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Ready to GUAC AND ROLL?
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Pakistan eyes US-Iran talks as it hosts Saudi, Turkiye, Egypt

By Zain Zaman Janjua
AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan said yesterday that it was ready to broker and host "meaningful talks" between the United States and Iran to bring an end to their war, outlining growing support for its peace efforts, including from the United Nations and China.

The government in Islamabad has emerged as a key facilitator, relaying messages between the two sides to try to stop the conflict from escalating.

Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar hosted his counterparts from Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkiye for several hours in the Pakistani capital yesterday, with concern high about the impact of the fighting, including the choking of maritime traffic through the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

In a televised statement, Dar, who is also Pakistan's deputy prime minister, said the visitors "expressed their full support" for potential US-Iran talks in Islamabad.

"The foreign ministers advocated dialogue and diplomacy as the only viable pathway to prevent conflicts and to promote regional

peace and harmony," he added.

Pakistan is seeking to capitalise on its longstanding links with Tehran and close contacts in the Gulf, as well as the personal rapport that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and the country's powerful army chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, have struck up with US President Donald Trump.

Dar and Sharif have held several calls with senior government ministers in Iran, including President Masoud Pezeshkian and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, and were "actively engaged" with the US administration, the foreign minister said.

"In this context, Pakistan is very happy that both Iran and the US have expressed their confidence in Pakistan to facilitate the talks," he added.

"Pakistan will be honoured to host and facilitate meaningful talks between the two sides in coming days, for a comprehensive and lasting settlement of the ongoing conflict."

Dar has spoken to his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. They "fully support" Pakistan's push for peace, as do other governments around the world, he added. **To Page 11**

Qatar launches mental health scholarship drive

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education is bankrolling a new generation of homegrown psychologists and mental health counsellors, announcing yesterday a dedicated scholarship stream under the Government Scholarship Plan for the 2026-2027 academic year aimed squarely at plugging a widening gap in the country's behavioural health workforce.

The Psychological Counseling and Behavioural Health Program will fund Qatari students through degrees in Clinical Psychology and Clinical Mental Health Counseling at universities ranked among the world's top 200 in health sciences – a list the ministry will determine.

It marks a deliberate shift, officials said, away from broad-based scholarship offerings toward targeted, demand-driven funding in fields where national talent is critically short.

"This is a strategic alignment with national development priorities," said Dr Hareb Mohamed Aljabri, Assistant Undersecretary for Higher Education Affairs, at a news conference in Doha. He drew a direct line to Qatar National Vision 2030 and pointed to nuclear engineering as a previous example of the ministry channelling scholarships into high-demand specialisations where a capable national workforce had yet to be built.

The bar to enter is high. Applicants must hold a secondary school average of at least 80%, score 6.0 or above on the IELTS, and secure unconditional admission from an eligible university before the ministry will consider their application.

The financial package is tiered by specialisation. Students on the Amiri Scholarship track receive QR20,000 a month, two business-class return tickets annually, and have their study years counted toward government service.

Psychiatry students start on QR18,000 monthly, rising to QR30,000 after year four, plus annual travel. **To Page 5**



HE Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhatir, Minister of Education and Higher Education, during her visit to Omar Bin Kattab School for Boys.

High attendance as physical school learning resumes

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

Schools in Qatar resumed in-person learning after a four-week gap due to ongoing regional conflicts. Most schools recorded a high student turnout, with students arriving and schools bustling with energy.

HE Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhatir, Minister of Education and Higher Education, yesterday conducted inspection tours of a number of government, private, and community schools to

review progress and assess the readiness of educational institutions.

She met with administrative and teaching staff as well as a number of students, and ensured the implementation of approved procedures, enhancing the provision of a safe and stable learning environment.

During the tour, the minister reviewed the progress of classes, listened to students' opinions, and examined the lessons learned from the distance-learning experience during the period.

In a press statement, the minister affirmed that the resump-

tion of in-person schooling represents an important step toward restoring the normal course of the educational process. She praised the efforts of teachers and school administrations in supporting students academically and psychologically, enhancing their stability and ensuring the continuity of their learning.

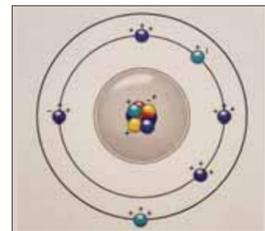
She also commended the role of parents and their integration with the school, stressing the importance of benefiting from the feedback when developing educational policies and programmes. **To Page 2**

War inflicts systemic shock to helium market

By Santhosh V Perumal
Business Reporter

In an interconnected resource system, shocks do not remain contained within their point of origin. The Iran war has caused a systemic shock to the global helium market to which Qatar contributes one-third; indicating that Doha is a system-critical node.

The current disruption is not a crisis, rather a signal that the demand-inelastic helium market is evolving from a byproduct-driven model to a strategically



managed downstream ecosystem shaped by energy geopolitics.

At present, three-fourth of global helium supply is controlled by just two producers – the US (as much as 42%) and Qa-

tar (33%), a critical reality that the helium market is not just concentrated but also structurally dependent on a very small number of LNG (liquefied natural gas)-linked systems.

Other producers are Russia (10%), Algeria (7%) and Canada and others (5%).

On March 2, Iranian projectile hit QatarEnergy facility at Ras Laffan Industrial City, where it extracts and liquefies up to 17 metric tonnes per day of helium. The hydrocarbon bellwether halted production and has since then declared force majeure. **To Page 5**

Defying regional crisis, Qatar has boldly turned it into an opportunity for growth

● With \$100bn in investment on the table, a business leader explains why now is the time to act

By Kamran Rehmat
Doha

Qatar has chosen an unlikely moment to make one of its boldest economic moves. As regional tensions reshape trade routes, disrupt supply chains, and test the resilience of Gulf economies, it has announced more than 188 projects targeting \$100bn in foreign direct investment by 2030 – a deliberate and defiant signal that it intends to accelerate, not retreat.

The sectors in play are telling: logistics, advanced manufacturing, technology, energy services, digital infrastructure, and education – all pillars of a diversification strategy

that goes well beyond the country's hydrocarbon base.

The timing is not coincidental. The current geopolitical environment has thrown into sharp relief the importance of economic resilience, and Qatar – backed by deep sovereign reserves, a well-defined regulatory framework, and a tradition of long-term strategic planning – finds itself in a stronger position than most to absorb external shocks while pressing ahead with structural reform. For international businesses watching events in the region unfold, the question is increasingly not whether Qatar remains an attractive destination, but whether the window to move first is beginning to close.

To unpack what this investment drive means for both incoming and



Neil Wilson, MD, Sovereign PPG Qatar.

domestic businesses, *Gulf Times* spoke with Neil Wilson, Managing Director of Sovereign PPG Qatar, one of the region's leading business advisory and corporate services

firms. Excerpts from the interview:

Qatar's announcement of over 188 projects targeting \$100bn in foreign investment by 2030 is a significant milestone. In your view, what does this signal about Qatar's broader economic vision, and which sectors do you see emerging as the most exciting growth opportunities for both local and international businesses?

This announcement sends a very clear message. At a time when many economies are becoming more cautious, Qatar is signalling that it intends to stay on the front foot, doubling down on diversification even as the regional backdrop becomes more complex. **To Page 2**

Maritime navigation set to resume gradually from today

The Ministry of Transport (MoT) announced the gradual resumption of maritime navigation exclusively for vessels licensed to engage in marine fishing activities, starting today.

In a statement yesterday, the MoT said the gradual resumption of maritime navigation will be in accordance with the following technical controls and requirements:

- 1- Ensuring the safety, readiness, and seaworthiness of the marine vessel before departure.
 - 2- The obligation to carry and operate the Automatic Identification System (AIS) throughout the voyage and until returning to port.
 - 3- The obligation to carry and operate the radio communication device (VHF - Channel 16) throughout the voyage and until returning to port.
 - 4- Compliance with all provisions of the Maritime Equipment Law and the regulations and decisions issued in implementation thereof.
- The ministry urged everyone to comply with this circular to avoid legal accountability. **(QNA)**

Drone attack repelled

The Ministry of Defence announced that Qatar was targeted by an attack involving a number of drones launched from Iran yesterday. In a statement, the ministry explained that the Qatar Armed Forces had successfully intercepted all the drones. **(QNA)**

Zelensky leaves Doha



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky and his delegation left Doha yesterday morning, after a working visit to the country. They were seen off at Doha International Airport by HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi and Ukraine's ambassador to Qatar Andrii Kuzmenko. - QNA



Shura Council Speaker meets Italian, African ambassadors

HE the Speaker of the Shura Council Hassan bin Abdullah al-Ghanim met yesterday with Italy's ambassador to Qatar Paolo Toschi.

During the meeting, they discussed co-operation relations between Qatar and Italy, particularly parliamentary co-operation and ways to support and develop it.

They also discussed the latest regional developments and military escalation. Toschi expressed his country's condemnation of Iran's attacks on Qatar and its targeting of infrastructure, affirming Italy's full solidarity with Qatar.

Both sides stressed the importance of de-escalation and reducing tensions, and resorting to dialogue and negotiations as the primary option for settling disputes.

They also emphasised the need to ensure the smooth flow of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, given its direct impact on the stability of global economy.

HE al-Ghanim also held a meeting with several ambassadors and heads of diplomatic missions of African nations accredited to Qatar, led by the chairman of the Group of African Ambassadors Thierno Abdoulaye Sow of Guinea, as part of strengthening communication and advancing parliamentary dialogue channels.

HE al-Ghanim said that he looks forward to an influential role for parliamentary diplomacy in ending wars and attacks, as well as reinforcing dialogue paths.

He noted the bilateral co-operation between

the Shura Council and various national parliaments, alongside international parliamentary organisations, through multiple initiatives aimed at bolstering the role of these institutions in promoting peace and stability.

HE al-Ghanim underscored the Shura Council's commitment to broadening co-operation with its counterparts in African nations, fostering partnerships among peoples and supporting co-ordination and integration on issues of shared concern.

The ambassadors underlined that their nations' stand in solidarity with Qatar, condemning the attacks targeting Qatar and regional countries, and hailed the prominent role Qatar undertakes in strengthening dialogue and peace. - QNA

Qatar joins Arab League Council ministerial-level meeting



Qatar participated yesterday in the 165th session of the Council of the League of Arab States at the ministerial level, held virtually.

HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi chaired Qatar's delegation. The meeting discussed the targeting of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Arab states that have been subjected to Iranian attacks.

During the session, Arab League Secretary-General

Ahmed Aboul Gheit called for an immediate halt to Iranian attacks against Arab states, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2817, and urged an end to threats disrupting navigation through Strait of Hormuz. He said that the Iranian attacks, including threats to freedom of navigation, constitute a threat to international peace and security, requiring a firmer stance that reflects the international consensus rejecting what it described as Tehran's coercive practices. - QNA

Qatar slams attack on residence of Iraqi Kurdistan president

Qatar has strongly condemned the attack targeting of the residence of the Iraqi Kurdistan president Nechirvan Barzani, in Duhok Governorate. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) reiterated yesterday Qatar's firm stance against violence, terrorism, and criminal acts, regardless of their motives or justifications. - QNA

Qatar joins IMO FAL 50 meetings

Qatar, represented by the Qatar Mission to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), took part in the meetings of the 50th Session of the IMO Facilitation Committee (FAL 50), held at the IMO in London from March 23-17.

Key topics discussed included adopting seamless procedures at ports, accelerating maritime digitalisation, and enhancing international co-operation between IMO member states and Qatar to ensure uninterrupted trade flow and an efficient maritime industry.

128mn gallons of rainwater discharged in 68 hours

The Ministry of Municipality has revealed the discharge of over 128mn gallons of rainwater over 68 continuous hours of operation, as part of the Joint Rainfall Emergency Committee's efforts to handle the weather conditions that swept across the country on March 25-28.

The ministry posted on X Platform yesterday that operation teams, comprising 808 staff members and workers backed by 479 field mechanisms, conducted 30,416 water extraction operations and handled 2,755 service requests received through the Unified Call Centre Department. - QNA

High attendance as physical school learning resumes

From Page 1

Private schools also resumed in-person learning as per the directions of the government.

Students arrived at school early in the morning, and attendance was nearly full at almost all schools.

An official from Qatar Academy said that the school had reopened to students with all the necessary precautionary measures in place, and students were eager and excited to return to their classrooms.

She added that the school had almost 100% attendance on the first day.

Several other private schools echoed similar sentiments, not-

ing that most students resumed their lessons, enjoyed the classroom atmosphere, and met their friends and faculty members.

Meanwhile, some Indian schools in the country were in the final days of their 2025-26 academic year, and school administrations were busy with final preparations for the next academic year starting on April 1.

There were orientation sessions for teachers regarding the upcoming academic year as well as the safety procedures to be adopted in the schools.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Interior has issued a set of instructions to be followed at schools in the event of an emergency evacuation.

PM receives telephone calls from Netherlands, Panama ministers

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani received phone calls yesterday from the Netherlands's Minister of Foreign Affairs Tom Berendsen and Panama's Minister of Foreign Affairs Javier Martinez-Acha. During the calls, developments in the region, particularly the ongoing military escalation, as well as efforts to resolve disputes through peaceful means, were discussed. - QNA

Minister meets Indian envoy



HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad met yesterday with India's ambassador to Qatar Vipul. Discussions during their meeting centred on the bilateral relations between the two nations, as well as a variety of issues of shared concern. - QNA

Qatar managed current crisis with 'efficiency, competence'

HE the Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Ibrahim bin Ali al-Mohannadi has affirmed that Qatar, under the wise leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, managed the current regional crisis with utmost efficiency, competence, awareness, and transparency, particularly given the exceptional circumstances marked by rapid developments and changes.

In an interview with Qatar Television last night, the minister emphasised that the decisions taken by the government, whether in the current phase or at other times, are an extension of a well-established approach developed in previous periods.

HE al-Mohannadi stated that Qatar has approved plans to ensure business continuity and adopted plans for crisis management, enabling it to address various circumstances as they arise, in a way ensuring that appropriate decisions are made at the right time within an integrated system characterised by both the firmness in implementing decisions and the flexibility to respond to the realities on the ground.

He pointed out that decisions are always monitored for implementation, evaluated for effectiveness, and assessed for the achievement of the desired goals as well

as when needed for continuation or modification based on evolving realities and fundamental criteria, most importantly the safety and security of all, family cohesion as a national pillar, and the continued provision of government services and the regular operation of government facilities.

The minister emphasised that the Cabinet is giving special attention to ensuring the continuity of work in vital sectors, particularly health, education, energy, and transportation, to guarantee the uninterrupted provision of these key services and the continued smooth operation of government facilities.

HE al-Mohannadi also affirmed that work is simultaneously underway to further improve the efficiency of government services and enhance the use of digital infrastructure to provide better and more accessible services.

During the interview, he spoke about the most important decisions taken by the government in light of the current crisis regarding work and education.

These included initially adopting a remote work system, followed by a return to 100% in-person work at workplaces, as well as distance learning at the beginning of the crisis, with students returning to in-person learning yesterday.

HE al-Mohannadi stated that



HE Ibrahim bin Ali al-Mohannadi

the initial transition to remote work was part of the government's work models, a pre-established model designed for implementation in any situation.

HE noted that the remote work model was partially implemented at the beginning of Ramadan.

The minister affirmed that the period during which the remote work model was implemented, whether at the beginning of Ramadan or during the current crisis, did not affect work requirements or the continuity of government performance.

The model was carefully designed, HE al-Mohannadi added, to suit any phase of its implementation without compromising performance and productivity re-

quirements in either the public or private sector, as all government entities currently have the institutional flexibility that enables them to provide their services and perform their duties under various circumstances.

This has been proven in practice, the minister added, as the remote work system did not negatively impact professional performance.

HE al-Mohannadi cited the decision to return to in-person work at a rate of 30% during this crisis followed a situation assessment, particularly by security authorities, which concluded that risks had subsided and that the security situation was stable enough to allow a partial return to the workplace.

HE noted that all government entities continued to provide advanced digital services, including the Ministry of Interior's Metrash application, for example, which offers more than 480 services.

HE al-Mohannadi also spoke about national priorities over the coming period.

The minister said that they are dictated by the Qatar National Vision 2030 and the Third National Development Strategy, which focus on achieving a sustainable economic growth of 4% annually, economic diversification, and strengthening food security, among other key pillars. - QNA

Defying regional crisis, Qatar has boldly turned it into opportunity for growth

From Page 1

What's particularly notable is that this is not just about scale, but direction.

These projects are clearly aligned with long-term structural priorities: logistics, advanced manufacturing, technology, energy services, and knowledge-based sectors.

There is also a continued push into areas such as education, digital infrastructure, and professional services.

At the same time, the current geopolitical environment has highlighted the importance of resilience, particularly around energy infrastructure and supply chains.

