



GULF TIMES



FRIDAY Vol. XXXXVI No. 13699

April 3, 2026
Shawwal 15, 1447 AH

www.gulf-times.com 2 Riyals

Published in QATAR since 1978



YOUR SAFETY AND COMFORT ARE OUR PRIORITY

Stay Connected with GigaHome. Activate your new home internet online in just a few taps.



Scan to activate



أوريكس بوليدكس
ORIX POLYDEX
Durable waterproofing-performance for roof protection
POLYDEX WATER PROOFING
44601602/3

Running Hotel Business For Sale
Furnished Hotel With License & Prime Location.
Serious Party Call Us:
33598672/30200166/52038746

BUSINESS | Page 1

MoCI, QDB chalk out strategies to enhance resilience, stability and sustainability of supply chains

Family العودة المدرسية
BACK TO SCHOOL
SUBSCRIBE TO OUR OFFER!

Ready to GUAC AND ROLL?
Only on talabat

'We're at a crossroads,' GCC chief warns UN

Cannot justify attacks on civilian assets, Albudaiwi says in historic briefing

GT Report

Gulf Cooperation Council Secretary-General Jassim al-Budaiwi delivered a sharp rebuke of Iranian attacks in the Middle East on Wednesday, telling the UN Security Council that the latest wave of ballistic missile and drone strikes has endangered civilian infrastructure across GCC states and Jordan and demanded a firmer international response.

The briefing marked the first time a GCC secretary-general addressed the council, underscoring the bloc's growing role in shaping the regional security agenda.

Al-Budaiwi said the strikes had hit airports, oil installations, ports and residential areas, calling them a "flagrant violation" of sovereignty and international law. He argued that attacks on civilians and civilian assets cannot be justified under any circumstances, and said GCC states retain their right to self-defence under the UN Charter.

The secretary-general welcomed Security Council Resolution 2817, adopted on 11 March, which condemned the Iranian attacks and demanded their immediate cessation. He urged full implementation of the text to ensure accountability, warning that the



Jassim al-Budaiwi, Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, during a briefing at the UN Security Council.

council must not allow repeated violations to become normalised.

Al-Budaiwi also broadened the warning beyond the region, saying instability in the Gulf has direct consequences for maritime routes, energy supplies and global trade. Security Council reporting on the April agenda noted that the GCC has pressed the council to act on attacks that threaten navigation and the flow of oil, gas, fertilisers and petrochemicals worldwide.

The UN Security Council later issued a unanimous presidential statement reaffirming its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states.

The statement, issued at the conclusion of a high-level meeting on UN-GCC co-operation, the first of its kind, highlighted collaboration on shared challenges, including maritime security, counterterrorism, and food and water security.

The Council praised the GCC's role in regional stability through mediation, preventive diplomacy, technical and financial support, and humanitarian engagement, while encouraging strengthened institutional cooperation with the UN. **To Page 2**

Amir receives DRC backing



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani reviewed regional and international developments with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) President Felix Tshisekedi during a meeting held at Lusail Palace yesterday.

The president expressed his country's solidarity with Qatar in light of the continued Iranian aggression against Qatar and several countries in the region, as well as his support for the measures it is taking to protect its sovereignty, security, and the safety of its citizens.

His Highness the Amir welcomed the president and his accompanying delegation, expressing his thanks and appreciation for DRC's stance and solidarity, and commending the growing co-operation between the two countries.

Both sides affirmed their commitment to support-

ing security and stability in the region. They also reviewed bilateral co-operation relations and ways to enhance and develop them across various fields, particularly in the areas of economy and investment.

The meeting was attended by HE the Chief of the Amiri Diwan Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Khulaifi, HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz al-Khulaifi, and a number of senior officials.

Also present from the DRC were the president's personal representative Sumbu Mambu Sita, his special adviser Jean-Claude Kabongo, and a number of senior officials. His Highness the Amir and the DRC leader also held a bilateral meeting, during which they exchanged views on key issues of mutual interest. **(QNA) Page 12**

Hormuz crisis sends shockwaves

By Santhosh V Perumal
Business Reporter

The Iran war has led the shipping sector to wade through risk-priced, not demand-priced, waters; giving windfall gains to tankers and opening arbitrage opportunities across regions; even as the global economy stares at stagflation.

Disruption in the shipping sector, facing war risk premium, hits critical upstream inputs, leading to unsustainable cost-push factors, especially in the food, manufacturing and construction sectors, thus raising the risk of higher inflation and lower growth.

Demand destruction, margin compression and rising subsidy

burdens have become the offshoot of disruption in the shipping sector, now grappling with industry consolidation pressures.

Geopolitical shock is affecting availability of both ships and tradable routes, as the Strait of Hormuz, which normally carries about 20% of global oil/LNG, leads to supply-side squeeze in available tonnage and operational inefficiencies.

The war has temporarily broken the global energy shipping system at its most critical chokepoint, which is reportedly operating at 1-5% of normal capacity. Some five to eight tankers pass through now compared to as many as 100-120 ships pre-war.

Only "approved" or "non-hostile" vessels are being allowed through the Strait of Hormuz,

which has shifted from a free global trade route to a restricted, permission-based corridor.

Since March 13, Lloyd's have traced 33 transits via the Larak detour route. There have been no transits tracked via the "normal" route since March 15. Bulk carrier activity has been dominating, with an increase in westbound traffic after a weeks-long lull in activity.

Freight rates today are less a reflection of trade, more a price of navigating war. Logistics shock turned into a supply shock with the tanker segment witnessing unprecedented day rate spikes to \$400,000 to \$420,000 for VLCCs (very large crude carriers); and \$250,000 for Suezmax, mainly driven by risk compensation and reduced fleet participation. **To Page 2**

SHIPPING: THE PRICE OF CONFLICT

Strait of Hormuz: From Free Trade Route to High-Cost Chokepoint



More opportunities for women professionals

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Women in Qatar are witnessing unprecedented expansion in professional and leadership opportunities, driven by national reforms and sustained advocacy for education and empowerment, Doha Women Forum founder Conchita Ponce has said.

The shift is evident not only in policy but also increasingly across workplaces and institutions, where women are stepping into decision-making roles and shaping the country's development trajectory, Ponce told *Gulf Times*.

"Today, women in Qatar have more opportunities than ever before, and the change is truly visible," she said, attributing much of this progress to the vision of Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of Qatar



Conchita Ponce

Foundation. "Her leadership has inspired generations of women to pursue education, step into leadership roles, and contribute meaningfully to the country's development."

Ponce stressed that government efforts aligned with Qatar National Vision 2030 have further strengthened the environment, enabling women to advance across sectors ranging from business to science and technology. **To Page 2**

Bathed in blue for a cause



Qatar's skyline and state institutions marked World Autism Awareness Day with a co-ordinated show of solidarity, underscoring a national push for inclusion and early intervention. Government ministries, civic bodies and key landmarks illuminated buildings as part of the global "Light It Up Blue" campaign, while education and health authorities highlighted ongoing efforts to support people with autism. The Ministry of Public Health stressed early screening and family awareness, aligning initiatives with long-term national strategies. The observance also reflects Qatar's legacy role in establishing the UN-designated day, reinforcing its commitment to dignity and equal opportunity. **Page 12**

Amir condoles with Saudi king

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani sent cables of condolences to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia on the passing of Princess Aljawhara bint Faisal bin Abdullal-Abdulrahman al-Saud, mother of Prince Mohammed bin Saud bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud. HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani also sent a similar cable to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. **(QNA)**

All drones intercepted

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

Be warned: No misuse of alert

The Ministry of Interior has warned against playing or circulating audio or video clips that mimic the National Emergency Alert System, including using such tones as mobile ringtones in public or private settings, citing risks of causing panic and disturbing public order.



In a statement posted on its official account on X, the ministry stressed the importance of public responsibility and adherence to regulations, noting that misuse of emergency alert tones constitutes a legal offence subject to accountability. Authorities also urged the public to report violations by calling 999. **(QNA)**



PM receives phone calls from German minister and Kurdistan Regional Government premier

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani received phone calls yesterday from Germany's Foreign Minister Johann Wadepful and the prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, Masrour Barzani.

During the calls, the developments of the military escalation in the region and its serious repercussions

on regional and international security and stability were discussed, as well as ways to resolve the disputes through peaceful means.

In the call with Barzani, HE Sheikh Mohammed also reiterated Qatar's strong condemnation of the attack that targeted the residence of the president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Nechirvan Barzani, in the Duhok Governorate. - **QNA**

Qatar takes part in ministerial meeting on Strait of Hormuz

Qatar participated in a ministerial meeting on developments related to the Strait of Hormuz, held yesterday via videoconference at the invitation of the United Kingdom's Foreign Office.

Qatar was represented at the meeting by HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi, who stressed in his remarks that the security of the Strait of Hormuz is an international issue, given its close link to global energy security and the safety of international supply chains.

He underscored the importance of reaching consensus on a comprehensive security framework that ensures freedom of navigation through the Strait and preserves regional stability.



HE Dr al-Khulaifi also reaffirmed Qatar's firm commitment to its role as a reliable partner in supporting maritime security and its continued contribution to the stability of international markets, and strongly condemned Iranian threats to close the Strait, as well

as unjustified attacks on shipping.

He further stressed the need to address the future of the Strait of Hormuz within a collective framework that includes all countries of the region.

The minister welcomed the efforts of the Gulf Co-operation

Council (GCC) to develop joint solutions to challenges related to the Strait, and emphasised that GCC states must be a key part of any relevant regional arrangements or agreements. - **QNA**

See report on Page 8

Qatar sends 11th identical letter to UN on Iran's aggression

Qatar has sent an 11th identical letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, and to Bahrain's Permanent Representative to the United Nations and President of the Security Council for the month of April, Jamal Fares Alrowaiee, regarding the latest developments of the Iranian attack on its territories.

The letter was sent by Qatar's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, HE Sheikhha Alya Ahmed bin Saif al-Thani.

The letter noted Qatar's Ministry of Defence's announcement that the country was subjected to attacks by a number of drones from Iran on Saturday, Sunday and Monday (March 28, 29 and 30), which the Qatari Armed Forces successfully intercepted, and to the targeting by three cruise missiles on April 1, two of which the Qatari Armed Forces managed to intercept, while the third hit an oil tanker leased to Qatar Energy in Qatar's economic waters. - **QNA**

Hormuz crisis sends shockwaves

From Page 1

The resultant shocks led to supercharging of shadow fleet, which acted as central and shock absorber for the disrupted supply chains but with higher systemic risks.

Shadow fleet, a network of oil tankers operating outside standard regulatory, insurance, and tracking systems to transport sanctioned crude, has accounted for 83% tanker/gas carrier transits captured between March 19 and 25.

This figure was 76% between March 12 and 18, according to Lloyd's database.

Global insurers have begun signing new war risk contracts for ships entering the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz at 3%-5% of a vessel's hull replacement value, renewable every seven days, compared to 0.15%-0.25% pre-war.

The supply shocks due to spiking oil and gas prices further turns into an economy-wide inflation, leading to many economies, especially in Southeast Asia, resort to emergency.

Nigel Green, founder of deVere Group, an independent financial advisory firm which serves over 80,000 clients across 100 countries, had said that households, businesses and investors should brace up for global stagflation.

"The figures show the severe impact the Iran war is already having on the eurozone economy," he said, adding "but, like in the 1970s, stagflation could become a widespread global phenomenon characterised by high inflation, low growth, and high unemployment, heavily driven by oil price shocks".

The global shipping industry's resilience will depend on diversification of routes and energy sources, investment in risk intelligence and alignment with geopolitical realities.

ICAO slams attacks on GCC, Jordan, supported by Qatari joint paper

THE Qatar Civil Aviation Authority (QCAA) has announced that the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) strongly condemned Iran's missile and drone attacks on Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries and Jordan.

The ICAO highlighted that the attacks forced emergency measures, including airspace closures and flight diversions, disrupting global aviation.

The organisation classified the strikes as a direct threat to civil aviation safety and a clear violation of the Chicago Convention

and the UN Charter.

The resolution, adopted during the ICAO's 237th session, was based on a joint working paper submitted by Qatar, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

It condemned Iran for breaching the sovereignty of affected states, called for an immediate halt to its attacks, and referred the matter to relevant UN bodies for ongoing review.

HE the Minister of Transport Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulah bin Mohammed al-Thani described the joint paper as a cru-

cial step in safeguarding airspace and regional civil aviation.

He reaffirmed Qatar's commitment to international and regional co-ordination to ensure aviation safety and warned that any threats to air travel would face a firm response.

QCAA acting president Mohammed bin Faleh al-Hajri noted that the resolution reflects global consensus on protecting airspace and enhancing aviation safety, while Qatar continues precautionary measures to maintain safe and efficient operations amid regional tensions. - **QNA**

Automation enhances food and drug oversight efficiency: health minister

THE assistant undersecretary for Healthcare Regulatory Affairs at the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), Dr Ghanim al-Mannai, has affirmed that the automation of inspection procedures has significantly improved the speed and efficiency of food and drug oversight, particularly under current conditions.

Speaking during a visit to the food and pharmaceutical inspection units and the Food Safety Laboratory at the Abu Samra border crossing, he praised the commitment of ministry teams in applying regulatory and preventative measures, as well as their close co-ordination with relevant authorities.

He also commended the Abu Samra Border Management Committee and the General Authority of Customs in providing the necessary resources to ensure smooth operations.

Al-Mannai said the visit is part of regular field inspections aimed at ensuring the flexibility and effectiveness of procedures, facilitating the flow of food, medicines, and pharmaceutical products into the local market while maintaining the highest safety standards.

He highlighted the readiness of the Food Safety Laboratory, its personnel and advanced technolo-



gies, which enable rapid and reliable testing of imported food products to ensure their safety.

The ministry revealed that 5,970 food shipments were cleared in March, with 1,180 samples tested, reflecting continued laboratory oversight alongside accelerated clearance processes.

It also reported that over 1,000 shipments of medicines and medical supplies have been inspected since February 28, with over 2.5mn pharmaceutical units and more than 157 shipments of diagnostic materials released, all subject to regulatory checks to ensure compliance and support national drug security. - **QNA**

More opportunities for women professionals

From Page 1

This progress, Ponce noted, is reflected in organisations such as Snoont, where nearly half of decision-making roles are held by women. "It demonstrates how women-led leadership can drive innovation and growth."

