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Rainwater reflects the illuminated Fanar Islamic Cultural Centre as heavy downpour and thunderstorms swept across Qatar, disrupting traffic and daily routines whilst authorities urged caution amid continuing unstable weather conditions. **PICTURE:** Noushad Thekkayil

## Iranian attacks on Gulf states cross all red lines: GCC chief

GT Report

Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) Secretary-General Jassem Mohamed Al-Budaiwi yesterday strongly condemned Iran's ongoing military aggression against GCC member states, declaring that Tehran has "crossed all red lines" and "crossed all limits" with its blatant and escalatory actions.

Speaking at a press briefing in Riyadh, Al-Budaiwi said Iran directed more than 85% of its recent missile and drone attacks toward Gulf countries, purposefully targeting civilian and critical infrastructure sites including hotels, embassies, water facilities, airports, and energy installations across the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait. These strikes have resulted in civilian deaths and significant damage, he added.

"Iran is purposefully targeting and launching direct attacks at the GCC countries," Al-Budaiwi stated. He described the aggression as "not just another escalation" but "a dangerous turning point" and "a change in the relationship and situation between Iran and the GCC countries."

The GCC chief also condemned Iranian actions in the Strait of Hormuz, including the closure of the vital waterway and the imposition of transit fees on vessels for safe passage, calling them clear violations of international law and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

He warned of severe long-term



consequences for global economic growth, energy security, and international trade, noting the region's critical role in oil exports.

Despite the severity of the threats, Al-Budaiwi emphasised the GCC's commitment to restraint and diplomacy. He revealed that Gulf states have directly informed Iran they will not allow their territories to be used to attack it and do not wish to become a party to the wider conflict.

At the same time, he affirmed that GCC member states "reserve the right to respond" and are "studying all options" to safeguard their sovereignty and security, in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter.

Al-Budaiwi welcomed the unanimous adoption by the UN Human Rights Council on March 25 of a resolution on the "Effects of the Recent Military Aggression Launched by Iran," describing it as an international rejection of the attacks on GCC territories and Jordan. **To Page 2**

## Heavy rains, gusty winds countrywide

By Joey Aguilar  
Staff Reporter

Heavy rains and thunderstorms swept across much of the country yesterday, bringing moderate to intense downpours, strong winds, and reduced visibility that disrupted daily routines and slowed traffic in several areas.

Commuters and motorists were among the most affected, with many slowing down and exercising extra caution due to the rapidly changing conditions.

The Qatar Meteorology Department said the unstable weather is likely to continue until

### MoI issues safety warnings, urges caution as storm affects daily life

early today. In its daily report, it said that conditions inshore until 6am today will be hazy to cloudy, with periods of moderate to heavy rain and possible thunderstorms, along with poor visibility and strong winds.

The department cautioned that reduced visibility at sea, combined with gusty winds, could pose risks to maritime operations. Offshore winds are forecast to be slightly stronger, blowing at 20 to 30 knots and gusting to similar peak levels during thundery rain.

Despite the intensity of the weather, officials stressed that the current conditions are part of a known seasonal pattern. In a Qatar News Agency report, Meteorology Department director Abdullah Mohammed al-Mannai said the disturbances are linked to "Al Sarayat," a transitional weather phenomenon typical at the end of winter.

Al-Mannai explained that Al Sarayat usually begins in the final third of March and can extend until mid-May. It is marked by the

rapid formation of cumulonimbus clouds over short periods, leading to sudden thunderstorms that may be heavy and are often accompanied by strong downdrafts capable of stirring dust in localised areas.

He said the term "Al Sarayat" reflects the phenomenon's intermittent nature, which frequently occurs in the evening and late at night. The pattern, he noted, is well documented in Qatar's climate and does not pose any unusual cause for concern.

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) issued a series of safety guidelines, urging the public to remain cautious and follow official advice amid the unstable weather. **To Page 12**

## Deputy PM, EU official mull defence ties



HE the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Affairs Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman bin Hassan al-Thani met with European Union Special Representative for the Gulf region Luigi Di Maio, during his visit to the country. They reviewed the latest regional security developments and discussed avenues for defence co-operation and joint co-ordination in light of the current circumstances. **(QNA)**

## Qatar Airways expands flight schedule

As the situation in the region continues to evolve, Qatar Airways is steadily working to restore and expand its operations. The airline has released an updated schedule – valid through April 15, 2026 – adding more frequencies across a network of over 90 destinations worldwide, offering some reassurance to travellers navigating an uncertain period. All flights continue to operate through dedicated corridors

developed in co-ordination with the Qatar Civil Aviation Authority. Passengers with existing bookings to affected destinations will be notified of any changes and are encouraged to keep their contact details current on the airline's website or app. The airline is also urging travellers not to head to the airport unless they hold a confirmed, valid ticket, as schedules remain subject to change on short notice. For those with confirmed bookings

between February 28 and June 15, 2026, Qatar Airways is offering flexibility options: either a free date change to any travel date up to October 31, 2026 – subject to availability – or a full refund of the unused ticket value, which may take up to 28 days to process. The airline stressed that despite the operational challenges it is navigating, getting passengers safely to their destinations remains its central commitment. **(QNA)**

## With Hormuz still shut, options market hints at risk of \$150 oil

Reuters  
London

Traders are piling into oil options betting Brent crude will surge to an all-time high of at least \$150 a barrel by the end of April, as the war in the Middle East continues to choke supplies through the Strait of Hormuz.

Brent, which is currently trading around \$107 a barrel for May, has shot up nearly 50% since February 28, when the US-Israeli war against Iran broke out, effectively blocking oil transit through the Strait of Hormuz. Prices remain volatile despite tentative signs that Washington and Tehran are looking for a way to end the conflict. Options trades in the derivatives market show bets have risen tenfold in the last few weeks on oil hitting at least \$150 a barrel by the end of April, as traders position themselves for near-term volatility. That would surpass Brent's record high of \$147 a barrel set in 2008, when booming demand strained supply capacity.

Data from ICE shows ownership of the contracts which expire at the end of April and give the holder the option to buy June Brent futures at \$150 – known as call options – is almost 10 times larger than it was a month ago. "These calls are clear signs that investors see tail risk outcomes to the current conflict and are increasingly trying to manage those outcomes," Tim Skirrow, head of derivatives and energy at Energy Aspects, said. "\$150 a barrel oil will certainly cause a demand shock but as long as oil cannot flow out of the Gulf there will be risks of outright shortages."

Open interest for April expiry \$150 call options has risen to 28,941 lots, each representing 1,000 barrels of oil. Based on the current crude price, that would equal nearly \$3 billion worth of crude. A month ago, there were just 3,374 lots in open interest for \$150 calls. The data did not show how many investors are holding these options, nor was their identity clear.



### Upbeat Trump puts off Iran strikes until April 6

US President Donald Trump said yesterday he would not yet strike Iranian power plants as previously threatened after a request from the government in Tehran, and added that talks with it were "going very well." "As per Iranian Government request, please let this statement serve to represent that I am pausing the period of Energy Plant destruction by 10 Days to Monday, April 6, 2026, at 8 P.M., Eastern Time," Trump said on his Truth Social platform. "Talks are ongoing and, despite erroneous statements to the contrary by the Fake News Media, and others, they are going very well." – **AFP**

## Al-Khulaifi, al-Ansari meet top EU official

**H**E the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi met yesterday with the European Union (EU) Special Representative for the Gulf Region Luigi Di Maio, who is currently visiting the country.

Adviser to the Prime Minister and Official Spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Majid bin Mohammed al-Ansari also held a meeting yesterday with Di Maio.

The meetings discussed the developments of the military escalation in the region and its serious repercussions on regional and international security and stability.

Also discussed were ways to resolve all disputes by peaceful means, in addition to ways to enhance joint co-operation under the current circumstances.

Di Maio expressed his solidarity with Qatar following the repeated attacks on its sovereignty, noting the importance of consolidating security and stability in the region. - QNA



## Qatar participates in meeting of GCC transport ministers

**Q**atar participated in the 28th extraordinary meeting of the Committee of Transport Ministers of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states, held via videoconferencing.

Qatar was represented by HE the Minister of Transport Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Thani.

During the meeting, the GCC transportation ministers in attendance discussed the current regional situation and its impact on supply chains, and agreed on several recommendations to enhance the sustainability of land and maritime transportation industries in their countries.

They aim to ensure the continuity of supply chains and trade flow amid the current situation in the region.

The recommendations included adopting exceptional and flexible procedures to facilitate land transportation and address the urgent challenges that can impede its smooth flow.

They also included applying seamless procedures at ports located outside the Strait of Hormuz for goods destined for the GCC countries, activating green corridors, and enhancing the efficiency of logistic connectivity between these ports and logistic hubs in the GCC countries by improving the readiness of land ports and facilitating the movement of trucks crossing borders.

The ministers also recommended allocating prioritised logistic routes for goods and essential commodities arriving through alternative ports.

Additionally, it's been agreed to form a permanent taskforce of representatives from port authorities, land transportation and customs authorities, along with the General Secretariat of the GCC, to monitor the work progress on this alternative plan. - QNA



HE the Minister of Transport Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Thani

## Jamaica governor-general receives credentials of Qatar's ambassador

**J**amaica's Governor-General Dr Patrick Linton Allen has received the credentials of Tariq Othman al-Othman as extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador of Qatar (non-resident) to Jamaica.

The ambassador conveyed the greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to the governor-general, along with wishes for good health and happiness, and for continued progress and prosperity for the government and people of Jamaica.

Dr Allen entrusted the ambassador with his greetings to His Highness the Amir, wishing him good health and happiness, and Qatar continued progress and development. - QNA



Sheikha Shaikha bint Jassim al-Thani

## Qatar joins Arab Social Affairs Ministers Council meeting

**Q**atar participated in the extraordinary session of the Council of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs's Executive Bureau, held yesterday via videoconference, to discuss developments in the social and humanitarian situation in Palestine and Lebanon amid escalating developments and inhumane practices by the Israeli entity.

Qatar was represented at the meeting by the assistant undersecretary for Family Affairs at the Ministry of Social Development and Family, Sheikha Shaikha bint Jassim al-Thani, as part of the country's commitment to supporting joint Arab action and enhancing co-ordination on priority social and humanitarian issues, as well as its continued support for Arab initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable social development and strengthening solidarity among Arab states.

The meeting was chaired by Egypt's Minister of Social Solidarity Maya Morsy, who is also chair of the Executive Bureau.

Participants reviewed the latest social and humanitarian developments in Palestine and Lebanon, as well as the urgent needs of affected groups.

They discussed ways to enhance joint Arab co-ordination to support humanitarian and social efforts.

Following the meeting, the Executive Bureau issued several decisions aimed at providing the necessary support to Palestine and Lebanon, and tasked the League of Arab States General Secretariat, in its capacity as the technical secretariat of the council, to co-ordinate with Egypt, as chair of the Executive Bureau, to take the necessary measures to implement these decisions and contribute to improving social conditions in both countries.

The bureau also commended the efforts of Arab states in providing various forms of social and humanitarian support, stressing the significance of continued joint action to address current challenges. - QNA

## MoPH issues guidelines for heavy rain, thunderstorms

**T**he Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) has issued guidelines for periods of heavy rainfall and thunderstorms, urging residents to remain indoors and avoid going out except when absolutely necessary.

The ministry advised the public to closely monitor weather updates and follow instructions issued by official authorities.

It strongly warned against walking or swimming in floodwaters to prevent exposure to contaminants and harmful microbes.

The MoPH also cautioned against touching metal objects in open areas during thunderstorms and stressed the importance of drying damp areas inside homes to prevent mould growth.

Residents are urged to ensure food safety and discard any items that may have been exposed to flood or rainwater.

The ministry highlighted the need to keep drinking water tanks securely covered at all times, recommending disinfection with chlorine and thorough cleaning if any change in water taste or colour is detected.

Additionally, it called for the prompt removal of stagnant water inside or around homes to prevent the spread of insects and pests, and emphasised the importance of regular handwashing and personal hygiene, particularly after contact with floodwater. - QNA

**Ministry of Public Health Issues Guidelines for Heavy Rain and Thunderstorms**

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- Called for the prompt removal of standing water inside or around homes to prevent the spread of insects and pests
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Advised the public to closely monitor weather updates and follow instructions issued by official authorities

## Qatar Foundation wins Family-Friendly Institutions Award 2025 for innovation

**T**he Qatar Foundation for Social Work (QF) won the Family-Friendly Institutions Award for 2025, granted by the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States, in recognition of its efforts in technological innovation supporting families and in developing services to enhance their efficiency and sustainability.

This achievement reflects the foundation's approach

to improving its services and adopting digital solutions that facilitate access for target groups and increase service efficiency, in line with community needs and the objectives of Qatar National Vision 2030.

QF chief executive Rashid Mohammed al-Hamda al-Nuaimi said that this recognition represents the outcome of joint efforts between the foundation and its affiliated centres, and reflects its com-

mitment to enhancing services and expanding their impact through innovation.

He said that the foundation will continue to develop its programmes and initiatives to improve service quality and broaden access.

The award represents an important addition to the foundation's track record in supporting families and strengthening their vital role in society.

It also reflects regional rec-

ognition of its efforts in leveraging technological innovation to improve and enhance the efficiency of family services.

The foundation had previously won the Child-Friendly Institutions Award in 2023, in recognition of its efforts to protect the institution of family and marriage from contemporary challenges, highlighting its continued excellence and institutional development. - QNA

## Iranian attacks on Gulf states cross all red lines, says GCC chief

From Page 1

Al-Budaiwi called for the active involvement of GCC countries in any future talks or agreements between the United States and Iran aimed at resolving the crisis, warning that their exclusion could undermine regional stability.

The GCC chief reiterated the bloc's consistent preference for diplomatic solutions while asserting its role

as a cornerstone of regional and global energy stability.

In the same remarks, al-Budaiwi reiterated the GCC's earlier condemnation of Israel's June 2025 strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

He noted that the bloc had promptly convened an extraordinary meeting, condemned the targeting of nuclear sites as a violation of international law and stressed the need for diplomacy, warning of serious risks to human life and the environment.

## Ban on sheep grazing

**T**he Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC) has called on livestock and farm owners yesterday to prevent grazing for sheep and goats following the recent rainfall, noting that restricting grazing during this period helps renew the growth cycle of plants and trees in the natural environment.

A statement from the ministry that was posted on X said that rainfall contributes to the revival of vegetation cover and the regeneration of life in the desert, which requires collective efforts to preserve these natural resources and avoid harming them by adhering to approved environmental guidelines. - QNA

## Ministry of Justice takes part in Paris Arbitration Week 2026

**T**he Ministry of Justice (MoJ), represented by the Arbitration Affairs Department, participated virtually in the "Institutions Symposium: Asia-Middle East Arbitration Corridor", held as part of Paris Arbitration Week 2026, where it highlighted key legislative and regulatory developments in Qatar's arbitration sector.

Representing the MoJ at the event, Arbitration Affairs Department director Dr Maryam Mohammed al-Kuwari presented an overview of the country's legislative and regulatory framework, emphasising the consolidation of "enforcement certainty" standards through the modernisation of relevant laws and the enhancement of enforcement mechanisms, ensuring that arbitral awards are executed in accordance with established legal safeguards.

She explained that Judicial Enforcement Law No. (4) of 2024 has strengthened the effectiveness of enforcing arbitration awards, particularly by recognising them as expedited, enforceable instruments.

This, Dr al-Kuwari said, grants them the same enforceability as final court judgments, helping streamline procedures and ensure the effective execution of awards issued by arbitration panels.

In this context, the ministry reviewed its efforts to develop the national arbitration system, including drafting and updating relevant legislation, overseeing the registration of arbitrators, licensing arbitration centres, and strengthening governance and institutional transparency requirements.

Dr al-Kuwari said that these efforts contribute to improving dispute resolution efficiency and enhancing the business environment.

The ministry addressed key features of two draft ministerial decisions concerning the registration of arbitrators and the licensing of arbitration centres.

These aim to regulate professional practice, establish clear registration standards, and organise the operations of arbitration centres within the country, thereby promoting professional competence and institutional compliance in the sector.

Dr al-Kuwari also touched upon the MoJ's direction toward adopting modern technologies within the justice system, including responsible artificial intelligence (AI) applications, to enhance procedural efficiency and service quality, while ensuring human accountability, legal accuracy, and data privacy protection. - QNA



## Apparel Group leads community impact with EAA Foundation through QR1mn contribution

Apparel Group, the global fashion and lifestyle retail conglomerate, supported the Education Above All (EAA) Foundation's 2026 Eid Gifts Campaign through an in-kind contribution valued at QR1mn in clothing and footwear for Palestinian and Syrian children. The contribution was highlighted through a Garangao community activity hosted at Place Vendôme Mall on March 4, bringing together community members and volunteers in the spirit of Ramadan.

Launched under the initiative of Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of the EAA Foundation, the Eid Gifts Campaign is implemented by the EAA in co-ordination with the Qatar Red Crescent Society and aims to bring joy to children in Palestine and Syria by providing Eid clothing during the holy month of Ramadan.

Through this contribution, Apparel Group is helping extend the initiative's reach, ensur-

ing more children can celebrate Eid with dignity and joy.

As part of this year's campaign, Apparel Group, in collaboration with Place Vendôme Mall, organised a Gifts Campaign Community Packing Activity, encouraging community participation and youth engagement in humanitarian action.

The initiative reflected the spirit of Ramadan and Garangao while reinforcing Apparel Group's long-standing commitment to supporting communities and meaningful social causes across the region.

"At Apparel Group, supporting the communities we serve is an important part of who we are," said Apparel Group chief executive Neeraj Teckchandani. "Through initiatives like the Eid Gifts Campaign, we are able to extend the spirit of compassion and generosity that defines Ramadan."