In that sense, these 188 projects are not just growth initiatives; they are part of a broader strategy to diversify and future-proof the economy.

Despite uncertainties in the wider region, Qatar has responded with remarkable confidence and clarity of direction. What is it about Qatar's governance model and financial foundations that allows it to stay focused on growth even when the environment around it is turbulent?

Qatar's resilience is rooted in a combi-

nation of strong state capacity, financial depth, and clear policy direction.

The country has built significant fiscal buffers over time, including substantial sovereign reserves, which allow it to absorb shocks and continue investing even during periods of external volatility.

While no market is entirely insulated from regional dynamics, Qatar's ability to respond quickly and strategically is a defining strength.

Recent developments across the region have underscored the importance of preparedness, particularly around energy and trade routes.

Qatar's strength lies in its ability to adjust without losing momentum - maintaining long-term investment plans while managing short-term pressures. That balance between stability and adaptability continues to underpin its growth trajectory.

For international companies evaluating where to plant their flag in the Gulf, what makes Qatar stand out as the destination of choice right now, and how are initiatives like these 188 projects making the entry process more straightforward and attractive for incoming investors?

Right now, investors are weighing two competing realities: risk and resilience.

The region is facing heightened geopolitical uncertainty, and that shapes perception, logistics, and operational planning.

Within that context, Qatar continues to offer a relatively high degree of clarity.

The regulatory environment is well defined, foreign ownership frameworks are supportive, and there is a clear pipeline of government-backed opportunities.

That sense of certainty - underpinned by strong fiscal reserves and consistent policy direction - is increasingly valuable in the current global environment.

The announcement of these projects is especially important because it reduces ambiguity. It gives investors visibility on where capital is being deployed and where partnerships are encouraged.

That level of structure helps streamline market entry and supports more confident decision-making.

With civil service, schools, and the private sector all returning to full operation, how quickly is business confidence being restored on the ground, and what kinds of opportunities are domestic businesses best

positioned to seize as this next phase of growth unfolds?

There is a clear and accelerating rebound in day-to-day activity. As institutions return to full operation, we are seeing projects resume, pipelines rebuild, and a broader sense of momentum re-emerge across the market.

That said, the recovery is not entirely uniform. Certain sectors, particularly those tied to global trade, aviation, and energy, continue to navigate disruption.

At the same time, logistical pressures, including longer delivery times and rising costs, are introducing some near-term complexity into planning cycles.

Even so, the overall trajectory remains firmly positive. Non-energy sectors are expanding, supported by sustained investment and regulatory progress, and business sentiment remains resilient.

For domestic businesses, the opportunity lies in agility - supporting large-scale projects, adapting to evolving supply chains, and aligning closely with national development priorities.

You've described this as a moment for businesses to act with confidence. For

companies that are still on the fence about entering or expanding in Qatar, what would your message be, and how is Sovereign PPG helping businesses make the most of this pivotal moment?

Confidence today needs to be informed, not blind. The operating environment is more complex than it was a month ago, and businesses need to plan with that in mind.

However, moments like this often define market leaders. Qatar is continuing to invest, open up opportunities, and provide a stable platform relative to the wider region.

For companies with a long-term perspective, the fundamentals remain compelling.

The key is preparation - having the right structure, the right partnerships, and a clear strategy for both growth and resilience from day one.

At Sovereign PPG, we work closely with both international investors and domestic businesses to support that process, whether it's market entry, regulatory alignment, or scaling operations in a fast-moving environment.

In many cases, the question is not whether to enter the market, but how quickly businesses can position themselves to benefit.

Early registration timeline for public schools announced

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) has announced the opening of early registration for students in public schools for the academic year 2026-27, effective April 12, 2026.

The ministry called on parents to complete the registration procedures in accordance with the set timelines.

Speaking at a press conference, the head of the MoEHE's Admissions and Registration Department, Warda Mohamed al-Aqeel, said that the early registration would kick off from April 12 until August 13, 2026.

She assured that a regulated time schedule has been prepared to observe categories and nationalities, as well as the educational

phases, to ensure procedures run smoothly.

Al-Aqeel said that the first phase regarding the automatic student promotion between grade levels (from kindergarten to 6th grade, from 7th to 9th grade, and from 9th to 10th grade) has been accomplished, confirming that the next phase will mark the start of online enrolment.

Regarding the registration categories, she indicated that the priority in the first phase will be for siblings among Qatari nationals, children of Qatari women, and children of GCC citizens, scheduled from April 12 to August 13, 2026, while for resident students (sibling category), registration will begin from May 17 to August 13.

Al-Aqeel further elaborated that registration of non-sibling students who are Qatari nationals, children of Qatari women, and children of GCC citizens will begin from April 26 to August 13, and for resident students from May 24 to August 13, while online enrolment for the new academic year for all nationalities will be open from August 25 to October 1.

She unveiled a plan to open seven new schools next year, including three specialty and technical schools, to enhance enrolment capacity and raise the quality of educational services.

The acting director of the Special Education and Inclusive Education Department, Amna Ali al-Mulla, meanwhile said that students with disabilities are en-



The officials at the press conference.

rolled based on procedures that ensure having the appropriate educational environment in place.

Those students, she said, shall be subject to an overall medical examination in collaboration with the Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) and Primary Health Care Corporation (PHCC) to identify the most suitable educational path, whether at inclusive schools, whose number reaches 80, or at early intervention pre-schools, as well as early childhood intervention centres.

The assistant director of the Department of School and Student Affairs, Fatima Yousef al-Obaidly,

clarified that online registration is now available at evening education centres and adult education (homeschooling or parallel track) for students enrolled for the academic year 2025-26.

This, she added, is done through nine centres distributed across various regions nationwide, with the number of registrants heretofore reaching almost 500 students of both genders who have registered via the Maarif Portal for Public Services.

Al-Obaidly noted that the portal continues to receive registration applications in support of continuing education. - QNA

QU opens applications for Summer '26 courses at Community College

Qatar University (QU) has announced the opening of applications for students to enrol in courses at the Community College of Qatar (CCQ) for Summer 2026, as well as at accredited external universities for Summer and Fall 2026.

These two academic services provide students with the opportunity to complete their degree requirements in diverse educational environments during the Summer and Fall 2026 terms, the QU outlined in a statement yesterday.

The statement highlighted that the services include concurrent enrolment at the CCQ for Summer 2026 and taking courses at other accredited universities for Summer and Fall 2026.

The concurrent enrolment service allows students to complete certain courses within the same academic term, enhancing academic flexibility and helping accelerate degree progress, the statement said.

It added that the external university course service allows students to register as visiting students at accredited institutions while maintaining the quality of education and academic standards set by the QU.

The application period for both services runs ends on Thursday, April 9, 2026.

These services are part of the QU's efforts to support students by offering flexible learning options, fostering diverse educational experiences at home and abroad, aligning with global higher education standards, and helping students achieve their academic and professional goals. - QNA

Third Safari Shop & Drive raffle draw winners named

The winners of the third raffle draw of Safari Hypermarket's mega promotion, "Shop & Drive - Win 30 Bestune Cars", have been selected.

Safari Hypermarket conducted the draw on March 29 at its Barwa Village store, in the presence of representatives from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Safari management.

The winners of the third draw are Mohammad Firoz (Coupon No: SDB300920316), Yousef Dehghani (Coupon No: SDB300043390), Nikhil Navas (Coupon No: SDB300382857), and Abdur Razzak (Coupon No: SDB300832566).

Customers who shop for QR50 or more at any Safari outlet receive an e-affle coupon, giving them a chance to win one of 30 Bestune cars.

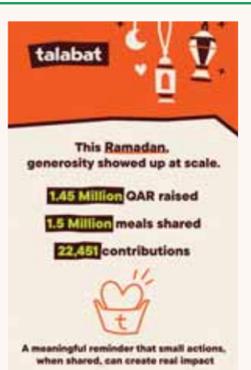
Four Bestune cars are awarded in each



draw, while five cars will be awarded in the final draw.

This Shop & Drive promotion is available

across all Safari outlets. The fourth raffle draw of this promotion will be held on May 10 at Safari Hypermarket, Industrial Area.



talabat enables millions of meals for communities this Ramadan

Talabat announced yesterday the results of its Ramadan 2026 "Share an Iftar" campaign in Qatar, highlighting the scale of community contributions during the holy month.

In Qatar, the campaign delivered 1.5mn meals, raised €343,024 in donations (approximately QR1.45mn), and recorded 22,451 contributions from 6,074 donors.

Across the region, the campaign delivered more than 24mn meals, raised €1.7mn in donations, and received over 218,000 contributions from more than 77,000 donors.

In Qatar, the initiative supported local charities, helping deliver meals and financial support to communities during Ramadan and Eid.

"Ramadan is a moment that brings communities together, and this year we saw that at scale," said talabat Qatar managing director Francisco Miguel De Sousa.

"What's powerful is how small, individual actions can add up to something much bigger," he said. "As a platform, our role is to make that giving simple and accessible, and the impact we've seen in Qatar is a reflection of the generosity of our community."

The campaign shows how simple, everyday contributions - enabled at scale - can translate into real, measurable impact for communities.

Alongside this, talabat supported riders through a series of Ramadan initiatives, including Iftar meal distribution reaching approximately 3,000 riders, Hero Meals distribution in collaboration with Qatar Red Crescent Society, over 35,000 beverages distributed across the rider fleet, and grocery support and Ramadan care initiatives with more than 34,000 distributions, as well as rider Iftar events and a "Double the Tips" initiative.

talabat extends its appreciation to partners including Rawa, Rayyan Water, Baladna, Ottoman Turkish Restaurant, Tasty Tea, and Lulu Hypermarket for their support in delivering these initiatives.

Doha Festival City reports 18% growth in Ramadan, Eid footfall

Doha Festival City recorded an 18% year-on-year increase in footfall month-to-date in March, alongside a 7.5% uplift during the Eid period, reflecting continued demand for experience-led offerings and reinforcing its position as a high-performing asset within Qatar's retail landscape.

This positive performance was supported by strong sales, leasing activity and tenant performance across key retailers, with sustained visitor engagement during a period where community connection remains especially important.

Doha Festival City's performance was further strengthened by high-impact seasonal activations, including the distribution of over 2,000 Eid goodie bags, the provision of 300 Iftar boxes to frontline and service workers, and strong participation in community initiatives such as the Solidarity Wall, which reached full capacity within hours and was extended due to demand.

Additional activations, including the distribution of white flowers symbolising peace and positivity, and Mother's Day

experiences, further enhanced the festive atmosphere and strengthened emotional connection with visitors.

Building on these initiatives, Doha Festival City delivered a cohesive and experience-led programme that enhanced the overall visitor journey, positioning the destination as a key hub for community connection during the season.

This was further reflected in strong digital performance across the campaign period, generating 14.2mn impressions, 422,000 engagements, and 10.2mn video views, extending the reach of on-ground experiences beyond the mall environment.

Footfall growth was also supported by new openings, including the introduction of globally renowned cosmetics brand NARS, alongside reinvestment in existing stores such as Tissot, Al Shalawi Jewellery, Green Apple Pharmacy, and Saccor Brothers, highlighting continued leasing momentum and strong retailer confidence in the asset's long-term performance.

"The strong Ramadan and Eid performance at Doha Festival City reflects the



Hayssam Hajjar

continued evolution of our destinations as experience-led, community-focused environments that respond to changing customer expectations," said Al-Futtaim Real Estate executive director (Asset Management) Hayssam Hajjar. "Through disciplined management, ongoing tenant curation, and a clear focus on experience, we continue to drive footfall, engagement, and spend across our portfolio."

"We remain on track with our leasing strategy, with a strong pipeline of new brands and concepts set to open this year, reinforcing the attractiveness of Doha Festival City and the confidence of our retail partners in its long-term performance," he said.

Building on this strong momentum, the mall is preparing a series of upcoming events and activations.

Qatar Calendar brings 'Hot Wheels Speed City' to Katara

Qatar Calendar has announced "Hot Wheels Speed City", a new family-focused activation, is set to take place at Katara South Parking from today until May 2.

Designed as an immersive Hot Wheels world, the 34-day experience will invite families to go-karting and play across a series of interactive zones, complemented by live entertainment and themed retail pop-ups.

Hot Wheels Speed City will feature a range of dynamic zones designed to immerse visitors in the world of speed and excitement.

These include Speed Rush, Loop Land, Turbo Tracks, Kart Arena, Fuel Café, Central Plaza, Souven Wheels, Little Wheels, Fuel & Fuellers, and a dedicated Stunt Show zone, where professional drivers push the limits with precision drifts, soaring jumps, and high-energy sequences that bring the thrill of Hot Wheels heroics to life.

Each zone has been carefully curated to deliver engaging, age-appropriate experiences for children aged four and above, ensuring an exciting adventure for the whole family.

Hot Wheels Speed City will operate daily throughout the event period, from 4pm to

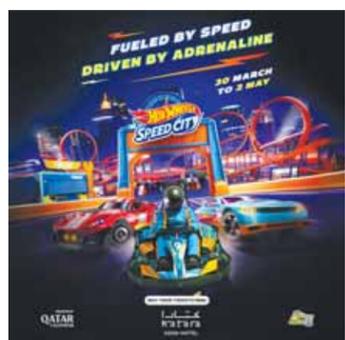
12 midnight on weekdays and 4pm to 1am on weekends.

Tickets will be available with options tailored for individuals and families.

General admission is priced at QR35 on weekdays and QR50 on weekends.

Family offers, allowing guests to purchase four tickets and receive one complimentary ticket, will be available for QR140 on weekdays and QR200 on weekends.

The upgraded ticket option includes "Fast Pass", which provides priority access to fast-track lanes at all Hot Wheels Speed City activities. The price is QR150 for weekends and QR100 for weekdays.



With QFFD support, Qatar Charity hands over rescue equipment to Sri Lanka's DMC

Qatar Charity (QC) has reinforced Sri Lanka's national disaster response capacity by delivering a new set of search-and-rescue equipment to the Disaster Management Centre (DMC), funded by the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD).

The handover took place during an official ceremony at the DMC headquarters in Colombo.

The event was attended by Qatar's ambassador to Sri Lanka Hamad bin Mohammed al-Dosari, while the equipment was formally received by DMC director-general Major-General (Retd) Sampath Kotuwegoda.

The assistance was provided under the project "Provision of Search and Rescue Equipment to Support Disaster Management Centre (DMC) Operations".

The delivered equipment included 22 generators, 22 outboard



The event was attended by Qatar's ambassador to Sri Lanka Hamad bin Mohammed al-Dosari.

motors for rescue boats, 22 submersible water pumps, and 22 sets of flexible hoses and related accessories.

Together, these resources will help strengthen preparedness and improve operational efficiency across 22 districts affected by Cyclone Ditwah.

This support marks the second phase of an ongoing humanitar-

ian project implemented by Qatar Charity, funded by the QFFD.

The first phase, completed earlier, provided emergency relief assistance to nearly 2,000 families affected by severe flooding.

The current phase focuses on reinforcing operational response mechanisms by equipping the DMC with tools essential for rapid action during natural disasters.

Vodafone Qatar marks Earth Hour



Vodafone Qatar participated in Earth Hour, switching off non-essential lights across its facilities, in line with the national call to action led by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC). The participation reflects Vodafone Qatar's ongoing commitment to sustainability and its role in supporting Qatar's environmental ambitions in line with Qatar National Vision 2030. For more on Vodafone Qatar and its services, visit www.vodafone.qa

For students, it's back to school with confidence



Ahmed (left) and Hamza.

By Shaima Sherif
Staff Reporter

Students across Qatar have returned to classrooms after a precautionary shift to online learning, with many expressing initial nervousness but growing confidence as schools implement safety measures and routines resume.

The move back to in-person education marks a gradual return to normalcy, as students, parents and teachers adapt to routines while maintaining awareness of safety protocols issued by authorities.

For many students, the transition brought mixed emotions, from initial nervousness to reassurance as the day progressed.

Hind al-Fadhala, an eight-year-old Grade 3 student, described feeling "nervous" at first when returning to school.

"I was only nervous about going," she said, adding that the feeling eased as the day went on. "I feel safe... the teachers tell us what to do."

Despite her preference for online classes, which she described as "funnier" –

Hind acknowledged that the school environment felt secure, with teachers guiding students on safety practices.

Older students shared similar experiences, balancing awareness of the situation with confidence in Qatar's systems.

Sara al-Fadhala, an 11-year-old Grade 5 student, said that online learning initially helped reduce anxiety.

"I believe online school helped my anxiety about what is going on," she said.

However, returning to school brought renewed confidence. "I was a bit nervous, but I knew it is a very safe school."

Sara added that teachers played a key role in ensuring students felt informed and prepared.

"They informed us about what to do if we were in danger," she said, noting that her anxiety faded quickly. "After the third period, I wasn't anxious."

