child was restless all night," Quinones said.

Francisco Gonzalez, a 79-year-old retiree, also said he had a sleepless night in the dark, "sitting in an armchair at home, waiting for the power to come back on."

The outages, as well as regular shortages of food, medicine and other basics, are fuelling public frustration with people banging pots at night as a form of protest.

In a rare moment of violence, demonstrators vandalised a provincial office of the Cuban Communist Party last weekend.

The breakdowns have intensified since Cuba's main regional ally and oil supplier, Venezuela's socialist leader Nicolas Maduro, was

captured in a US military operation in January.

Trump subsequently threatened to impose tariffs on countries that sell oil to Cuba.

No oil has arrived since January 9, hitting the power sector while public transport has dwindled and airlines curtailed flights to the island, a blow to the all-important tourism sector.

The latest blackout was due to an outage in a generating unit at one of the country's eight thermoelectric plants, triggering a domino effect in the system, according to authorities.

A gas power station near Havana and another in the beach resort of Varadero were generating power again yesterday, as well as a hydroelectric plant in central Cuba, energy and mining minister Vicente de la O Levy said on X. A unit of a thermo-

electric plant was also back online.

Havana's electricity company said on social media that more than 157,000 customers, or 18% of the capital, had power yesterday morning.

The new blackout occurred as an international aid convoy began to arrive in Cuba this week, bringing sorely-needed medical supplies, food, water and solar panels to the Caribbean island.

But getting oil to power its decades-old thermoelectric plant is becoming increasingly urgent.

"It is very severe. And we are acting as proactively as we can to cope with the situation," Fernandez de Cossio told NBC.

"We do hope that fuel will reach Cuba one way or the other and that this boycott that the US has been imposing does not last and cannot be sustained forever," he said.

Cuba is ready for any attack from US amid oil blockade, envoy says

Reuters
New York

Cuba is prepared for the unlikely possibility of a military engagement with the US, Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Carlos Fernandez de Cossio said over the weekend in response to US President Donald Trump's threats to take over the Caribbean island nation.

Havana and Washington entered talks earlier this month as an oil blockade imposed by Trump pushes the Communist-run nation deeper into economic crisis. Trump last Monday escalated his rhetoric against Cuba, saying he expected to have the "honour" of taking Cuba.

"Our country has historically been ready to mobilise as a nation as a whole for military aggression... We don't believe it is something that is prob-

able, but we would be naive if we do not prepare," de Cossio told NBC's *Meet the Press* in remarks aired yesterday. "We don't see why it would have to occur, and we find no justification whatsoever."

Reports had suggested the Trump administration was seeking to remove Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel from power.

De Cossio also said any suggestion of the nature, the structure, or members of the Cuban government being subject to negotiation in talks with the US is untrue.

He added a regime change is "absolutely" off the table in discussions with the US.

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

Panama rejects Hong Kong firm's claim of ignoring arbitration

AFP
Panama City

Panama's president denied Thursday that officials failed to respond to an arbitrage lawsuit by the Hong Kong firm opposing the takeover of its Panama Canal operations, saying the government would "strongly" defend itself.

The dispute stems from a Panama court ruling in January striking down the contract that let Panama Ports Company (PPC), a unit of CK Hutchison, to manage the canal's Pacific port of Balboa and the Atlantic port at Cristobal.

The decision came after claims by US President Donald Trump that China effectively runs the canal, part of broader tensions between Washington and Beijing.

PPC responded with a lawsuit filed at the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), and is seeking at least \$2bn in damages.

This week the company accused Panama officials of ignor-

ing the arbitration proceedings, saying the country had not hired lawyers and "needed time to develop a plan."

"That is scandalous and a lie," President Jose Raul Mulino told reporters on Thursday.

"We have appointed international lawyers who are going to defend us... strongly in this case," he said, adding that Panama had been given just two days to prepare its response, and therefore had sought a delay.

China had threatened Panama with payback after the court's decision in January, and CK Hutchison said this month it had intensified its legal actions over the takeover of the two Panama Canal ports it controlled.

It said it had also filed an administrative petition urging Panamanian officials to reconsider the executive action that "led to the occupation of facilities and confiscation of property".

Panama has always denied any Chinese control over the 80-kilometre (50-mile) waterway, which is used mainly by the US and China.

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.

Over 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



Workers from the ONPE (National Office of Electoral Processes) unload electoral material at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to then be sent to voters living abroad, in Lima yesterday. (AFP)

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, told AFP.

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."

Brazilian city trials new biofuel aimed at replacing diesel

Reuters
Passo Fundo, Brazil

As widening conflict in the Middle East roils global energy markets, one city in southern Brazil is planning to run more of its municipal fleet on an innovative homegrown biofuel designed to replace diesel entirely.

Nestled among rolling expanses of soybean farms in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, the city of Passo Fundo is deploying a diesel alternative for its municipal fleet made from feedstocks including soy, animal fats and used oils.

Whereas traditional biodiesel is blended with petroleum-based diesel at a ratio of 15% in Brazil, the new

fuel is designed to fully replace the fossil fuel in any vehicle that takes diesel, cutting carbon emissions and potentially reducing costs.

Be8, one of Brazil's biggest biodiesel firms, received regulatory approval in late 2024 to start producing the new fuel, called BeVent, in Passo Fundo, aiming initially to make 28mn litres (7.4mn gallons) annually.

BeVent is a so-called drop-in for the fossil fuel and can be used in regular diesel engines without needing modifications, Be8 said.

With crude prices soaring due to the US-Israeli war on Iran, triggering fears of diesel shortages in Brazil, Passo Fundo Mayor Pedro Almeida said the new fuel has brought some peace of mind.

"When we talk about these conflicts... and when we have an alternative fuel like BeVent available, that represents, without a doubt, a very large competitive potential," said Almeida.

Neither the mayor's office nor Be8 commented on the current cost per litre of BeVent, but the company said it was around 15% more expensive than biodiesel and much cheaper than its direct competitor, HVO, or green diesel.

Although the initial contract for BeVent represented a premium over traditional diesel, the mayor's office is confident prices will fall, and expects to use BeVent more widely across the rest of its fleet in the future. "I am certain the fuel will start becoming cheaper as production

increases, with more volume and a larger market," Almeida said.

When the first stage of the rollout is complete, 17 Passo Fundo vehicles — including trucks, backhoes and a minibus — will tank up with BeVent, requiring some 10,000 litres per month. Brazil, which imports about a quarter of the diesel it consumes, is on track for a record soybean harvest this year, leading soy crushers and biodiesel producers to push the government to allow higher biodiesel blends.

"We are betting heavily on BeVent for the company's growth in Brazil and abroad," Be8 CEO Erasmo Carlos Battistella told Reuters, adding that the company is in talks with businesses seeking to lower their net carbon emissions.



A drone view shows the Be8 biofuel plant as geopolitical tensions impact the global oil market and drive interest in alternative fuels such as BeVent, produced by the company, in Passo Fundo, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. (Reuters)

'Japan could consider Hormuz minesweeping'

Reuters
Tokyo

Japan could consider deploying its military for minesweeping in the Strait of Hormuz, a vital artery for global oil supplies, if a ceasefire is reached in the US-Israeli war on Iran, Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi said yesterday. "If there were to be a complete ceasefire, hypothetically speaking, then things like mine-sweeping could come up," Motegi said during a Fuji TV programme. "This is purely hypothetical, but if a ceasefire were established and naval mines were creating an obstacle, then I think that would be

something to consider." Japan's military actions are limited under its postwar pacifist constitution, but 2015 security legislation allows Japan to use its Self-Defense Forces overseas if an attack, including on a close security partner, threatens Japan's survival and no other means are available to address it.

Tokyo has no immediate plans to seek arrangements to allow passage through the Strait of Hormuz for stranded Japanese vessels, Motegi said, adding it was "extremely important" to create conditions that allow all ships to navigate through the narrow waterway, the conduit for a fifth of the world's oil shipments.



Japan Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi (Reuters/File photo)

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told Japan's Kyodo news agency on Friday that he had spoken to Motegi about potentially letting Japanese-related vessels pass through the strait.

Japan gets around 90% of its oil shipments via the strait, which Tehran has largely closed during the war, now in its fourth week. A spike in global oil prices has prompted Japan and other countries to re-

lease oil from their reserves.

US President Donald Trump met Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi on Thursday, urging her to "step up" as he presses allies - so far unsuccessfully - to send warships to help open the strait.

Takaichi told reporters after the Washington summit that she had briefed Trump on what support Japan could and could not provide in the strait under its laws.

Japan FM says Iran released one of two detained Japanese nationals

AFP
Tokyo

Japan's foreign minister said yesterday that one of two Japanese nationals detained in Iran has been released.

The person, who has not been publicly identified, was released on Wednesday and will be returning to Japan, Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi told a political talk show programme on Fuji Television. The individual had been taken into custody in Iran in June, according to Japanese media.

Iran released the person after deciding the individual's jail term was over, Jiji Press reported, citing unnamed Japanese diplomatic sources. Motegi said the development came after he made "strong calls" to Iranian Foreign Minister

Abbas Araghchi to release the detainees. He confirmed a second Japanese national remained in detention but did not identify the person.

In January, Iran arrested the Tehran bureau chief of Japanese public broadcaster NHK and sent him to a prison known for holding political inmates, according to media reports. A Japanese government spokesperson at the time told reporters that a Japanese citizen had been detained on January 20 but declined to give more details. Motegi declined yesterday to confirm whether the second individual is the NHK journalist.

"As for the other person, we are staying in touch with the person's family and we are working to secure the person's early release," Motegi said during the Fuji TV programme.

BTS draws over 100,000 fans to comeback concert

AFP
Seoul

More than 100,000 fans turned out to see K-pop superstars BTS's first concert in nearly four years, their label said Sunday, a smaller number than originally expected for the highly anticipated event in central Seoul.

The seven-member group took to the stage together for the first time following a years-long hiatus prompted by mandatory military service, with some stationed near the heavily fortified border with North Korea.

The comeback concert was held on Saturday against the backdrop of the historic Gyeongbokgung Palace - fitting for the "Kings of K-pop" - with thousands of fans from South Korea and abroad singing along.

"An estimated 104,000 fans attended the Gwanghwamun Square concert, based on ticket sales and data from the country's three major mobile carriers," HYBE said in a statement to AFP.

