



Qatar Insurance
Financial Results (FY 2025)

Gross Written
Premiums (GWP)

9% ▲
QAR 9.9B

Net Profit
Before the Impact of
Pillar Two Taxes

19% ▲
QAR 874M

Net Profit
Profit attributable to
QIC shareholders

9% ▲
QAR 791M

Earnings
Per Share:

10% ▲
QAR 0.188

qic-group.com

GULF TIMES



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Back to business from today

By A Staff Reporter
Doha

Qatar returns to full normal operations today as government ministries, financial institutions, healthcare facilities, courts, and educational institutions all resume regular activities following the Eid al-Fitr holiday.

The Council of Ministers Secretariat General confirmed that all ministries, government entities, and public bodies and institutions will revert to standard in-office arrangements, bringing to an end the remote work provisions announced on March 8, 2026.

Qatar Central Bank (QCB) separately confirmed the same effective date for all financial institutions operating in the country, making the announcement via its official X platform.

Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) declared the resumption of normal operations across all its medical facilities and clinics.

The Supreme Judiciary Council (SJC) resumed receiving litigants' applications at service halls across courts nationwide. Application hours vary by location.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education announced the gradual resumption

Qatar's Post-Eid Return to Normal Operations

GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC SERVICES

Resumption of In-Office Work
All ministries and public bodies have ended remote work to resume standard office arrangements.

Financial and Judicial Services
Qatar Central Bank and the Supreme Judiciary Council have resumed full regular operations.

Healthcare Normalisation
Hamad Medical Corporation has declared the resumption of normal operations across all clinics.

EDUCATION SECTOR TRANSITION

Higher Education and Staff Return
University classes, administrative staff, and nursery teachers have returned to in-person campus work today.

Phased School Reopening
Remote until Thursday, 26 March
Full in-person attendance starting Sunday

Remote Learning Schedule
Public school remote sessions run 9:00 am to 12:35 pm during the transition.

GT GRAPHICS

of in-person classes across educational institutions, with full in-person attendance for all students in schools and kindergartens set to resume next Sunday. The decision, the ministry said, forms part of a phased plan covering all educational levels. In-person care for children, along

with the return of administrative and teaching staff at nurseries, beginning today.

For kindergartens and public and private schools, students continue remote learning through Thursday, March 26, with administrative and teaching staff back in schools from

today to ensure full readiness ahead of Sunday's return.

Public school schedules during the remote learning period run from 9am to 12:35pm, comprising five 35-minute periods with two breaks for breakfast and prayer. Private schools have been granted scheduling flexibility, provided classes begin at 9am and the school day does not exceed five hours.

At the higher education level, the ministry confirmed the resumption of in-person classes at universities and other higher education institutions in accordance with each institution's approved schedule, a measure that also extends to private educational and training centres.

The ministry urged students and staff to follow updates through official channels and adhere to safety and security guidelines to ensure a stable learning environment.

Qatar University confirmed the resumption of in-person classes and on-campus work for students, faculty, and administrative staff, citing directives from the competent authorities on the return to normal workplace operations. The university called on its community to comply with attendance schedules, official working hours, and applicable regulations.

PM, regional, global partners push for de-escalation in calls

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani held a series of phone calls with regional and international counterparts yesterday to discuss the military escalation in the region and offer condolences over the deaths of Qatari service members.

His counterparts from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, and Egypt all conveyed their nations' condolences over the loss of Qatar Armed Forces personnel in a helicopter crash in Qatari territorial waters, caused by a technical malfunction during a routine mission. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan similarly extended condolences, as the crash also claimed the lives of members of Qatar-Turkiye joint forces and two Turkish civilian collaborators.

In all calls, the parties discussed the dangerous trajectory of military escalation in the region and its repercussions for regional and international security. They jointly stressed the urgency of halting escalatory actions, returning to dialogue, and prioritising diplomacy to contain the crisis – with



particular emphasis on safeguarding global energy security, freedom of navigation, environmental safety, and regional stability.

The prime minister also spoke with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas, in a call that touched on the same regional tensions but went further in addressing Iran's role directly. He condemned Iranian attacks on Qatari territory in unequivocal terms, stating they "cannot be accepted under any justification or pretence." **To Page 2**

QCAA: Airspace under 'full operational control'

Qatar's civil aviation authority has declared the country's air transport sector remains under "full operational control" despite heightened regional tensions and unprecedented risks to airspace safety. In an interview with Qatar News Agency, Acting President of the Qatar Civil Aviation Authority (QCAA) Mohammed bin Faleh al-Hajri said operations continue to be managed to the highest safety and efficiency standards, even as the region faces significant security challenges. Al-Hajri described a phased response to the crisis based on continuous risk assessment, which led to the partial reopening of Qatar's airspace on March 7 following an initial precautionary closure. Flights have since resumed on a limited basis using designated air corridors, under strict monitoring and in co-ordination with the armed forces. He said recent Iranian attacks had a "direct and tangible" impact on the region's aviation environment, including Qatari

airspace, warning of sharply increased risks posed by drones, missiles, and debris from air defence systems, as well as hazards such as aircraft misidentification and operations in restricted or high-risk airspace zones. Authorities have treated Qatar's airspace as a highly sensitive operational environment, restricting flights to approved routes and carefully controlled capacities. Initial operations focused on evacuation flights and cargo services, with civil air traffic gradually increasing to maintain essential connectivity and supply chains. QCAA and Qatar Airways worked closely with national partners to assist stranded passengers and sustain cargo operations, ensuring the continued flow of essential goods into the country. A range of contingency measures were introduced, including revised emergency plans, tightened air traffic procedures, and expanded reliance on overseas maintenance providers. Qatar Airways



Acting President of QCAA Mohammed bin Faleh al-Hajri

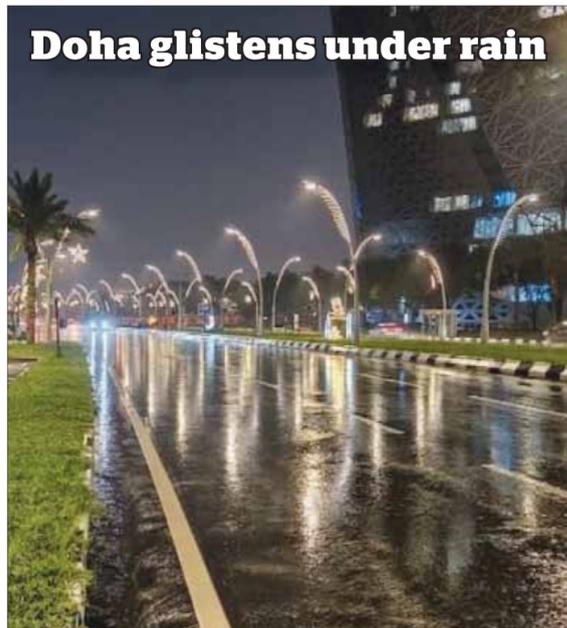
was authorised to operate maintenance stations abroad to support 188 stranded aircraft. At Hamad International Airport, aircraft were repositioned to safer locations, firefighting units redeployed, and construction on one runway temporarily suspended.

On airspace security, al-Hajri said QCAA had activated round-the-clock communication channels, increased inspection and patrol operations, and shared a regional regulatory document with the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) and neighbouring countries on managing airport security during conflicts. Risk information from civil aviation authorities in neighbouring countries and international organisations is continuously monitored to inform directives.

He outlined an integrated risk management methodology underpinning all operational decisions, encompassing the identification of approved and closely monitored air corridors, continuous civil-military co-ordination, a prior approval mechanism for each flight, enhanced fuel planning, identification of alternative airports, special crew briefings, and the implementation of exceptional operational procedures. **To Page 2**

Erdogan pays tribute to the martyrs

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed his condolences over the martyrs of the helicopter crash in Qatar's territorial waters. This followed the president's post on Turkish social media platform "Nsosyal", where he said that he had received with great sorrow the news that a member of the Turkish Armed Forces, two ASELSAN company employees, and members of the Qatar Armed Forces were martyred in the helicopter crash in Qatar. The Turkish president prayed for Allah's mercy upon the deceased in the tragic incident and extended his sincere condolences to their families, seeking Almighty Allah to grant Turkiye and its people as well as the people of Qatar patience and fortitude. **(QNA)**



A rain-soaked road glistens under decorative lights in the West Bay area along Doha's Corniche shortly after midnight on Sunday following a spell of light but steady showers. **GT Photo**

US claims, Iran denies talks after Trump postpones energy strikes

Iran denied yesterday that it had engaged in negotiations with the United States, after President Donald Trump postponed a threat to bomb Iran's power grid because of what he described as productive talks with unidentified Iranian officials.

Trump wrote early in the morning on his Truth Social platform that the US and Iran had held "very good and productive" conversations about a "complete and total resolution of hostilities in the Middle East".

As a result, he said, he was postponing a plan to hit Iran's energy grid for five days. His announcement sent share prices sharply higher and oil prices sharply lower, a sudden reversal to a market swoon caused by his weekend threats

and Iran's vows to respond. He later told reporters that his special envoy Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner, who had been negotiating with Iran before the war, had held discussions with a top Iranian official into the evening on Sunday that were to continue yesterday.

"We have had very, very strong talks. We'll see where they lead. We have major points of agreement, I would say, almost all points of agreement," he told reporters before departing Florida for Memphis.

In Memphis he said Washington had been negotiating with Iran "for a long time, and this time they mean business," adding: "I think it could very well end up being a good deal for everybody."

He did not identify the Iranian



US President Donald Trump speaks to reporters in West Palm Beach, Florida. **(AFP)**

official in touch with Witkoff and Kushner, but said: "We're dealing with the man who I believe is the most respected and the leader."

"We're dealing with some people that I find to be very reason-

able, very solid. The people within know who they are. They're very respected, and maybe one of them will be exactly what we're looking for."

Iran's powerful parliament speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf said on X that there had been no such talks with the United States, and ridiculed the suggestion as an attempt to rig financial markets.

"No negotiations have been held with the US, and fakenews is used to manipulate the financial and oil markets and escape the quagmire in which the US and Israel are trapped," he wrote.

"Iranian people demand complete and remorseful punishment of the aggressors. All Iranian officials stand firmly behind their supreme leader and people until this goal is achieved." **(Reuters)**

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

Qatar economic outlook remains 'highly positive'

Qatar's economy has emerged as one of the most resilient economies internationally with its ability to absorb shocks and crisis, and maintain its financial and credit stability and security in spite of the regional tensions and geopolitical challenges and the fluctuations of the international markets.

A report by Qatar TV indicated that Capital Intelligence (CI) Ratings has affirmed the Long-Term Foreign Currency Rating (LT FCR) and Short-Term Foreign

Currency Rating (ST FCR) of Qatar National Bank at "AA" and "A1+" respectively, while maintaining the future prospective stable status of the bank, which clearly indicates the bank's strength and its operational efficiency.

Previously, CI Ratings affirmed the rating of Qatar Islamic Bank at "AA-", with a stable outlook.

This reflects the positive strength and effectiveness of the banking sector in Qatar in general with its stable and efficient systems that have proven its ability to deal with intentional and regional crises and

challenges while maintaining its power and stability.

Meanwhile, Fitch Ratings has affirmed Qatar's Long-Term Foreign-Currency (LTFC) Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at "AA" with a stable outlook, citing the general finances, the strength and flexibility of the economy and its ability to face external challenges.

Further, S&P Global Ratings continues to affirm high ratings for most Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries, supported by robust financial reserves and structural reforms, despite rising

risks from regional conflicts.

Qatar holds a stable "AA/A-1+" rating, while the UAE maintains a strong "AA/A-1" standing.

Such ratings reflects the enduring strength of Qatar economy and financial systems, essential for a growing business outlook while other economies in various parts of the world are being negatively impacted by the turbulent geopolitical factors, regional tensions, and unstable security situations.

These achievements are mainly driven by a competent and efficient govern-

ment that has established its resilience and flexibility to address sudden swings of global markets and maintain a stable and secure investment opportunities with balanced and efficient partnership between the public and private sector, with focus on diversifying the investment portfolio to mitigate the adverse consequences of any occurrences.

Further, the government has been keen to encourage the private sector and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as a driving power for the future economy, believing in their valid potentials in creating more jobs and businesses opportunity for a more resilient economy.

Good point of view at Aspire Park



Families enjoy paddle boats on Aspire Lake on the third day of Eid al-Fitr at Doha's Aspire Park as the illuminated Torch Tower lights up the night sky. **PICTURE:** Thajudheen

MoCI carries out nearly 50,000 emergency inspection orders

QNA
Doha

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) has revealed that it had executed 49,756 emergency inspection orders during the period from February 28 to March 22, issuing violations against 80 violating commercial enterprises and shutting down two others.

A statement by the MoCI yesterday highlighted that its operations centre is working around the clock to monitor markets and receive reports and complaints, as well as ensure swift responses and address these matters more efficiently.

It added that 318 inspectors were engaged in surveillance inspections in collaboration with personnel from the Ministry of Municipality.

These inspections are intended to ensure the commercial enterprises are law-abiding entities and that key commodities are available, as well as their adherence to proclaimed prices, market stability, and stockpile surveillance, the statement read.

The statement further noted that the operations centre received 408 complaints during the same period, which were responded to instantly in less than 24 hours with 100%.

Overall, the ministry confirmed that it is committed to protecting consumer rights and maintaining a fair and thriving environment for commerce to help achieve balance among a variety of parties and promote market stability and sustainability.

MoI stresses adherence to safety rules at schools and workplaces

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has stressed the importance of adhering to instructions rendered by the competent authorities and complying with safety guidelines inside workplace premises, in light of the statement issued by the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers regarding the return to work.

In a statement on its official X account, the MoI affirmed the importance of continuing to comply with the approved precautionary measures and instructions across various entities, in a manner that contributes to maintaining the safety of employees and visitors and ensuring the continuity of

operations with efficiency and safety.

It also noted the importance of ensuring the readiness of emergency exits, evacuation routes, and assembly points, in addition to following the instructions issued by the competent authorities.

In addition, the ministry urged various entities to continue strengthening awareness among employees and visitors of the approved precautionary guidelines and to work on enforcing them effectively, in a manner that promotes a safe work environment and raises the level of readiness to deal with any developments.

Earlier today, the General Secretariat of

the Council of Ministers announced the return to normal work at workplace premises in accordance with the applicable regulations, starting today, across all ministries, other government bodies, and public authorities and institutions.

The MoI also stressed the importance of adhering to approved safety guidelines and preventative measures in educational institutions to ensure the safety of students, as well as teaching and administrative staff.

This guidance comes following a statement issued by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education on the resumption of in-person classes at all educational institutions.

In a post on X, the MoI urged adherence to the instructions of the competent authorities and compliance with emergency response guidelines, including evacuation or shelter-in-place procedures within educational facilities, depending on the nature of the situation, as well as following the directions of safety officers at each facility.

The ministry also called for enhancing preparedness within educational institutions by ensuring the safety of emergency exits, evacuation routes, and assembly points, and by raising students' awareness of the instructions issued by the competent authorities. - QNA

MoI warns against calls exploiting ongoing situation

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has strongly urged the public against responding to any suspicious calls or messages that take advantage of the current situation and falsely claim to represent government agencies within the nation, asking the recipient to disclose banking information or transfer funds.