She highlighted the importance of social interaction, saying that being back in school allowed students to reconnect.

"I believe it is better to socialise and be more active," Sara said.

Other students echoed the sense of normalcy returning to daily life.



Hind al-Fadhala



Sara al-Fadhala

Ahmed, a Grade 5 student, said the transition felt smooth.

"Now I'm back to school, I have final exams. It feels normal," he said, adding that seeing friends again was the best part of returning.

Similarly, Hamza said that he felt "normal and happy" to be back in school.

"I can talk with my friends and have fun... I'm feeling safe and calm," he said.

Students reflected on what they had learned from the experience, particularly regarding awareness and preparedness.

"I learned about safety and precautions," Sara said. "School is where you learn."

For older students like 14-year-old Sumaviya Ahmed, the experience highlighted an emotional adjustment, moving from initial fear to calm and stability.

"I felt fear in the first few hours, but it faded," she said. "It left a sense of calmness... and trust that Qatar would protect us."

Sumaviya noted the role of family and communication systems in maintaining reassurance.

"The alerts on our phones and being with my family helped me stay calm," she said.

The return to classrooms comes as authorities continue to emphasise safety, issuing guidelines for students, parents and educators to ensure preparedness while maintaining continuity in education.

The experience has underscored the importance of adaptability, with students demonstrating resilience as they navigate both online and in-person learning environments.

QSAF announces resumption of activities at Al Furjan playgrounds

The Qatar Sports For All Federation (QSAF), affiliated with the Ministry of Sports and Youth, has announced the resumption of activities at Al Furjan playgrounds across the country, noting that playground bookings are now available again for football teams and walkers via the Sports For All app.

In a statement, the QSAF emphasised that spectators will not be permitted and that full compliance with the procedures and safety standards approved by the Ministry of Interior is mandatory.

This, the statement added, ensures a safe and attractive environment for those wishing to practice sports within residential neighbourhoods.

This initiative is part of the federation's ongoing efforts to expand com-



munity participation in physical activity and utilise sports facilities to organise and host events and activities that appeal to young people.

QSAF executive director Abdullah al-Dosari said in a press release that Al Furjan playgrounds are witnessing a strong

return of various sporting activities following the exceptional hiatus.

This comes as a continuation of the federation's efforts to provide opportunities for young people to practice football through bookings now available to everyone via the QSAF application.

Al-Dosari said that the 18 Al Furjan playgrounds play a pivotal role in spreading the culture of sports and exercises and raising awareness of the importance of sports, which represent a vital outlet for young people and an important platform for amateur players to participate in diverse sporting activities.

He added that the designated playgrounds host a series of tournaments every two months, contributing to enhancing community participation and the sustainability of quality activities offered by the QSAF.

These activities aim to encourage different segments of society to adopt sports as a lifestyle that reflects the values of vigour and vitality, thus reinforcing the playgrounds' key roles in serving the youth. - QNA





QatarEnergy LNG
Tender Invitation

No.	TENDER NUMBER / DESCRIPTION	TENDER ISSUE PERIOD	TENDER FEE (QAR)	TENDER BOND (QAR)	TENDER CLOSING DATE
1	SUP/C/EDU/7400/25 Provision of Climate Survey for Al Khor International School	30/03/2026 to 13/04/2026	0	0	13/04/2026

Scope of Work:
Al Khor International School (AKIS) requires for providing a comprehensive, independent climate survey service for AKIS to be conducted annually over a five-year period. The service will measure stakeholder perceptions across multiple themes and provide comparative analysis, benchmarking, and actionable insights to support school improvement planning

Bid Validity: Bid Offer should be valid for 180 calendar days from the Tender Closing Date.

Place for Tender Collection and Bid Submission:
ITT document for this tender will be available in QatarEnergy LNG website under Suppliers tab >Current Open Tenders. The bids shall be submitted through the QatarEnergy LNG online platform (SMART by GEP).

Note: Local Companies (established under the Laws of State of Qatar with local Commercial Registration) are advised to refer to the tender documentation and In-Country Value (ICV) Digital Portal: - <https://icv.qa/en-US/> for details of ICV compliance that may be applicable.

INVITATION TO TENDER

QATAR SHIPYARD TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS

SN	Tender Ref. No.	Description	Tender Fee (QAR)	Tender Fee Closing Date
1	003-2026-HSSE	Provision of Security Services	1,000/- Non-Refundable	9 April 2026

Tender documents for the above invitation can be obtained as per following details:

- Interested parties shall first deposit respective Tender Fee to the below details (cheque will not be accepted).
- Tenderer must mention the Company's full name and Tender Ref. on the Bank Deposit Slip.
- Tenderer shall send the copy of the Deposit Slip along with Tender Reference Number to the email QatarShipyards_Itc@qatarshipyards.qa to obtain the Tender Documents.

Bank Name:	Commercial Bank of Qatar
Branch:	Hamad Al Kabeer
Account Name:	Qatar Shipyards Technology Solutions
Currency:	QAR
Account Number:	4580-582805-001
IBAN:	QA98 CBQA 0000 0000 4580 5828 0500 1
Swift:	CBQAQQA

Tender Collection Date:

- Tender Fee Closing Date - 9 April 2026
- ITT Collection Date - Subject to submission of deposit slip copy with Reference Number, from 30 Mar till 9 April 2026 between 0830hrs to 1530hrs.



For more information related to the tender requirements, please communicate to the below email address
QatarShipyards_Itc@qatarshipyards.qa

Recall order issued for BMW X3 20 xDrive 2025 models

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI), in co-operation with Alfardan Automobiles, Qatar's BMW dealership, has announced the recall of BMW X3 20 xDrive 2025 models.

The recall is due to the possibility that an error message may appear due to a faulty torque sensor, which may cause a slight change in the steering system.

The ministry said the recall campaign comes within the framework of its ongoing efforts to protect consumers and ensure that car dealers follow up on vehicle defects and repairs.

The MoCI said that it will co-ordinate with the dealer to follow up on the maintenance and repair works and will communicate with customers to ensure that the necessary repairs are carried out.

The ministry urges all customers to report any violations to its Consumer Protection and Anti-Commercial Fraud Department, which processes complaints, inquiries and suggestions through the following channels:

Call Centre: 16001, e-mail: info@moci.gov.qa, ministry's accounts on social media: @mociqatar, ministry's Mobile App: MOCIQATAR (available on iOS and Android devices)



QATAR FUEL ADDITIVES COMPANY LIMITED
QAFAC

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

The Tender Committee of QAFAC invites qualified local suppliers to participate in the following Tenders in accordance with QAFAC tendering procedures

No.	Tender No.	Description	Collection Fee Qrs.	Tender Bond Qrs.	Bid Closing Date
1	QTC/021/26	Supply of Stainless-Steel Piping material (pipes, flanges, elbows, tee, reducers, boss, bolts & nuts)	300/-	35,000/-	20 th April 2026
2	QTC/026/26	Four (4) year Call off Contract for Supply Installation, Repair and Testing of MV & LV Cables at QAFAC Plant, Mesaieed.	300/-	25,000/-	20 th April 2026
3	QTC/028/26	Five (5) year Call off Contract for Supply of Security Services at QAFAC Plant, Mesaieed.	300/-	200,000/-	20 th April 2026
4	QTC/019/26	Supply of Gate Valves, Globe Valves and Ball Valves	300/-	30,000/-	20 th April 2026
5	QTC/031/26	Supply of Self-Regulating Pressure Control Valves with Actuators and Accessories	300/-	25,000/-	20 th April 2026

Interested companies are invited to collect the above tender documents as follows:

- Collection Date :** From Monday, 30th March 2026 (QAFAC working days from Sunday to Thursday only)
- Collection Time :** 08:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m
- Location :** The Gate, Bay Tower 2, 13th Floor, West Bay, QAFAC
- Tender Fees :** As shown above, (Non-refundable) can be paid at QAFAC Doha Office
- Validity :** Offers must be valid for 120 days from closing date.
- Bid Bond :** Offers must include a Bid bond issued from a local bank and valid for 120 days from closing date.
- Authorization :** Tenders will be issued to authorized company personnel with the following:
 - Official authorization on Company Letter Head.
 - Proper Identification.
 - Copy of valid Company's Commercial Registration.
 - Focal Point of Contact (Name, Telephone, Mobile & Email)
 - Valid In Country Value (ICV) Certificate (Mandatory for No.1&3)

Note: "Effective from 1st July 2023, bids received from Local Companies (established under the Laws of state of Qatar with local Commercial Registration) who are not in possession of an ICV score in the ICV portal by Bid Closing Date (or commercial bid submission date if separately mentioned/notified) will not be accepted. Local Company that have been established for less than 2 years and insurance companies are exempted from this requirement. For further details please visit ICV digital Portal :- <https://icv.qa/US>

Nurturing the mind

Qatar is launching a targeted scholarship programme for the 2026-2027 academic year to build a specialised national workforce in behavioural health.

 <p>Specialised degrees in Clinical Psychology and Counselling</p> <p>Funding is prioritised for programmes at the world's top 200 health science universities.</p>	 <p>Minimum 80% average and 6.0 IELTS score</p> <p>Applicants must secure unconditional admission to qualify for the scholarship.</p>	 <p>Monthly stipends up to QR30,000</p> <p>Financial packages include annual travel and years of study counted toward government service.</p>	 <p>Guaranteed public-sector employment for graduates</p> <p>Career placements are secured through agreements with national medical and social institutions.</p>
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Qatar launches mental health scholarship drive

From Page 1

Those pursuing Clinical Psychology or Mental Health Counselling receive QR14,000 a month, one economy-class ticket per year, and the standard allowances extended to all scholarship holders.

Crucially, the ministry said it has already secured guaranteed public-sector employment for graduates through agreements with the Civil Service and Government Development Bureau and a network of medical and social institutions across the country – an assurance designed to make the long years of study abroad a more concrete proposition for prospective applicants and their families.

Doha International Family Institute executive director Dr Sharifa Noman al-Emadi gave the programme her backing but has pointed what she wants to see in the curriculum.

Research by her institute, she said, has identified a persistent gap between classroom training and real-world clinical practice.

Scholarships, Dr al-Emadi argued, must prioritise programmes with substantial supervised fieldwork hours, particularly in addiction services and child and adolescent behavioural health – areas where demand is growing and qualified Qatari practitioners are scarce. She also issued a direct appeal to Qatari men, who she said are conspicuously under-represented across the mental health professions.

The shortage among male practitioners is acute, Dr al-Emadi stressed, and the new scholarship programme should serve as a prompt – and an incentive – to change that.

By and large, the programme is primarily directed toward students studying in high-class domestic and international universities, with the essential provision of financial support and practical training that ensures having a professional workforce capable of handling a wide diversity of psychosocial challenges in an efficient manner.

War inflicts systemic shock to helium market

From Page 1

Helium, the second most abundant element in the universe, often accumulates in the same geological reservoirs as natural gas.

It is extracted during LNG processing, hence, any disruption to gas production directly cuts helium output; fundamentally altering the global market equilibrium.

The present conflict, a stress test of global technological interdependence, exposing vulnerabilities that extend far beyond energy into healthcare resilience and digital infrastructure stability, could lead to multi-month global shortage, resulting in structural inflation in healthcare as well as electronics and artificial intelligence (AI) infrastructure.

Helium spot prices have doubled since the Middle East crisis began, according to Phil Kornbluth, president of Kornbluth Helium Consulting, as buyers scramble to secure supply.

Helium shortage has cascading effect on MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), semiconductor manufacturing and aerospace systems, due to this mono-atomic noble gas' non-substitutability, geographic concentration, and tight supply-demand balance – all of which amplify even short-term geopolitical shocks into long-term structural risks.

Helium, the second lightest element, is essential for cooling superconducting magnets in MRI scanners, the shortage of which will have serious repercussions in the healthcare industry.

Large hospital networks, diagnostic chains, and national health systems are effectively the largest helium consumers in the MRI value chain.

Unlike oil, helium lacks strategic reserves and is difficult to store due to boil-off and logistical constraints, making it acutely sensitive to supply shocks and its attendant immediate transmission into pricing and allocation.

Even short disruptions can lead to shutdown of MRI units, as he-

lium boil-off cannot be reversed, according to experts.

Although healthcare is a priority sector, hospitals may face allocation quota and prices of imaging procedures likely to rise.

The global healthcare sector accounts for about 30-33% of total helium consumption, making it the largest single application segment worldwide. Within healthcare, MRI scanners are the dominant driver of helium demand due to their reliance on superconducting magnets.

As many as 50,000 MRI systems globally consume helium continuously for cooling, a third of the world's helium consumption.

Most MRI scanners use between 1,500-2,000 litres of helium a year and can consume many liters of helium per hour when in use, taking the lifetime consumption of a scanner to 10,000 liters of helium or even more.

High volume markets, implying largest helium consumption in MRI, are the US, China, Japan and Germany.

Shortage of helium poses great challenges to the fast growing semiconductor industry.

Qatar is home to one of only two plants that produce semiconductor-grade helium, which is ionised and used to etch silicon wafers.

The inert gas is indispensable in cryogenic cooling of silicon wafers, plasma etching and deposition processes and leak detection and ultra-clean manufacturing environments.

"People working in the semiconductor industry, and specifically memory chips, are anticipating issuing force majeure to their buyers maybe in a month's time, because they don't have enough helium," Rashid al-Mohannadi, a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs, told a webinar, sponsored by Gulf Times.

Asia (South Korea and Taiwan in particular) is heavily dependent on helium from Qatar, and lead times increase due to raw material and logistics delays.

Gaza civil defence says Israeli strikes kill nine

AFP
Khan Yunis

Gaza's civil defence agency said yesterday that nine people were killed in Israeli strikes in the south of the Palestinian territory.

On Saturday evening, "Israeli strikes hit police posts... in the Al-Mawasi area" killing eight, said Mohammed al-Mughair, an official at the agency which operates under Hamas authority.

Another person was killed yesterday "after being hit by fire from Israeli forces" at a roundabout in Khan Yunis, Mughair told AFP.

According to the official Palestinian news agency Wafa, a young girl was among the dead on Saturday night.

AFP images showed bodies being transported from the morgue of Nasser hospital in Khan Yunis then laid out on the ground, wrapped in white shrouds.

During the funerals, one woman was screaming, surrounded by crying men and children.

"Each day, the enemy hunts down and kills," said Ahmed al-Sufi, a Palestinian who had lost family. Asked about the strikes by AFP, the Israeli military did not immediately respond.



Relatives mourn the death of a loved one who was reportedly killed in an overnight Israeli strike, during the funeral of several victims at Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. (AFP)

It did, however, issue a statement in which it said it had "eliminated" overnight "a cell of 10 armed fighters from Hamas operating in the centre" of Gaza, as well as another person the day before who had repeatedly crossed the yellow line behind which Israeli forces in Gaza have

withdrawn. Israel and Hamas continue to accuse each other of violating the ceasefire in place since October 10 that largely halted two years of war in the territory. Israel has continued to strike Gaza, killing at least 702 Palestinians since the start of the ceasefire, according to the Gaza

health ministry, which also operates under Hamas authority.

The UN considers the ministry's figures to be reliable.

Media restrictions and limited access in Gaza have prevented AFP from independently verifying casualty figures or freely covering the fighting.

Iran accuses US of ground attack plan despite diplomatic talk

AFP
Tehran

The speaker of Iran's parliament accused the United States yesterday of plotting a ground attack despite publicly pushing for a negotiated deal, after a US warship with around 3,500 military personnel arrived in the Middle East.

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf's comments came after more than a month of aerial bombardments of Iran by US and Israeli forces, and as key regional players held talks in Pakistan.

The war has escalated into a regional conflagration as Iran has retaliated with attacks on Gulf states and the Strait of Hormuz shipping lane, sending energy markets into a tailspin and threatening the world economy.

"The enemy publicly sends messages of negotiation and dialogue while secretly planning a ground attack," Ghalibaf said in a statement carried by the official IRNA news agency.

"Our men are waiting for the arrival of the American soldiers on the ground to set them on fire and punish their regional allies once and for all," he added.

Ghalibaf called for unity among Iranians, saying the war was "at its most critical stage".

Weeks of unrelenting strikes have taken a heavy toll on ordinary people in the country.

"I miss a peaceful night's sleep," an artist in Tehran told AFP, saying night-time strikes were "so intense it felt like all of Tehran was shaking".

Farzaneh, a 62-year-old woman in Iran's western city of Ahvaz contacted by AFP from Paris, said: "People wake up each day worried about an uncertain future."

A university in Iran's central city of Isfahan said it was hit by US-Israeli airstrikes yesterday for the second time since the war erupted. In Tehran, the news channel Al Araby said an Israeli missile hit the building housing its office.