Institutions such as the Qatar Research, Development and Innovation Council are also actively promoting women into leadership positions.

Ponce highlighted inclusive funding programmes and initiatives that support women not only as participants but as leaders and decision-makers.

While some challenges remain, she said the broader ecosystem has become more supportive compared to previous years.

"Strong foundations are in place, role models are visible, and there is real momentum," Ponce said. "Women in Qatar are no longer just joining the workforce, they are helping shape its future."

She highlighted leadership qualities women bring, traits that have often been undervalued in traditional corporate hierarchies.

"Women are often viewed as soft and gentle, but in many ways, those are exactly the qualities we need in leadership today," Ponce

said, adding that empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence enable leaders to build trust and foster stronger team dynamics.

Ponce also pointed to tangible improvements in workplace policies that support women's career growth.

Companies are increasingly introducing family-friendly measures, including flexible working arrangements, mentorship programmes, and facilities such as breastfeeding rooms, with some organisations offering paid paternity leave and allowing mothers to bring their children to work.

"These changes make a real difference," she said, noting that such policies help women balance professional ambitions with family responsibilities while continuing to advance into leadership roles.

At the same time, Ponce said Qatar is witnessing a rise in female entrepreneurship, supported by incubators and innovation platforms, a trend she believes reflects a broader shift in mindset among women.

"Women are bolder than ever these days. They take risks and embrace empowerment," Ponce said.

With access to artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies, she added that women are becoming increasingly equipped

to launch and manage their own ventures.

"The idea of being independent and making their own decisions is definitely a big factor driving more women toward entrepreneurship," Ponce added, describing it as an attractive alternative to traditional corporate structures that may offer less flexibility.

Despite these gains, she cautioned that achieving work-life balance remains a significant challenge, particularly for working mothers with limited family support.

"Work-life balance can be very challenging," she said, stressing the importance of supportive workplace policies such as wellness programmes.

For Ponce, balance is less about equal distribution of time and more about intentional living: "It comes down to managing time, setting priorities, and knowing when to draw boundaries. It may not always be an even split, but as long as you make space to recharge and spend meaningful time with loved ones, that balance still exists."

As Qatar continues its development journey, she said the growing presence of women across sectors signals a deeper transformation: one where inclusion, innovation and human-centred leadership are becoming central to the nation's future.

DR Congo president and delegation leave Doha



The president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), Felix Tshisekedi, left Doha yesterday, following a working visit to the country. Tshisekedi and his delegation were seen off from Doha International Airport by HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraykhi and the DR Congo's ambassador to Qatar Valerie Lusamba Kabeya. - **QNA**



Doha College on list of top 100 private schools again

Doha College has once again been named among the world's top 100 private schools in the prestigious *Spear's Schools Index 2026*, reaffirming its position as a leading provider of British international education both regionally and globally.

Published annually, the *Spear's Schools Index*, an internationally renowned magazine, is widely regarded as a trusted guide to the world's leading private schools.

Drawing on the expertise of educational consultants and industry specialists, the index recognises schools for overall excellence across academics, culture, pastoral care and reputation, while reflecting global education and lifestyle trends.

Doha College is proud to be the only school in Qatar to be included in the top 100 schools in the Middle East, further strengthening its reputation as a benchmark for excellence within the region.

"Being recognised once again in the prestigious *Spear's Schools Index* is a testament to our unwavering commitment to excellence," said principal David Tongue. "This accolade reflects our strategic focus on creating a world-class environment where innovation meets tradition, ensuring Doha College remains at the global forefront of international education."

"Our inclusion in the Top 100 is much more than a ranking; it

is a validation of the consistent, high-level performance of our staff and pupils," said Doha College chief operating officer David Lish. "We are incredibly proud to be a global benchmark for academic success and holistic development, continuously pushing the boundaries of what a modern education can achieve."

Founded in 1980, Doha College is one of the largest not-for-profit British international schools in the world, serving a diverse community of nearly 3,000 pupils from almost 90 nationalities.

As an independent, not-for-profit institution, all resources are reinvested into enhancing the educational experience, facilities and professional development of staff, ensuring a sustained and future-focused commitment to excellence.

Doha College offers an extensive co-curricular programme designed to broaden horizons and develop essential life skills.

With over 300 activities spanning sport, the arts, leadership and service, pupils are encouraged to explore their interests, discover new passions and build confidence.

Opportunities such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, Model United Nations, and a wide range of competitive and creative pursuits ensure pupils develop resilience, collaboration and a strong sense of social responsibility.

Doha Design Biennale 2026 rescheduled to November

In light of the evolving situation in the region, Qatar Museums (QM) and Design Doha have made the decision to postpone the opening of the Design Doha Biennial 2026 to November 5-7, with exhibitions remaining on view until December 31.

The QM remains committed to the extraordinary designers, artists, makers, and artists who are a part of Design Doha.

This postponement will ensure that the biennial can be experienced in the spirit in which it was conceived: as a global celebration of the remarkable talent of the Menasa (Middle East, North Africa and South Asia) region.

The organisers of the biennial stressed that the overarching goal of Design Doha - to connect people through dialogue and creativity - is more important than ever. - **QNA**

We're at a crossroads: GCC chief warns UN

From Page 1

Al-Budaiwi used the council session to cast GCC-UN cooperation as a "new beginning", highlighting nearly five decades of engagement on peace, security and development.

He praised Saudi leadership on the Palestinian file, reaffirmed support for Yemen's political process under UN auspices, and called for respect for Lebanon's sovereignty and Syria's reconstruction.

He said GCC states contributed over \$14bn in humanitarian assistance between 2020 and 2025, and warned that any disruption in the Arabian Gulf reverberates through global markets.

"We stand at a crossroads," he said, framing the choice as one between collective security and the rule of force.

QPC exploring support for Sudanese journalists

Qatar Press Centre (QPC) director-general Sadiq Mohammed al-Amari held a meeting with Sudan's ambassador to Qatar Badr El-Din Abdullah Mohammed Ahmed to discuss ways to strengthen media co-operation and address the challenges facing Sudanese jour-

nalists amid the ongoing armed conflict in Sudan. The meeting at the QPC headquarters highlighted the importance of safeguarding press freedom and ensuring a safe working environment for journalists, enabling them to carry out their role in report-

ing facts and raising awareness of humanitarian issues.

Al-Amari welcomed the ambassador, describing the visit as a reflection of both sides' commitment to enhancing co-operation, particularly in the media sector.

He outlined the role of the QPC, which functions similarly to a journalists' union by supporting media professionals, defending their rights, and addressing their concerns, especially those working in conflict zones.

Al-Amari highlighted the centre's efforts to empower journalists through training, workshops, and specialised courses aimed at strengthening professional skills.

He reaffirmed the QPC's full support for Sudanese journalists, stressing its solidarity with those working under difficult conditions, and noted that the centre regularly issues statements condemning attacks on journalists and calling for accountability to protect press freedom.

The official added that the QPC is ready to provide various forms of support to Sudanese journalists, including training opportunities.

He also pointed out that the centre promotes Arab intellectual contributions by publishing works by Sudanese authors and engaging Sudanese trainers in its programmes.

Al-Amari emphasised that journalists are often among the first victims of conflict due to their role in conveying the truth, noting



QPC director-general Sadiq Mohammed al-Amari with Sudan's ambassador to Qatar Badr El-Din Abdullah Mohammed Ahmed.

Qatar Press Centre issues warning on the fate of detained Palestinian journalists

The Qatar Press Centre (QPC) has expressed deep concern over the fate of Palestinian journalists detained in Israeli prisons, following the Israeli Knesset's approval of a draft law permitting the execution of Palestinian prisoners - a step that represents a serious escalation and a grave violation of all international conventions.

The QPC warned of the catastrophic consequences of this legislation, particularly amid the rising violations against Palestinian journalists. According to a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) issued on February 21, the number of detained Palestinian journalists has risen to 60 since the events of October 7, 2023.

The report documented severe abuses, including beatings, starvation, degrading treatment, and even sexual violence, raising serious concerns that they could be targeted under this law, placing their lives in immediate danger.

The QPC stressed that this legislation could open the door to the liquidation of detained journalists under a false legal cover, in blatant violation of press freedom and human rights.

It described the move as a dangerous precedent that threatens the foundations of international law and reflects an approach aimed at undermining justice and legitimising extrajudicial killings.

The QPC called on the international community and human rights organisations to take urgent and decisive action to halt this violation, pressure for the withdrawal of the unjust law, and ensure the protection of detained journalists.

It reaffirmed its full solidarity with the Palestinian people and its support for their legitimate rights to freedom and dignity.

that press freedom can come at a high cost, sometimes paid with their lives.

Ambassador Ahmed expressed appreciation for the QPC's support and lauded its role in advancing the media sector.

He underlined the strong and longstanding ties between Qatar and Sudan, highlighting Qatar's consistent humanitarian support to the Sudanese people during times of crisis.

The ambassador also expressed Sudan's solidarity with Qatar following recent attacks targeting the country, describing it as a gesture of appreciation for Qatar's longstanding support.

Addressing the state of journalism in Sudan, Ahmed said that the sector is facing unprecedented challenges.

He noted that media infrastructure has suffered extensive damage, including the

destruction of several headquarters such as the Sudan News Agency building.

As a result, print newspapers have ceased operations, shifting to digital platforms to continue their work.

The envoy stressed that the conflict has underscored the critical role of media, which has become both a key target and one of the most affected sectors, given its influence in shaping public opinion and conveying facts.

He also highlighted the role of Sudanese youth in documenting events through informal digital networks, using social media to share developments and expose violations, including incidents such as the El Fasher massacre.

He noted that the circulation of such content has played a significant role in revealing the realities on the ground.

Tehran is 'not looking to restart uranium enrichment'

AFP
Vienna

Iran is not looking to enrich uranium to the levels needed to build an atomic bomb, Tehran's envoy to the United Nations' atomic agency told AFP yesterday.

Reza Najafi, Iran's ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), also said that US-Israeli strikes on the Islamic republic's Bushehr nuclear power plant constitute a "war crime" under international law.

Israel and the United States have long accused Iran of having ambitions to build a nuclear weapon, with US President Donald Trump claiming that threat as justification for both the 12-day conflict last year and the ongoing war sparked by US-Israeli strikes on February 28.

However, Najafi argued that that justification, which alleged that Tehran was looking to enrich uranium to the purity needed to build an atomic weapon, was a "lie".

In an interview with AFP, Najafi denied that Tehran had "restarted enrichment" of radioactive uranium following the US-Israeli strikes on the Islamic republic's nuclear facilities in June 2025.

"We didn't start the claim that Iran would like to restart the enrichment, we didn't restart enrichment, and it was a lie, a very big lie, like the other lies," the Iranian envoy said in an interview with AFP.

The diplomat also insisted that targeting Tehran's nuclear energy infrastructure would break international law, warning that a radioactive leak would contaminate the water supply and force civilians to evacuate.

The Bushehr plant was hit late last Friday for the third time in 10 days, according to the IAEA, which reported no radiation leak or damage to the reactor.

"Any attack on the nuclear power plant in Bushehr would be in clear violation of international law, international humanitarian law," Najafi said. "Even during the war, it is prohibited to attack the facilities for use of the civilians, and such an attack would be a very big crime, a crime against humanity, a war crime."

First connected to the grid in 2011, the Bushehr plant in southwestern Iran has the country's only operational nuclear power reactor, according to the IAEA.

The UN atomic watchdog has urged all parties in the Middle East war to exercise restraint around nuclear sites.

Gulf states seek UN mandate for force to protect Hormuz

AFP
United Nations

The secretary-general of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) has called for the UN Security Council to authorise the use of force to protect the Strait of Hormuz from Iranian attacks.

Iran has placed a stranglehold on the key shipping lane - threatening fuel supplies and roiling the global economy - in retaliation for US-Israeli strikes that triggered the month-old Middle East war.

"Iran has closed the Strait of Hormuz, prevented commercial vessels and oil tankers from transiting, and imposed conditions on some to pass through the strait,"

said the GCC Secretary-General Jassem Mohamed al-Budaiwi.

He was speaking in New York at the first Security Council meeting on co-operation with the GCC, which comprises Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman.

"We call upon the Security Council to assume its full responsibility and take all necessary measures to protect maritime routes and ensure the safe continuation of international navigation," al-Budaiwi said.

Bahrain has proposed a draft resolution that would greenlight states to use "all necessary means" to assure free transit through the Strait of Hormuz.

However, the measure has divided the 15-member Security Council.

According to diplomatic sources, Russia, China and France - who each hold veto privileges - have voiced strong objections despite several modifications to the text.

"The use of force cannot bring peace. Political settlement is the fundamental way forward," said Chinese ambassador Fu Cong.

"Authorising member states to use force would amount to legitimising the unlawful and indiscriminate use of force, which would inevitably lead to further escalation of the situation and lead to serious consequences," he added.

Russia, a long-time ally of Tehran, says it will not support what it calls one-sided measures that fail to address the root causes of the conflict.

Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron has said a military operation to free the strait is "unrealistic".

A fifth version of the draft text, which the United States supports, was distributed to member states yesterday and emphasises any force would be "defensive in nature".

"No country should be able to hold the world's economies hostage to try to gain leverage in a dispute," US ambassador Mike Walz told the Security Council.

Around a fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas passes through the Strait of Hormuz in peacetime.

Its near-total closure is impacting global supplies of important commodities including oil, liquefied natural gas and fertiliser. That has led to a sharp rise in energy prices.

US embassy in Baghdad warns of attacks in city within days

AFP
Baghdad

The US embassy in Baghdad has warned that pro-Iran armed groups in Iraq may attack the city in the coming one or two days.

Iraq has been dragged into the war between the United States, Israel and Iran, with strikes targeting both US interests and pro-Iran groups in the country.

The US embassy in Baghdad, located in the centre of the city, has been repeatedly targeted, and yesterday it warned of more attacks in central parts of the capital.

"Iraqi terrorist militia groups aligned with Iran may intend to conduct attacks in central Baghdad in the next 24-48 hours," the embassy said in a statement on X.

It repeated earlier advice for Americans in Iraq to leave.

The frequency of attacks in Iraq has decreased in recent days after the influential pro-Iran group Kataeb Hezbollah declared a pause on March 19, which was twice extended.

However, the group did not announce a further extension on Wednesday night after its latest pause expired.