In a statement on the X platform, the ministry also emphasised the critical need to refrain from sharing passwords, bank card information, or one-time passwords or verification codes (OTP), and to avoid clicking on links included in such messages. - QNA

Supreme Judicial Council has reviewed more than 5,000 cases remotely so far this month

The Supreme Judiciary Council (SJC) has reviewed more than 5,052 remote lawsuits through the use of visual communication technology connecting litigants and lawyers since the start of March in response to the recent tension in the region.

More than 777 new lawsuits have been registered electronically, while more than 8,596 electronic services have been executed through digital channels.

The council explained that these figures reflect its ongoing efforts to maintain the delivery of judicial services with

a high degree of efficiency and effectiveness.

The council noted that its remote litigation system has enabled the continuation of court proceedings without interruption, while facilitating communication between parties and their legal representatives through modern digital technologies.

The SJC further stressed that its prior digital readiness played a key role in supporting the full transition of court operations to remote procedures.

This preparedness has ensured the

continued adjudication of cases and the electronic issuance of judgments in line with the highest standards of organisation and procedural efficiency.

The council stressed its broader commitment to advancing digital transformation in the judicial sector and guaranteeing uninterrupted access to justice in the country.

From today, all courts will resume normal working hours in their halls and buildings and the related service department will resume their services for the public, as well.

PM, regional, global partners push for de-escalation

From Page 1

HE Sheikh Mohammed stressed that Iran's targeting of energy facilities constitutes a flagrant violation of international law and a serious threat to global energy security and the environment -

particularly notable given Qatar's longstanding efforts to facilitate dialogue between Iran and the international community.

The EU official echoed the call for de-escalation and urged a return to negotiations and diplomatic channels to

prevent further instability.

Across all conversations, a common thread emerged: the need for immediate co-ordinated action to pull the region back from the brink, with dialogue and reason taking precedence over military confrontation.

QCAA: Airspace under 'full operational control'

From Page 1

Securing Qatar's airspace, al-Hajri added, relies on a multi-layered system incorporating advanced radar, continuous airspace coverage, real-time flight tracking, and precise aircraft separation standards, all directly integrated with military authorities and joint operations centres through advance flight plan sharing.

He said that emergency plans have been activated across all civil aviation sectors.

In aviation security, evacuation plans were implemented, airport entry points reduced, and staffing brought to a minimum to avoid operational disruption.

In air navigation, measures included immediate traffic management, flight diversion when necessary, regulated

traffic through specific operational windows, and the activation of direct communication channels between all relevant parties.

The official pointed out that a guidance document on airspace management during emergencies was also issued, alongside an air circular on navigation emergency procedures to strengthen readiness within the Doha Flight Information Region.

Al-Hajri stressed that the air traffic control system is operating at a high level of readiness, with comprehensive airspace coverage, accurate real-time tracking, improved aircraft separation procedures, and direct military integration - all of which contributed to managing the situation with high efficiency.

The official noted that the QCAA periodically conducts exercises simu-

lating emergency scenarios, including partial or total airspace closure, loss of communications, and operations under security or military restrictions, with lessons continuously incorporated to sharpen future readiness.

Concluding his remarks, al-Hajri affirmed the QCAA's round-the-clock monitoring of all developments and reiterated that the safety and security of civil aviation remains the state's top priority.

All operational decisions, he said, are taken on the basis of precise professional risk assessment and in full co-ordination with the relevant national authorities.

What has been achieved during this period, he added, reflects Qatar's ability to manage exceptional circumstances efficiently and professionally. - QNA

Condolences

The Management, Staff and Students of



offer their heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of



V. M. Narayanan
on his sad demise

He was a respected Life Member of Birla Public School from 2004 to 2018 and will always be remembered for his association with the institution.

May almighty God rest the departed soul in peace.

Qatar National Library reopens today

Qatar National Library (QNL) will reopen for the public from today (Tuesday). QNL announced yesterday on its website. The library will follow its regular operating hours. It will be open from 8am to 8pm, Saturday to Thursday. On Friday, the library is open from 4pm to 8 pm. The Children's Library closes at 6.30pm, except on Friday and Saturday, when it closes at 8pm.



Ashghal monitors drainage networks after heavy rain

Qatar's Public Works Authority (Ashghal) said yesterday its teams are working 24/7 to monitor drainage networks and ensure highways and tunnels remain free of rainwater amid the country's current weather conditions.

Engineer Mohammad Hassan Haji, from the Drainage Network Operations and Maintenance Department, told reporters that rapid response teams are deployed across the country, monitoring field conditions and intervening immediately to address any rainfall-caused water pooling.

Haji added that operational control measures are ongoing to ensure smooth water drainage and minimise any impact on roads and infrastructure.

The authority urged the public



to follow updates via its social media accounts, adhere to safety instructions, reduce driving speed, and pay attention to road

signage. It also advised them to report emergencies or concerns through the authority's hotline at 188. (QNA)

Qatar set to lead education evolution in digital age

By Peter Alagos
Business Editor

Backed by a commitment to blending innovation with cultural heritage, Qatar is building toward a fully intelligent educational ecosystem that could see it leapfrog traditional learning models, an official of The Next Generation (TNG) School has said.

TNG director Riyaz Ahmed Bakali said Qatar is uniquely positioned to move toward an adaptive curriculum model where artificial intelligence (AI) handles the transmission of foundational knowledge, freeing the human educator to focus on cultivating critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and social-emotional development.

"Technology handles the what; the teacher focuses on the why and the how," Bakali explained to Gulf Times.

Bakali pointed out that the future of education lies in personalised learning pathways powered by data, adding that the Ministry of Education and Higher Education's vision aligns seamlessly with this direction.

He noted that the ministry continues to develop academic compliance infrastructure that brings all stakeholders together to build a sustainable and adaptable educational framework, one that balances innovation with the timeless principles of authentic learning.

On teacher retention, which



TNG director Riyaz Ahmed Bakali.

Speaking on autonomy, he pointed out that teachers are given genuine ownership of the curriculum and the freedom to innovate. "A teacher who feels like a technician following a script will not stay; a teacher who feels like a co-architect of learning will," Bakali said.

Asked about pathways, Bakali emphasised that continuous professional development converts teachers into leaders, with a clear career ladder provided for every team member.

"When educators see a clear trajectory for growth and feel their well-being is genuinely valued, they don't just stay; they grow roots, thrive, and become part of the institutional memory," he stated.

On the question of balancing high academic standards with holistic development, Bakali said he challenges the premise that these two are in tension with each other.

"High academic standards and holistic development are two sides of the same coin," he stated, adding that students achieve strong academic results not through drilling but by ensuring they are physically active, mentally resilient, and intellectually engaged through leadership opportunities, research projects, debates, the arts, and community work.

Bakali also said, "The result is a graduate who is not merely exam-ready but life-ready, equipped with both the credentials to open doors and the character to walk through them with purpose."

remains a challenge worldwide, Bakali said the issue goes deeper than retention itself. "Before we talk about retention, we must talk about attraction, specifically, the challenge of attracting and retaining talented professionals to teaching as a vocation, not just a job," he noted.

He explained that TNG has adopted a three-pillar strategy built around well-being, autonomy, and pathways to address this challenge.

On well-being, Bakali stated that beyond competitive compensation, the focus is on cultivating a healthy teaching and learning environment where mental health is prioritised not as a slogan but through tangible policies and a genuinely supportive culture.

Trump reveals productive Iran talks denied by Tehran

Reuters
Washington/Jerusalem/Tel Aviv

Iran denied yesterday that it had engaged in negotiations with the US, after President Donald Trump postponed a threat to bomb Iran's power grid because of what he described as productive talks with unidentified Iranian officials.

A European official said that while there had been no direct negotiations between the two nations, Egypt, Pakistan and Gulf states were relaying messages. A Pakistani official and a second source told Reuters that direct talks on ending the war could be held in Islamabad as soon as this week.

Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform that the US and Iran had held "very good and productive" conversations about a "complete and total resolution of hostilities in the Middle East".

As a result, he said, he was postponing for five days a plan to hit Iran's energy grid.

His announcement sent share prices higher and oil prices sharply lower to below \$100 a barrel, a sudden reversal to a market swoon caused by his weekend threats and Iran's vows to respond.

Trump later told reporters his special envoy Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner, who had been negotiating with Iran before the war, had held discussions with a top Iranian official into the evening on Sunday and would continue.

"We have had very, very strong talks. We'll see where they lead. We have major points of agreement, I would say, almost all points of agreement," he told reporters before departing Florida for Memphis.

In Memphis, he said Washington had been negotiating with Iran "for a long time, and this time they mean business," adding: "I think it could very well end up being a good deal for everybody."

He did not identify the Iranian official in touch with Witkoff and Kushner, but said: "We're



A view of a residential building damaged by a strike, amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Tehran, Iran, yesterday. (Reuters)

dealing with the man who I believe is the most respected and the leader."

"We're dealing with some people that I find to be very reasonable, very solid. The people within know who they are. They're very respected, and maybe one of them will be exactly what we're looking for."

An Israeli official and two other sources familiar with the matter said the interlocutor on the Iranian side was Iran's powerful parliament speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf.

"Qalibaf said on X that there had been no such talks with the US, and ridiculed the suggestion as an attempt to rig financial markets.

"No negotiations have been held with the US, and fakenews is used to manipulate the financial and oil markets and escape the quagmire in which the US and Israel are trapped," he wrote.

"Iranian people demand complete and remorseful punishment of the aggressors. All Iranian officials stand firmly behind their supreme leader and people until this goal is achieved."

Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards said they were launching fresh attacks on US targets, and described Trump's words as "psychological operations" that were "worn out" and having no impact on Tehran's fight.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a video statement that he spoke with Trump yesterday and that Israel would press on with attacks in Lebanon and Iran.

But Netanyahu said Trump believed there was a possibility of "leveraging the mighty achievements obtained by the IDF (Israel Defence Forces) and the US military, in order to realise the goals of the war in a deal - a deal that will preserve our vital interests."

Although there was no immediate confirmation that talks had taken place as described by Trump, Iran's foreign ministry described initiatives to reduce tensions. It said Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi reviewed developments related to the Strait of Hormuz with his Omani counterpart and agreed to continue consultations between the two countries.

Iran has effectively closed the key Strait of Hormuz, through which about a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas flows. Trump has demanded Iran open the strait, but Tehran says it will not do so until the US and Israel call off their attacks.

The Pakistani official said US Vice President JD Vance, as well as Witkoff and Kushner, were expected to meet Iranian officials in Islamabad this week, following a call between Trump and Pakistan's army chief.



Streaks of light illuminate the sky during an interception attempt amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, as seen from Tel Aviv, Israel, yesterday. (Reuters)



Emergency personnel work at the site of a strike on a residential building, in Tehran, Iran, yesterday. (Reuters)

The Pakistani prime minister's office and foreign ministry did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Iranian media reported that Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif discussed the impact of the war on regional and global security.

Pezeshkian was quoted as saying that Iran was committed "to preserving stability and security and countering foreign interference in regional affairs" and wanted to strengthen cooperation with the countries of the region.

Iran had responded to

Trump's threats to strike its power plants by saying it would hammer the infrastructure of US allies in the Middle East, raising the prospect that an extreme disruption to global energy supplies could last longer than previously expected.

One of the sources, briefed on Israel's war plans, said Washington had kept Israel informed of its contacts with Tehran, and that it was likely to follow Washington in suspending any targeting of Iranian power plants and energy infrastructure.

More than 2,000 people have been killed in the war the US and Israel launched on February 28.

Israel strikes south Beirut, says captured Hezbollah members



Smoke rises from Beirut's southern suburbs following an Israeli strike, after an escalation between Hezbollah and Israel, amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Lebanon, yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Hazmiyeh

Israeli strikes hit Beirut's southern suburbs yesterday, the first attack on the Hezbollah stronghold in days, as its military said it had captured two members of the group in southern Lebanon.

An earlier Israeli strike had hit the upscale, predominantly Christian area of Hazmiah near

Beirut, with Israel saying it targeted a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' foreign operations arm.

AFP's live broadcast showed a cloud of smoke over the capital's southern suburbs, and Lebanon's state-run National News Agency reported several strikes on the area. The Israeli military also announced it was "striking Hezbollah infrastructure in Beirut" after having called on residents to leave the southern suburbs beforehand.

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 attack. Israel has since launched strikes across Lebanon, killing at least 1,039 people, and sent ground troops into the country's south.

In a statement yesterday, the Israeli army said that "during an activity to locate weapons in

southern Lebanon, (Israeli) troops identified several armed Hezbollah Radwan Force fighters who were planning to fire an anti-tank missile", referring to the group's commando force.

"After being identified, the fighters surrendered. They were apprehended by the troops and transferred to Israeli territory for further questioning," it added.

The Israeli military told AFP two Hezbollah members were captured.



Feeding the displaced in Lebanon



Executive chef of Pelican restaurant Stephanie Hage and members of the staff prepare food portions for displaced people, following an escalation between Hezbollah and Israel, amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Beirut, Lebanon, yesterday. **Right:** A man hands over food portions to a young man at a school used as a temporary shelter for displaced people, following an escalation between Hezbollah and Israel, in Beirut, Lebanon, yesterday. (Reuters)



UN expert says world gave Israel licence to torture Palestinians

AFP
Geneva

The world has given Israel "a licence to torture Palestinians", a UN expert said yesterday, with life in the occupied territories "a continuum of physical and mental suffering".

Francesca Albanese, the UN's special rapporteur on the rights situation in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, alleged that "torture has effectively become state policy" in Israel.

"Israel has effectively been given a licence to torture Palestinians, because most of your governments, your ministers, have allowed it," she said, as she presented her latest report to the UN Human Rights Council.

Albanese has faced harsh criticism, allegations of anti-Semitism and demands for her removal, from Israel and some of its allies, over her relentless criticism and long-standing accusations of "genocide".

"Francesca Albanese is not a promoter of human rights; she is an agent of chaos... and any document she produces is nothing but a politically-charged, activist rant," Israel's mission in Geneva said in a statement Monday.

Albanese's report claimed Israel was systematically torturing Palestinians on a scale "that suggests collective vengeance and destructive intent".

"Torture extends far beyond prison walls, in what can only be described as a torturous environment imposed by Israel across the entire occupied Palestinian territory," she told the Human Rights Council.

She said torture destroys the conditions that make life meaningful, stripping away human dignity, leaving empty shells behind.

"The testimonies that I and many others are documenting are not only tragic stories of suffering; they are evidence of atrocity crimes targeting the totality of the Palestinian people, across the totality of the occupied land, through a totality of criminal conduct," she said. Albanese warned that the international response would be a test of countries' collective legal and moral responsibility.

"Disregard for international law will not stop in Palestine. It is already unfolding from Lebanon to Iran, across the regional countries, and in Venezuela. And if left unchecked, it will spread far beyond," she said.



UN special rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories Francesca Albanese presents her latest report before delegates at the UN Rights Council, in Geneva, yesterday. (AFP)

Though appointed by the UN Human Rights Council, special rapporteurs are independent experts and do not speak on behalf of the UN itself.