Footage from inside the office showed broken windows and shattered glass. Outside, people could be seen clearing large piles of rubble.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly spoken of diplomatic contacts with Iran, although these claims have been denied by Tehran. Pakistan, acting as a go-between for Washington and Tehran, hosted foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia,



A view of the Al-Araby TV and business building damaged by a strike, as the US-Israeli conflict with Iran continues, in Tehran, yesterday. (Reuters)



Emergency personnel work at an impact site following an Iranian missile strike, as the US-Israeli conflict with Iran continues, in southern Israel, yesterday. (Reuters)

Turkiye and Egypt in Islamabad for talks on the crisis.

Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said the visiting diplomats had discussed how to "bring an early and permanent end to the war" and that there was a growing consensus behind Islamabad hosting peace talks.

Despite making diplomatic overtures including proposing a 15-point plan to end the war, the US has also been sending more military assets into the region.

The USS Tripoli, an amphibious assault ship carrying around 3,500 Marines and sailors, arrived in the Middle East on Friday. The Washington Post reported the Pentagon was preparing plans for weeks of ground

operations – potentially including raids on sites near the Strait of Hormuz – though US President Donald Trump has yet to approve any deployment.

Iran says it has closed the Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping lane which previously accounted for a quarter of the world's seaborne oil trade and a fifth of liquefied natural gas shipments, to vessels from hostile nations.

FIRE AT COMPLEX
Iranian forces said they had fired a volley of missiles and drones at plants belonging to two of the world's largest aluminium producers in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, targeting what they described as industries linked to the US military.

Emirates Global Aluminium (EGA) said an Iranian attack wounded six and caused significant damage to its plant, while Bahraini state media said two Aluminium Bahrain (ALBA) employees were injured in a second attack. In Israel, thick black smoke could be seen rising from an industrial complex in the Negev desert in images released by the Israel Fire and Rescue Authority.

The military said the impact may have been caused by missile shrapnel, shortly after it detected a new barrage fired from Iran.

In Kuwait, the defence ministry said 10 service members were injured by an attack on a military camp and that the country had detected 14 ballistic missiles and 12 hostile drones in its airspace in the past 24 hours.

On another front, Israeli attacks have continued in Lebanon, which was drawn into the war when Hezbollah fired rockets at Israel on March 2.

The health ministry said yesterday that the death toll from Israeli strikes had passed 1,200 people. On Saturday, the Israeli military killed three journalists in the south. Lebanese authorities condemned the killings as war crimes, while Israel alleged that one of the reporters was also a member of an elite Hezbollah combat unit. Hundreds of mourners gathered in the rain for the funeral of the three journalists near Beirut yesterday.

American University of Beirut moves to online learning after Iran threats

The American University of Beirut yesterday said it would operate remotely over the next two days, following the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' threat to target US universities in the region.

"Like many of you, we learned early this morning of threats issued against American

universities in the region," AUB President Fadlo Khouri said in a statement.

"At this time, we have no evidence of direct threats against our university, its campuses or medical centers. At the same time, out of an abundance of caution, we will operate fully online on Monday and Tuesday,

with the exception of essential personnel."

Classes and exams will be carried out remotely, Khouri added. Iran's Revolutionary Guard on Sunday threatened to target US universities in the Middle East after saying US-Israeli strikes had destroyed two Iranian universities. (AFP)

Armed attackers kill 16 civilians near Niger's border with Mali

Armed attackers killed 16 civilians in western Niger this week when they ambushed a convoy of trucks near the Malian border, local sources said yesterday. The ambush occurred in the Banibangou district of Tillaberi, a region where fighters from Islamic State in the Sahel (ISS) and the Al-Qaeda-affiliated JNIM are said to operate.

"Five trucks carrying passengers and goods were stopped on Friday afternoon. The armed attackers executed 16 men and spared the women," a Banibangou resident told AFP. The trucks had left the capital, Niamey, and were heading towards Tizigou, he said, and the attack happened in a "desert area" not far from there.

They were on their way to a weekly market and "only the women were left alive", a resident of Tondikiwandi, a neighbouring district, told AFP. Among the 16 victims were several "wealthy local traders", the Banibangou resident said. The attackers stole three vehicles loaded with goods and burned another, he added. (AFP)



WTO talks in Brazil-US deadlock over e-commerce duties moratorium

Reuters
Yaounde

WTO talks are deadlocked as Brazil faces off against the US and several other countries seeking to extend a moratorium on customs duties for electronic transmissions such as digital downloads, diplomats said yesterday.

Negotiations to extend the moratorium – which is set to expire in March – by four years plus an additional buffer year to 2031 are stuck, even though a broader reform package appears close to a deal, a senior diplomat and two diplomats told Reuters.

The talks at a World Trade Organisation meeting in Cameroon include efforts to bridge differences between the US and Brazil over extending the e-commerce moratorium, which was first adopted in 1998 to help encourage early digital trade growth.

In what is seen as a test for the WTO's relevance, after a year of tariff-fuelled trade turmoil and major disruptions due to the Iran war, three diplomats told Reuters that ministers are stuck on extending the moratorium beyond more than two years following objections from Brazil.

"Brazil's opposition is probably linked to a number of issues, including tense relations with the US," a senior diplomat said. Washington initially imposed tariffs up to 40% last year. They have since come down to 10% for some sectors, 25% for steel and 0 in other areas.

"The US wanted the sky," a Brazilian diplomat told Reuters, adding that Brazil wanted to stay prudent in renewing the moratorium

by two years, like in previous ministerial conferences. "In four or five years' time, no one will be able to predict what e-commerce will be about, and this has an influence on a number of countries' policies," they added. Diplomats had been working



Delegates attend the World Trade Organisation (WTO) 14th ministerial meeting in Yaounde, Cameroon. (Reuters)

throughout yesterday to close the gaps between Brazil and the US. Earlier in the week, the US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer said Washington wanted a permanent extension, while India said it would support a two-year extension.

A draft document seen by Reuters proposed support for developing country members concerned about losing out on tax revenues, as well as a review clause.

Business leaders say an extension is vital to guarantee predictability, fearing duties could otherwise be introduced. It is also seen as key to securing US support for the WTO.

"If the moratorium does not get extended, the US will use it as an excuse to beat the WTO on the head," a senior diplomat said. After initial resistance from some WTO members, a new

draft of the reform roadmap, seen by Reuters, that provides a timeline for progress and sets out the key issues to address is close to being agreed, three diplomats said.

Those include improving decision-making in a consensus-based system that has long been stymied by a few countries, and the trade benefits extended to developing countries.

The reform debate comes amid efforts to rework WTO rules to render subsidy use more transparent and make decision-taking easier. The US and European Union argue China in particular has taken advantage of current rules to their detriment.

Bringing into WTO rules a deal reached by a subset of members aimed at boosting investment in developing countries also remains blocked by India.

VP Vance takes CPAC 2028 presidential straw poll victory

Reuters
Grapevine

Vice-President JD Vance was the Conservative Political Action Conference's choice this year to be the next Republican nominee for US president, according to a straw poll released on Saturday.

"I wasn't real sure about him at first, you know, like he's inexperienced, but I've seen everything he's done"

urday.

About 53% of the more than 1,600 attendees who voted in the poll chose Vance. Secretary of State Marco Rubio came in second with 35% at CPAC, a key annual gathering for Republican lawmakers, activists and presidential hopefuls.

CPAC, which is holding this year's event in Grapevine, Texas, draws heavily from the Republican Party's conservative wing. Its annual straw poll is not necessarily a reliable predictor of the eventual nominee.

But the poll offers a snapshot

of where the energy currently lies among core supporters of President Donald Trump's Make America Great Again movement, also known as MAGA. Trump, currently serving his second term, is not eligible to run again in 2028.

Paul Empson, a 58-year-old accountant from Fort Worth, Texas, said he voted for Vance because he sees him as aligned with the MAGA movement and was drawn to the vice-president's frequent references to the Christian faith.

"I wasn't real sure about him at first, you know, like he's inexperienced, but I've seen everything he's done," Empson told Reuters. "He's a real, genuine person, and he's also willing to proclaim his faith in public."

At last year's CPAC meeting in Oxon Hill, Maryland, Vance led the straw poll with 61% of the vote, followed by Steve Bannon, a conservative podcaster and Trump adviser during his first term, at 12%, and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis at 7%.

Rubio, who captured just 3% of the vote last year, has risen in prominence as he plays a visible role in high-stakes foreign policy,

including work related to the administration's actions in Venezuela and Iran. No other contender in the poll other than Vance or Rubio received more than 2% of the vote.

Several CPAC attendees told Reuters they would like to see Vance and Rubio on the ticket together.

James Schaare, 61, said he liked both men but was leaning toward Rubio. He said Rubio won him over in part through his speech at the memorial for Charlie Kirk, the conservative activist who was fatally shot in September.

"Over the last couple of years, everything he says and does is 100% conservative," said Schaare, a political activist from Euless, Texas. Schaare also said he thought Rubio has done a "phenomenal" job as Secretary of State.

Carol Kurpiel, 79, who travelled to CPAC from the Atlanta area, also said she liked Rubio as the 2028 nominee.

"He's strong. He's to the point. He works like Trump: go, go, go, go," Kurpiel said. "I like the strength I see in him. I like the way he presents himself when he speaks to the people."

Mexican protesters turn highway into football pitch to slam World Cup 'dispossession'

Reuters
Mexico City

Protesters transformed a major Mexico City highway into a makeshift football pitch on Saturday, playing impromptu matches to denounce World Cup preparation which they said is overshadowing the capital's pressing needs.

The event unfolded on the white-painted asphalt of a busy ring road, with demonstrators wearing Mexico jerseys alongside club colours of Pumas, Chivas and Italian side Juventus, while an organiser provided match commentary over a loudspeaker.

The protest was intended to denounce what organisers termed the "World Cup of Dispossession" and to draw attention to shortages of housing, water, transport and electricity.

Reuters has contacted the Mexico City government for comment.

The event took place just hours before Mexico was due to play Portugal in a World Cup warm-up match, and saw authorities deploy over 4,000 emergency services personnel to ensure safety.

Protesters played a friendly match, or "cascarita", along the highway's central lane, causing a massive build-up of traffic which eased when protesters moved to the outside lane for a second match.

In a further political twist, the second match featured a football bearing the face of US President Donald Trump, the significance of which was not immediately



People from different civil organisations play soccer matches on a major urban highway to protest against the reopening of Azteca Stadium, officially renamed Banorte Stadium, in Mexico City. (Reuters)

clear. Other signs of politics included Ukraine flags and chants of "Free Palestine".

"The union that this sport builds between people – if a ball appears everyone tries to play, you forget about your differences and enjoy the game, the moment," Roman, a protester who gave only his first name, told Reuters.

"Football is about community; it's about more than money," Roman said, adding that there are more pressing needs while the authorities are focused on the tournament. "We want attention. We want decent transport. We want water. We want electricity. We want to be able to get home. We want lights in the streets."

The players, encircled by police, remained focused on winning the match while making their political points. When the ball rolled into the road, they

paused and waited for its return while some passing drivers honked in support.

Banners unfurled during the protest included one reading "Global event, local eviction," reflecting participants' claims that World Cup-related development was fuelling displacement across the capital.

"It is contradictory, precisely because I like football a lot. I follow football, but that does not mean I support this. I do not think it is being handled in the best way in Mexico," Julian, another protester wearing a "Lucha Libre" wrestling mask, told Reuters.

Mexico will co-host the World Cup alongside the US and Canada. The tournament will take place from 11 June to 19 July, with matches scheduled for Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey.

TSA checkpoint queue at Baltimore airport



Passengers wait in a TSA security checkpoint queue that stretches outside the entrance of Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport (BWI) in Baltimore, Maryland, US, yesterday. (Reuters)

US carrier Ford arrives in Croatia for repairs

The US aircraft carrier Gerald R Ford, which had been deployed in US-Israeli operations against Iran, anchored in Croatia's Adriatic port of Split on Saturday for repairs and maintenance.

The Ford, America's newest and the world's largest carrier, was operating in the Red Sea in support of Operation Epic Fury when a non-combat fire broke out in its main laundry room on March 12, injuring three sailors.

Nearly 200 sailors were also treated for smoke-related issues, a US official said at the time. The fire took hours to bring under control and had an impact on roughly 100 sleeping berths.

The warship has been deployed for nine months and also took part in operations against Venezuela in the Caribbean prior to arriving in the Middle East.

It has been plagued by plumbing problems during its deployment, affecting the nearly 650 toilets.

The Ford had temporarily stopped at Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete. The government of Croatia, which is a Nato-ally of the US, approved its arrival earlier this week.

"During its visit, the USS Gerald R Ford will host local officials and key leaders to reaffirm the strong and enduring alliance between the US and Croatia," the US embassy to Croatia said in a statement.

The carrier, staffed by more than 5,000 sailors, has more than 75 military aircraft aboard, including fighter aircraft like the F-18 Super Hornet, and boasts a sophisticated radar system for air traffic control and navigation. (Reuters)

ANNOUNCEMENT

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holder of

INDIAN Passport No. C2973409
QID No. 28035661226

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NOUSHAD MOIDUNNY KOZHICKAL BAPPUTTY

to

NOUSHAD KOZHICKAL MOIDUNNY

Any objection, please contact
THE PERMANENT COMMITTEE FOR NATIONALITY AFFAIRS
within 15 days from the publication of this notice.

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I, VATSALA AGRAWAL

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Indian Passport No. AM761739
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Project Hail Mary tops N America box office for second week

AFP
Los Angeles

Space adventure flick *Project Hail Mary* topped the North American box office for a second straight week with \$54.5mn in ticket sales, industry estimates showed yesterday.

Ryan Gosling stars in the Amazon MGM film as a teacher-turned-astronaut who awakes on a spaceship with a mission to save Earth from a sun-dimming phenomenon.

It is adapted from a novel by Andy Weir, the author behind the 2015 hit *The Martian* starring Matt Damon.

Standing firm in second place was Disney/Pixar animated hit *Hoppers*, with \$12.2mn in the US and Canada, according to Exhibitor Relations.

The latest original film from Disney's Pixar tells the story of a young animal lover who uses technology to transfer her consciousness into a robotic beaver so she can better communicate and protect wildlife.

Debuting in third place was horror flick *They Will Kill You*, at \$5mn.

The Warner Bros film – which stars Zazie Beetz (TV's *Atlanta*), Tom Felton (of *Harry Potter* fame) and Oscar winner Patricia Arquette – tells the tale of a woman working as a maid in a mysterious New York building where disappearances are common.

"These are respectable numbers for an original horror comedy with a modest budget of around \$20mn to produce," said analyst David A Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research. "Foreign business should be solid."

Fourth place went to Hindi-language spy thriller *Dhurandhar: The Revenge* with \$4.75mn.

Released just three months after the original aired in North America, *Dhurandhar* continues the story of an Indian spy infiltrating crime syndicates and politics, seeking to dismantle a terror network.

Fifth place went to Universal's romance film *Reminders of Him*, with \$4.7mn. It is the latest adaptation of a novel by Colleen Hoover and stars Maika Monroe and Tyriq Withers.

Brazil presidential hopeful Flavio Bolsonaro praises second Trump term

AFP
Grapevine

Flavio Bolsonaro, son of former Brazilian president Jair, on Saturday praised US President Donald Trump's second term, promising an improved version of his father's presidency if elected in October.

"Trump 2.0 is being much better than Trump 1.0, right? Well, Bolsonaro 2.0 will also be much better," the 44-year-old senator said during a speech at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) gathering in Texas.

"I'm going to win because it's the will of my people. But for that will to be preserved, we need free and fair elections."

The controversial far-right leader's son also repeated the accusation that the administration of former president Joe Biden interfered to help leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva rise to power in the 2022 election cycle.



Brazilian senator Flavio Bolsonaro, Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro's son, speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) USA 2026 at the Gaylord Texan Resort and Convention Center, in Grapevine, Texas. (Reuters)

Brazil's Supreme Court sentenced Bolsonaro to 27 years in prison last year after he was found guilty of having led a scheme to prevent Lula from taking office and to retain power.

Bolsonaro has maintained his innocence, declaring he was a victim of political persecution.

The younger Bolsonaro is expected to be the main rival of Lula, 80, who is seeking a fourth term in office.

He has described himself as more moderate than his firebrand father and is a hardliner on security.

With seven months remaining until the vote, the two frontrunners are running neck and neck in the polls.

Bolsonaro called for the world to "monitor our people's freedom of expression" and to "apply diplomatic pressure so that our institutions function properly."

Venezuela's Maduro thanks supporters in first online post from US prison

AFP
Caracas

Ousted Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro and his wife, captured by US forces in a nighttime raid in January, said Saturday that they feel "steadfast" and "serene" in their first social media post from prison.

Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores have been held in a Brooklyn jail for almost three months, after American commandos snatched the pair from their compound in Caracas, and they have reportedly been without access to the internet or newspapers.

