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Sheikh Joaan conveys Amir's condolences to Turkish minister



On behalf of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani offered condolences to Minister of Defence of the Republic of Turkey Yasar Guler on the martyrs of the Qatar Armed Forces helicopter crash from the Qatar-Turkiye joint forces' members, praying to Allah Almighty to grant them His mercy and admit them to paradise, and to grant their families patience and solace. For his part, the Turkish defence minister expressed his sincere condolences on the Qatari martyrs, praising the distinguished strategic relations between the two brotherly countries. HE Sheikh Joaan was accompanied during his visit to Ankara yesterday by HE Sheikh Thani bin Hamad al-Thani. (QNA)

Qatar-US talks focus on defence, energy security

● PM holds high-level meetings in Washington with Vice-President J D Vance, Secretary of Treasury Scott Bessent and Secretary of War Pete Hegseth ● Talks cover strengthening strategic co-operation, defence ties and global energy security ● US commends Qatar's active diplomatic role in promoting regional stability

Staff Reporter
Doha

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani held high-level meetings in Washington with senior US officials, focusing on strengthening strategic co-operation, defence ties, and global energy security amid escalating regional tensions.

According to Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), HE Sheikh Mohammed met with Vice-President J D Vance and Secretary of the Treasury Scott Bessent, where discussions centred on deepening bilateral relations and enhancing co-ordination across multiple sectors, particularly defence, in light of ongoing developments in the region.

Both sides reviewed the close strategic partnership between Qatar and the US and explored avenues to reinforce co-operation that serve their mutual interests. The talks also addressed developments in global energy markets, with an emphasis on ensuring sustainable supply and maintaining the steady flow of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Qatar to international markets.

HE Sheikh Mohammed highlighted the importance of safeguarding global energy security and preserving freedom of maritime navigation in accordance with international law, particularly as disruptions threaten key shipping routes.

For his part, Vance lauded the strength of US-Qatar ties and



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani with US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth in Washington, DC. (QNA)

commended Qatar's active diplomatic role in promoting regional stability and contributing to global energy security. HE the Prime Minister also met with US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth to discuss ways to further advance defence and security co-operation. The meeting focused on enhancing joint co-ordination to address regional challenges and reinforce stability. Both sides stressed the importance of continued co-ordination and consultation on regional issues to promote security and stability locally and internationally.

The diplomatic engagements come against a backdrop of heightened tensions in the Gulf. On Wednesday, Qatar's Cabinet renewed its condemnation of Iranian attacks targeting Qatar and

neighbouring countries, calling for an immediate cessation. The region has been on edge since late February, when a US-Israeli conflict with Iran escalated into a broader confrontation, resulting in significant casualties across multiple countries. Iran has since launched drone and missile attacks targeting Israel as well as Jordan, Iraq, and Gulf states, asserting that US assets are its primary targets.

Regional leaders, however, have warned that such actions endanger civilian populations and risk further destabilisation. The conflict has also triggered a severe global energy crisis, with Iran effectively closing the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint through which roughly one-fifth of the world's oil supply passes.

Ashghal clears 85% of rainwater, field teams on constant readiness

QNA
Doha

The Public Works Authority (Ashghal) said it has cleared about 85% of the 770 rainwater accumulation incidents recorded during the current weather conditions, with operations continuing to address the remainder. Ashghal affirmed that its field teams remain on round-the-clock standby to ensure rapid water drainage and maintain smooth traffic flow, particularly in the most affected areas, including Al Wakra, Al Wukair, the Industrial Area and Mebairrek.

Engineer Mohammed al-Kubaisi of Ashghal's Drainage Networks Operation and Maintenance Department said teams were mobilised at the start of the week in co-ordination with the Ministry of Interior (MoI), represented by the General Directorate of Traffic and the National Command Center, as well as the Ministry of Municipality, to ensure a swift response to water accumulations.

He added that monitoring systems at the Rain Emergency Room, based on data from the Meteorology Department of the Civil Aviation Authority, recorded the highest rainfall accumulations since dawn on Monday in Al Wakra, Al Karaana and Meknes. Al-Kubaisi said teams



Authorities took to sudden action after heavy rains to clear water from the low-lying areas of the city and the surrounding areas. PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam

are working to keep tunnels and main roads clear of water, ensuring the efficiency of drainage networks and the smooth movement of traffic. He noted that more than 370 water tankers and over 44 mobile pumps have been deployed, alongside technical teams in the most affected locations.

For his part, Engineer Mohamed Mabrouk al-Korbi, Monitoring and Control Engineer at Ashghal, said the Rain Emergency Room is continuously monitoring the condition of main roads and tunnels in co-ordination with the National Command Center, municipalities and the General Directorate of Traffic.

He highlighted ongoing co-ordination with the Meteorology Department at the General Authority of Civil Aviation to track weather developments in real time, stressing that techni-

cal teams are working round the clock to keep roads clear and ensure traffic flow. He added that dynamic traffic signs are being continuously updated to guide road users and provide real-time information on road conditions and safety instructions.

He further noted that Ashghal had carried out extensive preventive maintenance ahead of the rainy season, including servicing more than 170,000 drainage inlets, cleaning and maintaining approximately 658km of drainage networks, and maintaining over 16,000 inspection chambers and more than 120 tunnels.

Ashghal urged the public to exercise caution while driving during rainfall and to report water accumulations through the Customer Service Center on 188 or via the "Ashghal 360" application.

'Limit social media exposure to manage anxiety during uncertainty'

By Shaima Sherif
Staff Reporter

Qatar residents should limit constant exposure to social media during regional developments as excessive news consumption can heighten anxiety and impact overall mental well-being, according to clinical psychologist Dr Naif al-Mutawa. Speaking to *Gulf Times* in a recent webinar on wartime stress management, Dr al-Mutawa highlighted the impact of continuous digital exposure on mental health, describing it as a key factor in increasing stress levels.

"We're living in a time where information is constant, and that can easily become overwhelming," he said. "Overexposure can lead to what we call 'psychological flood-

ing', where the nervous system is continuously activated."

Dr al-Mutawa explained that many of the emotional responses people are currently experiencing, including anxiety, irritability, difficulty concentrating and disrupted sleep, are natural reactions to uncertainty. "What most people are experiencing right now is actually very human," he said. "These are not signs that something is wrong with you, but signs that your mind and body are trying to adapt to uncertainty."

He noted that repeatedly checking for updates, particularly distressing content such as videos or breaking news, can amplify anxiety. "When we continuously check for updates or replay distressing scenarios in our minds, we escalate the anxiety," he said. "At some point, more information stops be-

ing helpful and starts increasing stress."

Drawing from personal experience, Dr al-Mutawa emphasised the importance of recognising individual limits in media consumption. "I know for me, certain types of content trigger stress, so I avoid them," he said. "Ask yourself, does checking the news help me or hurt me? If it's hurting you, then you are harming yourself by continuing to engage with it."

Experts recommend setting clear boundaries around news consumption, such as checking updates at specific times rather than continuously. "I usually recommend relying on a few trusted sources instead of endless scrolling," Dr al-Mutawa said. "Stepping away from the news is not avoidance — it is self-regulation." The effects of excessive infor-



Dr Naif al-Mutawa

mation are closely linked to sleep patterns, which play a critical role in emotional stability. "Sleep is often one of the first things affected during stressful periods," he said. "When sleep is disrupted, anxiety increases and our ability to cope becomes weaker."

He warned that habits such as staying up late, particularly during Ramadan, can further impact mental well-being. "Staying up all night is not good for the brain," he said. "It affects mood, concentration and overall resilience."

Maintaining routine, he added, is essential in times of uncertainty. "When everything feels unpredictable, routine becomes your anchor. It helps contain stress and gives structure to your day."

Dr al-Mutawa also highlighted the importance of managing how individuals think about events, not just the events themselves. "People aren't disturbed by things; they are disturbed by the thoughts they have about things," he said. For families, particularly those with children, managing media exposure becomes even more critical. "Children absorb the emotional

tone around them," he said. "If you are anxious, they will feel it. If you are calm, they will feel safe."

He advised parents to explain situations in simple, reassuring terms and avoid exposing children to distressing content. "Use language they understand and keep things grounded," he said. "What you project becomes what they feel."

Dr al-Mutawa added that while uncertainty can be challenging, it can also contribute to long-term resilience. "Resilience develops when people face challenges and realise they can move through them," he said. His message to residents remains focused on control and perspective: "The goal is not to feel calm all the time. It is to stay functional, connected and grounded, even when things feel uncertain."

Amid weather fluctuations, MoECC steps up bid to protect environment



Hamad Salem al-Nuaimi

The director of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC)'s Wildlife Protection Department and head of the Winter Camping Committee, Hamad Salem al-Nuaimi, has affirmed the ministry's commitment to strengthening efforts to protect the environment and ensure the safety of desert visitors and campers amid ongoing weather fluctuations.

He said these efforts are being implemented through integrated plans combining preventative measures, public awareness and enhanced field monitoring.

Al-Nuaimi said that one of the key challenges currently facing the department is responding to sudden weather changes, including strong winds and heavy rainfall, which can hinder field teams' access to certain desert locations.

He stressed the importance of ensuring campers' adherence to safety procedures to mitigate risks to both public safety and the environment.

Al-Nuaimi noted that rainfall has a positive short-term impact on vegetation and natural meadows, contributing to the regeneration of plant cover.

He added that conditions in grazing areas are being closely monitored, with regular reports submitted to the relevant authorities to support timely decision-making.

The official also pointed to intensified monitoring efforts to curb environmentally harmful practices by some visitors.

On preventative measures, he said inspection patrols have been stepped up to ensure compliance with environmental regulations

and safety guidelines, alongside continued coordination with relevant authorities to monitor weather developments and issue timely alerts and guidance through official channels.

Al-Nuaimi urged the public to avoid entering natural meadows or trampling vegetation in order to preserve fragile ecosystems.

He also underscored the importance of raising environmental awareness through ongoing campaigns across media platforms, social media and on-site signage, aimed at promoting responsible behaviour, including maintaining cleanliness, protecting plant life and adhering to official instructions.

Al-Nuaimi urged the public to co-operate and adhere to the issued guidelines, and to contact 16066 for inquiries or assistance. - QNA



Cote d'Ivoire vice-president meets Qatar's ambassador

Cote d'Ivoire's Vice-President Tiemoko Meyliet Kone has met Qatar's ambassador in Abidjan Mubarak bin Hussein al-Marri. During the meeting, they discussed bilateral relations and ways to strengthen co-operation between their countries. - QNA



Shafallah Centre all set for return with enhanced services

The Shafallah Centre for Persons with Disabilities has announced the completion of all preparations for the resumption of full operations for staff and beneficiaries, paving the way for the restart of educational and rehabilitation services next week.

The centre stated that preparations were carried out under a comprehensive operational plan, including a series of co-ordination meetings across departments to ensure alignment and integration.

Operational plans were updated, performance indicators reviewed, and facilities, infrastructure, and technical systems fully assessed to provide a safe, integrated, and supportive environment.

At this stage, the centre is prioritising the continuity of high-quality educational and rehabilitation services, alongside enhancing individualised programmes tailored to beneficiaries' diverse needs and abilities.

It also underscored its focus on workforce development through continuous training and strengthening active partnerships with families as a cornerstone of successful rehabilitation outcomes.

The centre noted that the return to full attendance enhances institutional readiness, enabling the completion of all administrative and technical arrangements ahead of the relaunch of services, and boosting the efficiency and flexibility of educational and administrative teams.

To ensure a smooth start, an integrated framework of organisational measures has been activated, including updated work plans, clearly defined departmental priorities, expanded use of digital solutions in daily operations, and strengthened monitoring and evaluation systems.

Additionally, teaching and administrative staff have undergone workshops and guidance sessions to enhance professional skills, modernise educational and rehabilitation approaches, and support psychological and social readiness for engaging with beneficiaries after the break.

The centre's executive director, Fatima Saeed al-Saadi, affirmed that teams are working collaboratively to ensure a strong and well-organised relaunch.

She emphasised that each new phase represents an opportunity to deepen positive impact in the lives of persons with disabilities, adding that the centre remains committed to delivering integrated, high-quality services that place beneficiaries at the core, support their empowerment, and promote their inclusion in society in line with best international standards.

Al-Saadi also highlighted the vital role of families as key partners in the rehabilitation process and reaffirmed the centre's commitment to advancing its programmes and workforce in alignment with Qatar National Vision 2030. - QNA

Qatar reaffirms support for OHCHR

Qatar has reaffirmed its continued role as a key supporter of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in fulfilling its mandate, including by hosting the UN Human Rights Training and Documentation Centre for South-West Asia and the Arab Region, providing full support for its work, and contributing regularly to the OHCHR budget.

This came in a statement delivered yesterday by Nour Hamad al-Kaabi,

third political researcher at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)'s Human Rights Department, during the general debate on technical assistance and capacity-building (Item 10) at the 61st session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

She noted that technical assistance and capacity-building are integral to the mandates of both the Human Rights Council and OHCHR, helping states meet their human rights obligations.

Al-Kaabi stressed that effective as-

sistance must be based on the needs, priorities, and consent of the concerned states, while taking into account their national contexts, within a framework of constructive dialogue and cooperation aimed at achieving tangible results on the ground.

She further affirmed that all human rights, including the right to development, are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, and must be treated equally with the same level of attention and priority. - QNA

HBKU's Unesco chair equips legal practitioners for energy transition age



Participants at the workshop.

The Unesco Chair on Environmental Law and Sustainable Development at Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU)'s College of Law recently hosted an energy legal lab for in-house lawyers working in governments and national energy companies across the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries.

Held under the theme *GCC Lawyers in the Age of Transition*, the workshop convened scholars, educators, and practitioners to explore the evolving energy landscape.

The two-day programme was organised in partnership with the International Bar Association (IBA)'s Oil and Gas Law Committee and Academic Advisory Group, Tulane Energy Law and Policy Centre, the World Bank's ESMAP Green Hydrogen Programme and the Global Carbon Council.

Through lectures and practical sessions, participants explored how artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming legal services; strategies for effective dispute resolution; due diligence; managing environmental, social, and

governance risks; and best practices for financing and structuring bankable projects in clean hydrogen, carbon capture, utilisation, storage, and renewable energy.

Participants identified strategies for integrating sustainability considerations into the design, financing, and implementation of energy investments and projects within their respective entities and jurisdictions.

The workshop addressed the intersection of technology, law, and financial frameworks in the energy field.

Commenting on the workshop, College of Law professor Dr Damilola Olawuyi, the Unesco Chairholder on Environmental Law and Sustainable Development, said: "Goal 7 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals aims to enhance access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy for all."

"Achieving this will require equipping lawyers who draft and negotiate high-stakes energy agreements with the latest insights on emerging risks, complexities, and solutions," he said. "We are

very proud at the Unesco Chair to collaborate with GCC-based stakeholders to strengthen knowledge exchange and promote best practices in this important field."

"This Energy Legal Lab enables the HBKU to collaborate with general counsels and other practitioners in the energy sector to explore the rapidly evolving landscape of corporate risk management in the age of transition," said College of Law dean Susan L. Karamanian. "Such dialogue consolidates regional partnership and enriches our understanding and teaching."

QC distributes Zakat al-Fitr to over 700,000 beneficiaries worldwide

As part of its Ramadan campaign, "Good Starts With You", and with the support of donors, Qatar Charity (QC) distributed Zakat al-Fitr in nearly 40 countries despite challenging circumstances.

The assistance targeted vulnerable families to help them meet their needs during Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr.

More than 706,000 people benefited from the food assistance and cash support.

In Djibouti, Zakat al-Fitr was distributed to vulnerable families and sponsored orphans, benefiting around 1,500 people.

Diwan Az Zakat director-general Souleiman Houssein Moussa said that Zakat al-Fitr helps families welcome Eid with reassurance and dignity.

Beneficiary Ali Hassan expressed gratitude, saying that the assistance came at the right time and helped his family secure essential needs before Eid.

In Mauritania, the QC office distributed complete food baskets to 600 beneficiaries, including widows, orphans, and persons with disabilities.

The baskets contained essential food items.

In Somalia, distributions targeted areas most affected by drought.

A total of 2,702 food baskets were delivered, benefiting approximately 16,212 people.

Somalia's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation Abdissalam Abdi Ali lauded the QC's humanitarian role in supporting vulnerable groups.

Beneficiary Hassan Mumin Mohamed said the food basket helped his family cope with the difficult conditions caused by the drought, noting it enabled them to meet their basic needs during Eid.

In Morocco, the QC distributed 437



food baskets to low income families in the Temara district, helping them meet daily needs and strengthening social solidar-

ity during the holy month. In Sudan, food baskets were distributed in Port Sudan and at the Sheikhha Aisha bint Hamad Al Attiyah



Model City for Orphan Care in Al Damir.

Additional distributions reached families in the villages of River Nile State.

The total number of beneficiaries reached 7,758 people.

In Bangladesh, more than 32,000 people benefited from Zakat al-Fitr distributions, including orphans in care centres and vulnerable families.

In Pakistan, the QC distributed 2,250 dry food baskets in Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, reaching around 15,750 beneficiaries, including women headed households, persons with disabilities, orphans, and the elderly.

Field teams also delivered food baskets to remote areas.

Ahmed Jan, a beneficiary with a disability, said receiving the basket at home had a positive impact on his family.

In Sri Lanka's Gampaha district, the QC distributed food parcels to 235 vulnerable families, benefiting 1,175 people, including sponsored orphans and low-income households.

Iranian soccer players hold schoolbags in protest over slain girls

Iran's men's national soccer team wore black armbands and held schoolbags as their anthem played ahead of a match in Turkiye yesterday, in what a team official said was a protest over the killing of schoolgirls on the first day of the Iran war.