Palestinian ambassador Ibrahim Khraishi told the council that the practices documented in Albanese's report "are not just individual cases of torture but amount to collective and systematic torture. "We renew our call to the international community to take urgent action to guarantee accountability, to stop impunity," he said. Pakistan, speaking for the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Co-operation, added: "Impunity has been entrenched and safeguards eroded."

"These crimes are being committed with the intent to inflict individual and collective suffering on the people under occupation in order to erase them from their own native land," Venezuela asked: "Where is the international community? It is painful and despicable to see nations remain silent and even worse, finance this massacre."

South Africa's representative said: "Inaction in the face of Israel's depravity is not neutrality: it is complicity."

At least 15 killed in attack on southern Sudan town

AFP
Khartoum

A series of strikes blamed on the Sudanese army in the southern town of Lagawa killed at least 15 people yesterday, a medical source said, while rival paramilitary forces mounted an offensive near the Ethiopian border.

Sudan's southern Kordofan region is currently the fiercest battlefield in the three-year war between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), who hold West Kordofan state where Lagawa lies.

"Fifteen bodies and 23 wounded people arrived in the hospital from three neighbourhoods," a medical source in the city said, speaking on condition of anonymity for their safety. The RSF accused the army of carrying out the attack, calling it part of the military's "systematic shelling of hospitals, markets and residential neighbourhoods in the cities of Kordofan and Darfur, using drones". Both sides have

been regularly accused of war crimes, including indiscriminate shelling and targeting civilians.

Across the country, the war has killed tens of thousands of people and left some 11mn displaced, creating the world's largest hunger and displacement crises.

Kordofan is a vast region that connects RSF strongholds in the western Darfur region with the army-controlled east.

Near-daily drone strikes have killed dozens at a time across the region, where the army has sought to stem an RSF advance, pushing them back towards Darfur and away from the capital Khartoum.

On Friday, an army drone strike ripped through a hospital in East Darfur state capital El-Daein, the region's gateway, killing at least 64 people. Last week, another blamed on the RSF on Darfur's western border town of Tine killed 17 people in Chad, in the latest spillover of the conflict.

On the other side of Africa's third-largest country, the RSF mounted an offensive on army territory along Sudan's eastern

border with Ethiopia. Control over Sudan's southeastern Blue Nile State, bordering both Ethiopia and South Sudan, is split between the army and the RSF's allies, a faction of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu. The eastern front has for months seen intermittent clashes as paramilitary troops inched north from the SPLM-N's southern strongholds.

Two sources, one from the army and the other from the RSF, said fierce battles broke out Sunday just south of the border town of Al-Kurmuk, the army's key position in the area.

The RSF source and an SPLM-N statement said the joint offensive captured the area of Gurt, just south of Al-Kurmuk. "Our forces are continuing their advance on Al-Kurmuk," the RSF source said.

From its foothold in the southern Blue Nile, a thin strip of land jutting south between Ethiopia and South Sudan, the SPLM-N maintains reported supply lines from both countries, building on decades-old links.

Sudan RSF detainees tell of horrors in conflict-hit El-Fasher

AFP
Tawila

In the suffocating darkness of a sealed shipping container, every thud signalled to Ibrahim Noureldin that one more detainee had died in the crush as Sudanese paramilitary fighters kept forcing more men inside.

Thousands of people are estimated to have been detained in the Rapid Support Forces' (RSF) October takeover of North Darfur's El-Fasher, a battle that a UN investigation found bore the "hallmarks of genocide".

"When people died of thirst and hunger, we were beaten and forced to bury them outside," 42-year-old Noureldin said.

"We were put to work, lifting their luggage, materials, weapons. If we moved too slowly, they beat us with whips," he said from Tawila - an overwhelmed refugee town west of El-Fasher now sheltering hundreds of thousands of people.

In February, the United Nations' rights office and the London-based Centre for Information Resilience (CIR) said that the RSF had converted hospitals, schools, warehouses and shipping containers - like the easy-to-lock, inescapable box that nearly killed Noureldin - into a sprawling network of makeshift prisons.

The RSF, at war with Sudan's regular army for nearly three years, has an iron grip on El-Fasher, and has only allowed in a handful of humanitarians, who say the city is "a ghost town".

But in Tawila, an AFP journalist gathered rare testimonies from five former detainees, speaking to them inside fragile shelters of straw and tattered fabric.

Under one straw awning, Noureldin leaned on a crutch, still weak from his injuries.

On October 26, he and six others were fleeing the RSF's final assault on the city when they were "shot at, beaten and accused of fighting for the army".

He was loaded into a Land Cruiser and taken to Al-Borsa market in the city's east, then locked with about 120 men in the airless container.

For over a month, they survived on "tiny sips of water" and "a little lentils".

Months of testimony, satellite imagery and verified videos analysed by the UN and CIR show that the detainees included government workers, doctors, journalists, teachers and aid staff.

Many were held for ransom,



File photo shows Sudanese displaced Ahmed Aman sitting at a makeshift shelter in the town of Tawila, in war-torn Sudan's western Darfur region. (AFP)

accused of army affiliation or based on tribal identity.

The RSF denies the abuses. A spokesman told AFP the reports were "propaganda", accusing the army of "using civilians as human shields".

Both warring sides have been accused of atrocities against civilians, including deliberate targeting and detention.

One of the RSF's largest detention centres was El-Fasher Children's Hospital, where "more than 2,000 men" were held "without access to water and food", the UN said.

"They brought us to the children's hospital, said we were fighters and kept me there for a month," said Abdullah Idris, 45.

With nothing but saline solution to drink, he said he "could only watch" as dozens of people died every day.

The UN recorded up to 40 deaths a day during a cholera-like outbreak, killing 260 people in a single week.

Besides disease, "the torture was horrible, especially to the young men", he said.

"If you tried to speak, they'd kill you with a single shot."

Ahmed Aman, 45, another hospital detainee, said some detainees "had their fingernails ripped out with pliers".

After weeks at the hospital, he was moved to Garni, northwest of El-Fasher, where CIR-verified footage showed "at least 600 detainees" being forcibly marched, including women and children.

Nedal Yasser, 27, was abducted the day after the RSF assault on the city.

For six weeks, she was shuttled with other women between detention sites, including Al-Mina al-Bary, a bus depot near the market where the UN said hundreds were held in about 70

shipping containers.

"I was beaten, tied up, interrogated. When they found out my husband was a soldier, the torture got even worse," she said.

"We were exploited and physically harassed, only sometimes allowed to go to the bathroom." She and the other women were ordered to pay \$2,000 ransoms, but everything she owned had "already been looted".

Finally, she was brought to a house, "assaulted", then dumped in a remote area.

She walked dozens of kilometres to Tawila, suffering a miscarriage on the way.

The UN has documented widespread torture and "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment", including physical violations, beatings with wooden rods, flogging and being suspended in painful positions from trees.

In the open fields of Tawila, survivors carry the scars.

Aman's back remains "torn apart" from beatings. Yasser regularly faints when she tries to stand.

And mechanic Ahmed al-Sheikh, 43, walks with a limp and cannot see out of his right eye after being struck by an RSF fighter. He reached safety only in February after four months in Shala prison, where the UN said the RSF held more than 2,000 detainees by January.

"They'd kill people right in front of us," he said.

"They would select people randomly, killing us like animals."

According to the UN, at least 6,000 more detainees were transferred from El-Fasher to Tagris prison in the RSF's de facto capital, Nyala, where they maintain a complete communications blackout.



File photo shows Sudanese displaced Ibrahim Noureldin, who says he was imprisoned and tortured in Rapid Support Forces' (RSF) prisons before fleeing El-Fasher, leaning on crutches at a makeshift shelter in the town of Tawila, in war-torn Sudan's western Darfur region. (AFP)



File photo of Romuald Wadagni, Benin's finance minister and the ruling party candidate for the presidential election, waving after presenting his platform in Cotonou, Benin. (Reuters)

Benin presidential candidate vows new police forces to fight militants

Reuters
Cotonou

The ruling party candidate in Benin's upcoming presidential election has vowed to create municipal police forces in northern border towns to defend against persistent attacks from militant groups.

Romuald Wadagni, who has been finance minister under President Patrice Talon since 2016, also said Benin had "no choice" but to work with neighbouring countries to address security challenges, as insurgents active in the Sahel rapidly increase their attacks on the borderlands between Niger, Benin and Nigeria.

Wadagni described the plan

for police forces in border towns while unveiling his political platform ahead of the April 12 election, in which he is the strong favourite.

Benin's national Republican Police force already has a presence in the north along with soldiers.

Wadagni did not specify a target number for municipal police officers in the area, nor did he say how much the programme would cost.

"The goal will be to ensure that young people, in their own environment, are trained, equipped, and given the opportunity to defend their homes, their families, their siblings, and their surroundings," he said.

Security issues in the north will be one of Wadagni's top

challenges if he takes over for Talon, who has pursued sweeping economic reforms while trying to boost Benin's appeal to tourists.

Benin rarely comments on militant violence in the north, though it said last April that an attack by Al Qaeda-linked JNIM had killed 54 soldiers. An attack earlier this month killed 15 soldiers and wounded five more at a military camp in the north.

Disgruntled soldiers attempted to oust Talon in a military coup in December, citing the deteriorating security situation in northern Benin "coupled with the disregard and neglect of our fallen brothers-in-arms".

That plot was foiled with help from neighbouring countries including Nigeria.

Trio of African nations eyeing debt-for-nature swaps: global group

■ Three debt-for-nature swaps would be worth over \$500 mn
■ TNC Africa head says demand for climate funding rising
■ Sees one deal likely to be closed this year, two in 2027

Reuters
Nairobi

The Nature Conservancy, a US-headquartered global environment group, is in talks with three African nations to seal debt swaps worth a combined \$500mn to secure cash for preservation of key ecosystems, its head of Africa told Reuters.

Debt-for-nature swaps help poorer countries reduce debt payments in return for conservation commitments. Both Seychelles and Gabon have used them over the last decade, but there have been none since Donald Trump's return to the White House last year curtailed crucial US support.

However, organisations that have helped pioneer the schemes, such as The Nature Conservancy, are working with multilateral development banks, private insurers and investment funds to kick-start them again.

"We have the projects on the table that we are working on with three different countries... we are looking at upwards of \$500mn (in total)," Ademola Ajagbe, TNC's regional managing director for Africa, told Reuters in an interview in the Kenyan capital, adding that one deal was likely to be closed this year and another two in 2027. He did not name the countries, multilateral lenders and international banks involved, citing confidentiality agreements.

PRESSURE ON FINANCING
Ajagbe didn't elaborate on how the US pullback had impacted the group's work in Africa, but stressed that demand for funding for environmental projects was still increasing.

"There are a multiplicity of factors limiting Africa putting money on the table to protect its natural assets," he said. "Part of the problem is because the cost of capital is rising, meaning we are at a very disadvantaged position." The eruption of the war in Iran has sent global borrowing costs surging, potentially curbing market access for debt-strained African countries but also boosting the appeal of debt swaps as falling bond prices make it cheaper to buy back debt.

The continent, which has been buffeted by landslides, floods and droughts since last year, receives just 1% of the annual global climate financing, government officials say. The likes of Kenya and Zambia, where TNC has long-standing programmes, have seen many key sectors such as tourism, food production and hydroelectric power generation hit by climate change. In addition, wider geopolitical tensions were affecting the provision of climate finance for Africa by Western donor nations, Ajagbe said.

"There has also been reallocation of development assistance from conservation, developmental causes to issues around defence."

He said Gabon, which saw a military coup just weeks after it secured its debt swap in 2023, was sticking to its commitments under the deal despite political upheaval. Discussions underway about additional financing go beyond ocean conservation, which was the focus of the 2023 deal, he said.

"The current government as we speak, are honouring the commitment made by the previous administration," Ajagbe said. "We are looking at ocean, forests, and freshwater. So it's a broader scope, it's a bigger overarching vision."

Mideast shock gives Dangote Refinery leverage as cheap imports dry up

Reuters
Lagos

Nigeria's Dangote Petroleum Refinery has stepped up gasoline exports across Africa as disruptions to energy flows due to the Iran conflict squeeze traditional fuel supply routes, curbing the cheap imports that long dominated West African markets.

Data from tanker-tracking firm Kpler show Nigeria's exports of clean petroleum products - which include gasoline, diesel, kerosene and jet fuel - have risen to about 214,000 barrels per day so far in March from an average 100,000 bpd in February.

Shipments to other African countries have climbed to about 90,000 bpd from 38,000 bpd previously.

The 650,000 barrel-per-day Dangote refinery has sold 12 cargoes of premium motor spirit, totalling 456,000 metric tons, on a free-on-board basis to international traders, with shipments delivered to Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Tanzania, Ghana and Togo, sources familiar with the deals



File photo shows a general view of Dangote Petroleum Refinery in Lagos. (AFP)

said. The sales mark Dangote's first exports of gasoline since the plant reached full capacity in February.

The escalating Middle East conflict has pushed up global crude prices, lifting feedstock costs for refiners worldwide. At the same time, shipping disruptions and lower fuel availability from Europe and the Gulf have cut flows of low-cost refined products into West Africa.

That has created opportunities for suppliers with shorter supply chains. Dangote's owner Aliko

Dangote has been sparring with Nigerian regulators over continued petrol imports, which he contends undermine his refinery.

Nigeria halted imports last month. Since then, domestic pump prices have risen more than 50% as the Iran conflict roiled energy markets.

The country consumes an estimated 50mn to 60mn litres of gasoline a day - nearly one-fifth of Africa's total demand - making fuel availability and pricing acutely sensitive to swings in global markets.

Mali journalist gets jail term over criticism of Niger junta head

AFP
Bamako

Bamako court yesterday sentenced a well-known Malian journalist critical of the region's military rulers to two years in prison over an article criticising the leader of neighbouring Niger.

Youssef Sissoko, publishing editor of the L'Alternance newspaper printed an article at the beginning of February criticising Niger's junta leader for claiming that France, Ivory Coast and Benin were involved in an attack on the airport in the capital Niamey.

The Islamic State group

claimed responsibility for the January attack. The article, written by another journalist, accused Niger's leader Abdourahamane Tiani of lying and turning his country into "a laboratory for a toxic political experiment".

Sissoko was arrested on February 5 and detained for spreading false information, damage to the reputation of the state and insulting a foreign head of state, according to the Association of Private Press Publishers (ASSEP).

Yesterday, Mali's National Cybercrime Unit court sentenced Sissoko to two years in prison and ordered him to pay 1mn CFA francs (\$1,770) in damages.

The president of ASSEP told AFP the decision would be appealed.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) condemned the sentencing as a serious violation of press freedom and called for Sissoko's release.

Niger, which has been led by a military junta since a July 2023 coup, has been plagued for a decade by militant violence involving Al Qaeda and the Islamic State group affiliates.

It, Mali and Burkina Faso, which are also led by juntas, have teamed up to create the Alliance of Sahel States. Mali ranks 119 out of 180 countries and territories in RSF's 2025 World Press Freedom Index.

South Sudan models chase global dreams as visa hurdles rise

AFP
Juba

Heels click on cracked paving stones as fantastically long-limbed men and women practice moves they hope will whisk them away from South Sudan, one of the fashion world's favourite scouting locations.

Many hope to follow in the footsteps of their compatriot Awar Odhiang, who went from a refugee camp in Ethiopia to closing Chanel's Paris Fashion Week show last year.