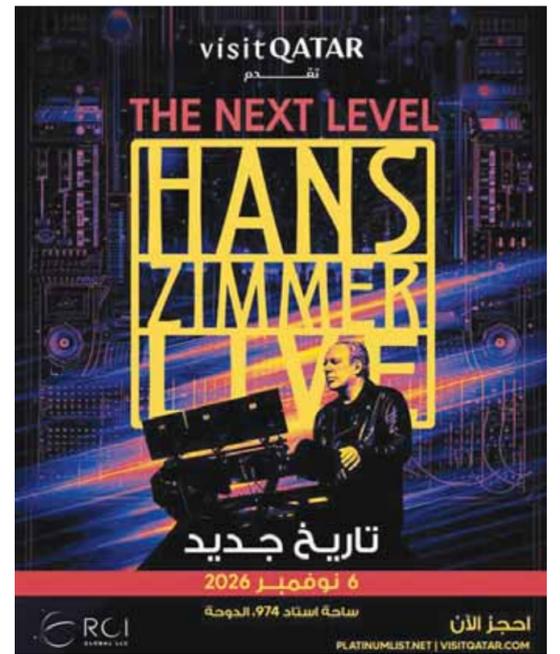
"We are proud to partner with Education

Above All Foundation and our community partners in Qatar to help bring joy and dignity to children celebrating Eid," he said.

"The Eid Gifts Campaign reflects our commitment to ensuring that children affected by hardship can experience the joy and dignity of Eid," an EAA Foundation representative said. "We are grateful to Apparel Group for this generous contribution and to Place Vendôme Mall for their valued partnership in making this initiative possible."

"This collaboration demonstrates the power of community solidarity in Qatar, especially during Ramadan, and how partnerships can create meaningful impact for children and families in need," the representative added.

The Eid Gifts Campaign continues to invite individuals and partners across Qatar to contribute through online and in-kind donations of children's clothing, helping more children celebrate Eid with dignity, confidence, and joy.



## Hans Zimmer Live in Doha rescheduled to November

Visit Qatar has announced that the Hans Zimmer Live concert, originally scheduled to take place on April 10 at the Stadium 974 Precinct, has been rescheduled to November 6. All previously purchased tickets will remain valid for the new concert date.

Ticket holders are advised to retain their tickets and refer to the official ticketing platform for any further updates.

Current tickets will be automatically transferred to the new date, with the category unchanged.

# Iran considers US peace plan as 'one-sided'

Reuters/AFP  
Tehran/Dubai/Washington

A US proposal for ending nearly four weeks of fighting is "one-sided and unfair", a senior Iranian official told Reuters yesterday, while US President Donald Trump said that Iran must make a deal or face a continued onslaught.

The Iranian official said that the proposal, conveyed to Tehran by Pakistan, "was reviewed in detail on Wednesday night by senior Iranian officials and the representative of Iran's Supreme Leader".

It lacked the minimum requirements for success and served only US and Israeli interests, the official said, while stressing that diplomacy had not ended despite the lack for now of a realistic plan for peace talks.

Trump described the Iranians as "great negotiators" but added that he was not sure he was "willing to make a deal with them to end the war".

Iran has launched strikes against Israel, US bases and Gulf states as well as effectively blocking Middle East fuel exports via the Strait of Hormuz since the US and Israel attacked Iran on February 28.

"They now have the chance,

that is Iran, to permanently abandon their nuclear ambitions and to join a new path forward," Trump said during a Cabinet meeting at the White House. "We'll see if they want to do it. If they don't, we're their worst nightmare. In the meantime, we'll just keep blowing them away."

Oil jumped to \$105 a barrel yesterday and stock markets fell on renewed pessimism over ceasefire prospects as global plastics, technology, retail and tourism struggled with the impact.

Trump suggested yesterday that Iran let 10 oil tankers transit the Strait of Hormuz as a goodwill gesture in negotiations, including some Pakistan-flagged vessels, elaborating on what he had described as a "present" from Iran. The president, who is expected to send thousands of troops to the Middle East, driving expectations of a ground invasion, also said taking control of Iran's oil was an option but gave no further details.

A note seen by Reuters on Tuesday to the United Nations from Iran said that "non-hostile vessels" could transit the strait if they co-ordinated with Iranian authorities.

A Thai oil tanker has passed through the strait following diplomatic co-ordination with Iran, and Malaysia said its vessels were also



A symbolic mock-up of an Iranian missile is mounted on a car during a rally in Tehran yesterday. - Reuters

being allowed to transit in a sign that restrictions were loosening for some countries (see report on page 7).

Iran would be receptive to any request from Spain related to the strait, its embassy in Madrid said, in the first such offer to an EU state.

US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff confirmed that the US had sent a "15-point action list" as a basis for negotiations to end the war.

Pakistan's foreign minister said "indirect talks" between the US and Iran were taking place through

messages relayed by Islamabad, with other states including Turkey and Egypt also supporting mediation efforts.

Any talks, were they to happen, would likely prove very difficult given the positions laid out by both sides.

According to sources and reports, the 15-point proposal includes demands ranging from dismantling Iran's nuclear programme and curbing its missiles to effectively handing over control of the strait.

Iran has hardened its stance since the war began, demanding guarantees against future military action, compensation for losses, and formal control of the strait, Iranian sources say.

It also told intermediaries that Lebanon must be included in any ceasefire deal, regional sources said.

Trump has not identified who the US is negotiating with in Iran, with many high-ranking officials among the thousands of people killed in the war across the Middle East.

Israel removed Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi and Parliamentary Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf from its hit list after Pakistan urged Washington to press Israel not to target them, a Pakistani source with knowledge of the discussions told Reuters.

An Israeli military spokesperson declined to comment.

Yesterday Iran launched multiple waves of missiles at Israel, striking Tel Aviv, Haifa and other areas, including a Palestinian town in central Israel.

At least one ballistic missile hit Tel Aviv, according to the military, while others carried cluster munitions that dispersed smaller explosives, damaging homes and cars.

Israel's ambulance service said a man was killed in Nahariya after Hezbollah fired a rocket barrage at the northern city.

In Iran, strikes hit a residential zone in the southern city of Bandar Abbas and a village on the outskirts of the southern city of Shiraz, where two teenage brothers were killed, Iran's Tasnim news agency said.

A university building in Isfahan was reported to have been hit.

US and Israeli officials said that Israel had killed the naval commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, and that it had many more targets left as it degraded Iranian capabilities.

Off the coast from Bandar Abbas on Qeshm - the largest Iranian island in the Gulf - one local resident told AFP via Telegram that he hoped the site would not be taken over by the military.

"The suffering of people, the poverty, and the political oppression have been getting worse every year," said 42-year-old Sadeq. "I don't think war is the solution to these conditions, but ending it won't change much for us either."

Fresh violence flared in the Gulf, with two killed by debris from an Iranian ballistic missile intercepted near Abu Dhabi, and drones fired at both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

## Iraqis mourn fighters killed in attacks

By Ammar Karim & Shvan Harki  
AFP

Hunched against the cold and drizzle, Iraqi army medic Ahmed and two colleagues looked across the wreckage that just days ago was their clinic, now rubble after a strike on Wednesday.

"We're the only ones left of the medical unit," he said, his voice breaking with grief. "They were all either killed or wounded."

Iraq has been drawn into the war sparked by US and Israeli strikes against Iran on February 28, which has since engulfed much of the region.

The country is having to weather both strikes targeting US interests on its soil and also attacks on pro-Iran groups.

On Wednesday, strikes targeting the Habbaniyah base in western Anbar province killed seven military personnel, the defence ministry said.

Afterwards, Baghdad said the incident undermined "ties between the peoples of Iraq and the United States", but without directly blaming the United States for the attack.

A State Department spokesperson contacted by AFP strongly denied US strikes had targeted Iraqi security forces.

However, the former paramilitary Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), now part of the regular army, has condemned US strikes on PMF positions.

The group's base nearby was targeted earlier in the week, killing 15 people.

Ahmed, who gave only his first name, said several of his friends were trapped under the debris after Wednesday's strike in Habbaniyah, some 70km (40 miles) from Baghdad.

"We tried to rescue them from under the rubble... but the pilot returned and targeted us directly," he said. "The medics and those who came to rescue the trapped were killed."

The site was known to be a base hosting the Iraqi army, military commanders on the ground told AFP during a media tour.

From western Iraq to the country's northern autonomous Kurdistan region, families mourned.



An army officer inspects the site of an airstrike at a military medical clinic, where Iraqi security sources said several soldiers were killed and wounded, in Iraq's western Anbar province. - Reuters

On Tuesday, an Iranian strike killed six peshmerga soldiers near the border with Iran in the first deadly attack on the Kurdish regional force since the war began.

Fatima Muzafar, 24, cried for her 21-year-old brother Kaywan, a peshmerga member for three years. "When we went to the hospital, we were hoping he'd only been wounded," she said, her voice hoarse.

At the family home, she showed AFP photographs of her younger brother on his wedding day, while in another room her father Muzafar Qader mourned the loss of his son.

Tissue balled in his hands, he said he spoke to Kaywan by phone immediately after the first missile strike.

However, then just seconds later, a second missile hit.

"I tried to call him back, but the phone was disconnected."

Retired peshmerga Muzafar said he was left partly paralysed after fighting the Islamic State group (IS).

Before that he had fought in the 1980s against Saddam Hussain's regime.

"Now my son has fallen to an Iranian missile strike. Our family has a long history of sacrifice for this land," Muzafar said.

## Iran recruiting teens for Tehran checkpoints

Iran's security forces are recruiting children as young as 12 to man checkpoints and perform other duties during the war in the capital, a Revolutionary Guards official told state TV yesterday.

Checkpoints have sprung up all around Tehran since the start of the war, with residents reporting teenagers in plainclothes manning some of them with machine guns.

Iranian authorities have launched a recruitment drive dubbed "For Iran" in Tehran to register people to join the security forces, lowering the minimum age of recruits to 12.

Rahim Nadali, an official with the Guards in Tehran, told state television that people as young as 12 could register to help the Guards and the Basij youth volunteer militia stand "against the global bully", a term used for the United States.

The tasks include "collecting security data and operational patrols" as well as organising caravans of cars at night in the city, he said.

"At the Basij checkpoints and patrols that you see across the cities, we had a very high number of volunteers among young people and teenagers who

wanted to participate," he said. "Considering the ages of those requesting to join, we have now lowered the minimum age to 12 years old, because children aged 12-13 want to be involved."

Tehran residents have told AFP journalists outside the country of seeing armed youths around the city since the war broke out with the United States and Israel.

"Military pickup trucks with heavy weapons mounted on them block the roads and search cars. You pass them, and just 100m ahead, there are several private cars with teenagers holding Uzis (sub-machine guns), again stopping vehicles," said resident Kaveh.

"When a missile hits somewhere, the area is immediately sealed off. Untrained teenagers with Kalashnikovs shout orders at people - 'stand here, stand there'" and regularly fire warning shots into the air, he said.

Another Tehran resident said at night supporters of the Islamic republic "take cars fitted with speakerphones and they give them flags and they march with lots of noise and shout slogans in the streets". - AFP

## Kuwait arrests six over 'assassination' plotting

Kuwait arrested six people linked to Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah group who were planning "assassinations" in the Gulf state, the interior ministry said on Wednesday.

Those arrested were planning "assassinations targeting symbols and leaders of the state and recruited people to carry out these missions", the ministry said in a statement.

Five of the six people were Kuwaiti nationals, it said.

This is at least the third set of arrests in Kuwait linked to Hezbollah in recent weeks.

Last Wednesday, Kuwait said it had arrested 10 Hezbollah members who were planning attacks on vital infrastructure.

And on March 16, the country announced the arrest of 16 people, two of them Lebanese and 14 Kuwaiti, who it said had been planning acts of sabotage.

Kuwait has been repeatedly targeted with missiles and drones by Hezbollah's sponsor Iran during the Middle East war. - AFP

## AU hails UN slavery vote

The African Union (AU) welcomed as "historic" a UN vote to designate the transatlantic African slave trade as "the gravest crime against humanity" and said it marked an important step towards "healing".

The non-binding resolution was adopted at the UN General Assembly on Wednesday in a vote backed by 123 countries, with three voting against and 52 abstentions.

"This historic decision marks an important step toward truth, justice, and healing, and reinforces the urgent need to address the enduring legacy of slavery," the AU's head Mahamoud Ali Youssouf said in a statement. - AFP



# Lebanon says Israeli strikes kill five as Hezbollah claims new attacks

AFP  
Beirut

Fighting between Israel and Hezbollah claimed casualties on both sides yesterday as Lebanon said it would complain to the United Nations Security Council over Israeli attacks.

In a sign of divisions, Lebanese ministers from Hezbollah and its ally Amal boycotted a cabinet session over the government decision this week to declare the Iranian ambassador persona non grata, as demonstrators rallied in support of Iran outside its embassy in Beirut.

War erupted between Israel and Hezbollah on March 2 when the Iran-backed group began firing rockets into Israel to avenge the killing of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran.

Israel has since been bombing Lebanon, mainly in areas where Hezbollah has long held sway, and has sent in ground troops in a push to establish a buffer zone in south Lebanon.

State media said Israeli strikes killed at least five people yesterday, two of them in a

raid on a building in the Nabatiyeh area in the south.

AFP images showed a badly damaged building and smoke rising from the rubble, as rescue workers and firefighters worked at the scene.

Israel's military said a soldier was killed in fighting in south Lebanon, bringing the number of its troops killed there this month to three.

Israeli emergency services also said a rocket fired from Lebanon killed a man in northern Israel's Nahariya area.

"MDA teams have pronounced a man of about 30 dead and were treating a man of about 50 who is in serious condition," Israel's Magen David Adom emergency service said in a statement.

Yesterday Hezbollah claimed a series of attacks against Israeli troops in south Lebanon and at sites across the border, including targeting Nahariya and a barracks to the city's north, and a defence ministry complex in Tel Aviv.

It also said its fighters had fired rockets in Lebanon's Khiam, a town near the border that has reportedly seen intense fighting.

A military source in south Lebanon told AFP that the Israeli army was "slowly advancing a bit more each day" in the border area, including near the town of Taybeh where Hezbollah has claimed repeated attacks against Israeli troops.

The Committee to Protect Journalists called yesterday for an investigation into the killing of Hussain Hamood, a freelance journalist who worked for Hezbollah-affiliated Al Manar TV, who it said was killed in an Israeli strike in Nabatiyeh a day earlier.

Lebanon's foreign ministry this week gave Tehran's ambassador until Sunday to leave the country, the latest unprecedented step by Lebanese authorities since the war erupted.

The spat escalated as two ministers from Hezbollah and two from its ally Amal boycotted yesterday's cabinet session.

In a statement afterwards, the cabinet said Israel was "threatening Lebanon's sovereignty"; and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam said he had asked the foreign minister to "immediately file a complaint with the Security Council in this regard".

Dozens of protesters gathered near Iran's

embassy, AFP correspondents said, some waving Iranian or Hezbollah flags amid chants of "Death to America, death to Israel".

The embassy is on the outskirts of south Beirut, where Israel has repeatedly bombed in recent weeks.

"We came here to show our support for the Iranian ambassador in Lebanon, so the government will back down on this decision," said protester Mohammed, declining to provide his surname.

Demonstrator Farida Noureddine, 43, said Lebanese Foreign Minister Youssef Raggi "does not represent us. He is carrying out Israeli decisions".

The health ministry said yesterday that Israeli strikes had killed 1,116 people including 121 children since March.

Israel's military said it had killed 700 Hezbollah fighters since the war began, although the group has not announced its casualties.

Visiting Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty of Egypt called for the immediate cessation of what he called Israel's "aggression" on Lebanon.

## Violence against journalists in DR Congo rising: RSF

AFP  
Kinshasa

Journalists have faced increasing violence and pressure amid the escalating conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said yesterday.

The Rwanda-backed M23 armed group has seized large swathes of territory in the eastern part of the DR Congo since 2021.

The region is rich in natural resources and has been ravaged by conflict for the past 30 years.

The M23, known for its silencing of dissenting voices, captured the major cities of Goma in January 2025 and Bukavu in February 2025, setting up a parallel administration in those areas.

"All of the journalists in eastern DR Congo interviewed by RSF report that since the capture of Goma in January 2025, their working methods have radically changed," RSF said. "At least eight journalists have been detained by M23 or by the military intelligence services of the regular army for several days."

Two journalists were locked up by M23 in containers converted into jails, where up to 80 detainees are crammed together, according to a report published by RSF on Tuesday.

The M23 has also imposed "ideological training" on at least four journalists, censored programmes on local radio stations, and forced certain shows or talking points onto them.

Meanwhile, the government has accused journalists "of belonging to the M23 camp and its ally, Rwanda", the report said.

The DR Congo's High Council for Audiovisual and Communication (CSAC) has controlled the narrative on the war and "regularly takes decisions that increasingly resemble censorship", RSF said.

The capture of Goma also "marked an intensification of disinformation" by both sides, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) added.

Around 90 journalists from the South Kivu and North Kivu provinces were forced to flee their homes between 2023 and early 2025, according to the National Union of the Congolese Press.

## 'At least 28 civilians die in Sudan drone strikes'

Two drone strikes in Sudan, one at a market in Darfur and the other along a road in Kordofan, killed at least 28 civilians, adding to a toll from drone attacks that has already surpassed 500 victims this year.

Health workers in two cities 800km apart reported the latest deaths to AFP yesterday via satellite Internet connection to get around a communications blackout.

Repeated pleas from the United Nations to curtail drone attacks and protect civilians have fallen on deaf ears, as Sudan's warring sides - the regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) - launch near-daily strikes, killing dozens at a time.

On Wednesday, one such strike hit a market in North Darfur state's Saraf Omra town, killing "22 people, including an infant, and injuring 17 more", one health worker at the local clinic told AFP.

"The drone hit a parked oil truck, which caught fire along with part of the market," said Hamid Suleiman, a vendor at the market, which serves Saraf Omra and the surrounding towns in the remote Darfur area.