Iran were playing a friendly against Nigeria in the Mediterranean resort town of Belek ahead of the World Cup in the US, Mexico and Canada, at which their participation is in doubt due to the conflict.

The men lined up holding pink and purple bags with ribbons on them – a reference to the attack on the Shajarah Tayyebah School that Tehran says killed more than 175 people, including children and teachers, on the first day of joint US-Israeli strikes on the country.

Mehdi Mohammad Nabi, a vice-president of the Iranian football federation, told Reuters that the players had decided to stage the protest as a symbolic gesture of solidarity with the victims.

"They were deeply affected by the bombing of the girls' school and wanted to express their sympathy," Nabi said, speaking in Farsi through the association's translator. "This was a collective decision by the team. We are united."

US President Donald Trump said earlier this month that while Iran's national team were welcome to play in the US, it might not be appropriate for their "life and safety".

Iran's football federation said it was in discussions with soccer's world governing body FIFA about moving its World Cup matches to Mexico from the US. – **Reuters**

Iran bans sports teams from traveling to 'hostile' nations

Iran has banned the nation's sports teams from traveling to "hostile" countries, Iranian state TV reported.

The statement from Iran's ministry of sports singled out a soccer playoff game that is scheduled to take place in Saudi Arabia in April.

"The presence of national and club teams in countries that are considered hostile and are unable to ensure the security of Iranian

athletes and team members is prohibited until further notice," read the statement.

The ban did not specifically mention this summer's FIFA World Cup, taking place in the US, Canada and Mexico.

Iran have qualified for the tournament, and their matches against New Zealand, Belgium and Egypt were scheduled to be played in the US. – **AFP/Reuters**

Rubio expects Iran war aims to be finished within 'weeks'

Reuters/AFP
Paris/Tehran

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said yesterday that the United States could achieve its objectives in Iran without the use of any ground troops and expected its operation to conclude in a matter of weeks, despite recent deployments of additional forces to the region.

Rubio spoke to reporters before returning to the US after he discussed with G7 foreign ministers in France the conflict launched by the US and Israel late last month.

Rubio said the US was achieving its objectives in the war – which he said were destroying Iran's missile and drone capabilities and facto-

ries to produce those weapons, as well as its navy and air force – and expected to conclude its operation in "weeks, not months".

"We are ahead of schedule on most of them, and we can achieve them without any ground troops, without any," Rubio said. "When we are done with them here in the next couple weeks, they will be weaker than they've been in recent history."

He said that recent deployments of thousands more troops to the region were intended to give President Donald Trump options to respond to contingencies in the conflict, but declined to go into operational details.

"In terms of why there's deployments, number one, the president has to be prepared for multiple

contingencies... We are always going to be prepared to give the president maximum optionality and maximum opportunity to adjust the contingencies, should they emerge," he said.

Rubio also said Iran may decide to set up a tolling system for the Strait of Hormuz and insisted that European and Asian countries that benefit from trade through the waterway should contribute to efforts to secure free passage through the strait once the conflict ends.

"Not only is this illegal, it's unacceptable, it's dangerous to the world, and it's important that the world have a plan to confront it," he said.

In a joint statement, the G7 foreign ministers "reiterated the absolute necessity to permanently

restore safe and toll-free freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz" and called for "an immediate cessation of attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure".

Iran had sent "messages" to the American side but had not responded to a US-proposed peace plan, Rubio said.

Iranian media meanwhile reported a US-Israeli attack on the Khondab heavy water complex in central Iran, citing a local official, while the country's atomic energy agency said a uranium processing plant 600km away in Aradkan was also hit.

Israel's army confirmed that it struck the two facilities, while the Iranian sources said there was no release of radioactive material at either site.

UN appeals for \$80mn for refugees, hosts

The United Nations said yesterday that it had launched an \$80mn appeal to address the urgent humanitarian needs of nearly 2mn refugees in Iran and their host communities as the Mideast war rages.

Iran hosts the largest number of refugees in the world and has a significant migrant population, including 4.5mn Afghans, according to Tehran, and, according to the UN, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

"With the recent escalation of conflict, refugees, other Afghans and host communities in Iran are struggling with concerns for their safety, job losses, psychological distress and urgent shelter needs," said

Babar Baloch, spokesman for UNHCR, the UN refugee agency.

The UNHCR and its humanitarian partners have put together a flash refugee response plan, urgently seeking \$80mn to respond to the immediate humanitarian needs from March to May.

"This will cover 1.8mn Afghan refugees and Afghans under other status living in Iran, plus also 1mn in their hosting communities who have also been affected," Baloch told a press conference.

"In Iran, most Afghan refugees, they live with the urban communities side by side, and everyone is affected," he said. – **AFP**

US, Israeli strikes have damaged over 100 museums, historic buildings

AFP
Tehran

US and Israeli strikes on Iran have damaged at least 120 culturally or historically significant sites across the country since the start of the war, the head of Tehran city council's heritage committee said.

"At least 120 museums, historical buildings and cultural sites across various provinces were directly targeted and sustained serious structural damage," said Ahmad Alavi.

He was quoted by state TV as naming Unesco-listed Golestan Palace – sometimes likened to Versailles – as well as Tehran's Marble Palace, Teymourash house and Saadabad Palace.

One of the capital's most visited sites, the Saadabad Palace complex includes an extensive park and museums dedicated to Iranian history.

In addition to the cultural institutions, it also houses the residences of the Iranian president and governor of Tehran province, with judicial and Revolutionary Guards facilities located nearby.

Iran, whose history spans several millennia, possesses significant cultural heritage that has largely been spared from mass tourism.

According to the UN, at least four of the country's 29 Unesco-listed sites have been damaged in the war: Golestan Palace, Chehel Sotoun Palace in Isfahan, the Masjed-e Jame mosque in the same city, and the prehistoric sites of the Khorramabad Valley.

It'll never be the same: Iranians recount one month of war

By Susannah Walden
AFP

After a month of war with Israel and the United States with no clear end in sight, Iranians tell AFP about how life has changed, about watching missiles fall, and how security forces have tightened their grip.

Their names have been changed to protect their identities, as Iran has been arresting and warning citizens about speaking to journalists or sending images outside the country amid an Internet blackout and severe phone network restrictions.

Iran was already suffering economically before the war, but the conflict has sparked even higher inflation and brought many industries to a standstill.

"My income comes from my online shop, but for the past two months I've had no income at all," Golnar from Tehran told AFP.

"In our family, everyone is working and we don't even pay rent, yet we still can't think about things like going to restaurants or any kind of leisure activities," the 29-year-old said. "We can only afford the most basic and essential living expenses."

The island of Qeshm, where 42-year-old Sadeq is based, enjoyed a tourism boom in recent years, but saw few visitors over the usually busy Nowruz holidays marking the Iranian New Year in March.

"Our hotel and cafes are half empty. Many people have come here to stay longer, waiting to see what happens with the war," he said. "We sometimes have to wait for hours to get fuel."

For Shayan in Tehran, there is some normalcy in the shadow of the war.

"There is no famine, everything is available. Cafes are open, and we still go out... There is gasoline, water, and electricity. But there is a sense of helplessness in all of us," the 40-year-old said. "We gather with family and friends, play card games together, and drink. Shops and restaurants are open until 9pm, but the city feels empty, most people have left."

Another Tehran resident originally from Iran's Kurdish region said she also feels she has grown "used to the situation".

"The noise, the explosions and the missiles are now a part of our daily life... I think little by little it's becoming more ordinary for everyone," said the 35-year-old. "Right now, our only worry is that our oil and gas infrastructure might be targeted by missile attacks. I think that's the one thing all Iranians agree on at the moment."

Katayoon recently left Iran for Turkiye, after several "terrible" months since the protests in January that saw thousands killed in a crackdown.

Two nights before departing, the blastwave from an airstrike threw her from her bed.

However, her decision to leave was more from "living in fear for at least a decade... from my scarf falling off my head in the street, to not being able to teach the oppo-



This picture taken on March 5 shows motorists on an expressway as plumes of smoke rise after an air strike in Tehran. – **AFP**



Onlookers watch from a window near the site of a residential building in Tehran that was damaged in an air strike. – **Reuters**



Right: Emergency responders inspect a residential building in Tehran that was damaged in an air strike. – **Reuters**



Belongings and furniture inside a residential building in Tehran that was damaged in an air strike. – **Reuters**

site sex, or having basic liberties", the yoga teacher said.

There is fear of bombardments, but "there is no other recourse – people don't have money to eat. Life has become impossible," she said.

Ensieh, a dentist in the capital, said every day she is "losing more hope".

"We're caught between three mad powers, and war is terrifying. I know I'll never be the same person again. War has torn a part of me away, and it's not coming back," the 46-year-old said.

A 34-year-old resident of Sanandaj in western Iran said the intensity of the attacks had decreased and that in recent days he "realised the Islamic republic will not be overthrown in the way we imagined".

Since the war started, Iranians have reported heavy security in the streets, with limited anti-government demonstrations quickly quelled, while crowds of Islamic republic supporters regularly rally.

Out in Tehran, "you'll likely pass through multiple checkpoints in a single day... Cars are searched, phones are checked", including photos, hidden files, apps even personal notes, said 38-year-old artist Kaveh.

He said groups of armed security forces who have "taken control of the streets" drive through Tehran at night "honking and carrying flags".

Tehran accuses US of 'calculated' assault on school

AFP/Reuters
Geneva

Iran's foreign minister has branded a deadly strike on an Iranian school on the first day of the Middle East war as a "calculated" US assault.

Abbas Araghchi said "more than 175 students and teachers were slaughtered in cold blood" in a "calculated, phased assault" in the February 28 strike on an Iranian elementary school in Minab.

At an urgent debate in the United Nations Human Rights Council focused on the strike, he described it in his video address as "a war crime and a crime against humanity, one that demands unequivocal condemnation by all, and unambiguous accountability for the culprits".

UN rights chief Volker Turk meanwhile told the council that the bombing evoked "visceral horror", insisting on the need for "justice".

"There must be justice for the terrible harm done," he said by video link after meetings with US officials in Washington this week.

Asked for comment, Israel's diplomatic mission to the UN in Geneva criticised Iran for attacks on civilians across the region.

"The fact that the embodiment of human rights violations is convening this urgent debate is a charade and an abuse of the UN Human Rights Council," a spokesperson said.

The US mission referred questions about the incident and the status of investigations to the State Department, which did not immediately

respond to a comment request.

Their seats were empty as both have disengaged from the body, alleging anti-Israel bias.

Pakistan's ambassador to the UN in Geneva Bilal Ahmad said the death of schoolchildren was unconscionable while China's ambassador Jia Guide said he was deeply shocked.

Jia slammed the United States and Israel for launching their attacks on Iran "without authorisation of the Security Council, which is the root cause of this tragedy".

Numerous other countries like Britain said they were appalled while also drawing attention to Iran's own human rights violations.

Others condemned Iran's retaliatory strikes since the war began on February 28, including its attacks against Israel, US bases and Gulf states.

Brazil's ambassador Tovar da Silva Nunes voiced regret that there had been no holistic debate on violations during the regional war, echoing concerns by rights groups about "selective outrage".

Mohaddeseh Falahat, the mother of two children killed in the attack, also spoke to the council by video.

Calling on the diplomats in Geneva "not to let this tragedy be forgotten", she added: "No mother is prepared to hear the words: 'Your child is not coming back'".

The attack happened on the day the US and Israel launched the war with attacks across Iran.

A US Tomahawk cruise missile hit the elementary school due to a targeting mistake, according to the preliminary findings of a US

military investigation reported by the *New York Times*.

The newspaper said the US military had been bombing an adjacent Iranian base, of which the school building was formerly a part.

The target co-ordinates were set using outdated data, the paper reported.

UN rights chief Turk insisted that "the onus is on those who carried out the attack to investigate it promptly, impartially, transparently and thoroughly".

"Senior US officials have said the strike is under investigation," he said in a video address, calling for Washington to swiftly conclude the probe and make the findings public.

Araghchi did not wait for the results of the probe to attribute blame.

"At a time when the American-Israeli aggressors, in their own assertions, possess the most advanced technologies, and the highest-precision military and data systems, no one can believe that the attack on the school was anything other than deliberate and intentional," he told the council.

Yesterday's discussion, held at the request of Iran, China and Cuba, marked the second urgent debate before the rights council this week focused on the war in the Middle East.

On Wednesday, a debate requested by Bahrain on behalf of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) and Jordan, ended with the 47-member rights council adopting by consensus a resolution condemning Iran's "egregious attacks" on its Gulf neighbours, calling for swift "reparation" to all victims of its strikes.



Trump board plan would disarm Hamas in stages over eight months

By **Nidal al-Mughrabi**
Reuters

Hamas would be required to allow the destruction of its vast Gaza tunnel network as it lays down its arms in stages over eight months under a disarmament plan presented to the militants by US President Donald Trump's "Board of Peace".

The plan follows a timeline that begins with a US-backed committee of Palestinian technocrats taking security control of Gaza and concludes with Israeli forces withdrawing completely upon "verification that Gaza is free of weaponry".

Hamas's disarmament is a critical sticking point in talks to implement Trump's plan for Gaza and cement an October ceasefire that halted two years of full-blown war.

Hamas has long rejected calls to lay down its weapons, which are believed to have largely been transported and stored in tunnels under Gaza.

Israel says it will not agree to withdraw

from Gaza unless Hamas is fully disarmed first.

A Palestinian official close to the talks said that the plan was "unfair", expecting Hamas would seek some "amendments and improvements".

The official, who asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the negotiations, said the plan did not provide guarantees that Israel would carry out its obligations.

It would risk causing the war to resume by linking reconstruction and improvements to living conditions to the political issues such as disarmament, the official said.

The plan's full text, which was first reported by Al Jazeera, was shared with Reuters by two Palestinian officials involved in the talks.

A Hamas official confirmed its authenticity.

The Board of Peace presented the plan to Hamas last week.

Hamas has not commented publicly on it; a Hamas official said the group was studying it.

On Thursday, three other Palestinian factions, including Islamic Jihad, issued statements criticising the plan, saying that it unfairly prioritised disarmament over issues such as reconstruction and Israeli withdrawal.

The plan includes two components: a 12-point document titled *Steps to Complete the Implementation of Trump's Comprehensive Peace Plan for Gaza*, and a five-stage timeline during which Hamas would surrender its arms over eight months.

The first component says that all armed factions in Gaza, including groups such as Islamic Jihad, will participate in a disarmament process that will be overseen by the Palestinian technocrats, known as the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG).

"Gaza will be governed under the principle of one authority, one law, one weapon, whereby only individuals authorised by (NCAG) may possess weapons, and all armed factions will cease military activities," the document says.

The disarmament process will be "veri-

fied by the Weapons Collection Verification Committee", a body that will be set up by Nickolay Mladenov, the Board of Peace's lead envoy, the document says.

Reconstruction will only be allowed in areas that are designated as demilitarised, it says.

The October ceasefire left Israel in control of well over half of Gaza, with Hamas keeping a firm grip on the other half of the enclave and its 2mn people, most of whom are homeless after two years of relentless Israeli bombardment.

Hamas, committed to armed resistance and sworn to Israel's destruction, has publicly rejected calls to disarm in recent months.

However, in private, Hamas officials have voiced openness to disarmament so long as it is done along a political track that would see the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The 12-point plan makes no mention of Palestinian statehood or independence.

According to the plan's timeline, the first stage, consisting of 15 days, would see

the NCAG take security and administrative control of Gaza and begin preparatory steps for weapons collection.

In the second stage, days 16-40, Israel would remove all heavy weapons from areas under its control, including heavy artillery and tanks, and an international security force would be deployed.

The third stage, from days 31-90, would be the most intensive: Hamas would give all its heavy weapons and military equipment to the NCAG, and "will allow the destruction of all tunnels, explosives, and military infrastructure".

In the fourth stage, from day 91-250, the NCAG's police forces would collect and register all remaining weapons including guns and rifles.

Israeli forces would begin to withdraw in stages.

The fifth stage is described as "final verification" of disarmament, and would see "Israeli forces withdraw completely from Gaza except for a presence in a security perimeter, and the start of comprehensive reconstruction efforts".

Lebanon at risk of 'humanitarian catastrophe': UN

AFP/Reuters
Geneva

Nearly a month into the Middle East war, Lebanon is facing a deepening humanitarian crisis that now risks teetering over into a catastrophe, the United Nations refugee agency warned yesterday.

Since March 2, more than 1mn people - one in five residents - have been forced to flee their homes, said the UNHCR.

With the numbers continuing to rise, "it is really a deepening humanitarian crisis that we here on the ground are seeing in Lebanon", said Karolina Lindholm Billing, the agency's representative in the country.

"The situation remains extremely worrying and the risk of a humanitarian catastrophe... is real," she told reporters in Geneva, speaking from Beirut.

Lebanon was drawn into the Middle East war on March 2 when Tehran-backed Hezbollah began firing rockets into Israel to avenge the killing of Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"More than 136,000 displaced people are

staying in 660 collective shelters, most of them schools, filled far beyond capacity," she said.

There was limited access to sanitation, and older people were struggling to sleep on classroom floors.

In southern Lebanon, Israel's destruction of key bridges has left more than 150,000 people isolated and severely limited humanitarian access, said Lindholm Billing.

The UNHCR is appealing for more than \$60mn to scale up its response, and warned that needs were rising faster than resources.

"Lebanon was already facing multiple crises, and this massive displacement is adding immense pressure on families and services," Lindholm Billing said. "Again and again, people tell me the same thing: they simply want to go home."

The UN Women agency said pregnant women were giving birth in temporary shelters with limited access to care.