South Sudan has been mired in conflict, poverty and corruption since its independence in 2011, but the success of its models has been a ray of positivity.

No less than nine of the top 50 models currently listed on Models.com are originally from the east African country.

"Paris, Milan, London - the fashion industry is dominated by South Sudanese boys and girls at the moment," said Doris Sukeji, founder of the Jubalicious modelling agency in the capital Juba.

"Mostly it's the skin colour. That is how most of the South Sudanese get signed. They are looking for very dark models," she said.

One of the first to blaze a trail was Alek Wek, scouted in London in the 1990s after her family fled an earlier war.

It was an image of Wek on her mother's Facebook feed that in-



File photo shows professional models from the Juba-based modelling agency Jubalicious practicing catwalking during a modelling training session on the agency office rooftop in Juba. Right: File photo shows young fashion enthusiasts aspiring to become models observing a training session led by professional models from the Juba-based modelling agency Jubalicious at a hotel in Juba. (AFP)

spired Yar Agou, 19, now signed with Jubalicious.

"Damn! I saw her and I thought that is me one day if God is there. I want to make it like her," she said in Juba.

All skinny-long limbs and charming attitude, Agou has what it takes for the runway, but politics is standing in the way of her dream.

She was supposed to be working at the recent Milan Fashion Week, but her visa was rejected at the last minute. For now, she is working as a cleaner, hoping there will be more opportunities.

'HEARTBROKEN'

Successful models can earn tens of thousands of dollars in a season, a life-changing amount in South Sudan where 92% live under the poverty line.

But Sukeji said seven men and women had been rejected for visas in recent months despite having work sponsors, as the climate against immigrants hardens in the West.

"You get heartbroken," she said. Bichar Hoah, 24, raised by a single mother in Kakuma refugee camp in neighbouring Kenya, was recently rejected for a European

visa. "There are some people who discourage us by saying that we tried and failed... (but) I want to represent South Sudan as a model," he said, hoping to change the narrative around his country.

'A CHANCE'

But even those who make it abroad face immense challenges in an industry known for relentless turnover.

Clients constantly want "new faces," Sukeji said.

There are added challenges in a conservative country like South Sudan.

As well as physical require-

ments - tall but not above 5 foot 11 (1 metre 80) for women - Sukeji must also contend with families who view modelling as a cover for illegal activities.

"I always ask them to give the boy or the girl a chance," she said.

She brings them in for free training, which can take up to three months, taking a 10% cut if they get work.

Her trainer, drilling the models with the precision of a military sergeant when AFP visited, said many were like "newborn babies" when they started.

But as the young models gath-

ered on a Juba rooftop to practice their struts, there was hope for a future beyond South Sudan's poverty and ever-present threat of war.

"One day, really, South Sudan will change," said Agou.

All hope they can emulate the likes of Anyier Anei, who landed international modelling gigs and recently starred in French film "Coutures".

"Failure is less frightening than having dreams you never try to achieve," Anei told Harper's Bazaar recently. "Even with fear, you have to take that risk."





US deploys ICE agents to key airports

AFP/Reuters
Washington

The US immigration agency at the centre of a firestorm over heavy-handed enforcement tactics began deploying to major airports yesterday, as officials scrambled to ease mounting travel disruption during a prolonged, partial government shutdown.

The move places Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) personnel – already under intense scrutiny after fatal shootings linked to immigration operations – in highly visible roles at crowded transport hubs across the country.

Officials say the agents are being sent to at least 14 airports, including hubs in New York, Chicago and Atlanta, to assist overstretched Transportation Security Administration (TSA) staff, many of whom have gone weeks without full pay.

The agents will not conduct passenger screening but are expected to handle support roles such as monitoring exits and managing logistics, allowing TSA officers to focus on security checks.

Separately, Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson – the busiest US airport – told passengers

to arrive at least four hours early for flights after more than 40% of TSA officers did not show up for work on Sunday.

The deployment of ICE agents comes as airports struggle with long delays during a busy travel period for the annual spring break, with some passengers reporting waits of several hours.

Unscheduled absences among TSA staff have surged to their highest levels since the beginning of the shutdown, which has halted the operations of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) – which oversees the TSA – raising concerns about safety and system strain.

Tom Homan, President Donald Trump's point man on border security, told CNN that the move was a temporary measure to "help TSA move those lines along", while Trump framed it as part of a broader effort to maintain security during the funding standoff.

Social media posts showed ICE agents standing near TSA officers who were checking IDs.

For now, ICE personnel will not be deployed in areas behind airport security checkpoints because they lack the specific clearance needed, sources told Reuters.

Trump said yesterday that ICE agents

could make immigration arrests but that was not the mission.

"They're able to now arrest illegals as they come into the country. That's very fertile territory. But that's not why they're there. They're really there to help," he told reporters.

The decision to deploy ICE agents has drawn sharp criticism from Democrats, rights activists and some Republicans, who warn it risks escalating tensions in already stressed environments.

House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries told CNN that deploying the ICE in crowded airports could create new risks, while Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski told reporters it was "not ICE's mission" and warned of "additional tension" at airports.

The controversy reflects broader unease over the administration's immigration crackdown, which has sparked protests and legal challenges in several states.

In Minnesota earlier this year, two US citizens – Renee Good and Alex Pretti – were killed in separate encounters with federal immigration officers, incidents that fueled nationwide outrage and scrutiny of enforcement tactics.

Good, a mother of three, was shot by an



Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents are seen as they enter an elevator at Terminal E of the George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston, Texas. – AFP

ICE agent during an operation, while Pretti, an intensive care nurse, was later killed by officers from Customs and Border Protection (CBP) during a related deployment.

Against that backdrop, the airport deployment has taken on outsized significance, highlighting the increasingly blurred lines between immigration enforcement and domestic security roles.

Meanwhile, negotiations in Washington remain deadlocked.

Democrats have pushed to reopen most of the DHS while demanding new limits on

immigration enforcement, while Republicans have resisted those conditions.

Trump has further complicated talks by insisting he will not sign any funding deal unless Congress also passes the SAVE America Act, a contentious bill to overhaul how citizens register to vote in US elections.

With no breakthrough in sight and Congress nearing a recess, officials warn the disruption could deepen – leaving airports, and the wider system, under growing strain.

Runway collision kills pilots, shatters New York airport

Reuters/AFP
New York/Montreal/Washington

An Air Canada Express jet collided with a fire truck while landing at New York's LaGuardia airport late on Sunday, killing both pilots, injuring dozens and closing the facility, authorities said.

The Air Canada Express CRJ-900 plane, operated by its regional partner Jazz Aviation, was carrying 72 passengers and four crew members and had departed from Montreal, said Jazz, which is owned by Chorus Aviation.

Jazz and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey confirmed that the pilot and first officer were killed.

The crash comes as US aviation faces chronic shortages of air traffic controllers and a separate shortfall of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers due to a partial government shutdown that has led to delays, long security lines and heightened safety concerns across airports nationwide.

A separate 35-minute ground stop at nearby Newark Liberty International yesterday morning added to delays after air-traffic controllers evacuated their tower because of a burning smell from an elevator, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said.

"Today is an incredibly difficult day for our airline, our employees, and most importantly, the families and loved ones of those affected by the accident involving flight 8646," said Jazz president Doug Clarke.

Kathryn Garcia, executive director of the Port Authority, said 32 of the 41 injured had been released, while nine remained in hospital with "serious injuries".

US Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy said that at least two Port Authority firefighters sustained serious injuries.

Aviation safety experts say investigators would look at air traffic control staffing levels and the actions of both the controller and truck crew.

"The Air Canada jet was obviously cleared to land and from the radio transmissions, it appears that the airport rescue and firefighting vehicle was cleared. There are a lot of questions now regarding the communications," said US safety expert Anthony Brickhouse. "Communication is going to be a major part of this investigation."

Air-crash investigations typically find that accidents result from multiple contributing factors, rather than a single cause.

Garcia said that the fire truck was responding to a separate United Airlines aircraft that had "reported an issue with odour".

United, along with unions representing US air traffic controllers (ATC) and Air Canada pilots declined to comment.

Minutes earlier, air traffic control audio from LiveATC.net indicated that a United flight had declared an emergency due to an odour on-board.

Controllers advised the crew that fire trucks were already on site.

A later transmission captured a fire truck being cleared to cross Runway 4 at taxiway "Del-



The Air Canada Express CRJ-900 sits on the runway after colliding with a Port Authority fire truck at LaGuardia Airport in New York. – AFP

ta", where the collision occurred.

Moments later, according to the ATC audio, a controller can be heard saying: "Stop, stop, stop, truck 1 stop, truck 1, stop."

The aircraft struck the fire vehicle at a speed of about 24mph (39kph), according to flight-tracking website Flightradar24, which last recorded data at 11.37pm ET (0337 GMT).

Photos taken by Reuters after the accident showed visible damage to the nose of the plane, which was tilted upward.

Two unnamed passengers told ABC affiliate WABC of the shock on board, with one describing a friend suffering a broken nose and travelers hitting their heads on the seats ahead.

The US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) said it was deploying a team of experts to investigate the incident, while Canada's Transportation Safety Board said it would also send a team to support the investigation.

Air Canada, the country's largest carrier, said its teams and those from Jazz Aviation are also heading to the site.

The closure of one of New York's busiest airports will add to travel disruption.

Absences among transportation security workers have soared, leading to lengthy lines for passengers at major US airports.

Hundreds of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents were ordered yesterday to deploy to airports to help fill the TSA staffing gaps.

About 546 flights had been canceled at the airport so far yesterday, according to tracking website FlightAware.

Located in the New York borough of Queens, LaGuardia is New York's third-busiest airport, serving 33.5mn passengers in 2024, according to port authority figures.

It completed an \$8bn redevelopment in 2024, upgrading its aging infrastructure with new terminals and roadways.

Transcript of exchange between the air traffic controller and fire truck

Driver: "Truck one and company, LaGuardia Tower. Requesting to cross four at Delta."

Controller: "Truck one and company, cross four at Delta."

Driver: "Truck one and company crossing four at Delta."

Controller: "Frontier 4195, stop there please. (Pause) Stop, stop, stop, truck one, stop, stop, stop. Stop, truck one, stop! Stop, truck one, stop."

(Alarm goes off)

"Jazz 646. Jazz 646, I see you collided with vehicle. (Inaudible) Hold position. I know he can't move. Vehicles are responding to you now."

After further dialogue.

Second controller: "Man, that wasn't good to watch."

First controller: "Yeah, I know. I was here. I tried to reach out to my staff. And we were dealing with an emergency earlier. I messed up."

Second controller: "No man, you did the best you could." – AFP

The FAA recorded 97 runway incursions in January this year, compared with 133 in the same period last year.

A bipartisan group of US House lawmakers last month proposed legislation to address 50 aviation safety recommendations issued after a year-long investigation into the January 2025 collision between an American Airlines regional jet and a US Army Black Hawk helicopter that killed 67 people.

Last year also saw a UPS cargo plane crash shortly after takeoff in Louisville, Kentucky, killing seven and injuring 11 on the ground.

Preservation groups sue Trump to block overhaul of Kennedy Centre

Reuters
Washington

A coalition of US historic preservation and architectural organisations sued President Donald Trump and the Kennedy Centre's board yesterday, seeking to block a major reconstruction of the Washington performing arts complex.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States, the American Institute of Architects and six other groups alleged in a lawsuit in federal court in Washington that the Trump administration launched the project without required congressional approval and bypassed mandatory federal reviews.

The organisations contend that the planned project, which will require the closure of the building for two years, goes beyond what the Kennedy Centre's governing law permits.

That law limits the board's authority to repairs and improvements necessary to maintain the building's basic functionality, according to the lawsuit.

"The Kennedy Centre is not

a personal project of any president," Rebecca Miller, executive director of the DC Preservation League, said in a statement. "It is a national cultural monument built to honour John F Kennedy and to serve the American people."

The White House and Kennedy Centre did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The Kennedy Centre overhaul is part of Trump's ambitious effort to remake Washington, including the planned construction of a 90,000sq-foot ballroom on the site of the White House's East Wing that Trump demolished last year.

The Kennedy Centre opened in 1971 as a living memorial to the late president John F Kennedy.

Yesterday's lawsuit alleges the Trump administration already caused unlawful damage to the building by repainting its 200 gold columns white and adding new exterior signage placing Trump's name above Kennedy's.

Further renovations on the building are set to begin after the July 4 Independence Day holiday.

US Supreme Court turns away online Texas journalist's case over arrest

The US Supreme Court has declined to hear a bid by an online citizen journalist to revive her lawsuit accusing authorities in the Texas city of Laredo of wrongful arrest after she asked for and obtained from police non-public information about cases.

The justices turned away Priscilla Villarreal's appeal of a lower court's ruling that the police officers and prosecutors she accused of retaliation were protected by a legal doctrine called qualified immunity and could not be sued for violating her free speech rights under the US Constitution's First Amendment.

In doing so, the justices left the lower court's ruling in place. Qualified immunity is a legal defence that can shield government officials from liability in lawsuits over their actions.

Villarreal had asked the Supreme Court to conclude that qualified immunity is unavailable to public officials who use a state statute in a way that clearly violates the First Amendment, as she contends it was when police arrested her.

Liberal Justice Sonia Sotomayor dissented from the court's decision not to hear Villarreal's appeal.

She wrote that by turning away the appeal, the Supreme Court "leaves standing a clear attack on the First Amendment's role in protecting our democracy".

Sotomayor said that Villarreal's case, which garnered the support of prominent US media outlets and free speech advocates, "implicates one of the most basic journalistic practices of them all: asking sources within the government for information".

Villarreal was charged with two felony counts of misuse of information after she published the identities of suicide and car crash victims on Facebook in 2017, using information she verified by speaking to a police officer in Laredo. – Reuters



Flames and thick black smoke rise from an Air Force Hercules that crashed during takeoff, as a member of the Colombian Police stands nearby, in Puerto Leguizamo, Colombia, near the southern border with Ecuador. – AFP

Colombia military aircraft crashes with 125 on board

AFP/Reuters
Bogota

A Colombian military plane carrying 125 troops and crew crashed on take-off yesterday, with as many as 80 people aboard feared dead.

The Hercules aircraft went down shortly after departure from Puerto Leguizamo, near the southern border with Ecuador, strewn burning wreckage on the jungle floor.

The troubled border area has been the scene of heavy military activity in recent weeks, as the Colombian and Ecuadoran militaries try to tackle drug-running cartels and militias.

The toll remained unclear. Images from the scene showed civilians clambering around the broken tail of the aircraft, marked FAC 1016, as smoke and

flames billowed above the trees.

Defence Minister Pedro Sanchez expressed "deep sorrow" over the disaster.

"Military units are already at the scene," Sanchez posted on social media, adding that "the number of victims and the causes of the crash have not yet been confirmed".

"It is a deeply painful event for the country. May our prayers bring some measure of comfort," said Sanchez.

Two military sources told Reuters that 71 people had been rescued from the wreckage. General Carlos Fernando Silva Rueda said that 114 troops were aboard and 11 crew.

They had been travelling between Puerto Leguizamo and another Amazon outpost nearby.

The crash is the second by a C-130 Hercules aircraft in South America in under a month.