Hundreds of kilometres to the east, far from the RSF's strongholds in Darfur, another drone strike set fire to a truck travelling on a North Kordofan road in army territory.

"Six bodies arrived at the hospital yesterday, three of them charred, in addition to 10 wounded," a medical source at the local hospital in El-Rahad told AFP, blaming the RSF for the attack.

The civilians were travelling between the army-controlled towns of El-Rahad and Um Rawaba.

Drones from both sides have repeatedly attacked Sudan's central east-west highway, which runs through North Kordofan state capital El-Obeidi and connects Darfur to the army-controlled east.

Since April 2023, the war between the former allies has killed tens of thousands and uprooted 11m, creating the world's largest hunger and displacement crisis.

The UN says more than 500 civilians were killed in drone strikes between January and mid-March alone, particularly in the Kordofan region, currently the war's fiercest battlefield.

The marked increase in drone warfare shows "the devastating impact of high-tech and relatively cheap weapons in populated areas", the UN rights office said.

Last week, on the first day of the Eid al-Fitr holiday, a strike blamed on the army on the El-Daein Teaching Hospital in Darfur killed 70 people and injured 146.

Days before, another drone strike blamed on paramilitary forces killed 24 people on the Chadian town of Tine, as fears mount of spiralling regional spillover. - AFP

## Ancient site in Tyre threatened by Israeli bombs

By Celia Lebur  
AFP

At an archaeological site in southern Lebanon's Tyre, small signs bearing a blue and white emblem provide a symbolic shield, meant to protect the ancient ruins from bombardment.

One of the oldest cities on the Mediterranean coast, Tyre is located around 20km (12 miles) from the Israeli border, and has been the target of several strikes since Lebanon was drawn into the Middle East war by Hezbollah's March 2 rocket attack on Israel.

The Al-Bass site is centred on a necropolis that dates back three millennia to Tyre's time as a major Phoenician city and was still in use until the Arab conquests of the 7th Century.

An organisation linked to Unesco, the United Nations' cultural heritage agency, launched the signs initiative near the site, part of a push that covers more than 30 locations across the country.

It is a reminder that the 1954 Hague Convention obliges warring parties to protect cultural property.

On March 6, an Israeli strike hit just a few metres away, killing eight people according to Lebanon's health ministry.



Smoke rises from the site of an Israeli airstrike that targeted the eastern outskirts of the southern Lebanese coastal city of Tyre. - AFP

The target, a family home, is now a pile of rubble.

"They were our neighbours... They thought that being close to an archaeological site protected them, that because this is a World Heritage site it would not be struck," said Nader Saqlawi, director of archaeological excavations in the south for Lebanon's culture ministry.

The team from the ministry that came to inspect possible damage to the monuments found human remains - "a hand and pieces of flesh" - on the roof of the site's museum, which is still under construction, he said.

The museum suffered dam-

age, its windows were blown out, but the explosion did not reach the necropolis or the Roman-era triumphal arch, aqueduct and hippodrome that are also part of the site.

In antiquity, the city of Tyre was at various times Phoenician, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine.

While many of its inhabitants have fled the latest war, others remain alongside the city's precious relics.

Lebanese Culture Minister Ghassan Salame condemned what he called Israel's aggression.

"The archaeological sites do

not contain any military or security presence. Therefore, this argument cannot be used to justify their bombing," he said.

There was no immediate comment in response to AFP's request from the Israeli army, which usually says it is targeting Hezbollah sites or operatives with its attacks.

"Lebanon is full of archaeological riches... and the Beirut depots do not have the capacity to accommodate all these threatened objects," said David Sassine, an expert at the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage.

There is also no guarantee that the objects would be safer in the capital, which is itself regularly bombed by Israel, and transporting the items from the south of the country, even under military escort, "remains risky", Sassine said.

Saqlawi of the culture ministry said he believed attacks on historic sites were intentional.

"The Israelis know everything. They know your shoe size... and they know very well this is an archaeological site," he said.

Mustapha Najdi, a guard at the archaeological sites, was at the Al-Bass site when the March 6 strike hit.

"No one cares about us", Najdi lamented, calling on "everyone who can exert pressure to stop this barbarity".

## Somalia's tuk-tuks stall as ongoing Iran war drives fuel price spike

Reuters  
Mogadishu

Drivers of tuk-tuk taxis in Somalia's capital are abandoning their livelihoods as fuel prices surge, pushed up by disruptions to oil shipments linked to the Iran conflict.

With fares rising, passengers have dropped away and many drivers in Mogadishu say they can no longer keep their three-wheelers on the road.

The conflict has nearly halted shipments of around one-fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) via the Strait of Hormuz, leaving African nations among the most exposed by supply disruptions and rising prices for fuel and food.

"There are no passengers. People stay home or walk on foot. We raised fares because fuel prices went up," Hasan Suleiman, a 21-year-old tuk-tuk driver, told Reuters in Mogadishu. "The city has few passengers and they won't pay the higher fares. We have inevitably parked the tuk-tuks."

Fuel prices in some parts of Somalia have more than doubled,



Operators of rickshaw taxis push a vehicle to a parking yard in Mogadishu. - Reuters

raising transportation costs for passengers and businesses.

Already 6.5m people, roughly a third of the Horn of Africa country's total population, face severe hunger amid drought.

"The tuk-tuk needs fuel, and I need to provide for my family from what it earns. We are in a very bad condition," said Jamal Omar, a 55-year-old tuk-tuk driver.

## Landslides in southern Tanzania leave at least 20 dead

Landslides in southern Tanzania caused by heavy rain have killed at least 20 people, authorities said yesterday, with the toll expected to rise.

East Africa has been hit for several weeks by torrential rains that have left at least 81 dead and thousands displaced in neighbouring Kenya this month.

In Tanzania, the rain combined with strong wind triggered landslides that destroyed houses early on Wednesday in the Mbeya region, said Jaffar Haniu, administrator for the Rungwe district where the disaster occurred.

"The death toll now stands at 20," he told reporters, saying that 18 bodies were found on Wednesday and two more yesterday.

"One victim is a very young child, a year and a half old," Haniu added, while calling on residents to "take precautions".

Those in areas vulnerable to landslides should evacuate, he urged.

Tanzanian meteorological services have forecast heavy rain across most of the country through next Tuesday. - AFP

## Niger police killed in militant attack near border with Mali

An attack by "heavily armed" religious militants on a police post in western Niger near the border with Mali has killed at least eight police officers, local sources told AFP yesterday.

The military junta that has ruled Niger since a July 2023 coup is struggling to stem violence that has plagued its western Tillaberi region since 2017.

Militants from the Islamic State (IS) in the Sahel group and the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM), Al Qaeda's Sahelian branch, are active in the region.

Last year, the vast area was named "the deadliest region in the central Sahel" where "civilians were the primary targets" by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) ACLED, which records global conflict-related casualties.

"The attack on the police checkpoint at the entrance to Tillaberi (city) was carried out on Wednesday in broad daylight around 1pm (1200 GMT) and several police officers were killed," a resident of the city, located about 100km (62 miles) from the capital Niamey, told AFP.

It was conducted by "heavily armed assailants who arrived on dozens of motorcycles", the resident said, adding he had lost "a member of his family" in the attack.

An official from a community association also confirmed the attack and reported "the death of eight police officers".

Niger's military authorities have not yet made a public statement on the attack, which has been claimed by IS.

The Tillaberi region in western Niger, on the border with Mali and Burkina Faso, has in the space of a decade become the epicentre of religious militant attacks in Niger.

Last year, the region accounted for nearly 1,300 of the 1,939 people killed in violence recorded by ACLED in the country. - AFP

## Nine lives lost, 45 missing after shipwreck off Djibouti

At least nine people were killed, and 45 others remain missing, following a shipwreck off the coast of Djibouti, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), a United Nations migration agency, said yesterday.

The incident occurred on the night of March 24 near Djibouti's northern coast, off the area of Ombok, the IOM said in a statement.

The boat was carrying 320 passengers at the time of the accident. The agency did not provide information on the vessel's origin or destination, though similar accidents are frequent in waters between the Horn of Africa and Yemen.

These routes are often used by migrants attempting to reach the Middle East and beyond.

Tens of thousands of migrants from the Horn, especially from Ethiopia and Somalia, transit through Djibouti each year in an attempt to reach Saudi Arabia and Gulf nations in search of employment opportunities.

Last year was the deadliest on record along the route with the IOM recording 922 deaths, double the number for 2024. - Reuters/AFP

## 'White House weighs bypassing Congress to pay TSA officers'



Customer Service Representative Maria Gonzales Alatorre puts together a display thanking TSA agents at the Los Angeles International Airport in Los Angeles yesterday.

Reuters  
Washington

The White House is weighing unilateral action to pay Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers if the Senate cannot quickly agree to a deal on the Department of Homeland Security's budget, the Washington Post reported yesterday, citing people familiar with the discussions.

A partial government shutdown has forced 50,000 TSA officers to work without pay since mid-February, leading to major

strains at U.S. airports and the longest lines in the agency's history.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune described the potential plan, which would sidestep Congress, to Republican senators in a closed-door lunch, the Post reported.

Asked about the proposal, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a statement that "it is true the White House is having discussions about a number of ideas to blunt the impact" of the shutdown but added "no preparations or plans are currently underway".

## US House committees approve sweeping aviation safety reforms

Reuters  
Washington

Two US House committees unanimously voted to pass sweeping aviation safety reform legislation to address dozens of recommendations issued after a January 2025 collision between an American Airlines regional jet and a US Army Black Hawk helicopter that killed 67 people.

The House Armed Services Committee voted 53-0 to require the installation of collision prevention technologies on all military aircraft by 2031, except flight-

ers, bombers and drones.

The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee separately voted 62-0 to establish requirements for equipping collision mitigation technologies for airplanes and helicopters. The legislation addresses deficiencies in the Federal Aviation Administration's safety culture, enhances air traffic control training and procedures, and strengthens the safety of airspace around Reagan Washington National Airport, where the fatal collision occurred.

The National Transportation Safety Board said the safety legislation, called the ALERT Act,

meets its 50 recommendations proposed after the mid-air collision. NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy called the action historic, saying it was the first time committees in Congress had approved legislation that addresses all of the board's recommendations following a major aviation disaster.

The bill would also require the use of a safety system known as ADS-B by the end of 2031. The bill includes a review of flight frequency at Reagan National — which has the nation's single busiest runway — to determine if it can handle current traffic. The US House failed to pass a separate aviation bill last

month after the Pentagon withdrew its support and despite pleas from lawmakers and relatives of those killed in the American Airlines collision, the worst US aviation disaster since 2001.

The ROTOR Act had been passed unanimously by the US Senate in December. But under fast-track rules designed to expedite legislation, the bill needed a two-thirds majority in the House to pass, and it fell one vote short.

If the House passes the ALERT Act, the House and Senate would likely meet to work out differences between the two bills before any measure could become law.

## Trump administration opens investigations into three medical schools

Reuters  
Washington

The Trump administration has opened investigations into admissions policies at three major medical schools, the *New York Times* reported yesterday, citing two administration officials and documents it reviewed.

The investigations into medical schools at Stanford University, Ohio State University and the University of California, San Diego, will focus on "possible race discrimination in medical school admissions," the *Times* reported, quoting a letter from Assistant

Attorney-General for Civil Rights Harmee Dhillon.

The *Times* said the government is seeking information about medical school applicants from each of the past seven years, including test scores and home ZIP codes, as well as copies of internal university messages about diversity, equity and inclusion and correspondence between school officials and pharmaceutical companies about admissions policies.

The government demanded the schools provide the data by April 24 or risk losing federal funding, according to the *Times*.

Ohio State University, Stanford University, the University of California, San Diego,

and the Department of Justice did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Since taking office for his second term in January 2025, President Donald Trump's administration has threatened to withhold federal funds from universities over issues including pro-Palestinian protests against Israel's war in Gaza, diversity initiatives and transgender policies.

The administration has launched multiple investigations and lawsuits against universities, particularly focusing on whether schools illegally consider race in admissions after the US Supreme Court's 2023 ruling that ended affirmative action in higher education.

# Maduro back in US court

AFP, Reuters  
New York

Ousted Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro cut a relaxed figure yesterday as he returned to a federal court in New York for his second appearance since his capture by US forces in an extraordinary nighttime raid.

During the one-hour hearing, the judge indicated he would not dismiss the case over Maduro and his wife's apparent inability to afford their legal bill without aid from the Venezuelan government.

The former leader, 63, and wife Cilia Flores have been held in a Brooklyn jail for almost three months since American commandos snatched the pair from their compound in Caracas in early January.

Maduro, who smiled as he entered the room, did not address the court during the proceedings, which focused on arguments over who will pay his and Flores's legal fees.

US sanctions prevent the Venezuelan government from footing the bill, and Maduro and Flores

## US judge questions block on Maduro's use of Venezuelan funds for defence

say they do not have sufficient personal funds to cover it themselves.

A US judge questioned yesterday whether the US can bar Venezuela from funding Nicolás Maduro's legal defence without violating his US constitutional rights, but stopped short of dismissing drug-trafficking charges against the ousted Venezuelan president facing trial in New York.

Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, wore beige prison garb to the hearing in Manhattan federal court more than two months after US military forces captured them in a surprise raid on Caracas and ferried them to New York.

Maduro, 63, and Flores, 69, have pleaded not guilty to charges including narcoterrorism conspiracy and have been jailed in Brooklyn pending trial.

They had asked US District Judge Alvin Hellerstein to dismiss the charges, saying their inability to rely on Venezuelan public funds due to US sanctions on Venezuela

was interfering with their right to have a lawyer of their choosing under the Sixth Amendment of the US Constitution. All criminal defendants in the US have constitutional rights regardless of whether they are US citizens.

Their lawyers have said Maduro and Flores cannot afford to pay their defence fees on their own.

In court, prosecutor Kyle Wirshba said the US sanctions blocking the payments were based on legitimate national security and foreign policy interests. During his first term in the White House, Trump ramped up sanctions on Venezuela over allegations that Maduro's government was corrupt and undermining democratic institutions. Washington called Maduro's 2018 re-election fraudulent.

Hellerstein appeared sceptical of that argument, noting that the US had relaxed sanctions on Venezuela since Maduro's ouster.

"The defendant is here, Flores is here. They present no further national security threat," said

Hellerstein, a judicial appointee of Democratic President Bill Clinton. "The right that's implicated, paramount over other rights, is the right to constitutional counsel."

Pollack, who previously represented WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, has said he wants to withdraw from the case if Hellerstein doesn't dismiss the charges and the Venezuelan government cannot pay his fees. It was unclear how much Pollack is charging Maduro for his services. Pollack did not respond to a request for comment.

Earlier on Thursday, US President Donald Trump told reporters that additional cases would be brought against Maduro, without offering details.

US special forces captured Maduro and Flores in a surprise January 3 raid on their Caracas residence and flew them to New York to face drug trafficking charges, an operation detailed in a Reuters examination of the covert mission and its geopolitical fallout.

Prosecutors argue that because the US has not recognised Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate president since 2019, he and Flores should not expect the



A motorcade carrying ousted Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores departs Manhattan after the pair appeared in federal court for a status conference hearing yesterday in New York City. (AFP)

US government to allow Venezuela to pay their legal fees. The prosecutors say Maduro and Flores can be assigned public defenders if they cannot afford their own lawyers.

Wirshba said Maduro and Flores could challenge the sanctions by bringing a separate lawsuit against the Treasury Department, which enforces sanctions.

Hellerstein asked whether he could order Treasury to modify the sanctions to allow for the Venezuelan government to pay the legal fees. Wirshba said Hellerstein could not because the executive

branch, not the judiciary, was in charge of foreign policy.

Maduro faces four felony charges including narcoterrorism conspiracy, which criminalises drug trafficking that helps to finance activities the US considers terrorism. The statute has rarely been tested at trial, and two of four trial convictions have been overturned over issues stemming from witness credibility, a Reuters analysis of court records found.

Maduro dismissed those accusations, along with allegations of his participation in drug trafficking.

## Nominee to head US nuclear forces sees no need for warhead tests

Reuters  
Washington

The Navy admiral tapped as the new head of US nuclear forces yesterday endorsed a finding by the Energy Department and Pentagon that the US nuclear arsenal is safe and reliable and there is no need to conduct nuclear warhead tests.

Admiral Richard Correll's comments come as officials are assessing how to implement a directive issued in October by President Donald Trump to conduct nuclear weapons tests.

Correll, testifying at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on his confirmation as US Strategic Command chief, was asked if he saw a military need for the US to conduct nuclear warhead tests, the last of which took place in 1992.

Noting that the Energy Department and Pentagon annually

certify the safety and reliability of the US nuclear arsenal, he expressed support for the most recent certification, which was issued for 2025-2026.

The departments "indicated we have the capabilities and sufficient testing to satisfy ourselves on the reliability and efficacy of our nuclear warheads. But we monitor that very closely and I will continue to provide my best military advice."

On Tuesday, the State Department's top arms control official, Thomas DiNanno, told another Senate panel that the administration still is assessing how to implement Trump's order for the US to test nuclear weapons "on an equal basis" with other countries.

DiNanno did not rule out a resumption of full-scale underground explosive tests.

The administration has alleged that Russia and China secretly conducted yield-producing nuclear weapons tests in 2019 and 2020,

respectively. Moscow and Beijing deny they did so and some experts have challenged the US allegations.

Since 1994, the US has ensured that its nuclear arsenal is safe and reliable by replacing underground test blasts with a multi-billion-dollar "science-based approach" of supercomputer modelling and other advanced tools.

Arms control advocates oppose a return to underground explosive testing by the US, warning this would prompt Russia, China and other countries to conduct such tests, fuelling a nuclear arms race.

Some experts, however, contend that only such tests can verify the reliability and safety of ageing US warheads.