The shelters, such as school classrooms, are not set up for long-term displacement, said the agency's Lebanon representative Gielan El Messiri.

"Women describe constant fear, sleeplessness and exhaustion, while also com-



Children play outside their tent at a temporary encampment for displaced people in Beirut, Lebanon. - Reuters

forting frightened children," she said.

The UN children's agency Unicef said more than 370,000 children in Lebanon were among those forced to flee their homes - and there was "no safe place" to go to.

"The speed and scale are staggering," said Marcoluigi Corsi, the Unicef's representative in Lebanon.

He said 19,000 children were uprooted daily, many for the second or third time since previous escalations just 15 months ago.

"The mental and emotional exhaustion weighing on the children of Lebanon is just devastating," he said remotely from Beirut. "There is no safe place for people to go."

At least 121 children have been killed and 399 injured since the latest escalation began, according to the Unicef.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has sent a first humanitarian convoy overland to

Lebanon, which has now reached Syria.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) said the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) was distributing aid to households, including blankets, mattresses, meals, bread and safe drinking water.

IFRC spokesman Tommaso Della Longa said the LRC was the main ambulance service provider.

"Between March 2 and 23, LRC teams conducted 2,754 ambulance missions and 11 urban search and rescue operations," he said.

One LRC volunteer had been killed and several others wounded during ambulance missions, Della Longa added.

"Staff and volunteers are working under extreme pressure while ensuring both their personal safety and the safe evacuation of injured individuals," he said.

6,000 tonnes of tea stuck at Kenya's Mombasa port

Between 6,000 and 8,000 tonnes of tea, worth around \$24mn, is stuck at Kenya's port of Mombasa because of the war in the Middle East, trade officials said yesterday.

The East African Tea Trade Association (EATTA) manages auctions at the port city, which serves as a global marketplace where hundreds of thousands of tonnes of tea from the region are sold every year.

Around 65% of the east African tea market has been affected by the war that began on February 28 when the United States and Israel launched strikes on Iran, EATTA director George Omuga said.

As a result, "6-8mn kilos" are stuck in Mombasa, he told AFP. "So that's an average of \$24mn worth of tea at the port," he added.

The tea has been sold to customers but cannot be shipped, mainly to the Middle East, which accounts for about 20% of the market, he estimates.

Shipments to Pakistan, which makes up 40% of the market, have also been disrupted by a surge in transport costs because of changes in shipping routes and higher insurance premiums.

Tea sales, meanwhile, have fallen by nearly 20% in recent weeks because of the war, resulting in lost revenue of \$8mn per week.

Kenyan meat and horticulture are also feeling the impact of the conflict, suffering losses amounting to millions of dollars weekly.

During the first three weeks of March, only 5% of the 150-200 tonnes of daily meat exports were delivered, most of which were destined for the Middle East, according to Nicholas Ngahu, chief executive of the Kenya Meat and Livestock Exporters Industry Council (KEMLEIC).

The Middle East also accounts for between 10-15% of Kenya's flower exports, and serves as a major transit point, particularly for shipments to Europe.

The disruption is troublesome for Kenya, which is also dependent on fuel imports.

Pump prices remained unchanged in March, but traders are worried about the consequences of a possible surge.

Vivo Energy Kenya, which operates Shell service stations in the east African country, reported on Thursday "temporary stock-outs at some service stations", attributed to a rise in demand.

The firm said it is "working continuously to replenish affected sites as quickly as possible", without providing further details. - AFP

Overnight petrol queues in Ethiopia due to shortages caused by Middle East war

By **Tolera Fikru Gemta**
and **Dylan Gamba**
AFP

Ethiopians said yesterday that they slept in their cars in hours-long queues for petrol as shortages caused by the Middle East war began to take their toll.

The effective blockade of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran, through which a fifth of the world's oil and gas normally passes, has caused shortages in many countries.

Ethiopia, a nation in the Horn of Africa with around 130mn people, is particularly vulnerable as it imports all its petrol, primarily from the Gulf.

Drivers waiting in an enormous queue at a petrol station in the Summit 72 area of the capital Addis Ababa said the wait was "more than a day".

"I've been in the queue since last night around 7pm. I spent the night in my car without food," said taxi driver Awoke Derese yesterday morning.

"I have already lost two days of business," he said. "I pay 2,000 birr (\$13) per day in rental fees for the car. My family is at risk because I can't support them."

Shortages started to be noticed earlier this week.

At another petrol station in the



A petrol station attendant sits in front of fuel pumps at a closed petrol station in Addis Ababa. - AFP

Summit 72 area, a worker said they had been closed for four days and did not know when fresh deliveries would arrive.

Bakery worker Natenahel Gedamu said his business needed fuel for generators and baking machines.

"We ran out yesterday and have not produced anything since," he said.

"I'm worried the station may run out of fuel before I reach it. I've already tried several stations - this feels like my last chance," added Natenahel, who had been queueing since 4pm the previous day.

Land-locked Ethiopia relies on

the port of Djibouti for its imports.

It has only 13 strategic reserve depots, according to the state-owned Ethiopian Petroleum Supply Enterprise, which did not respond to requests for comment from AFP.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed last week urged Ethiopians to "use oil sparingly and prioritise basic needs" until "the problem is resolved".

More than 40% of Ethiopians live below the poverty line, according to the World Bank, and fear the inflation - already running around 10% - from rising fuel prices.

UN says over 1,700 killed in Syria's Suweida violence, cites possible war crimes

AFP/Reuters
Geneva

War crimes and crimes against humanity might have been committed when brutal violence tore through Syria's southern Suweida province last year, killing more than 1,700, UN investigators said yesterday.

An 85-page report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) on the Syrian Arab Republic found that at least 1,707 people were killed in Su-

weida Governorate, the majority of them civilians of the Druze community, alongside members of the Bedouin community and at least 225 government personnel.

The COI said that violations were committed by all main parties to the conflict.

"Serious violations carried out by government forces and Druze armed groups may amount to war crimes," commissioner Fionnuala Ni Aolain said in a statement.

The commission has been probing international law violations in Syria since the start of the long civil war that devastated the country from 2011 until the over-

throw of president Bashar al-Assad in December 2024.

It detailed "three overlapping waves of violence" in Suweida on July 14-19 last year.

The UN report, which drew on 409 first-hand accounts from survivors and witnesses, alongside field visits to the hardest-hit areas, said the first wave of violence on July 14-16 was the deadliest.

Government forces accompanied by tribal fighters had committed "widespread violations of international humanitarian and human rights law against Druze civilians", the commission statement said, listing "murder,

torture, arbitrary detention and pillage".

Men identified as Druze were separated from women and children and "executed", it said.

During a second wave, beginning on July 17, government forces withdrew following Israeli airstrikes on Suweida and Damascus.

Meanwhile, Druze armed groups attacked Bedouin civilians, committing murder, torture, arbitrary detention and forced displacement, among other violations, the report found.

In the third wave, from July 17-19, tribal fighters targeted Druze civilians.

"Nearly all homes, businesses and religious sites in up to 35 Druze-majority or mixed villages were burned and looted, and civilians were killed or abducted," the commission said, pointing out that members of government forces had removed their uniforms and joined the attacks.

The COI also highlighted how Israel's strikes had not only killed and maimed people, but had contributed to instability, "fuelling accusations of treason against Druze community leaders, and prompting... retaliatory attacks against the entire community".

Cholera aid for African countries stalled by Iran conflict

Reuters
Geneva

Emergency cholera medical supplies for several African countries have become stuck in a logistical quagmire caused by the Iran war, aid officials told Reuters, raising concerns about preparations ahead of the high-risk rainy season.

The stocks stranded in Dubai warehouses are contingency supplies placed in cholera-prone countries, including Chad and Sudan, ahead of the rainy months starting from May to curb any future outbreak of the fast-spreading, potentially fatal diarrhoeal disease.

Both the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) told Reuters that some of their African cholera supplies were stuck in a Dubai backlog.

They are trying to either fly them out - at 70% above the normal rate - or buy replacements.

The kits create mini field hospitals for thousands of people with rehydration treatments as well as chlorine to treat sewage and drinking water to prevent further spread.

"We don't know if the kits will come in time and it will be more costly and delayed," the IFRC's Danielle Brouwer said.

Five cholera kits to treat 3,000 people a month intended for Sudan's war refugees, are among those affected as well as tents for cholera patients in South Sudan, she added.

Last year was exceptionally bad for cholera with more than 600,000 cases in 34 countries and 8,000 deaths globally, the WHO said.

So far in 2026, the number of cases is down by about 50% versus 2025 but the agency warned against complacency.

"A disruption of the supply chain will have dramatic consequences because we're talking (about) an explosive disease," said WHO's Lorenzo Pezzoli, team lead for epidemic bacterial diseases. "If you don't have the time or the resources to control it in a matter of days or even hours, you would have an extreme contamination."

With the Strait of Hormuz shut amid Iranian attacks linked to nearly a month of US-Israeli strikes, competition to use alternative overland or air routes is creating congestion and soaring costs, the IFRC said.

Many African countries like Chad do not produce their own medicines and rely fully on imports.

US court overturns \$16.1bn judgment against Argentina over oil firm seizure

AFP
Buenos Aires

Argentina appeals court yesterday overturned a \$16.1bn judgment against Argentina for nationalising the oil company YPF in 2012.

The ruling was a big victory for President Javier Milei as he tries to boost Argentina's troubled economy.

"We won the YPF trial," Milei wrote in capital letters on the social media platform X, calling the 2-1 ruling by the 2nd US Circuit Court of Appeals in New York the "best possible outcome."

The court struck down a 2023 ruling from Judge Loretta Preska of the US District Court for the Southern District of New York that ordered Argentina to pay \$16.1 bn to minority shareholder companies she said were harmed by the nationalisation of YPF.

The appeals court said yesterday that breach of contract claims made by these companies were not recognisable under Argentine law.

The case was heard in the US rather than Argentina mainly because YPF is listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

Jurisdiction was consistently an issue, as Argentina argued the case should be argued back home but in the end the US courts kept it in New York.

In the expropriation, the Argentine state took over 51% of YPF, which at the time was partially controlled by the Spanish energy giant Repsol.

Two years later Repsol was awarded \$5 bn in damages but smaller shareholders like Petersen Energia Inversora and Eton Park Capital Management, which together controlled a 25.4% stake, got nothing and sued in 2015.

They argued that the government had not made a tender offer, as mandated by Argentine law, to these two companies, which were

YPF's second- and third-largest investors.

Argentina has argued that having to pay the settlement – \$18bn including interest, it says – would cause severe harm to the finances of a country with persistent debt and inflation problems.

It said the settlement would have amounted to a large chunk of its foreign currency reserves.

YPF is an emblematic Argentine company founded in the early 20th century as a state-owned entity but it was privatised in 1993 and eventually came under the control of Repsol.

Then-president Cristina Kirchner re-nationalized YPF in 2012, arguing that it did not produce enough oil and gas to satisfy Argentine demand.

If the \$16.1bn judgment had been upheld, much of the money would have gone to Britain-based Burford Capital, a company that provides financing for other firms' lawsuits.

US foils plot to assassinate pro-Palestinian activist

AFP
New York

A US-based Palestinian-American activist said yesterday that the FBI had disrupted an imminent plot to assassinate her, as authorities charged a 26-year-old man with possessing Molotov cocktails he meant to use against her home.

Nerdeen Kiswani leads Within Our Lifetime, a Palestinian advocacy group active in New York City, and has been a key figure in organising protests particularly focused on the Gaza war.

"Late last night the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force informed me that a plot against my life was 'about to' take place," Kiswani wrote on X.

The suspect, Alexander Heifler, from New Jersey, was arrested after he unwittingly shared with an undercover detective his plans to throw Molotov cocktails into Kiswani's home, according to charging documents. Authorities recovered eight of the incendiary bottles from Heifler's residence and said he expressed plans to leave the United States after the attack.



Nerdeen Kiswani (centre), founder of the group Within our Lifetime-United for Palestine. (AFP/File photo)

Heifler faces separate counts of making and possessing destructive devices, which each carry up to 10 years in prison. He was to appear at a New Jersey court yesterday.

The motive behind the apparent plot was not immediately clear.

"For months, Zionist organisations like Betar and politicians like Randy Fine have encouraged violence against my family and me," Kiswani said. Last month Kiswani sued Betar US, a right-wing pro-Israel group, for allegedly violating

her civil rights by offering "bounties" on social media for people to harass or assault her.

CAIR, a Muslim civil rights group, praised the law enforcement response in this case and called for a full investigation.

"This disturbing case underscores the growing climate of harassment, threats, and violence directed at those speaking out on Palestinian human rights and other social justice issues," it wrote on X.

Trump tells farmers that tractor companies should lower prices



US President Donald Trump gives remarks to farmers on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC, yesterday.

Reuters
Washington

President Donald Trump announced new measures yesterday to support US farmers who are reeling from the administration's trade policies and the Iran war and suggested farm equipment makers cut prices – a call that sent their shares lower.

"I want John Deere and Case and all of – they're great companies, Caterpillar... I want these companies to give it to you in the form of lower tractor and equipment costs," Trump told hundreds of farmers and ranchers gathered under drizzle at an event on the South Lawn of the White House.

Deere & Co shares dropped 2% after the statement. Case IH manufacturer CNH Industrial NV fell 1% while Caterpillar Inc was down nearly 1.2% in late-session trading.

The three companies could not immediately be reached for comment.

Trump called for lower prices in an aside during a speech that otherwise focused on shoring up support among the Republican president's loyal constituency of rural voters, who have backed Trump in all three of the last presidential races. For the fourth straight year, US crop producers are facing tight margins, high production costs and low commodity prices – and are struggling financially – despite near-record government payments.

The Trump administration is distributing \$12bn in aid to US farmers – a move that farm trade groups and agricultural economists have said is helpful in the short-term but will not fully compensate farmers for financial losses that have topped

"I want John Deere and Case and all of – they're great companies, Caterpillar... I want these companies to give it to you in the form of lower tractor and equipment costs"

\$30bn in recent years.

yesterday, Trump said he would seek even more such aid for farmers from Congress. More than 50 farm-interest groups, such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, are urging Congress to approve additional aid in a military funding package. The event happened as the administration finalised new biofuel blending mandates for US oil refiners, requiring them to mix more of the fuels made from corn and other agricultural products into the nation's gasoline and diesel than initially proposed, in an apparent win for farmers.

Trump also said the US Small Business Administration would open up new loan guarantees for farmers and food suppliers.

Farmers are entering the critical spring planting season under a cloud of uncertainty as the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran disrupts global trade, causing fertiliser and diesel costs to spike.

The long-term US trade relationship with China also remains unclear amid the ongoing trade war launched by Trump's administration with the country, the world's top soy importer.

Rural voters constitute a fifth of the US electorate, and they favoured Trump by a two-to-one margin over Democrat Kamala Harris in the 2024 presidential election.

House Republicans reject Senate effort to end US airport chaos

AFP
Washington

US House Republicans yesterday effectively shot down an effort by the Senate to end a budget standoff that has forced thousands of airport security staff to work without pay, likely extending the partial government shutdown.

A lapse in federal funding has left Transportation Security Administration (TSA) staff – who screen passengers, baggage and cargo – working without pay since mid-February.

The stalemate has led to long delays at several airports, where authorities have warned travellers to arrive hours earlier than usual because of long security lines.

The funding dispute centred on demands by opposition Democrats for reforms of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) authority, which has faced nationwide criticism of its aggressive tactics against immigrants and for the killings of two US citizens this year.

Senators voted before dawn yesterday to fund all of the Depart-



A pair of ICE agents drink coffee as travellers wait in line at Terminal A at George Bush Intercontinental Airport yesterday in Houston, Texas. (AFP)

ment of Homeland Security (DHS), the TSA's parent agency, except ICE and the Border Patrol, for 2026.

The bill would provide funding for TSA, the US Coast Guard and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, among other operations.

The compromise measure would have to now pass the House of Representatives, but many Republicans in the chamber warned yesterday that it lacked sufficient support.

"We're not accepting the gar-

bage from the Senate," House Republican Chip Roy said on X, adding: "We'll send something back to stand with @CBP & @ICEgov," referring to US Customs and Border Patrol.

The House's Republican leaders have indicated they instead will introduce a bill to extend funding for all of DHS for 60 days while a solution is worked out, but it appears unlikely that Democrats will accept such a proposal.

Republicans hold a major-

ity in both chambers of Congress, but due to Senate rules, a certain number of Democratic votes would be required to pass budget bills.

And even if a new bill did clear the House, the Senate has adjourned for two full weeks, potentially meaning more dragged-out pain for air travellers and TSA workers.

The political fight has deeply strained TSA services. More than 300 TSA staff have quit and unscheduled absences have surged since the partial shutdown began, leading to extended flight delays and airports struggling to screen travellers.

The federal government began deploying ICE agents to assist in providing airport security, drawing sharp criticism from Democrats, rights activists and some Republicans, who warn ICE personnel are not trained for such work and that it risks escalating tensions in already stressed environments.

President Donald Trump, who promised on Thursday to pay TSA personnel, previously said he would not sign a funding deal unless Congress also passes a contentious bill to overhaul how citizens register to vote in US elections.

US House transportation panel chair will not seek re-election

Reuters
Washington

Veteran Republican US lawmaker Sam Graves, who chairs the House of Representatives Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said yesterday he will not seek re-election this year, joining more than 50 other incumbents who are exiting the chamber. Graves, 62, has represented a Missouri district in the House since 2001.

President Donald Trump's fellow Republicans are seeking to maintain their narrow majorities in the House and Senate in the November midterm elections.

A total of 57 House members – 36 Republicans and 21 Democrats – have announced they will not run for re-election, according to a House tally.