A Bolivian military cargo plane carrying ban-

knets crashed while landing near La Paz on February 27, leaving at least 24 people dead.

The Hercules is a four-engine turboprop plane built by Lockheed Martin.

Renowned for its ability to operate from makeshift airstrips, it is widely used by militaries around the world and can carry everything from troops to vehicles.

Lockheed Martin did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"I hope there are no fatalities in this horrific accident that should never have happened," President Gustavo Petro said in a post on X, in which he criticised bureaucratic obstacles for delaying his plans to modernise the military.

"I will grant no further delays; it is the lives of our young people that are at stake," he said. "If civilian or military administrative officials are not up to this challenge, they must be removed."

Trump in Memphis to tout his crime-fighting efforts

Reuters
Memphis

Under pressure to improve Republican chances in November's midterm elections, President Donald Trump highlighted his crime crackdown in a visit to Tennessee yesterday in a return to an issue he hopes will resonate with voters.

Trump's roundtable event in Memphis with some members of his senior leadership team took place as the war against Iran entered its fourth week, a conflict that is dominating his agenda and driving up global gasoline prices.

In September the Trump administration launched the Memphis Safe Task Force, a multi-agency effort involving federal officers, local police and the Tennessee National Guard to fight violent crime.

Trump was joined yesterday by Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth, Attorney-General Pam Bondi, deputy White House chief of staff Stephen Miller and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Kash Patel as he sought to show that the initiative in Memphis is paying off.

Before the initiative was launched, the city of Memphis had the highest rate of violent crime per capita in the country, according to the FBI.

Overall crime is down in Memphis about 43% compared to last year, according to local law enforcement data.

The task force said recently it has made close to 7,000 arrests and seized almost 1,100 illegal firearms since the crackdown began.

"You have now developed a reputation as a city that's coming back stronger than any city in the country because of what's happened with crime, and because your political leaders had the courage to do what they did," Trump said, sitting on a stage arranged with long guns, marijuana and methamphetamine seized in the operation.

Trump's event marked a return to an issue that he hopes will show voters he has their concerns



Tennessee Governor Bill Lee (left), US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth, US President Donald Trump, Attorney-General Pam Bondi, and Director of the US Marshals Service Gadyaces Serralla (right) attend the Memphis Safe Task Force roundtable in Memphis. - AFP

on his mind as he tries to redefine his law enforcement record after a tumultuous crackdown on illegal immigration in Minnesota earlier this year.

Trump's top political advisers want him talking about kitchen table issues, but Americans' affordability concerns and his recent foreign policy pursuits have overshadowed his domestic trips to talk about what he is doing to tackle high prices.

Fuel costs have risen since the US and Israel started attacking Iran on February 28, with oil and gas exports from the Middle East held up by the hostilities.

Gas prices in Tennessee are on average up more than \$1 per gallon compared to last month, according to travel analyst AAA.

"We're in a war that we know nothing about, and we really do make a decent salary, but gas is getting too expensive for us," said Kimberly Jenkins, 55, a hospital

administrator visiting Memphis from Houston, Texas.

Republicans hope that highlighting a crime reduction in a large city will help bring the conversation back to political territory that their party has often embraced in the past.

In recent months, Trump's top immigration officials often cited the Memphis operation - which was welcomed by some of the city's Democratic officials - as a positive example that stands in contrast with strong-arm immigration enforcement efforts in Minneapolis, which prompted large protests after federal agents fatally shot two US citizens in the city.

The change in tactics could be politically advantageous to Trump's Republican Party in November, when it hopes to build on its current slim majorities in Congress.

About 61% of respondents in a Reuters/Ipsos poll last month -

including 92% of Republicans and 35% of Democrats - said that they "support deporting unauthorised immigrants" but generally disapprove of the Trump administration's hardline tactics.

The night before Trump's visit to Memphis, residents and tourists on Beale Street, where neon signs emphasise the city's history of blues and jazz, said they were split on the visible increase of law enforcement.

"The crazy presence of National Guard and ramped-up police is only in the predominant tourist areas," 33-year-old law student Darius O'Neal said in an interview, questioning Trump's political motivations for the surge.

However, Dewayne Hambrick, a 60-year-old Memphis photographer who considers himself a Democrat, said that while crime still continues, "I think it's been great that the law enforcement is here".

Cuba restores its power grid after latest blackout

AFP/Reuters
Havana

Cuba's power grid has been restored, officials said, a day after the second nationwide blackout in a week as the crisis-hit island struggles under a US oil blockade.

Two-thirds of Havana had power again by Sunday afternoon, the capital's electricity company said, a day after the energy ministry reported a "total disconnection" of the national electric system in the country of about 10mn people.

The grid failed on Saturday evening at 6.32pm (2232 GMT) after a major power plant in Nuevitas, in eastern Cuba's Camaguey province, went offline, grid operator UNE said, causing a cascade effect.

Nearly 500,000 homes and businesses in Havana - approximately 55% of the total - as well as 43 hospitals, were back online by afternoon yesterday, UNE said.

"Thanks to the efforts of our electrical workers, the SEN (National Electric System) was restored," Prime Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz said on X late on Sunday.

Authorities cautioned, however, that demand would still exceed supply.

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 past week about "taking" the Caribbean island.

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.

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

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

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 have curtailed flights to the island, a blow to its all-important tourism business.

Life carried on as normal across most of Havana despite the ongoing blackouts, which have become a regular part of the daily routine in the capital even when the national grid is operational.

"We're stuck in the same rut," said Havana resident Leoni Alberto, who said he was forced to cook with firewood several times a week due to the outages. "It's absolute madness. There's no other way around it."



A woman walks on a street without electricity during the nationwide blackout in Havana over the weekend. - AFP

US Supreme Court hears challenge against Mississippi's mail-in ballot law

Reuters/AFP
Washington

Conservative US Supreme Court justices signaled scepticism yesterday toward a Mississippi law challenged by Republicans that allows a five-day grace period for mail-in ballots received after Election Day to be counted in a case that could lead to stricter voting rules around the country.

Republican President Donald Trump's administration argued in favour of the challenge to Mississippi's law, which permits mail-in ballots sent by certain voters to be counted if they were postmarked on or before Election Day but received up to five business days after a federal election.

Absentee voting by mail is limited to a few categories of voters under the law including elderly people, the disabled and those living away from home.

The Supreme Court heard arguments in Mississippi's appeal of a lower court's ruling that deemed its mail-in ballot law illegal.

The dispute centred on whether federal laws setting Election Day for federal elections preempt state laws in various states that allow ballots to be received after that day.

US Solicitor General D John Sauer, arguing on behalf of the Trump administration, criticised Mississippi's law as unduly "general and permissive".

"Official receipt is at the definitional heart of 'election'" he said, referring to the receipt of ballots.

The Supreme Court has a 6-3 conservative majority.

Questions posed by some of the conservative justices during the arguments appeared to express concern over mail-in ballot practices more broadly, beyond grace periods, including who can receive a ballot, whether it must be postmarked and even whether states may allow mailed-in bal-



Snow flurries fall outside the US Supreme Court in Washington, DC. The US Supreme Court was weighing yesterday whether mail-in ballots received by electoral authorities after Election Day can be counted, in a case that could have repercussions for November's midterm elections. - AFP

lots to be recalled by the voter.

Last year Trump vowed to end the use of mail-in ballots nation-

wide before the 2026 US midterm elections in November, a move that likely would disproportion-

ately benefit his party given that Democratic voters traditionally have been more likely to use mail-in ballots than Republican voters.

Legislation now being considered by Congress would put new restrictions on mail-in ballots involving requirements for certain government-issued photo identification.

Trump, however, has urged Senate Republicans to expand the proposal to include a sweeping ban on mail-in voting, with limited exceptions for military personnel and certain others.

Republicans have taken a sceptical view toward mail-in ballots.

Trump has sought to cast doubt on the security of these ballots, although evidence of voter fraud is rare.

Trump has continued to make false claims of widespread voting fraud in the 2020 presidential election that he lost to Democrat Joe Biden.

About 30 states and the District of Columbia accept at least

some ballots that are postmarked on or before Election Day but received afterward.

During the first year of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, the Republican-controlled Mississippi legislature in 2020 passed the law on a bipartisan basis.

The New Orleans-based 5th US Circuit Court of Appeals in 2024 ruled in favour of the Republican challengers.

Though the 5th Circuit's action applied only in the three states where the regional federal appeals court has jurisdiction - Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas - it called into question the voting practices in the other states with similar mail-in ballot policies.

The Supreme Court is likely to deliver its rulings in the cases by the end of June or early July, which would provide enough time for them to be applied to the November congressional elections.

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N Korea's Kim reappointed as president of state affairs

AFP
Seoul

North Korea's rubber-stamp legislature has re-elected Kim Jong-un as president of state affairs, state media reported yesterday.

Kim's reappointment as head of the authoritarian nation's highest policymaking and governing body, the State Affairs Commission, was announced by the state news agency KCNA.

Critics argue that elections in North Korea are pre-determined and designed to give the country's leadership a veneer of democratic legitimacy.

"The Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK re-elected Comrade Kim Jong-un as President of the State Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the First Session, the first state affairs activity of its 15th term, on March 22," KCNA reported.

The report said the decision to re-elect Kim to the "top post" reflected "the unanimous will and desire of all the Korean people."

Kim is the third-generation ruler of the nuclear-armed state founded by his grandfather Kim Il-sung in 1948. He has ruled the country since his father's death in 2011.

The election is a "highly choreographed event with a pre-determined outcome," said Lee Ho-ryung of the Korea Institute for Defence Analyses.

"Throughout the third-generation rule, the North has staged



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un receives applause as he attends the first session of the Supreme People's Assembly, where state media reports he is reappointed as president of state affairs, in Pyongyang, North Korea, March 22, 2026. (Reuters)

such events to showcase a procedure in an attempt to achieve political legitimacy," she said.

"But no one thinks any different outcome would emerge from it."

Photos released by KCNA show Kim dressed in a formal western suit and seated at the centre of a stage, flanked by top officials in front of two giant statues of his father Kim Jong-il and grandfather.

Prior to the event, 687 deputies were elected to the SPA, with North Koreans over 17 given the choice of approving or rejecting the sole candidate put forward by the ruling party.

The new deputies were duly ap-

proved with 99.93% of votes in favour and 0.07% against, KCNA reported earlier, with turnout at 99.99%.

The Pyongyang assembly hall was "full of the extraordinary political awareness and revolutionary enthusiasm" by the newly elected members, it said.

Analysts say the current assembly session may also take up possible constitutional amendments that could include formally codifying inter-Korean relations as those between "two hostile states".

The language Kim uses to describe his stance towards South Korea in his assembly speech will

be a "barometer" of his inter-Korea plans, Hong Min, a senior analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification, told AFP.

"The extent to which terms such as 'national unification' or 'Korean unity' are removed and replaced by aggressive expressions including 'territorial control' could serve as a barometer of his ideological framework," he said.

The key point lies in how far he will "flesh out issues of territory, territorial waters and airspace" in dealing with Seoul, he added.

The gathering follows a five-yearly meeting of the ruling party last month.

S Korea FM urges safe Hormuz transit in call with Iranian counterpart

AFP
Seoul

South Korea's foreign minister urged his Iranian counterpart during a call yesterday to guarantee the safe passage of its fleet through the Strait of Hormuz, Seoul said.

The call came as South Korea faces mounting risks to its energy supplies, after the strategic artery was effectively closed since the war began late February, when the US and Israel launched an attack against Iran.

Around 70% of South Korea's crude oil imports transit through the waterway.

During the conversation, Foreign Minister Cho Hyun urged

his Iranian counterpart Abbas Araghchi to "halt attacks on civilians and civilian facilities in Gulf countries, ensure safe navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, and take steps to ease tensions and stabilise global energy supplies", the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Cho noted that "multiple vessels of various nationalities, including S Korea's", are anchored in the strait - from which one fifth of global oil and gas supplies flow.

The crisis has already pushed South Korea to impose a fuel price cap for the first time in nearly 30 years.

South Korea uses about 2.5mn barrels of oil per day as of the end of 2024, according to data website Worldometer.

Indonesia says no to \$1bn fee for Trump's 'Board of Peace' seat

AFP
Jakarta

Indonesia's president, under fire at home for signing up to US counterpart Donald Trump's so-called "Board of Peace", has insisted his country would not pay the \$1bn joining fee for permanent membership.

Jakarta had only committed peacekeeping troops for the initiative, Prabowo Subianto said in a statement published on the presidential YouTube channel Sunday.

The "Board of Peace" came together after the Trump administration, teaming up with Qatar and Egypt, negotiated a ceasefire in October to halt two years of devastating war in Gaza.

Countries that want to be permanent members must pay \$1bn - sparking criticism the board could become a "pay-to-play" version of the UN Security Council.

Prabowo, a former general, has come under criticism from Indonesian Muslim groups for

joining the board and pledging to send 8,000 peacekeeping troops to Gaza.

Prabowo attended the inaugural meeting of the "Board of Peace" in Washington last month.

But he later said he would withdraw from the board if it does not bring benefits to Palestinians or align with Indonesia's national interests.

"We never said that we wanted to contribute \$1bn," Prabowo said in statements broadcast on his YouTube channel Sunday.

He said he did not make any financial commitments "at all".

Prabowo signed a tariff deal with the US last month, but insisted Sunday that Indonesia could withdraw from any agreement if its conditions or execution threatens the national interest.

Talks with Washington about any peacekeeping mission to Gaza have been put "on hold", according to state news agency Antara, citing Foreign Ministry spokesman Vahd Nabyul Achmad Mulachela.

EU chief in Australia as trade talks enter 'last mile'

AFP
Sydney

EU-Australia talks to strike a trade pact were in their "last mile" yesterday, Brussels said as European Union chief Ursula von der Leyen arrived in Sydney raising hopes for a deal.

Years in the making, the accord would be the latest inked by Brussels in a push to diversify trade as Europe faces challenges from the US and China.

"Clearly there is mutual interest, and a positive hunger from both economic communities for having this new framework," EU trade commissioner Maros Sefcovic said.

Von der Leyen's visit with Sefcovic in tow comes as the 27-nation bloc and import-reliant nation navigate renewed energy vulnerability sparked by the war in the Middle East.

She arrived in Sydney yesterday for a meeting with Australia's head of the state, the Governor-General, before heading to Canberra, where she is expected to meet Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

"The goal is to tie down the final details," commission spokesman Olof Gill told a press conference in



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (centre) with Australia's Governor-General Sam Mostyn (second left) attend a traditional Aboriginal welcome ceremony at Admiralty House in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

Brussels, cautioning that "the last mile is the hardest".

Improved access to the EU market for Australia's lamb and beef - a big no-no for some European farmers - was understood to be among the last sticking points.

Australia's luxury car tax on European vehicles was another.

Australia's largest export market is China and the US is its largest source of investment.

But Canberra has redoubled ef-

orts to diversify export markets for farmers since a 2020 dispute with Beijing saw agriculture exports blocked for several years, and then last year's global imposition of US trade tariffs.

Likewise, the European Union is on a drive to strike new partnerships in the face of US levies and Chinese export controls.

The bloc, which is seeking greater access to Australia's critical raw materials, is the resource-rich

country's third largest two-way trading partner and second largest source of foreign investment.