Last month Washington and



Women light candles in memory of the victims of the US-Israeli attacks on Iran and Lebanon during a rally yesterday in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. - AFP

Baghdad said they would "intensify co-operation" to prevent attacks and ensure Iraqi territory is not used to launch assaults against US facilities.

However, the US embassy statement yesterday said that "the Iraqi government has not prevented terrorist attacks in or from Iraqi territory".

"Iran-aligned terrorist militia groups may claim to be associ-

ated with the Iraqi government," it added.

Former Iraqi paramilitary alliance Hashed al-Shaabi - also known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) - is a sprawling coalition of armed groups that are now part of Iraq's regular army, but they contain pro-Iran factions who have a reputation for acting independently.

These factions and the PMF

have been targeted by strikes since the outbreak of war and have blamed the US and Israel.

The Pentagon has said helicopters have carried out strikes against pro-Iran armed groups in Iraq during the war.

Washington has strongly denied claims that it has targeted Iraqi security forces.

A strike on Wednesday against a PMF position in northwestern

Iraq - which the PMF blamed on the US and Israel - killed three fighters.

The US embassy in its statement urged US citizens in Iraq to leave immediately, warning that "terrorist militias have targeted Americans for kidnapping".

On Tuesday evening an American journalist, named by her employer and media advocacy groups as Shelly Kittleston, was abducted in Baghdad.

A suspect has been detained in connection with the kidnapping, and an Iraqi security official told AFP the man had links to Kataeb Hezbollah.

The US embassy later reposted the State Department's "Rewards for Justice" account, which had posted offering \$3mn for information on pro-Iran attacks, appealing in Arabic for help to "stop the terrorist attacks".

Autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan has also not been spared the violence.

Erbil governor Omed Khoshnaw said yesterday that since the start of the war, more than 500 attacks had targeted the region.

Security sources told AFP that at least 30 drones targeted the Erbil and Duhok governorates overnight, but there were no casualties reported.

Dubai's luxury stores take a hit as war in Middle East drags on

By Marie Dhumieres
AFP

Rows of luxury boutiques line an up-market Dubai mall, yet a month into the Middle East war their sales staff sit idly, phones in hand, watching for the rare customer.

Salespeople in immaculate suits say they have been told not to speak to reporters, but one briefly described the mood.

"Of course, there are fewer customers, especially tourists," the salesperson told AFP. "Locals still come. Luckily, we have a strong local clientele and no one is panicking."

This glamorous playground for the world's rich has taken a hit since the start of the US-Israeli offensive against Iran on February 28.

Dubai, long known for its peace and stability, has been targeted frequently by

Tehran's retaliatory drones and missiles, sending tourists fleeing.

One industry figure, requesting anonymity, said the prevailing belief was that "the situation is temporary and will improve soon".

Just out of Chanel, one of the few shoppers put it more bluntly: "People shouldn't come (to Dubai) right now."

"It's dangerous, it's war. For me it's different. I'm from here - if I die, I die with my family," she said, dressed in a black abaya and niqab and carrying an orange Hermes bag.

The Middle East, one of the few regions where luxury sales are still growing, accounts for six to eight percent of global revenues for top brands, according to Bernstein analysts.

They estimate that the region's luxury sales will fall by half in March, mostly due to the collapse in tourism - both to the Gulf and in transit, with major air hubs like Dubai, Doha and Abu Dhabi closed or operat-

ing at diminished capacity.

More than half the region's luxury stores are in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The most profitable ones are clustered in Dubai Mall, a vast shopping complex that sits below Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building.

With its waterfalls, massive aquarium and more than 110mn visitors a year, the mall, a monument to bling, claims to be the most visited place on the planet.

No tour groups drifted through its wide, air-conditioned corridors on a late March evening, but the regulars were out.

And more shoppers were lining up at Primark - a newly opened budget chain - than inside the mall's glitzy "Fashion Avenue" area, lined with chic luxury chains.

To avoid "unnecessary alarm" and protect the UAE's reputation, the mall's developer Emaar has warned retailers against closing or shortening work hours, the company said, in a note to the shops seen by AFP.

Foot traffic has "collapsed", Bernstein analysts note, and several brands have shifted staff to online outreach.

The strategy works well, they say, in a region teeming with wealthy customers with "little else to do but shop" - "like during (the coronavirus [Covid-19] pandemic)".

Hoping for a quick end to the conflict, the industry is also counting on a wave of "revenge spending" - customers splurging in relief once the situation improves.

However, "the key is the return of tourists", the industry figure said.

The worst-case scenario, he warned, was a lengthy conflict with sporadic attacks across the Gulf, which could damage Dubai's long-term appeal.

At the Mall of the Emirates, even the famous indoor ski slope was nearly vacant.

Bundled in thick parkas to withstand the cold, employees stood about as the ski lift turned almost entirely empty, waiting for tourists to return.



A boy stands at a makeshift camp for displaced Palestinians in the Nahr al-Bared area of Khan Yunis, in the southern Gaza Strip. - AFP

Hamas 'wants guarantees of Israeli troop withdrawal before disarmament talks'

Palestinian group Hamas has told mediators that it will not discuss giving up arms without guarantees that Israel will fully quit Gaza as laid out in a disarmament plan from US President Donald Trump's "Board of Peace", three sources told Reuters.

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

A Hamas delegation met with Egyptian, Qatari and Turkish mediators in Cairo on Wednesday and yesterday to give their initial response to a disarmament proposal presented to the group last month, two Egyptian sources and a Palestinian official said.

Hamas conveyed several demands and amendments to the board's plan, including an end to Israeli violations, implementation of all provisions and Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, the two Egyptian sources told Reuters.

Hamas accuses Israel of breaking the ceasefire with attacks that have killed hundreds in Gaza.

Israel says its strikes are aimed at thwarting imminent attacks by militants.

The sources said that Hamas also sought clarification about what it described as Israel's continued expansion of areas under its control.

Israel retained control of well over half of Gaza after the ceasefire.

The sources said Hamas does not want to discuss disarmament before those issues are addressed.

Two Hamas officials declined to comment on the content of the meetings.

Israel's government did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Representatives for the Board

of Peace did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Another source with direct knowledge of the Board of Peace's thinking said that Hamas's response meant that talks over the group laying down its arms were unlikely to immediately lead to a breakthrough.

The source said Hamas was supposed to meet with mediators again next week.

The US may move forward with reconstruction absent Hamas disarmament, but only in areas under complete Israeli military control, the source said.

Funding pledges important for reconstruction, many of which were from Gulf Arab states, were being held up during the Iran war, the source added.

The Palestinian official close to the talks said Hamas was unlikely to reject the plan out of hand but "it will not say yes until the remarks and demands of Palestinian factions are addressed".

Israel says it will not agree to withdraw from Gaza unless Hamas is fully disarmed first.

Trump's top Board of Peace envoy in the Middle East, Nickolay Mladenov, said in a social media post on Wednesday that all mediating parties had endorsed the plan.

"(The) international community has supported it, now is the time to agree to the framework for its implementation. For the sake of both Palestinians and Israelis, there is not time to lose," Mladenov said in a post on X.

The events of October 7, 2023 in Israel killed 1,200 people, according to Israeli tallies.

Israel's ensuing two-year campaign killed more than 72,000 Palestinians, most of them civilians, according to Gazan health authorities, and has spread famine, demolished most buildings, and displaced most of the territory's population, in many cases numerous times. - Reuters

'Medical needs surging in Iran, supplies under threat'

Emergency medical needs in Iran are rising exponentially, and stocks of trauma kits and other gear could run low if the war persists, the head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) delegation there said yesterday.

More than 1,900 people have been killed since the US-Israeli airstrikes on Iran began on February 28, and more than 21,000 injured, according to the agency - the only humanitarian group working across the country.

Other estimates are higher. Maria Martinez told Reuters that three of the agency's own workers had died on duty, including one during an airstrike on March 31 that hit a medical clinic in Zanjan province.

She did not attribute blame for the killings.

"Our concern is really how the humanitarian needs are escalating so rapidly and (over) our ability to bring all the support into the country," Martinez said.

Hopes for a swift end to the conflict faded yesterday after US President Donald Trump vowed to conduct more aggressive strikes.

Washington has said that its Iran strikes are being carried out with precision.

Israel's military has said it takes measures to mitigate harm against civilians during its operations.

Martinez said there were no shortages of emergency stocks for now, but the situation would worsen if the fighting continued, especially as the price of supplies went up and their insufficient funding ran low.

"The needs are exponentially increasing. Resources are not unlimited," she said.

She was concerned that people's fears of bombings would stop them from venturing out to seek aid.

"The streets are completely empty... you can sense the fear, you can sense the uncertainty in people's eyes," she said in a video interview from Tehran.

The aid group says that it has 100,000 responders across the country's 31 provinces as well as helicopters and rescue dogs, and provides first aid for those injured by airstrikes and support for the displaced.

One IFRC rescue worker called to help clear rubble discovered members of his own family were among the dead buried there.

Others take turns sleeping at the IFRC offices to be on standby in the case of bombings, she added.

Work was frequently disrupted and staff were transcribing documents by hand because of power and Internet cuts.

"We are in the middle of a meeting and the alarms are activated. We need to evacuate immediately and this happens three, four, six times per day," she said.

The agency had been unable to import vital supplies from its Dubai warehouse for weeks amid a logistical quagmire exacerbated by Iran's shutting down of the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation for US-Israeli strikes.

It now aims to ship them overland from Turkey on April 7, IFRC supply chain director Cecile Terraz said, but it will take weeks. - Reuters

Prize-winning rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh arrested: daughter

Iranian authorities have arrested the prize-winning rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, her daughter said yesterday as activists accuse the Islamic republic of cracking down on civil society during the war with Israel and the US.

"Mum was arrested last (Wednesday) night while she was alone at home," her daughter Me-

hraveh Khandan wrote on Instagram. Sotoudeh, who won awards including the 2012 Sakharov Prize of the European Parliament and the 2020 Right Livelihood award, has been repeatedly arrested in the past for her work.

Her husband and Mehraheh's father, Reza, has been in prison since December 2024.

Mehraheh Khandan said when relatives went to the house they found that "electronic devices, including mum and dad's laptops and phones, had been confiscated", adding that she had had no contact with her mother since her arrest and it was unclear which branch of the security forces had detained her. - AFP

A month into war, Lebanon's PM sees no end in sight

By Raghed Waked and Mahmoud Hassano
Reuters

Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam said yesterday that there was no end in sight to a war that had already displaced a million people over the last month, as families fleeing Israeli strikes said they were exhausted by repeated rounds of conflict.

Lebanon is entering the second month of conflict between Iran-backed armed group Hezbollah and Israel, which has pledged to occupy swathes of southern Lebanon as part of a "security zone" to protect its own northern residents.

"Lebanon has become a victim of a war - one whose outcomes and end date no one can predict," Salam told reporters yesterday after a meeting of his cabinet.

"The positions of Israeli officials, and the practices of their army, reveal far-reaching goals, including a significant expansion in the occupation of Lebanese territories, dangerous talk about establishing buffer zones or security belts, and the displacement of more than 1mn Lebanese," he said.

Israel's assertion that its military will retain control of southern Lebanon has fuelled fears of a long-term occupation, after a two-decade Israeli presence ended in 2000.

Salam said his government would redouble diplomatic and political efforts to end the war.

A call by Lebanese President Joseph Aoun for direct talks with Israel has so far received no response.

Israel has continued to carry out strikes on Lebanon after a 2024 ceasefire ended its last war with Hezbollah, while keeping troops stationed on five hilltop positions in southern Lebanon.

Israel launched a full-scale air and ground campaign after Hezbollah fired into Israel on March 2 in solidarity with Iran after the US and Israel began their war on Tehran.

Salam, without naming Hezbollah, condemned co-ordinated attacks carried out with Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

More than 1,300 people have been killed in Israeli strikes and about a fifth of Lebanon's population has been displaced.

Israel has issued evacuation orders covering around 15% of Lebanese territory.

"I want to direct the biggest salute to our people who are staying in their hometowns and villages in the south, and want to reiterate that we stand by them," Salam said.

Tens of thousands of Lebanese have remained in their homes in southern Lebanon, even as Lebanese troops withdraw from the area to avoid confronting Israeli troops.

They include around 9,000 Lebanese Christians living in a cluster of border towns, who told Reuters



A displaced child holds a loaf of bread at an unofficial camp for displaced people on Beirut's waterfront area. - AFP

that they were determined to stay despite the advancing military operations.

Salam also stressed the need to preserve internal stability as the war strains Lebanon's sectarian political faultlines.

Some communities have been reluctant to host displaced families.

As the war drags on, Lebanon is examining ways to house those families in the long-run.

Mohammad al-Badran, a Syrian who had lived for years in Beirut's southern suburbs, said he and his family were turned away when they sought refuge in a mountainous area outside the capital.

Badran, his wife and their four

children - the youngest of whom was born barely two weeks before the war started - are now sleeping in a makeshift tent area in the capital.

His 10-year-old daughter, Nour, can hear the sound of Israeli strikes on the nearby southern suburbs.

"The sound is loud, the children are crying, and I feel like the missiles are flying above us," she said.

Ali al-Aziz, who also fled the southern suburbs, told Reuters that Israel should withdraw from Lebanon so that the conflict could end and he could go back home.

"We want the war to end once and for all. Not for a war to happen every year or every ten years," he said.

Burkina, Mali troops 'kill more civilians than militants do'

By Portia Crowe
Reuters

Government and allied forces in Burkina Faso have killed more than twice as many civilians as religious militants have since 2023, according to a tally of incidents documented in a report published yesterday by Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The pattern is broadly consistent with data shared with Reuters by Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), a conflict monitoring group, and also applies to neighbouring Mali.

In that country, which like Burkina Faso is ruled by a military-led government that seized power in a coup, government forces and their partners have been responsible for three to four times as many civilian killings as religious militants over the last two years, according to ACLED's data.

Violence involving religious militant groups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger has surged since 2021, making the Sahel region a global terrorism hotspot.

Widespread deaths of civilians at the hands of government forces could bolster the political legitimacy of militant groups and fuel recruitment, analysts said.

Burkina Faso's security forces and allied militias "appear to be more brutal and violent" than militant groups like the local Al Qaeda affiliate, Jama'at al-Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), said Ilaria Allegrozzi, senior Sahel researcher at HRW.

The Burkinabe forces' behaviour is part of a regional pattern, raising concerns about military indiscipline and its consequences for counterinsurgency efforts, she said.