Graves has been a key legislator on aviation matters, including safety legislation that the House unanimously approved on Thursday in the wake of last year's Washington midair collision between an American Airlines regional jet and an Army Black Hawk helicopter that killed 67 people as well

as the 2024 reauthorisation of the Federal Aviation Administration that included safety-related provisions.

The congressman has been working on a five-year reauthorisation of highway spending, expected to be around \$500bn, before the current law expires at the end of the current fiscal year on September 30, though that legislation may be delayed until after the midterms.

Graves this month said he favours an annual fee for owners of electric vehicles to help pay for US highway repairs. Most revenue for federally funded road repairs is collected through diesel and gasoline taxes, but EVs do not use these fuels.

Last year, House Republicans proposed a new \$250 annual fee on owners of EVs and \$100 for hybrid EVs but it was not included in the massive tax and spending bill eventually approved by Congress.

Legislation co-authored by Graves that Congress passed in 2024 aimed to boost US air traffic controller staffing, increase funding to avert runway close-call incidents and speed up refunds for cancelled flights.

The 2024 FAA reauthorisation measure prohibits airlines from charging fees for



Sam Graves, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Chair. (Reuters/File Photo)

families to sit together, requires airplanes to be equipped with 25-hour cockpit recording devices, raises maximum civil penalties for airline consumer violations from \$25,000 per violation to \$75,000 and boosts aircraft production scrutiny.

Life after Trump: Republicans eye Vance, Rubio for leadership

AFP
Grapevine, US

For a decade, President Donald Trump has been the gravitational force of the American right, but at this year's Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) a pressing question is animating conversations in the hallways: who comes next?

At what is billed as the world's largest conservative meeting, there is no clear consensus – but an early contest is taking shape.

For the first time in years, the 79-year-old second-term president is skipping the conference – typically held in Washington, but this year staged in the Dallas suburbs – allowing other Republican

stars to step out of his shadow.

Across conversations with attendees, Vice-President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio stood out as the main contenders to lead a post-Trump Republican Party, with support split in a race that remains wide open.

Polling suggests Vance holds a comfortable national lead among Republican voters.

But on the ground in Texas, the divide appeared more even – with roughly half backing Vance and a significant share favouring Rubio or considering him at least as capable.

"I have the utmost confidence in both JD Vance and Marco Rubio to lead the country," said Suzy Phillips, 68, a retired nurse from Dallas. "They would be my top two."

For many, the choice reflects a

For the first time in years, the 79-year-old second-term president is skipping the CPAC

balance between continuity and experience.

Vance's appeal lies in his alignment with Trump's movement and personal story – growing up in poverty in an Appalachian community beset by opioid addiction.

"I loved JD Vance before he ever went into politics... I just loved his rags-to-riches story – that it was somebody who saw a better way and went the better way," said Phillips. Others pointed to his communication skills and ideological fluency.

"He's very articulate, very educated," said Laura McGarragh, 52, an emergency room nurse from

Austin. "He has a great grasp of any kind of questions he can field. He's a little more diplomatic than Trump. I mean, I like Trump too, but I feel like JD Vance is a little more clean-cut."

Even Vance's past criticism of Trump – once a potential liability – was brushed aside.

"People change. People evolve. I haven't kept the same opinions my whole life," McGarragh said.

Rubio's supporters, by contrast, emphasised experience and steadiness – particularly on the world stage.

"Marco Rubio is an outstanding statesman," said Brian Su, 60,

a consultant from Chicago.

"He has a very clear vision of dealing with international relations. So personally, I love him."

Phillips said she would ultimately lean toward Rubio, citing "his international diplomacy" and background as the son of immigrants.

Despite the split, both candidates are judged through the same lens: their relationship to Trump and the movement he reshaped.

Neither is seen as a break from Trumpism. Instead, they are viewed as competing heirs.

That dynamic leaves little room – for now – for alternative figures to gain traction.

Levi Mikula, 35, a media assistant from Dallas, said he would prefer Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, even as he acknowledged that Ru-

bio was more likely to prevail. "I didn't trust (Rubio) early on, but he's been a lot stronger," Mikula said. "And I think Donald Trump is the reason for it. But on foreign policy, he's amazing right now."

A handful of attendees floated other possibilities, including candidates in Trump's anti-establishment mould – or even, in some cases, a return by Trump himself, despite the constitutional barrier to a third term.

That lingering focus on Trump underscores the central tension shaping the race. Even as activists begin to weigh successors, many are not ready to move on. "We're hoping he will go for four more years," Phillips said. "But we have to face the fact that we're facing the end of the Trump era."



Missing aid boats from Mexico 'safely' crossed to Cuba: US Coast Guard

AFP
Havana

Two aid boats bound for Cuba that were feared missing after they set sail from Mexico have "safely transited" to the island, the US Coast Guard said yesterday.

The Mexican Navy had reported on Thursday that it launched a search and rescue mission after losing communication with the vessels, which had left from Isla Mujeres in southeast Mexico on March 20 with nine people aboard.

The US Coast Guard, which was not involved in the search efforts, said yesterday it had received a report at 10:36am (1436 GMT) that "the two vessels safely transited to Cuba."

The sailboats are part of an international convoy that has brought 50 tonnes of medical supplies, food, solar panels and other goods to support Cuba as a US fuel blockade has deepened the communist-ruled island's energy and economic crisis.

The first shipments arrived by plane from Europe and the United States last week as part of Our

America Convoy to Cuba.

A fishing boat that was converted into an aid vessel, which had also left Mexico last Friday, arrived in Cuba on Tuesday, a few days later than planned due to unfavourable weather, currents and battery issues.

It had been escorted by a Mexican Navy ship part of the way.

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel had voiced concern earlier over the two missing boats and said Havana was "doing everything possible" to help the search.

After the Mexican Navy reported the search, a spokesperson for Our America Convoy sought to ease concerns over the fate of the boats, saying organisers remained confident in the crew's ability to reach Havana safely.

The spokesperson said the captains and crews were "experienced" sailors and that both vessels were equipped "with appropriate safety systems and signalling equipment."

The spokesperson could not be immediately reached for comment on Friday.

The Mexican Navy had indicated that the boats were due to arrive between Tuesday and Wednesday.

Naval authorities did not specify the identities or nationalities of the crew members on the boats, but said they were maintaining communication with rescue agencies in Poland, France, Cuba and the United States.

The Mexican Navy was also in contact with diplomatic missions of the crew.

The search had involved aircraft searching the route between Isla Mujeres and Havana.

Meanwhile, a Mexican Navy ship carrying 111 tonnes of food and other donations arrived in Havana on Friday, according to official Cuban media.

Mexico has now sent four shipments of aid to Cuba totalling more than 3,000 tonnes, though it has yet to resume oil deliveries.

US President Donald Trump imposed a de facto oil blockade on Cuba in January after US forces captured Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, whose government had been Cuba's principal source of fuel supplies.

Trump has also threatened tariffs on countries that ship oil to Cuba.

The island has suffered seven nationwide blackouts since 2024, including two last week alone.

UN pushes fuel solution for Cuba aid work amid US talks

AFP
Havana

The United Nations has proposed an emergency plan for crisis-hit Cuba, including tracking fuel use, amid talks with the United States on allowing energy imports for humanitarian services, a UN official said on Wednesday.

Francisco Pichon, the UN co-ordinator in Cuba, said the \$94.1mn plan was proposed to keep critical services running for the country's most vulnerable people and "save lives."

"If the current situation continues and the country's fuel reserves are exhausted, we do fear a rapid deterioration, with the potential loss of life," Pichon told reporters including AFP.

"The feasibility and implementation of this action plan obviously depend on fuel solutions," he said.

The UN has been in talks with Washington to allow fuel in for humanitarian purposes.

Pichon said the action plan and a "fuel traceability model" were being traced "as instruments to try to reach an agreement, a pathway to gain access to fuel."



People line up at a bus stop, waiting for public transportation in Havana, Cuba - which is suffering from a fuel shortage, on Tuesday. (AFP)

He said a fuel monitoring plan was needed "to ensure that it goes to the critical, essential services that are prioritised in the plan."

"All solutions are being considered, including working with the non-state sector," he said.

Washington slightly eased the embargo last month to allow oil sales to Cuba's small private sector.

Pichon said the plan was presented to dozens of diplomats and representatives of international NGOs on Tuesday. US diplomats were invited, but Pichon said he did not know if they were there.

The UN's plan is an expansion of its response to Hurricane Melissa, which slammed Cuba in

October, to include the humanitarian impact of the energy crisis.

UN staff have been largely unable to carry out field work and UN agencies are having difficulty retrieving aid shipments from Havana's airports.

UN chief Antonio Guterres warned last month that Cuba risked a humanitarian "collapse" if it were denied oil.

Cubans have endured regular blackouts that can last more than 20 hours, with two nationwide outages last week alone.

President Miguel Diaz-Canel has imposed emergency measures to conserve fuel, including strict fuel rationing.

Brazil's Bolsonaro leaves hospital, starts house arrest for coup attempt

AFP
Brasilia

Former far-right Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro was discharged from hospital yesterday after a two-week stay and transferred to his home in Brasilia to begin house arrest, his doctor said.

Bolsonaro was hospitalised with bronchopneumonia after falling ill in prison, where he was serving a 27-year sentence for attempting a coup after his 2022 election loss to President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

The 71-year-old "has just been discharged," his doctor, Brasil Caiado, told reporters outside the private DF Star hospital. Bolsonaro will have to follow an intensive routine of physical therapy and care, the doctor said.

"His health condition is more or less stable," Caiado said. Bolsonaro was hospitalised on March 13 after suffering from a high fever, chills and low oxygen saturation in prison. After more than a week in intensive care, he was moved to a regular ward on Monday, paving the way for his release.

Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes on Tuesday granted a request by Bolsonaro's lawyers to allow him to serve his sentence at home for a period of 90 days on humanitarian grounds.

Previously, the justice had repeatedly rejected similar requests from the defence, who had argued that Bolsonaro's poor health made serving his sentence in prison infeasible. The severity of this latest hospitalisation appears to have tipped the scales.

After the 90 days have elapsed, the court will re-evaluate whether to extend the house arrest or if the controversial former leader should go back to jail.

While at home, Bolsonaro will have to wear an electronic ankle monitor and will be prohibited from using a cell phone, social media or recording any video or audio.



Michelle Bolsonaro, wife of former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, speaks during a press conference after Bolsonaro left the DF Star hospital in Brasilia yesterday. (AFP)

He will be allowed visits from family members, lawyers and doctors.

Bolsonaro, who served as president from 2019-2022, had been under house arrest before the official start of his sentence but was moved to prison after he took a soldering iron to his ankle monitoring bracelet in what the court saw as an escape attempt.

His lung infection is the most recent episode in a long medical history that dates back to 2018, when he was stabbed in the abdomen during a campaign event.

Since then, Bolsonaro has undergone multiple surgeries and suffers from recurring bouts of hiccups, sometimes accompanied by vomiting. The infection that landed him in the hospital was a consequence of an aspiration pneumonia linked to those aftereffects.

The doctor said earlier this week that recovery from bronchopneumonia, which includes the risk of scar tissue forming in the lungs during healing, could take between six weeks and six months.

Bolsonaro's return home comes less than seven months before October's presidential elections.

Bolsonaro chose his eldest son, Senator Flavio Bolsonaro, as the right-wing candidate to face the leftist Lula, who is 80 and seeking a fourth term.

31% of country's disappeared people may be alive: Mexico

Reuters
Mexico City

Mexican authorities said yesterday they have potentially identified more than 40,000 people listed as disappeared who may be alive, by cross-referencing official databases such as tax records and marriage registries.

After a year-long review of the national registry of missing persons, officials said 40,308 entries - 31% of the total - showed some activity across other government records such as tax filings or birth certificates, suggesting those people could be alive and locatable.

Of those, authorities have so far located and confirmed the identities of 5,269 people, allowing their cases to be reclassified as "found."

Mexico has over 130,000 missing people, a consequence of decades

The figure - 130,000 missing - is also the result of a poorly managed database riddled with errors, missing information, and duplication

of drug violence as cartels have expanded their reach and power. But the government said the figure is also the result of a poorly managed database riddled with errors, missing information, and duplication.

About 46,000 records - roughly 36% - lack basic information such as names, dates or places of disappearance, making searches impossible. Officials said the registry was initially compiled by uploading unverified lists from federal and state prosecutors, search commissions, citizen reports and activist groups, creating duplication and incomplete entries.

A further 43,128 cases do have complete records but show no activity through cross-referencing with other government databases.

as people are located, and said new legal reforms now block entries without minimum data.

"We will continue looking for all disappeared people until finding them," Marcela Figueroa, a top security official, said at President Claudia Sheinbaum's morning press conference.

Mexican political analyst Viri Rios said any changes to the list of disappeared people are controversial because mothers searching for their children fear that legitimate cases may be erased by mistake or negligence.

But she said for decades the registry was managed with "very little control," with cases added to the registry haphazardly and authorities neglecting to follow them up.

"Local prosecutors' offices will now be required, will be obligated, to open investigation files for all disappearance cases, and that is a major step," Rios said.

Hot weather, energy woes lead Venezuela to take a week off

Venezuela's interim president Delcy Rodriguez has declared a week off for public-sector workers as hot weather exacerbates the country's energy shortages. The South American nation has rationed power frequently over the years, and has shortened workdays and suspended school to save energy during Easter. "During this Holy Week, I want to announce that I have decreed days off on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday for the entire education sector," Rodriguez said. "The ministries" should also take time off as "part of the electric power saving plan," she added, saying Venezuela had faced "45 days of high temperatures." Essential services will not be affected. Rodriguez has led Venezuela after Nicolas Maduro was seized by the US military on January 3. (AFP)

Basic military training in Havana



People wearing gas masks take part in a basic military training in Havana yesterday. (AFP)

Mercosur and Canada near free-trade agreement with April talks

Reuters
Montevideo/Brasilia

Canada and South America's Mercosur bloc are advancing towards a free-trade agreement that could be signed by the end of the year, with more negotiations scheduled for next month in Brasilia, according to three sources familiar with the talks.

The government officials, from Canada, Argentina and Brazil, told Reuters they expected the deal to be concluded in 2026, with one noting that talks were progressing well and could be wrapped up before September.

The Argentine government official said the agreement was expect-

ed to be signed in September or October, marking roughly a year since negotiations formally restarted.

Another diplomat, based in Brazil, also told Reuters negotiations were going at a record speed and extremely well, confirming the countries would probably reach a deal this year.

Canada has intensified efforts to diversify trade amid uncertainty linked to tariffs imposed by US President Donald Trump, and South America, especially Brazil, is a trade partner Canada cannot do without, the diplomat in Brazil said.

For Mercosur, a major exporter of beef, soy and minerals, an agreement with Canada would expand access to developed markets and help attract investment in key

Deal expected to conclude in 2026; Canada seeks trade diversification amid US tariff uncertainty

industries such as mining.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney is expected to visit Brazil in the next quarter, the source in Brazil said. Although neither government plans to announce an agreement during the visit, it may serve as a push to finalise one as soon as possible, the source said.

Mercosur's office in Montevideo did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

A spokesperson for the Canadian trade ministry said: "Negotiations on a free trade agreement are moving forward with momentum, and we are encouraged by the progress being made. Canada

is committed to concluding an ambitious, comprehensive (Mercosur) agreement that creates real opportunities for Canadian businesses, workers, and investors."

A Canadian government official directly involved in the negotiations told Reuters yesterday the country's trade minister, Maninder Sidhu, was "very keen" to finalise the deal this year and would meet his Brazilian counterpart on the sidelines of the World Trade Organisation meetings in Cameroon on March 28.

The renewed momentum follows months of technical exchanges after Canada and Mer-

cosur agreed last year to relaunch the talks that had been stalled since 2021. Mercosur is composed of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, with Bolivia expected to become a full member in 2028.

Earlier in March, trade officials from Ontario, a province central to Canada's economy, visited Argentina and Uruguay as part of efforts to lay the groundwork for a future deal and showcase support for increased bilateral trade.

Ontario's minister of economic development, job creation and trade, Victor Fedeli, met with technology and mining industry representatives as part of the trip, building on a visit to Brazil late last year.

Fedeli said Ontario was stepping up outreach to South Amer-

ica partly due to what he called the "Trump acceleration" effect, noting that roughly 80% of the province's trade is with the US.

"We're building on that momentum," Fedeli said in an interview with Reuters in Montevideo. "The Canadian government is serious about diversifying away from the US, working to unlock new opportunities for trade, partnership, and investment," he added.

The talks with Canada come after Mercosur signed a trade agreement with the European Union in January, following 25 years of negotiations. The European Commission said key trade elements of the accord, which has proven contentious in Europe, will apply on a provisional basis from May 1.

S Korea's Lee to pursue wartime command, selective conscription

Reuters
Seoul

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung yesterday said the country would seek to reclaim wartime operational control from the US at an early date, underscoring the need for greater military self-reliance.

In a meeting with military leaders at the defence ministry, Lee also said the government would pursue military reform such as implementing selective conscription to better reflect demographic and security realities.

Lee cited wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as tension on the Korean Peninsula, saying the armed forces' foremost responsibility was to maintain readiness to

respond to provocation by North Korea.

"The ironclad South Korea-US alliance is an essential pillar of peace and stability on the peninsula but excessive dependence is not desirable," Lee said.

"The transfer of wartime operational control will be pursued swiftly."

Currently, the US would command allied troops in the event of war on the Korean peninsula, but successive South Korean governments have sought to regain wartime operation control.

Lee's administration has signalled it aims to finalise the process during his term, which runs through 2030, once South Korea meets a set of military capability conditions agreed with the US.