The figure was lower than an initial projection of 260,000, while police estimates of the crowd size were far lower at about 42,000, according to Yonhap news agency.

Netflix livestreamed the concert to about 190 countries.

Fans waved a sea of glowsticks and sang along to the group's hits, holding their phones aloft to film the performance as giant screens set up across the venue allowed the crowd to watch.

Some 15,000 police officers and security personnel were mobilised for the concert, with barricades lining the roads and nearby venues shut.

The latest album, "ARIRANG", released on Friday, is billed as reflecting the maturing boy band's Korean identity. It sold nearly 4m copies on its first day, according to the label.

Vietnam to sign energy deal with Russia: govt

AFP
Hanoi

Vietnam's prime minister left yesterday for an official visit to Russia during which the two nations will sign several agreements, including on oil and gas co-operation, Hanoi said.

Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh's trip to the major oil-producing nation from Sunday to Wednesday comes as Vietnam seeks to shore up its fuel reserves amid global supply disruptions due to the war in the Middle East.

His visit will focus on deepening ties with Russia and expanding co-operation in trade, investment and energy, Vietnam's government said in a statement yesterday.

"During this visit, a series of important agreements related to nuclear power plant projects, as well as co-operation in energy and oil and gas will be signed,"

"During this visit, a series of important agreements related to nuclear power plant projects, as well as co-operation in energy and oil and gas will be signed"

another statement from Hanoi said on Saturday.

"Co-operation in oil and gas energy will be reinforced in all fields of trade, exploration, extraction, and human resource training," it added.

Since the US-Israel war against Iran began in late February, sparking fuel price hikes and fears of shortages around the world, the cost of 95-octane petrol and diesel in Vietnam, a manufacturing hub, has soared by 50% and 70%, respectively.

Chinh held phone talks recently asking for fuel support

from several countries, including Qatar, Kuwait, Algeria and Japan, according to Hanoi.

He is scheduled to meet with his Russian counterpart, Mikhail Mishustin, on Monday, Moscow said.

They will discuss "issues of Russian-Vietnamese trade", with a focus on implementing joint projects in the energy and other sectors, according to a Russian government statement released Thursday.

During a visit by Mishustin to Hanoi in January 2025, Russia said it was "ready to participate in building a national nuclear power industry in Vietnam", and the two nations would work together on joint oil and gas projects, according to a joint statement.

The two sides also signed a deal on nuclear energy at the time, with Chinh saying his country would aim to build a nuclear power plant within five years.



K-pop boy group BTS perform during their concert at Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul on Saturday. (AFP)

Philippines allows temporary use of dirtier fuel amid Middle East crisis

Reuters
Manila

The Philippines has allowed the temporary and limited use of a cheaper but dirtier type of fuel to ensure supply as it finds ways to cope with the impact of the Middle East crisis.

The Department of Energy (DOE) said only vehicles from model year 2015 and earlier, traditional jeepsneys, power plants and generators, and the marine and shipping sectors would be allowed to use Euro-II compliant petroleum products.

"The measure is intended to help maintain a continuous, ad-

equate and accessible fuel supply, while allowing limited flexibility for sectors that may be affected," the DOE said in a statement.

It ordered oil companies that will be offering Euro II fuels to maintain segregation from Euro IV across storage, transport and retail systems.

Manila switched to cleaner Euro-IV compliant fuels from Euro-II in 2016. Euro-IV fuels, which remain in force, have sulphur content of 50 parts per million (ppm) versus 500ppm for Euro-II fuels. Last week, thousands of jeepney drivers took to the streets across the country to protest a more than doubling of local diesel prices after global oil prices surged because of the US-

Israel war on Iran. Like many of its Southeast Asian neighbours, the Philippines has taken steps such as shortening the work week and providing fuel subsidies to counter the impact of rising costs. Congress has also granted the president emergency powers to suspend or reduce fuel taxes.

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos said in a video message yesterday that the government is talking to India, China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand and Brunei about possible fuel supply arrangements. The country, which relies heavily on Middle Eastern oil for fuel needs, is set to import Russian oil this month for the first time in five years.

Vietnam's Communist Party secures nearly 97% of assembly seats

Vietnam's Communist Party won nearly 97% of the 500 seats in the National Assembly, according to results released by the parliament yesterday, confirming its overwhelming dominance after a vote in which almost all candidates were fielded by the ruling party. The party's 482-seat haul was roughly in line with the number it held in the outgoing parliament.

Turnout at the five-yearly elections for members of the parliament and for local councils exceeded 99%, authorities have said, in line with past elections. The unicameral parliament has virtually no power to challenge the party's key decisions, including on personnel, but it has occasionally amended proposed laws. The National Assembly is scheduled

to hold its first weeks-long session from April 6. During that plenary, lawmakers are due to confirm new state leaders to be named by the party, including the prime minister and the president.

To Lam, who was confirmed as general secretary at the party's January congress, is widely expected to be chosen as president as well. Lam's expected elevation would further align Vietnam's political structure with that of neighbouring China. (Reuters)

Australia fuel supply strong: energy minister

Reuters
Sydney

Australia's fuel supply remains strong and there are no immediate plans to ration fuel to manage the impact of the Iran war on the nation's supply chain, Energy Minister Chris Bowen said yesterday.

Australia, which imports about 90% of its fuel, has experienced localised shortages as the escalating US-Israeli war disrupts supply. The nation has 38 days' worth of petrol and 30 days of diesel and

jet fuel, Bowen said in televised remarks, citing data from Saturday. Supply remains strong despite the cancellation of six fuel shipments from Asia, he said.

"While we are dealing with an uncertainty, we still have two refineries working full pelt. It would be better if we had more, sure, but we do have two, and we also have the boats continuing to arrive," he said.

Asked about whether the centre-left government would consider using emergency powers to ration fuel, Bowen said, "We're a long way from that".

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese again urged Australians not to panic-buy fuel amid shortages in some rural areas. "People need to engage responsibly, and I'm sure that overwhelmingly that's what Australians will do," Albanese said, according to an official transcript.

Albanese said last week his government would roll out additional measures to safeguard fuel supply, appointing Anthea Harris, the former boss of the Australian Energy Regulator, as head of a national fuel supply task force to tackle shortages and improve the domestic fuel supply chain.

Japan ski resort faces strains of global acclaim

AFP
Niseko, Japan

Beneath the powder snow at internationally popular Japanese ski resort Niseko, anxiety is mounting among residents over soaring prices and a massive influx of overseas workers.

At a time when Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi is talking tough on immigration, upscale Niseko has never been more popular with seasonal workers, investors and skiers from across the globe.

The snow "is the best in the world", said Gideon Masters, a 29-year-old Australian tourist. "It's just soft, powder fluff. You can pick it up with your bare hands, it doesn't even feel cold... It's just a shame that it's become so populated," he told AFP at the foot of the slopes, snowboard in hand.

Built in the 1960s on the northern island of Hokkaido, the resort began attracting foreigners, mainly Australians, in the 1990s and became a popular destination

after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 for those wanting to avoid the US.

They gradually opened more shops and acquired property, and were later joined by Asian investors from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, among others, pushing land prices ever higher.

In Hirafu, one of the four resorts that make up Niseko, land prices jumped 70% between 2020 and 2025.

"If ski resorts in Japan had stayed the way they used to be, they would never have gained such worldwide renown," said Hiroshi Hasegawa, director of a local real estate agency.

"It's thanks to the taste and sensibilities of Australians and New Zealanders that this town has grown."

They are no longer alone, with "funds based in tax havens and all kinds of investors (who) have started pouring money in. Hollywood stars and artists come here, and owners of multinationals are buying second homes," he added.

"All of this is driving prices up even further," a trend that will likely continue, according to the agent.

Unaffordable for locals

For residents, inflated property prices and living costs are leaving a bitter taste.

"Land is being sold at prices that are no longer affordable for locals," explained 42-year-old Masatoshi Saito, who runs a painting company.

"In the supermarket, you find luxury products, sea urchins or Dom Perignon champagne, and vegetables have become extremely expensive," pushing some people to do their shopping in a neighbouring town.

To attract staff, hotels and restaurants are raising wages, but local businesses are struggling to keep up.

"In construction, paying that much is very difficult because market prices are fixed. Raising wages is a huge risk for bosses," Saito said.

Meanwhile, "care workers sometimes prefer jobs in hotels," which pay better, creating a risk of labour shortages in social services," warned Hasegawa.

Driven by tourist demand, the region sees thousands of seasonal

workers arrive each year, most of them foreigners.

In Kutchan, a large town in the area, the non-Japanese population doubles in winter to 3,000 people from 70 countries, making up nearly 20% of residents.

"Young people in their twenties come here from all over the world (...), which creates a very lively atmosphere," but also causes problems with neighbours, admitted Kutchan Mayor Kazushi Monji.

Saito and other residents, meanwhile, have complained about littering.

A plan to build housing for 1,200 foreign workers that was approved last autumn sparked outcry among locals.

"Cultures are different, not to mention the language barrier," the mayor said, urging "mutual support and consideration".

'Harmonious coexistence'

Reflecting growing anti-immigration sentiment, the far-right "Japanese First" Sanseito party made gains in February's general election.

Prime Minister Takaichi, mean-



Foreign tourists skiing and snowboarding at the Niseko Tokyu Grand Hirafu ski resort in Kutchan, Hokkaido prefecture. (AFP/File photo)

while, has promised tougher rules for foreigners in the name of "harmonious coexistence" between communities.

Her government is proposing stricter checks on foreigners entering the country, lengths of stay and illegal work.

It also wants to revise rules on land purchases by foreigners for "national security" reasons.

While acknowledging the need to adapt legislation to current realities, Monji rejects "the somewhat extreme view" that foreigners could "take over".

The interest Niseko is generating "boosts the economy and greatly

contributes to the town's development", Kutchan's mayor said.

And with births falling again in 2025 for the tenth year in a row in Japan, the country desperately needs foreign workers.

Hokkaido is experiencing extreme polarisation, hosting both the localities that saw the sharpest land-price increases in the country last year due to tourism and foreign investment, and those where prices fell the most, due to population decline.

"If we want to share the beauty of this region with the whole world, we must move beyond nationality divides," Monji said.



India to tackle global obesity with cheap fat-loss jabs

AFP
Mumbai

A deluge of weight-loss drugs is set to transform the global fight against obesity as India prepares to unleash low-cost generic versions of injections like Ozempic after a key patent expired Friday.