"We are well, steadfast, serene and in constant prayer," the pair said in a message shared on Maduro's X account, though it was unclear who made the post on their behalf.

"We have received your communications, your messages, your e-mails, your letters and your prayers. Every word of love, every gesture of affection, every

expression of support fills our souls and strengthens us spiritually."

A source close to the Venezuelan government told AFP that Maduro is referred to as "president" by some of his fellow detainees in Brooklyn's Metropolitan Detention Center, a federal prison known for unsanitary conditions.

He is only allowed to communicate by phone with his family and lawyers for a maximum of 15 minutes per call, the source added.

His son, Nicolas Maduro Guerra, known as "Nicolasio," has said in public appearances that his father is well, calm, and even exercising in prison.

Maduro, who has declared himself a "prisoner of war," had not spoken since being arraigned in New York on January 5.

"We feel a deep admiration for our people's ability to remain united in difficult times, to express love, awareness, and solidarity, within Venezuela and beyond our borders," the couple

added in Saturday's post.

During a one-hour hearing on Thursday, the judge rejected a defence motion over Maduro and his wife's apparent inability to afford their legal bill without aid from the Venezuelan government. Neither spoke during the court appearance.

Maduro has pleaded not guilty to charges of "narco-terrorism" conspiracy, cocaine importation conspiracy, possession of machine guns and destructive devices and conspiracy to possess machine guns and destructive devices.

The January operation deposed Maduro, who had led Venezuela since 2013, forcing the oil-rich country to largely bend to US President Donald Trump's will.

Delcy Rodriguez, who had been Maduro's vice-president since 2018, is now at the helm and grappling with leading a country saddled with the world's largest proven oil reserves but an economy in shambles.

Chile to reverse expropriation of Pinochet-era torture centre

AFP
Santiago

Chile's new right-wing government will reverse plans to expropriate a German-themed settlement that served as a torture centre when Augusto Pinochet was in power, a government minister said in remarks published yesterday.

Colonia Dignidad, as it was called, featured a swimming pool, manicured lawns and lush forest backdrop, making it look like a nice holiday getaway spot.

But in Chile, the area's name is synonymous with horror, as the former home of a brutal cult that was used for torturing and killing dissidents during Pinochet's dictatorship.

Last year, then leftist president Gabriel Boric ordered that 116 hectares (287 acres) of the 4,800-hectare site — an area including the residents' homes, a hotel, a restaurant and several food processing factories — be expropriated to make way for a centre of remembrance.

This will no longer happen for financial reasons, said Housing Minister Ivan Poduje, who is part of the government of Chile's new far-right president Jose Antonio Kast.

"We are going to reverse the issue of the expropriation of Colonia Dignidad and we will issue



This aerial view shows Villa Baviera Village, formerly known as Colonia Dignidad (Dignity Colony), now called Villa Baviera, near Parral, Maule Province, Chile. (AFP/File Photo)

a new decree that revokes the one that gave rise to the plan," Poduje said, according to the newspaper *La Tercera*.

"This project has nothing to do with our agenda," the minister said.

He said the Kast administration inherited a terrible financial situation from the last government and is axing four big projects including the Colonia

Dignidad one. Around 3,200 people were killed and more than 38,000 people tortured during Chile's brutal dictatorship.

An estimated 26 dissidents disappeared in Colonia Dignidad, where a potato shed — now a national monument — was used to torture dozens of kidnapped regime opponents.

It was founded in 1961 by a former Nazi soldier, Paul

Schaefer, who led the Pinochet dictatorship use it as a prison and torture centre.

Schaefer was eventually jailed for the sexual abuse and torture of children at the settlement. He died in 2010.

Kast has praised the Pinochet regime, but the housing minister insisted the plans to end the expropriation had nothing to do with politics.

Russian tanker nears Cuba, defying US oil blockade

AFP
Havana

A Russian oil tanker under US sanctions is scheduled to arrive in Cuba today, challenging a de facto American fuel blockade of the energy-starved island, shipping data shows.

The Anatoly Kolodkin, which is carrying 730,000 barrels of crude, was north of Haiti yesterday as it headed towards the port of Matanzas in western Cuba, according to maritime analytics firm Kpler.

Cuba lost its main regional ally and oil supplier in January when US forces captured Venezuela's socialist leader Nicolas Maduro.

US President Donald Trump subsequently threatened to impose tariffs on any country sending oil to Cuba and has mused about "taking" the communist-ruled island.

Jorge Pinon, an expert on Cuba's energy sector at the University of Texas at Austin, said he was surprised the US did not try to intercept the Russian tanker before it got so close to Cuba.

"I think now the chances that the US will try to stop her have basically disappeared," Pinon told AFP, though he added that it was difficult to assess what the White House might do.

Once the boat enters Cuban waters, he said, it "is almost impossible for the US government to stop it."

The Cuban government says it has not received any oil since Jan-

uary, deepening an energy crisis in the country of 9.6mn people.

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

Fuel prices have soared, public transport has dwindled and some airlines have suspended flights to Cuba, hitting the country's fragile economy.

Cubans have endured regular outages as its ageing power plants struggle to meet demand, with seven nationwide blackouts since 2024, including two this month.

The Anatoly Kolodkin, which is under US sanctions, was loaded with oil in the Russian port of Primorsk on March 8.

It was escorted by a Russian navy ship across the English Channel, but the two vessels split when the tanker entered the Atlantic, according to the British Royal Navy.

Another ship that was reportedly carrying Russian diesel to Cuba, the Hong Kong-flagged Sea Horse, arrived in Venezuela instead earlier this week.

Once the Anatoly Kolodkin's crude arrives in Cuba, it would take about 15-20 days to process the oil and another 5-10 days to deliver its refined products, Pinon said.

"The urgent need today in Cuba is diesel," the former oil executive said.

The Russian shipment could be converted into 250,000 barrels of diesel, enough to cover the country's demand for around 12.5 days, according to Pinon.

Sailboats carrying aid reach Cuba after going missing

AFP
Havana

Two sailboats carrying humanitarian aid to crisis-hit Cuba reached Havana on Saturday after disappearing during a longer-than-expected journey from Mexico that triggered a search-and-rescue operation.

The crew of nine — who included American, French and German citizens and a four-year-old boy — appeared in good health and spirits, smiling and giving thumbs-up as they moored in the capital under clear skies.

The vessels delivered the final shipments of Our America Convoy, an international humanitarian effort that has brought aid to support Cuba as a US oil blockade deepens the island's energy and economic crisis.

"We are very sorry to make people worried about us. We were never in any real danger," Adnaan Stumo, a 33-year-old American and co-ordinator of the sailing convoy, told reporters.

"It was not a very difficult journey. It's just a circuitous journey," Stumo said. The boy, he said, "is a strong, young sailor."

"We're so happy to bring a crew from so many different countries that are demonstrating solidarity and support for the Cuban people in the face of this criminal blockade," Stumo said.

The ships were greeted by scores

of Cubans, including government officials, chanting "long live the revolution!" and "down with imperialism!"

"They scared us a little because we kept wondering, 'when will they get here?'" Gerardo Hernandez, a former Cuban spy who served time in US prison, told the crowd.

The Friend Ship and Tiger Moth, which set sail from southeast Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula on March 20, had been expected to arrive in Cuba on Tuesday or Wednesday.

But the Mexican Navy announced a search-and-rescue mission Thursday after losing communication with them, raising concerns about their fate.

After a tense wait, organisers of the convoy reported early Saturday that the Mexican Navy had finally located the boats and that the crews were safe. The Navy said one of its aircraft had spotted the sailboats 80 nautical miles northwest of Havana. It then deployed a ship to support them.

Stumo said the crews agreed to take a longer route north after facing strong winds from the east.

Contact was lost with the Mexican Navy because the boat's small satellite link "was on the fritz." They re-established contact with the Mexican Navy plane.

"We were not worried at all," Stumo said, noting that arriving on schedule is never a sure thing on sailboats. "We are very thankful that the Mexican Navy came out

and looked for us last night."

The sailboats brought medicine, food, hygiene products and other supplies.

'CUBA IS NEXT'

The first shipments from the convoy arrived by plane from Europe and the United States last week.

A fishing boat that was converted into an aid vessel, which had also left Mexico last week, arrived in Cuba on Tuesday. It had been escorted by a Mexican Navy ship part of the way.

In total, the convoy brought more than 50 tonnes of medical supplies, food, water and solar panels to Cuba, with hospitals among the recipients.

Cuban exiles in Miami and other critics have slammed the convoy as benefiting the communist government more than ordinary people.

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

Trump has also threatened tariffs on countries that ship oil to Cuba, whose ageing electricity system has been hit by regular blackouts, including two nationwide outages last week.

He renewed his threats on Havana on Friday, even as the US-Israeli war against Iran entered its second month, saying "Cuba is next."

Forty new migratory species win international protection: UN body

AFP
Rio de Janeiro

The UN Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) yesterday approved the listing of 40 new species for international protection, including the snowy owl featured in the Harry Potter saga.

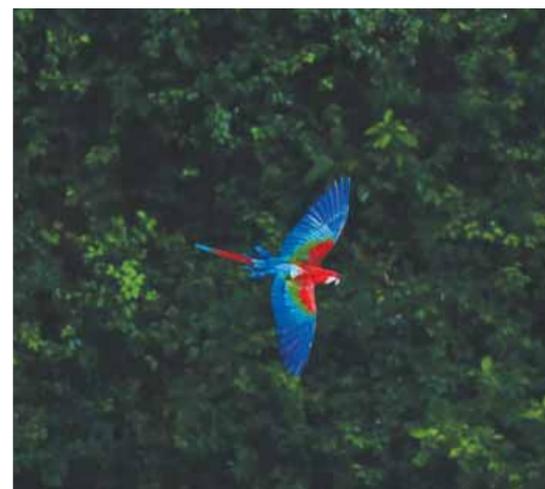
The decision came at the conclusion of the COP15 summit on migratory species in Campo Verde, Brazil, which brought together representatives from 132 countries and the European Union.

It is one of the world's most important global meetings for wildlife conservation.

Also on the new list for protection along with the snowy owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) are the Hudsonian godwit (*Limosa haemastica*) — a long-beaked shorebird threatened with extinction — and the great hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna mokarran*).

The new list featured land mammals like the striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*) and other aquatic wildlife such as the giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*).

The countries that are party to the CMS are legally obliged to protect species listed as at risk of extinction, conserve and restore their habitats, prevent obstacles to migration and co-operate with other range states.



A red-and-green macaw (*Ara chloropterus*) is seen flying along the rocky walls of the Buraco das Araras sinkhole in Jardim, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil. (AFP/File Photo)

Campo Verde is in Brazil's biodiversity-rich Pantanal wetlands, in the southern Amazon.

According to a report released ahead of the summit, nearly half (49%) of all species catalogued by the CMS are showing signs of declining numbers, and nearly one in four are threatened with extinction on a worldwide scale.

Another major UN assessment, published on Tuesday as the summit opened, warned that migratory freshwater fish popu-

lations crucial to river health and sustaining the livelihoods of millions of people are in freefall and risk collapse.

Habitat destruction, overfishing and water pollution from the Amazon to the Danube threaten the very survival of hundreds of species whose epic voyages along the world's great rivers go largely unnoticed.

Last November, Brazil hosted the COP30 climate summit in the Amazonian city of Belem.



Indonesia looks to save \$2.3bn from free meal distribution cut

AFP
Jakarta

Indonesia is looking to save up to 40tn rupiah (\$2.3bn) by cutting back on its free meal programme, an official told AFP yesterday, in a first austerity measure taken in response to price pressures from the Mideast war.

The meals, primarily intended for schoolchildren across the country, will be distributed for five days a week instead of six starting March 31 in a move that is expected to save "around 40tn rupiah", National Nutrition Agency deputy head Nanik Sudaryati Deyang said.

She said the measure was taken as part of the government's moves to cushion Southeast Asia's largest economy from the fallout of the war in the Middle East, which has sent global oil prices soaring.

In a statement yesterday, the agency, which oversees the programme, announced the policy to adjust the distribution of meals in-line with students' five-day school week. But recipients in remote areas or areas with high rates of stunting will see meals delivered for six days a week, agency head Dadan Hindayana said.

"The provision of the free nutritious meals on Saturdays for regions with a high risk of stunting is a strategic step to ensure that children receive adequate nutrition every day," Dadan said.

The nutrition agency will work with local authorities to ensure that the programme reaches its intended target, Dadan said.

Prasetyo Hadi, a spokesperson for President Prabowo Subianto, previously said the country was seeking to set aside

80tn rupiah as the government looks to shield its economy from the Middle East fallout, without disclosing further details.

Prabowo previously insisted that the meal programme, originally budgeted for 335tn rupiah this year, would be untouched, claiming that there were many other cost saving measures Jakarta could implement as the government weighed options to respond to price pressures.

The government is considering whether to allow workers to work remotely for one day a week in a move to curb fuel consumption.

The free meal programme has drawn criticism following a spate of food poisoning cases since its launch last year, with critics calling for its suspension over hygiene concerns.

The initiative has served 61mn people, according to the agency.

Cherry blossoms in full bloom in Tokyo



People admire the cherry blossoms in full bloom along a river in Tokyo yesterday. (AFP)

North Korea's Kim oversees test of high-thrust engine

AFP
Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un oversaw the ground test of an upgraded rocket engine, state media reported yesterday, marking another key step in its weapons programme.

Defence experts believe North Korea is planning to use its solid-fuel rocket engines for launching intercontinental ballistic missiles. The engines enable faster missile launches as they require little preparation before ignition.

The latest test was "part of the national defence development plan in the period of the new five-year plan", Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said, without elaborating on the date or location of the test.

It was the first officially confirmed high-thrust solid-fuel engine test since September last year, when state media said an engine generated a maximum thrust of 1,971 kilonewtons.

KCNA reported the recent test had achieved a higher thrust of 2,500 kilonewtons.

The development demonstrates



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un inspecting a combustion test of a solid-fuel rocket engine at an undisclosed location in North Korea. (AFP)

North Korea's "resolve to acquire missiles capable of hitting targets around the globe", Hong Min, an analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification, told AFP.

"Given the increased maximum thrust, this indicates its intention to possess ICBMs with global strike range, as well as the ability to overwhelm missile defence systems," he added.

Photos released by KCNA showed leader Kim Jong-un in-

specting what appeared to be part of the engine, flanked by officials.

Another image showed flames erupting from a ground-mounted engine, illuminating the surrounding test site in orange light.

Kim said that North Korea's defence capabilities had entered "a significant phase of change" in building up its strategic forces.

The North has already demonstrated it has mastered the engine technology needed to launch a

missile capable of reaching the US mainland with a lower-thrust engine, said Lee Ho-ryung of the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses.

"They have already passed that mark," she said. The question is no longer whether a missile could reach the US, but whether it could carry multiple warheads, she said.

A multi-warhead missile can strike multiple targets with a single launch while overwhelming defence systems through simultaneous, dispersed reentry vehicles.

"A multi-warhead missile needs higher thrust power because of its heavier weight," she said.

"In order for the North to show it can launch a multi-warhead ICBM, it needs a test launch to prove its mastery of such technology."

Pyongyang last test-fired an ICBM in October 2024.

Kim also visited a special forces training base, according to a separate KCNA report, inspecting drills in which photos showed soldiers wielding weapons, including an axe and a sledgehammer.

The demonstration "showed the physical and technical ability they have prepared to be a match for a hundred combatants with iron fists", KCNA said.

Over 300 Vietnamese arrested after Cambodia scam bust: police

AFP
Hanoi

More than 300 Vietnamese accused of Internet fraud have been arrested in Vietnam after being repatriated from Cambodia this month where authorities dismantled a transnational cyberscam ring, police said Sunday.

Across Southeast Asia, organised criminal gangs have used casinos, hotels and fortified compounds as bases to carry out sophisticated online scams, defrauding people around the world, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

Cambodia hosts dozens of scam centres with tens of thousands of people perpetrating online scams — some willingly and others trafficked — in a multibillion-dollar illicit industry, rights monitors say. The arrests of 343 people on Internet fraud charges were made on Friday, said police in Vietnam's Dong Nai province, which borders Cambodia.

They were among nearly 400 Vietnamese handed over by Cambodian authorities on March 17 who "were part of a transnational online fraud ring recently dismantled in Cambodia", Dong Nai police said in a statement.

Cambodia's immigration department said this month that

776 Vietnamese nationals "involved in online fraud cases" in the country were deported to Vietnam on March 17.

Vietnamese police said the accused had worked at a casino in the Cambodian city of Poipet, on the border with Thailand, and used social media and messaging apps including WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook to "defraud internet users, especially the elderly, frequent social media users, online traders and those with limited technological knowledge" in Vietnam.

Police did not say how much money the criminal group had obtained from victims.