Lee said South Korea's military

must be prepared to take a leading role in defending the peninsula, calling for a shift toward a "smarter, stronger military" equipped to deal with future battlefields shaped by advanced technology.

The armed forces are largely made up of conscripts, with most men required to serve for around 18 months, reflecting the country's status as still at war with North Korea in the absence of a peace treaty following a 1953 armistice.

Selective conscription was a theme in Lee's presidential campaigns, during which he pledged to retain mandatory service but allow eligible recruits to choose volunteer or alternative pathways and adjust service terms to address South Korea's shrinking military manpower brought about by demographic change.

Indonesia, Malaysia strengthen regional ties against 'uncertainty'

AFP
Jakarta

Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to strengthen regional integration to ensure stability and guard against global upheaval, visiting Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said yesterday.

Anwar met Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto during a one-day visit, with the war in the Middle East at the top of their agenda.

US-Israeli strikes on Iran and Tehran's retaliatory response in the Gulf have sent global oil prices soaring, with Iran maintaining a hold on the vital Strait of Hormuz.

Anwar said in a post on his Instagram account that Malaysia and Indonesia stressed "the need

to strengthen principled regional integration to preserve peace, ensure stability and strengthen economic resilience" at a time of "increasing global uncertainty".

Prabowo said Indonesia and Malaysia "affirmed their mutual commitment to mitigating the economic impact of various conflicts".

Rising oil prices caused by the Middle East conflict have prompted Indonesia and Malaysia to look for ways to reduce fuel consumption.

Anwar announced a range of measures on Thursday, including a reduction in the subsidised fuel quota for Malaysian citizens and new diesel purchase limits in the eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak, as part of tighter controls to curb hoarding and smuggling of subsidised fuel.

Indonesia hopes to save up to 80tn rupiah (\$4.7bn) to cushion its economy from the fallout of the war, presidential spokesman Prasetyo Hadi said last week without giving any details.

Southeast Asia's largest economy is also considering fuel-saving measures that include one day of remote working a week for government and some public sector workers.

Anwar said he and Prabowo also "agreed to intensify diplomatic efforts to defuse conflicts, protect civilian lives and open up space for negotiations towards a peaceful and lasting solution". He said "the continuity of global supply chains and strategic trade routes", including the Strait of Hormuz through which about a fifth of global oil supplies pass, must not be affected.

Cyclone triggers outages at major Australian LNG plants

AFP
Sydney

Some of the world's largest LNG plants were forced shut yesterday by a cyclone off western Australia, squeezing fuel supplies already stretched thin by war in the Middle East.

Energy giant Chevron said it suffered outages at its Gorgon and Wheatstone gas plants, which collectively supply more than five percent of the world's liquefied natural gas.

Fuel company Woodside said its Karratha plant, which processes fuel from one of the world's biggest offshore gas operations, had also fallen offline.

Australia is one of the world's largest LNG exporters, supplying Asian nations reeling from fuel disruptions caused by Iran's Strait of Hormuz blockade as Tehran retaliates against Israeli-US attacks.

Gas sector analyst Josh Runciman said the cyclone had come at the "worst time", warning that

Australia is one of the world's largest LNG exporters, supplying Asian nations reeling from fuel disruptions caused by Hormuz blockade

even a minor hit to output could ripple through global markets.

"This current disruption does little to reassure LNG importers about the reliability of LNG supply," said Runciman, from the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis.

US President Donald Trump somewhat soothed energy markets on Thursday by pushing back a deadline for Iran to open the shipping channel, which once carried one-fifth of the world's oil and gas.

Oil prices eased after Trump postponed his demand to April 6, although most equities also dropped as hopes for an imminent ceasefire faded.

The US-Israel war on Iran has caused major disruptions to global supplies of both oil and LNG.

Qatar, one of the world's top LNG producer, has seen gas exports plunge as Iran targets en-

ergy installations and fuel tankers steer clear of the strait.

A sprawling industrial complex sitting just off Australia's western coast, Chevron's Gorgon plant is capable of pumping out more than 15 million metric tonnes of gas each year.

At full capacity, the smaller Wheatstone project produces almost nine million metric tonnes.

"Chevron Australia is working to restore production at the Gorgon and Wheatstone gas facilities following production outages," Chevron said in a statement.

"We will resume full production at both facilities once it is safe to do so."

Woodside's Karratha plant serves the massive North West Shelf gas project, described by the company as one of the largest LNG operations in the world.

"If there is any material impact to production or assets, Woodside

will update the market in accordance with its continuous disclosure obligations," the company said in a statement.

The ongoing war meant Australian LNG exports had become "more vital than ever", International Energy Agency chief Fatih Birol said earlier this week.

"But Australia alone will not be able to offset the entire lack of LNG coming from the Middle East," he said during a trip to capital Canberra.

Some 40 percent of Japan's LNG comes from Australia, according to the Asia Natural Gas and Energy Association.

LNG prices in some parts of Asia have more than doubled since the joint US-Israel strikes against Iran on February 28.

Tropical Cyclone Narelle was inching towards the coast of Western Australia yesterday afternoon, whipping up winds as strong as 200 kilometres (125 miles) per hour.

With LNG profits set to soar on the back of the Middle East crisis, Australia is reportedly mulling a new windfall tax on fuel exporters.

Australia defends Middle East efforts after Trump criticism

AFP
Sydney

Australia's leader said yesterday it was not consulted over the war with Iran which was having a "massive global economic impact", responding to President Donald Trump's swipe the US ally was not doing enough.

Trump has urged nations to dispatch warships to secure crucial oil supply routes through the Strait of Hormuz.

Although many have balked at

Trump's proposal, the US president included criticism of Australia as he vented his frustrations over lack of British support.

"Australia was not great. I was a little surprised by Australia," he said Thursday during a cabinet meeting at the White House.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said Australia was in close contact with Gulf states under attack from Iran, providing a surveillance aircraft to help defend the United Arab Emirates, where many Australians live.

"There is no request been made

to Australia that has not been agreed to," Albanese told reporters in Canberra yesterday.

"I make the point as well that Australia wasn't consulted before this action was undertaken. I respect that, that's a matter for the United States," he added.

The United States is Australia's main security ally, and a partner with Britain in the trilateral AUKUS pact to build more nuclear submarines to counter China.

"We do want to see a de-escalation and we do understand that this war is having a massive global

economic impact," Albanese said.

War has engulfed much of the Middle East since the United States and Israel launched strikes against Iran on February 28.

Australia made an early statement of support for the US acting to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Australia had "abhorrence" for Iran's regime, Albanese said Friday, pointing to its expulsion of Iran's ambassador in August after attributing the fire bombing of a Melbourne synagogue a year earlier to Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

Japan's ispace delays moon landing to 2030

Reuters
Tokyo

Japanese spacecraft startup ispace said yesterday it will further delay a US government-sponsored lunar mission to 2030 and cut its global workforce, in a strategic shift after two failed lunar landings.

The announcement highlights the murky outlook for the venture, as the US revamps space missions with commercial and international partners to send astronauts to the Moon before China does.

Tokyo-based ispace said it will consolidate moon lander development across its Japanese and US units and push back a launch commissioned under Nasa's commercial lunar payload services program by three years from 2027, following previous delays.

In the meantime, ispace said it would launch five lunar orbiters by 2030 that can provide telecommunication, navigation and surface observation services to contribute to development on the Moon.

The company could incur costs of several million dollars due to the changes, which could lead to further equity financing and a reduction of a few dozen staff, Chief Financial Officer Jumpei Nozaki told a media briefing.

Since its 2023 Tokyo stock listing, ispace has had two failed lunar landing attempts, has been running at a loss and has seen its share price slump. It had



A model of lunar lander "Resilience", operated by ispace, is displayed in Tokyo. (Reuters/File Photo)

about 300 employees across Japan, the US and Luxembourg as of last year.

Its third mission is scheduled for 2028 as part of the Japanese government's commercial space programme. It will launch its "Ultra" lunar lander which is capable of carrying a 200kg (441 lbs) payload to the Moon.

Only two private companies, Intuitive Machines and Firefly Aerospace — both from the US — have landed on the Moon.

Nasa on Tuesday announced updates to its Artemis programme, including plans to send up to 30 uncrewed missions to the lunar surface starting next year.

"While it's true that we are

moving against Nasa's push to accelerate moon missions in 2028-29... as the only (private company) outside the US with moon landing technology, we are seeking a greater role in their program," Nozaki said.

Changes to the American space programme under President Donald Trump has led to confusion among Japanese space ventures that had hoped for deeper US-Japan co-operation to counter China.

Tokyo-based rocket startup ISC, whose chief executive sits on the ispace management board, in December cancelled a launch test in New Mexico, citing disruption in regulatory procedures.

China tech groups to boycott top AI conference

AFP
Beijing

Chinese science and tech associations called yesterday for a boycott of a leading global artificial intelligence (AI) conference this year, after event organisers said they could not accept submissions from those on a US list of sanctioned entities.

The China Association for Science and Technology (CAST) blasted the move by NeurIPS — whose 40th annual conference takes place in Sydney in December — as "injecting political hegemony into academic exchange".

The China Computer Federation and the Chinese Association of Automation have also urged their members to refrain from submitting papers or working academically with NeurIPS.

China says hopes to boost trade co-operation with US

China wishes to strengthen economic co-operation with the United States to avoid "vicious competition", commerce minister Wang Wentao told US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer, according to a readout released yesterday.

The two met on Thursday on the sidelines of a World Trade Organisation (WTO) ministerial conference in Cameroon's capital, less than two months ahead of US President Donald Trump's planned visit to Beijing.

"China is willing to strengthen

NeurIPS, run by a US-based non-profit, is one of the most prestigious academic conferences in machine learning, AI and computational neuroscience.

China has in recent years become a major contributor to the gathering, which typically draws tens of thousands of researchers to present and discuss cutting-edge work, while tech firms and investors scout for emerging talent.

NeurIPS organisers initially stated in a recent policy update that they were "required by law to comply with US sanctions and trade restrictions" and were therefore "unable to accept or publish submissions" from sanctioned institutions.

Chinese tech companies including Huawei, DJI, China Telecom and chipmaker SMIC, and leading academic institutions such as Harbin Institute of Tech-

nology and Beihang University are sanctioned by various US government agencies.

Organisers later clarified that the rules apply specifically to entities on the US Treasury's Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN) list.

"No matter how prestigious an academic conference may be, once it is tainted by political scyphancy, it will be spurned by the academic community," read a commentary published Friday by CAST, China's largest professional body for scientists and engineers.

In a separate statement, the association said it would stop accepting funding applications from scholars wishing to attend the 2026 NeurIPS conference.

CAST added that it would no longer recognise papers accepted by NeurIPS this year.

multilateral and regional economic and trade cooperation with the United States," Wang told Greer, according to a statement by the Beijing's Ministry of Commerce.

The two powers must "properly handle the relationship between competition and co-operation" and "avoid vicious competition," he said.

The world's two largest economies were locked in a bitter trade battle last year before agreeing to a truce in October. High-level talks in Paris this month between US Treasury Secretary Scott Bes-

sent and Chinese Vice-Premier He Lifeng also helped to ease tensions.

Nevertheless, issues including US tariffs and US restrictions on exports of advanced technologies continue to threaten relations.

Wang expressed "grave concerns" on Thursday regarding recently announced US trade investigations signalling the possibility of fresh tariffs.

Washington's trade investigations target 60 economies, including China, and will look into "failures to take action on forced labour".



Isogo Thermal Power Station, a coal-fired power plant operated by the Electric Power Development Co. Ltd, is seen in Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture, yesterday. (AFP)

Japan to boost coal-fired power as war causes energy turmoil

AFP
Tokyo

Japan's government plans to temporarily lift restrictions on coal-fired power plants as it seeks to ease an energy crunch caused by the Middle East war, officials said on Friday.

Officials presented the plan at a meeting of a panel of experts, who approved the proposal, the industry ministry said on its website.

"Given the current situation in the Middle East affecting fuel prices, we believe that uncertainty regarding future LNG procurement is increasing," an industry ministry official said at the meeting, which was broadcast online.

"We think it will be necessary, by increasing the operation of coal-fired power plants, to... ensure the reliability of stable supply," he said.

Power suppliers have previously been required to keep the operating rate of coal-fired thermal power stations that emit large amounts of carbon dioxide at or below 50%.

But the government now intends to allow the full operation of older, less efficient coal-fired plants, for a year from the new

fiscal year starting April, according to the plan presented at the meeting.

Japan relies on thermal power plants to generate around 70% of its electricity needs, with coal constituting 30% of their fuel.

Liquefied natural gas (LNG) accounts for another 30%, and oil comprises 7%.

The emergency measure to boost reliance on coal is estimated to "result in an LNG savings effect of approximately 500,000 tonnes", the official added.

But Yoko Mulholland of climate think-tank E3G told AFP that the plans to lift coal power restrictions "deepen the risk that Japan will not meet its goal of phasing out inefficient coal plants by 2030".

Not only threatening climate health, the move can also "lock Japan into a vicious cycle of fossil-fuel dependence" and delay progress toward Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's stated goal of 100% domestic energy self-sufficiency, she said.

"This crisis has laid bare the risks of relying on imported fossil fuels, and now is the time for Japan to shift course to fully embrace renewable energy as a strategic national asset."



India clears military purchase proposals worth \$25bn

Reuters
New Delhi

India approved proposals worth \$25bn yesterday to buy transport aircraft, Russian S-400 missile systems and remotely piloted strike aircraft as it pushes its military modernisation and replenishes equipment after its conflict with Pakistan.

The decision comes on the back of another major approval last month worth \$40bn to purchase more French Rafale fighter jets for the air force and Boeing P-81 reconnaissance aircraft for the navy.

Yesterday's approvals also covered purchases of armoured piercing tank ammunition, gun systems and aerial surveillance systems for the army, increasing the life of the

Sukhoi-30 fighter jets operated by the air force, and hovercraft for the coastguard, a statement from the defence ministry said.

Separately, the ministry also signed a 4.45 billion rupees (\$47mn) contract yesterday with Russia's JSC Rosoboronexport to acquire Tunguska air defence missile systems for the army.

In all, India has approved 55 proposals worth 6.73tn rupees (\$71bn) and signed contracts for another 503 proposals amounting to 2.28tn rupees in the fiscal year ending March 31, the statement said, adding that both were the highest in a fiscal year.

India is the world's fifth-largest military spender and the second-largest arms importer after Ukraine, according to latest data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

It has for decades been modernising its mostly Soviet-era equipment and increasingly looking to new sources including France, Israel, the US and Germany. In recent years, it has pushed to manufacture everything from guns and drones to fighter jets and submarines at home, either on its own or in collaboration with foreign partners. Last year, India and Pakistan were involved in a fierce four-day military conflict, their worst in decades, after an attack on Hindu tourists in Indian Kashmir. New Delhi said the militant attackers were from Pakistan. Pakistan denied the accusations.

India's ties with China have also been testy and they were locked in a military stand-off in the Himalayas for more than four years before they agreed to pull back in 2024 and repair relations.

India cuts excise duties on petrol, diesel as global oil prices surge

Reuters
New Delhi

India has slashed excise duties on petrol and diesel to protect consumers and curb a potential spike in inflation, while imposing windfall taxes on aviation fuel and diesel exports, amid volatile global oil markets due to the Iran war.

Global oil prices have surged past \$100 per barrel after the near closure of the Strait of Hormuz, which serves as a conduit for 40% of India's crude oil imports, since the US and Israel first struck Iran on February 28.

In a government order late Thursday, India's finance ministry reduced the special excise duty on petrol to 3 rupees (\$0.0318) per litre from 13 rupees. It also cut the duty on diesel to

zero from 10 rupees per litre.

The move comes ahead of elections next month in four Indian states and one federal territory, with voters very sensitive to higher prices.

India will lose 70bn rupees (\$739mn) a fortnight from the excise cuts, although it will recover part of this — 15bn rupees — through separate export taxes on some fuel products, Vivek Chaturvedi, chairman of Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs, told a press briefing.

The net hit to government finances will be 55bn rupees per fortnight. The yield on 10-year government bonds rose 7 basis points to 6.95%, its highest level in 20 months on concerns that the government may struggle to meet its fiscal deficit target of 4.3% of GDP for the financial year beginning April.

The tax cuts also ease the burden for oil marketing companies. While fuel prices in India are technically deregulated, state-run oil companies, which control 90% of the retail network, do not always raise prices when crude climbs.

As a result, consumers are shielded from volatility, with either the government or the companies absorbing the increases.

"Government has taken a huge hit on its taxation revenues to ensure very high losses of oil companies, approximately 24 rupees a litre for petrol and 30 rupees a litre for diesel, at this time of sky high international prices, are reduced," Oil Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said in a post on X.

The government said that at current crude rates, the combined daily under-recoveries being absorbed by oil firms stand at 24bn rupees.

Nepali rapper Shah sworn in as PM

AFP
Kathmandu

Nepal's rapper-turned-politician Balendra Shah was sworn in as prime minister yesterday after sweeping the first election since deadly anti-corruption protests toppled the government last year.

The 35-year-old reformist and his Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) dominated polls this month on a platform of youth-driven political change.

"I, Balendra Shah, in the name of the country and people, pledge that I will be loyal to the constitution," Shah said, dressed all in black, including his trademark dark sunglasses.

Crowds at the ceremony cheered and chanted his name after he formally took office, where he named key cabinet posts, including former youth activist Sudan Gurung as interior minister.

At least 77 people were killed in the anti-corruption youth uprising, which began over a brief social media ban but tapped into long-standing fury over economic hardship in the nation of 30mn people.

Shah, better known as Balen, was sworn in a day after he released his first public statement since winning the March 5 elections, via a rap song posted on social media.