Spokespeople for the Mali and Burkina Faso governments did not immediately respond to requests for comment from Reuters.

The Burkina Faso government



This picture taken in 2019 shows soldiers from Burkina Faso on the road in Gorgadji, in the Sahel region. - Reuters

and JNIM's Sharia Committee in Burkina Faso did not respond to requests for comment from HRW.

Covering the period between January 2023 and August 2025, the HRW report documents 57 incidents in which at least 1,837 civilians were killed.

Of those, 33 were committed by government forces and their allies, resulting in 1,255 civilian deaths, according to the report, which details widespread abuses by all parties to the conflict.

The ACLED data shows that in 2025 alone, the Burkinabe military and forces from the pro-government Homeland Defence Volunteers militia killed 523 civilians while JNIM and Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), another militant group, killed 339.

In Mali, the military, together with Russian paramilitary groups Wagner and Africa Corps, killed 918 civilians in 2025, while JNIM and ISSP killed 232, according to ACLED.

JNIM could not be reached for comment.

Russia's defence ministry, which runs Wagner and Africa Corps, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

ACLED sources its data from social media, press reports and statements from governments, armed groups and non-governmental organisations.

It says it provides conservative estimates of fatalities.

HRW based its report on 450 interviews and verified social media and satellite imagery.

It also says the incidents it has documented are not exhaustive.

Because JNIM controls large swathes of territory, security forces are sometimes called on to escort humanitarian or supply convoys in rural areas - but in many cases they kill civilians they encounter along the way, Allegrozzi said.

One resident of eastern Burkina Faso, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals, told Reuters that he was travelling in a civilian convoy under military escort in July 2024, and many of

the villages they passed had been abandoned.

Then they reached the village of Sakoani, 30km (19 miles) west of the town of Kantchari.

"When the army arrived in this village and saw that it was populated, they surrounded the entire village and they exterminated everything - every living being," he said. "People tried to flee, but if you run, they shoot at you."

He estimated that he saw at least 100 dead bodies.

In Mali, meanwhile, many civilian killings have been carried out by drone strikes, according to ACLED.

Drone warfare there has surged since the government began purchasing Turkish-made drones in 2022.

Drone or airstrikes on civilians by Mali's armed forces jumped from four incidents that year to 66 incidents in 2025, resulting in 155 deaths, the ACLED data shows.

In July 2024, government drone strikes killed at least 50 civilians at the Inatiyara artisanal gold mining site in northern Mali, according to ACLED.

HRW and ACLED also documented grave abuses by JNIM, including the killing of 133 civilians in Barsalogo, Burkina Faso, in August 2024 and 19 civilians in Diallassagou, Mali, in May 2024.

The group has nonetheless been able to position itself as a defender of marginalised communities like the Fulani, a widely dispersed pastoralist group whose members are often accused of being affiliated with JNIM, analysts have told Reuters.

"As state responses increasingly rely on retaliation and collective punishment, more civilians find themselves trapped in areas under religious militant control, where JNIM is consolidating its influence through coercion and strategic engagement with local populations," said Henri Nsabira, ACLED's senior analyst for West Africa.

Police: Four children killed at Ugandan kindergarten

Four children were stabbed to death yesterday at a kindergarten in Uganda's capital, Kampala, police said.

The male suspect, in his thirties, gained access by posing as a parent before attacking children aged around two and three with a knife, police said.

"We confirm a tragic incident at the Ggaba Early Childhood Development Programme school in Makindye Division, Kampala City, where a male suspect brutally stabbed and killed four juveniles," police spokeswoman Racheal Kawala told AFP.

The suspect fatally stabbed three boys and one girl among 14 children present at the compound, police said.

The man had visited the nursery last week to seek admission for a child, paid the fees and was instructed to re-

turn this week, Kawala said.

Angry residents attempted to lynch the man as he tried to escape before security forces intervened by firing teargas to disperse the irate crowd and arresting him.

Videos on social media showed distressed parents outside the daycare centre, now cordoned off, anxiously seeking news of their children and demanding their release.

"Ten children survived the attack and are already with their parents," Kawala said.

The motive behind the killings remains unclear and police are investigating.

Such killings are rare in Uganda.

"We shall push for the death sentence for this criminal," Uganda's army chief Muhoozi Kainerugaba posted on X. - AFP

Astronauts begin Nasa lunar mission after climactic blast-off

AFP
Kennedy Space Center

Four astronauts blasted off aboard a massive Nasa rocket on Wednesday on a long-anticipated journey around the Moon, the first crewed lunar flyby in more than 50 years.

With a thunderous roar that reverberated far beyond the launchpad, the enormous orange-and-white rocket carried three Americans and one Canadian away from Florida's Kennedy Space Center at approximately 6:35pm (2235 GMT) local time.

Nasa teams and spectators alike were ecstatic as the spacecraft ascended into a radiant sky atop a cascade of flames.

The team, who donned bright orange suits with blue trim as the mission began, includes Americans Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover and Christina Koch along with Canadian Jeremy Hansen.

"We have a beautiful moonrise. We're headed right at it," said Wiseman, the mission commander. US President Donald Trump praised "our brave astronauts,"

calling the successful launch "quite something" at the top of his televised address on the war against Iran.

The astronauts are now in orbit around the Earth, where they will remain while performing various checks to ensure the reliability and safety of a spacecraft that has never carried humans before.

They successfully completed "proximity operations" demonstrations, which tested how their Orion capsule can move relative to another spacecraft and included various manoeuvres that mimic what would be needed to dock with a lunar lander.

"Great flying with you, Houston. Nice vehicle," said pilot Glover. Early on teams identified a number of kinks to work out, including "a controller issue with the toilet when they spun it up," said Amit Kshatriya, NASA's associate administrator, during a post-launch briefing. "We're just getting started," he added.

Nasa head Jared Isaacman also noted a temporary communication problem with the spacecraft that had since been resolved.

The astronauts were "safe,

they're secure, and they're in great spirits," he said.

Isaacman also emphasised the historic nature of Wednesday's launch: "NASA is back in the business of sending people to the Moon."

If all goes well the Artemis 2 team is expected to head out on Thursday on its three-day journey towards the Moon, which it will then loop around to capture new images and make naked-eye observations.

The voyage should last approximately 10 days in total, and aims to pave the way for a Moon landing in 2028.

Scientist Sian Proctor ventured to Florida's Space Coast to witness the moment along with the approximately 400,000 people local authorities said had gathered to watch.

"I'm just so happy that we're going back to the Moon," Proctor said. "Everybody should be excited and be following the next 10 days, because this is a big step for humanity."

The mission marks a series of historic accomplishments: it will send the first person of colour,

the first woman and the first non-American on a lunar mission.

If the plan proceeds as expected, the astronauts will set a record by venturing farther from Earth than any human before.

It is also the inaugural crewed flight of Nasa's new lunar rocket, dubbed the Space Launch System. SLS is designed to allow the United States to repeatedly return to the Moon, with the goal of establishing a permanent base that will offer a platform for further exploration.

It was meant to take off as early as February after years of delays and massive cost overruns.

But repeated setbacks stalled it and even necessitated rolling the rocket back to its hangar for investigation and repairs.

"Nasa really needs this win right now," Casey Dreier, chief of space policy at The Planetary Society, told AFP, noting the US space agency's recent budget turmoil and a workforce exodus that have challenged morale.

The current era of American lunar investment has frequently been portrayed as an effort to compete with China, which aims



The Artemis II crewed lunar mission lifts off from Pad 39B at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida, on Wednesday. (AFP)

to land humans on the Moon by 2030.

During the post-launch briefing, Isaacman said competition was "a great way to mobilise the resources of a nation."

"Competition can be a good thing," he said. "And we certainly have competition now."

Earlier in the day Trump said on Truth Social that the US is "WINNING."

"Economically, Militarily, and now, BEYOND THE STARS. Nobody comes close! America doesn't just compete, we DOMINATE, and the whole World is watching," he posted.

Trump sacks attorney-general

Names ex-personal lawyer to serve as the acting chief of the DOJ

AFP
Washington

US President Donald Trump fired Attorney-General Pam Bondi yesterday and named his former personal lawyer to serve as the acting chief of the Justice Department.

The move, which the Republican president announced in a social media post, comes amid criticism of Bondi's handling of the Epstein files and her failure to successfully prosecute several perceived Trump political foes.

"Pam Bondi is a Great American Patriot and a loyal friend, who faithfully served as my Attorney General over the past year," Trump said on Truth Social. "Pam did a tremendous job overseeing a massive crackdown in Crime across our Country."

Bondi "will be transitioning to a much needed and important new job in the private sector to be announced at a date in the near future," the president said, and will be replaced on an interim basis by Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche.

Bondi has been a staunch ally of the president but has drawn fire from some Trump supporters for



US President Donald Trump, alongside Attorney-General Pam Bondi (right), speaks during a news conference. (AFP/File photo)

her handling of the release of the Justice Department files on convicted Jeffrey Epstein.

The Epstein affair has been a major political liability for Trump, who was a longtime friend of the disgraced financier.

Bondi has also reportedly drawn Trump's ire by falling short with efforts to prosecute perceived Trump opponents such as former FBI director James Comey and New York Attorney-General Letitia James.

According to The New York Times, Trump may name former Republican congressman Lee Zeldin, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), to be the next attorney-general.

In the meantime, the post will be filled by Blanche, who was one of the personal lawyers who

defended Trump in the multiple criminal cases he faced after he left the White House in 2021.

Bondi's ouster comes nearly a month after Trump fired Kristi Noem as the head of the Department of Homeland Security.

Democratic lawmakers welcomed Bondi's firing.

"Good riddance," said Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts.

"Under Attorney-General Pam Bondi, the Department of Justice (DOJ) became a cesspool of corruption," Warren said. "Bondi will be remembered for blocking the release of the Epstein files (and) weaponising the DOJ to go after Trump's political opponents."

Senator Mark Warner of Virginia said Bondi's "botched handling of the Epstein files" had

"denied victims transparency and further undermined trust in our justice system."

"Americans deserve a Justice Department that is actually focused on delivering justice, not on serving a president's agenda of personal and political self-interest," Warner said.

Bondi joined Trump's legal team during his first term impeachment trial, in which he was alleged to have pressured Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to find political dirt on Democrat Joe Biden.

Trump was impeached by the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives but acquitted by the Republican-majority Senate.

Bondi helped push Trump's false claims of voter fraud after he lost the 2020 election to Biden.

She made television appearances on behalf of Trump and pushed to delegitimise vote counting in battleground states as part of the push by the former president to overturn the results of the vote.

Bondi also criticised the criminal cases brought against Trump, appearing in solidarity at his New York trial, where he was convicted of falsifying business records to cover up hush money payments to a porn star.

Bondi served as a prosecutor for 18 years before being elected Florida's attorney-general in 2010, the first woman to hold the post. She was re-elected to a second term in 2014.

Trump to sign order to pay tens of thousands of DHS employees

Reuters
Washington

US President Donald Trump said yesterday he would soon sign an emergency order to pay all employees at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) who have worked without pay since mid-February as Congress has failed to reach a funding deal.

"I will soon sign an order to pay ALL of the incredible employees at the Department of Homeland Security," Trump said in a post on Truth Social.

The US Senate cleared the way early yesterday for the House of Representatives to pass a DHS funding bill through September 30 that would end a nearly seven-week partial shutdown. The US House met yesterday but did not vote to approve a funding bill.

Tens of thousands of civilians at the US Coast Guard, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Federal Emergency Management Agency and other agencies have not been paid since the government funding standoff began in February.

Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin praised Trump's action "to ensure the hardworking men and women across DHS are paid."

About 80,000 sworn law enforcement agents like the Secret Service, immigration officers and others have been paid dur-

ing the shutdown.

The White House said in a memo it can pay DHS employees using funds from a large budget and tax bill approved by Congress last summer through additional executive action.

On Monday, 50,000 Transportation Security Administration airport security officers began getting paid after Trump signed an order last week to pay them.

"I will soon sign an order to pay ALL of the incredible employees at the Department of Homeland Security"

The standoff led to daily absences of 10% or more of TSA workers and brought chaos and long security lines to US airports.

Democrats in Congress have held up funding for the DHS while demanding a change in rules governing its immigration operations, after agents in Minneapolis shot and killed US citizen Renee Good and Alex Pretti.

Republican leaders in the US House of Representatives on Friday rejected a bipartisan Senate compromise to end the deadlock over DHS funding.

Democrats had proposed funding TSA separately while negotiating over reforms on how Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents operate.

US agencies to monitor drinking water for microplastics, pharmaceuticals

Reuters
Washington

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Department of Health and Human Services yesterday announced that they will monitor the impact of microplastics and pharmaceuticals on drinking water, the first step toward assessing their health risks and shaping new policies.

The joint announcement was hailed by EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin and Health Secretary Robert F Kennedy, Jr as a win for President Donald Trump's "Make America Healthy Again (MAHA)" agenda, whose priorities have included reducing the number of recommended childhood vaccines and promoting whole foods in new dietary guidelines.

The EPA will now include microplastics and pharmaceuticals on the sixth Contaminant Candidate List, which would mean they would start being tested and monitored under the Safe Drinking Water Act and receive funding for research, a precursor to future regulation if they are determined to threaten public water systems.

"We cannot treat what we cannot measure. We cannot regulate what we don't understand," Kennedy said at a press conference at EPA headquarters.

Zeldin and the EPA have drawn criticism from MAHA activists for falling short on addressing their concerns, including micro-

plastics, and not applying more stringent rules on pesticides.

"For too long, Americans have been ignored as they sound the alarm about plastics in their drinking water. That ends today," Zeldin said at the press conference.

Supporters of RfK, Jr and his MAHA platform helped elect President Donald Trump in 2024.

Seven US governors from states including New Jersey and Michigan as well as 175 environmental and health groups late last year filed a legal petition calling on the EPA to add microplastics to the list of contaminants to monitor. The list is updated every five years.

Microplastics are microscopic pieces of plastic that have been discovered everywhere from inside human bodies to drinking water to the depths of oceans and Arctic ice. Some studies have linked them to cancers or reproductive harm.

Plastic industry groups have dismissed these studies and said the

science is not settled concerning the harms caused by microplastics.

Judith Enck, president of Beyond Plastics and former EPA regional administrator, said the EPA's move is "an important first step."