The move will dramatically widen access to treatments that have long been considered a luxury, especially in middle-income countries, where soaring demand has collided with steep prices.

At clinics across Mumbai, doctors say they are already preparing for an influx in new patients.

More than 50 people walk into endocrinologist Nadeem Rais's office every week seeking weight-loss injections.

"We have around 70 to 80 patients on active treatment right now," he told AFP.

"When generics come out and prices drop, that could go up to 200 easily."

His colleague Sunera Ghai agrees saying that demand is "very high" but many "probably aren't taking it just because it is truly a luxury item at this point".

The breakthrough comes as patents on semaglutide — the active ingredient in drugs such as Ozempic and Wegovy — expired Friday in India, the world's largest supplier of generic medicines.

By the end of 2026, core patents on semaglutide will have expired in 10 countries that represent 48% of the global obesity burden, according to a study published earlier this month by researchers.

These include Brazil, China, South Africa, Türkiye and Canada, the study said.

For India's drug giants, this marks the start of an aggressive new race.

At least four major firms have already prepared generic semaglutide injections, regulatory filings and compliance documents viewed by AFP show.

Some, including Zydus Lifesciences, have announced "Day 1" launches, suggesting generic versions may become available as



A medicine distributor stores Mounjaro (tirzepatide) self-injecting GLP-1 prefilled pens and vials in a fridge at his office in Thane. (AFP)

soon as this weekend in India.

Research firm Pharमारack estimates the Indian market will soon be flooded with options.

"What we understand is, there will be more than 50 brands that will be launched in the market and there are more than 40 players who will be launching these drugs," Pharमारack's vice-president Sheetal Sapale said.

The timing aligns with India's shifting health landscape.

While the country still accounts for a third of the world's undernutrition according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), rising incomes and urban lifestyles have pushed obesity rates sharply upward.

Government data released March last year shows 24% of women and 23% of men are overweight or obese in India.

"Once a person starts earning money, he becomes more sedentary here," says bariatric surgeon Sanjay Borude.

"While in first-world countries, the more the money, they become more active and devote time for their health, this is reversed in India."

These flipped economics have worked well for big pharma players like Eli Lilly and Novo Nordisk who have been cashing in on the market.

India's weight-loss drug sales have grown tenfold in five years to \$153mn as of 2026, and are projected to soar to over half a bn by 2030.

But using such drugs can cause side effects including nausea and gastrointestinal issues.

Eli Lilly's Mounjaro became the country's top-selling drug by value last year, surpassing even common antibiotics.

Still, high prices — often 15,000 to 22,000 rupees (\$161-\$236) a month — limit access, says Swati Pradhan, who runs a weight-loss clinic in Mumbai.

She expects patient numbers to rise once generics push treatment costs closer to 5,000 rupees (\$60) a month.

The global impact may prove even more profound.

India supplies more than half of Africa's generic medicines, and cheaper semaglutide could become a lifeline for countries where

obesity is rising rapidly but treatment remains unaffordable.

"Lower-cost semaglutide could significantly expand access to effective treatment particularly in middle-income countries where price has been a major barrier," Simon Barquera, president of the World Obesity Federation, told AFP.

"But medication alone will not reverse the global rise in obesity. Obesity is a complex, chronic disease," he said, noting the importance of prevention efforts and healthier environments.

Indian firms will be a key driving force, with Dr Reddy's Laboratories aiming to launch its version of semaglutide in Canada by May 2026.

For patients like 46-year-old Sukant Mangal, who lost nearly 30 pounds in eight months, wider access could not come soon enough.

Many he knows simply abandoned treatment mid-way when they realised they would have to spend 20,000 rupees (\$214) a month for seven to eight months.

"Had it been cheaper, (it) would've been much easier to have it."

Indonesia president says acid attack on activist 'terrorism'

AFP
Jakarta

An acid attack that maimed an Indonesian rights activist was an act of terror, President Prabowo Subianto said in an interview, vowing accountability.

Andrie Yunus, deputy co-ordinator of Jakarta-based NGO KontraS, was riding a motorbike last week when he was approached by

two men on a scooter, one of whom threw acid at him, according to the group. He suffered injuries to his face, an eye, hands and torso.

"This is terrorism, isn't it? A barbaric act. We must pursue (the perpetrators)," Prabowo said in an interview published Thursday on his personal YouTube channel.

The former general vowed to "uphold the law" regardless of who was behind the attack.

The military detained four sol-

diers from the armed forces' intelligence unit on Wednesday, suspecting their involvement.

The same day, the Jakarta Police released CCTV footage showing the faces of two people suspected of attacking Andrie. Their links to the detained soldiers were unclear.

Andrie has repeatedly taken issue with the military's influence in the government and had recorded a podcast on the topic shortly before he was attacked.

Lawmakers agreed on Wednesday to form a special committee to oversee the handling of the case.

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

Indonesia "has undergone further democratic backsliding, crackdowns on protests, media censorship and intimidation of activists" under Prabowo, Human Rights Watch said in its latest report on the country.

Britain sees no evidence that Iran is targeting Europe with missiles

Reuters
London

British cabinet minister Steve Reed said yesterday that there was no assessment that backed claims Iran is planning to strike Europe with ballistic missiles, or that it even has the capacity to do so.

On Saturday, the Israel Defence Forces posted on social media that Iran has missiles "that can reach London, Paris or Berlin".

"There is no assessment to substantiate what's being said," British Housing Secretary Reed told the BBC.

"I'm not aware of any assessment at all that they are even trying to target Europe, let alone that they could if they tried."

In a separate interview with Sky News, Reed said that US President Trump spoke for himself when he threatened to "obliterate" Iran's power plants if Tehran did not fully reopen the Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours.

Asked to define Britain's position on Trump's deadline, Reed said: "The US president is perfectly capable of speaking for himself and defending what it is that he's saying."

"We're not going to be dragged into the war, but we will protect our own interests in the region. We will work with our allies to de-escalate the situation."

UK submarine positioned in Arabian Sea amid Iran crisis: Daily Mail

A British nuclear-powered submarine equipped with Tomahawk cruise missiles has taken position in the Arabian Sea, giving Britain the capability to launch long-range strikes if regional conflict escalates, the Daily Mail reported on Saturday.

Reuters could not immediately verify the report. The British Ministry of Defence did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment. HMS Anson, armed with Tomahawk Block IV missiles and Spearfish torpedoes, left Perth earlier this month and travelled roughly 5,500 miles to the region, the Daily Mail said.

The submarine surfaces periodically to communicate with the UK's Permanent Joint Headquarters in Northwood, where any launch order would be authorised by the prime minister and conveyed by the chief of joint operations, the report added.

The deployment comes after Downing Street authorised the US to use British bases for strikes on Iranian sites threatening the Strait of Hormuz. (Reuters)

India lifts domestic airfare caps in relief to airlines

Reuters
New Delhi

India will revoke temporary fare caps it had imposed on domestic air tickets in December, according to a government order reviewed by Reuters, a move to ease the financial burden on airlines facing higher costs from disruptions due to the Iran war.

The caps, set to be lifted from today, were introduced in December due to mass flight cancellations by market leader IndiGo that led to a jump in airfares at other carriers.

"The prevailing situation has since stabilised, with restoration of capacity and normalisation of operations across the sector," the Indian civil aviation ministry said in its order.

The order, which was dated Friday and reviewed by Reuters on Saturday, has not been made public. A spokesperson for the ministry did not respond to a

request for comment.

Indian airlines had urged the government to lift the price caps, arguing they were causing "huge" revenue losses amid higher operational costs in part because of a jump in jet fuel prices due to the war, Reuters reported on Friday.

Though airlines have not revealed the extent of losses suffered, HSBC analysts have said a \$1 per barrel change in fuel prices could impact IndiGo's full-year fuel bill by about 3bn rupees.

Under the caps, a one-way fare for a journey up to 500 kilometres cannot be more than 7,500 rupees (\$80.07). Journeys between 1,000 and 1,500km — such as the New Delhi-Mumbai route — were capped at 15,000 rupees.

The government's order instructs airlines to ensure fares remain "reasonable, transparent and commensurate with market conditions, and that passenger interests are not adversely impacted."

Nepali youth demand release of govt report into deadly uprising

AFP
Kathmandu

Nepali youth staged a demonstration in Kathmandu yesterday, demanding the release of findings into the deadly 2025 uprising, which forced the previous government to collapse.

At least 77 people were killed in the September 8-9 protests which began over a brief social media ban, but tapped into longstanding fury over corruption and economic hardship. No one has been held accountable for the deaths.

Just days after Nepal went to the polls March 5, interim leader Sushila Karki formed a commission to probe the violence — in which parliament and scores of government buildings were set ablaze.

More than 200 people were questioned, including ousted former prime minister KP Sharma Oli, and a 900-page report with an additional 8,000 pages of evidence were submitted to the commission for investigation.

"We are here seeking the report of why the incident happened, why so many youths were

killed," Sanatan Rijal, a 26-year-old activist told AFP.

Laxmi Ghimire, another activist at yesterday's protest, said "promoting a motto of good governance will not make the country and its people feel it".

Yesterday's demonstration is one of many that have erupted in Nepal's capital over the past week calling on the interim government for transparency.

Karki said the interim government would make a summary of findings public but would entrust the newly elected Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), who are expected to be sworn in next week, with how to implement any of the commission's possible recommendations.

The RSP campaigned alongside popular rapper-turned-politician Balendra Shah, presenting him as its prime-ministerial candidate.

Shah, 35, defeated veteran four-time premier KP Sharma Oli whose Marxist-led government was ousted during last year's protests.

His upset victory and rapid rise from Kathmandu mayor to expected prime minister mark one of the most dramatic shifts in recent Nepali politics.

Sri Lanka raises fuel prices by 25% as Iran war bites

AFP
Colombo

Sri Lanka raised fuel prices by 25% yesterday, the second increase in two weeks, as the country prepared for more impact from the war in the Middle East.

Regular petrol was increased to 398 rupees (\$1.30) per litre, up from 317 rupees, while diesel, the fuel commonly used for public transport, rose by 79 rupees to 382.

Last week, the government ordered an eight % increase in retail fuel prices and introduced rationing to limit consumption.