A deal could boost EU exports to Australia by more than 30% and save exporters about one bn euro a year (\$1.15bn), Brussels said.

Australian Trade Minister Don Farrell last week said a pact would add Aus\$10bn (US\$7.1bn) in trade for Australia in the first year.

"They are potentially our second largest trading partner if we can pull this off," he told Sky News Australia.

Front and centre in meetings will also likely be the war in the Middle East, which has sent oil prices soaring.

In Canberra, International Energy Agency chief Fatih Birol said yesterday the world faced an energy crisis not seen in decades if the conflict was not resolved.

And von der Leyen this month said the conflict had served as a "stark reminder" of the continent's vulnerabilities.

Australia - which is heavily reliant on fuel from abroad - has also felt the pressure from the global energy squeeze.

While conceding that some petrol stations had run out of fuel, Energy Minister Chris Bowen said yesterday the country was a "long way" from rationing.

Japan 'not thinking about' discussing Hormuz passage with Iran

Tokyo is "not thinking about" calling on Iran to let Japanese tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, the foreign minister has said, after Tehran said it was ready to help. Japan depends on crude oil imports from the Middle East, most of which transits the strait, located in the Gulf. Iran has effectively closed the

strait in retaliation for US-Israeli strikes, sending countries reliant on the shipping lane scrambling for alternative routes and tapping reserves. Asked about whether the government would urge Iran to let Japanese ships transit Hormuz, Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi said Sunday on a Fuji Television programme

that "for the time being, we are not thinking about that". His comment came after Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi said in a telephone interview with Kyodo News Friday that Tehran was prepared to ensure safe passage for Japan. "They only need to contact us so we can discuss how this transit

can take place," Araghchi added. Motegi spoke with Iranian counterpart Araghchi on Tuesday but he told Fuji Television that there was no mention from his counterpart of helping Japanese ships. "Safety of navigation is extremely important. That's what we spoke about," Motegi said. (AFP)

China urges US, Israel to stop military action in Middle East, warns of 'vicious cycle'

Reuters
Beijing

China yesterday urged all parties involved in the Middle East conflict, particularly the US and Israel, to cease military operations, warning of a "vicious cycle" in a war that analysts say if prolonged, could undermine global growth and weaken demand for Chinese exports.

"The one who tied the bell must be the one to untie it," said Chinese special envoy to the Middle East Zhai Jun at a briefing after his shuttle-diplomacy trip that included stops in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait.

In a separate briefing, foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian cautioned that the use of force would only lead to a "vicious cycle" and that the war should not have been started.

"Should the hostilities continue to spread and intensify, the entire region will be plunged into chaos," he said.

"The lessons of the past are not far behind us," the Chinese foreign ministry said yesterday in a reply to Reuters seeking comment on the Iraq War anniversary last week.

"The war 23 years ago brought profound suffering to the Iraqi people and had a serious impact on the Middle East," the statement said.

Last Friday marked the 23rd anniversary of the Iraq War, in which US-led forces invaded the country to oust Saddam Hussein, partly on claims that his government possessed weapons of mass destruction. Though the regime fell quickly, Iraq sank into years of chaos and instability, in a war estimated to have killed more than 100,000 people, cost the US trillions of dollars and created a power vacuum that saw the rise of the Islamic State terrorist group.

"The war 23 years later on Iran has caused severe losses to the Iranian people, and the spillover and spread of the conflict have also affected the entire region," the ministry said.

Trump on Saturday imposed a 48-hour deadline on Tehran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz to all shipping, threatening to destroy Iranian power plants otherwise.

Iranian attacks have effectively closed the key waterway which carries a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas, causing the worst oil crisis since the 1970s.

While Beijing did not detail its concerns, a prolonged conflict could weigh on China's export outlook.

Emerging markets - key drivers of Chinese export growth - are particularly vulnerable due to limited oil reserves and sensitivity to rising energy costs.



Tugboats move a crude oil tanker to its berth at the oil terminal at the port in Qingdao, in China's eastern Shandong province yesterday. (AFP)

India's economic fundamentals strong, ample coal, petrol available, PM Modi says

Reuters
New Delhi

The fundamentals of the Indian economy are strong and the country has adequate availability of petroleum, fertilisers and coal to weather trade and energy disruptions caused by the US-Israeli war on Iran, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said yesterday. The conflict, which began last month, has disrupted sectors from air travel to shipping and gas supplies, including by the near-closure of the Strait of Hormuz, which serves as a conduit for 40% of India's crude oil imports.

India has sufficient petroleum availability, with strategic reserves currently exceeding 5.3m metric tonnes, and work underway to re-

ate reserves of another 6.5m metric tonnes, Modi told parliament's lower house yesterday.

"The inherent strength of India's economic fundamentals has... provided significant support to the nation during this period," he said.

Adequate arrangements have also been made for fertilisers supply for the summer sowing season that starts in June-July, and for coal to meet the rising demand for electricity as temperatures rise, he added.

The South Asian country — the world's most populous and its fastest growing major economy — still relies on coal for three-fourths of its electricity generation, even as it ramps up renewable energy generation at a record pace. The Indian economy is estimated to grow by 7.6% in the fiscal year

ending March 2026, the National Statistics Office said last month. It is projected to grow between 7% and 7.4% in FY27.

Analysts say a prolonged crisis in the Gulf region could significantly dampen India's growth in FY27 due to surging energy costs and supply chain disruptions. Modi had emphasised the importance of ensuring shipping lanes remain open and secure despite the war during a conversation with Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian on Saturday.

India is walking a tightrope in the war, boasting historical cultural ties with Iran, strong, strategic relations with Israel, and close friendships with Arab countries.

It has repeatedly called for dialogue and diplomacy to resolve the conflict.

Two more India-bound tankers cross Strait of Hormuz: shipping ministry

Reuters
London/New Delhi

Two tankers bound for India sailed through the Strait of Hormuz yesterday, as US President Donald Trump threatened to attack Iran's power plants unless Tehran drops threats that have effectively closed the Gulf.

Gulf nations including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have seen exports blocked since the war in Iran began on February 28 and Tehran launched attacks on ships and threatened any passing through the Gulf's southern strait.

The two India-flagged tankers were carrying liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) used mostly for

cooking in India. They loaded at anchorages in Kuwait and the UAE, LSEG ship-tracking data showed.

The Pine Gas, which loaded in UAE waters, sailed through the strait followed by the Jag Vasant carrying LPG from Kuwait, ship-tracking data on the MarineTraffic platform showed.

Hundreds of vessels have dropped anchor in and outside of the Gulf, cutting off food and other vital imports and energy exports, mostly to Asia and Europe.

India's Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, confirmed that the two tankers, carrying more than 92,000 tonnes of LPG, had sailed through Hormuz and were expected to reach ports in India between March 26-28.

The Pine Gas broadcast a mes-

sage identifying itself as "India ship and crew", LSEG ship-tracking data showed.

Some 20,000 seafarers remain stranded inside the Gulf, according to the UN's shipping agency.

Iran yesterday threatened to lay sea mines if Trump followed through with attacks, state media reported, while suggesting non-belligerent states might coordinate passage with Iran, leaving analysts remaining cautious.

"Iran is assessed highly likely still capable of damaging shipping transiting the Strait of Hormuz," British maritime security group Ambrey said in a note.

There remains a "heightened risk of miscalculation in congested waterways", the US Navy-led Joint Maritime Information Center said in an advisory.

PM Starmer calls emergency meeting on economy as Iran war risks mount

Reuters
London

Prime Minister Keir Starmer summoned a national emergency meeting yesterday to deal with the economic fallout from the escalating war in Iran, as Britain's government borrowing costs surged to their highest level since the global crisis of 2008.

The storm in financial markets intensified in early trade this week after Iran said it would strike the energy and water systems of Gulf neighbours if US President Donald Trump follows through with a threat to hit Iran's electricity grid.

Britain's heavy dependence on imported natural gas, persistently high inflation and stretched public finances have pushed its government bonds into a far steeper decline than those of international peers.

The so-called "Cobra" meeting — named for a secure cabinet briefing room used for national emergencies — was set to take place in the afternoon, London time. The governor of the Bank of England Andrew Bailey is due to attend, as well as Starmer's finance minister, foreign secretary and energy secretary.

"I am asking for every lever that's available to the government to deal with the cost of living to be discussed at Cobra," Starmer told reporters.

The finance ministry said energy security and the resilience of industry and supply chains would also be discussed.

Finance minister Rachel Reeves



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer meets pupils during a visit to St Paul's Church of England Primary School in southeast London to announce further cost-of-living support for parents through an expansion of the government's school-based nurseries, yesterday. (Reuters)

has said it is too soon to say what the impact of the war will be for Britain's economy. She has resisted calls for sweeping cost-of-living measures for households, saying instead that more targeted support is under consideration.

Housing minister Matthew Pennycook told the BBC that options included tackling "profiteering that we're potentially seeing from fuel retailers". The industry denies it is happening.

The energy price shock threatens to push Britain's inflation rate back up — possibly to 5% later this year, according to some economists — and deal another setback to the slow-growth economy.

It could also knock Reeves off course from her efforts to repair

the public finances.

Last week, the government launched a 53 million-pound package for homes that use heating oil to generate warmth. But the pressure for wider measures has added to the unease of bond market investors.

Yesterday, British 10-year government borrowing costs surged further past the 5% mark, last seen during the global financial crisis almost 20 years ago.

Until last week the majority of losses had been confined to short-dated gilts, which largely track interest rate expectations.

Bets on the next move by the BoE have shifted violently towards interest rate hikes and away from the cuts that were expected until the

eve of the war. Yesterday, the market priced in nearly four quarter-point rate hikes.

Last week, the central bank said it was ready to act to keep inflation on track for its 2% target. Some policymakers said an increase in borrowing costs might be needed but Bailey said it was too soon to say that rates would have to go up.

"On top of higher inflation, calls for the government to provide financial support for the economy in the face of higher energy prices is unsettling for the gilts market," said Jane Foley, senior FX strategist at Rabobank.

"A rout in gilts, if driven by speculative or overseas investors, has particular capacity to weigh on the pound."

Briton held in Iran urges PM Starmer to publicly reject spying accusation

A British man detained in Tehran urged Prime Minister Keir Starmer yesterday to "step out of the shadows" and publicly deny the spying charges against him and his wife, who fear for their lives more than three weeks into the US-Israeli war on Iran.

Craig Foreman and his wife Lindsay were sentenced to 10 years in prison in February after Iran accused them of spying for Britain and Israel. The couple have repeatedly denied the charges.

In a voice message recorded from Evin prison in Tehran and shared with Reuters, Craig Foreman said he and his wife were living in a "war zone" and accused the British government of failing to defend their innocence. He said the couple felt "let down, alone and completely frustrated by the lack of public defence by the people in charge of the government".

"You know we are innocent," he said. "Go public with the information you have, to clearly step up, step out of the shadows and help us. Our lives are constantly at risk."

Tehran has been hit repeatedly by US and Israeli air strikes. A blast near the jail blew out window panels and sent prisoners diving under beds for cover.

Craig Foreman said the couple had received "zero information" from the British government about what to do if conditions deteriorated further. Britain's foreign ministry reiterated in a statement that the sentences were "totally unjustifiable" and said the welfare of British nationals detained in Iran was a priority.

"We will continue to pursue this case relentlessly with the Iranian regime until we see Craig and Lindsay safely returned to the UK and reunited with their family," a spokesperson said. (Reuters)

Iran seeks repatriation of sailors in Sri Lanka

AFP
Colombo

Iran was in talks for the return of 251 sailors in Sri Lanka after one of its frigates was sunk near the island earlier this month, Tehran's ambassador said yesterday.

Alireza Delkhosh said crews from two vessels — 32 men from the IRIS Dena, which was torpedoed by a US submarine, and 219 from the IRIS Bushehr, which was given safe harbour in Sri Lanka — wanted to return home.

"We are talking, and we are

following this issue with the Sri Lankan government," Delkhosh said in a press conference broadcast on local networks, but which was not open to international media.

"I do hope that we can solve this problem as soon as possible," he added, saying that they were being treated well but wanted to leave.

"Their only worry is that they are separated from their families," Delkhosh said.

There was no immediate reaction from Sri Lankan authorities to Iran's request.

IRIS Dena was attacked just south of Sri Lanka on March 4, and

the ambassador said that 104 sailors were killed, many of them cadets, as well as a music band.

That raises the death toll from 84, based on the recovery of bodies by Sri Lanka's navy. Those bodies have since been flown back to Iran.

Sri Lanka's President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has said that the island provided protection to the Bushehr crew in line with the 1907 Hague Convention, which requires a neutral state to hold combatants of a belligerent state until hostilities end.

Dissanayake on Friday said he had denied permission for US warplanes to use ground facilities in Sri Lanka

in order to maintain Sri Lanka's neutrality. A third Iranian ship, IRIS Lavan, with 183 crew members, sought shelter in India's Kochi port.

Sri Lanka meanwhile has raised fuel prices by more than a third since the start of the Middle East war and has taken several energy-saving measures, including a four-day working week.

The Iranian envoy said Sri Lanka's crude oil supplies would face no issue passing through the Strait of Hormuz. "Sri Lanka is our friendly country... the Hormuz Strait is not closed to our friendly country's vessels," he said.

Hot air balloon festival



An aerial view shows hot air balloons decorated with traditional motifs before their launch during the annual hot air balloon festival held to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, at Semayu village in Wonosobo, Central Java, Indonesia, yesterday. (AFP)

Nepal's anti-graft body charges 21 in airport corruption case

Nepal's anti-graft commission has filed charges against 21 people, including two Chinese citizens, in a case alleging multi-million-dollar corruption in a major airport construction project, officials said yesterday. The charges are the latest against officials involved in the China-backed Pokhara airport project, after charges were filed against 55 people in December 2025, including five former ministers, taking the total number charged to at least 76. The airport project in the major tourism hub of Pokhara, which opened in 2023, inflated cost estimates by around \$75m, according to the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority. The charges, submitted on Sunday, come after the election this month of a new parliament, after youth-led anti-corruption protesters in September 2025 overthrew the government and set parliament on fire. (AFP)



A Sri Lanka Navy vessel approaches an Iranian Navy vessel IRIS Bushehr (422) during a rescue operation, off the coast of Colombo. (Reuters/File Photo)



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NZ struggles to regain economic mojo without housing recovery

For decades, New Zealand has relied on inflating the housing market to engineer a recovery during downturns, but the playbook has failed this time, putting policymakers in a quandary just as the Middle East war adds a new layer of uncertainty.

Even after the Reserve Bank of New Zealand aggressively slashed the benchmark interest rate from 5.5% to 2.25%, house prices still languish some 20% below their pandemic peak, dismantling the wealth effect that long anchored the economy.

The war compounds the problem, with oil price inflation pushing up borrowing costs globally, potentially forcing the RBNZ into a more hawkish stance even with the economy in the worst shape since the global financial crisis. New Zealand's borrowers are already being squeezed by higher market interest rates and anaemic demand, making any recovery in the housing market - once one of the world's most expensive - elusive, said Nick Goodall, head of research at Cotality NZ.

"It's sort of been thrown into question now with all the global uncertainty," Goodall said, noting he had previously expected some pick-up in the housing market this year as prices, mortgage rates and salaries found an equilibrium. "The longer the war drags on, the worse it will get."