Kimberly Wise White, vice-president of regulatory and scientific affairs at the American Chemistry Council, which represents plastic manufacturers, said the group supports science-driven monitoring of drinking water for microplastics.

When Kennedy ran for the 2024 Democratic presidential nomination, he pledged to tackle plastic pollution, including its production. He later endorsed Republican candidate Trump, whose administration last year warned countries to oppose any attempt to cap plastic production under a potential UN treaty to limit plastic pollution.

Pharmaceuticals enter water systems through improper disposal and human waste.



Jessica Kramer, EPA Assistant Administrator for the Office of Water, speaks next to EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin and US Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr, during an announcement on microplastics at the EPA headquarters in Washington, DC, yesterday. (Reuters)

Planning commission approves White House ballroom project

Reuters
Washington

US President Donald Trump's White House ballroom project was approved by Washington planning authorities yesterday, two days after a judge ruled work cannot proceed without Congress' approval.

The National Capital Planning Commission, which is chaired by one of Trump's former lawyers, deliberated and then voted to approve the "East Wing Modernization Project."

The Republican president says the \$400mn, 90,000sq ft (8,400sq m) ballroom will be a privately financed defining addition to the White House and a lasting symbol of his presidency.

The ballroom is part of Trump's broader push to reshape Washington's monumental core, which also includes plans for a 250-foot (76m) arch and a multi-year renovation of the Kennedy Center performing arts complex. He has also ripped out and replaced the White House Rose Garden and added a wide array of gilding to the Oval Office.

"I believe that, in time, this ballroom will be considered every bit as much of a national treasure as the other key components of the White House," said Will Scharf, who chairs the commission and is Trump's former personal lawyer.

Scharf, who was appointed by Trump, said that many of the negative comments the commission had received on the project dealt with issues beyond its scope,



National Capital Planning Commission meeting to deliberate about the Trump White House East Wing ballroom project in Washington, yesterday. (Reuters)

including negative comments on the private funding of the ballroom, the demolition process and opinions about Trump.

Phil Mendelson, a member of the commission and chairman of the Council of the District of Columbia, criticised the speed of the process, however, saying it was rushed. "I think that we can have a ballroom. To me that's not the issue," he said. "It's just too large. And if we can get the same program, but not as tall, not competing in height with the main structure, and a condensed footprint, we are better for that."

Over a dozen protesters gathered outside the commission building ahead of the vote, holding signs that read, "Hands off the people's house", among other messages, and displaying a stack of boxes they said contained 35,000 comments from the public, with 97% of them against the project.

"The American people have weighed in on this project, and they hate it," Jon Golinger, democracy advocate with Public Citizen, said as he criticised Trump over the project. "He needs to put the White House back the way the people gave it to him."

He said a vote to approve the project could be legally vulnerable to challenge.

The commission is one of two federal bodies, along with the US Commission of Fine Arts, assigned a role in overseeing key DC-area building projects.

The federal judge in the case granted a request for a preliminary injunction by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a nonprofit organisation that brought a lawsuit alleging Trump exceeded his authority when he razed the historic East Wing and launched construction on the new building.



Mexico's foreign minister leaves post for health reasons

Mexican Foreign Minister Juan Ramon de la Fuente will leave his post due to health reasons and be replaced by Roberto Velasco, President Claudia Sheinbaum said on Wednesday. Roberto Velasco, the current undersecretary for North America, has been nominated by Sheinbaum to lead the Foreign Ministry. The Senate must now ratify or reject the nomination. The leadership change comes at a pivotal moment for regional trade. The three member nations

of the USMCA - Mexico, the United States, and Canada - are conducting a joint review of the trade pact this year. Originally negotiated during the first Trump administration to replace Nafta in 2020, the agreement serves as a foundation of the Mexican economy. "Juan Ramon has asked me to leave the Foreign Ministry for health reasons," Sheinbaum said in a video posted on X, appearing alongside De la Fuente and Velasco. (Reuters)

Trafigura rejects Bolivia's fuel contracts suspension claim

Global commodity trading firm Trafigura's contracts with Bolivia's state-owned oil and gas company YPFB have not been halted, a company spokesperson said yesterday, rejecting a statement by Bolivia's Energy Minister Mauricio Medinaceli. Medinaceli said on Tuesday that Bolivia would suspend its gasoline contracts with Trafigura and rival trading house Vitol until investigations into poor quality fuel allegedly smuggled in from neighbouring Chile were

completed. "Contracts between Trafigura and YPFB do not concern the supply of gasoline," the Trafigura spokesperson said. "Trafigura has always met its contractual obligations in full and has received no complaints or claims from YPFB relating to product quality or any other matter. The contracts remain in effect and have not been suspended." Vitol could not immediately be reached for comment. (Reuters)

Argentina expels Iran's diplomatic envoy: ministry

Argentina yesterday expelled Iran's diplomatic envoy following what the foreign ministry called "false, offensive and baseless accusations" by Tehran. Mohsen Soltani Tehrani, Iran's charge d'affaires and counsellor, was ordered to leave the country within 48 hours, the ministry said in a statement. The expulsion order accused Iran of "obstructing justice" and said Argentina "will not tolerate affronts or interference". The row reflects deep anger in

Argentina over Iran's refusal to comply with arrest and extradition warrants related to the 1994 assault on an Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA) Jewish community centre, which killed 85 people. Argentina says Iran was also behind the truck bombing on March 17, 1992 of the Israeli embassy in the Argentine capital, killing 22 people and injuring more than 200. Argentina is host to the largest Jewish community in Latin America. (AFP)

US lifts sanctions on Venezuelan interim leader Delcy Rodriguez

AFP
Washington

The United States on Wednesday lifted sanctions against Venezuela's interim President Delcy Rodriguez, who took power after Washington ousted her predecessor Nicolas Maduro in a military operation in January.

Rodriguez's name was deleted from the "Specially Designated Nationals List," according to a post on the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control website.

Rodriguez welcomed the decision, writing on X that it was part of the "normalisation and strengthening" of bilateral relations. "We trust that this progress will allow for the lifting of the sanctions currently in force against our country, and make it possible to build and guarantee an effective binational cooperation agenda for the benefit of our peoples," she added. Ties between Washington and



Venezuela's acting president Delcy Rodriguez meets with US Secretary of Energy Chris Wright (out of frame) at the Miraflores Presidential Palace in Caracas. (AFP/ File Photo)

Caracas have warmed since Maduro's ouster, with Rodriguez complying with US President Donald Trump's demands for Caracas to open up its energy industry to American companies.

Rodriguez served as Maduro's deputy and was sanctioned by Washington for being a key official in his government, alongside officials including former defence minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez and Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello.

Rodriguez fired Lopez in mid-March, but she has been walking a fine line between demands from Washington and those from her own backers since Maduro's toppling.

Cabello, who remains in office, is seen as one of her key backers.

On Monday, the US embassy in Caracas resumed operations after being closed for seven years, the State Department said.

The reopening came after the US military operation that seized Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores from Caracas on January 3, taking them to New York to face drug trafficking charges that they deny. The operation killed around 100 people in Venezuela, according to authorities there.

US 'stands firmly with Panama' over ships detained by China

AFP, Reuters
Washington

The United States yesterday expressed support for Panama after China was accused of detaining Panama-flagged ships in a dispute over control of the Central American country's strategic canal.

Detentions of Panama-flagged vessels by China that followed a Panamanian court ruling raise serious concerns about efforts to undermine rule of law in the Latin American country, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said yesterday. The US Federal Maritime Commission said last week that it was closely monitoring a surge in detentions of Panama-flagged vessels in China that appears tied to a Panama court ruling against Hong Kong-based port operator CK Hutchison.

"China's recent actions against Panama-flagged vessels raise serious concerns about the use of economic tools to undermine the rule of law in Panama, a sovereign nation and vital partner for global commerce," Rubio said in a statement.

Panama's Supreme Court in late January invalidated the legal framework supporting the 1997 concession granting CK Hutchison's Panama Ports Com-

"China's recent actions against Panama-flagged vessels raise serious concerns about the use of economic tools to undermine the rule of law in Panama, a sovereign nation and vital partner for global commerce"

pany the right to operate the Balboa and Cristobal terminals on the Pacific and Atlantic sides of the Panama Canal. The cancellation followed mounting US pressure to curb Chinese influence around the strategic canal, which handles about 5% of global maritime trade.

China's embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Rubio's statement. Beijing had said it firmly opposed the court ruling against Hutchison's port concessions, calling it an "act of bad faith."

CK Hutchison, which operated the ports for nearly 30 years, has rejected the court ruling, accused Panamanian authorities of unlawfully seizing property, and launched an international arbitration case against the country, claiming damages of more than \$2bn.

"This sovereign ruling upheld transparency, the rule of law, and held private operators accountable to the public interest," Rubio said.

The US "stands firmly" with

Panama and looks forward to expanding economic and security co-operation, he said.

The FMC had said China's detentions of Panama-registered ships far exceeded historical norms, with Lloyd's List Intelligence report saying last week that the number had reached nearly 70 since March 8.

The United States has accused China of detaining Panama-flagged ships in response to a takeover by Panamanian authorities of two canal ports previously run by a Chinese company.

Washington and Beijing accuse each other of seeking to control the Panama Canal, a vital trade link between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lin Jian said China's position on the port was "clear-cut" when he was asked about the ship detentions at a press briefing on Friday.

"The US's repeated unwarranted comments only reveal its scheme to seize the canal," he said without directly addressing the accusations of ship detentions.

Russia will send second ship with oil to Cuba

AFP
Moscow

Russia will send a second ship carrying oil to Cuba as the island grapples with a US fuel blockade, Energy Minister Sergei Tsivilev said yesterday.

Cuba has been suffering from an energy crisis since January, when US forces abducted Venezuela president and Cuban ally Nicolas Maduro.

His removal deprived Cuba of its main oil supplier.

Washington then threatened to tariff any country that sold

or provided oil to the island, although it allowed Russia to deliver a tanker earlier this week for "humanitarian reasons".

"A vessel from the Russian Federation broke through the blockade. A second one is now being loaded. We will not leave the Cubans in trouble," Tsivilev was quoted as saying by Russian state media.

Moscow historically maintains close ties with Havana and has criticised Washington for attempting to block fuel deliveries.

Since the blockade began, the communist-run island has endured weeks of blackouts, fuel

rationing and food shortages.

A Russian tanker carrying 730,000 barrels of crude arrived in the Cuban port of Matanzas on Tuesday, providing the island with its first oil shipment since January.

US President Donald Trump, whose administration has long regarded Cuba as a hostile regime, said on Sunday he had "no problem" with Russia sending oil to the island.

"Cuba's finished. They have a bad regime. They have very bad and corrupt leadership and whether or not they get a boat of oil it's not going to matter," he said.

Cubans demand end of US embargo



Hundreds of Cubans demonstrated in front of the US embassy in Havana yesterday, riding bicycles and electric vehicles as they waved flags and signs demanding an end to the decades-old trade embargo on the country. Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel greeted the crowd before the "anti-imperialist youth parade" set out across the capital's famed oceanfront Malecon. (AFP)

Mexico sees up to 2.9% growth for 2027

Reuters
Mexico City

Mexico's government sees Latin America's No 2 economy growing between 1.9% and 2.9% next year, a draft budget from the country's finance ministry showed on Wednesday, presenting a slightly rosier outlook than the central bank.

For this year, the ministry held its forecasts steady at 1.8% to 2.8%.

The Bank of Mexico predicted the economy will grow 1.6% this year and 2.0% in 2027 in its most

recent quarterly report in late February, citing uncertainty around the ongoing review of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada free trade pact.

In a central bank poll published earlier on Wednesday, private sector analysts forecast growth of 1.5% this year and 1.8% in 2027.

Mexico should log a primary deficit of 4.1% of gross domestic product (GDP) this year, the finance ministry added, falling to 3.5% of GDP in 2027. Mexico's fiscal deficit in 2025 was 4.3% of GDP, according to official data.

Headline inflation, meanwhile, is likely to end 2026 at 3.7% and is likely to be at the

central bank's target of 3.0% at the end of next year, the finance ministry said. It predicted the central bank's policy interest rate would end 2026 at 6.3% and 2027 at 5.5%.

The Opec+ nation said that the average price for its oil export mix was expected to hit \$77.3 per barrel this year and fall to \$54.7 per barrel in 2027. It expects to produce 1.79mn barrels per day (bpd) this year, increasing to 1.81mn bpd next year.

The finance ministry expects the peso to end 2026 at 18.4 per US dollar, and weaken slightly to 18.6 next year.

Bolivia, US drug enforcement resume joint investigations

Bolivia and the US have resumed joint anti-drug trafficking investigations, the South American country's drugs czar Ernesto Justiniano told AFP on Wednesday. "There is joint work, joint investigations (with the US Drug Enforcement Agency or DEA)," said Justiniano, deputy minister for Social Defense and the official in charge of the country's anti-drug policy.

"We are investigating with the DEA, we are exchanging information." Paz came to power in November after nearly 20 years of socialist governments. He has radically shifted Bolivia's foreign policy, seeking greater economic and security cooperation with US President Donald Trump's administration. (AFP)

Brazilian researchers remix coffee varieties to confront climate challenge

Reuters
Campinas, Brazil

Under a baking sun, agronomist Oliveira Guerreiro Filho meanders through a hodgepodge of coffee plants at the Campinas Agronomy Institute where, unlike the uniform rows on most Brazilian coffee farms, each cluster is different from the next.

This menagerie of coffee species - some squat, others soaring - includes 15 uncommon and non-commercial breeds such as racemosa, liberica and stenophylla, the genes of which could shore up future supplies of arabica coffee, researchers hope.

Scientists warn that crops of arabica - the world's most com-

mon coffee bean - will be severely affected by a rapidly changing climate, with output from countries including No 1 grower Brazil expected to decline.

Climate change could make 20% of areas now growing arabica globally unsuitable for coffee crops by 2050, a report from lender Rabobank said this week.

By introducing genetic material from more rustic coffee species into new hybrids, scientists at the research institute in Sao Paulo state aim to create more resistant arabica varieties.

For example, liberica's hardiness in the face of hotter and drier conditions has drawn praise from farmers in Indonesia and Malaysia planting small plots of the species to see how they hold up against drought.



Different varieties of coffee are displayed at the Campinas Agronomy Institute during an interview with Brazilian researchers in Campinas, Brazil. (Reuters)

"Liberica can tolerate heat and high temperature environments very well, and it is disease-resist-

ant," Jason Liew, the founder of My Liberica, a coffee plantation in Malaysia's Johor state, told Reuters.