"We hope to achieve a 15 to 20% reduction in fuel consumption with the latest increase," an

official at the Ceylon Petroleum Corp said.

He said President Anura Kumara Dissanayake told them last week that the country must prepare for a prolonged conflict in the Middle East that could affect the island's energy supplies.

The president ordered a four-day working week from last Wednesday and asked employers to reintroduce work-from-home arrangements where possible.

The Strait of Hormuz, a key waterway through which some 20% of global oil exports pass in peacetime, has been effectively closed by Iran in retaliation over the US and Israeli war against it, now entering its fourth week.

Sri Lanka imports all of its oil and also buys coal for electricity generation.

Britain says Cyprus base will not be part of UK-US self-defence deal

Reuters
London/Nicosia

Britain said its Akrotiri airbase in Cyprus would not be involved in its defensive agreement with the United States to use UK bases, after a call on Saturday between Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides.

The UK government gave authorisation on Friday for the US to use RAF Fairford in England and Diego Garcia, a joint US-UK base in the Indian Ocean, to carry out defensive strikes on Iranian missile

sites attacking ships in the Strait of Hormuz. "RAF Akrotiri would not be involved in the UK's continuation of its agreement with the US to use UK bases in collective self defence of the region," a spokesperson for Starmer's office said in a British readout of the call with Christodoulides.

An Iranian-type Shahed drone caused slight damage on March 2 when it hit facilities at the Akrotiri airbase in southern Cyprus, with two others later intercepted. There have been no further known security incidents on the island, where Britain retained sovereignty over two bases when it granted its

former colony independence in 1960.

A Cypriot government spokesperson said in a statement that Starmer had reiterated "that the security of the Republic of Cyprus is fundamental to the United Kingdom and, to that end, a decision has been taken to enhance the means contributing to the preventive measures already in place".

"Finally, the Prime Minister reiterated that the British Bases in Cyprus will not be used for any offensive military operations," the Cypriot government spokesperson added.

Separately, a source at Britain's

defence ministry said an Iranian ballistic missile attack towards Diego Garcia had occurred before the UK gave the US its latest authorisation.

British Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper told British media on Saturday that the government's policy on the US-Israeli-war on Iran remained defensive. "We will provide defensive support against these reckless Iranian threats, but we have not been and we continue not to be involved in offensive action and we want to see the swiftest possible resolution," she said.

"We will not be drawn into a wider conflict," she added.



A U-2 aircraft flies after take off from RAF Akrotiri, a British sovereign base that was hit by a drone, causing limited damage, in Cyprus. (Reuters/File Photo)

Paris and Marseille in focus as French vote in election runoffs

Reuters/AFP
Paris/Marseille

French voters went to the polls yesterday to elect mayors in Paris, Marseille and more than 1,500 other cities and towns, in a test of the far-right's strength and the resilience of mainstream parties ahead of next year's presidential election.

Heading nearly 35,000 municipalities – from major cities to villages with only a few dozen residents – mayors are France's most trusted elected officials.

Many won enough votes to be elected in the first round on March 15, but tight races in France's biggest cities are going to runoff elections.

One of the key ballots is in Marseille, the country's second-biggest city, where the second round pits the far-right National Rally (RN) against the incumbent Socialist mayor.

A close race is also likely in Paris, where opinion polls show victory for either the conservatives or the left is within their margins of error.

Voting started at 8am (0700 GMT) and ends between 6pm and 8pm.

Results will trickle in through the evening. The level of participation at 5pm was 48.1%, slightly lower than the 48.9% in the first round a week earlier, the interior ministry said.

The anti-immigration, eurosceptic RN has so far struggled to make meaningful gains in municipal elections.

The first round brought mixed results for the party, which got re-elected in several cities but failed to make major wins beyond its southern and northern bastions.

"It's true that these 2026 municipal elections do not mark a landslide for the National Rally – far from that. But... it stands to confirm its territorial integration in France," said Anne Muxel, a political science research director at Sciences Po university.

The RN's chances of winning the biggest prize it covets – Marseille – took a hit when hard-left candidate Sebastien Delogu of France Unbowed (LFI) withdrew from the second round out of concern that splitting the left's vote could help the RN.

However, in the French Riviera city of Nice, an ally of Le Pen's party, renegade conservative Eric Ciotti, looks set to win against a candidate backed by the centre.

Alain Faïola, 71, a retiree from Marseille, said he was voting RN after previously backing the mainstream right-wing party.

"I want change. Marseille has gone downhill since this mayor has been in office," he told Reuters.

In the same polling station overlooking the city's old port, others said they were determined to stop the far right.

"We voted for the left, logically. Their

programme interested us more, and we prefer to block the far-right," said Nezha Bourray, 26, who was voting for the first time, having recently obtained French nationality.

In Paris, which has been run by the left since 2001, the Socialist candidate, Emmanuel Gregoire, was ahead in the first round.

However, a far-right candidate decided to pull out of the runoff to help Rachida Dati, a conservative former justice minister, snatch the city away from the left, meaning it is now a very close race.

"I refuse to vote for the extremes. I prefer consensus and balance," said Malika Sif, 58, who voted for Gregoire in Paris' 18th district.

Patrice Laurent, 77, was among those voting yesterday in Paris, a capital of some 2mn inhabitants that has been under leftist leadership for the past 25 years.

"I don't want the city to go back to the right," he said, outside a school turned polling station in northeastern Paris.

Bernard Collet, 79, said it was time for change in Paris.

"Social issues are important, but so are the rest – traffic, cleanliness, all that is important too. I feel like some things are being neglected," he said.

However, Marion, a 41-year-old legal adviser who had cycled to her polling station in the same district, said Paris had

improved under the left, with "bike lanes everywhere".

"As a cyclist with young children, these are changes that really affect quality of life," she said.

The thousands of separate municipal ballots are often focused on very local issues and their outcome does not forecast who will win in the April 2027 presidential election.

However, they show trends, in popularity and in the type of alliances that can be struck in an increasingly fragmented landscape.

A key question is what impact the alliances – or lack of alliances – struck between the two rounds will have.

Local party negotiations since March 15's first round have highlighted divisions on the left, with the Socialists striking deals with their hard-left arch-rivals from LFI in some cities, such as Lyon and Toulouse, but not in others such as Marseille or Lille.

LFI has never been strong in local elections, but it has focused more on them this time.

"We can clearly see that, because of the relatively good performance of France Unbowed in the municipal elections; this party and (leader) Jean-Luc Melenchon once again gain a position of power in what the balance of power in the left could constitute," Sciences Po's Muxel said.

Conservatives eye comeback in Slovenia's election

Slovenians voted yesterday in a parliamentary election pitting incumbent liberal Prime Minister Robert Golob against right-wing populist Janez Jansa, with neither looking set to win a majority in a vote that could be decided by smaller coalition partners.

More than 362,000 people, or 21.38% of the electorate, had cast their votes by 11am (1000 GMT), slightly more than the 21% in the 2022 poll which recorded a historic turnout of 71%, said Slovenia's election commission, which is expected to announce preliminary results after 8.30pm local time.

Opinion polls before the vote indicated pro-Donald Trump Jansa's Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) and Golob's Freedom Movement (GS) were set for a close race after a last-minute drama involving allegations of foreign meddling and graft.

Jansa said the vote is one of the most important in Slovenia's 35 years of independence, and will decide the future direction of the country.

"I hope that Slovenia will get rid of the organised criminal organisation," he told reporters after casting his vote in the village of Arnace, 85km northwest of the capital Ljubljana.

Analysts say Jansa, who is seeking a fourth term as premier of the European Union and Nato member state of 2mn people, has a devoted voter base and the lower the turnout, the higher the chances of him winning the election.

At stake is Slovenia's domestic and foreign agenda, where the outgoing government had focused on social and health reforms but delivered mixed results.

Jansa has promised to introduce tax breaks for businesses and cut funding for civil society, welfare and media.

Pro-Israeli Jansa, who is an ally of Hungary's veteran nationalist leader Viktor Orban, would also likely change Golob's foreign policy under which Slovenia was one of the few European countries that recognised an independent Palestinian state and last year imposed an arms embargo on Israel.

Casting his vote after his government had imposed restrictions of fuel purchases at the pump caused in part by cross-border fuelling and stockpiling due to the Iran war, Golob urged voters to "follow your heart, feed it with love for your country and the path ahead will be clear".

The election campaign, which observers described as dirty from the start, heated up this month when videos were published on an anonymous website purportedly exposing government corruption.

"These elections are important," Petra Kladnik, a 40-year-old lawyer, told AFP at a polling station in Ljubljana.

She added the video scandal "had a strong impact on the community but not on my decision today".

A report this week alleged that Jansa met with officials from Israeli private spy firm Black Cube, which LinkedIn alleged in 2023 was behind a hidden camera campaign that targeted activists and journalists in the lead-up to Hungary's 2022 vote.

Jansa has admitted to having met a Black Cube official, but has denied being behind the videos. – AFP/Reuters

Italy holds referendum on judicial reform

Italians began voting yesterday in a two-day referendum on reforms that Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni says will make the judiciary more independent – but which critics argue will do the opposite.

The poll risks turning into a referendum on the far-right leader herself, ahead of parliamentary elections next year.

Meloni's hard-right government wants to change Italy's constitution to separate the role of judges and prosecutors and reform their oversight body.

She says the plan is essential to guarantee impartiality and improve the functioning of Italy's creaking justice system.

It will make it "more modern, more meritocratic, more autonomous, more accountable and above all, free from political constraints", Meloni said in a video this week.

However, critics condemn it as a political power grab that fails to address the real challenges, from years-long trials to prison overcrowding.

Elly Schlein, the leader of the centre-left Democratic Party, said it was badly drafted and "weakens the independence of the judiciary".

Opinion polls show the two camps are neck-and-neck.

A decisive "No" would be a blow for Meloni, who has led an uncharacteristically stable coalition government since October 2022.

Meloni and her ministers have repeatedly attacked rulings they claim are too lenient, particularly on the issue of immigration.

Their reform has sparked intense opposition within the judiciary, with more than 80% of members of Italy's National Magistrates Association staging a one-day strike last year.

The most divisive part of the reform involves changes to the Superior Council of the Judiciary (CSM), an oversight and disciplinary body whose members are elected by their peers and parliament.