The RBNZ already forecasts no rise in house prices this year. Economic growth cooled in the fourth quarter, data showed last week, with construction slumping and consumer spending weak, even before the massive disruptions created by the war. The unemployment rate stands at a decade-high of 5.4%.

The war compounds the problem, with oil price inflation pushing up borrowing costs globally

Government efforts to stoke growth have been lacklustre, even with an election looming on November 7 that is sure to be dominated by voter dissatisfaction over the economy. Prime Minister Christopher Luxon has offered little aimed at reviving the labour market, which is still reeling from waves of public sector layoffs last year.

Real estate projects have frozen, with the market hobbled by a glut of supply and few buyers.

In Auckland, a 56-storey residential tower called Seascape - meant to be New Zealand's tallest building - may never be completed with developer Shundi Customs placed in receivership this month.

At an apartment project in Wellington named One Tasman, which was launched in 2021 and due to be completed in early 2025, the existing building on the site had been cordoned off but had yet to be demolished when Reuters visited last month. Repeated calls to developer Willis Bond's office did not go through, while interview requests to company executives on LinkedIn were ignored.

"Launching in 2021 when the market was as hot as it could be, it's a challenge for any developer to bring something to the market ... because the market turned very shortly after 2021," said Tamba Carleton, director of residential research at CBRE. "Quite a few other projects were in that situation, where they just had to go back to the drawing board until market cycle timing was more supportive."

New Zealand's housing malaise has been exacerbated by a wave of affluent New Zealanders opting to leave the country for better economic conditions elsewhere. Statistics New Zealand estimated the country lost 40,000 citizens last year alone, with more than 60% of them moving to Australia, building on two years of similar outflows. Former New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern's recent move to Sydney has become a symbol of the problem.

"Because thousands of Wellingtonians have left the area, the supply-and-demand seesaw has completely changed," said Brian Ellis, a 59-year-old retiree, who recently sold his inner city apartment for a price well below his expectations. "It's literally made a half-million-dollar difference to how much money I'm going to have to enjoy my retirement."

Meanwhile, former project manager David Laing said he had considered a move to Australia but ultimately decided against it because his wife has stable employment in Wellington.

Since being laid off 18 months ago, Laing says he has received only a handful of interviews from hundreds of job applications. "We've cut anything that's not non-discretionary out of our budget," he said. "From a financial perspective, it definitely feels like the household is going backwards." - Reuters



Conflict, contracts and uncertainty: Why force majeure clauses matter more than ever



By Matthew Williams
Doha

When conflict erupts, the first disruptions are often measured not only in geopolitical headlines but also in legal notices. Within just two days of the current crisis in the Middle East, contractors involved in major infrastructure projects in Qatar had begun issuing and receiving force majeure notices.

This rapid response reflects a deeper reality about doing business in a region impacted by global politics. Large-scale infrastructure projects, from transport networks to energy facilities, are often planned years in advance and involve billions of dollars in investment. Yet geopolitical events can change the operating environment overnight. When they do, one contractual mechanism quickly moves from the fine print to the forefront: force majeure.

The term 'force majeure,' meaning 'superior force,' originates in French civil law but has become a standard feature in international construction contracts. It allows a party to suspend or avoid certain contractual obligations when extraordinary events beyond its control, such as war, natural disasters or terrorism, prevent performance.

For contractors and developers operating in the Middle East today, reviewing these provisions is not merely a legal technicality. It is an urgent commercial necessity. In the absence of an explicit force majeure clause, parties may find themselves with limited protection when external events disrupt their ability to perform a contract.

Under English common law, for example, the doctrine of frustration may excuse performance if an unforeseen event fundamentally changes the nature of the contract. However, this doctrine applies only in narrow circumstances. By contrast, the Qatar Civil Code expressly recognises the concept of force majeure under Article 188. Even so, most construction contracts include their own detailed force majeure provisions to clarify how risk will be allocated when extraordinary events occur.

At the heart of every force majeure clause lies a definition of what qualifies as a force majeure event. Some contracts adopt a broad formulation, referring to

any event beyond the reasonable control of the affected party. Others rely on more detailed lists of qualifying events such as war, floods, earthquakes, or terrorist attacks. Both approaches have advantages and risks.

A narrowly drafted list may fail to capture unforeseen crises, leaving parties exposed if a disruption falls outside the specified categories. On the other hand, overly broad definitions can create uncertainty about when the clause should legitimately apply. As a result, many modern construction contracts combine the two approaches: listing anticipated events while also including broader 'catch-all' language to capture similar circumstances that the parties may not have predicted. But identifying a qualifying event is only the first step.

To rely on force majeure, a party must usually demonstrate several key elements. The event must have prevented, hindered, or delayed performance of contractual obligations. It must be beyond the party's control. And the party must show that it could not reasonably have avoided or mitigated the consequences. This last requirement is particularly important.

Force majeure is not a remedy for commercial inconvenience. A contractor cannot rely on the clause simply because a project has become more expensive or

difficult. Courts and arbitral tribunals will typically expect evidence that reasonable steps were taken to mitigate the impact of the disruption.

Equally critical are the procedural requirements contained in most contracts. Force majeure clauses usually require the affected party to notify its counterparty within a specified timeframe. These notices must explain the nature of the event and how it is preventing performance. In practical terms, this means that failing to comply with the notice requirements, even during a crisis, may prevent a party from relying on force majeure at all. In fast-moving situations such as regional conflict, this can create significant legal risk.

When properly invoked, the most common consequence of force majeure is the temporary suspension of contractual obligations. In effect, the contract is paused while the disruptive event continues to prevent performance. If the disruption persists for a prolonged period, however, termination may follow.

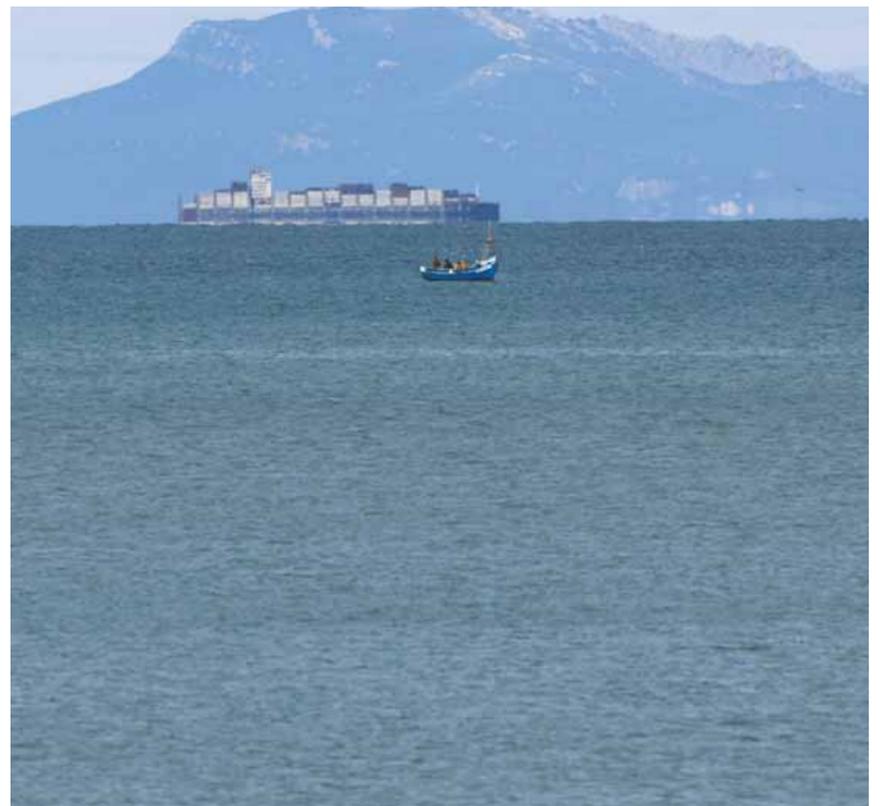
Many construction contracts allow either party to terminate the agreement after six to twelve months of sustained force majeure. In those circumstances, contractors are typically paid for work completed and may recover certain costs, such as demobilisation expenses, but

they rarely receive compensation for lost profits. These scenarios frequently give rise to disputes, particularly regarding the valuation of completed work and the costs incurred before termination, so careful documentation of project progress and costs can be critical evidence if disagreements later arise.

The current regional crisis serves as a stark reminder that even the most carefully negotiated contracts operate within a broader geopolitical environment. Infrastructure development across the Middle East continues to accelerate, but global tensions mean that disruption can never be entirely ruled out.

In this context, force majeure clauses are far more than standard boilerplate. They are essential tools for managing risk in an unpredictable world. For companies operating in the region's construction sector, understanding how these clauses work, and ensuring they are drafted and invoked correctly, may ultimately determine whether a crisis results in a manageable delay or a costly legal dispute.

● Matthew Williams is Counsel at Crowell & Moring in Doha. With more than a decade of experience in Qatar, he advises on construction, project finance and arbitration matters across the region.



The current regional crisis serves as a stark reminder that even the most carefully negotiated contracts operate within a broader geopolitical environment. Infrastructure development across the Middle East continues to accelerate, but global tensions mean that disruption can never be entirely ruled out. (Reuters)

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Qatar's ambassador participates in Indian FM's meeting with GCC envoys



Qatar ambassador to India Mohammed bin Hassan Jaber al-Jaber participated in the meeting of Minister of External Affairs of the Republic of India Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Their Excellencies the GCC ambassadors, accredited to India. The meeting discussed co-operation relations, along with regional developments. (QNA)

Qatar's envoy partakes in Uzbek meeting



Ambassador of Qatar to Uzbekistan Hassan bin Hamza Hashim participated yesterday in the meeting of First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan Bakhromjon Aloyev with their Excellencies heads of diplomatic missions of the State of Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the State of Kuwait, accredited to Uzbekistan. The meeting discussed co-operation relations. (QNA)

Pakistan vows to 'eradicate terrorism' as Afghan truce nears end

AFP
Islamabad

Pakistan's foreign minister said yesterday that the country remains committed to "eradicating the menace of terrorism", as the clock ticked down to the end of a temporary ceasefire with Afghanistan.

Both countries last Wednesday announced a halt to weeks of hostilities for the Eid al-Fitr holiday marking the end of Ramadan, agreeing to a temporary ceasefire until midnight yesterday.

But in a message to mark Pakistan Day, a national holiday, Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar indicated that the country's approach to the conflict had not changed.

"Pakistan remains firmly committed to eradicate the menace of terrorism," he said in a statement. "Pakistan's actions inside Afghanistan... are directed towards this goal."

On Sunday, the Taliban government and a medical source said one person was killed by a mortar shell fired by Pakistan in the east-

ern border province of Kunar. Afghanistan and Pakistan have been locked in conflict for months over claims from Islamabad that Kabul is harbouring extremists behind cross-border attacks on its territory.

The Taliban authorities deny the claim.

In his own Pakistan Day message, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif yesterday said military action inside Afghanistan was "a symbol of our national resolve against terrorism".

"We will not allow any harm to the peace and security of our country," he added.

The Eid truce came after a Pakistani strike on a drug rehabilitation centre in Kabul last Monday, which Afghan authorities said killed more than 400.

The Norwegian Refugee Council, an international NGO, said the following day that "hundreds" were killed and injured.

Interior ministry spokesman Abdul Mateen Qani told AFP yesterday that identification of the bodies was still ongoing and new funerals were expected to take

place in the coming days.

About 50 bodies were buried in a mass grave in Kabul last Wednesday.

On Saturday, the Afghan Health Ministry called on families to contact the forensic medicine department to help identify "dozens of bodies".

The UN assistance mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) yesterday said preliminary figures from their investigation indicated that there were 143 killed and 119 wounded.

But a spokesperson told AFP the toll was likely to increase, with the process slowed by difficulties in identifying some bodies.

According to a UN toll last Tuesday, not taking into account the drug rehabilitation centre strike, at least 76 Afghan civilians have been killed in the fighting since it intensified on February 26.

More than 115,000 people have been displaced in Afghanistan, it added.

"The calls for a ceasefire continue... China has offered to mediate and the Secretary General has said that he would support such a mediation," the UNAMA spokesperson said.

Ukraine hits major Russian oil port

AFP
Moscow

Ukraine fired drones at a key Russian oil port near the Finnish border yesterday, both Moscow and Kyiv said, triggering a huge fire at the facility.

Satellite images showed flames and thick plumes of black smoke rising into the air from the oil terminal in the Russian town of Primorsk, which sits on the Gulf of Finland and is about 50 kilometres (30 miles) from the EU and Nato member.

Russia has been pummeling Ukraine with near-daily air strikes, repeatedly hitting its energy infrastructure and triggering blackouts that plunged millions into cold and darkness during the winter months.

Ukraine has retaliated by launching drone attacks at Russia, mainly at Moscow's energy and military facilities.

"A fuel tank was damaged in the port of Primorsk, causing a fire," said Alexander Drozdenko, governor of Russia's western Leningrad region.

Drozdenko said Russian air defence systems had destroyed more



This handout satellite image taken yesterday by Planet Labs PBC shows smoke rising from the Russian oil terminal at Primorsk, the most important Russian loading port in the Baltic Sea, following a drone attack claimed by Ukraine. (AFP)

than 70 drones over the region, which has not been a main front in Russia's war with Ukraine.

The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine said it had "struck key fuel and energy infrastructure facilities in the Russian Federation", including at Primorsk. "According to preliminary information, both the tank farm and the oil loading infrastructure were hit," the General Staff said on social media yesterday.

The satellite images appeared

to show fires and smoke rising from several cylindrical fuel tanks at the site.

Ukraine said Primorsk handles approximately 60mn tonnes of oil per year.

"The aggressor country uses the proceeds from oil sales to continue the war against Ukraine," it added. The General Staff also claimed a hit on an oil refinery in the central Russian city of Ufa, around 1,400 kilometres (870 miles) from the front line.

Italian voters reject Meloni's reforms in referendum blow

AFP
Rome

Italians inflicted the first major blow against Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni by rejecting her justice reforms in a referendum, results showed yesterday - but she insisted she was going nowhere.

With almost all votes counted, the result from Sunday and yesterday's constitutional referendum put the "No" camp at around 53.5 percent, and "Yes" at around 46.5 percent, with a higher-than-expected turnout of almost 59 percent.

"The Italians have decided. And we respect this decision," Meloni wrote on X.

But this "does not change our commitment to continue, with seriousness and determination, to work for the good of the nation and to honour the mandate entrusted to us".

Meloni, the head of the far-right Brothers of Italy party, has led an uncharacteristically stable government since taking office in October 2022.

During the referendum campaign, she repeatedly said that the vote - which concerned the role and oversight of judges and pros-



Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni leaves after voting in a referendum on reforms to Italy's justice system, before the polls close, in Rome, yesterday. (Reuters)

ecutors - was not about her own leadership.

But she campaigned hard for the proposals, alongside her coalition partners in the hard-right government, while the opposition parties had fought for a "No".

Daniele Albertazzi, a professor of politics at the UK's University of Surrey told AFP it was a "bad, bad result" for Meloni.

"It means she has lost the Italian electorate on a major issue in her manifesto, and one of the key proposals of the right... for the past 30 years," he said.