The US and China signed but have not ratified the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Russia revoked its ratification in 2023. Under international law, however, the three countries as signatories still are obligated to uphold the pact.

## Canadian leaders, corporate bosses should speak 'both official languages': FM

AFP  
France

All Canadian leaders, including corporate bosses, should speak both official languages of English and French, the foreign minister said yesterday, after the Air Canada CEO failed to issue a condolence message in French for a fatal airport disaster.

Two pilots were killed in the deadly collision late Sunday between an Air Canada jet and a fire truck at New York's LaGuardia Airport.

According to media reports, one of the pilots killed was from French-speaking Quebec.

But in the video message to express condolences, Air Canada President and CEO Michael Rousseau used only English, sparking controversy.

"Canada is a bilingual country," Canadian Foreign Minister Anita Anand told AFP on the sidelines of the G7 foreign ministers meeting in France, repeating the same phrase in French: "Le Canada est un pays bilingue."

"And we continue to advocate for the leaders of our country to be able to speak both official lan-

guages, including in the corporate sector," she added.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney earlier criticised the CEO's conduct saying he was "very disappointed, as others are, rightly so, in this unilingual message", saying it showed a "lack of judgement and a lack of compassion".

Anand expressed "deep condolences to the families of the two pilots whose lives were lost".

"Every single day I wake up and think about their loss of life and how sad their families and friends of their communities must feel and I am grieving with them," she said.

## Trump to announce actions to help US farmers on Friday

Reuters  
Washington

President Donald Trump yesterday said his administration will announce actions to help US farmers on Friday, as the White House prepares to host hundreds of farmers, ranchers and executives for an event highlighting the agricultural sector.

The move comes as the administration is expected to release long-awaited biofuel blend-

ing quotas under the Renewable Fuel Standard, a policy closely watched by corn growers, ethanol producers and oil refiners that dictates how much renewable fuel must be mixed into the nation's gasoline and diesel supply.

Reuters reported that the Trump administration will release its 2026-27 biofuel blending volume obligations this week, according to two sources familiar with the matter. The rule will not differ materially from volumes proposed by the EPA prior to the onset of the Iran

war, the sources said.

Trump, speaking to reporters at a cabinet meeting yesterday, said US farmers had been mistreated by some countries and touted the multibillion-dollar bailout farmers received to help offset losses related to tariffs.

The biofuel decision comes at a fraught moment for both the oil and farm sectors, with the White House balancing pressure from refiners worried about gasoline prices and farmers counting on stronger biofuel demand to support crop markets.

## US creates fund to help return displaced Ukrainian children

AFP  
Washington

The United States announced the creation of a \$25mn fund yesterday to help with the return of Ukrainian children forcibly relocated to Russia.

The fund will be used for "the identification, return, and rehabilitation of Ukrainian children and youth who have been forcibly transferred or otherwise held away from their families and communities," the US State Department said in a statement.

According to Kyiv, nearly 20,000 Ukrainian children have been forcibly taken to Russia since Moscow's February 2022 invasion.

The fund will support two kinds of programs: identifying

**Nearly 20,000 Ukrainian children have been forcibly taken to Russia since Moscow's invasion**

and tracking displaced children, and supporting their reintegration into society, the statement said.

Ukraine's First Lady Olena Zelenska welcomed the creation of the fund, saying on X that "all Ukrainian children must return."

She met in Washington with two senior State Department officials, Riley Barnes and Jeremy Lewin, who are respectively in charge of human rights and humanitarian aid.

The issue is highly sensitive in Ukraine and remains central to every new round of negotiations

for a potential peace agreement between Kyiv and Moscow.

A UN international commission of inquiry recently accused Moscow of committing "crimes against humanity" by forcibly deporting thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia and obstructing their return.

Russia maintains that it transferred Ukrainian children from captured areas for their own safety and is prepared to return them to their families under conditions it deems appropriate.

Small groups of children have been repatriated through various intermediaries, including US First Lady Melania Trump.

Last year, the Trump administration cut funding to a humanitarian research lab at Yale University that had been collecting data to track the displaced children.



## Brazil govt awards first Amazon reforestation concession to startup

Reuters  
Sao Paulo

The Brazilian government auctioned its first-ever public land concession for reforestation to startup Re.green, marking an initial attempt to use carbon credits to finance the recovery of millions of acres of degraded protected areas.

Re.green was the only bidder offering to restore and help protect a 145,000-acre plot in the Bom Futuro reserve in the Amazon rainforest for 40 years. It offered a fee of 0.7% of revenue from the sale of carbon credits earned through the project, expected to reach around \$2mn annually, according to the auction notice released by the government. The company is one of a group of carbon removal startups buying degraded lands from farmers and ranchers to replant tree species native to Brazilian forests. Bom Futuro will be its first project in a government-owned area.

An Indigenous community of the Karitiana people who live in the area will also be part of the project.

"We are managing to turn something that is extremely negative for the climate, biodiversity and local populations into something positive," said Environment Minister Marina Silva during the auction at the Sao Paulo stock ex-

change on Wednesday.

Decades of deforestation and the growing impact of climate change have pushed the Amazon rainforest toward a tipping point, beyond which scientists warn it could start an irreversible transformation into a degraded biome. Researchers say halting deforestation is no longer enough, and that governments must reforest vast sections of the forest to protect it. Brazil's nascent carbon market is attracting interest from private investors and lenders looking to restore native forests and sell credits for the carbon they remove from the atmosphere to offset companies' emissions.



An aerial view shows a deforested plot of the Amazon during a Greenpeace flyover amid the COP30, near Cachoeira do Piria, state of Para, Brazil. (Reuters/File Photo)

The auction was a test of whether such projects can operate at a scale that will help the government achieve its goal of reforesting some 30mn acres of forest by 2030.

A second, slightly smaller plot of the Bom Futuro reserve received no bids at the auction.

Officials said they were still satisfied with the results, because the model is new and untested.

The government plans to offer some 750,000 acres under this model by 2027, said Garo Batmalian, the head of Brazil's forestry service. Officials have mapped 3.2mn acres of protected areas in need of restoration, he added.



A crew of workers from Constructora y Comercializadora Maya, subcontracted by state oil company Pemex to clean black tar slicks from beaches, in Coatzacoalcos, Mexico, on Tuesday. (Reuters)

## Mexican government removes 128 tonnes of crude following oil spill

AFP  
Mexico City

The Mexican government said on Wednesday it has removed 128 tonnes of crude oil residue from the Gulf of Mexico following a spill first reported in early March.

Left-leaning President Claudia Sheinbaum's administration is investigating the origins of the spill, whose damage extends along 165km (100 miles) of coastline between the southern

states of Veracruz and Tabasco, according to official estimates.

Environmental organisations deemed the spill an environmental disaster. The Gulf of Mexico Reef Corridor Network shared a report that identified 630sq km of damage and published a map showing sites where it said crude was reported.

Without naming any specific organisation, the government said in a communique that "the image disseminated widely and publicly by an NGO is clearly false... and doesn't match satellite images."

Authorities added that they are using boat and drones to probe the origin of the spill.

Sheinbaum has dismissed the idea that Pemex, the state-owned oil company, was responsible, suggesting that the leak came from a private company.

Greenpeace reported last August that Pemex was tied to 1,146 oil spills between 2008 and 2024.

Last week five people died in a fire in a Pemex facility notorious for numerous accidents in recent years.

## Corruption allegations dent Milei's popularity in Argentina, polls show

Reuters  
Buenos Aires

Argentine President Javier Milei's administration has experienced a decline of nearly 5 percentage points in public approval in March, according to multiple polls, following recent corruption allegations directed at the government. Milei, a libertarian who is expected to seek re-election next year, is under scrutiny after briefly promoting the cryptocurrency \$LIBRA, which surged and then collapsed within hours of its 2025 launch, prompting fraud complaints from investors who reported millions of dollars in losses.

Criticism of the government intensified in recent weeks, after local media outlets published communications between a financier implicated in the case and Milei, among others.

Milei's administration is particularly sensitive to corruption accusations, as he built his political rise on pledges to confront what he calls the "caste" of traditional politicians, whom he has

repeatedly referred to as thieves.

A government confidence index compiled by Torcuato Di Tella University showed this week a 3.5% drop in March to 2.3 points, on a scale measuring the government's performance from 0-5.

According to a survey by consulting firm Trespuntozero, approval of Milei's administration fell to 37.2% from 41.5% in early March, while negative perceptions rose to 59.8%, up from 53.1%. Respondents cited low wages, corruption and unemployment as their main concerns.

Consulting firm Synopsis also found in a survey that approval of Milei's government fell to 35.1% in March from 38.5% in February.

The government has also faced backlash over a scandal involving Milei's chief of staff, Manuel Adorni, who is under scrutiny over spending that does not appear to match his income and his wife's travel aboard the presidential plane.

"I built my wealth before entering the government. I have nothing to hide," Adorni told reporters on Wednesday. "I can do whatever I want with my money."

## Argentina government designates CJNG as terrorist organisation

Argentina has designated the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) as a terrorist organisation, the office of President Javier Milei announced yesterday. Last year, the administration of US President Donald Trump, who is a close ally of Milei, designated CJNG as a foreign terrorist organisation.

The decision "is based on official reports that document illicit transnational activities, as well as links to other terrorist organisations," the Argentine government's statement said.

The designation allows for the imposition of financial sanctions and operational restrictions in Argentina aimed at limiting the ability of the criminal organisation and its members to operate.

The US State Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment. A spokesperson for Mexico's foreign ministry did not immediately have a comment. (Reuters)

## Early political test for Kast as fuel prices spike in Chile

Reuters  
Santiago

Empty gas stations and price boards still displaying pre-hike rates captured Chileans' rising concerns as a steep fuel price hike announced by the government took effect on Thursday, immediately testing the strong public support that propelled right-wing President Jose Antonio Kast into office. The new administration, inaugurated on March 11, activated a clause in its fuel-stabilisation mechanism to quickly bring domestic prices in line with surging international rates linked to conflict in the Middle East.

With public finances under strain, officials said the government could no longer absorb the fast-mounting cost shock, prompting the abrupt adjustment now unfolding at pumps across the country.

Early yesterday, central Santiago gas stations appeared deserted, with premium fuels sold out after long lines the night before.

"I came to buy 'gold,'" said driver Valentina Ortega, referring to gasoline, now a high-demand commodity.

"Honestly, I find this terrible. It's been so few days and he's already doing things that affect the entire middle class and lower class - but nothing is known about what he's going to do with the upper class," she said about Kast.

The hike lifts the price of 93-octane gasoline by about 30% and diesel by 60%. Lines began forming Monday night after the announcement, and some stations ran out of supply.

"Nobody in any country is happy when gas prices go up. It im-



Demonstrators march as a water cannon sprays them during a protest against the Chilean government's budget cuts to education, in Santiago, Chile, yesterday. (Reuters)

mediately threatens his popularity in the short term and creates governance challenges depending on how long prices remain high," said Cate Klemme of Latin America advisory firm Southern Pulse.

A survey by pollster Cadem showed Kast's approval dipping four points to 47%, with 59% saying the hike could have been avoided. The poll also found disapproval exceeds approval for the first time, and 54% expect further increases in fuel prices.

Francisca Alfaro, an attorney who was filling her gas tank in Santiago, said she was already bracing for higher prices across the board.

"Everything is going to go up because everything in Chile is transported by land. So food, pro-

duce, vegetables, all of that is going to become more expensive," she said.

Finance Minister Jorge Quiroz said future price changes will be gradual and that any drop in crude prices will be passed through quickly.

To ease the impact, the government announced measures including freezing public transport fares through December, a move that will offset part of the fuel-price shock, according to an analyst note by JP Morgan. The jump in gasoline and diesel, however, could still trigger nonlinear inflation pressures, the firm said.

Chile's central bank revised its inflation forecast a day earlier, indicating that it will see a significant

increase in the second quarter, reaching figures of around 4% annually.

Kast, Chile's most right-leaning leader since its return to democracy, has blamed former leftist President Gabriel Boric for strained public finances and said he will lead an "emergency government" focused on recovery.

Guillermo Holzmann, a political expert at the University of Valparaiso, said Kast was "paying a significant political-social cost given the public rejection of a measure of this nature, yet hoping to reap, at the end of this crisis, a better position in the eyes of the public."

The hikes may fuel social unrest and protests, including by public transport operators, analysts said.

## We trust in the US legal system: Maduro's son

AFP  
Caracas

Ousted Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro's son, whose father faces a second hearing before a New York court Thursday, told AFP he trusts the US legal system but that the case was tainted by his parents' "kidnapping."

"We trust in the legal system of the US," Nicolas Maduro Guerra, a lawmaker who is also known as "Nicolasito" or "Little Nicolas", said in Caracas.

But he added: "This trial has vestiges of illegitimacy from the start, because of the capture, the kidnapping, of an elected president in a military operation."

He said his father had "worldwide immunity" under international law, as he joined hundreds of Maduro supporters in a Caracas square where a giant screen carried live coverage of court proceedings.

"Freedom for Cilia and Nicolas!" chanted the crowd.

Maduro and wife Cilia Flores - Nicolasito's step-mother - have been held in a Brooklyn jail for almost three months, after American commandos snatched the pair from their compound in Caracas in a nighttime raid in January.

The brazen operation deposed the strongman who had led Venezuela since 2013, and has since forced the oil-rich country to largely bend to US President Donald Trump's will.

Maduro has declared himself a "prisoner of war" and pleaded not guilty to the four counts he faces: "narco-terrorism" conspiracy, cocaine importation conspiracy, possession of machine guns and destructive devices, and conspiracy to possess machine guns and destructive devices.

Trump said yesterday that "other cases are going to be brought" against Maduro, without giving more details.



Supporters of Venezuela's ousted president Nicolas Maduro demonstrate with a poster of him and his wife Cilia Flores reading "We want them back" and Venezuelan national flags in Caracas yesterday. (AFP)

## Health situation in Cuba 'deeply concerning': WHO

AFP  
Geneva

The WHO chief said on Wednesday the health situation in Cuba was "deeply concerning" as the US fuel blockade deepens the island's energy crisis. "Health should be protected at all costs and never be at the mercies of geopolitics, energy blockades and power outages," World Health Organisation (WHO) director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on X.

"The situation in Cuba is deeply concerning as the country struggles to maintain health service delivery at a time of immense turbulence, leading to energy shortages that have been affecting health."

Cuba's ageing electricity generation system is in shambles, with daily power outages of up to 20 hours the norm in parts of the island, which lacks the fuel needed to generate power.

But since the US ousting of

Cuba's top ally, president Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela, on January 3, the island's economy has been hammered further as Trump maintains a de facto oil blockade.

No oil has been imported to the island since January 9, hitting the power sector while also forcing airlines to curtail flights to the island, a blow to the all-important tourism sector.

He said reports showed that Cuban hospitals have been struggling to maintain emergency and intensive care services.

"Thousands of surgeries have been postponed during the last month, and people needing care, from cancer patients to pregnant women preparing for delivery, have been put at risk due to lack of power to operate medical equipment and cold chain storage for vaccines," Tedros said.

"Cuba's hospitals, clinics and ambulances are needed now, more than ever, and must be supported to perform their lifesaving work."

# Taiwan says next US arms purchase is on track after guarantee

Reuters  
Taipei

Taiwan Defence Minister Wellington Koo said yesterday the next arms sale package from the United States is on track after the government received a letter of guarantee from Washington, even as the US and Chinese leaders prepare to meet in May.

A major US arms package for Taiwan worth about \$14bn that includes advanced interceptor

missiles is ready for US President Donald Trump's approval and could be signed after his upcoming trip to China, Reuters reported this month, citing sources briefed on the discussion.

But Trump has postponed that trip, originally scheduled for early April, due to the Middle East war, and is now due in Beijing May 14-15.

Taiwan, which China views as its own territory, is sure to be a topic, especially after Chinese President Xi Jinping told Trump in a call last month that the US must "carefully" handle arms sales to the demo-

cratically-governed island.

Asked by reporters at Taiwan's parliament whether the Trump-Xi meeting would impact US arms sales, Koo said the government had already received a letter of guarantee indicating the US is willing to authorise the next deal.

"We have also been in close communication with the US Department of War's Defense Security Cooperation Agency regarding its willingness to provide and sell this to us, including guidance concerning the items, the amount, and the transaction," he added,

without offering details.

The package is still undergoing an internal US review and Taiwan has not received any notification about delays, Koo said.

The US State Department, which generally handles queries about government policy towards Taiwan, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

China has repeatedly demanded Washington end arms sales to Taipei, the last of which in December was worth \$11bn, the largest ever for Taiwan.

A Chinese defence ministry

spokesperson yesterday urged Washington to handle Taiwan with "extreme caution".

"The US should fully recognise the high sensitivity and serious harmfulness of the issue of arms sales to Taiwan," spokesperson Jiang Bin told a regular press briefing in Beijing. Taiwan's opposition-dominated parliament is continuing to debate President Lai Ching-te's \$40bn in extra defence spending, though it has already authorised the government to sign US agreements for four arms sales packages worth some \$9bn before

the budget is passed.

Koo said the government was talking to the US about possibly deferring payment or reducing the initial payment given he could not predict when parliament may approve the funds.

The US is Taiwan's most important international backer and weapons supplier, despite the lack of formal diplomatic ties, and is bound by law to provide the island with the means to defend itself.

Taiwan has faced stepped-up Chinese military pressure in recent years, including war games.

# South Korea to roll out \$17bn 'wartime' budget

AFP  
Seoul

South Korea aims to roll out a \$17bn "wartime" supplementary budget and expand fuel tax cuts as the war in Iran pushes up energy prices, the government said Thursday.

Officials aim to "draw up a supplementary budget worth 25 tn won next month - funded by excess tax revenue - in response to the prolonged Middle East conflict", the government said in a statement.

Budget minister Park Hong-keun also said the bill aims to support small and mid-sized firms and vulnerable households hit by the prolonged war.