While farmers prize those qualities among less common species, the Brazilian researchers have specialised in bringing those traits to more productive and popular arabica plants.

"We've been working at the institute for many years to transfer drought tolerance genes from the racemosa species to arabica," Guerreiro Filho said. "We're trying to create drought-tolerant arabica varieties."

That can take decades of research. Scientists must produce cross-bred saplings and expose those hybrid varieties to harsh conditions in order to evaluate and identify the most robust plants, he said, a process that can take 20-30 years.

Hybrids are also tested for increased resistance to pests and

diseases, as well as improved quality. Arabica crossed with liberica has proven more resistant to coffee rust, a fungal infection, for instance, while arabica bred with racemosa does better against larvae of coffee leaf miner moths, Guerreiro Filho noted.

That makes research like the studies underway at the institute key to the future of coffee, said Rodolfo Oliveira, head of Brazilian state research agency Embrapa's coffee unit.

"Working with alternative species of coffee ... is vital because arabica has an extremely narrow genetic base, making it highly vulnerable to pests, diseases, and climate change," Oliveira said, underscoring the value of introducing new, "wild" genetic material from less common species.

South Korea's Lee urges US visa reforms, raises defence role in talks with senators

Reuters
Seoul

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung yesterday urged visiting US lawmakers to improve visa policies for Korean workers to prevent a recurrence of last year's detentions of Korean nationals in a raid at a Hyundai Motor facility in the state of Georgia. The presidential Blue House said Lee raised the issue during talks with a bipartisan delegation of US senators in Seoul, stressing that stable residency conditions for Korean workers in the US were essential for the smooth implementation of South Korea's investment package there. He also called on Congress to support legislation aimed at creating new work visas for South Korean professionals, known as the "Partner with Korea Act", as bilateral economic and industrial

cooperation deepens. The US lawmakers said they understood Seoul's concerns and pledged to pay close attention to visa-related issues affecting Korean workers, the Blue House said. Lee also told the senators South Korea was ready to shoulder a greater role in its own defence, including through the eventual transfer of wartime operational control from the US to South Korea. "South Korea believes it is appropriate to defend the Korean peninsula largely with our own capabilities and to reduce the burden on Washington," Lee was quoted as saying. Currently, the US would command allied troops in the event of war on the Korean peninsula, but successive South Korean governments have sought to regain wartime operational control. Lee's administration has sig-

nalled it aims to finalise the process during his term, which runs through 2030, once South Korea meets a set of military capability conditions agreed with the US. Touching on global issues, Lee said South Korea was grappling with the security and economic fallout from the Middle East conflict and sought US views on how to manage the impact. Democratic Senator Jeanne Shaheen, ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said efforts toward the operational control transfer were making progress but needed to be underpinned by the ability to respond effectively to crises. Republican Senator John Curtis welcomed Seoul's pledges to raise defence spending and purchase \$25bn worth of US weapons by 2030, as well as South Korea's plans for large-scale investment in the US, including in shipbuilding and manufacturing.

French president arrives in S Korea



French President Emmanuel Macron (centre) and his wife Brigitte Macron (left) are welcomed upon their arrival at Seoul Air Base in Seongnam yesterday. Macron's two-day itinerary includes a summit with President Lee Jae Myung and a visit to a war memorial to pay tribute to French soldiers who fought in the Korean War, as well as an economic forum and a dinner with K-pop stars and South Korean cineastes. (AFP)

7.4-magnitude quake off Indonesia kills one

Tsunami warning lifted

AFP
Manado, Indonesia

A major 7.4-magnitude quake struck off the coast of eastern Indonesia yesterday, killing at least one person, causing waves of up to 75cm (2.5 feet) and triggering a tsunami warning that was subsequently lifted.

The US Geological Survey (USGS) said the tremor hit at a shallow depth of 35 kilometres in the Molucca Sea between the Sulawesi and Maluku island groups in the early morning.

One person was killed when a building collapsed in the city of Manado in North Sulawesi province, a local search and rescue official told AFP.

"The quake was felt strongly and around Manado... one person died and one person had a leg injury," George Leo Mercy Randang told AFP by telephone.

The victim was "buried under the rubble" of a collapsed building, he said.

The Hawaii-based Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC) initially said hazardous tsunami waves were possible within 1,000km (621 miles) of the epicentre along the coasts of Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia.



Police officers look at a building of the North Sumatra's National Sports Committee of Indonesia damaged following a severe 7.4-magnitude offshore quake in Manado, North Sulawesi, yesterday. (AFP)

Within half an hour of the quake, waves up to 75cm were recorded in North Minahasa and 20cm in Bitung, both in the north of Sulawesi island, according to Indonesia's BMKG geological agency.

Thirty-centimetre waves were also logged in North Maluku province.

The PTWC lifted its warning just over two hours after the tremor, saying the tsunami threat "has now passed."

Ternate resident Budi Nurgianto, 42, said he was inside his house when the tremor struck, sending people panicking outside.

"The quake was felt strongly. I heard it first from the walls of the

house that shook," he said. "When I went outside, there were many people outside. They were panicked. The quake was felt (for) quite long, more than a minute.

"I even saw some people leaving their house without having finished their shower."

BMKG head Teuku Faisal Fathani told journalists in the capital Jakarta there were 11 after-shocks, the biggest with a magnitude of 5.5.

An AFP journalist in Manado on Sulawesi, about 300km west of Ternate by sea, said the shaking woke him and others in the city of around 450,000 people.

"I immediately woke up and

left my house. People (were) immediately scrambling outside. There is a school and the pupils rushed outside," he said.

The shaking persisted for "quite long" but he did not witness "significant damage", he added.

The PTWC had initially warned that tsunami waves of up to one metre were possible for parts of Indonesia, with smaller waves possible for the Philippines, Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan, Guam and Palau.

"Government agencies responsible for threatened coastal areas should take action to inform and instruct any coastal populations at risk," the agency said.

The Japan Meteorological Agency said it expected "slight changes" in the sea level along the Pacific coast from northern Hokkaido to southern Okinawa, but has not issued any warnings.

The earthquake centres of the Philippines and Malaysia have also not issued tsunami alerts.

Indonesia and neighbouring countries experience frequent earthquakes due to their location in the Pacific "Ring of Fire" - an arc of intense seismic activity where tectonic plates collide that stretches from Japan through Southeast Asia and across the Pacific basin.

In 2004, a magnitude 9.1 quake struck Aceh province, causing a tsunami and killing more than 170,000 people in Indonesia.

Indonesia issues fresh summons for Google, Meta over teen social media ban

AFP
Jakarta

Indonesia issued a second round of summons letters yesterday to Google and Meta for allegedly flouting a days-old ban on social media access for under-16s.

The Communication and Digital Ministry said it had "issued a second summons letter to Google (YouTube) and Meta (Facebook, Instagram, Threads) after both parties failed to comply" and warned of "sanctions".

App-addicted Indonesia began enforcing a social media ban for users under the age of 16 on Saturday, citing threats from online pornography, cyberbullying and internet addiction.

The ministry said yesterday Google and Meta had asked for a postponement and had failed to comply with a first summons issued earlier in the week for alleged non-compliance.

"Summonses can be issued up to a maximum of three times before sanctions are imposed," the ministry statement said.

It added that "compliance with child protection regulations is not merely an administrative obligation, but a responsibility that has a direct impact on children's safety in the digital space".

Concerns have grown globally over the impact of social media on children's well-being, with Australia becoming the first in the world to require sites to remove accounts held by under-16s.

"Every delay prolongs the

risks faced by children in the digital space. Therefore, we demand concrete and timely compliance from all platforms, including global platforms," said the ministry's Director General for Digital Space Supervision, Alexander Sabar.

If not, "enforcement mechanisms will proceed", he added without providing further details.

"Compliance with child protection regulations is not merely an administrative obligation, but a responsibility that has a direct impact on children's safety in the digital space"

Indonesia, with its population of over 284mn, boasts among the most social media users in the world, and has about 70mn children under the age of 16.

Meta said it had requested an extension that was approved by the government, the company's head of public policy in Indonesia and the Philippines Berni Moestafa said in a statement yesterday.

Berni added that Meta will meet with the ministry next week and that it is "committed to protecting teens on our platforms and will share more information once it is confirmed".

Google did not immediately respond to AFP's requests for comment.

Taiwan to strengthen Pratas islands' defences as China steps up pressure

Reuters
Taipei

Taiwan will strengthen its defences of the Pratas as China steps up its activities around the islands which lie at the top end of the South China Sea, the minister in charge of Taiwan's coastguard said yesterday.

Lying roughly between southern Taiwan and Hong Kong, the Pratas are seen by some security experts as vulnerable to Chinese attack due to their distance - more than 400km (250 miles) - from mainland Taiwan.

The Pratas, an atoll which is also a Taiwanese national park, are only lightly defended by Taiwan, and its coastguard has that responsibility rather than the military. China claims the Pratas, and Taiwan, as its own territory.

Kuan Bi-ling, head of Taiwan's Ocean Affairs Council, said China was gradually expanding the maritime areas in which it carries out "grey zone harassment" - referring to non-combat operations designed to put pressure on Taiwan such as coastguard patrols.

Since last year, the number of Chinese government boats, which include the coastguard, has increased around the Pratas, whereas previously activity was concentrated around Taiwan itself and the Kinmen islands, which sit close to the Chinese coast, she added.

"From a political and strategic perspective, we have found that for them, seizing Dongsha would carry considerable strategic significance," Kuan said, using the name both Taiwan and China use for the Pratas.

Taiwan has renovated the wharf on the main island and will regularly deploy vessels with greater operational capacity there, she added, in comments to the Taiwan Foreign Correspondents' Club.

"Dongsha is an excellent and highly important site for the development of an island defence system, and we currently have plans to develop this," Kuan said, without giving details.

China's Taiwan Affairs Office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In January, Taiwan said a Chinese reconnaissance drone briefly



Kuan Bi-ling speaks during a press conference in Taipei, Taiwan, yesterday. (Reuters)

flew over the Pratas, in what Taiwan's defence ministry called a "provocative and irresponsible" move. Kuan said China's pressure campaign "lets down people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait", given it drains resources from other things such as rescuing mariners in distress.

In time of war, Taiwan coastguard ships would be pressed into action, including its new Anping-class corvettes, which are based on the navy's Tuo Chiang-class warships and have space to install anti-ship missiles.

Manila says Iran to allow Philippine oil shipments through Strait of Hormuz

AFP
Manila

The Philippines said yesterday that Iran has pledged to allow safe passage for shipments of oil to the import-dependent archipelago through the Strait of Hormuz.

President Ferdinand Marcos last week declared a state of national energy emergency, saying "nothing was off the table" as the country of 116mn tries to navigate a global fuel crisis driven by the Middle East war.

Fuel prices have hit historic highs in the Philippines since treaty ally the US and Israel launched strikes on Iran on February 28, with Tehran effectively closing the vital Strait of Hormuz to traffic since.

Yesterday, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs said a "productive phone conversation" between Foreign Secretary Theresa Lazaro and her Iranian counterpart had opened the

door to crucial oil shipments.

"The Iranian foreign minister assured the secretary that Iran will allow the safe, unhindered, and expeditious passage through the Strait of Hormuz of Philippine-flagged vessels, energy sources, and all Filipino seafarers," the foreign affairs department said in a statement.

The Philippines imports the majority of its energy requirements from the Middle East with the move ensuring "the steady delivery of critical oil and fertiliser supplies to the Philippines" the ministry added.

Lazaro said in a post to X the call had reached a "positive understanding on the safety of our seafarers and the security of our energy supply".

A day earlier, Lazaro met with Iran's ambassador in Manila to seek the formal designation of the Philippines as a "non-hostile country".

US President Donald Trump said yesterday that the US was "very close" to achieving its ob-

jectives while simultaneously threatening to bomb Iran "back to the Stone Ages" over the next two to three weeks.

In a report to the Philippine stock exchange this week, the operator of the country's sole oil refinery, said it had agreed to purchase Russian crude after seeing at least 4mn barrels in shipments cancelled since the start of the war.

Its purchase of around 2.5mn barrels of Russian crude had been made out of "extreme necessity", the report from Petron Corp said.

AFP had previously reported that a tanker filled with Russian crude oil had arrived at the harbour servicing Petron's refinery, a purchase unthinkable before the US eased sanctions tied to Moscow's war in Ukraine.

The Philippines' announcement of an accord with Iran comes just days after neighbouring Malaysia said its tankers would be permitted to pass through the Strait of Hormuz without paying any toll to Tehran.

Myanmar parliament to elect new president today

Myanmar lawmakers will elect a new president on Friday, the parliamentary Speaker said, with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing one of three candidates for the post. The former commander in chief has led Myanmar since 2021, when he ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi and triggered a civil war. He was one of three vice presidents elected by lawmakers on Tuesday, receiving 247 of 260 votes in the lower house. "Among the three vice presidents... (members of parliament) have to vote to select and elect the one vice president they prefer as the President," parliamentary speaker Aung Lin Dwe said yesterday, adding the vote

will be held at 10:00am (0330 GMT). The other two vice-presidents are Nan Ni Ni Aye, a regional MP from Karen state with the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), and current Prime Minister Nyo Saw. After five years of hardline rule, the top general oversaw heavily restricted elections that returned a walkover win for pro-military parties in January. Now the USDP - led and staffed by many retired officers - is entrenched in parliament after winning 80% of elected seats, and it is expected the new government will march in lockstep with the top brass. (AFP)

Malaysia civil servants to work from home: PM

Malaysia will introduce a work-from-home policy for ministries, agencies, statutory bodies and government-linked companies starting April 15 to conserve energy during the Middle East war, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said. The premier's announcement late Wednesday comes as the southeast Asian nation starts to feel the impact of the Middle East war on global fuel supplies. "The cabinet has agreed to the work-from-home policy. It aims to reduce fuel consumption and ensure a stable energy supply," Anwar said during a special briefing. He did not give details, saying more updates would be

announced soon. Malaysia heavily subsidises fuel, with eligible citizens paying just 1.99 ringgit (\$0.49) per litre of unleaded petrol. But as global crude prices soar and Iran keeps the crucial Strait of Hormuz effectively closed, Anwar said the quota for subsidised fuel would be cut from 300 litres to 200 litres a month. Transport Minister Anthony Loke added that the vessels would be exempt from any prospective tolls imposed by Iran, a measure Tehran has threatened. "We are a friendly party. We have a good diplomatic relationship with the Iranian government," he said, expressing confidence that Iran would allow the ships to pass. (AFP)



India defence exports hit 'all-time high'

AFP
New Delhi

India's defence exports "skyrocketed" to an all-time high of more than \$4bn in the last fiscal year, as it looks to boost its arms manufacturing sector, the government said yesterday.