"The strength of unity is my



Newly appointed Prime Minister Balendra Shah, popularly known as "Balen", and his newly sworn-in cabinet of ministers pose for a photo after taking the oath of office at "Shital Niwas", the presidential building in Kathmandu, yesterday. (Reuters)

national power," Shah sang in the song, which has racked up nearly three mn views since being released on social media and streaming sites on Thursday evening.

Shah had remained silent publicly since his RSP party won the election in a landslide, winning a commanding majority of 182 in the 275-seat House of Representatives.

He campaigned alongside the RSP president, combative television host Rabi Lamichhane, 51, a former deputy prime minister and interior minister and now a fellow lawmaker who retains a pivotal role in power.

"My heart is full of courage, my red blood is boiling; my brothers stand with me, this time we will

rise," Shah said in his song, over a video of him campaigning for election.

"May my breath not run out; I will run like a leopard," he added.

Finance Minister Swarnim Wagle, a former UN economic adviser, takes up hard task of reforming Nepal's battered economy.

Foreign Minister Shishir Khanal, a former education minister, must balance landlocked Nepal's relations between giants India and China.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was swift to congratulate Shah yesterday, saying he looked forward to taking "India-Nepal friendship and co-operation to even greater heights," he said in a statement.

China also congratulated Shah, with foreign ministry spokesman Lin Jian telling reporters Beijing wanted to "deepen practical co-operation" with Nepal.

Sushila Karki, 73, a former chief justice who had led the caretaker administration for six months, said the country's future lay in the hands of a younger generation.

"It makes me even more delighted to have a 35-year-old youth as my successor," the outgoing interim prime minister, who hugged Shah after he took the oath, said in a statement. "May you succeed in honouring the people's mandate by striking a balance between caution and boldness."

Myanmar military signals leadership changes

AFP
Naypyidaw

Myanmar's junta signalled changes in the military's leadership ahead of the country's annual show of force yesterday, potentially clearing the way for defence chief Min Aung Hlaing to become president.

Tanks and military trucks laden with rocket launchers and mobile field guns trundled through the streets as thousands of soldiers marched for Armed Forces Day in the capital Naypyidaw, where Min Aung Hlaing made his yearly speech to rally morale.

The armed forces "reaffirmed its pledge to support the government legitimately elected by the people, with the aim of strengthening and sustaining the multi-party democracy system", he said.

Min Aung Hlaing has ruled by diktat since ousting the hugely popular government of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2021 — detaining the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, dissolving her party and triggering civil war.

There will be "leadership changes" in the armed forces after the ceremony, the state-run *Global*

New Light of Myanmar newspaper quoted Min Aung Hlaing's deputy Soe Win as saying at an official dinner Thursday.

Lawmakers are set to begin the process of selecting a president next week following a walkover victory by pro-military parties earlier this year in elections overseen by the junta.

Under the constitution, Min Aung Hlaing would have to step down from his military post to become president, and Soe Win's comments reinforce expectations that he will do so.

He is already acting president, but taking the role on a permanent basis would bolster critics who say the transition to a new government is effectively the military transferring power to itself in a civilian disguise.

"Irrespective of who leads," the armed forces "will continue to follow the guidance of successive leaders, advisers and mentors," the newspaper cited Soe Win as saying in indirect speech.

Myanmar's military mythologises itself as the only force protecting the restive nation from disintegration.

The newspaper devoted its front page to the military pageant, with



Military Chief Min Aung Hlaing inspects the troops during a ceremony marking Myanmar's Armed Forces Day in Naypyidaw yesterday. (AFP)

an image of missile launchers before three huge statues of ancient kings that dominate the parade ground.

Marching bands and small submarines atop vehicles emblazoned with the words "Made in Myanmar" paraded past hundreds of spectators as the sun went down yesterday, state TV channel MRTV showed.

The Armed Forces Day events have progressively shrunk since 2021, as the military's ranks have been sapped by the civil war against anti-coup guerrillas and

long-active ethnic minority rebel factions.

But attendance appeared to be higher and the show more extravagant at yesterday's parade compared to last year's event, which fell on the day before a devastating 7.7 magnitude earthquake hit the country, killing thousands.

Over the past year, there have been signs the junta is back on the front foot — with a string of moderate victories thanks largely to China-backed truces with ethnic rebels along their shared border.

Sri Lanka jails man for hoarding fuel

Sri Lanka has jailed a man for three weeks after he admitted to hoarding four litres of petrol during a nationwide fuel shortage triggered by the Middle East war, local media reported yesterday.

The 48-year-old man initially said the fuel was for his lawnmower. A magistrate in Nikaweratiya, 125 kilometres (78 miles) northeast of the capital Colombo, also imposed a fine of 1,500 rupees (\$5), according to the Lankadeepa daily newspaper. It added that the man had been charged with hoarding petrol and trying to sell it on the black market at a time when authorities had imposed fuel rationing. Motorists on the South Asian island are currently receiving fuel every other day.

Authorities say existing diesel stocks are sufficient until mid-May, while petrol supplies could last about a week longer.

Fuel prices across Sri Lanka have risen by a third since the US and Israel began bombing Iran, triggering retaliatory attacks that disrupted global supplies.

President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's office said he had held talks with visiting Russian Deputy Energy Minister Roman Marshavin on securing oil supplies.

In a statement, Dissanayake's office quoted the Russian minister as saying: "Russia is prepared to support Sri Lanka in facing any challenges arising from the Middle East conflict." (AFP)

Middle East war exposes UK Navy's limitations

AFP
London

A single destroyer sent to the Mediterranean and Germany stepping in to command a Nato maritime mission: the Iran war is exposing the limits of Britain's navy, seen by observers as an embarrassment for a once proud maritime power.

The conflict, launched on February 28 with US-Israeli strikes on Iran, is highlighting the effects of years of under-investment and industrial delays, leaving the Royal Navy virtually absent from the Middle East.

Controversy about Britain's naval capabilities first erupted over the slow deployment of HMS Dragon to protect British bases in Cyprus, one of which was hit by an Iranian drone on March 1.

The destroyer has only just arrived.

In the meantime, France deployed its Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier, while Italy and Greece sent ships to reassure Cyprus. Right-wing newspaper the Daily Telegraph called the comparisons "embarrassing".

This week Germany announced it will assume command in April of a Nato maritime mission in the North Atlantic in place of Britain, which was due to assign HMS Dragon to the role but is not able to deploy another vessel.

"This is what good allies do," Defence Secretary John Healey said Thursday, while admitting he was "not happy with the situation we have with British warships".

"I have to make decisions based on what we've got," he added, noting the UK now has 17 frigates and destroyers, compared with 23 when Labour was last in power in 2010.

The vessels include six Type 45 destroyers and 11 Type 23

frigates, but most are currently unavailable, in maintenance or being decommissioned.

The next generation of warships — eight Type 26 anti-submarine frigates and five Type 31s — are not due to be ready before 2028-2029 due to delays, prompting some experts to warn of a capability dip in the coming years.

The Strategic Defence Review published last year lamented that maintenance costs are being driven up by the ageing fleet — a blow for the Royal Navy, which for centuries extended Britain's empire around the world, once dominating the oceans and turning the island into a global power.

It took eight years to complete upgrades on the destroyer HMS Daring.

Britain's two aircraft carriers — HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Queen Elizabeth — are also docked. The former is expected to take part in a North Atlantic mission soon.

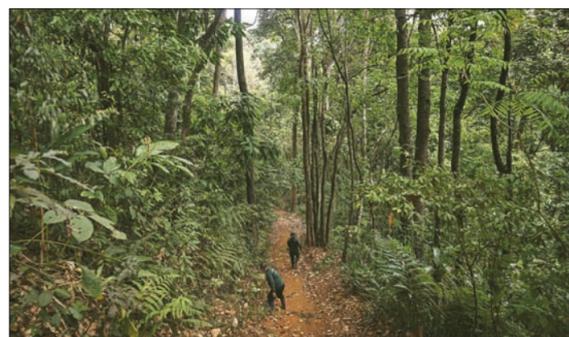
They were labelled "toys" by US President Donald Trump on Thursday, who has criticised London for its limited response to the US-Israel war against Iran.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer has said the UK will not be drawn into a broader war, and refused to join the US and Israel's bombing of Iran.

But the UK government has allowed US planes to take off from two UK bases to target Iran's missile sites.

And Britain has deployed fighter jets and air-defence systems to the Gulf to protect British interests and allies, shooting down numerous drones.

Russia's war in Ukraine, the expansion of Nato missions, and the conflict in the Middle East means it is "a particularly challenging period for the Navy", Nick Childs of the International Institute for Strategic Studies told reporters including AFP recently.



Volunteer firefighters from Hmong Doi Pui village clearing a firebreak in the Doi Suthep-Pui National Park area of Chiang Mai. (AFP)

Tech-equipped Indigenous firefighters protect Thai forests

AFP
Chiang Mai

In the dry-season heat of northern Thailand, Hmong villagers zip through forested slopes, blasting tinder with leaf blowers and cutting through brush with machetes, while others scan for smoke on live feeds from their phones. Across about a dozen villages in the hills of Doi Suthep-Pui National Park, just above the city of Chiang Mai, Indigenous volunteers patrol on foot and clear firebreaks while

also deploying drones and treetop cameras — all to detect blazes early and defend Thailand's second-largest city from wildfire smoke.

"The forest we protect is part of the national park — the lungs of Chiang Mai," said Mathaphan Phuchakritdapa, who started the firefighting volunteer force a decade ago and is chief of Suthep subdistrict. "If it burns, the city's lungs are destroyed. That's why we have to take care of it as best we can."

He and his team shifted to tech-driven firefighting after devastating wildfires in 2020 tore through the mountains above the tourism-de-

pendent city. The blazes lasted weeks in March and April that year, killing at least five people and injuring and displacing residents and wildlife.

The thick smoke from fires then and since has regularly pushed Chiang Mai to the top of global air pollution rankings.

Satellite imagery from the peak of the 2020 crisis showed northern Thailand blanketed by dense clusters of fire hotspots, with nearly 400 recorded in Chiang Mai province in a single day.

"It was the worst fire I've seen in my life," said Mathaphan, adding it took more than 40 days to bring it under control.

G7 allies press Rubio on US plans for Iran

AFP
Cernay-la-Ville, France

G7 allies were yesterday pressing US Secretary of State Marco Rubio for clarity on American plans for Iran almost one month into the war in the Middle East, with concern also intensifying over the extent of co-operation between Russia and the Islamic republic.

Having skipped the first day of the meeting at the historic monastery turned luxury hotel complex outside Paris, Rubio arrived at the Vaux-de-Cernay Abbey for a full day of talks with counterparts from leading industrialised democracies.

German Foreign Minister Johann Wadepuhl said the international community needed to collaborate even more closely now it was dealing with two wars – including the conflict sparked by Moscow's invasion of Ukraine – in which Russia and Iran were co-operating.

"We need to strengthen our unity. Given that Iran and Russia are working together in the closest way, we must stand even closer together," Wadepuhl told reporters.

He told German radio earlier ahead of the talks that allies needed to know "how the US will proceed" in Iran. Rubio, he said, would "perhaps explain this more precisely".

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, said a diplomatic



Foreign Ministers pose for a family photo on the second day of the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Vaux-de-Cernay Abbey in Cernay-la-Ville near Paris, yesterday. (Reuters)

source who asked not to be named.

The UK's foreign minister Yvette Cooper urged a "swift resolution to this conflict that restores regional stability".

She echoed concerns over the ongoing de facto blockade by Iran of the key Strait of Hormuz, which has driven up global oil prices and left vessels queueing up to enter the energy bottleneck.

"Frankly, Iran cannot be able to just hold the global economy hostage as a result of a Strait which is about international shipping routes and the freedom of navigation," she said.

It is Rubio's first trip abroad since the US and Israel launched the war with the air strikes on February 28 that killed supreme leader Ali Khamenei.

Before leaving for France, Rubio said Thursday that it was in the "interest" of all G7 nations to push for the reopening

of the Strait of Hormuz.

Defending the war, he said: "The president is not just doing a favour to the US and to our people. This is for the world."

With Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andrii Sybaha in attendance, European ministers are keen to emphasise support for Kyiv must not be forgotten over four years after Russia's full-scale invasion.

"Putin is cynically hoping that the escalation in the Middle East will divert our attention from his crimes in Ukraine," Wadepuhl said.

"This calculation must not succeed," he said, warning that any compromising on Ukraine's defence capabilities would "play into Putin's hands".

Writing on X, in his first comment on the meeting, Rubio said he had reiterated at the G7 "that President Trump is committed to reaching a ceasefire and negotiated settlement to the Russia-

Ukraine war as soon as possible".

France is eager to broaden the scope of the elite G7 club – whose origins go back to the first G6 summit held in the nearby Chateau de Rambouillet in 1975 – and which now comprises Canada, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, UK and US.

It has invited foreign ministers from key emerging markets Brazil and India, as well as Saudi Arabia and South Korea.

The event is leading up to a G7 summit in the French Alpine lake-side resort of Evian in June to be chaired by President Emmanuel Macron.

The South African presidency Thursday alleged Washington had urged Paris to disinvite President Cyril Ramaphosa from that summit. But French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said Kenya – rather than South Africa – had been invited. "We did not give in to any pressure," he said.

Energy crisis may force Germany to run coal plants longer

AFP
Frankfurt

Chancellor Friedrich Merz said yesterday that if the energy crisis sparked by the Middle East war dragged on, Germany might have to keep running coal-fired power plants longer than planned.

Germany has committed as part of its climate plans to gradually shutting down plants fired by anthracite and lignite and complete the coal phase-out by 2038 at the latest.

"If the energy crisis continues and a shortage actually occurs, we may even have to keep existing coal-fired power plants online for longer," Merz told a forum in Frankfurt organised by the FAZ newspaper.

"We have to supply this country with electricity. I am not prepared to jeopardise the core

of our industry just because we have decided on phase-out plans that have become unrealistic."

Europe's biggest economy has for decades pushed an energy transition away from fossil fuels and nuclear energy by building up wind, solar and other clean and renewable energy sources.

While the Merz government has pledged to stick to national climate targets, it has prioritised boosting the stagnating economy and scrapped some green energy initiatives.

Under Merz, Germany has lobbied for the EU to weaken the phase-out of combustion engine car sales, proposed ending subsidies for rooftop solar panels and reversed a law mandating green heating for buildings.

Yesterday, Merz said he was committed to the further expansion of renewable energies, but said they must be supplemented by new gas-fired power plants.

French TV under fire over 'disgraceful' interview

French public television came under severe criticism yesterday for airing a prime-time interview with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

The France 2 television channel aired 10 minutes of the pre-recorded interview during its Thursday evening news, while the full hour-long version was posted online.

More than four years into Russia's full-scale invasion on Ukraine, Lavrov on France 2 claimed Moscow was intent on defending "international law".

He said US-Israeli strikes on Iran that sparked the Middle East war had breached these rules. But he rejected any notion of Russia breaking international law in Ukraine, claiming its forces never targeted

"exclusively civilian" targets. Ukraine's ambassador to France Vadym Omelchenko said on X people must be wondering why French television had given a platform.

Russia specialist Dimitri Minic described the interview as "catastrophic".

"In case France TV teams still underestimate information warfare, they should understand that Moscow has made it the central weapon of its war against the West," he wrote on X.

France TV did not immediately respond to an AFP request for comment.

During the interview, presenter Lea Salame responded that France 2 reporters had documented civilian deaths in Ukraine. (AFP)

Norway to reach target of 3.5% of GDP on defence with new spending boost

Reuters
Oslo

Norway is to raise defence spending by another 115 billion crowns (\$12 billion) by 2036, the government said yesterday, as it also delayed committing to long-range defence systems while it learns lessons from the Ukraine war.

The spending comes on top of Norway's previously announced plan to spend 1.62 trillion crowns (\$167 billion) on defence between 2025 and 2036.

Norway, like other Nato members, is increasing defence spending as a result of the war and under pressure from US President Donald Trump. The extra spending will take Norway to its Nato commitment of 3.5% of GDP in 2035, the government said.

"We are ... allocating a significant increase in resources to the long-term plan, while also carefully weighing the priorities needed to rapidly strengthen Norway's defence capabilities," Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre told a press conference.

Norway is Nato's monitor for the vast 2 million square km (772,000 square miles) area of the North Atlantic used by the Russian northern fleet's nuclear submarines.

It is the only country in Europe that does not need to borrow money to finance increased defence spending, thanks to its \$2 trillion sovereign wealth fund, the world's largest.

It is also one of few countries where there was a consensus across the board when the long-term defence plan was first presented, with all parties in parlia-



Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store, Head of the Norwegian Armed Forces Eirik Johan Kristoffersen and Minister of Defence Tore O. Sandvik hold a press conference on the long-term plan for the defence sector in Oslo, yesterday. (Reuters)

ment backing it in 2024.

Support for Ukraine would come in addition to the 3.5% of GDP spending, the government said.

Oslo has committed to buy six submarines from Germany's TKMS and at least five frigates from Britain's BAE Systems as well as long-range rockets and artillery systems from South Korea's Hanwha Aerospace.

The first of the six submarines will be delivered in 2029 while the first two frigates are expected to arrive in 2030 and 2032, respectively, Støre said yesterday.

Norway will also prioritise short-range air defence and defence against drones, as a result of lessons learned in the Ukraine war.

Among elements being delayed

are long-range maritime surveillance drones as well as long-range anti-ballistic air defences.

Støre said more work was needed to reach the right decision, given the experience from Ukraine, where current air defence systems struggle with countering this type of Russian missile.

"We need to see how we can answer that best," he said.

Defence Minister Tore Sandvik said it was important to have a co-ordinated Nordic effort to buy similar systems, which is not the case at present.