"We will first ease the burden on citizens caused by high oil prices and support the smooth implementation of an oil price cap system to stabilise domestic fuel prices and reduce fuel costs," Park said.

Han Byung-do, the ruling Democratic Party's floor leader, said it and the government would accelerate their review of the budget bill in the National Assembly, stressing there was "no

reason for any delay".

President Lee Jae Myung earlier urged the government to prepare a supplementary budget aimed at steadying the economy, supporting impacted industries and strengthening supply chain resilience.

To ease the impact of rising energy prices, fuel tax cuts will also be expanded - to 15% from 7% on gasoline and to 25% from 10% on diesel, the finance ministry said in a separate statement.

Lee said yesterday the ongoing energy crunch could "impose unexpected burdens and inconvenience across people's daily lives".

Given that global supply chains are "far more complex" than before, it is "nearly impossible to pinpoint where risks lie and how far their impact may spread", he added.

He urged the public to actively take part in "small" efforts to relieve pressure on fuel supplies, such as using public transportation.

Yesterday's announcement came days after the energy ministry issued guidelines urging the public to conserve energy.

It entailed a total of 12 recommendations, including taking shorter showers, walking or

cycling for short distances, and charging mobile phones during daytime hours.

It also recommended using washing machines and vacuum cleaners only on weekends, if possible, and switching off unnecessary lights.

The energy crunch from the Middle East crisis is "grave", and "there are limits to what the government can do alone", energy minister Kim Sung-whan said in a statement.

He asked the public to "actively participate - even if it entails some inconvenience".

Much of South Korea's imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz, a critical shipping route that has been effectively shut by Iran since the US and Israel began attacking the country on February 28.

South Korea's ruling party said last week officials would lift a cap on coal-powered generation capacity set at 80% and boost the use of nuclear power to about the same level.

The disruption along the key oil route has sent prices soaring and prompted Seoul to impose a fuel price cap for the first time in nearly 30 years.

# Belarus leader seals friendship treaty with North Korea's Kim

By Mark Trevelyan  
Reuters

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko signed a friendship treaty on yesterday with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and presented him with an automatic rifle at a summit between two of Russia's main allies in its war with Ukraine.

"Just in case enemies appear!" Lukashenko joked - drawing laughter from Kim, who examined the weapon with interest and tried out the reloading mechanism. In return, he gave his guest a vase made of shells, with an inlaid image of Lukashenko.

The summit in Pyongyang brought together two leaders, both under international sanctions, who have provided crucial backing for Russian President Vladimir Putin in the four-year war.

Kim has provided Moscow with millions of rounds of ammunition and sent troops to help Russia expel Ukrainian forces who seized part of its western Kursk region in 2024.

Lukashenko allowed Belarus to be used as a launchpad for Russia's invasion in February 2022, and subsequently agreed to host



Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un attend a signing ceremony in Pyongyang, North Korea, yesterday. (Reuters)

Russian tactical nuclear missiles on its territory, which borders three Nato alliance countries.

Lukashenko's visit to Pyongyang - the first in his 33-year rule - highlighted a diplomatic balancing act, as he strengthens links with countries friendly to Russia and hostile to the West while trying to normalise relations with the US.

His trip followed a meeting last week with US President Donald Trump's envoy John Coale and the release of 250 political prisoners in return for a further easing of US sanctions on Belarus.

Belarusian state news agency

Belta quoted Lukashenko as telling Kim that relations between their countries were entering a "fundamentally new stage".

It quoted Kim as saying the two sides shared joint positions on many issues, and that "we oppose undue pressure on Belarus from the West".

The two countries have a small volume of bilateral trade but share long experience of surviving under sanctions - North Korea because of its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes and Belarus over its human rights record and backing for Putin in Ukraine.

## US cleared non-dollar payments for Russian naphtha: Seoul

South Korea has confirmed with the US that it can pay for Russian oil products, including naphtha, in currencies other than the dollar without facing secondary sanctions. Yang Ki-wook, director general of the Office of Industry, Trade and Resource Security at the trade ministry, said late on Wednesday. The clarification removes a key hurdle to imports after Washington temporarily eased enforcement to curb global oil price spikes amid the Iran war, allowing Korean firms to more actively consider Russian naphtha purchases. LG Chem CEO Kim Dong-chun thanked the government yesterday for supporting the purchase and payment of Russian naphtha and called for a national stockpiling system to stabilise supplies during emergencies, the Blue House said. (Reuters)

## Australia, Germany deepen defence ties

Australia and Germany agreed yesterday to simplify hosting each other's troops and co-operate on space defence during a visit by German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius to Canberra.

Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles said the two countries would sign a status of forces agreement making it "much easier for our defence forces to operate from each other's countries".

Australia will join Germany's plan to build an "early warning system for space", which Pistorius said was a response to Russia and China's growing capability to blind and destroy satellites.

Germany intends to deploy an "independent global network of surveillance sensors" to defend its systems, he added.

Australia will also add missiles from German company TDW to its expanding domestic manufacture of guided weapons, designed to hedge against shortages in the Indo Pacific as the Ukraine and Middle East conflicts strain global supply.

Pistorius has emphasised shared interests among mid-sized countries in Europe and the Indo Pacific to "uphold international rules", and protect trade routes, energy supplies and security, while visiting Japan, Singapore and Australia this week.

"Security in Europe and security in the Indo Pacific are two sides of the same coin," he said in a speech at the National Press Club in Canberra, where he highlighted Beijing's support of Russia's war in Ukraine.

The US and Israel's war with Iran is an example of how international rules have come into question, he



Germany's Defence Minister Boris Pistorius (right) walking with Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles in Parliament House in Canberra, yesterday. (AFP)

said, adding the immediate focus must be how to end the war. "We don't want to get sucked into that war," he said.

"What concerns me the most about that war is there was no consultation, there is no strategy, there is no clear objective and the worst thing from my perspective is there is no exit strategy," he said.

Germany would potentially be willing to join an operation to secure navigation in the Strait of Hormuz after a ceasefire, he said. (AFP)

## Iran allowing Malaysian vessels to pass in Strait, PM says after talks with regional leaders

Reuters  
Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said yesterday he had spoken to the leaders of Iran, Egypt, Turkiye and other regional countries and said Malaysian vessels were now being allowed to pass through the Strait of Hormuz.

Anwar in a televised address thanked Iran's president for allow-

ing the passage of Malaysian ships.

"We are now in the process of releasing the Malaysian oil tankers and the workers involved so that they may continue their journey home," he said.

Anwar said he talked with Iran and other countries as part of efforts to facilitate peace in the Middle East.

"But it is not easy, as Iran feels it has been deceived repeatedly and finds it difficult to accept steps toward peace without a clear and

binding security guarantee for their nation," he said. Malaysia's government would maintain oil price subsidies but is taking steps to weaken the impact of supply disruptions, he said, including reductions in the monthly allocations of subsidised fuel.

"For us now, we are compelled to manage the situation because the effects of the blockade at the Strait of Hormuz, the war, and the halted supply of oil and gas all have an impact on us," he said.

## China warns US against building ammunition facility in Philippines

AFP  
Beijing

China warned the US yesterday against bringing "conflict and the chaos of war" to the Asia-Pacific, after Washington and its allies said they would weigh building a weapons base in the Philippines.

A US-led intergovernmental defence group agreed last week to assess funding for a new ammunition assembly and production line in the Philippines, ac-

ording to a joint statement.

The decision was made by the 16 members of the Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience (PIPIR), which also includes Britain, Australia, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines.

China's foreign ministry warned yesterday that a potential ammunition facility would destabilise the region and "backfire".

"The US and its allies should earnestly respect the common aspirations of regional countries... and refrain from introducing bloc confrontation, conflict and the

chaos of war into the Asia-Pacific," ministry spokesman Lin Jian told a news conference.

"If the relevant country is willing to be a powder keg and ammunition depot, it will only backfire on itself," he said, when asked about the potential new facility.

China claims nearly the entirety of the crucial waterway, despite an international ruling that its assertion has no legal basis.

Lin added yesterday that Beijing would "firmly safeguard its territorial sovereignty and security interests".

## Russian oil arrives as Philippines battles 'energy emergency'

AFP  
Manila

A ship carrying more than 700,000 barrels of Russian crude oil has arrived in the Philippines, a source with knowledge of the matter told AFP yesterday, days after the country declared a national energy emergency over the Middle East war.

The purchase, unthinkable before long-time treaty ally the US eased sanctions tied to Russia's war in Ukraine, comes as the import-dependent archipelago scrambles to expand its options in a suddenly volatile oil market.

The Sierra Leone-flagged Sara Sky and its cargo from Russia's ESPO pipeline arrived on Monday, with documents showing the consignee as Petron Corp, operator of the Philippines' sole oil refinery,

said the source, who asked to remain anonymous as they were not authorised to speak to the press.

The Philippines has seen the price of fuel hit historic highs since the US-Israeli war with Iran forced the partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz, with President Ferdinand Marcos saying the country's dwindling stocks could last about 45 more days.

Presidential spokeswoman Claire Castro later confirmed the Russian oil purchase to reporters in a group chat on a messaging app.

An AFP journalist yesterday saw the Sara Sky at anchor in Limay port just outside Manila, where the Petron refinery is located. It is believed to be the first shipment of Russian oil to the country in five years.

Ramon Ang, CEO of Petron, told AFP last week the company

was "in talks" to potentially purchase Russian oil. Ang declined Thursday to confirm the arrival of the shipment.

President Marcos said on Wednesday that the Philippines was casting a wide net in its search for fuel.

"We have not only gone to our... traditional oil suppliers, we have tried to explore other sources that are not affected by the war that is ongoing in the Middle East," he said in a press briefing addressing the state of emergency.

"Nothing is off the table. We are looking at everything, everything that we can do."

Asked about the Russian oil, the Philippines' foreign affairs department told AFP yesterday the country would co-operate with "all possible partners to contribute to regional and global stability, balanced with our duty to protect

and secure Philippine national interests".

The US this month eased some restrictions on sales of Russian crude, allowing countries to purchase oil that was already at sea until April 11.

Ateneo de Manila University economist Ser Pena Reyes said buying the Russian crude - equivalent to about two days of national demand - was a pragmatic move that might help stabilise prices in the short term.

Ongoing geopolitical volatility, however, made Moscow less attractive as a long-term partner, he told AFP.

"Russia can be a useful supplementary supplier... but the Philippines will likely benefit more from a balanced approach, maintaining strong ties with traditional partners while gradually investing in renewable energy and regional en-



The Sierra Leone-flagged Sara Sky, which is carrying crude oil from Russia, is seen anchored at Limay port, Bataan province, yesterday. (AFP)

ergy cooperation," Pena Reyes said.

The Department of Energy on Thursday separately announced the arrival of 142,000 barrels of government-procured diesel, part of its target of "up to 2mn barrels of additional supply for the country", it said in a statement.

Energy secretary Sharon Garin told AFP the shipment had come from Japan.

Earlier in the day, Garin said the department had taken the "proactive step" of activating a 20bn-peso (\$332mn) emergency fund aimed at securing fuel supplies.



## Indians panic-buying fuel despite government assurances

AFP  
Ahmedabad

India's government says there are adequate fuel stocks despite shortages due to the Middle East war, but panicking citizens have triggered long queues at filling stations.

In retaliation for US and Israeli strikes that began more than three weeks ago, Iran has virtually closed the strategic Strait of Hormuz through which one-fifth of the world's oil passes, sending global energy prices soaring.

India, one of the world's largest crude oil importers, relies on foreign suppliers for more than 85% of its oil needs – with Russia being the biggest supplier.

Retail prices in India have, however, held steady, with Prime Min-

ister Narendra Modi's government saying it has "adequate crude inventories" and "sufficient stock of petrol and diesel".

"Don't believe rumours," India's top oil ministry official Sujata Sharma told reporters on Wednesday. "Don't indulge in panic buying."

But several parts of the vast country have witnessed just that nonetheless.

Police guarded fuel depots in the western state of Gujarat after sales reportedly doubled.

Private company employee Ashish Singh said he had to queue for nearly an hour.

"I was given only Rs2,000 (\$21) worth of fuel," he told AFP. "They said no to full tanks."

He was not the only one forced to ration.

"I could only get Rs300 (\$3)

worth of petrol from one station, despite asking for more," said marketing executive Shailesh Prajapati, whose job involves long commutes on his motorbike.

Indian media report similar disruptions elsewhere.

Several pumps in the southern state of Telangana put up "no stock" signs after a surge in sales, the *Hindustan Times* newspaper reported.

Neighbouring Karnataka state also reported unusual queues, *The Hindu* reported, forcing several depots to shut.

Indian state-owned refiners issued statements Wednesday saying "rumours" about fuel shortages were "completely unfounded".

"There is no shortage of petrol or diesel," said Indian Oil Corp Limited, the country's largest oil marketing company.

## Indonesia's military intelligence chief resigns after acid attack on activist

AFP  
Jakarta

The head of Indonesia's military intelligence has stepped down after four members of his unit were arrested over an acid attack on an activist critical of the military's growing role in government, according to a spokesman from the armed forces.

Andrie Yunus, deputy coordinator of the KontraS rights group, suffered serious injuries when two men on a scooter threw acid at him this month while he was riding a motorbike, right after he finished recording a podcast about the military's influence in the Indonesian government.

Four members of the military's

Strategic Intelligence Agency (BAIS) were arrested, and remain in custody.

Police separately announced the arrest of two other suspects, prompting questions on the links, if any, between the six suspects – something the authorities have yet to clarify.

BAIS head Yudi Abrimantyo stepped down on Wednesday in a move military spokesman Aulia Dwi Nasrullah described as a "form of responsibility".

The spokesman did not give further details or specify who would replace Yudi.

UN rights chief Volker Turk has condemned the attack on Andrie as a "cowardly act of violence" and called for a full investigation.

Yesterday, Amnesty International Indonesia said the case was "taking on political undertones"

with "conflicting facts" emerging from police and military probes, which appear to be separate.

It urged President Prabowo Subianto to launch an independent investigation and for the case to be referred to a civilian court.

Amnesty director Usman Hamid told AFP it was unclear what Yudi's resignation meant or where the investigation was headed next.

The Andrie case "is a systematic terror designed to silence critical voices and the constitutional rights of citizens to express their opinions," Usman said in a statement.

Prabowo, an ex-general in office since 2024, has described the attack as "terrorism" and has vowed to "uphold the law" regardless of who was responsible.

# Leaked Nepal report into uprising calls for prosecuting ex-PM Oli

AFP  
Kathmandu

Nepal commission has recommended the prosecution of ex-prime minister KP Sharma Oli in connection to the deadly September 2025 uprising that toppled his government, according to a leaked report.

At least 77 people were killed in the anti-corruption youth uprising on September 8 and 9, which began over a brief social media ban but tapped into longstanding fury over economic hardship.

Four-time prime minister and Marxist leader Oli, 74, was defeated in the polls this month by the 35-year-old rapper-turned-politician Balendra Shah, whose Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) won in a landslide after promising to oust an ageing elite, stem corruption and fix the economy.

The commission's recommendations, set out in a report leaked by Nepali media, came ahead of the swearing-in yesterday of newly elected members of parliament.

"It was decided to recommend to the Government of Nepal that an investigation, inquiry, and prosecution be carried out against the then executive head, Prime Minis-



Newly elected lawmakers taking an oath during a swearing-in ceremony at the parliament in Kathmandu yesterday. (AFP)

ter KP Sharma Oli," reads a copy of the report seen by AFP yesterday.

At least 19 young people were killed in a crackdown on the first day of protests.

Former interior minister Ramesh Lekhak and ex-police chief Chandra Kuber Khapung should also be investigated and prosecuted, according to the recommendations in the report. Lekhak bore "overall responsibility for home administration, security agencies, and maintaining law and order," the report said, adding that he and Oli "did not appear to have made any effort

on the afternoon... to prevent further human casualties".

The report said it was "not established that there was an order to shoot", but "no effort was made to stop or control the firing and, due to their negligent conduct, even minors lost their lives".

The report said victims in 48 out of 63 completed autopsies died of bullet wounds, and that the majority were struck in their chest or head.

The nationwide unrest in September saw the parliament and government offices set ablaze and

led to Oli's ouster.

Former chief justice Sushila Karki took on the role of interim prime minister and established a commission to investigate the violence. The commission's report was submitted this month and protesters have demanded that its findings be released.

Commission member Bigyan Raj Sharma told reporters the team had questioned more than 200 people and submitted a 900-page report – with more than 8,000 additional pages of evidence.

Karki's office said on Wednesday

evening that she would release the report but the official version was not out yet.

The March 5 election returned a new 275-seat lower house of parliament, with the RSP winning a commanding majority of 182.

New lawmakers took the oath of office yesterday in a hall within the newly constructed parliament building.

The national anthem played as RSP's president Rabi Lamichhane and soon-to-be prime minister Shah stood next to each other, before the parliamentarians were sworn in.

### PM-in-waiting Shah raps first post-election message, urges unity

Nepal's rapper-turned-politician Balendra Shah, set to be sworn in as the new prime minister, issued his first post-election message via a rap song yesterday, urging unity.

"The strength of unity is my national power," Shah, better known as Balen, sang in the track, which racked up tens of thousands of views within minutes of being released on social media and streaming sites.

"Undivided Nepal, this time, history is being made," the 35-year-old added, singing in Nepali.

The sharply dressed Shah, who usually sports trademark dark sunglasses, has emerged as a symbol of youth-driven political change and will formally become premier today.

His Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) won March 5 polls in a landslide, the first elections since a deadly youth-led uprising in September 2025. At least 77 people were killed in the anti-corruption protests, which began over a brief social media ban but tapped into longstanding fury over economic hardship.

Shah, who had maintained a public silence since his election victory, delivered a message of solidarity in his track *Jay Mahakaali*.