In January, Vietnamese police took 35 people into custody for allegedly scamming victims out of \$350mn, "using advanced technology for fraud and online gambling". The month before 22 Vietnamese suspects in Cambodia were arrested on fraud charges in a joint operation between the two countries.

Police in Vietnam said last year that since 2020, Vietnamese victims have lost \$1.5bn in more than 24,000 cases of internet fraud.

From hubs across Southeast Asia, scammers lure internet users into fake romantic relationships and cryptocurrency investments, stealing tens of billions of dollars annually from victims around the world.

China protests US public alert over security rules change in Hong Kong

China's top diplomat in Hong Kong has met the senior US diplomat in the city to protest against a US public alert over new security rules in Hong Kong, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said.

In a statement released late on Saturday, the Chinese foreign ministry's Hong Kong office said Commissioner Cui Jianchun met US Consul General Julie Eadeh on March 27 and expressed

"strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition", urging Washington to stop interfering in Hong Kong's affairs and China's internal affairs "in any form".

Hong Kong this month amended its enforcement rules for the national security regime, making it an offence in national security cases to refuse to provide passwords or other decryption assistance to access an electronic device.

In response to the rule changes, the US Consulate General in Hong Kong issued a security alert on March 26, calling for contact with the Consulate in case US citizens are arrested or detained in connection with the new security enforcement rules. "We do not discuss the details of diplomatic engagements," a US Consulate spokesperson said in response to a request for comment. (Reuters)

China conducts patrols around South China Sea shoal

China conducted naval, air and coast guard patrols around the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea on Sunday, its military and Coast Guard said.

The shoal is in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone but China also claims it as part of its territory.

The patrols came after Beijing and Manila restarted high-level talks last week over the disputed

waters and discussed oil and gas cooperation in the area.

The talks were also the first broader discussion on bilateral relations since March 2023, aimed at confidence building among others, the Philippine foreign ministry said on Saturday.

Recent maritime confrontations have heightened tensions, with Manila accusing Beijing of "dangerous manoeuvres" and de-

ploying water cannon to interfere with its resupply missions in contested areas.

"Such patrols serve as an effective countermeasure to cope with all sorts of rights-violation and provocative acts," the Chinese military's Southern Theater Command said in a statement yesterday. The Philippine embassy in Beijing did not immediately respond to a request for comment. (Reuters)

Vietnam arrests 74 over 'falsified' environmental monitoring

AFP
Hanoi

Authorities in Vietnam have arrested more than 70 people, including government officials, accused of falsifying data from air and wastewater monitors at power plants and other major emitters, state media said yesterday.

The state-run *People's Police* newspaper said police had identified "nearly 160 environmental monitoring stations that had been tampered with, altered and had their data falsified" — accounting for more than half of the total number of stations nationwide.

Police arrested 74 people, including officials at state environmental agencies and others at dozens of businesses that discharge

"Even though the monitoring equipment is sealed and has its own surveillance camera system, it was still being remotely adjusted via software"

wastewater and install monitoring equipment, on charges related to environmental monitoring violations, the newspaper said.

"Even though the monitoring equipment is sealed and has its own surveillance camera system, it was still being remotely adjusted via software," the state-run outlet said.

"The perpetrators interfered to reduce the output indicators thereby ensuring that the data

sent to the management agency always remained within permissible levels."

Authorities said data sent to local environment departments from large-scale emitters of air pollution and wastewater, including the Quang Ninh Thermal Power Plant, Hai Phong Thermal Power Plant and Thai Binh 2 Thermal Power Plant, as well as aluminium and steel companies, were "being manipulated and altered in a sophisticated manner".

AFP could not immediately reach representatives of the three state-owned, coal-fired power plants or the environment ministry for comment on Sunday evening.

The *People's Police* newspaper said the arrests followed a months-long investigation but did not say when or where the arrests occurred.

Let's get physical: Singapore's seniors turn to parkour

AFP
Singapore

In a corner of suburban Singapore, Betty Boon vaults a guardrail, crawls underneath a slide, executes forward shoulder rolls and scales a steep slope, finishing the course to applause.

"Good job!" the 69-year-old's coach cheers.

This is "geriatric parkour", where around 20 retirees learned to tackle a series of relatively demanding exercises, building their agility and enjoying a sense of camaraderie.

Boon, an upbeat grandmother, said learning parkour has aided her confidence and independence as she ages.

"When you're weak, you will be dependent on someone," she told

AFP after sweating it out with her parkour classmates in suburban Toa Payoh, under the shadow of government-built apartment blocks.

"I feel more alive, it's a whole new world."

The discipline has gained a devoted following of senior citizens in the city-state, which is among the world's fastest-ageing countries.

Singapore is projected to become a "super-aged" nation this year, meaning the proportion of residents aged 65 and above exceeds 21%.

By 2030, one in four Singaporeans will be aged 65 and above, according to the health ministry.

As the society greys, various activities and industries have mushroomed up to cater to seniors' needs, including social activities and group exercise classes.

Coach Tan Shie Boon, 33, said he

was initially met with scepticism when he started offering parkour classes for older students in 2017, especially due to the risk of injury.

But his idea was to share manoeuvres that could help seniors with their balance, stamina and coordination.

"It's meaningful, I can see the impact of my work," he said. Parkour, a discipline that originated in France, focuses on overcoming physical obstacles like walls, gaps and platforms without any aid.

Often called the "art of displacement," it involves running, jumping, climbing, rolling and vaulting to quickly dart from one point to another.

The activity has a young, athletic following, but coach Tan and his students insist it

can be suitable for every age.

"When people hear the word parkour, they think it's only for youngsters who can jump from rooftops," said retired banker and parkour enthusiast Irene Chuah, 67. "We don't do that. We jump over benches."

Tan, who specialises in coaching senior citizens in his classes across Singapore, tailors all the stunts to match the capabilities of his students, aged between their early 50s to 83. "The whole point of parkour is to improve your agility... you'll be faster in your reaction," he said.

"When seniors fall, they get severely injured because they have a lack of coordination, balance and agility. They're not fast enough to react in time," he added. Chuah experienced firsthand how the



Coach Tan Shie Boon (right) guiding Singaporean elders during a parkour training session in Singapore. (AFP)

moves she learned in parkour class can apply outside of practice.

When a trolley she was pushing at a supermarket hit an obstacle, it overturned and pulled her over. But thanks to her training, she managed to jump over the mess, remain on her feet and escape unharmed.

"Nobody helped me because the people thought I was young," Chuah told AFP with a laugh.

Retired kindergarten teacher Ling Ying Ying, 66, said doing parkour helped her to be able to mop the floor on her knees "like we used to do when we were young."

UK police question suspect after Derby car incident

AFP
London

British police were yesterday questioning a 36-year-old man arrested for attempted murder after a car ploughed into people on a street in a central English city, injuring seven of them.

Police in Derby, about 40 miles (64 kilometres) north of Birmingham, said counter-terrorism officers were supporting the probe but they had not yet determined a motive for the incident there late Saturday.

In an update yesterday, Chief Superintendent Emma Aldred told reporters investigators believe the "horrific incident" was "isolated" and that there was "no wider risk to the public".

"Officers were on scene just seconds after a car collided with pedestrians who were simply enjoying a night out in Derby," she said.

"While none of those injured in the incident have suffered life-threatening physical injuries, the impact on them, I am sure, is just beginning to be felt."

Aldred noted the involvement of counter-terror officers was "common practice for an incident of this



Police forensic officers work amongst a variety of personal items seen covering the road, inside a cordon set up on Friar Gate in central Derby, central England yesterday. (AFP)

nature" as police probe the circumstances and a possible motive.

"I would like to clarify that this does not mean the incident is currently being treated as terrorism," she added.

The 36-year-old in custody is originally from India but is a Derby resident who has lived in the UK "for a number of years," according to Aldred.

UK police forces have started to release such details in some high-profile cases, after a 2024 Southport mass stabbing targeting chil-

dren was initially falsely blamed on a purported immigrant.

Misinformation online was viewed as helping to fuel anti-immigration riots that subsequently swept the country.

The suspect in the Derby incident was arrested on suspicion of attempted murder, causing serious injury through dangerous driving, inflicting grievous bodily harm with intent, and dangerous driving.

Police have opted not to provide any further details about him.

The interior ministry declined to comment on his immigration and citizenship status.

"The police are leading the investigation and ministers are being kept updated as it progresses," a spokeswoman for the ministry said.

Officers detained the suspect on the other side of central Derby seven minutes after the incident unfolded, thanks to eyewitnesses reporting the vehicle's movements in its aftermath, police said.

The black Suzuki Swift car had struck the pedestrians at about 9:30pm (2130 GMT) in the area around Friar Gate which is a popular nightlife spot.

The seven injured, some seriously according to police, were treated at the scene and then taken to Royal Derby Hospital and Queen's Medical Centre in the nearby city of Nottingham.

"The seven suffered a range of serious but not life-threatening injuries and we can confirm that, contrary to online speculation, no-one died in the incident," an earlier Derbyshire Police statement noted.

Interior minister Shabana Mahmood was being kept updated on the incident, Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson told the BBC.

High hopes at China's gateway to North Korea as trains resume

AFP
Dandong, China

Now retired, Wang Meili wants to see the world — including North Korea, the reclusive nation that lies across the river from her lifelong home in northeastern China.

North Korea has long kept tight control over foreign visitors, and effectively sealed its borders at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic six years ago.

It has since partly reopened and restored daily passenger train services with China this month, but has not yet resumed issuing tourism visas to Chinese citizens, who once made up the bulk of its overseas visitors.

"We'd like to get visas to go. I've already got my passport," said 68-year-old Wang, who grew up in the border city of Dandong.

In another apparent sign of North Korea's reopening, Air China is set to resume flights to Pyongyang today.

But for now, only those with work or study visas can go.

AFP journalists in Dandong, the main gateway for cross-border travel and trade, saw a mostly empty passenger train rattle over a bridge into North Korea this week.

Nearby, tourists on another bridge, partly destroyed by US bombs during the Korean War, posed for photographs and peered through binoculars at the North Korean city of Sinuiju on the opposite shore.

Tour boats took curious sightseers to gaze at North Koreans cycling along the Yalu river separating the two countries or cleaning boats on the bank. Uniformed guards stood at regular points along the boundary.

Li Shuo, the manager of a Dandong-based travel agency, said the resumption of passenger train services had had "no impact" on his business.

Unable to run tours into North Korea, he has been offering trips through border areas so customers can catch glimpses into the secretive state from a distance.

"We can only wait for news" on tourism visas, Li said, adding that they "would be a good thing for domestic tourists".

"Many people want to go," he said.

Others were less keen. One Chinese tourist from the northeastern city of Shenyang told AFP that a peek at North Korea from Dandong was close enough for him.

"It's totalitarian over there, the people are brainwashed," he said, declining to provide his name given the sensitivity of the

topic and his public-sector job. "Actually, there's brainwashing here in China too, but it's not as severe," he said.

AFP also spoke to tourists from outside mainland China — including Hong Kong, Japan and Australia — all drawn to Dandong for a rare view of the country it borders.

Louis Lamb, a 22-year-old nurse from Brisbane, told AFP that travelling into North Korea was "a bucket-list item".

"You can see (North Korea) from a certain perspective in what we see from our media," said Lamb, adding that he would like to experience the country for himself.

Although stretches of the opposite riverbank appeared "desolate", he said, "it's a lot more developed than I thought".

China is a major backer for diplomatically isolated North Korea, though Pyongyang has notably drawn closer to Russia since the start of the Ukraine war.

But trade with China, much of it through Dandong, is a key lifeline for North Korea's moribund economy, under UN sanctions because of its nuclear weapons programme.

Cross-border shipments swelled to \$2.7bn last year and have nearly rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, according to Chinese customs data.

AFP journalists saw a steady stream of trains and freight trucks hauling cargo from Dandong to Sinuiju.

For some in Dandong, North Korea's tentative reopening kindled hope of returning home.

Thousands of North Koreans are thought to reside in the city of two million people, despite sanctions banning them from working overseas.

North Korea's abrupt border closure in 2020 stranded many of them abroad for years, and Pyongyang later beefed up defences along the frontier to dissuade illegal crossings.

Staff at a North Korean restaurant in Dandong forbade AFP journalists from filming or taking photos of a large screen showing a patriotic music and dance performance.

One waitress from Pyongyang told AFP she had been in China for over six years without returning home.

Western experts say such workers endure miserable living and working conditions, have their movements restricted and see most of their wages commandeered by the North Korean state.

But after a long wait, travel between the two nations now seemed to be getting easier, the waitress said, declining to give her name.

"I'll be going home soon."

Nepal court extends ex-PM Oli detention for five days

AFP
Kathmandu

Nepal court yesterday extended by five days the detention of former prime minister KP Sharma Oli and his home minister after their arrest over alleged involvement in a deadly crackdown on the 2025 protests that ousted him.

Oli, 74, and ex-home minister Ramesh Lekhak were arrested in pre-dawn raids on Saturday, a day after Prime Minister Balendra Shah was sworn in following the first elections since the September uprising.

They were arrested over their alleged involvement in the protest crackdown that killed at least 76 people, though neither man has been charged, and both deny responsibility for the violence.

"The court has decided to permit five days extension," Kathmandu District Court information officer Deepak Kumar Shrestha told AFP.

Shrestha noted that the court has also said the former prime minister should get the medical care he requires.

Oli appeared in court via video-link from a hospital yesterday, where he was admitted on Saturday following a procedural check-up.

Police said Oli has heart and kidney issues. AFP reporters saw him



Supporters of Nepal's former prime minister and Chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) KP Sharma Oli march escorted by police during a protest following Oli's detention by police, in Kathmandu, yesterday. (Reuters)

being taken to a hospital on Saturday after his arrest, surrounded by a heavy police guard.

The Supreme Court is due today to consider a petition for Oli and Lekhak's release, court spokesman Arjun Prasad Koirala said.

The arrests of Oli and Lekhak came after an inquiry commission recommended that the four-time ex-prime minister and other officials be prosecuted for failing to stop security forces from firing on demonstrators.

The report says that statements given to the commission by Oli and Lekhak suggesting they did not know about the violence were part of a bid to shift responsibility and amounted to "criminal negligence".

It recommends that they be investigated under a law that deals with death caused by recklessness.

Ex-energy minister Deepak Khadka was also detained yesterday "in a case relating to money laundering", Central Investigation Bureau spokesman Shiva Kumar Shrestha said.

The unrest in early September began over a brief social media ban, but tapped into longstanding fury over economic hardship.

It spread nationwide the following day as parliament and government offices were set ablaze, resulting in the collapse of Oli's government.

Oli's CPN-UML Marxist party has called the arrests "a revengeful

act" and has called for protests.

Police barricaded roads yesterday and used batons to drive back more than 100 of Oli's supporters near the court in the capital Kathmandu, an AFP photographer saw.

Supporters said they had submitted a letter demanding his release.

"The prime minister has made a hasty decision that could push the country towards confrontation," said Tejila Thapa, 44, a supporter of Oli.

"This is a wrong decision, and it must be corrected."

Home Minister Sudan Gurung has said Oli's and Lekhak's arrests were "not revenge against anyone, just the beginning of justice".

Shah, a 35-year-old rapper-turned-politician, and his Rastriya Swatantra Party swept to power on a platform of youth-driven political change.

He challenged and defeated Oli in his own constituency.

Shah's government has unveiled an ambitious 100-point reform agenda including investigations into the assets of politicians and high-ranking officials.

Before the uprising, Nepal ranked 107th out of 180 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.

The World Bank says a "staggering" 82% of Nepal's workforce is in informal employment, with GDP per capita at just \$1,447 in 2024.

Two India-bound LPG tankers clear Strait of Hormuz, government says

Two India-bound liquefied petroleum gas tankers carrying about 94,000 metric tonnes of the cooking gas have safely transited the Strait of Hormuz and are heading towards India, the government said yesterday. The carriers BW Tyr and BW Elm are expected to arrive in Mumbai on March 31 and New Mangalore on April 1 respectively, the petroleum ministry said in a statement. The US-Israeli war against Iran has all but halted shipping through the strait, but Iran has said "non-hostile vessels" may transit the waterway

if they co-ordinate with Iranian authorities. The ships are the latest Indian-flagged vessels to make it through the chokepoint. Four LPG tankers have already completed the crossing, while three more are still in the western section of the strait, LSEG ship tracking data showed on Friday. A total of 18 Indian-flagged vessels with 485 Indian seafarers remain in the western Gulf region, the government said. Port operations across India remain normal with no congestion reported, the government said. (Reuters)

Indian tile makers feel heat of ME war energy crunch

AFP
Morbi

Blazing-hot kilns in India's \$6.5bn ceramics manufacturing hub employing hundreds of thousands of people have gone cold, shut down in an energy crunch caused by the Middle East war.