The figures mark a rise of more than 60% from 2024, the defence ministry said, and provide a shot in the arm for the South Asian country, which is determined to recast itself as a major producer and exporter of weapons.

"India is marching ahead towards becoming a global defence manufacturing hub," the ministry quoted Defence Minister Rajnath Singh as saying.

"This big jump... in defence exports reflects the growing global trust in India's indigenous capabilities and advanced manufacturing strength," Singh said, adding that it had hit an "all-time high" in the fiscal year 2025-26 of 38,424bn rupees (\$4.15bn).

Government defence companies produced nearly 55% of the exports, with the rest made by private companies.

"This milestone showcases the power of a collaborative and self-reliant defence ecosystem," Singh said.

India exports defence equipment to more than 100 countries, with the US, France and Armenia among the top customers, according to the defence ministry.

Shipments range from missiles,

boats and artillery to radar systems, rocket launchers and electronic components.

However, the country is still primarily a buyer, not a seller, and remains globally a minor player in exports.

New Delhi earlier this year announced a record \$85bn boost for its defence sector.

The spending hike came after a four-day conflict with arch-rival Pakistan in May that killed at least 70 people, and saw both sides make extensive use of drones as well as intense missile and artillery barrages.

But India's arms purchases still make up around eight % of all imports globally, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

India graveyard raid uncovers hidden cooking gas canisters amid shortage

Reuters
Hyderabad

Indian police this week seized 414 cooking-gas canisters hidden in a graveyard in Hyderabad city and arrested those involved in trying to sell them on the black market amid shortages due to the Iran war, a government official said yesterday. Authorities have stepped up raids to curb hoarding of liquefied petroleum gas canisters after the US-Israeli war against Iran disrupted shipping, causing supply shortages. India, the world's No. 2 LPG importer, meets about 60% of its demand through overseas purchases, mostly from the Middle East.

"Just yesterday, around 2,600 raids were carried out and about 700 cylinders were seized," Sujata Sharma, a senior official in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, told a regular briefing on the Middle East crisis.

"In addition, around 400 cylinders were recently found at one location inside a graveyard in Hyderabad. Ten people have been detained there, and the distributor involved has been suspended," she said.

Police said the accused had been selling both commercial and domestic canisters from the graveyard at nearly three times the current market price. A commercial canister that costs about 2,100 Indian rupees (\$22) had

been sold for as much as 6,000 rupees.

The total value of the seized canisters and some vehicles used by the accused was nearly 2.2mn rupees, police said. Reuters could not immediately contact the accused or their representatives.

"The supply of natural gas to domestic consumers is 100% assured," Sharma said. "With regard to LPG supply, prices have remained stable despite international volatility, and there has been no increase in the price of domestic LPG cylinders." To ease the pressure on LPG supplies, India has been promoting the use of alternatives such as kerosene, coal and biogas, while accelerating the rollout of piped natural gas for households.

British FM Cooper stresses 'urgent need' to reopen Strait of Hormuz

AFP
London

British foreign minister Yvette Cooper stressed yesterday the "urgent need" to reopen the Strait of Hormuz and slammed Iran's "recklessness" as she convened a meeting of some 40 countries on the vital shipping route.

Cooper said Iran's blockading of the waterway was "hitting our global economic security" as she kicked off the virtual meeting of international allies.

The strait has been virtually closed since the US-Israeli war against Iran started on February 28, impacting global supplies of important commodities including oil, liquid natural gas, and fertilizer.

That has led to a sharp rise in energy prices.

Cooper said foreign ministers and representatives from more than 40 countries had joined the call to discuss "the urgent need to restore freedom of navigation for international shipping, and the strength of our international determination to see the Strait reopen once more".

A total of 37 countries have signed a statement, first published last month, expressing "readiness to contribute to appropriate efforts to ensure safe passage through" the shipping lane.

Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the Netherlands are among those to have signed it.

The US, China, and most Middle Eastern countries have not, according to a list provided by the UK government.



British Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper prepares to speak during a virtual summit at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London, yesterday. (Reuters)

"We have seen Iran hijack an international shipping route to hold the global economy hostage," Cooper added in her opening remarks, broadcast before the rest of the meeting took place behind closed doors.

Cooper said the discussions would focus on the "collective mobilisation of our full range of diplomatic and economic tools and pressures" to "enable a safe and sustained opening of the Strait".

A spokesperson for the French foreign ministry said securing the Strait of Hormuz could "only take place once the intense phase of the bombing is over".

French President Emmanuel Macron, speaking on a visit to South Korea, meanwhile, said a military operation to liberate the Strait of Hormuz was "unrealistic", while

lamenting Trump's differing daily

statements on the Iran war and Nato.

"There are those who advocate for the liberation of the Strait of Hormuz by force through a military operation, a position sometimes expressed by the US," Macron said.

"I say sometimes because it has varied, it is never the option we have chosen and we consider it unrealistic," he said.

The virtual meeting came after Trump urged oil-importing nations to show "courage" and seize the narrow strait.

"The countries of the world that... receive oil through the Hormuz Strait must take care of that passage," Trump said in a prime-time address at the White House late Wednesday.

"Just take it, protect it, use it for yourselves," he added.

Trump has said he would consider a ceasefire only when Hor-

muz is "free and clear".

Western officials have insisted any operation to protect seafarers using the strait could only come after a ceasefire.

"We are also convening military planners to look at how we marshal our collective defensive military capabilities, including looking at issues such as de-mining or reassurance once the conflict eases," Cooper told yesterday's meeting.

Around a fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas passes through the strait in peacetime.

The channel normally sees around 120 daily transits, according to shipping industry intelligence site Lloyd's List.

But since March 1, commodities carriers have made just 225 crossings, according to maritime intelligence firm Kpler, a 94-percent decrease on peacetime.

Maldives seeks fuel from India amid Iran conflict

Reuters
New Delhi

The Maldives is seeking fuel supplies from India, which is continuing to ship out fuel to neighbouring countries, a spokesperson for India's foreign ministry said yesterday.

India, the world's fourth biggest refiner, is supplying fuels to Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka under commercial engagements, said Randhir Jaiswal at a news conference.

"The government of Maldives has also reached out to us for supply of petroleum products both on short-term and long-term basis. Maldives' request is being examined keeping in mind our own availability and our own needs," Jaiswal said.

Maldives typically sources most of its fuel from Oman, according to World Bank data. Shipping of oil and oil products from the Middle East has been disrupted by the US-Israeli war with Iran, which has led to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a major transit point for energy supplies.

Jaiswal said India is also dis-

cussing the current energy situation with Mauritius and Seychelles. "We have not received any request from them as yet," he said.

India is talking to Iran and other countries to secure the safe transit of its tankers stranded in the Strait of Hormuz, carrying oil and products such as liquefied petroleum gas and liquefied natural gas, Jaiswal said.

So far India has managed to move out six LPG carriers from the Gulf. Eighteen India-flagged vessels are still stuck in the Strait, said Mukesh Mangal, additional secretary in the federal shipping ministry.

Refiners in India, the world's third biggest oil importer and consumer, are also preparing to buy Iranian oil after the US allowed a waiver of sanctions. India last imported Iranian oil in 2019.

Sanctioned vessel Ping Shun, carrying Iranian oil, is signalling as its destination the Indian west coast port Vadinar, according to LSEG ship tracking data.

However, Indian authorities are not aware of the tanker's arrival at Indian ports, said Mangal.

Nepal charges 32 over fake helicopter rescue scam

AFP
Kathmandu

Nepal has charged 32 people over a multi-million-dollar insurance scam involving fake helicopter rescues of trekkers, police said yesterday, a long-running racket that has cast a shadow over the country's vital tourism industry.

The Himalayan nation attracts thousands of trekkers each year, many walking remote high-altitude trails where emergency airlifts are common and often costly.

But investigators say some operators have for years orchestrated fraudulent evacuations to cash in on insurance payouts.

Police say they uncovered cases in which multiple insurance claims were filed for a single rescue, chartered flights were falsely billed as emergency evacuations and private hospitals issued inflated or fabricated medical invoices.

"Court proceedings are underway. Charges have been filed against 32 people. So far 10 people have been arrested," Manoj Kumar KC, chief of Nepal's Central Investigation Bureau

(CIB), told AFP.

The companies involved allegedly defrauded insurers of at least \$19.69 million, with cuts distributed at different levels, the police had said in January, when the first arrests were made.

Those named in the chargesheet, seen by AFP, include people in trekking agencies, helicopter firms and hospitals allegedly linked to the racket.

Investigators said guides sometimes sickened travellers - including by mixing baking soda into their food or serving contaminated meals - to justify helicopter evacuations.

Trekkers were also pressured into airlifts even for minor illnesses, according to the chargesheet.

Six suspects were first detained in January.

The arrests came after nearly three months of inquiries by the CIB that they said uncovered a trail of forged documents and manipulated records.

A 2018 government probe identified 15 companies involved in similar scams, but no action was taken, allowing them to persist despite new guidelines introduced after warnings from insurers.

Court extends detention of ex-PM Oli in protest probe

AFP
Kathmandu

Nepal court yesterday extended the detention of former prime minister KP Sharma Oli and his ex-home minister for a further two days as investigators probe their alleged roles in a deadly crackdown on protests last year.

Police arrested Oli, 74, and former home minister Ramesh Lekhak on Saturday, a day after Prime Minister Balendra Shah was sworn in following the first elections since the September uprising that toppled Oli's government.

Authorities are investigating their alleged involvement in the crackdown on demonstrations in 2025 that killed at least 76 people.

Neither man has been formally charged and both deny responsibility for the violence.

"The court has granted two days extension," Kathmandu District Court information officer Deepak Kumar Shrestha told AFP.

The court decision said investigators required more time as Oli's statement was still being recorded.

The order marks the second extension after the court initially granted police five days' detention on Sunday.

Oli remains hospitalised, where he was admitted on Saturday for what police described as a procedural medical check-up, adding that he suffers from heart and kidney problems.

On Monday, Nepal's Supreme Court ordered the government to explain Oli's arrest after his wife filed a petition claiming the detention was unlawful.

Police said on Thursday said they had submitted their response.

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

The commission's report said the statements given by the two men suggesting they did not

know about the violence were part of a bid to shift responsibility and amounted to "criminal negligence".

Oli's CPN-UML Marxist party has described the arrests as "a vengeful act" and called for protests.

But Rabi Lamichhane, leader of the ruling Rastriya Swatantra Party, rejected that claim.

"The first right to receive justice belongs to the mother of the martyr, this cannot be called revenge," Lamichhane said yesterday as he addressed the opening session of parliament.

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.

Shah, a 35-year-old rapper-turned-politician, led the Rastriya Swatantra Party to a sweeping election victory on a platform of youth-driven political change and defeated Oli in his own constituency.

Nepal holds its first post-poll parliament session

AFP
Kathmandu

Nepal's newly elected lawmakers met yesterday for the first parliamentary session since deadly anti-corruption protests toppled the government in September 2025 and left the old parliament building in flames.

Lawmakers, elected in March, met within the new parliament building, with many of the politicians taking their seats for the first time.

That includes the Himalayan nation's leader, rapper-turned-politician Prime Minister Balendra Shah, who led the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) to sweep the polls, winning 182 of the 275 seats, just short of a two-thirds majority.

Shah, 35, was dressed all in black, including

his trademark dark sunglasses that he kept on inside the hall.

The prime minister has remained silent publicly since his RSP party won the election, beyond taking the oath as leader and the release of a rap song, where he said that the "strength of unity" was his "national power".

Rabi Lamichhane, president of the RSP, spoke to lawmakers yesterday.

"The votes we have received are not just of support, but for change... and I can proudly say we have begun that change," he said.

"Our work, and the government's work, will speak," he said.

Lamichhane asked the opposition to "monitor us 24 hours", and use their experience to point out their mistakes.

The new parliament is markedly younger compared to the previous government, with nearly 60

directly elected members under the age of 40.

The deadly September demonstrations began over a brief social media ban but tapped into longstanding fury over corruption and economic hardship.

At least 76 people were killed over two days of unrest.

Three high profile arrests - including four-time ex-prime minister KP Sharma Oli - linked to the unrest have been made so far.

An inquiry commission into the violence had recommended that Oli and ex-home minister Ramesh Lekhak, as well as the capital Kathmandu's former chief district officer Chhabil Rijal, be investigated under laws addressing deaths caused by negligence.

Oli, Lekhak and Rijal have denied responsibility for the violence and no charges have been laid.