The reform would divide the CSM into two separate councils, one for judges and one for prosecutors, and create a new 15-member disciplinary court.

Members would be drawn by lots, no longer voted by their peers, with three members of the court chosen by Italy's ceremonial president and three from a list of experienced lawyers approved by parliament.

The second part of the reform would prevent judges and public prosecutors from switching between the two functions, addressing concerns that too-cosy relations between the two groups harm defendants.

Referendums in Italy can be politically perilous.

In 2016, then-premier Matteo Renzi staked his career on a constitutional reform that voters rejected, toppling his government.

"Beyond the technical question, both sides have injected so much politics into the debate that at the end it's a political referendum, whether Meloni likes it or not," said Stefano Burchi, a 78-year-old retiree. – AFP



Poll positions

Voters prepare to cast their ballots during Slovenia's general election in Radomlje. – AFP



A woman walks past campaign posters during the second round of the French mayoral election in Paris. – Reuters



People in Copenhagen pass an election advertisement for Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, ahead of parliamentary elections. – Reuters

Danish prime minister bids for third term in general election

AFP
Copenhagen

Denmark votes tomorrow in a tight general election, with Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen seeking a third term after a campaign focused on domestic issues and set against tensions with the US over Greenland.

Frederiksen, 48, has benefited from her image as an experienced leader, but her party's support has slipped sharply.

The Social Democrats still lead in the polls, though they are expected to shed about six points compared with the 2022 election.

Eleven other parties are vying for the 179 seats in the Folketing, Denmark's parliament, each running separately and not as part of a coalition or alliance.

Pollsters and analysts traditionally group them into two blocs: red for the left wing and blue for the right wing.

However, the Moderates... are the pivotal party, so they get to decide," University of Copenhagen political scientist Karina Koslarska-Pedersen told AFP.

"There's a tie in many opinion polls where the Moderates... are the pivotal party, so they get to decide," University of Copenhagen political scientist Karina Koslarska-Pedersen told AFP.

"In some opinion polls, the red bloc – the prime minister's bloc – has got the majority, so it's quite likely that the prime minister will be Social Democratic... but it is definitely not decided," she said.

The four overseas seats held by Denmark's two autonomous territories – two for Greenland and two for the Faroe Islands – could also tip the balance.

Given the far-right Danish People's Party's (DF) negative stance on Greenland, "even a moderately right-wing Greenlandic MP would find it very hard to support a Danish government backed by DF", explained Ole Waever, professor of international relations at the University of Copenhagen.

This "could be the case for all right-wing coalitions", he added.

The three-week campaign has centred on the quality of Denmark's drinking water – amid high nitrate levels from agriculture – as well as the retirement age and a proposed wealth tax.

Frederiksen's party wants to tax personal assets above 25mn kroner (\$3.86mn) to help fund the welfare state, particularly education reform.

The proposal has riled right-wing parties.

"That's the right way to go in order to

have a socially responsible way of financing expenses," said Damoun Ashournia, chief economist at the Danish Trade Union Confederation (FH). "We need to invest more in our welfare state to be able to deliver the same level of service to the population."

Just before Frederiksen called the election in late February, the outgoing three-party coalition – the Social Democrats, Moderates and liberal Venstre party – succeeded in passing a "food cheque" proposal to help Danes struggling with high living costs.

For the country's 4.3mn voters, security concerns sparked by US President Donald Trump's threats to take control of Greenland remain a quiet but persistent issue.

Around 23% of Danes consider defence and security policy a top priority, according to an opinion poll by the Voxmeter institute.

German state vote puts Merz's conservatives to the test

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) took the lead in an election in the western state of Rhineland-Palatinate yesterday, ahead of their Social Democrat (SPD) coalition partners who faced a "bitter" defeat after ruling the state for 35 years.

The first projection on the ARD

broadcaster after polls closed showed Merz's CDU at 30.5% of the vote, ahead of the SPD at 26.9%, pointing to a likely victory for Merz after his party narrowly lost an election in the neighbouring state of Baden-Wuerttemberg on March 8.

CDU general secretary Carsten Linnemann called it a "great result" that showed strong overall

support for the two partners in Merz's coalition.

The SPD has ruled Rhineland-Palatinate for 35 years and losing control of it is likely to deepen the air of crisis that has overshadowed the party since the collapse of the former SPD chancellor Olaf Scholz's governing coalition in Berlin in 2024.

SPD secretary-general Tim

Kluessendorf told ARD that the forecast result was a "bitter setback".

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), now clearly established as Germany's second-strongest party at the national level, was set to take 20% of the vote, in line with the result they scored in Baden-Wuerttemberg.

The state of Rhineland-Palat-

inate, bordering France, Belgium and Luxembourg and with a population of 4mn, is known for steep river valleys, many lined with vineyards and topped by castles.

It is home to heavy industry, including steelmakers and chemicals giant BASF, and hosts several US military facilities including the sprawling Ramstein Air Base. – Reuters/AFP



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Ultra-low-cost carriers pin their hopes on fuel-efficient planes

Ultra-low-cost carriers have some of the newest, most fuel-efficient planes in the industry, but if travel demand in the United States falters as a result of growing macroeconomic uncertainty, paying for the new planes could become a barrier to profit.

US carriers on Tuesday said that they were seeing stronger-than-expected spring travel demand. Still, as the US-Israeli war on Iran has pushed US jet fuel prices above \$200 per barrel, legacy carriers are starting to trim capacity like United Airlines or could park aircraft to save on costs, a luxury that Frontier Airlines may not have.

Frontier said it saw an improvement in demand in the first quarter as it filled gaps left by Spirit's contraction on the West Coast. The company's adjusted revenue per available seat mile, a proxy for pricing power, was trending higher before the fuel spike, a company spokesperson said. Greater fuel efficiency is a clear advantage as airlines' largest expense after labour is jet fuel. On Thursday, jet fuel surpassed \$200 per barrel, according to Klotz Advisors principal analyst Tom Kloza, compared to about \$105 before the conflict began. Frontier started 2026 committed to raising its aircraft utilisation rate to cut costs and lower fares for customers.

Frontier said it has the most fuel-efficient fleet in the US and that its fuel burn per passenger is 40% below its peers. "We start from a better place on a per-passenger basis, given the high-density business model we have, and the predominance of new aircraft in the fleet," said James Dempsey, Frontier CEO, at the JP Morgan Industrials conference.

New planes are costly to park if demand drops, says Deutsche Bank analyst

But low-cost carriers' success depends on keeping the planes moving. The most fuel-efficient planes are the newest and most costly, and if demand starts to waver, it is financially tough to park them, said Michael Linenberg, Deutsche Bank research analyst in a note.

"It is far more 'expensive' for an airline to idle a new aircraft rather than an older one that is fully depreciated and financially unencumbered," Linenberg said, adding that if fuel prices more than double, operating an aircraft that is 15% more

efficient than the older generation does not even come close to offsetting the financial pain.

Spirit, aiming to emerge from bankruptcy later this year, decided to return to lessors or sell most, possibly all, of its newer, more fuel-efficient Airbus A320neo aircraft, aviation industry analyst Henry Harteveldt said.

The decision reflects the higher ownership costs of these newer jets, he said, which were too expensive for the airline to retain in its fleet. Spirit declined to comment.

Frontier has also made moves to cut its fleet size, terminating the leases on 24 jets currently in service. It also deferred the induction of 69 A320neo jets, which were expected to be delivered between 2027 and 2030.

The Denver-based carrier's full-year fuel expenses fell 11% to \$929mn in 2025 in part due to a 10% decrease in fuel costs. But Frontier's aircraft rent expense rose 11% to \$748mn in the same period, as it brought on new aircraft. A company spokesperson said Frontier was confident in its ability to weather the current volatile fuel environment. Dempsey this week said that Frontier was "following suit" other airlines in raising fares.

As of December 2025, about 85% of Frontier's fleet was the more fuel-efficient Airbus A320neo family aircraft.

Christopher Anderson, a professor at the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business, said carriers with newer fleets face pressure to generate sufficient cash flow to service those aircraft. The issue is not new, added Tom Fitzgerald, TD Cowen equity analyst. "Even prior to the fuel spike there was a dynamic where ultra-low-cost-carriers with newer planes were lowering utilisation and facing the headwind from parking expensive new assets," he said.

Newer planes also come with a higher maintenance bill, Fitzgerald said. "The fuel efficiency gains of the new generation engines came at a price of durability." - Reuters

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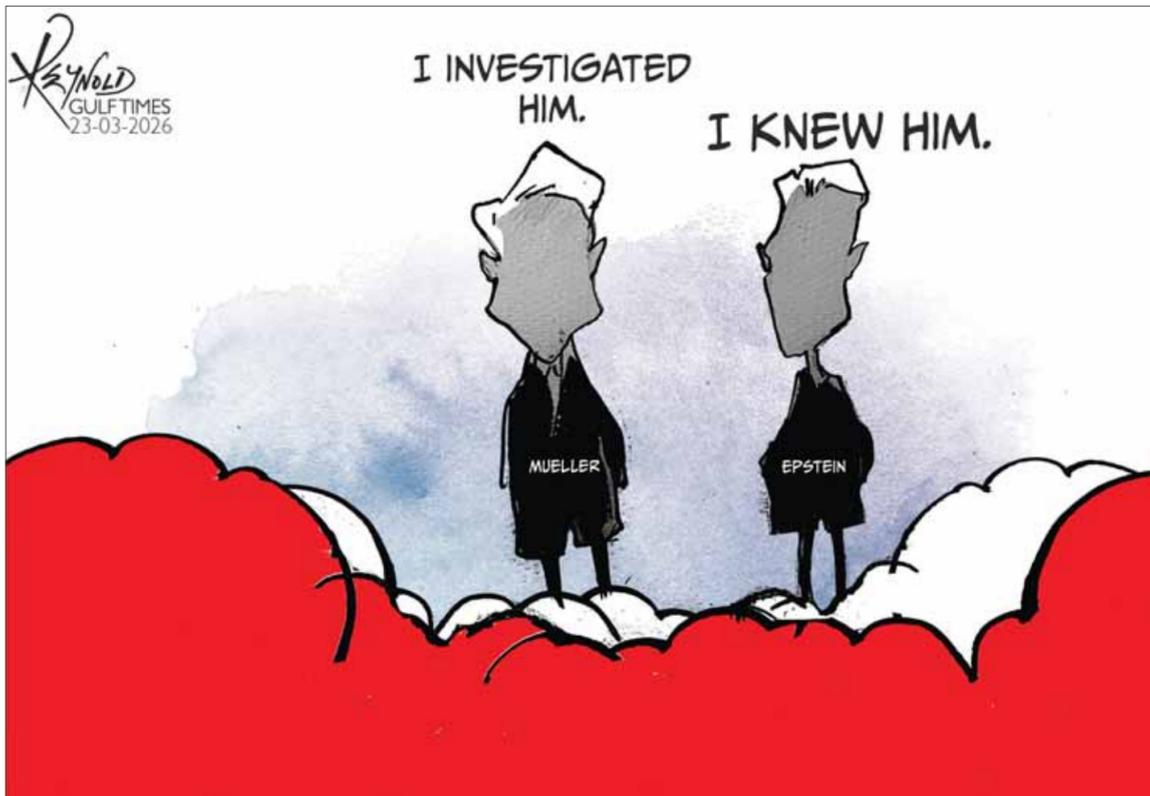
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Russia tightens the screws on the Internet

- Government blocks WhatsApp, restricts Telegram
- New laws bolster powers of FSB security agency

By Guy Faulconbridge
Reuters

Office workers toiling with blocked Internet. Teenagers continually forced to switch VPNs. Taxi drivers struggling to find their way around Moscow without online navigation.