"My heart is full of courage, my red blood is boiling, my brothers stand with me, this time we will rise," he sang, over a video of him campaigning for election.

"This time, joy and happiness will burst in every home. Like wood from a green forest, I will break whatever comes. May my breath not run out, I will run like a leopard." (AFP)

## Britain authorises military to board Russian shadow fleet tankers

AFP  
London

UK forces will be able to board and seize ships sanctioned as part of Russia's so-called shadow fleet passing through its waters, the government announced Wednesday.

"British military will be able to board shadow fleet vessels transiting UK waters as the UK steps up its pressure" on Russian President Vladimir Putin, Downing Street said in a statement.

London has sanctioned hundreds of vessels suspected of being part of the shadow fleet used by Russia to bypass Western embargoes since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The ships – usually ageing tankers with dubious ownership – are banned from accessing UK ports and services.

"The prime minister has agreed that the UK Armed Forces and law

enforcement officers will now be able to interdict vessels that have been sanctioned by the UK and are transiting through UK waters," Downing Street said.

"The UK will put a further stranglehold on the shadow fleet, closing off UK waters, including the Channel, for sanctioned vessels. This will in turn force operators to either divert to longer, financially painful routes, or risk being detained by British forces."

"Putin is rubbing his hands at the war in the Middle East because he thinks higher oil prices will let him line his pockets," said UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

"That's why we're going after his shadow fleet even harder, not just keeping Britain safe but starving Putin's war machine of the dirty profits that fund his barbaric campaign in Ukraine."

Starmer is due to address a summit of the Joint Expeditionary Force – a UK-led defence alliance of 10 member countries – in Hel-

sinki yesterday.

The move comes as Washington eased restrictions on Russian oil to soften prices sent soaring by the US-Israel war against Iran.

In January, London provided support to Washington during a US operation to seize a Russia-linked oil tanker called the *Marinera* – previously known as the *Bella-1* and accused of flying a false flag.

"Following the detention of a ship, criminal proceedings may be brought against the owners, operators and crew, for breaches of UK sanctions legislation," Starmer's office said.

Each operation under the new approach will be considered by law enforcement and require ministerial sign-off, according to the government.

The UK government says it has sanctioned 544 vessels thought to be part of the shadow fleet – which it claims transports around 75% of Russia's crude.

## UK PM 'very keen' to curb addictive social media after US ruling

UK leader Keir Starmer said yesterday he was "very keen" to tackle addictive features on social media following a landmark US ruling that found Meta and YouTube liable for harming a young woman.

Britain's government is currently considering new restrictions for popular social media apps, as countries around the world grapple with how to keep children safe online.

Starmer said officials would study "very carefully" Wednesday's

decision by a jury in Los Angeles, which found that Meta and YouTube were negligent in the design and operation of their platforms.

The jurors ordered the companies to pay \$6m in damages, including \$3m in punitive damages, holding them accountable for the mental health toll of their design choices.

"The status quo isn't good enough. We need to do more to protect children," Starmer said during a visit to Finland.

"I'm very keen that we do more on addictive features within social media," he added.

The two chambers of Britain's parliament are currently in a stand-off over whether the government should follow Australia and issue a blanket ban on social media for children under 16.

The unelected upper House of Lords voted in favour of prohibiting social media for under-16s for a second time late Wednesday, piling pressure on the government to follow suit. (AFP)

### Britain steps up crackdown on Southeast Asia scam network

The UK has frozen assets including a central London penthouse as part of a growing crackdown on a network of "vile" scam centres operating across Southeast Asia, the government said yesterday.

Largely concentrated in Southeast Asia, the global cyberscam industry has reached "industrial proportions", with estimates of its annual revenues as high as \$64bn, according to the UN Office on Drugs

and Crime. Some of the hundreds of thousands of people carrying out scams in the region are trafficked and held against their will.

Countries across the world have been seeking to crack down on the network.

The latest British measures include an asset freeze on a £9-million (\$12-mn) penthouse in Westminster in central London.

They build on action taken by the

UK and the US last year against Chinese-born Cambodian tycoon Chen Zhi and his Prince Group conglomerate, who are responsible for a "huge network" of scam centres, the foreign ministry said.

Chen was arrested in January and has been extradited to China, which has repatriated thousands to face trial and earlier this year executed at least 15 people linked to compounds in Myanmar. (AFP)

## Bangladesh rescuers recover 24 bodies after bus plunges into river

AFP  
Dhaka

Rescue teams including navy divers in Bangladesh have recovered 24 bodies from a bus that plunged into a river at a ferry crossing, officials said yesterday.

The bus sank into the deep waters of the Padma river in Goalanda on Wednesday, about 65 kilometres (40 miles) west of the capital Dhaka. It had around 50 passengers on board, many

of whom managed to escape.

A fire service report said that 24 bodies, including those of five children, had been recovered by midday yesterday.

Some were pulled out by fire service officers, others by locals who come to help, as well as by the navy divers.

"The bus was waiting to board a ferry, when it fell into the river," said Noor Jahan Begum, 35, who saw the accident.

"Some passengers got out of the bus, but their family members died, trapped inside." Deadly crashes are relatively common

in the South Asian nation, because of poor roads, badly maintained vehicles and reckless driving.

Bangladesh's Road Safety Foundation reported over 200 deaths during the just-concluded Eid holidays. In one incident, a train ramed into a bus, killing 12.

The World Health Organisation says that while reported road traffic fatalities in Bangladesh are around 5,000 a year, it estimates that actual deaths are far higher, at more than 31,500, according to figures from 2023.



Onlookers gather near the scene of an accident involving a bus that plunged into the Padma River in Goalanda in Bangladesh's Rajbari district yesterday. (AFP)



# Know Allah in prosperity, and He will know you in adversity

In his comprehensive advice to Ibn 'Abbaas, may Allah be pleased with him, and all Muslims after him, the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam (may Allah exalt his mention), said: "Know Allah in prosperity, and He will know you in adversity."

This is an invaluable piece of advice for you, dear Muslim, if you wish that Allah, The Exalted, protects you during times of adversity and tribulation, shields you against misfortune and afflictions, and guards your religiosity against temptations that lead you astray. So know Allah at times of prosperity. When a slave of Allah fears his Lord at times of prosperity, honours His boundaries, fulfils His Rights over him, obeys His Commandments, avoids His Prohibitions, and glorifies Him at all times and in all states, he develops a special knowledge of Allah and a love and affection for Him that entail earning His Protection at times of adversity.

If you are enjoying good health and wellness, wealth and richness, safety and welfare, (find) comfort in your family, tranquillity in your marital life, your children are obedient to you, and your affairs are favourably going well, as you wish, then you are indeed relishing prosperity and bliss. This should not hinder you from devoting time to worship, abundantly supplicating Allah, reciting Qur'an and Thikr (expressions of remembrance of Allah), and performing good deeds.

Do not be an ungrateful slave who only knows his Lord and turns to him during times of need and destitution.

Do not be an ungrateful slave who supplicates his Lord (only) when afflictions befall him, then, whenever He bestows upon him a blessing, he forgets Him Whom he once called upon and ascribes equals to Him! Instead, accustom yourself to resort to Allah before adversities befall you. All people are good at turning to Allah during times of adversity and need, even the Arab polytheists (in the early days of Islam), the disbelievers all over the world, and the atheists throughout the history of mankind. Allah, The Exalted, Says (what means) about them: {And when they board a ship, they supplicate Allah, sincere to Him in religion. But when He delivers them to the land, at once they associate others with Him.} [Qur'an 29: 65]

A brother related to us that he once boarded a plane departing from an Arab capital city and heading to Moscow, the capital of atheism in the world. The plane



carried a large number of those who say: "There is no god." During the flight, the plane flew into a thundercloud and was tossed violently in extreme turbulence, so much so that all the passengers were certain of their imminent demise! He said: "Every single passenger on that plane raised his hands asking Allah to save him." Allah, The Exalted, spoke the truth when He Said (what means): {It is He Who enables you to travel on land and sea until, when you are in ships and they sail with them by a good wind and they rejoice therein, there comes a storm wind and the waves come upon them from everywhere and they assume that they are surrounded, supplicating Allah, sincere to Him in religion. "If You should save us from this, we will surely be among the thankful." But when He saves them, at once they commit injustice upon the earth without right...} [Qur'an 10: 22-23]

#### True Heroism

Heroism is not in remembering Allah, The Exalted, at times of need, destitution, adversity, and distress. Everyone is good at that, as we said before. True heroism, rather, is in remembering Him at times of prosperity, showing gratitude to Him for His Blessings, striving to earn His Pleasure (through good doing), fulfilling His Rights, and adhering to the (straight) path

He chose for you.

As for those who do not know their Lord except at times of adversity and forget Him at times of bliss and well-being, Allah, The Exalted, rebuked their behaviour and dispraised them in many verses of the Qur'an. He Says (what means):

{And when adversity touches man, he calls upon his Lord, turning to Him [alone]; then when He bestows on him a favour from Himself, he forgets Him Whom he called upon before, and he attributes to Allah equals to mislead [people] from His way. Say, "Enjoy your disbelief for a little; indeed, you are of the companions of the Fire."} [Qur'an 39:8]

{And when affliction touches man, he calls upon Us, whether lying on his side or sitting or standing; but when We remove from him his affliction, he continues [in disobedience] as if he had never called upon Us to [remove] an affliction that touched him. Thus is made pleasing to the transgressors that which they have been doing.} [Qur'an 10:12]

{And when We bestow favour upon man, he turns away and distances himself; but when evil touches him, then he is full of extensive supplication.} [Qur'an 41:51]

There are many verses to the same effect, and they point to a reality that most of us live. As long as we are relishing well-being, we are heedless of Allah, far from

Him, far from worshipping and obeying Him, and neglectful of supplicating Him. However, the moment an adversity, anguish, disease, or tribulation befalls us, we raise our hands to Him with extensive supplication.

During times of adversity, Allah, The Exalted, only answers the supplications of those who knew Him and turned to Him during times of prosperity. Therefore, accustom yourself to resort to Allah before adversity befalls you, sharpen your arrows (of supplication) before shooting them (to ensure their acceptance), and increase your credit (of good deeds) with Allah, The Exalted, at the time of ease so that you could withdraw from it at times of need and distress.

Ponder over how Allah, The Exalted, treated His slave Yunus ibn Matta (Prophet Jonah), may Allah exalt his mention, when the whale swallowed him. He called upon his Lord while enveloped in three layers of darkness: the darkness of the night, the darkness of the sea, and the darkness of the whale's belly. Allah, The Exalted, Says (what means): {...And he called out within the darknesses, "There is no deity except You; exalted are You. Indeed, I have been of the wrongdoers."} [Qur'an 21:87] Allah also Says (what means): {So, We responded to him and saved

him from the distress. And thus do We save the believers.} [Qur'an 21:88] Allah, The Exalted, clarified the reason for accepting his supplication and saving him from this strange place from which no one ever comes out alive. He Says (what means): {And had he not been of those who exalt Allah, He would have remained inside its belly until the Day they are resurrected.} [Qur'an 37:143-144] This means that if it were not for his abundant remembrance of Allah, supplication, and obedience at time of prosperity, He would not have saved him during times of distress and adversity.

On the opposite end is Fir'awn (Pharaoh), may Allah curse him, who was blessed with Allah's Favours but arrogantly disobeyed Him, disbelieved, and stubbornly failed to show gratitude to Him for His Blessings and Grace. When he was drowning, he supplicated his Lord – just as Yunus did – but the response was drastically different; Allah, The Exalted, Says (what means): {Now? And you had disobeyed before and were of the corrupters?} [Qur'an 10:91] It means, "At the time of prosperity, you disbelieved, turned arrogant and tyrannical, and you forgot your Lord, and therefore, you do not have any credit with Us like the credit Yunus had, so: {...today We will save you in body that you may be to those who succeed you a sign...} [Qur'an 10:92]

The Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Whoever wishes that Allah answers his supplication during hardship and grief, let him supplicate plentifully at times of ease." [At-Tirmithi, and Al-Haakim: authentic]

If you wish that Allah, The Exalted, aids you at the time of misfortune the way you like, then you should devote yourself to Him (in worship and obedience) at the time of prosperity the way He likes. If you wish Allah to know you at the time of adversity, you should know Him at the time of blissfulness and ease, as the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Know Allah in prosperity, and He will know you in adversity." May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon our master Muhammad, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, his family, and his Companions.

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



## Knowledge is the foundation of true fear

Fear is the sensation that results from the anticipation of an expected harm; it is also felt when a person loses, or expects to lose something he cherishes. It is the exact opposite of security and can be applied to worldly matters as well as those of the Hereafter. Fear is a state of disturbance of the heart from an evil or harm that may befall a person, or, it can be the sensation it feels when missing out on something that is beloved to it.

Imam Ibn Qudamah (may Allah have mercy upon him) said:

"Fear is no more than the pain and burning that one finds in his heart due to an expected harm; it is like the example of one who committed a crime and was subsequently caught; such a person will fear being sentenced to death, and the pain which his heart will suffer is dependent on how certain he is that he will (or will not) be sentenced, depending on the severity of his crime ... sometimes one fears the ruler due to the power of the latter. Thus, when one realises the power of Allah and knows that if Allah wished to destroy all His creation it would not affect Him, nor could anyone stop Him from doing so, and therefore, one would fear Allah to the extent of the sins that he has committed. This is the fear of warning."

There is a certain type of fear that is experienced only by the knowledgeable, and it is called *Khashyah* in Arabic, as Allah The Almighty Says (which means):

{"...Only those among His servants fear Allah who have knowledge..."} [Qur'an, 35: 28]

This is fear that is based on knowledge. Ordinary believers experience a general fear of Allah The Almighty whilst *Khashyah* is only experienced by the devout believers and the scholars from among them; the more knowledge one has regarding Allah The Almighty, the more he will fear Him. When one fears a person who may or may not apprehend him then this is an ordinary fear, whereas if he is absolutely sure that this person can seize him and inflict harm upon him, then it is *Khashyah*.

Fear, with its various different meanings, is mentioned in many places in the Qur'an, and its



causes are varied:

\*Fear of being killed or defeated; Allah The Almighty Says (what means):

{“And when there comes to them something [i.e., information] about [public] security or fear...”} [Qur'an, 4:83]

\*Fear during war and hostility; Allah The Almighty Says (what means):

{“... And when fear comes, you see them looking at you, their eyes revolving like one being overcome by death. But when fear departs, they lash you with sharp tongues...”} [Qur'an, 33: 19] 'Fear' in this verse refers to war.

\*Fear resulting from knowledge, as Allah The Almighty Says (which means):

{“But if one fears from the believer [some] error...”} [Qur'an, 2:182]

Allah The Almighty also Says (what means): {“...Unless both fear that they will not be able to keep [within] the limits of Allah...”} [Qur'an, 2: 229] 'Fear' in this verse is due to one's knowledge.

\*Fear due to decrease in numbers, as Allah The Almighty Says (what means): {“Or that He would not seize them gradually [in a state of dread]”} [Qur'an, 16: 47] This is the fear that people feel regarding a decrease in their numbers, which would be the result of them being

killed, or facing death in any other way.

\*Fear of punishment, as Allah The Almighty Says (what means): {“...They [i.e., the believers] supplicate their Lord in fear...”} [Qur'an, 32: 16]

Imam Ibn Qudamah (may Allah have mercy upon him) said: "Know that fear is the whip by which Allah controls His slaves so that they may continue exerting effort in order to come close to their Lord; fear is the light which illuminates the heart and enables it to distinguish good from evil." When a person fears another, he will attempt to flee from him, and this is the case for everyone except Allah; one escapes from Him by fleeing to Him.

Fear does not depart from one's heart except that it causes its ruin, because when fear is present in one's heart, it burns all desires and expels the pleasures of this life from it. Fear causes a person to wake up from his heedlessness and puts him back on the right path after he has diverted from it. Being fearful is not an objective in itself, meaning, we do not feel fear due to any contentment that comes with being afraid, but rather, it should be a means to rectify our condition.

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

## Mannerism of the great Salaf

The Messenger of Allah, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: The believers with the most complete eemaan are those with the best character, who have the best conduct and are humble and who easily get along and are easy to get along with and there is no good in one who neither gets along or isn't gotten along with. (At-Tabaraani – hasanahu Al-Albaani, Silsilatul-Ahaadeeth As-Saheehah #751, pp. 389)

Umar bin Hafsa said: "Umar bin Abdul-'Aziz said to me, 'If you hear a word from a Muslim, then do not think evil of its meaning, as long as you could find a good explanation for it.'"

Surely he who loves people to treat him kindly, should treat them the same way he wishes they would treat him. Moreover, when one thinks of others the same way he thinks of himself, he will realise his own shortcomings and faults and will be compelled to correct them.

Bakr bin Muhammad bin Abdullah said: "If you witness your brethren being generous and honouring you, then say to yourself, this is a virtue that they have earned. If you see them fall into a shortcoming, then say to yourself, this is due to an error I have committed."

Abdullah bin Zaid al-Jarni said: "If a shortcoming (that a brother of yours fell into) reaches you, try hard to find a good explanation for it. Otherwise, if you do not find a good explanation, say to yourself that maybe, my brother has an excuse I am not aware of."

It should be remembered that this life is full of shortcomings and that friends make mistakes sometimes, either by committing sin or by erring with their friends and brothers. When a friend of yours commits a sin and insists on it, it is incumbent on you to advise him softly so that he refrains from the sin, returns to correctness and becomes aright and pious again. Soft admonishment using kind words and reminding one of Allah are all basis of good advice.

Sufyan Ath-Thauri said: "I asked S'ad bin Kudam, 'Do you like that someone gives you a present consisting of errors?' He said, 'Yes if it is coming from someone who is advising, but not from someone whose purpose is to admonish.'" When Abu Dardaa, radiallahu 'anhun, passed by a man who was being admonished by others because he committed a sin, he asked them: "If you found this fellow in a well, would you rescue him from it?" They said, "Yes." Abu Darda said, "then do not admonish him and praise Allah that He has saved you from his sin." They asked, "Should we hate him?" He said, "No. Hate his sin and if he abandons it, he again becomes my brother."