At a cavernous facility in Morbi, in India's western Gujarat state, a 200-metre-long propane-powered kiln that normally fires clay nonstop is silent. It is one of hundreds of plants supplying homeware tiles across the world that have been forced to suspend operations.

Thick layers of dust smother giant grinding and pressing machines, while only a tiny crew of workers transfer the last batch made three weeks ago off snaking assembly lines and into trucks.

"We are suffering a lot," said Kishor Dulera, a tile unit proprietor who closed this factory and two others in early March, sending hundreds of workers home.

India, the world's fourth-largest economy, depends on imports for 60% of its liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) demand.

The overwhelming majority comes through the Strait of Hormuz waterway, which has been effectively blocked by Iran after US-Israeli strikes on the Islamic republic late last month sparked a broader regional conflict, disrupting global energy supplies.

New Delhi has prioritised supply for households, shielding Indians who use it to cook food. That has squeezed the amount available for industrial use.

Factories in sectors including stainless steel and plastic have cut back on production as a result.



Workers load tiles onto a truck for delivery at a ceramics factory facing propane gas supply constraints amid global energy crisis owing to the Middle East war, in Morbi. (AFP)

"If the main raw material is disturbed, the whole industry is disturbed," Dulera told AFP.

The ceramics hub at Morbi makes up 90% of India's total production and is one of the world's largest ceramic manufacturing centres, exporting tiles to countries like the US and Thailand.

The industry at Morbi provides direct and indirect employment to nearly a million people, according to government statistics.

More than 400 plants have closed after the gas supply chain was "broken," said Manoj Arvadiya, head of the local manufacturing industry association.

Keeping the kilns hot means plants operate around-the-clock — and emergency shutdowns can damage machinery.

"It is a continuous process," said Arvadiya. "You can't run it for two days and then switch it off for one day. It doesn't work like that."

Hitesh Detroja said his now-shut Lexus Granito plant had produced 30,000 tiles per day, calling the closure a "disaster". He said he has no income to pay his fixed costs and interest on loans of \$74,000 each month. "This crisis is horrible," Detroja said.

The ripple effects of the energy crisis have been felt throughout the Morbi ecosystem.

"Everyone is worried," said 29-year-old labourer Bunty Goswami, a migrant worker at a shut plant. "We are confused about what to do — whether we should go home, or not?"

Merdeka 118 view from KL Tower



Onlookers watch Merdeka 118, the world's second-tallest building, from the KL Tower at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. (Reuters)



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War in Lebanon is stealing the future of a generation

When the sirens blare in Beirut, 17-year-old Ahmad Melhem pauses his tablet and looks up.

Around him, a classroom that was once a place of chalk and exams has become a crowded shelter, divided by plastic curtains, mattresses scattered across the floor, and a small stove doubling as a communal kitchen. In this fragile space, education is no longer a given; it is a quiet act of resistance.

Melhem, displaced from Beirut's southern suburbs, is one of nearly half a million Lebanese students forced out of school by the war. Since large-scale Israeli strikes and a ground offensive in the south began in early March, over 350 public schools have been converted into shelters, while others in targeted areas have simply shut their doors. The United Nations children's agency, Unicef, warns that the war is not only killing and displacing families but also dismantling an entire generation's future.

Inside the shelter-classroom, Melhem sets up his books and a screen, chasing a flickering digital thread to stay in school. His private high school has tried to continue with distance learning, cutting subjects and shortening lessons, but the reality is uneven. There is no Internet in the room; an NGO provides access only in the yard, where children play and adults gather. The noise distracts him, so he watches recorded lessons later, often exhausted. "I don't want to regret not finishing my studies despite the difficult circumstances," said Melhem. "In-person class is better and more engaging," he said. "I miss group work and the science projects we used to do."

Students chase lessons in crowded shelters as girls risk dropping out

university exams face the same pressure. Unicef's head of education in the country, Atif Rafique, warns of rising dropout risks, especially among girls and adolescent women, who may be pushed into early marriage.

Beyond the shelters, the scale of the "digital divide" is stark. In the northern suburb of Dekwaneh, another teenager, Aya Zahran, shares a single phone with her siblings in a vocational institute turned shelter. The link her school sent for online classes often fails; the institute has neither stable Internet nor enough devices. Zahran, like Melhem, is displaced from the southern suburbs. Instead of studying, her days are filled with preparing food and helping to keep the shelter liveable. Rafique said hundreds of public schools lack the resources for distance learning, and noted a "big digital divide" when it comes to Internet access, with teachers also affected.

Unicef has responded with an online platform of recorded lessons and a phone-based hotline that lets students request materials without Internet, but these are stopgap measures in a country where the economy is already in crisis. He said children in south Lebanon have been disproportionately affected by education interruptions since the last round of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah broke out in October 2023. The conflict that pulled Lebanon into the wider Middle East war has reignited long-standing pain.

Just a week before the current round of hostilities, Unicef had reopened 30 previously damaged schools in the south, steps towards recovery now erased.

At the vocational institute's entrance, an education ministry employee was registering children to assess what educational services they need.

"The situation here is very difficult... there's no Internet here, and not even pens," said Nasima Ismail, who has been displaced from the northeast Bekaa region, as she signed up her children. "My children are top students. I don't want them to miss out on their education, as happened to us when we were kids," said Ismail, recalling Lebanon's devastating 1975-1990 civil war. "I want them to complete their education, even if we are left with nothing," she said.

"I wish them days better than ours." — AFP

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Qatar joins the global community's united fight against cybercrime

- Existing Qatari laws align closely with new UN cybercrime standards
- Reinforces need to protect critical infrastructure and data

By Dr Susan L. Karamanian
Dean, College of Law,
Hamad Bin Khalifa University

On October 25, 2025, Qatar and numerous other states signed the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime, a multilateral treaty aimed at preventing, investigating and prosecuting cybercrime.

The signing ceremony, held in Hanoi, culminated years of negotiations to address the growing global problem of the ease with which perpetrators have been able to access information and communications systems to engage in illicit activities.

The Convention requires each State Party to criminalise specific cyber acts, including unauthorised access to communications technology systems, interception or interference with electronic data, misuse of devices, forgery of information and systems, and online theft or fraud. Other acts requiring criminalisation involve cyber activity exploiting children and non-consensual dissemination of intimate images.

Beyond the obligation to enact specific criminal laws, a State Party has sweeping procedural duties, ranging from obligations to gather and preserve certain electronic data, which invariably implicates service providers. Measures are to be established to protect witnesses and victims. Recognising the global nature of cybercrime, the treaty requires State Parties to co-operate in investigations and prosecution



Qatar and numerous other states have signed the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime, a multilateral treaty aimed at preventing, investigating and prosecuting cybercrime.

of offences. Further, the treaty establishes guidance on mutual legal assistance, especially extradition.

What does this Convention mean for Qatar?

Notably, the country's adoption of the 2014 Cybercrime Prevention Law foreshadowed numerous Convention requirements. The 2014 Qatar Law criminalises unauthorised access to information systems, software, networks and websites and misuse of these systems and devices to engage in various offensive acts, such as blackmail and threats to national security. The Law also has extensive measures setting forth Qatar's obligation to co-operate with other states, which is aligned with the Convention.

A highly publicised update occurred in August 2025, shortly before Qatar signed the Convention, which imposed a

maximum of a one-year prison term and a Qatari Riyal 100,000 fine for the dissemination of images of a person without their consent.

Other aspects of Qatar's legal system beyond the 2014 Qatar Law, however, are relevant to Convention obligations. For example, under the Convention, a State Party is to criminalise laundering of cybercrime proceeds.

In 2019, Qatar adopted the Anti-Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing Law (AML Law), which criminalised a person's engagement in various acts to conceal the true nature of funds when they are the proceeds of a crime. So, Qatar's AML Law aligns with the Convention's AML obligation. Nevertheless, the Convention may require Qatar to update domestic legislation to explicitly list the predicate

offences in the Convention as invoking the AML Law.

Another area of overlap between Convention obligations and existing law in Qatar concerns data protection.

Under the Convention, a State Party may be required to transfer personal data to another State Party. In doing so, however, the State is to comply with data protection safeguards, and in the case of Qatar at a minimum that would mean Qatar's Personal Data Privacy Protection Law.

The Convention includes conditions and safeguards, such as requiring that state measures align with the state's international human rights obligations and be proportional. This aspect of the Convention opens the door for a detailed review of existing relevant cybercrime laws and related ones in the context of Qatar's human rights duties.

Details aside, the Convention should be the impetus for a broader conversation in Qatar about the need to protect critical cyber infrastructure and data while preserving other competing values. Striking the right balance is a challenge and may involve various moving parts as technology advances. Given Qatar's relatively lengthy focus on cybercrime, it is well-poised to undertake the challenge.

(This piece has been submitted by HBKU's Communications Directorate on behalf of its author. The thoughts and views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect an official University stance.)

World Cup fever sends rentals soaring in US

By Maya Davis & Brandon Sapienza
Bloomberg

The biggest winners from this year's World Cup are poised to be those able to rent out their properties, especially in the tri-state area.

Bobby Roufael, who manages more than a dozen short-term rentals in New Jersey, said a luxury rental in the state could bring in \$240,000 between June 11 and July 19 when the tournament runs. He said he's tripling rates for his units in anticipation of fan inflow for the games and fielding calls from homeowners looking to capitalise on demand.

"They're like, listen, I'll figure it out. I'll go stay with my relatives for the month or for a few weeks just to be able to capitalise on this revenue," said Roufael, founder of Settled In Property Management.

Already listings show a surge in prices. One six-bedroom Airbnb Inc property in Princeton, New Jersey, is offered at roughly \$6,000 a night during the World Cup, about 140% higher than its price a year ago. That's despite being more than an hour's drive from the games being played at MetLife Stadium.

The fervour is reshaping the lodging market in World Cup cities across the US, which are expecting millions of visitors throughout the course of the tournament. Matches are also being held in Mexico and Canada.



World Cup host cities are seeing lodging prices increase ahead of matches. (Bloomberg)

"Big events like the FIFA World Cup create meaningful economic opportunities for local hosts, many of whom use the extra income to offset the rising cost of living," Airbnb said in an emailed statement. "At the same time, guests still have a wide range of listing options to choose from — as of late February, roughly 80% of available listings across host cities were priced under \$500 a night on average."

For those renting out their homes, it can be a lucrative prospect — especially as Airbnb has offered as much as \$750 in cash for first-timers to incentive new listings. For travellers, the cost of attendance adds up as prices surge for tickets, hotel rooms and flights. The tourism boom is expected to lift hotel rates in the host cities by an average of 300% around opening matches, the

New York Times has reported. Those expenses are causing Mehdi Salem, the founder of French soccer fan association Les Baroudeurs du Sport, to find ways to save money as he organises accommodations for 80 of his members to see France play at MetLife.

He's squeezing eight people in a room designed to sleep four and booked hotels in Manhattan more than a year before the games when prices were lower. Now, he is looking at spaces in New York City's outer boroughs like the Bronx and Queens, as well as Airbnbs in less-travelled New Jersey neighbourhoods.

"Some prices are totally ridiculous," Salem said.

Montclair, New Jersey, a well-off suburb, has seen a 169% increase in short-term rental occupancy during the group stage compared to the same dates last year, according to data as of March 26 from analytics platform AirDNA, which tracks rental demand, rates, and occupancy across host cities. Nearby towns of Clifton, Newark, Paterson and Jersey City, have also seen surges, the data shows.

Jamie Lane, chief economist at AirDNA, said that as the games grow closer — prices are poised to increase.

"When bookings start, people typically aren't booking the properties that are priced really high," he said. "Other properties that are more reasonably priced do get booked and then we see the delta between the available rates and the booked rates begin to merge."

Pakistan eyes US-Iran talks as it hosts Saudi, Turkiye, Egypt

From Page 1

Yesterday's talks, held under tight security and with no US, Israeli or Iranian representation, addressed efforts to stop the conflict from spreading and to encourage "a negotiations track" between Tehran and Washington to prevent the region "slipping into a state of complete chaos", Cairo said.

All three visiting ministers — Badr Abdelatty from Egypt, Hakan Fidan from Turkiye, and Saudi Arabia's Faisal bin Farhan — also met Sharif as well as Munir.

Tehran has refused to admit to holding official talks with Washington but has passed a response to Trump's 15-point plan to end the war via Islamabad, Iran's Tasnim news agency has reported.

Germany's Foreign Minister Johann Wadepuhl said on Friday he expected a direct US-Iran meeting in Pakistan "very soon".

But Shuja Nawaz, founder director of the South Asia Center at the Atlantic Council, said Pakistan had taken on a "challenging task" in trying to get Washington and Tehran to the table.

"It could only do this with

Saudi blessing," Nawaz, author of *The Battle for Pakistan: The Bitter US Friendship and a Tough Neighbourhood*, told AFP.

"The real challenge for Pakistan is to bring together a single person in the White House who changes his mind frequently and an Iranian government that is debating whether to fight a long war or find an end to its economy being further devastated.

"Israeli autonomous decision-making will further complicate any Trump decision to claim victory and end a conflict that is hurting his popularity at home. Pakistan has limited leverage over both the US and Iran; none with Israel.

"Will it remain an event planner only?"

Pakistan's efforts make economic sense: it relies on oil and gas imports through the Strait of Hormuz. Continued disruption to shipping could worsen fuel supplies, driving up prices and forcing further austerity measures.

Dar said late on Saturday that Iran had allowed 20 more Pakistani-flagged vessels — or two ships daily — to pass through the Strait.



Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar (2nd left) in a meeting with his counterparts, Saudi Arabia's Faisal bin Farhan (left), Turkiye's Hakan Fidan (2nd right) and Egypt's Badr Abdelatty at the Foreign Ministry office in Islamabad. (AFP)

Russia reports fire in new Ukrainian strike on major Baltic port

AFP
Moscow

A drone strike claimed by Ukraine triggered a fire at Russia's Baltic port of Ust-Luga as the regional governor yesterday reported new damage at the major exporting hub hit for a second time in days.

Ukraine has intensified retaliatory attacks on Russian infrastructure — including refineries, oil depots and ports — saying they are justified as part of the effort to cut revenues funding Russia's offensive.

"There is damage to the port of Ust-Luga. There were no casualties," Russian regional governor Alexander Drozdenko said on social media.

He said that rescuers were working to extinguish a fire at the port, a key hub for Russian fertilisers, oil and coal exports.

Thirty six drones were destroyed overnight in the region, Drozdenko added.

Ukraine's SBU security service later yesterday claimed the attack saying its drones "successfully struck" the Ust-Luga oil terminal.

"The SBU, together with the Defence Forces, continues systematic work to reduce the enemy's financial and logistical capabilities," acting head of the SBU, Yevgeny Khmara, said in a statement.

"Russia will pay a high price for its aggression," Khmara said, vowing that such attacks "will continue".

The northwestern port suffered damage this week when it was targeted by drones in a previous attack claimed by Ukraine's military.

"Over the past week the SBU has already successfully struck the enemy's oil infrastructure in the Baltic Sea four times,"

the security service said.

Ukraine on Monday claimed an attack on another major Russian Baltic port, Primorsk. The black smoke from the fire could be seen on satellite images.

A Ukrainian drone also killed a man in Russia's Belgorod region, its governor said yesterday.

The civilian was killed after two drone strikes hit the border city of Grayvoron, Belgorod governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said on Telegram, blaming the Ukrainian military.

Belgorod, which borders Ukraine's Kharkiv region, has frequently been hit with drone attacks, with Russian officials reporting multiple civilian injuries and damage to homes and vehicles across the region in recent weeks.

Russia meanwhile fired 442 drones and one missile in its latest night-time offensive, with 380 UAVs shot down or intercepted, Kyiv's air force said yesterday.

Two more arrests over attempted attack on US bank HQ in Paris

AFP
Paris

Police have arrested two more people over an apparent bid to explode a homemade device outside the Paris branch of the Bank of America, the French domestic security service said yesterday.

Police detained a first suspect, possibly a minor, in the early hours of Saturday just after he placed a device outside the bank building, near the Champs-Elysees.

The suspect was accompanied by a second person, who appeared to be taking photos and videos with a mobile phone but who fled when police arrived.

The device contained five litres of liquid believed to be fuel and an ignition system, a source close to the investigation said.

The two further arrests were

made on Saturday night.

According to a police source, the first suspect said he had been recruited through the Snapchat app to carry out a bombing in exchange for 600 euros (\$692).

Nunez said he did not know who was behind the incident but speculated that it might have been "proxies" linked to Iran.

Police said the suspect arrested early Saturday outside the bank had told them he was a minor and from Senegal. They were working to verify his identity.

The incident came after more than a month of US and Israeli bombardment of Iran and as talks between key regional players began late yesterday.