The Kremlin is flexing its muscles over the Internet. The government is periodically jamming the web in regions across Russia, while restricting messaging services Telegram and WhatsApp and taking down dozens of virtual private networks that can be used to swerve bans on sites and apps.

Over the past week, mobile Internet has been completely down every day in parts of central Moscow, St Petersburg and other major cities, according to Reuters reporters in those areas and eight senior foreign diplomats in Russia.

"These measures are taking place," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Reuters when asked about restrictions to messaging apps and Internet service.

"They are partly related to the fact that a number of foreign companies refuse to comply with the norms of Russian legislation, and partly due to security measures against the threat of Ukrainian drones."

Attack drones can use cellular networks to aid navigation.

Russia's online clampdown this year has been accompanied by the introduction of new laws which oblige mobile operators to cut off any client at the demand of the Federal Security Service and give the agency powers to create a network of pre-trial detention centres under its own jurisdiction.

The broader aim of the bolstering of online powers is to help the Kremlin shore up domestic control in the context of the war against Ukraine, according to the diplomats who requested anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

Should the conflict drag on, it could increasingly strain popular support, the envoys said. Should the war end, Russian officials are likely keen to prepare for any dissent that may ensue, they added. One said Moscow had assembled powers that gave it the option to enact a "great crackdown" online.

The end of Moscow's war in Afghanistan in 1989 caused major social ructions in Russia with returning veterans fuelling a wave of lawlessness that blighted the 1990s. The chaos was compounded by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

"Russia's leaders and security services remember 1991 and they remember what happened to Russia and what happened to them when Moscow stopped a big war in Afghanistan: the country collapsed, the security services



File photo shows a web page of the Russian messenger app Max displayed on a smartphone next to a screen showing the logo of WhatsApp and Telegram applications. (Reuters)



File photo shows a woman speaking on a phone as she walks past an advertising board, in Omsk, Russia. (Reuters)

were split apart — it was a disaster," said Andrei Soldatov, a Russian investigative journalist who is an expert on the security services.

"What is happening now is that the security services are trying to create a situation in which — if Putin signs a peace deal or if Putin goes for a protracted war — it would not destroy the whole thing."

Two Russian sources with knowledge of the online clampdown said Moscow had studied the experience of other countries, particularly China and Iran, and had tasked authorities with developing a way to block swathes of the Internet, both mobile and fixed, while controlling online communications.

KREMLIN TARGETS MESSAGING APPS

After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia imposed the

most repressive laws seen since Soviet times, bolstering censorship powers and the influence of the FSB, the main successor to the Soviet-era KGB.

This year, Moscow has further ratcheted up security. President Vladimir Putin, who served as a KGB officer from 1985-1990, marked the fourth anniversary of the Ukraine war on February 24 by attending the FSB's annual meeting in Moscow.

He told the agency to step up the fight against terrorism — in which he included attacks from Ukraine — while strengthening the "information and digital space".

Kremlin spokesman Peskov said that all measures were lawfully taken to ensure security amid the Ukraine conflict, which Putin casts as a confrontation with the West.

Two Russian officials close to

the Kremlin disputed that the moves against the Internet and messaging apps were repressive, casting them as essential to improve security and ensure national unity against an attempt by the West to sow discord.

Russia's state digital and communications watchdog, Roskomnadzor, did not reply to a request for comment.

The eight diplomats said Moscow's Internet crackdown this year went much further than they had seen before in the country.

Mobile Internet has been periodically shut down in some Russian regions for months, often after major Ukrainian drone attacks. By mid-January, Russia has blocked from 400 VPNs, 70% more than late last year, according to Kommersant newspaper.

In recent weeks, the crackdown has intensified in Moscow, according to the diplomats and Reuters reporters, and the government has also moved against Dubai-based Telegram and US service WhatsApp.

Last month, Russia slowed down Telegram, which has more than 1bn active users and is widely used in both Russia and Ukraine, and investigated its billionaire founder Pavel Durov as part of a criminal case involving accusations of terrorism.

Russian officials said Telegram had been penetrated by Ukraine and Nato member intelligence agencies, and that Russian soldiers had died as a result.

Telegram has denied it has been penetrated and said Moscow is trying to force Russians to use Max, a state-backed messenger app that schools and universities have been told to use for parent and student chat groups.

"Each day, the authorities fabricate new pretexts to restrict Russians' access to Telegram as they seek to suppress the right to privacy and free speech," Durov told Reuters. "A sad spectacle of a state afraid of its own people."

The Kremlin also completely blocked WhatsApp last month for failing to comply with local law. The app's owner, tech giant Meta, decried the move as a backwards step for people's security in Russia.

Some young Russians vowed to evade the clampdown by switching to different VPNs as services were banned, not for politics but simply to engage with Western apps such as Instagram and Snapchat, which are restricted in Russia.

"If these quite old politicians want to block everything, why have they not made any Russian apps that are interesting?" said Andrei, who declined to give his second name due to the sensitivity of the situation.

Pakistan's Uighurs mark Eid al-Fitr but fear loss of culture

On a rooftop of a house in a densely populated area of Rawalpindi in Pakistan, more than 100 Uighur Muslims gathered to celebrate Eid al-Fitr. Young and old, many in the doppa skullcap traditionally worn by Uighur people, embraced and exchanged greetings under a backdrop proclaiming: "Eid Mubarak, Uighur Kids Pakistan!"

"Every year, by the grace of God, we bring our Uighur children together, we have fun here, to preserve our culture and our mother tongue," Muhammad Umar Khan, leader of the Uighur community in Pakistan, told AFP on Saturday.

Uighurs are mainly found in the Xin-

jiang region northwest China but the diaspora is spread across several countries. In Pakistan, where migration started in the 1960s, there are about 400 to 500 families, mostly in the northern Gilgit-Baltistan region, and in Rawalpindi, near the capital, Islamabad.

Much of the focus on the Uighur people in recent years has been on allegations, strongly denied by China, of human rights violations, including possible crimes against humanity.

A 2022 UN rights report said there were "credible" allegations of widespread torture, arbitrary detention and violations of the religious and reproductive rights of

Uighurs and other Muslim groups. Umar said that he has about 300 relatives in Xinjiang province but had lost contact with them.

"Our relatives are oppressed there. Not just mine, but Uighurs all over the world, no one is able to contact them," he said. "Some of them have died. What condition they are in, we have no knowledge of it for the past 10 years."

Despite the loss of links to their homelands, Uighur activists said they are determined to pass on their ethnic identity to the new generations born in Pakistan.

"(Our children) understand our language but they cannot speak it. That's

why we are a bit worried," said Amanullah Khan. "We want a school so they can at least learn the Uighur language, so that we can preserve our culture."

Exiled Uighurs said they feared for their language and culture but even overseas they have run into barriers trying to keep it alive.

Umar said he once tried to establish a school for Uighur children but it was closed down by authorities and he suspected "interference by China".

Today, poverty means many Uighur children cannot attend good schools. Some are not attending formal education at all.

Amanullah Khan said a school is needed so "our children can reach the level where they can become doctors, or engineers, or enter journalism, or get some good position in government".

Despite the hardships, some younger Uighurs are determined to carry the cause forward.

"My father is a Uighur, my forefathers are also Uighur, that's why I feel proud to be a Uighur," said Muhammad Umar Khan's daughter Sadia Umar. "I just love the way my father works so hard for Uighur people, Uighur kids, God willing in the future I will do the same thing." - AFP

Belgium recalls terror attacks on Brussels in 2016

AFP
Brussels

Yesterday Belgium marked 10 years since 2016 bombings in Brussels, a trauma that still scars the country and that authorities say sharpened focus on intelligence and counterterrorism.

The March 22, 2016 attacks claimed by the Islamic State (IS) group left 32 people dead and more than 300 wounded - Belgium's worst peacetime massacre.

"Our country will never forget," King Philippe told hundreds gathered around a monument to the victims. "We did not give in to fear, we did not give in to division."

He, along with Queen Mathilde and Prime Minister Bart De Wever, watched as survivors recounted the harrowing scenes witnessed that morning.

The country's remembrance ceremonies began earlier yesterday at Brussels Airport in Zaventem, at 8am (0700 GMT), the same time the suicide bombers struck.

Proceedings continued an hour later at the Maelbeek metro station, also targeted in the co-ordinated suicide blasts that ripped through the Belgian capital, before culminating at the victims' monument.

"Telling you that living this life is easy would be a lie. I wake up every day with the

memories of horror. I look at my body that has been burnt, bruised and torn apart," said Beatrice de Lavalette, who lost her legs at the airport.

"Every day, I remember lying on this floor bleeding out, and in that moment I remember telling myself: 'This is not my time. I will not die here,'" said Lavalette, who became a Paralympic horse rider after the tragedy.

The Brussels attacks were the work of the same militant cell that struck Paris months earlier, on November 13, 2015, killing 130 people.

Having retreated to Brussels safe houses, the militants mounted a hastily organised attack in the days after the March 18 arrest of Salah Abdeslam, the only surviving member of the Paris attack group.