For the drones, the delay is due to prohibitive costs, but also because new technology is developing fast and new solutions may be more relevant, Norway's chief of defence Eirik Kristoffersen said.

Half of Dutch fleet idle as European fishing hit by high diesel prices

Reuters
Amsterdam

The fishing industry is emerging as an early European casualty of soaring diesel costs amid the Iran war, with at least half the Dutch fleet staying in port this week, according to industry representatives.

The pressure is most acute in the Netherlands because of an outsized number of beam trawlers in its fleet, which makes up about 7% of the European Union's total.

These ships target high-value North Sea flatfish such as sole, turbot and brill, but burn relatively large amounts of fuel. Industry group VisNed said 80% to 90% of such trawlers did not sail out this week.

Durk van Tuinen, a spokesperson for the Dutch Fishers Union, said weekly fuel bills that ran 12,000 to 13,000 euros (\$13,800-\$15,000) before the war started on February 28 are now heading toward 30,000 euros, roughly equal to the total value of fish a vessel might bring at this time of the year, leaving no money to pay a crew.

"Now the fuel bill is equal to



Many Dutch fishing trawlers at a port after a sharp rise in the price of fuel in IJmuiden, Netherlands yesterday. (Reuters)

the revenue, so it simply does not work," he said.

The Dutch may be hardest-hit, but they are not alone, said Daniel Voces, managing director of Euronêche, the representative body for EU fishermen. Belgium and Britain also use beam trawlers, and fleets targeting groundfish such as cod and haddock around Europe are near or at loss-making levels with current prices.

Voces said top fishing nations Spain, Italy and France had all introduced modest support measures, but with fuel costs up by around 70%, some ships have been unwilling to put to sea.

He said the industry met with the EU fisheries chief, Costas

Kadis, this week to ask the European Commission to again relax state aid rules for the industry – as it did during the energy crisis that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

According to Van Tuinen, the immediate impact on consumers will be tighter supply and higher prices. He noted the price of sole had already jumped to 18 euros at auction this week from roughly 12 euros.

Faced with those costs, he said, restaurants might serve smaller portions to maintain their margins, but many others will simply stop buying.

"Fish will disappear from the menu," he predicted.

Europol targets Scottish crime gang behind drug trafficking

A violent Scottish crime gang alleged to be behind drugs trafficking has been targeted by European police, Europol said yesterday, adding that the operation had resulted in 13 arrests. The pan-European police body said the operation against the gang, which it did not identify by name, involved police in Spain,

the Netherlands and Britain. Europol said eight suspects had been arrested in Scotland, while another five were arrested in Spain.

"The gang is known for using violence to dominate territory and protect its criminal activity. Investigators believe it maintained control over parts

of the United Kingdom through intimidation, retaliation and organised violence tied to drug trafficking," Europol said in a statement. "While violence played out on the ground, senior figures operated from Spain and the United Arab Emirates, directing operations and managing profits at a distance. (Reuters)



Divers and helpers try to rescue a stranded humpback whale off the Baltic Sea coast of Timmendorfer Strand near Luebeck, northern Germany. (AFP)

Beached whale frees itself from German coast

AFP
Luebeck

A humpback whale stranded on Germany's Baltic Sea coast since early this week has freed itself and swum into deeper waters, rescuers said yesterday.

A flotilla of vessels was following the weakened animal at a distance, hoping to help guide it into the North Sea and toward the Atlantic Ocean, its natural habitat.

The roughly 10-metre- (33-foot-) long sea mammal was first spotted on Monday stuck in shallow water close to Niendorf near the northern city of Luebeck.

That set off days of intensive efforts using boats to make waves, then excavators to dig up sand and free the whale, as fears grew for its life.

Rescue teams from Thursday used earth moving equipment on a pontoon to dredge a channel through the sand to allow the animal to escape.

Then, overnight to Friday,

the whale "gathered its forces" and "freed itself using its own strength", marine biologist Robert Marc Lehmann said.

"Whale rescue successful," he wrote on his Instagram profile.

However, he cautioned against excessive optimism and said the animal is "very ill" and had a long way to go before reaching "its real home, the Atlantic".

The whale had been entangled in a fishing net, most of which rescuers managed to remove.

Lehmann said the whale was "zigzagging" in the water and

could become stranded again.

Experts from the marine conservation group Sea Shepherd also warned that the whale is suffering from a skin disease.

The animal was being escorted by, among others, two vessels from the Schleswig-Holstein state water police, a spokesperson from its headquarters in Kiel told AFP.

"Now we just have to hope that it finds its way out," state premier Daniel Guenther said on local radio, thanking the rescue volunteers.



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What comes next after the social media trial verdicts?

Recent jury verdicts in California and New Mexico involving Meta Platforms and Alphabet's Google are sharpening scrutiny of social media companies as plaintiffs advance legal theories aimed at holding platforms liable for harm to children. Here's a look at how the cases could be an early test of how courts may handle similar claims going forward.

The jury ordered Meta and Google on Wednesday to pay a combined \$6mn in damages to plaintiff Kaley GM, a 20-year-old who said she suffered from depression and suicidal thoughts after becoming addicted to the companies' platforms at a young age because of their attention-grabbing design. The jury found that both Meta and Google were negligent in designing their platforms and failed to warn consumers about their risks.

Separately, a jury in New Mexico on Tuesday ordered Meta to pay \$375mn after finding the company misled users about the safety of Facebook and Instagram while enabling child sexual exploitation on those platforms in a lawsuit brought by the state's attorney general.

The trials were the first to test whether Big Tech can be held liable for the design of apps blamed for harming young people's well-being. Meta, Snapchat and parent Snap Inc, Google's YouTube, and TikTok and parent ByteDance are facing thousands of lawsuits in federal and state courts over claims they knowingly designed their platforms with features that addict children and teens, fueling a mental health crisis.

The trials were the first to test whether Big Tech can be held liable for the design of apps blamed for harming young people's well-being

companies that make similar claims have been centralized in the California federal court. The federal litigation also includes lawsuits brought by state attorneys general alleging harm to their states, as well as cases by school districts that say social media addiction has caused costly disruptions and problems.

While there can be some coordination between state and federal courts overseeing similar claims, verdicts in state court do not typically have a direct impact on the federal litigation.

Both the New Mexico and the California cases highlighted a central legal dispute that is likely to shape future cases: how much federal law shields social media companies from liability.

Meta, Google and other social media companies have argued such lawsuits are barred by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which generally protects platforms from liability over user-generated content. Plaintiffs counter that their claims target the sites' design features that cause harm rather than the content itself.

The judges in Los Angeles and Santa Fe rejected that argument when they allowed the cases to go to trial. The verdicts could form the basis of appeals that would give higher courts a chance to weigh in on the key question of whether Section 230 applies to claims focused on platform design rather than content.

In May, the judge in New Mexico will oversee a second phase of that trial where the state attorney general will ask for a court order directing Meta to make changes to its platforms and for additional monetary damages. Meta said it will appeal both verdicts. Google said it will appeal in the Los Angeles case. In addition to the Section 230 question, the companies could also base appeals on events surrounding the trial, including the judge's decision-making on evidence, or jury or attorney conduct.

Yes, in both state and federal courts. A trial is scheduled for June in federal court in a lawsuit brought by a school district in Breathitt County, Kentucky, against Meta, ByteDance, Snap and Google, according to court records. In California state court, another trial is slated to begin in July involving claims against Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Snapchat. — Reuters

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Memories of another time



A passenger looks at Goree Island from a ferry in Dakar. The island of Goree lies off the coast of Senegal, opposite Dakar. From the 15th to the 19th century, it was the largest slave-trading centre on the African coast. The UN General Assembly earlier this week designated the transatlantic African slave trade as "the gravest crime against humanity," in a move advocates hailed as a step towards healing and possible reparations. The resolution was adopted to applause by a vote of 123 in favour, three against — the United States, Israel and Argentina — and 52 abstentions, including Britain and member states of the European Union. (AFP)

Italy's Meloni faces risky choices after referendum defeat shakes government

- Meloni weighs risky paths to stay in control
- New vote law or even early elections now in play
- Weak economy and Iran war add to political pressure

By Crispian Balmer and Angelo Amante
Reuters

Giorgia Meloni's defeat in a justice reform referendum has thrust the Italian leader into the toughest phase of her premiership, with her authority weakened, her reform programme in tatters and no easy way to regain the initiative.

The prime minister's right-wing coalition suffered a resounding loss in the March 22-23 vote, puncturing the aura of political invincibility she has cultivated since taking office in 2022.

As the result came in, Meloni made clear she had no plans to resign, but none of her options looks attractive, political analysts say.

Governing as if nothing has changed risks leaving her a lame-duck prime minister, with the anaemic economy under growing strain and her closeness to US President Donald Trump seen by pollsters as an increasing liability.

Alternatively, she could seek to reshape the electoral law to try to boost her chances of winning the next general election, due in 2027, but would open herself to charges of upending the rules to suit her political interests.

A third option could be to gamble on forcing an early ballot this spring before the full impact of the Iran war hits Italy's already fragile economy, hoping to catch the fragmented centre-left



Italian PM Giorgia Meloni conceded defeat in a referendum on her justice reforms, while confirming she would not hand in her resignation. (AFP)

opposition unprepared. "It's clear that what's at stake is the end of the legislature. Even the date of the next election is uncertain," said Nicola Lupo, director of the Centre for Parliamentary Studies at Rome's Luiss University.

OPPOSITION BLOC REMAINS FRAGMENTED

For all the damage, the referendum did not amount to a blanket rejection of Meloni, with 37% of those who voted "No" telling Youtrend pollsters she should remain in office. "This wasn't an opposition victory so much as a victory for the judiciary," said Massimiliano Panarari, a political analyst at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia.

The centre-left opposition

hailed Monday's result as evidence the political cycle was turning its way, but its two main components, the Democratic Party and 5-Star Movement, remain deeply divided over key issues, including foreign policy. These splits could tempt Meloni to resign shortly and force a snap election, Luiss' Lupo said, adding that the government had pushed for a swift referendum in March to have the eventual option of holding a pre-summer vote.

"Meloni knows the next budget won't allow for generous spending, so she might say it would be better to go to elections now and not give the opposition time to organise," he said. While none of her allies are openly suggesting this, some of her partners — including Maurizio

Lupi, head of the small "Us Moderates" party — are urging a change to the electoral law to introduce a system based solely on proportional representation.

Latest polls show the conservative bloc, including Meloni's Brothers of Italy party, the League and Forza Italia, in the lead, but vulnerable to defeat in a future ballot because of the way seats are distributed under the current system. Studies have suggested a pure PR system could give the ruling coalition a comfortable majority.

Although government parties presented a draft bill on this last month, some of Meloni's allies urged caution after the referendum, saying voters would not approve. "It would be stupid," Stefano Candiani, a League lawmaker in the lower chamber, told Reuters. "There are so many problems facing Italians, including the Iran war and (high) cost of living, that anyone who wants to tie up parliament with this electoral law is crazy?"

TRUMP TIES, WEAK ECONOMY DRAG ON MELONI

Pollsters confirmed an unexpectedly high turnout in the justice referendum was driven by voters motivated by broader political and economic concerns rather than the technical details of the complex judicial reform. "In the last 10 days, the number of people saying they would vote grew by 10 percentage points. We had never seen such a surge," said pollster Antonio Noto.

The referendum's timing proved challenging for Meloni, with the US-Israeli war on Iran turning a spotlight on her friendship with Trump and costing her votes, analysts said. "Even if she has tried to put a bit of distance between herself and him in recent days, the shift hasn't been very noticeable," said political analyst Panarari.

Meloni risks treading water for the next 12 months, with her reform agenda in shreds and little time left to enact meaningful change. "From this day forward, she is a lame duck," said centrist leader Matteo Renzi, who quit as prime minister in 2016 after losing a referendum on his own constitutional reform agenda.

He told La7 news channel that opposition parties would draw strength from Monday's result, saying the Meloni-backed "Yes" camp had until recently enjoyed a big lead. "If beating Meloni in the referendum wasn't easy, it will be far easier to beat her on issues like inflation, fuel taxes, the cost of living, and public safety in major cities," he said.



A person holds a placard depicting Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni crossed with the word "No" as supporters of the "No" to the constitutional referendum on justice reform celebrate their victory in Rome. (Reuters)

EU hopes Hungarian election will bring end to Orban's blockades

Reuters
Brussels

Few EU leaders will miss Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban if he loses an April 12 election after he blocked key policies, including vital aid to Ukraine, but they don't expect his rival – if elected – to fully reverse Budapest's approach to Europe.

Most opinion polls suggest Orban's nationalist Fidesz party, in power since 2010, could lose to Peter Magyar's centre-right Tiszza party.

Orban, who maintains friendly ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin and is also a close ally of US President Donald Trump, has often infuriated his EU partners, most recently by blocking a vital 90bn euro loan to Ukraine.

"This was the last straw that broke the camel's back," said one EU diplomat. "On our side, the hope to talk reason into Orban is gone."

If Orban loses power, diplomats from multiple EU governments say they hope for an end to Hungary's blockade of policies ranging from the Ukraine loan to sanctions against Russia and violent Israeli settlers.

If Orban wins and continues to wield his veto, some officials expect

a push to sideline Hungary.

"It seems that 'more of the same' is no longer an option for most EU countries," former Latvian prime minister Krisjanis Karins, who spent years around the table with Orban at EU summits, told Reuters.

"If Orban stays, we will have to change how we work," added a senior European official.

A Hungarian government spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment.

Reuters spoke with over a dozen current and former officials familiar with Europe's relationship with Hungary on the implications for the EU of next month's election. Speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss internal politics in a member state, many were blunt about their frustration with Orban.

"I think everybody hopes Orban will lose," said a second EU diplomat.

European officials have long fretted over what they see as the erosion of democratic norms in Hungary as Orban consolidated executive power, curbed media freedoms and NGO activities, and ran campaigns disparaging the EU and its policies.

Orban denies accusations of eroding democracy, casting himself as a defender of Europe's traditional Christian values against an out-of-touch liberal elite.

But the Orban government's

close ties with the Kremlin even after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to a deeper rupture between Budapest and many Western capitals.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said last week that Orban's veto of the Ukraine loan was an act of "gross disloyalty" that damaged the EU's reputation and ability to act.

While many in Brussels hope for a new era in relations with Budapest in the event of a Tiszza win, there is also caution.

Vera Jourova, a former deputy head of the European Commission, told Reuters an opposition victory would "renew the chance of unity on basic security matters" in the 27-nation EU.

But Magyar – who is remembered in Brussels as a sharp negotiator when he served as a Hungarian diplomat – would still be among the most sceptical voices on migration and the possibility of Ukraine joining the EU, officials say.

"I have very few illusions about Magyar's world view. We should be careful not to expect too much," said a third EU diplomat. "The difference will be more in tone of voice than substance."

A fourth EU diplomat added: "Magyar is from the same political family (as Orban), nobody is expecting a revolution."

Rubio attacks Zelensky, ready to divert Ukraine arms to Iran

AFP
Paris

Secretary of State Marco Rubio yesterday accused Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky of lying over US demands and voiced openness to diverting weapons to Kyiv to support the US attack on Iran.

Zelensky had said in an interview that the US was pressing Ukraine to give up the eastern Donbas region to Russia, which invaded four years ago, before finalising any post-war security guarantees to Kyiv.

"That's a lie," Rubio told reporters when asked about Zelensky's remarks.

"I saw him say that, and it's unfortunate he would say that, because he knows that's not true," Rubio said in Paris after talks of the Group of Seven industrialised democracies.

"What he was told is the obvious: security guarantees are not going to kick in until there's an end to a war, because otherwise you're getting yourself involved in the war," Rubio said.

"That was not attached to, unless he gives up territory," Rubio said. "I don't know why he says these things. It's not true," Rubio said.



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio speaks to the press following a G7 Foreign Ministers' meeting with partner countries before his departure at the Bourget airport in Le Bourget, outside Paris, yesterday. (AFP)

The attack on Zelensky was especially striking coming from Rubio, a former hawkish senator who has largely been seen as more supportive of the Ukrainian cause than some others in President Donald Trump's circles.

In a scene that went viral in February last year, Rubio sat sullenly in the Oval Office as Trump and Vice-President JD Vance berated Zelensky, saying he was ungrateful for US assistance.

Recently, Trump has again criticised Zelensky, saying that he needs to accept compromises and comparing him unfavourably with

Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Rubio said that the US was open to shifting assistance to Ukraine after the US and Israel attacked Iran. "Nothing yet has been diverted, but it could," Rubio said. "If we need something for America and it's American, we're going to keep it for America first."

But he said there had not yet been any change to the so-called Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List, a Nato initiative established after Trump's return, in which European allies fund weapons requested by Ukraine that are purchased from the US.

Ukraine, Saudi sign air defence deal

AFP
Kyiv

Ukraine and Saudi Arabia have signed an air defence agreement during President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to the kingdom facing Iranian drone attacks, two senior officials told AFP yesterday.

Kyiv has sought to leverage its expertise in downing Russian drones to help Gulf nations, which are being attacked with the same kind of Iranian-designed Shahed drones that Russia fires on Ukraine.

"The point of the agreement is that Ukraine will support them in developing all the necessary components of air defence, which they currently lack," one official said of the document which, according to another was signed on Thursday.

Both spoke to AFP on the condition of anonymity.

Kyiv has been using a mix of cheap drone interceptors, electronic jamming tools and anti-aircraft guns to down Russian drones fired at its cities on a nightly basis for four years.

It touts its anti-drone defences as the best in the world.

Ukraine has proposed swapping



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman meeting in Jeddah yesterday. (AFP)

its interceptors for vastly more expensive air-defence missiles that Gulf countries are using to down Iranian drones. Ukraine says it needs more of them to fend off Russian missile attacks.