Moreover it was reported about two brothers from our salaf that one of them abandoned the path of righteousness and his brother was asked if he would shun him. He replied: "What he needs from me the most, now that he has fallen into sin, is that I take his hand, advise him softly and invoke Allah that he returns to the way he was before."

To continue we mention here a good statement by Imam Abu Haatim: "The wise person is required to use good conduct with people to abandon ill manners. Verily, good mannerism dissolves errors, just as the sun dissolves ice,

while ill conduct spoils the deeds, just as vinegar spoils honey. One might have many aspects of good mannerism mixed with some ill behaviour, but the little ill behavior spoils his otherwise substantial good mannerism."

Good mannerism requires forbearance and graciousness when one has to confront people or is confronted in public. Once when 'Ali Ibn Al-Husain entered a masjid, a man cursed him, prompting the people to want to punish him. 'Ali asked them to leave the man alone and said to him: "What Allah has covered from you of my errors is more than what has been uncovered! Is there anything I could help you with?" That man felt ashamed, and 'Ali gave him a robe he had and a thousand dirhams. The man used to describe 'Ali bin Al-Husain, the son of Husain, radiallahu 'anhun, the grandson of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, by saying, "This is a descendant of the Prophets ('alaihims salaam)!"

Habib al-Jallab said: "I asked Ibn al-Mubarak, 'What is the best gift that was given to mankind?' He said, 'A wise mind.' I said, 'If one did not have that?' He said, 'Good conduct.' I said, 'And if one did not have that?' He said, 'An advising friend whom he seeks his council.' I asked, 'If one did not have that?' He said, 'Long periods of silence.' I asked, 'If one did not have even that?' He said, 'Then a swift death!'"

Another good indication of the salaf's mannerism is that when they wanted to advise someone, they would do it in confidence. One of our salaf one said: "When someone advises his friend in confidence, it will be an advice, but if he advises him in public, he will have exposed him."

Furthermore, Al-Fudhail bin 'Iyaad said, while explaining the difference between advising and publicly exposing others: "The believer advises in confidence, while the wicked exposes and shames."

Abu Dardaa, radiallahu 'anhun, said: "It is better to advise your friend than severing relations with him, for no one can take the place of your friend if you lose him. Be generous and lenient with your friend, and do not allow an envious person to come in between you and him, for in this case, your friend might die tomorrow and you grieve for him. However, how could you grieve for him after he dies when you have shunned him when he was still alive?"

Yahya bin Mu'adh explains the role a good friend plays in his friend's life:

"Your brother is he who makes you aware of your errors, and your friend is he who warns you against sinning."

Al-Khalil bin Ahmed, a scholar of the Arabic language, teaches us the types of people and the benefit we could present to them: "Men are four types. There is a man who knows, but is not aware that he knows; this type is unaware and you need to alert him. There is a man who does not know and knows that he does not know; this type is ignorant and you should teach him. There is a man who knows and knows that he knows; this type is a scholar, so learn from him. There is a man who does not know, but is unaware that he does not know; this type is wicked so beware of him."



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# Iran war speeds tie-up between tech start-ups and US military

The Mideast war has highlighted the newfound alliance between the tech sector and the US military after decades of strained relations, displaying a synergy that investors see as a potential gold mine. For the first time, the usual military-industrial pillars like Lockheed Martin and Boeing are being joined by rising tech giants Palantir, Anthropic and Anduril in helping to keep the US war machine ticking.

Tech firms are increasingly involved in helping the military with everything from cloud computing to AI-powered drones. Maven, Palantir's data analytics platform, has been used extensively in the offensive against Iran, as has Anthropic's artificial intelligence.

Anduril's president, Matthew Steckman, said Monday that it was providing "one of the main defense systems" against Iran's low-cost, long-range Shahed drones. The company recently announced a 10-year, \$20bn contract with the US military. Palantir's chief Alex Karp called the developments "a huge shift in Silicon Valley."

"When we started Palantir," he said this month, "we couldn't get funding" because the company was still too focused on civilian applications for its technology.

Employee revolts at Microsoft, Amazon and Google in the late 2010s helped keep those giants out of the military market. Google ended up relinquishing the Maven contract in 2018, with Palantir getting onboard in 2024. But times have changed.

Investors and tech companies have now "moved from being hostile to skeptical to neutral, from neutral to positive on the idea that Silicon Valley, like every other part of industry has to support the war fighter," Karp said. In 2025, private equity invested a record \$49bn in defence technology companies, nearly double the previous year's \$27bn, according to the specialized website PitchBook.

That shift relates to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and worries about China's ambition to take over Taiwan, said Merritt Ogle, chief operating officer at the Silicon Valley Defense Group, which promotes closer ties between the two sectors.

"When you start to think about protecting democracy and protecting freedom and protecting things that I think a lot of the countries that are allied with the US appreciate," she said, the concept that "all defense is bad becomes a harder argument to make."

Generative AI technology has revived some concerns, however. Anthropic has refused to allow its systems to be used by the Pentagon for mass surveillance, prompting the Trump administration to brand the trailblazing company a "supply chain risk" -- even as Anthropic's AI systems continue to be used for fighting in the Mideast.

Behind the shift has been a wider recognition among military and political leaders that the United States "needs to tap into a broader innovation base for national security," said Mark Valentine, head of defense strategy at Skydio, a maker of autonomous drones. Funding has never been an issue for the US military, which has the world's largest defence budget by far, amounting to \$962bn for the 2026 fiscal year.

Almost all of that funding has historically gone to the usual major suppliers. For about a decade, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, the Pentagon has launched numerous initiatives to foster the development and adoption of new technologies.

"There's a broader understanding that maintaining a technological edge depends on integrating the best capabilities and doing it faster than we have in the past," Valentine said. Several programs have been initiated to strengthen ties with the private sector, and "the government has seemingly shown a lot more appetite to support earlier stage companies," said Drew Wandzilak, principal of the strategic tech fund at the private equity firm Alumni Ventures. The widespread use of drones and missiles in the Ukrainian conflict and the Mideast war has shown that having "the most expensive, most exquisite system was no longer a differentiator," Wandzilak said. "It's a volume game, and so there's competition on volume, there's competition on capacity. And I think ultimately it's a mix of the two." — AFP

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# Ukraine faces new Russian offensive as peace talks stall

- Russian attacks take aim at Ukraine's eastern 'Fortress Belt'
- Offensive comes as Iran war diverts US attention and resources
- Kyiv hopes to slow Russian gains with new capabilities

By Dan Peleschuk  
Reuters

Ukraine will aim to repel Russia's new springtime offensive along the front line during a breakdown in US-backed peace talks by building on recent tactical successes and battlefield innovations like mid-range strikes.

The focus of the widely anticipated campaign is the so-called "Fortress Belt" of heavily defended cities in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, which Moscow has repeatedly demanded Kyiv relinquish in return for peace.

Over the last week, Russia has launched a battalion-size assault northeast of Sloviansk, the belt's northern anchor, and smaller attacks near the cities of Pokrovsk and Kostiantynivka, on its southern end, seeking to create conditions for a broader offensive, the US-based Institute for the Study of War (ISW) said.

Authorities in Sloviansk announced the evacuation of children from the city as Russian forces advanced just 20km east -- a sign of the deteriorating security situation.

Though Russian forces outnumber Ukraine's, improved tactical assaults by Kyiv and its evolving drone strike capability could slow Moscow's gains, said Rob Lee, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a Philadelphia-based think tank.

"Russia still has enough manpower to keep advancing this year," said Lee. "How far they're going to get is an open question."

Kyiv's forces enter spring having clawed back some territory on the southeastern front in a rare battlefield win last month -- helped on by Elon Musk's crackdown on Russia's

use of his Starlink internet service which has disrupted its military communications.

Ukraine said it has begun eliminating more troops than Russia is recruiting, a key part of new Defence Minister Mykhailo Fedorov's technology-driven, metrics-focused war plan. Russia dismisses Ukrainian claims about its losses.

The intensification in fighting comes as war in Iran has diverted US attention away from its mediation of peace talks and has replenished Russia's state coffers thanks to a jump in oil prices.

The Middle East war is also draining supplies of US air-defence weapons that Ukraine relies upon to defend its cities, energy infrastructure and military sites.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's finances look precarious after Hungary blocked a 90bn euro EU loan this month, and the military is still struggling to recruit enough soldiers for the front.

**MULTI-FRONT BATTLE**

Russia's grinding winter gains included nearly all of the former eastern logistics hub of Pokrovsk, where Ukrainian officials said Moscow lurched forward at great human cost.

Yevhen Lasiychuk, commander of Ukraine's 7th Rapid Response Corps overseeing the sector, said there were no immediate signs that Russia was massing for a major new assault there.

Instead, he added, any push for the Fortress Belt would likely combine attacks around Pokrovsk with sieges of nearby Kostiantynivka and Sloviansk in order to "shake" multiple axes.

"They'll try to break our battle formations, rupture them where there's a weak point, and then exploit that," Lasiychuk said in a recent interview.

"The tactics haven't changed - we understand them"

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that Russia was taking advantage of warmer weather to intensify its offensive efforts.

Ukraine's General Staff said Russian forces had carried out more than 600 assaults over four days last week on several parts of the front line - including 163 near Pokrovsk and 84 near Kostiantynivka.

Valery Gerasimov, the chief of Russia's General Staff, said last week that Moscow's offensive was "underway in all directions" and aimed at the cities of Sloviansk, Kramatorsk and Kostiantynivka.

Emil Kastehelmi of Black Bird Group, a Finland-based security and intelligence analysis team, said recent attacks in northern Donetsk had involved a significant number of armoured vehicles, whose use has been made rarer by their vulnerability to drone attacks.

That was a sign that Russia was looking to punch through the front line and increase the pace of its gains, he added.

"Generally, it hasn't been successful," Kastehelmi said, adding that drone dominance of the battlefield had neutralised armoured advances. "Russia will probably continue advancing a few hundred square kilometres per month, but the general dynamics, I don't see them changing."

ISW, in a recent report, said it also expected to see only "some tactical gains" by Russia around the Fortress Belt in 2026, rather than a major breakthrough.

In the southeastern Zaporizhzhia region, Moscow's troops are crawling forward across lowlands around 70km east of the regional capital. There, Kyiv faces the daunting task of defending swathes of

open land, unlike the densely packed cities of the east.

"Zaporizhzhia is the steppe... where there are no geographic obstacles that might hinder the enemy's advance or allow us to hide easily," said Oleh Shyriaiev, commander of the 225th Separate Assault Regiment, whose unit was deployed around the strategic town of Huliaipole this winter to help stem sudden Russian advances.

Russian troops are also attempting to press through a narrow corridor just 20km south of heavily industrialised Zaporizhzhia city.

**MODEST GAINS AND MID-RANGE STRIKES**

Ukrainian battlefield advances last month, which the government said totalled around 400 sq km, were modest but sent a clear message to Russia, said Vladyslav Urubkov, head of the military department at Come Back Alive, a leading Ukrainian charity which helps equip the army.

For the first time since summer 2024, Kyiv's troops regained control over more territory last month than Russian forces captured, Ukrainian officials said. Russia says it captured 6,000 sq km overall in 2025.

"It reminds them that they are not (an) absolute power and they have also weaknesses, and we see those weaknesses and we can use them," said Urubkov, citing what he said was low morale and poor training of Russian troops.

He added that Kyiv would need to concentrate larger, well-prepared forces if it wanted to achieve bigger breakthroughs elsewhere.

Lee, the FPRI fellow, said Ukraine's counterattacks were driven largely by battle-hardened units whose integration of drones during assaults could offer broader lessons in exploiting Russian gaps.

Kyiv's intelligence services, together with its Unmanned Systems Forces, have meanwhile stepped up long-range strikes on strategic Russian targets like oil depots and refineries, as well as weapons and missile manufacturing sites.

Ukraine is also expanding its mid-range drone strike abilities, allowing battlefield units like those in Lasiychuk's sector to target personnel and, critically, logistics at a distance of 50 km or more.

"It doesn't matter whether it's an ammunition depot or food storage -- both are critical targets," Lasiychuk said. "A soldier won't fight without food."

He added that new coordination among drone units in his corps has also allowed forces to plan better and assign targets more efficiently.



New recruits of the 65th Separate Mechanized Brigade of the Ukrainian Armed Forces attend a military training near a frontline, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Zaporizhzhia region, Ukraine. (Reuters/File Photo)

## Pakistan resumes military operations against Afghanistan after ceasefire ends

Reuters  
Islamabad

Pakistan's military resumed operations against Afghanistan after a temporary pause, Pakistan's foreign ministry said yesterday, dashing hopes of a permanent ceasefire.

Pakistan and Afghanistan's worst fighting in years erupted last month, claiming heavy human losses on both sides.

Kabul said more than 400 people were killed in a Pakistani air strike on a drug rehabilitation centre in the Afghan capital last week before the neighbours suspended fighting.

Pakistan rejected the Taliban's statements about the strike, saying it had "precisely targeted military installations and terrorist support infrastructure".

A pause in hostilities was announced for Eid al-Fitr, which is-

lamabad says was also requested by Turkiye, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

"The pause has concluded midnight between, I think, 23rd and 24th March," said Tahir Andrabi, the spokesperson at a weekly foreign ministry briefing in Islamabad.

He said the operations would continue until the objectives are achieved, and until the Afghan Taliban administration reviewed what he called its misplaced priority of supporting terrorist infrastructure.

Islamabad accuses the Afghan Taliban of harbouring and supporting militants who carry out attacks inside Pakistan. Kabul denies it, saying the militancy is Pakistan's domestic problem.

Trade at the main border crossings between the two neighbours has been suspended since the Pakistani military launched its first air strikes in October.

Torkham border crossing in northwest Pakistan was temporarily opened yesterday for hundreds of Afghan refugees to go back home, officials said.

"We have been stranded here for at least a month and a half," Zabi Ullah, an Afghan refugee who was waiting for the border to open, told Reuters TV. "There are also sick relatives with us."

Pakistan has hosted over two million Afghan refugees sheltering from successive cycles of war in Afghanistan over the decades.

Islamabad wants all Afghan nationals to leave - except for those who have valid visas - saying they had been involved in militant attacks and other crimes.

Pakistan's repatriation drive is part of a campaign called the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan launched in late 2023.

The United Nations calls sending the refugees back a violation of international obligations.

## Tanker carrying Russian oil hit by drone in Black Sea near Turkiye

Reuters  
Istanbul

A marine drone struck a crude oil tanker that had departed Russia, causing an explosion in the Black Sea near Istanbul's Bosphorus strait yesterday, Turkiye's transportation minister said.

The incident, one of several in recent months involving Western-sanctioned vessels heading to or from Russian ports, occurred in the early hours, minister Abdulkadir Uraloglu told broadcaster Kanal 24.

All 27 crew were safe, he said, adding that the coastguard had been dispatched to the vessel, the Altura, which was about 18 nautical miles (33km) from the Bosphorus, a key commodities-shipping channel linking the Black Sea with the Marmara and the Mediterranean.

The attack, just outside Turkiye territorial waters, likely aimed to disable the engine room in the Sierra Leone-flagged vessel that was carrying Russian oil, Uraloglu said.

Ship-tracking and Refinitiv AIS data showed the vessel had left Russia's port of Novorossiysk with about 1 million barrels of crude oil and appeared almost fully laden.

The ship is sanctioned by the European Union and Britain. The Black Sea is shared by Russia and Ukraine, which have been at war for more than four years, as well as other states.

Turkiye's defence ministry said yesterday it was closely monitoring risks posed in the Black Sea by drones, given their extensive use in the Russia-Ukraine war. Risks included drones losing control or mobility, drifting towards the Turkish coast, it said.

"We are talking to our coun-

terparts and conveying necessary warnings to maintain navigational safety in the Black Sea," it said at its weekly briefing without mentioning yesterday's drone attack, and added Turkish naval vessels were patrolling the area to prevent any damage to vessels or civilians.

Late last year, shipping insurance rates rose after Ukrainian naval vessels hit Russia-bound tankers in the Black Sea, prompting Moscow to threaten retaliation and Nato-member Turkiye to urge calm.

Ankara has warned both Kyiv and Moscow against carrying out such attacks near its territorial waters amid the escalation in the Black Sea earlier, which saw Russian and Turkish vessels hit by drones and Ukrainian ports damaged.

There was no immediate comment from Moscow or Kyiv yesterday.

## EU Parliament gives conditional approval to EU-US trade deal

AFP  
Brussels

European Union lawmakers yesterday gave a green light - with conditions - to the bloc's tariff deal with US President Donald Trump, which Europe wants to salvage while it also races to diversify trade ties around the globe.

Brussels and Washington last summer clinched a deal setting tariffs at 15% for most EU goods.

But Trump's 2025 tariff blitz, including hefty levies on steel, aluminium and car parts, jolted the 27-country bloc into cultivating trade ties around the world.

The EU has since signed deals from South America to Australia and continues to pursue others.

That doesn't mean it intends to walk away from its 1.6tn euro (\$1.9tn) relationship with the US, its largest trade partner.

A large majority of EU lawmakers agreed to cut EU tariffs on some US imports - as a first step towards implementing the 2025 deal - but with additional safeguards.

"Today's vote is an important procedural step and a political signal that the EU stands by its word," EU economy chief Valdis Dombrovskis said in a parliamentary debate yesterday before the vote.

EU trade commissioner Maros Sefcovic hailed the move as a "crucial step" and said he would meet



Members of the European Parliament attend a session to vote on legislation to cut import duties for US products, in Brussels, Belgium yesterday. (Reuters)

US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer on the sidelines of a World Trade Organisation meeting in Cameroon today.