On March 22, a Tuesday morning, three suicide bombers detonated their explosives, first at Zaventem and then at the packed metro station close to the seat of EU institutions.

The commemorations took place as the ongoing war in the Middle East has heightened the authorities' concerns about possible new attacks.

This month, a pre-dawn blast damaged a synagogue in the eastern city of Liege, causing no injuries.

Over the border, the Netherlands was



Artists perform during a ceremony in Brussels commemorating the 10th anniversary of the March 22, 2016 suicide bomb attacks at the Brussels airport and the Maelbeek metro station. - Reuters

later hit by two similar incidents targeting the Jewish community.

In Belgium, the threat level remains "serious", at three on a four-point scale, following an October 2023 attack in Brussels that saw a gunman shoot dead two Swedish football fans before being killed by police.

Belgium was criticised for security failings in the run-up to the 2016 bombings, something the head of the country's OCAM national threat analysis centre, Gert Vercauteren, said he remembers well.

"It's a feeling of failure that obviously hit us all," he said in an interview with AFP. In the aftermath of the bombings, the Belgian government was left reeling.

Two ministers offered their resignations after Turkiye said that Belgium had ignored warnings from Ankara, which had deported airport bomber Ibrahim El Bakraoui in 2015 following his arrest near the Syrian border.

"Those responsible for our security have a duty to take the lessons of the past

to heart. I take that duty very seriously," Prime Minister De Wever posted on X before attending the ceremonies.

Today, Belgium's justice system, police and intelligence services assert that they have significantly improved information sharing.

The number of state security service staff has increased from 600 to 950 agents in a decade.

"We have learnt the right lessons," Vercauteren said.

The creation of a shared database on extremist profiles was "a major step forward", the official added.

This database, which all security services, including municipal police forces



King Philippe and Queen Mathilde lay down flowers during the ceremony in Brussels. - AFP

working with community outreach staff, can access and contribute to, is constantly updated.

Last year, it contained 555 names "under priority monitoring", 86% of whom were flagged for "Islamist extremism", according to OCAM.

However, some victims complain that even 10 years after the attacks, they are still unable to have their physical or psychological injuries recognised, limiting their right to compensation.

"Many victims and many relatives feel abandoned. This is a struggle for recognition and financial justice," said Edmond Pinczowski, who lost his two adult children, Alexander and Sascha, at the airport.

Rights activists concerned over crackdown on protest movements

By Shrouq Tariq
AFP

Mavra Bari had intended to take part in a march for International Women's Day in the Pakistani capital Islamabad, but spent it in a cramped prison cell.

What was meant to be a celebration was instead a terrifying 12-hour ordeal in a suffocating space, with a broken toilet and the smell of damp concrete and sweat.

More than 30 others - women, men and children - were also held.

"We were in a horrible prison," said Bari, a 36-year-old sociologist and activist. "We were beaten."

An AFP journalist saw detainees when they were released.

All looked shaken from the experience and some had signs of ill-treatment such as bruises and swelling.

Outside the police station, one man said tearfully: "My daughter came here just to observe the march... She did nothing wrong."

On the face of it, the Women's Day march, like those elsewhere in the world, should have posed little concern for the authorities in Islamabad or the powerful military.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif himself posted on X on March 8 that women's empowerment was "central to our government's vi-

sion for Pakistan's development".

"Today, we celebrate their strength, resilience, leadership, and the invaluable contributions they make to our families, our communities, and our nation," he wrote.

Human rights monitors, however, have repeatedly voiced concern about the increasing use of arrest to stifle free speech and peaceful assembly in Pakistan.

Amnesty International has warned that there is a "shrinking space for dissent", with the authorities using arbitrary detention, force and restrictions on gatherings.

Those who find themselves detained are rarely told why.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has also documented cases of intimidation, enforced disappearances and legal harassment of activists, lawyers and journalists.

Protest movements, women demanding equality or opposition groups have frequently found themselves blocked or banned while state-aligned groups are allowed to march freely.

"Anything and everything is a national security issue these days (for the state), anyone can be punished for it," said Usama Khilji, a digital rights activist.

Khilji pointed to the case of human rights lawyer Imaan Mazari, who has taken on some of Pakistan's most sensitive cases, including the enforced disap-



This picture taken on March 8 shows police personnel dressed in plain clothes detaining activists of the women's rights group Aurat March, upon their arrival ahead of a rally on International Women's Day in Islamabad. - AFP

pearance of ethnic Balochs, and defended the community's top activist.

Mazari and her husband Hadi Ali Chattha, a fellow lawyer, are both serving lengthy jail terms for "anti-state" social media posts.

Sohrab Barkat, a digital journalist and YouTube host, has been held without trial since late last year on suspicion of spreading "derogatory remarks" and misinformation about state institutions.

A Pakistani-origin doctoral student from Canada also disap-

peared for several days last month, reportedly for "anti-state" social media posts, Khilji said.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a media rights group, said Pakistan remains among countries where journalists face significant risks.

At least seven journalists were killed in 2024, the CPJ said, while others faced harassment and alleged enforced disappearances.

New laws regulating both mainstream and social media have been widely criticised as restrictive and excessive, limiting free-

dom of expression and independent reporting.

As a result, voices critical of the state have been muted or silenced completely in newspapers, online or in broadcast.

Sehrish Qureshi was one of three journalists held at the Women's Day rally.

"I only went to the police station that day to know why other journalists were held for doing their job," she told AFP. "I was allowed inside the police station but after I was detained without any reason."

Press freedom groups such as Reporters Without Borders have similarly pointed to increasing state control over information and pressure on independent media outlets.

Harris Khalique, secretary-general of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, called those restrictions "draconian".

A few days after her release, Bari was in a restaurant and told her friends: "It was scary at first. We didn't know why we were arrested or what they would do to us."

Police told them afterwards that they were violating a law banning gatherings of more than four people.

Despite the risks, many activists are undeterred.

"This is not going to stop me," said Punjrash, who was also detained and beaten during a recent rally.

Turkiye arrests journalist for spreading 'false information'

A journalist from the *Birgun* newspaper critical of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government has been arrested for "spreading false information", the left-wing outlet said.

Ismail Ari was detained on Saturday evening in the northern province of Tokat, which he was visiting to celebrate the end of Ramadan, before being taken to Ankara yesterday morning for questioning, *Birgun* said.

"Ismail has never lied to the people," *Birgun* posted on X.

The Istanbul-based paper, known for its investigations into the Turkish government, did not specify what articles led to Ari's arrest.

"We repeat: journalism is not a crime. Ismail Ari must be released immediately," the Turkish Journalists' Union likewise wrote on X.

In late February, a Turkish journalist from Germany's *Deutsche Welle* public broadcaster was likewise arrested and detained for the crime of allegedly "insulting the president", prompting Berlin to demand his immediate release. - AFP

Train kills rare bison in Poland

Three wild European bison died yesterday morning after being hit by a train in Poland's vast Uesco-listed Bialowieza Forest in the east, the local police told AFP.

According to a police spokesman, a herd of Europe's largest mammals, whose male specimens can reach 900kg (nearly 2,000 pounds), crossed onto the train tracks as a locomotive carrying some 50 passengers between Bialystok and Warsaw was steaming ahead.

"No passenger was injured but three animals perished in this accident, which happened at 7am, near the village of Witow," spokesman Konrad Karwacki told AFP.

The "Zubr" line train, which takes its name from the Polish word for bison, did not derail and was able to resume its journey around an hour and a half after the collision. - AFP



A Soyuz-2.1a rocket booster with a Progress MS-33 cargo spacecraft blasts off to the International Space Station (ISS) from the launch pad at the Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, in this still image taken from video. - Reuters

Russia launches first rocket from repaired Baikonur launch pad

Russia launched a Soyuz rocket yesterday from a repaired launch pad at its Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, restoring its capability to fly to the International Space Station (ISS) for the first time since the launch pad was damaged last year.

At 1200 GMT, a Soyuz-2.1a rocket carrying the Progress MS-33 cargo spacecraft lifted off and was placed into orbit, Russia's space agency said.

The spacecraft is expected to dock with the ISS tomorrow.

The launch pad had been out of commission since it was badly damaged in November when a Soyuz MS-28 spacecraft with two Russian cosmonauts and one NASA astronaut on board blasted off.

No one was hurt and the crew safely reached the space station, but the incident deprived Russia of its sole means of sending crew or cargo back to the ISS for months.

Repairs on the damaged section of the site

wrapped up earlier this month, according to Roscosmos.

Video showed Russia launching the unmanned Progress MS-33 cargo ship to the ISS from Site 31.

"The flight is normal," a commentator on Russia's Roscosmos space agency said on the video.

While Russia has other cosmodromes on its own territory and Baikonur has other launch sites, the damaged launch pad was the only one able to handle the Soyuz rocket that carries crew capsules and Progress cargo vehicles to the ISS.

The Baikonur Cosmodrome is located in Kazakhstan, but is being used by Russia under a lease set to last until at least 2050.

Once considered a pioneer in space exploration, Russia's space programme has faced numerous setbacks since the fall of the Soviet Union, including the loss of its first lunar lander in almost 50 years in 2023. - Reuters/AFP

Routine, community and calm key to coping in uncertain times: expert

By Shaima Sheriff
Doha

Residents in Qatar experiencing normal stress responses amid regional developments can maintain mental well-being through routine, community support and limiting exposure to distressing information, a mental health expert has said.

Dr Naif al-Mutawa, clinical psychologist and founder of Socoon Clinic, said many of the emotional and physical reactions people are experiencing are natural responses to uncertainty.

"What most people are experiencing right now is actually very human," he said. "Heightened anxiety, difficulty concentrating, disrupted sleep and a constant sense of unease are all signs that the mind and body are trying to adapt."

He added that some individuals may experience stronger reactions, particularly

those with previous exposure to stress or trauma.

"In some cases, this can show up as hypervigilance or intrusive thoughts," he said. "There is also something we don't talk about enough, survivor's guilt, where people feel uneasy about being safe while others are struggling."

Dr al-Mutawa stressed that these responses should not be seen as weakness. "These are not signs that something is wrong with you," he said. "They are signs that your system is responding to uncertainty."

He highlighted the importance of maintaining routine as a key coping mechanism.