The war has escalated into a regional conflagration, with Iran retaliating by attacks on Gulf states, sending energy markets into a tailspin and threatening the world economy.

The French government and security services have said that while they do not believe France itself is a target, US and Israeli interests on its soil might potentially be singled out.

Nunez urged the security forces to be "extra-vigilant" and increase their presence in railway stations and other crowded places.

France's counter-terrorism prosecutor's office told AFP on Saturday it had launched a probe into "attempted damage by fire or other dangerous means".

Both the Paris judicial police and France's domestic intelligence service, the General Directorate for Internal Security (DGSI), were involved in the probe, the office told AFP.

The Bank of America, whose global headquarters are in North Carolina, is a multinational investment bank and financial services holding company.

Hundreds flee as fire rips through German nightclub

AFP
Berlin

Hundreds of people were evacuated from a nightclub in southwest Germany after a fire broke out, police said yesterday, with images from the scene showing the blaze raging on the building's roof.

Police said the fire began around 3:45am (0145 GMT) in the nightclub in Kehl, which is on the border with France.

The blaze went on to "spread over the whole building", a police statement added.

All of the roughly 750 people inside at the time were able to escape, with three people treated by emergency services. Images published in German media showed a huge fire on the roof of the nightclub, which is located in an industrial area of the city.

In a statement, Kehl's mayor Wolfram Britz said he was "happy and relieved that nobody was hurt" and thanked the nightclub owner for ensuring an orderly evacuation.

Firefighters were on the scene into Sunday afternoon, with remnants of the fire being put out in the interior of the nightclub.



A videograb shows firemen working at the site of a fire accident at the nightclub K in Kehl, south-western Germany, yesterday. (AFP)

City authorities said the damage was so extensive that most of the building had to be torn down.

The blaze came months after a bar in the Swiss ski resort of Crans-Montana caught fire in the early hours of New Year's Day, killing 41 people.

Kehl lies directly across the Rhine River from the French city of Strasbourg, and the club regularly attracts visitors from across the border.

Unlike in the Crans-Montana

fire, in Kehl the evacuation process seems to have gone smoothly.

"All of a sudden we heard: there's a fire! There were several announcements in German, French and English," a reveller told the local French newspaper DNA.

The paper quoted clubbers as saying the staff "handled it really well" and that the evacuation was "very quick".

An investigation has been opened into the fire, the cause of which was not immediately clear.

Reuters
Zurich

The vast majority of Swiss want stronger protection for children and teenagers on social media, according to a survey published yesterday, as governments and courts worldwide intensify scrutiny of Big Tech over its impact on young users.

On Wednesday, a Los Angeles jury found Meta and Alphabet's

Google negligent for designing social media platforms that are harmful to young people, in a verdict that will serve as a bellwether for numerous similar cases.

The Swiss survey by polling firm GfS Bern for the Mercator Foundation found 94% of respondents felt minors should be better protected from the damaging effects of social media, while 78% believed large technology firms have too much influence over public opinion.

Swiss Interior Minister Elisabeth

Baume-Schneider has said she is open to a potential ban on social media for youngsters. Her government is drafting legislation to regulate major online platforms.

The poll's publication in newspaper *SonntagsZeitung* follows a decision by neighbouring Austria to pursue a ban on social media use for children under 14.

The GfS Bern survey polled about 1,000 Swiss residents aged 16 and above between December 1 and 12.

Finland reports territorial violation by drones

Reuters
Helsinki

Finland reported yesterday a suspected territorial violation by unmanned aerial vehicles in the southeast of the country, which the Finnish prime minister said was likely linked to Ukrainian drone attacks against Russia.

Nearby countries Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania said last week that several Ukrainian drones had crashed on their territory after going astray during attacks on Russian oil export facilities on the Baltic Sea coast.

Ukraine has stepped up drone attacks on Russian oil refineries

and export routes over recent weeks in an attempt to weaken Russia's war economy and as peace talks, brokered by Washington, have stalled.

Yesterday morning, several small, slow-moving objects flying at low altitude were detected over a maritime area and in southeastern Finland, the defence ministry said in a statement.

Finland's Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said the stray drones seemed to be linked to Ukraine's attacks on Russian targets in Finland's vicinity.

"Russia has extremely strong electronic jamming capabilities, which could explain why these drones are drifting into Finnish airspace, something that is a very

serious issue," Orpo told Finland's public broadcaster Yle.

Finland sent its F/A-18 Hornet fighter jets to recognise flying objects that approached its territorial waters, one of which was identified as a Ukrainian AN196 drone, the Finnish Air Force said.

"The pilot did not open fire in order to avoid collateral damage," it said in a statement, adding the drone fell to the ground north of the town of Kouvola in eastern Finland. Another drone hit the ground in the same region, it said.

Ukraine has hit all three major oil ports in western Russia this month: Novorossiysk on the Black Sea and Primorsk and Ust-Luga on the Baltic Sea in Finland's vicinity.



A humpback whale in shallow coastal waters in Wismar Bay in the Baltic Sea, off Wismar, northern Germany, yesterday. (AFP)

Freed whale gets stranded again off German coast

AFP
Berlin

A humpback whale struggling in shallow waters off Germany's northern Baltic Sea coast has become stranded for a third time, experts said yesterday, just hours after the animal had freed itself from a sandbank.

The 13.5m (44-foot) long mammal was first spotted in the early hours of Monday on a sandbank

near the city of Luebeck. It managed to free itself on Friday after a mechanical digger set up an escape route.

However, it has run into fresh difficulty after swimming further east. After escaping a second sandbank late Saturday near Wismar, it was stranded once again yesterday.

"The prognosis as a whole doesn't look good," marine scientist Burkard Baschek told reporters on Sunday after conducting an assessment at the scene.

Scientists say the whale's breathing frequency has reduced and that it is no longer exhibiting reactions to nearby vessels.

For the moment no further rescue actions are planned but the government of the German state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania say there are also no plans to euthanise the whale.

Experts still held out some hope that the animal may free itself again after gathering enough strength.

However Baschek warned that its health had "considerably deteriorated" and that the risk of it becoming stranded yet again was high.

Experts had hoped the whale would return to its natural habitat in the Atlantic through the North Sea.

Humpbacks are rarely seen in the Baltic and the experts said it may have been following a shoal of fish or been distracted by the noise of a submarine.

Local grocery stores form the backbone of daily supplies

Baqalas have long served their communities, fostering relationships that go beyond simple transactions

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Often overlooked in discussions of urban development, baqalas (neighbourhood grocery stores) function as a form of “last-metre” retail across Doha, providing immediate access to daily necessities within walking distance of residential areas.

Operating long hours and offering flexible purchasing, even for single items, these small neighbourhood groceries form a local network that supports everyday consumption and maintains supply continuity during disruptions.

Scattered across nearly every district in the capital, baqalas have become both a practical necessity and a defining feature of daily life.

Long before the rise of delivery platforms like talabat and Snoonu, residents relied on a simpler system: calling the neighbourhood baqala to request items, sometimes as small as eggs or bottled water. Today, that system has evolved with mobile phones and messaging apps, but the principle remains unchanged: fast, informal, and rooted in familiarity with the community.

While no official figures exist, industry estimates suggest there are thousands of baqalas operating across Doha, forming a dense retail network embedded within residential areas. Their widespread presence reflects a model of convenience built not on scale, but on proximity.

A neighbourhood landmark

In Al Hilal, one such store, the Palace Grocery, has become a familiar landmark among residents. According to an employee, the baqala has been operating for nearly 30 years, quietly serving



At their core, baqalas operate as a form of urban infrastructure, providing hyperlocal access to essential goods and services. **PICTURE:** Joey Aguilar

generations of customers.

Inside, shelves are stocked with an array of basic necessities, snacks, and groceries to cater to a diverse clientele. Filipino noodles sit alongside Indian spices and Arab staples, reflecting the multicultural composition of the neighbourhood it serves.

For Abdulrahman, a Qatari resident who lives a few blocks away, the store is deeply tied to personal memory. “I’ve known Palace Grocery since my childhood. These baqalas are part of our culture. People know each other—the shopkeeper and the customers. It’s not just business,” he told Gulf Times.

He noted that such stores have long served their communities, fostering relationships that go beyond simple transactions. “There’s a personal connection,” he added, describing a familiarity that has been built over years of daily interaction.

Abdulrahman also pointed to the resilience of baqalas as businesses, describing them as part of Qatar’s history. Their continued relevance, he said, lies in their proximity to residents and the convenience they offer, even as larger supermarkets and modern retail formats expand.

Convenience as infrastructure
At their core, baqalas operate

as a form of urban infrastructure, providing hyperlocal access to essential goods and services. Typically located within residential neighbourhoods, they enable quick, small-quantity purchases that reflect everyday consumer behaviour.

For many residents, the appeal is simple: speed. Rahul, an Indian expatriate, said he visits a nearby baqala every few days to buy milk, yogurt, and fresh bread.

“It’s five minutes from my house. If I order through an app, it can take more than an hour.”

His visits are often unplanned. “Most of the time, it’s spontaneous,” he added, noting that he also relies on the baqala when water deliveries are delayed or when he forgets items from his grocery list.

“Baqala stores are convenient for everyone and everything.” That sentiment is echoed by others. Aneeta, another Indian resident, said she turns to her neighbourhood baqala for last-minute needs.

“When it’s not possible to go out and something is urgently needed and without delivery charges I buy it from a baqala,” she said.

This immediacy is what distinguishes baqalas from larger retail formats. Unlike supermarkets, which require time and planning, or delivery apps, which depend on logistics and fees, baqalas

offer frictionless access, often within minutes.

A lifeline in urgent moments

For some, that convenience becomes essential in urgent situations.

Filipino expatriate Ferginald D said he visits a baqala about twice a week, usually to pick up items he forgot during larger grocery trips or to satisfy sudden cravings.

“I choose a baqala because it’s closer to my home, which saves time and fuel. There are no extra delivery fees,” he said.

He added that his visits are typically last-minute and sometimes driven by necessity. “Yes, I have relied on a baqala late at night. It’s very convenient in urgent situations, as it usually has most of the essential items I need at home.”

Asked to describe a baqala in one sentence, he said: “A baqala is a lifesaver for quick and immediate needs.”

This role becomes even more pronounced during periods of disruption. According to Bashir, an employee at Palace Grocery, baqalas were among the businesses allowed to remain open during the Covid-19 pandemic.

“We continued serving customers,” he said, highlighting their role as essential services during times of crisis.



PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam

Such resilience highlights their importance within the broader retail ecosystem. By operating long hours, Palace Grocery, for example, opens at 6am and closes at 2am, baqalas provide continuity when other options may be unavailable.

Informal but efficient network

Part of what enables this consistency is the way baqalas operate. Unlike large retailers, they rely on informal but highly efficient systems.

Shopkeepers often maintain direct relationships with suppliers, manage small-scale inventory turnover, and fulfil delivery requests based on familiarity with nearby buildings, flats, and villas. Orders are handled quickly, without the structure of formal platforms, creating a decentralised distribution network that reduces reliance on centralised retail hubs.

This model, while simple, has proven adaptable. As technology evolves, many baqalas have integrated mobile communication and digital payments into their operations, blending traditional practices with modern convenience.

A cultural fixture

Beyond their functional role, baqalas are deeply embedded in Qatar’s social fabric. Described as a defining feature of everyday life, they are regularly used by residents across neighbourhoods and serve as informal spaces of interaction. Casual conversations at the counter, familiar faces, and shared routines contribute to a sense of community that extends beyond commerce.

Historically, small retail formats like baqalas and kiosks have acted as neighbourhood hubs: places where people meet, exchange news, and build relationships. In Doha, that tradition continues.

Unlike some global cities where large convenience store chains dominate, Qatar’s retail landscape remains shaped by these smaller, locally embedded establishments.

They also reflect the country’s demographic diversity. Often operated by expatriates, baqalas adapt their inventory based on the needs of surrounding communities, stocking products from across regions and cultures.

In a single store, customers may find items catering to Filipino, Indian, Arab, and other preferences, creating a microcosm of Qatar’s multicultural society.

Enduring relevance

As Doha continues to modernise, with new malls, supermarkets, and digital platforms reshaping how people shop, baqalas remain a constant.

Their strength lies not in competing directly with larger retailers, but in offering something different: immediacy, familiarity, and trust. For Abdulrahman, that enduring relevance is no surprise. “These shops have always been there for the community. They are part of our daily life.”

He added that, despite growing competition, baqalas continue to present viable business opportunities due to sustained demand.

“Because of their convenience and location, they will always have customers,” he said.



PICTURE: Joey Aguilar



In Al Hilal, one such store, the Palace Grocery, has become a familiar landmark among residents. **PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam



PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam

NPC, Difi sign MoU for research on demographic and social issues

Driven by their vital and active roles in society, the National Planning Council (NPC) and the Doha International Family Institute (Difi), a member of Qatar Foundation, have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for research collaboration on demographic and social issues.

The MoU aims to exchange expertise, enhance the efficiency of staff and other personnel of both parties, and strengthen cooperation in research, studies, surveys, and opinion polls.

The MoU was signed by Raed Ibrahim al-Emadi, assistant secretary-general for National Development Planning and Policy Affairs at the NPC, and Dr Sharifa Noaman al-Emadi, executive director of the Difi.

In a press statement, Raed Ibrahim al-Emadi stated: “This MoU represents a significant step toward strengthening research co-operation in demographic and social issues. This contributes to the development of an accurate and comprehensive database that supports policymaking and the advancement of programmes in the State of Qatar, aimed at achieving the objectives of the Qatar National Vision 2030 and the Third National Development Strategy (NDS3).”

He noted that the collaboration between the NPC and Difi will facilitate the exchange of expertise and the utilisation of data and specialised research findings to support evidence-based developmental



planning based on accurate figures.

Dr Sharifa said: “Today’s signing of the MoU formalises a joint effort between the two entities across several areas that support family well-being, social cohesion, and balanced demographic policies. We have worked together on an important study examining the social determinants of fertility in the State of Qatar and the implications of related policies, in addition to several other projects that provide technical support for the development of informed, evidence-based policies.”

The signing of the MoU comes within the framework of strengthening cooperation between the two parties in several areas, including research, studies, surveys, and opinion polls of mutual interest particularly in family-related issues such as marriage and divorce, the elderly, child well-

being, fertility, and population growth.

The agreement also seeks to implement joint projects and programs that contribute to achieving the objectives of Qatar’s NDS3 and subsequent strategies, organise joint scientific and training events, and exchange relevant data and information. These efforts aim to enhance the effectiveness of development planning, support the State’s efforts to improve its ranking in international indicators, and develop specific indicators related to family well-being and population growth.

Additionally, the two parties will organise seminars, workshops, and other activities to raise awareness and exchange scientific and practical expertise in areas of mutual interest, and to develop joint training programmes to build the capacities required to implement demographic and social policies.

Early rush at Al Wakra Yard signals growing trust in local produce

Al Wakra Yard, for selling local agricultural products, witnessed strong footfall from early morning hours, reflecting growing consumer confidence in the quality of locally produced goods and a clear commitment to supporting national food security and self-sufficiency initiatives.

On operating days, the market has evolved into a key shopping destination for many residents. Farmers and vendors offer a wide variety of fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables, showcasing the agricultural sector’s significant progress and its ability to meet market demand with competitive, high-quality products at reasonable prices.

Visitors consistently highlight that buying local produce offers both reassurance in quality and direct support for local farmers and traders. The affordability, freshness, and quality of the goods stand out as major draws. The market’s family-friendly atmosphere further enhances the overall experience, blending shopping with leisure.

Shoppers report stable and accessible pricing across essential items, even during periods of increased demand. This price stability is largely attributed to abundant local production and a direct-to-consumer sales model that eliminates intermediaries and reduces costs. Commonly purchased items such as zuc-

chini, tomatoes, and cucumbers are available at notably affordable rates, while staple vegetables remain consistently stocked without price increases.

Vendors cited rising demand, particularly in the early hours when fresh produce arrives. Competitive pricing across a broad range of products, from leafy greens to bulk vegetables, has encouraged many consumers to make regular weekly visits. The consistency and affordability of these prices make local produce an attractive and reliable option for households.

Recent prices include QR10 for a two-kilogram box of zucchini, QR7 for a large box of tomatoes, and QR7 for cucumbers. A head of cabbage is sold for QR3, while leafy vegetables are priced at QR2

per bundle. Other locally produced items include eggplants, sold at QR10 for a box of around 5kg, and potatoes at the same price for a similar quantity. A wide variety of fresh, high-quality farm products is supplied directly to the market on the same day.

Since its launch in the 2012-2013 season, the local produce market initiative expanded significantly in both scale and impact. What began as a single market with limited participation has grown into a broad network involving more than 160 farms and generating substantial seasonal sales. This growth underscores the initiative’s success in promoting local production and ensuring a steady supply of fresh, affordable agricultural products.