The latest opinion polls before

the referendum put her party top at 28 or 29 percent of support, and Albertazzi stressed there was no risk of her government falling.

But "if the centre-left gets its act together, this is going to help them" in parliamentary elections due next year, he said.

"Because it means that her image as unbeatable is not there any more."

The referendum aimed to separate the roles of judges and prosecutors and change their oversight body, a measure sold by the government as necessary to ensure impartiality in the courts.

But critics said it was an attempt to exert more control over independent judges, whose decisions Meloni's ministers have often attacked in public, particularly over migration.

They also argued it failed to address the real challenges facing Italy's dysfunctional justice system, from years-long trials and huge case backlogs to prison overcrowding.

The reform's complexity and the rhetoric surrounding the campaign meant that for some, the referendum became a vote on the prime minister herself.

"Meloni will certainly emerge weakened," Lorenzo Castellani, professor of politics at Rome's Luiss university, told AFP.

Elly Schlein, leader of the centre-left Democratic Party, gathered supporters in Rome to celebrate the defeat of a "damaging" and badly written reform of Italy's cherished post-war constitution.

She said the vote sent a "clear political message" ahead of next year's elections: "The country is demanding an alternative, and we have a responsibility to organise it."

Former prime minister Giuseppe Conte, the leader of the Five Star Movement, said the referendum was "an eviction notice for this government after four years".

'In Iceland's interest' to restart talks on joining EU, minister says

A vote in favour of resuming long-stalled talks on joining the European Union would be "in Iceland's interest", the Nordic island nation's top diplomat said yesterday. Icelanders are set to go to the polls on August 29 for a referendum on whether to restart negotiations on joining the European Union, which have been officially suspended since 2015. "In my point of view is in Iceland's interest... to say 'yes' to see what kind of agreement we can reach with the European Union," Foreign Minister Thorgerdur Katrin Gunnarsdottir told a press conference in Lisbon. Should the "yes" vote triumph

- and the government reach an agreement with the EU after that - "then we will hold another referendum" on becoming the bloc's 28th member, Gunnarsdottir added. The foreign minister argued that closer ties with the EU were necessary given "the current geopolitical context", overshadowed by US President Donald Trump's increasing ambitions in the Arctic and his desire to take over neighbouring Greenland. "It is so important to be among like-minded countries that share the same values when it comes to democracy, when it comes to freedom, when it comes to human rights," Gunnarsdottir said. (AFP)

Rescue launched for whale stranded on German coast

Efforts are underway to rescue a whale which was spotted stranded on Germany's northern Baltic Sea coast early yesterday morning. A police spokesman said that the massive marine mammal was first sighted at around 1:50am (0050 GMT) near Niendorf in the state of Schleswig-Holstein. Initial signs are that it is a humpback whale. Attempts to rescue the mammal were made throughout the day, including by using boats to generate waves to help the whale return to deeper water. While these failed, the rescuers did manage to partially free the whale from the netting that had become wrapped around its body.

The police set up barriers on land and used boats on the water to ensure that the whale was not disturbed by onlookers. Local media report that alongside the police and fire brigade, the state's Environment Minister Tobias Goldschmidt and wildlife experts had gone to assist the rescue. The NDR broadcaster said that the whale could be heard periodically making "deep, muffled" sounds and that it appeared weak. It is possible that the stranded animal is the same whale that became entangled in a fishing net further east along Germany's Baltic Sea coast just under two weeks ago. (AFP)

Lithuania probes drone crash near Belarus border

AFP
Vilnius

Lithuanian authorities said yesterday they are investigating the crash of an unidentified drone near the country's border with Belarus, Russia's ally in the war against Ukraine.

The drone came down in a lake near the southern city of Varena, around 30 kilometres (20 miles) from the border, without causing any reported casualties or damage.

A spokesman for the Baltic country's armed forces, Gintautas Ciunis, told journalists "the working theory" is that the drone came from Belarus. It was not detected on the country's radar.

Video published on social media and LRT state television recorded what sounded like a drone and showed a subse-

quent blast occurring.

One resident who filmed the scene, Vytautas Labednykas, told LRT the drone woke him just after 3:00am (0100 GMT) by flying very low over his house. "The explosion was so strong that the windows shook," he said.

Two drones previously entered Lithuanian airspace in July 2025 - one of them armed - after apparently deviating their flight trajectories during Russian attacks on Ukraine.

Similar drone incidents have happened in fellow European Union countries Romania and Poland, and also in Moldova.

Ciunis said Lithuania deploys air defence units from close to the capital Vilnius, but they do not cover the region of the drone crash.

Lithuanian Prime Minister Inga Ruginiene called an emergency security meeting for today.

Bosnian truckers blocked EU freight terminals for a day over visa rules

Bosnian truck drivers blockaded two freight terminals on the border with EU member Croatia yesterday in a one-day protest over visa rules limiting their time in the bloc.

The EU has since October been rolling out its long-delayed Entry/Exit System (EES), which Balkan drivers consider "discriminatory" because it subjects them to the same 90-days-in-180 rule as tourists.

"Our work has been made administratively impossible," Hidajet Muratovic, one of the protest organisers, told AFP at the Orasje crossing.

The blockades were lifted late yesterday, after drivers were promised talks with Bosnian authorities tomorrow to discuss possible solutions.

The rollout, due to take full effect on April 10, has led to stricter checks, with many drivers now being turned back at the border with Croatia, which joined the EU in 2013.

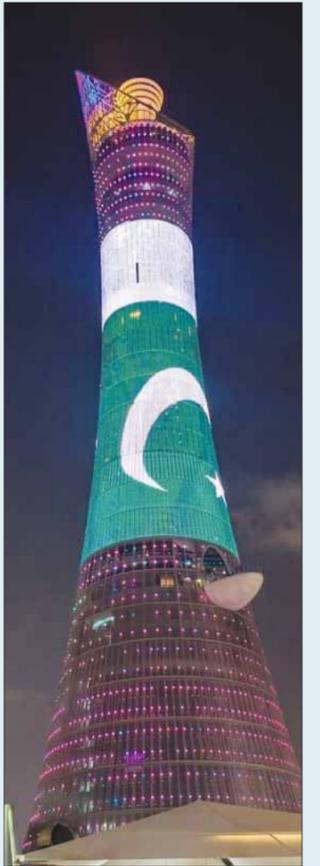
"In March alone, we had more than 200 drivers turned back at the Croatian border," trucker Atif Hadzidedic said during the blockade at the Svilaj crossing.

In late January, hundreds of truck drivers from several Balkan countries staged days-long blockades at multiple terminals to protest the EES rollout.

The blockades in Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia were lifted after talks were announced in Brussels, but those discussions have yet to produce a decision. (AFP)

Pakistan embassy celebrates National Day

The Embassy of Pakistan in Qatar celebrated Pakistan Day yesterday highlighted by a flag-raising ceremony led by ambassador Muhammad Aamer. Another highlight was the reading of messages from President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar. Speaking at the event, the ambassador emphasised the historical significance of Pakistan's creation, stressing the importance of educating younger generations about the nation's origins, and noted that "our founding fathers' immense sacrifices represent a debt that today's generations must honour and repay." He also provided an overview of bilateral relations between Pakistan and Qatar, highlighting the cordial nature of the ties. He said further efforts were being undertaken consistently to add layers of substantive partnership between Pakistan and Qatar. He also thanked and appreciated the people and government of Qatar, especially His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani "for his continued support and hospitality extended to the Pakistani community and to Pakistan, year after year." The ambassador discussed the regional challenges arising from the current situation. The ceremony was attended only by the officials of the embassy and concluded with a pledge to continue working for the peace and prosperity of the nation in view of the instructions from the host authorities.



Qatar's healthcare system ensures continued medicine availability

By Shaima Sherif
Staff Reporter

Pharmacies in Qatar have confirmed stable medicine availability amid regional developments, reassuring residents that no shortages exist, while advising maintaining essential stock due to possible minor delays in shipments. They continue to operate normally with no shortages of medicines reported, despite ongoing regional developments, as healthcare professionals reassure residents about the strength and reliability of the country's pharmaceutical supply system.

A pharmacist here confirmed that medicine availability remains stable, noting that while minor delays may occur, there is no cause for concern. "There is no shortage of medications, all medications are available," the pharmacist said, adding that "there can be slight delays due to shipments, but overall, the system is reliable and strong."

The reassurance comes amid growing public awareness around preparedness, with some residents opting to ensure they have sufficient medication at home. However, experts emphasise that panic buying is unnecessary. "So far, pharmacies are not facing any issues. Everything is functioning normally, including home delivery



Pharmacies across the country continue to operate normally with no shortages of medicines reported.

services," the pharmacist noted.

Residents are being encouraged to maintain a reasonable supply of essential medications as a precautionary measure, particularly in light of potential logistical delays linked to cargo and shipments.

"People have been advised to check if they have at least one month of medication available. This is to stay prepared, not because there is a shortage," the pharmacist emphasised. The pharmacist also highlighted confidence in Qatar's healthcare system, which continues to ensure uninterrupted access to medicines: "The medical system is very reliable and well trusted. There is confidence that solutions will always be in place."

Qatar has, in recent years, strengthened its pharmaceutical sector by investing in local production and supply chain resilience, reducing reliance on imports and enhancing long-term sustainability in medicine availability. These efforts have contributed to maintaining stability even during periods of regional or global uncertainty.

Healthcare professionals advise residents to remain calm, follow official guidance, and avoid misinformation, noting that pharmacies are fully equipped to meet demand. While minor shipment delays may occur, the overall system continues to function efficiently, ensuring that residents have access to essential medications without disruption.

Community highlights remote learning pros and cons

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

Adapting remote learning in the light of the ongoing crisis in the region has been commended by the academic community at Qatar Foundation universities. They agree that it reflects resilience and commitment of the academic community while highlighting some of the major drawbacks of the programme. Dr Ali Sultan, associate dean, Foundational Sciences, Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar, said this approach has proven to be an effective solution under the current circumstances. "It has allowed teaching and learning to proceed without interruption while prioritising the safety and well-being of students, staff and faculty. The transition was relatively smooth, with most courses delivered efficiently through online platforms while maintaining a high standard of education," he noted. He said remote learning works well as a temporary or complementary approach. "Completing an entire academic year exclusively online may not provide the same educational experience as in-person instruction. In medical education, direct interaction with faculty, hands-on laboratory work, and clinical exposure at the hospitals and health centers are essential components that are more effectively delivered in a physical learning environment," he emphasised. According to Dr James Roach, associate dean for Premedical Education, Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar, lessons learned from the Covid-19 times



Radiyah Ahmed



Dr James Roach

have allowed the academic community to transition more effectively to remote delivery this time. "Additionally, necessary instructional software packages have added features that better facilitate both learning and evaluation. Our students have also adapted quickly to the new delivery modality. While the curricula can be delivered in a remote manner, it is better delivered onsite," he explained. Jannat Almazbek, a student of Georgetown University in Qatar stated that remote learning system is the best alternative to recreate the sense of community during these times. "One suggestion that I have for online classes is to increase engagement as much as possible. Some professors view active participation as consistent quizzing during the sessions, which can discourage speaking up. Including some light activities, such as Kahoots or using reactions/avatars to answer questions, could uplift the general mood and make classes more fun," she stated. She also pointed out that students should exert effort by showing up and being active in classes, without putting all of the pressure of engagement on the professors and teachers. Radiyah Ahmed, another student



Jannat Almazbek

from Georgetown University in Qatar, highlighted that remote learning is convenient in many ways: "It saves time because students don't have to commute every day and it makes classes more accessible since we can join from home. However, there is much less interaction with teachers and classmates, so students can feel isolated and less motivated." However, she believes that students spend too much time on screens, which can affect both their attention and their health. She added: "When learning is fully online, students also miss opportunities to develop important social and intellectual skills through real classroom interaction and group activities. "In my opinion, remote learning can be useful in some situations, but it should not replace in-person learning. A balanced mix of both systems would probably work better."

3-2-1 Qatar Olympic Museum displays 23,000 related objects

Acquisition collections are the lifeblood of any museum, as they give it real value and transform it into a living platform that preserves memory and tells the stories behind achievements, according to Abdulla Yousef al-Mulla, director of the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum.

He explained that every object in the museum carries both historical and human significance, reflecting the journey of sport and its development over time.

Al-Mulla noted that the museum has succeeded in building a rich and diverse collection through its donations and loans project, which has attracted thousands of items from athletes, champions, and institutions in Qatar and abroad. The museum now holds 23,000 objects, a substantial portion of which have been donated or loaned by sports figures, champions, and international institutions. This diversity of exhibits documents the Qatari sporting achievements and extends to the history of the global sports movement, reinforcing the museum's standing as a cultural institution with an international dimension.

Al-Mulla said these collections



Abdulla Yousef al-Mulla.

open broad opportunities for visitors, especially students and researchers, to access reliable historical sources and gain a deeper understanding of the development of sport in Qatar and the region. He further stressed the importance of depositing memorabilia in the museum to protect it from loss or damage and to ensure that it remains a living witness capable of inspiring future generations and strengthening awareness of the value of sporting heritage.

Al-Mulla noted that at the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum, its collection does more than narrate the history of sport, as it documents the achievements of individuals and the nation, while turning the museum into an educational and cultural platform that



reflects the evolution of sport in Qatar and its global presence.

He highlighted that the largest group of donors includes many Qatari, resident, and international athletes, Arab and international sporting personalities, and sports institutions and global museums. The museum works with champions from several Arab countries, stretching from North Africa to the Levant, and holds memorabilia linked to leading Olympic figures from around the world, reflecting its vision as a global institution connected to the international history of sport rather than one confined to a purely local narrative.

Regarding the types of items accepted, he explained that the museum receives a wide collection connected to sporting achievements, from medals, trophies,



and certificates to sportswear, equipment, and rare memorabilia, with each piece telling a story that marks an important stage or achievement in sporting history.

Among the most notable items are Qatar's first silver medal from the inaugural School Games in Kuwait in 1963, a medal from a championship hosted by Qatar in 1981 for the Middle East Liaison Center, original Olympic torches from different editions ranging from Berlin 1936 to Paris 2024, the original ball from the 1888 FA Cup Final, and the glove of world boxing legend Muhammad Ali, which he used on his way to winning gold at the 1960 Rome Olympics.

Al-Mulla confirmed that safeguarding the collection is a top priority, as all items are registered through official contracts, insured according to the financial value



determined by their owners, and subjected to conservation and restoration processes in line with the highest international museum standards.

The museum has a specialised team capable of handling delicate and fragile items, whether old textiles or rare materials, while the names of donors and lenders are displayed in the exhibition halls to ensure recognition and preserve their rights. He noted the public benefit of these donations lies in giving visitors access to rare items that might otherwise have remained private or hidden in storage, enabling students, researchers, and museum enthusiasts in particular to consult reliable historical materials that deepen their

understanding of the evolution of sport in Qatar and the region.

In this way, the museum functions as a vibrant cultural and educational centre that not only exhibits objects but also helps build awareness and inspire future generations, al-Mulla said.

He further explained that many valuable items have been lost over time through neglect, after the death of their owners, or because their historical importance was not recognised, and for this reason the museum encourages owners to deposit their collections so they can be preserved, documented, and made accessible to future generations rather than left in closed storage or exposed to deterioration over time.