US ambassador to the European Union Andrew Puzder also welcomed the vote.

"Thanks to your efforts, we're very close to a significant milestone in the US-EU trade relationship that will lock in transatlantic stability and economic opportunity for our businesses, workers, and consumers," he said on X.

Puzder had previously warned the EU to pass the deal without amendments.

Before the US tariff deal is implemented by the bloc, it still needs to be negotiated with EU states in talks expected to be difficult but which EU diplomats hoped would be concluded quickly.

The green light comes after months of delay as lawmakers resisted approving the accord due to transatlantic tensions over Greenland - and then put it on hold again following the US Supreme Court's ruling striking down many of Trump's levies.

The ball started rolling again after the European Commission, in charge of EU trade policy, said it would stick to the pact despite the US ruling and called on lawmakers to do the same, having received reassurances from Washington.

Trump, however, came up with a new tariff regime after the verdict - pushing EU lawmakers to tighten the existing agreement with numerous safeguards.

They inserted provisions making the EU's tariff reductions automatically lapse in March 2028,

and tying tariff cuts on steel and aluminium goods to similar reductions by the US side. "Let's not be naive. More Trump coercion and chaos will come, and that is exactly why we say today no free pass, no blank cheque," EU lawmaker Kathleen Van Brempt said during yesterday's debate.

It is the EU's vulnerability to the consequences of wars and other shocks that has pushed Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen to make diversifying trading partners a priority, to cut overdependence on the US and China.

The frenzy began with a long-awaited accord signed with the South American Mercosur bloc in January. Weeks later, Brussels struck another pact with India and just this week clinched a stalled deal with Australia.

## Hungary government accuses journalist of spying for Ukraine

Reuters  
Budapest

Hungarian authorities said yesterday they had launched an investigation into a journalist over accusations that he was spying for Ukraine amid an increasingly acrimonious election campaign - allegations dismissed by the reporter.

Nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has kept close ties with Russia during Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, is fighting to extend his 16 years in office in the face of an unprecedented challenge from a centre-right opposition party.

Yesterday, Orban's chief of staff told a briefing that journalist Szabolcs Panyi, who has been investigating the government's ties to Moscow, was a spy working for Ukraine.

"More and more Ukrainian spies are uncovered in the country. The first of them is Szabolcs Panyi, who was discovered ... to have spied against his home country in collusion with a foreign state," Gergely Gulyas said.

Government spokesperson Zoltan Kovacs said a formal investigation has been launched into the journalist. Police did not immediately respond to e-

mailed questions from Reuters.

Panyi dismissed the accusation.

"Accusing investigative journalists of espionage is entirely unprecedented in the 21st century from a European Union member state," Panyi wrote on his Facebook page.

"This is truly characteristic of Putin's Russia, Belarus and similar regimes."

Panyi is an investigative journalist who works for the Hungarian non-profit investigative outlet Direkt36 and Warsaw-based Vsqare.org.

As campaigning has accelerated in the build-up to the April 12 parliamentary election, relations between Budapest and Kyiv have reached new lows.

Orban has cast the election as a stark choice between "war or peace", saying his centre-right opponent would drag Hungary into the war raging next door in Ukraine, an allegation the opposition has firmly denied.

He also repeated accusations that Kyiv and Brussels are interfering in Hungary's election, a charge both reject.

On Monday, Orban ordered an investigation into what he said was the wiretapping of his foreign minister, Peter Szijartó, as his government responded to a media report about its links to Russia.

## G7 meets in France hoping to heal transatlantic Iran rift

AFP  
Abbaye des Vaux-de-Cernay

European and allied nations yesterday looked for ways to narrow differences with the US on the Middle East war as a two-day meeting of G7 foreign ministers got underway outside Paris.

While President Donald Trump says Washington is pursuing diplomacy with Iran while threatening even more intense military action, American allies are hoping that the US will set out its position clearly.

The start of the two-day meeting of seven leading industrialised democracies at the Vaux-de-Cernay Abbey outside Paris yesterday was marked by the absence of US Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

He will join fellow top diplomats from Canada, Germany, Italy, France, Japan and the United Kingdom - but only today.

In contrast to usual protocol, and in a sign of the distance between the US and its allies, there is to be no joint communique at the end of the meeting.

Instead, the G7 presidency, which France holds this year, will issue a statement, a diplomatic source said, asking not to be named.

"I am quite confident that we can define a common position," said German Foreign Minister Johann Wadepuhl before entering the meeting.

"The goal is to end this conflict as quickly as possible, but also sustainably."

He added it was of "great importance" for Germany to know "precisely what our American partners are intending", adding it would be encouraging if the US was holding "direct" talks with Iran.

While all G7 nations are close US allies, none have unambiguously offered support for the assault on Iran, angering Trump.

Trump's threat to hit Iranian energy facilities - now toned down amid the purported talks - has troubled European allies, who have all called for de-escalation and are not engaged militarily in the conflict.

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said there was a "need to exit from the war, not escalate it further".

She also warned that more than four years into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, "attacks of Russia on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure are increasing every day and we can't overlook this".

Kallas also accused Moscow of sharing intelligence with Tehran that was used to target Americans in the Middle East.

"These wars are very much interlinked," she said. The meeting got underway after a morning of bilateral talks with a session on reforming global government.

Sessions on Iran and Ukraine are set for today, according to the schedule.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot is due to hold a news conference later yesterday evening. In a bid to broaden the scope



France's Foreign Affairs Minister Jean-Noel Barrot gives a press conference during the G7 Foreign Ministers' meeting with partner countries in Cernay-la-Ville outside Paris, yesterday. (AFP)

of the elite G7 club - whose origins go back to the first G6 summit held in the nearby Chateau de Rambouillet in 1975 - France has also invited foreign ministers from key emerging markets Brazil and India, as well as Ukraine, Saudi Arabia and South Korea.

France would also host a separate G7 meeting via video call on Monday bringing together finance ministers, energy ministers and central bank governors, Finance Minister Roland Lescure told RTL radio.

The G7 should collectively back efforts to de-escalate the war, Canada's Foreign Minister Anita Anand told AFP, pointing to "problems in the global provisioning chain" due to the almost total closure of the Strait of Hormuz trade bottleneck.

"We must continue to use diplomatic channels to be sure there is a common view not just for a de-escalation but to mitigate the economic shock," said Anand.

## Nato chief Rutte treads carefully between Trump and Europe on Iran

AFP  
Brussels

Nato chief Mark Rutte yesterday attempted to thread the needle between defending US President Donald Trump while justifying Europe's desire to stay out of the US-Israeli war with Iran.

"Iran is an exporter of chaos to the region and to the world for many years now. Let's not be naive about that," the transatlantic alliance's secretary-general told the press.

"And what the US is doing now is degrading that capability. And yes, I applaud that," said Rutte, who has gained something of a reputation as a "Trump whisperer".

## Return hubs vote makes EU migration policy 'more credible': Meloni

AFP  
Rome

Italy's Giorgia Meloni hailed a European Parliament vote yesterday clearing the way for irregular migrants to be deported to hubs outside the EU, saying it signalled "a more credible" migration policy.

"The European Parliament has approved the new repatriation rules: Europe is finally moving in the right direction, along a path Italy has strongly supported," the far-right prime minister wrote on social media.

"Return hubs increase the

Rutte has faced criticism from several European leaders for siding with the US president on a war many experts consider unjustified and illegal, at a time when Trump has slammed Nato's European members as "cowards" for refusing to join the war in the Middle East.

But the former Dutch prime minister insisted that all Nato members shared Washington's assessment of the danger posed by Iran's ballistic or nuclear capabilities, the latter of which Trump claimed to have destroyed in the 12-day war last year.

That said, while Rutte conceded that the Europeans took time to respond to Trump's call to help reopen the strategic Strait of Hormuz, they did so for "good reasons".

The US president's blindsiding of Washington's European allies by striking Iran without warning them was "because they wanted to keep the campaign secret", Rutte argued.

"And again, for good reasons... it's always a risk if you inform too many people that things might leak," the Nato chief added, though he conceded that "that also has the disadvantage that it takes time for the Europeans to get organised".

"The good news now is that thanks to the leadership from... six countries, the UK, France, Italy, and Germany, and Japan, and the Netherlands, then on Friday... by now over 30 countries, have committed to come together to discuss the where and when, when it comes to making sure that the sea lanes stay open," Rutte insisted.

possibility of identifying a repatriation country for irregular immigrants, including not only countries of origin but also third countries. This is an important step towards making repatriations more effective, strengthening border control, and finally giving Europe a more credible migration policy," she added.

Meloni's hard-right government has taken a tough line on the tens of thousands of irregular migrants who arrive each year on Italy's shore on overcrowded boats from North Africa.

Under a flagship scheme, Italy opened migrant processing centres in non-EU Albania in 2024,

but they have largely stood empty due to legal challenges.

European lawmakers yesterday approved a package of measures including a reform allowing for the opening of centres or "return hubs" outside the EU's borders, to which migrants whose asylum applications have been rejected would be sent. It also envisages harsher penalties for migrants who refuse to leave, including through detention and entry bans.

The measures, criticised by human rights groups, are part of a tightening of Europe's immigration rules in response to pressure across the 27-nation bloc to curb migration.

## LuLu chief apprises PM Modi as food supplies to GCC continue from India

Staff Reporter  
New Delhi

India continues to play a crucial role in ensuring a stable and uninterrupted supply of food products to GCC countries. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was briefed by Yusuffali MA, chairman of LuLu Group, on a series of initiatives being undertaken to maintain supply continuity during the current challenging times.

The meeting, held at the prime minister's official residence in New Delhi, focused on ongoing efforts to maintain the availability of essential food items across the Gulf region, which is home to a large Indian diaspora and has strong consumption of Indian-origin food products. Discussions also covered the importance of strengthening supply chain continuity and ensuring price stability during the current global challenges. LuLu Group,

which operates more than 280 hypermarkets across the GCC, is among the major players contributing to food distribution in the region.

Its recent supply chain interventions are seen as part of broader efforts by retailers and governments to ensure there is no disruption in the availability of essential goods, while also helping maintain market confidence and prevent panic buying.

During the interaction, Yusuffali briefed Prime Minister Modi on LuLu Group's recent initiatives aimed at supporting food security across its GCC markets.

The group has been facilitating large-scale imports of both perishable and non-perishable food products (15,000 tonnes till date) through a combination of exclusive chartered flights, cargo vessels, and regular shipping services from multiple locations in India.

According to LuLu Group, 34 dedicated



LuLu Group chairman Yusuffali MA and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

chartered flights have come in so far, and similar numbers are expected to continue in the days to come. These efforts are supported by the group's own sourcing

and export infrastructure across various Indian states, where production and logistics hubs are operating at enhanced capacity to meet international demand.

India continues to be a key trade partner for GCC countries, with Indian agricultural and food products widely consumed by both expatriates and local populations. The ongoing supply initiatives are also providing timely support to India's food and agriculture sector, enabling farmers, producers, and exporters to efficiently move their produce to international markets during this challenging period.

Yusuffali also outlined plans to continue these supply initiatives in the coming weeks, with additional chartered flights and cargo shipments being scheduled to support ongoing demand. Modi acknowledged the importance of such initiatives and assured full support from the Government of India to facilitate the smooth export of food products to GCC countries.

Yusuffali also briefed the Indian PM on the solid efforts taken by the GCC authorities to keep all residents, including Indians, safe, secure, and protected.

# Doha eases back into routine after family-focused Eid holidays

By Joey Aguilar  
Doha

Daily life in Doha is gradually returning to normal after the Eid al-Fitr holidays, following a celebration marked by indoor family outings and quieter evenings instead of large public gatherings.

During the break, indoor amusement spaces and mall-based attractions were among the busiest spots in the city. Children queued for brightly coloured rides, from miniature race cars to spinning attractions, while parents watched from nearby seating areas.

The hum of arcade machines mixed with laughter and music, creating a lively but controlled environment that appealed to families seeking both entertainment and comfort.

Venue operators said the Eid period remains one of their peak seasons, but this year saw a noticeable shift in behaviour. Families tended to stay longer in a single location rather than moving between multiple destinations, turning malls and indoor parks into all-day experiences.

Extended operating hours and bundled ride offers also helped sustain footfall throughout the holiday stretch. A staff member at a major mall said "there's a preference now for convenience at an indoor attraction," noting that "families want everything in one place: rides, food, seating, and they're staying for hours rather than hopping around."

That pattern reflects a broader adaptation in how residents mark Eid in an urban, climate-controlled setting. While traditional visits to relatives and home gatherings



Indoor attractions and festive décor brought life to Doha malls over Eid. Malls and shopping centres also offer comfort and convenience amid rain and thunderstorms.

remained central, many households complemented them with short outings tailored to children's preferences and ease of access.

The concept of a "staycation Eid" was also evident this year, it is learnt. With some residents opting not to travel abroad, hotels, malls and leisure destinations reported steady demand. For many, the holiday became an opportunity to rediscover local attractions, but with caution due to the regional tensions, rather than leave the country.

As the day's activities wound down, attention shifted outdoors, though in a more subdued way than in previous years. In residential districts and lifestyle precincts, families and small groups took evening walks under softly lit street lamps. The pace was unhurried: children on scooters, couples strolling along pavements, and small clusters of friends lingering outside cafes.



Residents take a quiet evening walk along a softly lit street as life in Doha returns to normal after Eid.

Compared to the bustle typically associated with Eid nights, the atmosphere this year leaned toward



A quiet but steady stream of visitors fills an indoor amusement park in Doha. PICTURES: Joey Aguilar

calm and reflective.

Urban planners and sociologists have long noted that Doha's built environment, characterised by mixed-use districts and pedestrian-friendly zones, has gradually reshaped social habits.

Instead of crowding into a few central landmarks, residents now disperse across multiple neighbourhoods, creating pockets of activity rather than a single focal point.

Traffic during the holiday showed this shift. While big shopping malls were crowded during peak hours, nearby residential streets were less congested, especially later in the evening.

Just days after Eid, the transition back to routine is evident as morning traffic picks up again, signalling the return to work, while schools and offices prepare to resume regular schedules. Cafes that extended their hours during the holiday are scaling back, but have become busy during the day.

"We were extremely busy during Ramadan, as a large number of customers thronged the shop at night. Since the start of Eid and onwards, we started receiving more people again during the day," said a supervisor at a popular coffee shop along Airport Road.

However, changing weather conditions have further shaped how residents spend their time, with many choosing to stay indoors as intermittent rain and thunderstorms sweep across Doha.

Over the past few days, heavy downpours and flashes of lightning have disrupted outdoor plans, prompting families to scale back



Children enjoy colourful rides inside a mall-based attraction, reflecting the shift toward indoor family outings.

evening outings and weekend activities. Streets that were previously filled with pedestrians during Eid have appeared quieter, with fewer people venturing out except for essential trips.

Residents said the unstable weather has encouraged a more home-based weekend, with families opting for indoor gatherings, movie nights and small get-togethers instead of visiting parks or open-air destinations. Some cafes and restaurants also reported a slight dip in evening foot traffic, particularly during periods of intense rainfall. Authorities have previously advised motorists to

exercise caution on wet roads, as sudden showers can reduce visibility and cause water to accumulate in low-lying areas. Despite this, traffic has remained generally manageable, with fewer leisure trips contributing to lighter movement in some parts of the city.

Weather forecasts indicate that rain showers may continue over the next two days, with the possibility of thunderstorms in isolated areas.

As a result, many residents are expected to maintain a cautious approach, keeping plans flexible and prioritising safety while the unsettled conditions persist.

## Heavy rains, gusty winds countrywide

From Page 1

Motorists have been advised to avoid sudden overtaking and to apply brakes gradually on wet roads. Ensuring that windshield wipers and vehicle lights are functioning properly is also essential. Drivers are urged to avoid roads affected by water accumulation and to stay away from tunnels and low-lying areas during flooding.

The ministry stressed that driving through puddles poses serious risks and should be strictly avoided. In the event of hail or worsening weather, motorists are advised to pull over in a safe location and remain inside their vehicles. Motorcyclists, meanwhile, have been urged not to ride under such conditions due to increased danger.

At home, MoI said residents are encouraged to remain indoors in safe areas, keep windows securely closed and ensure children are kept away from rooftops and balconies. It also highlighted the importance of avoiding exposed areas and staying clear of glass surfaces during storms.

Electrical safety is another key concern, according to MoI. Resi-



Heavy downpour drenches a neighbourhood street, with water accumulation building up during the storm. PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam

dents are advised not to handle electrical outlets or devices with wet hands and to unplug non-essential appliances during severe weather. Staying away from streetlight poles and electrical boxes was also emphasised.

For those in outdoor settings, including campsite owners, authorities recommended securing tents and belongings and avoiding exposed locations, particularly during strong winds or hail.

The ministry further urged the public to rely only on official information channels and refrain

from sharing rumours or unverified content, noting that responsible behaviour contributes to overall public safety.

Earlier, *Gulf Times* reported that the country was expected to experience heavy rainfall yesterday and today, in line with forecasts issued by the meteorology department.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Municipality stressed that it is ready to respond to rain-related incidents. Water tankers have been deployed at full capacity, while municipalities are closely



Lightning flashes over a rain-soaked Souq Waqif as thunderstorms sweep across Qatar. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil



Vehicles move slowly along a wet Doha road as heavy rain and low visibility disrupt traffic. PICTURE: Thajudheen

monitoring conditions through the Unified Operations Centre. In a statement posted on X yes-

terday, the ministry said it is coordinating with the Meteorology Department, the Public Works



Rainwater pools on a city street, reflecting lights amid ongoing showers and strong winds. PICTURE: Thajudheen

Authority (Ashghal) and other relevant entities to ensure swift responses to public reports, particularly those involving water accumulation.

The coordinated efforts aim to enhance safety for residents and citizens while maintaining smooth traffic flow across affected areas as the country continues to experience unstable weather conditions.