The deal signed between Ukraine and Saudi Arabia "is not only about interceptors as such, but about building a system, integrating it with other air defence components, Ukrainian experience in its use, AI, and all the other

elements of data analysis needed to counter Shaheds and other drones," one of the officials said.

Zelensky confirmed on social media that both countries had "reached an important arrangement" on defence co-operation and that he had met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during his visit.

"We are ready to share our expertise and systems with Saudi Arabia," Zelensky said, adding:

"Saudi Arabia also has capabilities that are of interest to Ukraine, and this co-operation can be mutually beneficial."

He did not disclose what exactly has been agreed as part of the deal.

Zelensky also met with Ukrainian anti-drone experts that have been deployed to the country since US and Israel launched strikes on Iran that spurred retaliatory drone and missile attacks from Tehran. "Even in such a short time,

Ukraine reaching agreement on Middle East diesel supplies

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday that Kyiv was working on reaching an agreement with countries in the Middle East on supplies of diesel, the type of fuel most in short supply in the country. Zelensky was speaking to a Ukrainian television interviewer while on a tour of Middle Eastern countries. Earlier, he said Ukraine and Saudi Arabia had signed an agreement on defence co-operation that lays the foundation for future contracts, technological co-operation and investments. Zelensky said he was discussing with his ministers and Naftogaz, the national gas production and distribution company, "a potential diesel shortage". "I understand the importance of this task for Ukraine's security

and believe that this issue will be resolved," he said.

"First and foremost, this is about diesel. Because about 90% of the potential shortage is specifically diesel. This is therefore the issue we are focusing on to resolve," he added.

Zelensky earlier said the framework agreement was signed ahead of a meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The president hopes during the visit to the Gulf to bolster support for Ukraine in its four-year-old war against Russia.

Kyiv has sent more than 220 experts to advise several Middle Eastern countries on how to intercept drone attacks that have wreaked havoc on energy infrastructure across the region. (Reuters)

Ukrainian experts were able to share extensive expertise," Zelensky said.

"Ukraine's expertise is unique,

and recognised as such, and that is why everyone is so interested in our technologies and experience."

Russia to introduce ban on gasoline exports from April 1, govt says

Reuters
Moscow

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak yesterday instructed the energy ministry to draft a resolution banning gasoline exports from April 1, the Russian government said. The state-run TASS news agency earlier reported that the ban would remain in place until July 31. Novak said that turmoil in the global oil and oil products market, caused by the crisis in the Middle East, is leading to significant price fluctuations. At the same time, the high demand for Russian energy resources in foreign markets remains a

positive factor, he added.

Crude oil processing volumes remain at last year's level, ensuring a stable supply of oil products, the government said in a statement.

Several regions in Russia and parts of Ukraine under Russian control were reporting gasoline shortages last year after Ukraine stepped up attacks on Russian oil refineries and amid a seasonal surge in fuel demand.

Russia has repeatedly imposed curbs on gasoline and diesel exports to rein in rising fuel prices and tackle shortages.

According to industry sources, the country exported nearly 5 million metric tonnes of gasoline last year, or about 117,000 barrels per day.

Top Swiss court bars 'milk' label on vegan alternatives

AFP
Geneva

Switzerland's top court ruled yesterday that plant-based drinks may not use the word "milk" in their marketing, rejecting an appeal from French dairy giant Danone.

In a decision that echoed a similar ruling in Britain last month, Switzerland's Federal Court said it had dismissed an appeal from Danone and determined that "the designation 'milk' cannot be used for vegan products".

The popularity of meat and dairy alternatives has surged in recent years, but the use of traditional terms like "milk" for

plant-based products has been strongly contested by the agricultural sector.

The Swiss case centred on an oat drink sold under Danone's Alpro brand in Switzerland, with packaging reading "Shhh... this is not milk", with the "I" replaced by a white droplet.

In 2022, the Zurich Cantonal Laboratory banned the oat-based beverage from the market, saying that it violated the provisions of the Swiss law on foodstuffs.

The lab's decision was upheld by the Zurich Cantonal Court, and Danone Switzerland then appealed to the Federal Court.

In a statement detailing yesterday's ruling, which brought

four years of proceedings to a close, Switzerland's highest court pointed to a 2025 legal precedent regarding the designation of "vegan" food products.

Based on that precedent, it said, "in this concrete case, the designation 'milk' cannot be used for a vegan product".

"In principal, the same applies if the specific term 'milk' is used in a negative statement," it said, "or if it is modified typographically", as in this case.

According to the Switzerland's Foodstuffs Act, the presentation and labelling of foodstuffs must not mislead the consumer, particularly with regard to the production, composition, and nature of the product in question.

Austria plans social media ban for children under 14

Austria's conservative-led, three-party government plans to introduce a ban on social media use for children under 14, it said yesterday.

Cabinet members from the three ruling parties announced a deal between them on the principle of a ban, aimed at protecting children from "algorithms that are addictive" and content including abuse, but could not say when it would begin, and they have yet to agree on how it will be implemented.

"We will decisively protect children and young people in future from the negative effects of social media," Vice-Chancellor Andreas Babler of the Social Democrats said. (Reuters)

Full steam ahead for revived Paris-Berlin night train

AFP
Berlin

The first service on a revived night train between Paris and Berlin arrived in the German capital yesterday morning, winning plaudits from its passengers.

Among them was 25-year-old French student and train enthusiast Victor Falzon, who had long dreamed of visiting Berlin but was reluctant to fly for environmental reasons.

"When we saw that a new line was opening, we said to ourselves:

"This is the moment!" he told AFP after stepping off the train at Berlin's Central Station.

The new service has been launched without public subsidy by the Dutch-Belgian European Sleeper company, founded in 2021.

It replaces the Paris-Berlin night train which started with great fanfare in late 2023, in a joint venture by the French company SNCF, Germany's Deutsche Bahn, and Austria's OeBB.

That service was suspended in December 2024 after the French government ceased a 10mn euro (\$11.5mn) subsidy for the line, rendering it unviable.

The collapse of the previous night train route between the two capitals prompted "pyjama protests" at several European stations. Little wonder then that train buffs have welcomed the new service so warmly.

Falzon remembered with a smile that "every time we pulled into a station, people were waiting for us with flags".

What with the scenery rolling past and the excitement of the trip, he and his friends "had trouble falling asleep".

Falzon admitted that the cabin was "a little cramped" with five passengers.

"But that's the train vibe!" he added.

Ulrike Jendrezok, 55, was on her way back home to Germany after a Paris stay with her two children and told AFP the journey was "comfortable and straightforward".

"We had dinner, talked and played games, then made up the beds late at night, and we slept well," said Jendrezok, a doctor.

She had rushed to book tickets as soon as sales opened for her very first night-train trip.

In low season, one-way fares start at 39.99 euros for a seated ticket and 59.99 euros for a couchette.



Passengers stand next to the first European Sleeper night train from Paris to Berlin after its arrival in Berlin, yesterday. (AFP)



Esports: A Game Changer exhibition explores the rapid ascent of e-sports from niche pastime to global phenomenon.



Ho Tzu Nyen, Installation view at the Aichi Triennale 2019. Photo by Hiroshi Tanigawa



Waters' Witness exhibition explores how water shapes urban life through recordings from international port cities.

Diverse QM exhibitions showcase art, culture and innovation

From e-sports to reflections on rural life and global culture, exhibitions in Qatar cover wide-ranging subjects after QM announced the opening of its major institutions on March 21

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

From the rise of e-sports to reflections on rural life and global culture, a diverse programme of exhibitions across museums and galleries in Qatar offers visitors an engaging mix of art, history, and innovation. On view through April and May, the exhibitions cover major institutions including the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, and the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum (QOSM), all of which reopened on March 21 except for outdoor heritage and archaeological sites.

At the forefront of the programme is Esports: A Game Changer, an exhibition curated by QOSM that explores the rapid ascent of e-sports from niche pastime to global phenomenon. Running until April 30, the exhibition blends historical artefacts with immersive digital installations, tracing how competitive gaming has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar industry that shapes youth culture and redefines sport.

Having debuted during the 2024 Summer Olympics, where it drew nearly 12,000 visitors and reached millions online, the exhibition now makes its regional premiere in Doha. Its arrival signals Qatar's growing ambition to position it-



Chung Seoung, A GOOSE, 2007, cement, 34x102x38cm, Collection of Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art.

self at the intersection of sport, technology, and youth-driven innovation. Through interactive kiosks and experiential displays, the show examines not only esports' meteoric rise but also its broader social implications, from identity formation to community-building in digital spaces.

A different kind of reflection unfolds at the Fire Station, where South Korean artist Chung Seoung presents Endless Facts, her first solo exhibition in the Middle East. Running until April 20 at the Garage Gallery, the exhibition brings together works spanning more than three decades, charting the evolution of her sculptural language amid South Korea's period of rapid transformation in the late 20th century.

Through installations that combine everyday materials with industrial objects, Chung constructs



Empire of Light exhibition explores Afghanistan's 5000-year cultural and artistic legacy.

what she describes as "sculptural moments", instances in which ordinary elements coalesce into unexpected forms. The exhibition's open-ended layout invites viewers to discover relationships between works, suggesting that reality itself is layered and continuously unfolding rather than fixed.

Questions of how people live and where are central to Countryside: A Place to Live, Not to Leave, a large-scale exhibition staged across NMOQ and Qatar Preparatory School (QPS). Running until April 29, the project is presented by QM in collaboration with AMO, the research studio led by Rem Koolhaas and Samir Bantal.

Through immersive installations and research-driven narratives, the exhibition challenges the long-held assumption that cities are the primary engines of progress. Instead, it reframes rural regions across Africa,



Sneakers Unboxed: Studio to Street tells the story of sneakers through 500 objects, including over 200 pairs alongside contextual images, film, and archival materials. Photo Rachel Dray

the Middle East, Central Asia, and China as sites of innovation, sustainability, and future living.

By highlighting agricultural technologies, ecological practices, and community-based systems, the exhibition invites visitors to reconsider the countryside not as a place to leave behind, but as a viable model for addressing global challenges. Back at the 3-2-1 QOSM, Sneakers Unboxed: Studio to Street traces another cultural evolution - this time through footwear. On view until April 30, the touring exhibition from London's Design Museum features more than 500 objects, including over 200 pairs of sneakers. It charts the journey of sneakers from functional sports gear to global symbols of identity and style, shaped by athletes, designers, and youth subcultures alike. The exhibition underscores how a seem-



Countryside: A Place to Live, Not to Leave, a large-scale exhibition staged across NMOQ and Qatar Preparatory School.



Haroon Mirza, Miraj Al Shams, 2026, site specific Installation, photovoltaic panels, corten steel, bespoke media device, timer, DMX lights, active speakers, LEDs, courtesy of the artist.



Afghanistan: Crossroads of Culture and Lives highlights Afghanistan's rich history, social life, and cultural traditions.

ingly everyday object can reflect broader shifts in fashion, technology, and consumer culture.

Sound and environment take centre stage at Mathaf with Waters' Witness by artist and composer Tarek Atoui, on view until May 18. Presented for the first time in the Arab region, the installation transforms recordings from port cities around the world, including Athens, Beirut, Singapore, and Sydney, into an immersive acoustic landscape.

Using materials such as marble, metal, and ceramics, Atoui translates underwater and coastal sounds into spatial experiences, revealing how water shapes urban life and collective memory. A new chapter of the project will focus on Qatar's own coastline, extending the work's dialogue with local communities.

Meanwhile, MIA presents Empire of Light: Visions and Voices of Afghanistan until May 30, offering a sweeping exploration of Afghanistan's 5,000-year cultural legacy. Featuring nearly 100 objects, from archaeological artefacts to contemporary works, the exhibition highlights the country's historical role as a crossroads of civilisa-

tions. Complementing the show, the museum's library hosts Afghanistan: Crossroads of Culture and Lives, a display of books examining the nation's traditions, social life, and artistic heritage.

Contemporary experimentation continues at the Fire Station with Everything Was, Is and Always Will Be, Haroon Mirza's first institutional solo exhibition in the Gulf region. Running until May 31, the exhibition spans Gallery 3 and the Tower, featuring installations that use electricity, light, and sound as sculptural materials. Drawing on concepts ranging from solar energy to metaphysical inquiry, Mirza's works blur the boundaries between technology and spirituality, culminating in installations that activate in sync with natural and cultural rhythms.

In Gallery 4, Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen presents Hotel Aporia, a multi-channel installation examining the ideological undercurrents of interwar Japan. Through archival footage, film excerpts, and layered narratives, the work interrogates how history is constructed and how its unresolved tensions continue to reverberate in the present.

166 farms join local yards as sales top 6,500 tonnes in current season

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

The seasonal yards for selling local agricultural produce have resumed operations across Qatar, with Al Mazroua yard at Umm Salal Central Market open daily. In contrast, the yards in Al Wakra, Al Khor, Al Thakira, Al Sheehaniya, and Al Shamal operate from Thursday to Saturday. All locations follow standard hours from 7am to 3pm.

Adel al-Kaldi, assistant director of the Agricultural Affairs Department at the Ministry of Municipality, said 166 local farms are participating this season across the five yards. Since the season began in November, total sales have reached 6,586 tonnes. He encouraged residents to continue visiting the yards to enjoy fresh, high-quality local produce, noting that public support remains vital to the initiative's success.

This season also marks a shift from direct subsidies for production inputs to a voucher-based system, giving farmers greater flexibility in sourcing supplies. The programme includes 15 approved companies and covers essential inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides. The market yards serve as a direct link between Qatari farmers and consumers, eliminating intermediaries and offering competitively priced produce under regulations set by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Strict quality and safety standards are maintained for all fruits and vegetables. Beyond their commercial role, the yards function as a government support mechanism to boost local agricultural production while providing accessible outlets for both farmers and consumers. A wide range of seasonal products is available, including vegetables, natural honey, and dates. The yards also feature integrated facilities, including parking areas, shaded spaces, and restrooms, to enhance the overall shopping experience.

Since its launch in the 2012-2013 season with a single yard at Al Mazroua—then involving 24 farms and recording sales of



884 tonnes—the initiative has expanded significantly. Al Sheehaniya yard, introduced in the 2019-2020 season, grew from 12 participating farms and 421 tonnes sold to 26 farms and 661 tonnes by 2023-2024. Al Khor and Al Thakira, opened in 2013-2014, increased from 22 farms and 851 tonnes to 76 farms and 1,207 tonnes over the same period. Meanwhile, Al Wakra yard, launched in 2014-2015, expanded from 20 farms and 758 tonnes to 37 farms and 1,196 tonnes by 2023-2024.

In the 2024-2025 season, participation reached 166 farms, with total sales of 10,679 tonnes—accounting for 12% of Qatar's locally marketed agricultural production. These figures underscore the initiative's growing role in



supporting farmers, strengthening national food security, and providing consumers with fresh produce at competitive prices, driven by affordability, quality, and reduced time between harvest and sale.

Livestock sector drives food security gains, farmers say

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

Local livestock production continues to play a vital role in meeting Qatar's domestic demand for red meat, currently covering more than 40% of national needs, according to several livestock farm owners. They say the sector's contribution to food security is further increasing and could expand further with sustained investment and support.

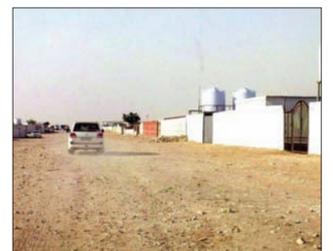
Farmers noted that output is expected to rise through improved breeding techniques, enhanced production methods, and ongoing government assistance, including subsidised feed, veterinary medicines, and vaccination programmes. Prices for local livestock have remained stable, with Syrian Awassi sheep averaging around QR1,500 per head, local sheep at about QR1,700, and Aradi goats ranging between QR1,100 and QR1,200.

Rashid Faleh al-Hajri, a barn owner, said production levels remain strong due to government backing. His farm, which houses more than 100 sheep, produces between 50 and 80 heads every six months. He added that local farms could meet up to 35% of market demand, provided production is not disrupted by animal diseases.

Jabran al-Ahbab, another barn owner, said camel prices have also remained stable, with young camels ranging from QR5,000 to QR8,000 depending on size, while females are priced between QR11,000 and QR12,000. His farm includes around 250 Aradi goats and 50 camels. He called for the allocation of open grazing areas near farm complexes to support animal health, encourage natural movement, and allow the use of seasonal pasture during spring.

Ibrahim al-Ghazali reiterated that livestock farms already meet more than 40% of red meat demand and highlighted the sector's growth potential through further investment. He also underscored the importance of the Animal Health Department in supporting breeders, particularly through facilitating sheep imports.

He called for the introduction of



high-productivity breeds such as Hijazi Harri and Moroccan and Algerian Sardi sheep, which can reach weights of up to 200kg. According to him, such breeds would enhance crossbreeding and boost overall production, although import procedures remain a challenge, prompting some breeders to source livestock through neighbouring countries.

Hamad Hamdan al-Suwaidi noted that mobile desert farms can sometimes outperform those within farm complexes due to better grazing conditions and increased animal movement, both of which improve livestock health and productivity. He added that the Al Wakra farm complex includes around 700 farms, each with at least 100 sheep, supported by government-provided veterinary care, vaccinations, and feed. However, he stressed that a truly productive farm should maintain no fewer than 200 sheep, a benchmark only a limited number currently achieve.

Jaber al-Marri confirmed the availability of sufficient quantities of locally produced sheep, both Syrian and local breeds, at approximately QR1,700 per head. His farm has more than 100 sheep, and he praised government support programmes, particularly in vaccination and feed provision, noting that livestock farms remain essential in meeting the country's growing demand for high-quality red meat.