"When everything around you feels unpredictable, routine becomes your anchor," he said. "Simple habits like waking up at the same time, maintaining meals and continuing daily activities help stabilise the mind."

Sleep, he noted, is another critical factor.



Dr Naif al-Mutawa

"Sleep is often the first thing affected during stressful periods. When sleep is disrupted, anxiety increases and coping becomes more difficult. Protecting sleep should be a priority."

He also cautioned against excessive exposure to social media and constant news updates.

"Overexposure can lead to what we call psychological flooding," he said. "Set boundaries, check updates at specific times and rely on trusted sources. Stepping away from the news is not avoidance, it is self-regulation."

For families, particularly those with children, emotional regulation plays a vital role.

"Children don't need perfect parents, they need regulated ones," Dr al-Mutawa said. "They absorb the emotional tone around them, so consistency and calm behaviour from parents help create a sense of safety."

He advised parents to keep communication simple and age-appropriate, while maintaining stability in routines and emotional support.

Community support also remains a key protective factor. "Human beings are not designed to go through stress in isolation," he said. "Even small moments of connection can significantly reduce the intensity of anxiety."

In addition, faith and spiritual practices can provide grounding during uncertain times.

"Practices like prayer and reflection offer perspective and emotional stability," he said. "They help people find meaning rather than feeling overwhelmed."

Dr al-Mutawa added that while uncertainty can be challenging, it can also build resilience over time.

"Resilience develops when people face challenges and realise they can move through them," he said.

He encouraged residents to focus on what they can control. "The goal is not to feel calm all the time," he said. "It is to stay functional, connected and grounded."

A workshop on Wartime Stress Management led by Dr al-Mutawa will be hosted by Gulf Times on March 24 at 5pm, offering practical tools to help individuals and families navigate stress during uncertain periods.

Key role of mental health during conflicts underlined

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and other healthcare entities have highlighted the importance of mental health amid ongoing regional conflicts.

MoPH has advised that anyone who needs mental health support should contact the mental health support services by calling 16000.

In an advisory, the Primary Health Care Corporation (PHCC) underscored the significance of mental health in response to external events. In a social media post, PHCC underlined the importance of maintaining social connections, engaging in physical activity and following a daily routine. It is also important to keep the children secured by providing age-appropriate explanations, spending quality time with them and making them engage in various activities such as colouring, drawing or crafts.

The Institute for Population Health (IPH) at Weill Cornell Medicine - Qatar has offered a number of tips to cope with the current situation. IPH said that directives to remain indoors can potentially increase worry or tension, and the constantly changing news cycle can aggravate these feelings.

"While you may not have much control over outside circumstances, there are steps you can take to remain calm and maintain inner peace. Healthier choices when it comes to self-care and physical and emotional well-being can help cope with challenging circumstances," the institute said in a statement.

According to IPH advisory, it is important to stay informed, but constantly checking a news feed or social media can fuel stress or worry. "Rather, set specific times of the day to check the news to avoid constant emotional swings. Choose credible, well-established sources when it comes to news."

The first step in managing mental health is recognising the feelings of fear, stress, frustration, anxiety or helplessness. "But do not let them overwhelm you as it is the first step to a better state of mind. Taking a few minutes to reflect on these feelings,



speaking to a trusted friend or family member, or writing your thoughts in a journal, can help you to healthily process these emotions."

IPH communicate also notes that a calm and organised environment can significantly improve mood and reduce stress. "Simple changes - like adding indoor plants, displaying meaningful photos, or playing soft, soothing sounds - help create a peaceful atmosphere. By intentionally shaping our surroundings, we support emotional well-being, making it easier to cope with daily pressures."

Another step suggested by IPH to overcome the situation is nurturing relationships with family, friends, colleagues, or even pets, which can provide comfort and strength during trying times. "Offering support, whether in-person or virtually, fosters a sense

of belonging and can be deeply uplifting. Small acts of kindness help build community, and compassion towards yourself and others plays a vital role in resilience and overall well-being."

IPH also underlines the importance of managing anger constructively as feeling angry during stressful or uncertain times is completely normal. "Try expressing your emotions through creative activities such as writing, painting, or playing music - these can be therapeutic and help release tension in a positive way. Finding healthy outlets can make a meaningful difference in your well-being."

IPH advises seeking professional help if stress or anxiety becomes overwhelming. "Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness, and timely guidance can make a meaningful difference."

Pet grooming demand surges amid regional tensions

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Pet grooming demand in Qatar has surged over the past three weeks, with mobile service providers reporting a sharp rise in bookings as owners respond to their pets' stress and shifting routines amid ongoing regional tensions.

Industry workers say grooming has increasingly become part of "comfort care" for pets, a combination of cleaning, calming, and maintaining routine, as animals react to environmental changes such as loud noises and disrupted daily patterns.

An employee of a mobile pet grooming company said they have witnessed a notable spike in calls from pet owners over the past 16 days.

"We've seen a surge in bookings recently," he said, attributing the increase to heightened anxiety among pets and owners responding with more attentive care. "Pets are very sensitive to changes in their surroundings. With everything going on, owners want to make sure they're comfortable."

He added that many of their customers, particularly those living in The Pearl Island, have been working from home more frequently and have less time to groom their pets themselves. As a result, they are increasingly turning to mobile grooming services for convenience.

Mobile grooming units, essentially fully equipped salons on wheels, offer services ranging from bathing and haircuts to nail trimming and ear cleaning. Designed to operate at the customer's doorstep, they provide a stress-free alternative to traditional grooming by eliminating the need to transport pets.

Service providers noted that pets are being kept indoors more often as a precaution, with owners closely monitoring their behaviour. This shift, however, has led to secondary effects.

"Keeping pets inside more can lead to increased shedding, hygiene issues, and even odours," the employee said. "That's another reason I presume why people are calling us more frequently."

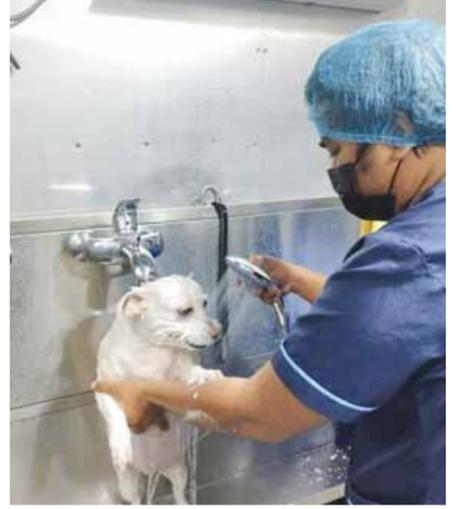
Another worker from a separate mobile grooming company reported a similar trend, citing a steady increase in customers over the past two weeks. He said the ongoing situation has altered the daily routines of many pet owners, with fewer outdoor walks, irregular schedules, and more time spent indoors.

"When routines are disrupted, people rely more on services," he said, adding that safety and convenience are key factors driving demand. "Mobile grooming allows owners to take care of their pets without leaving home, and the cost is reasonable."

It is learnt that the recent surge is also building on a broader trend in Qatar's pet care sector. Pet ownership has been rising in recent years, accompanied by a shift in attitudes toward treating pets as family members. This has led to growing demand for premium services, including grooming, spa treatments, and preventive care.

The current situation, industry insiders say, has simply accelerated that trajectory.

"In times like these, people focus more on what they can control," one worker said. "For many, that includes making sure their pets are clean, calm, and well taken care of."



Growing opportunities for women in Qatar's engineering sector

By Shaima Sheriff
Doha

Qatar's evolving infrastructure landscape is creating new opportunities for engineering leadership, with professionals highlighting the country's growth, collaborative environment and increasing prospects for women in large-scale projects.

Qatar's rapid infrastructure development continues to provide a dynamic environment for engineering professionals, with international expertise playing a key role in shaping large-scale projects across the country.

Florentina Canto Navarro, electrical manager for the Facility E reverse osmosis desalination plant project and a senior industrial electrical engineer at ACCIONA, said her nearly decade-long experience working on Qatar-linked projects reflects both professional growth and the country's transformation.

"Having worked with ACCIONA for almost ten years on projects linked to Qatar, I

One of the key challenges lies in maintaining alignment between technical planning and real-world construction conditions

have seen significant development both in my career and in the country's infrastructure," Navarro said.

She explained that her career has progressed through several roles, starting from electrical site supervision to engineering leadership positions, allowing her to gain experience across different stages of project development.

"My journey has evolved from being directly involved in construction activities to taking on more engineering leadership responsibilities," she said. "This has given me a comprehensive understanding of projects from design through to execution."

Navarro currently balances responsibilities between engineering leadership and on-site field operations - a role she described as both challenging and rewarding. "My work is quite dynamic," she said.

"It requires co-ordination between engineering teams and on-site execution, ensuring that what is designed is implemented correctly."

She noted that one of the key challenges lies in maintaining alignment between technical planning and real-world construction conditions.

"Being involved both in design and on site means constantly adapting and solving problems," she said. "But it is also one of the most rewarding aspects of the role."

Navarro highlighted that Qatar's infrastructure environment has evolved significantly over the years, shifting from rapid urban expansion to more strategic and sustainability-focused development.

"Previously, many projects were centred on urban growth," she said. "Now, the focus is more aligned with long-term planning and sustainability."

She also emphasised the collaborative nature of projects in Qatar, which bring together diverse teams from different backgrounds.

"One of the most remarkable aspects of working in Qatar is the collaboration between multiple nationalities and institu-



Florentina Canto Navarro

tions," she said. "It creates a highly skilled and efficient working environment."

As a woman in a traditionally male-

dominated field, Navarro encouraged young women in Qatar to consider careers in engineering.

"Engineering is a challenging but highly rewarding field," she said. "There are increasing opportunities, and what matters most is passion, commitment and willingness to learn."

She stressed that the industry is evolving, with more women taking on leadership roles in large-scale projects.

"Don't be discouraged by traditional perceptions," she said. "Focus on your skills and the value you can bring."

Reflecting on her work, Navarro said the most fulfilling moment comes when a project transitions from concept to reality. "What I enjoy most is seeing how ideas, designs and calculations gradually take shape," she said. "When the project becomes operational and starts delivering results, it is incredibly rewarding."

She added that being part of such projects in Qatar has been particularly meaningful. "It is a great feeling to know that your work contributes to infrastructure that supports the country's development," she said.