Nepal's Prime Minister Balendra Shah (second right) and Rastriya Swatantra Party President Rabi Lamichhane (second left) arrive to attend the parliament session in Kathmandu yesterday. (AFP)



Every good deed is charity

Allah The Exalted instructs His Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, to enjoin his Ummah (Muslim nation) to practise goodness and make it their intrinsic quality and moral characteristic. He Says (what means): {Take what is given freely, enjoin what is good} [Qur'an 7:199] The prominent scholar of Tafseer (exegesis) Ibn Sa'di said:

"Saying {enjoin what is good} includes every good word, beautiful deed and perfect morals towards relatives and strangers. Be keen on goodness to people through teaching knowledge, enjoining good such as maintaining ties of kinship, dutifulness to parents, reconciling people, offering some useful advice or a right opinion, co-operation in righteousness and piety, and forbidding evil or guiding to obtain an interest, whether religious or worldly." [Tafseer Al-Kareem Ar-Rahmaan fi Tafseer Kalaam Al-Mannaan]

The Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, informed us that: "Every act of goodness is a charity." [Al-Bukhari and Muslim] Thus, you are rewarded for every act of goodness you perform. Many texts came to show us different kinds of good deeds. For example, Abu Hurayrah narrated that the Messenger of Allah said:

"There is a (compulsory) charity to be given for every joint of the human body (as a sign of gratitude to Allah) every day the sun rises. To judge justly between two persons is regarded as a charity. To help a man concerning his riding animal by helping him to ride it or by lifting his luggage on to it is also regarded as a charity, and (saying) a good word is also a charity. Every step taken on one's way to offer the obligatory prayer (in the mosque) is also a charity. To remove a harmful thing from the way is also a charity." [Al-Bukhari and Muslim]

The good deeds mentioned by the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, include deeds with general benefit, such as reconciling people and helping a man concerning his riding animal by helping him to ride it by lifting his luggage onto it. Saying good words which includes greeting and responding to a person who sneezes, removing a harmful thing from the pathways, enjoining good, forbidding evil, aiding the needy, helping the deaf to hear and the weak sighted to see and guiding the blind are some other good deeds that come under the same category. Other acts whose benefit does not transcend the one who does them, include utterances of glorification of Allah The Almighty, utterances proclaiming His greatness, praise and professing His oneness, walking to prayers and praying the two Rak'ahs (units of prayer) of Dhuha (mid-morning prayer). [Jaami' Al-'Uloom wal Hikam]

Among the types of charity is what was mentioned in the Hadeeth of Ibn 'Umar that a man came to the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, and said:

"O Messenger of Allah, who are the dearest people to Allah and the dearest deeds to Allah?" The Messenger of Allah, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, replied: "The dearest among people to Allah is the one who is most beneficial to people, and the dearest of deeds to Allah is to bring happiness to a fellow Muslim, or relieve him of distress, or pay off his debt or stave away hunger from him. It is better for me to walk with my Muslim brother in his time of need than to stay secluded in this mosque of Madinah for a month. Whoever holds back his anger, Allah will cover his faults and whoever suppresses his fury while being able to execute it, Allah will fill his heart with satisfaction on the Day of Judgment. Whoever walks with his brother in need until he establishes that for him, Allah will establish his feet firmly on the day when all feet would slip." [At-Tabaraani] [Al-Albaani: Hasan]

It was narrated on the authority of Abu Jurayy Al-Hujaymi that he said, "I came to the Messenger of Allah, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, and said, 'O Messenger of Allah, we are a people living in the desert, teach us something with which Allah The Almighty and Exalted may benefit us?' He said: 'Do not hold in contempt any act of goodness even if it is pouring water from your cup into the container of one seeking water and even talking to your brother with a cheerful countenance.'" [Ahmad] [Al-Albaani: Saheeh]

Among other types of charity is paying the rights to their owners. Abu Hurayrah narrated that the Messenger



of Allah, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "'Six are the rights of a Muslim over another Muslim.' It was said to him, 'O Messenger of Allah, what are these?' Thereupon he said: 'When you meet him, offer him greetings; when he invites you to a feast accept it. When he seeks your counsel, give it to him, and when he sneezes and says: All praise is due to Allah, you say Yarhamuk Allah (may Allah show mercy to you); and when he falls ill visit him; and when he dies follow his bier.'" [Muslim] Al-Baraa' ibn 'Aazib may Allah be pleased with him said that the Messenger of Allah, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, ordered them to do seven things (including): "To accept invitations, to help the oppressed and to fulfil the oaths." [Al-Bukhari and Muslim] Besides, 'Umar ibn Al-Khattaab may Allah be pleased with him added that the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said on the same occasion: "Help the oppressed (sorrowful) and guide those who have lost their way." [Abu Daawood]

Giving respite for the insolvent is another act of goodness. It was narrated on the authority of Sulaymaan ibn Buraydah may Allah have mercy upon him that his father said, I heard the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, saying:

"Whoever gives respite to an insolvent person, will receive a reward as if he has spent this amount in charity for every day he delays." Then, I heard him saying: "Whoever gives respite to an insolvent person, will receive a reward as if he has spent double this amount in charity for every day he delays." He said, 'O Messenger of Allah, I heard you saying, 'Whoever gives respite to an insolvent person, will receive a reward as if he has spent this amount in charity for every day he delays?' then, I heard you saying, 'Whoever gives respite to an insolvent person, will receive a reward as if he has spent double this amount in charity for every day he delays?' He said: 'He will receive a reward as if he has spent this amount in charity for every day before the debt is due. When the debt is due, he will receive a reward as if he has spent double this amount in charity for every day he delays.'" [Ahmad]

Being kind to animals is an act of goodness. Abu Hurayrah may Allah be pleased with him narrated that the Messenger of Allah, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said:

"While a man was walking, he felt thirsty and went down a well and drank water from it. On coming out of it, he saw a dog panting and eating mud because of excessive thirst. The man said, 'This (dog) is suffering from extreme thirst like I was.' So he (went down the well), filled his shoe with water, caught hold of it with his teeth and climbed up and gave water to the dog. Allah thanked him for his (good) deed and forgave him.' The people asked, 'O Messenger of Allah! Is there a reward for us in serving (the) animals?' He replied: 'Yes, there is a reward for serving any animate being.'" [Al-Bukhari and Muslim]

Moreover, Allah The Almighty facilitates charity as He considers desisting from doing mischief to people a sort of charity that can be performed by man. Thus, if he does not do good, he should not do evil. This is supported by the Hadith (narration) of Abu Tharr, may Allah be pleased with him who narrated,

"I said, 'O Messenger of Allah, which of the deeds is the best?' He (the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam) replied: 'Belief in Allah and Jihaad (striving) in His cause.' I again asked, 'Who is the slave whose emancipation is the best?' He replied: 'One who is the most precious for his master and whose price is the highest.' I said, 'If I cannot afford to do it?' He replied: 'Help an artisan or make anything for the unskilled (laborer).' I (Abu Tharr) said, 'O Messenger of Allah, you see that I am helpless in doing some of these deeds.' He replied: 'Desist from doing mischief to people. That is your charity for yourself.'" [Muslim]

The righteous predecessors set the greatest examples in doing acts of goodness. Abu Bakr As-Siddeeq, may Allah be pleased with him, after assuming the caliphate, used to go everyday to a house in the outskirts of Madinah where an old blind woman resided. He would cook her food and clean her house. She did not know who he was. He used to compete with 'Umar ibn al-Khattaab, may Allah be pleased with him, in serving people. When 'Umar assumed the caliphate, he used to acquaint himself with the conditions of the Muslims. He found a widow with her orphans crying because of hunger. He immediately went to Bayt Al-Maal (the Muslim treasury), carried some food on his back, cooked it for them and stayed with them till they ate and laughed.

Among the remarkable things mentioned about 'Ali Zayn Al-'Aabideen may Allah have mercy upon him is that some of the people of Madinah did not know from where their means of sustenance came to them. When he died, they stopped getting the supplies that they used to get every night. While they were washing his body may Allah have mercy upon him they found marks on his back due to the heavy sacks he used to carry at night to the houses of widows. [Siyar A'laam An-Nubalaa']

'Abdullaah ibn Al-Mubaarak, may Allah have mercy upon him, used to spend his money on jurists. He used to take upon himself the costs of Haj for anyone who wanted to perform Haj from among the people of Marv. He also used to pay people's debts provided that the creditor did not inform the debtor of his name. [Siyar A'laam An-Nubalaa']

We also believe that Allah The Almighty rewards any doer of good even if he did not intend to draw closer to Allah The Almighty. Al-Hasan, may Allah have mercy upon him, was asked, "If a man asks another for money while he hates him, so he gives it to him only out of shyness, will he be rewarded?" He said, "This is a good deed and good deeds are rewarded." Moreover, Ibn Seereen may Allah have mercy upon him was asked about a man who follows a funeral not out of hope for the reward of Allah The Almighty but only out of shyness of the family of the deceased, will he receive a reward? He replied, "One reward? Rather, he will receive two rewards, one for praying on his Muslim brother and the other for maintaining ties with the family of the deceased." [Jaami' Al-'Uloom wal Hikam]

Therefore, let us hasten to do good deeds. 'Ali ibn Abi Taalib, may Allah be pleased with him, said: "Do not abandon good deeds because of the ingratitude of the ungrateful. Perhaps, the thankful would thank you as many times as the ingratitude of the ungrateful." Al-Maawardi may Allah have mercy upon him said,

"Whoever is capable of performing a good deed, should hasten to it out of fear of missing it or inability to perform it. He should know that it is among the opportunities of his lifetime and the crowning achievement of his abilities. He should not be reluctant out of confidence regarding his ability to do it. There have been many people who were confident of their abilities, then they lost them and regretted. Many depended upon a status that was gone, leaving nothing but shame. al-'Abbaas, may Allah be pleased with him, said, 'An act of goodness is not complete except with three qualities; hastening to it, considering it small and hiding it. If you hasten to it, you make it faultless. If you consider it small, you increase its value and if you hide it, you make it perfect!'"

Do not hesitate to help your fellow Muslim even if this affects your time and effort. Trust that your Creator will reward you with goodness, satisfy your needs, alleviate your worries, remove your distress and bless your sustenance. The Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Whoever fulfills the needs of his brother, Allah will fulfill his needs." [Al-Bukhari and Muslim] Ibn 'Abbaas, may Allah be pleased with him, said: "Whoever seeks to recover the right of his Muslim brother will be rewarded a charity for every step."

Do not be reluctant to alleviate the worry of a person, offer help to rescue him, pay a debt on his behalf, lend him money, protect his chastity, keep him company, secretly supplicate for him and offer every help in righteousness or support in goodness. All of these are deeds by which the love of Allah The Almighty is attained and His pleasure is won. Let us remember the Hadeeth in which the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "By the One in whose hand is my soul, there is no slave performing an act with the intent of attaining the reward of Allah except that I will hold his hand on the Day of Judgment to enter Paradise." [Ibn Hibbaan] [Al-Albaani: Hasan]

We ask Allah The Almighty to enable us to benefit others, to make us keys to goodness, locks to evil and to use us in obeying Him.



Giving sincere advice

The giving of sincere advice enjoys a sublime and exalted position in Islam, and how could this not be so? The Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam (may Allah exalt his mention), considered the giving of sincere advice on a par with the religion as whole. The Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Religion is giving sincere advice."

A person would give sincere advice to others when he loves and sympathises with them, when he wishes goodness for them, and when he wishes to thwart evil and harm from them. Thus, Ibn Al-Atheer, may Allah have mercy upon him, said that giving sincere advice is an indication of the adviser's wish to bring about goodness for the one advised.

The Companions, may Allah be pleased with them, gave an oath of allegiance to the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, that they would sincerely advise the Muslims: Jareer ibn 'Abdullah, may Allah be pleased with him, said: "I gave the oath of allegiance to the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, that I would perform prayers, pay the Zakah, and give advice to every Muslim."

In fact, a person who sincerely advises people, seeking goodness for them, is one of the vicegerents of Allah The Almighty upon the earth. Al-Hasan, may Allah have mercy upon him, said: "There still exist persons who give sincere advice for the sake of Allah The Almighty. They sincerely advise people for the sake of Allah and educate them as to what is due to Him. They implement the order of Allah The Almighty upon the earth by giving sincere advice - and these are the vicegerents of Allah upon the earth."

To whom should sincere advice be given?

Sincere advice is for Allah, His Messenger, His Book, and to the Muslim leaders and the public at large. Imam ibn Hajar, may Allah have mercy upon him, said:

"Sincere advice for Allah The Almighty means describing Him with the appropriate attributes, submitting to Him overtly and covertly, seeking His pleasure through obeying Him, fearing His anger by not

disobeying Him, and striving to help sinners return to Him.

"Sincere advice for His Book means learning and teaching it, reciting and writing its letters properly, understanding its meanings, observing its boundaries, applying its instructions and rebutting the allegations that fabricators try to raise against it.

"Sincere advice for His Messenger, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, means venerating him, supporting him during his life and after his death, reviving his Sunnah by learning and teaching it, following his example in sayings and actions, and loving him and his followers.

"Sincere advice to the Muslim leaders means assisting them in the tasks with which they are assigned, alerting them when they are heedless, covering their unintentional mistakes, uniting people upon their obedience, and guiding straying hearts back to them. The greatest sincere advice that a person may give to them is to prevent them - in the best way possible - from oppression."

The Imams of Ijtihad [those who issue rulings] are among the Muslim leaders, and sincere advice to them means disseminating their knowledge and merits and thinking good of them.

Sincere advice to the Muslim masses means having compassion for them, seeking what benefits them, teaching them what is useful for them, preventing harm from them, loving for them what a person would love for himself, and hating for them what a person would hate for himself.

Shaykh 'Abdur-Rahman ibn Nasir As-Sa'di, may Allah have mercy upon him, said: "Sincere advice for Allah and His Messenger implies true belief in them, sincerity in making Jihad, determination to perform it when one can do so, and trying one's best to encourage and urge Muslims to do so. Sincere advice begins with sincerely advising oneself first, for rarely will a person advise others sincerely if he cheats himself."

The Messengers were the most concerned of all with sincerely advising their people

The Prophets of Allah, may Allah exalt their mention, endeavoured to call people to Allah. They were extremely keen on guiding them and spared no effort in giving them sincere advice. For instance, we can see that Allah cites His noble prophets' words to their people in different verses.

Allah quotes Prophet Nooh's, may Allah exalt his mention, words in the Qur'an (what means): {But I am a messenger from the Lord of the worlds. I convey to you the messages of my Lord and advise you...} [Qur'an 7:61-62]

Allah quotes Prophet Hud's, may Allah exalt his mention, words (what means): {I am to you a trustworthy adviser.} [Qur'an 7:68]

Allah quotes prophet Salih's, may Allah exalt his mention, words (what means): {I advised you, but you do not like advisors.} [Qur'an 7:79]

Allah again quotes Prophet Shu'ayb's, may Allah exalt his mention, words (what means): {O my people, I had certainly conveyed to you the messages of my Lord and advised you.} [Qur'an 7:93]

Also, the Companions of Prophet Muhammad, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, confirmed that he sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, conveyed the message of Allah The Exalted and sincerely advised people. It was narrated on the authority of Jabr, may Allah be pleased with him, that the Prophet said to his Companions: "You will be questioned about me [in the Hereafter]; what are you going to say?" They replied, "We will testify that you have conveyed the message, fulfilled it and have given sincere advice."

Giving sincere advice is a due right upon a Muslim from his brother

The Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, considered the giving of sincere advice as one of the greatest rights that are due upon Muslims; he said: "There are six rights due upon a Muslim from his Muslim brother..." one of which was: "... giving him sincere advice if he asks for it." The Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, also said: "If any of you consults his [Muslim] brother, he [the



latter] should sincerely advise him."

Allah The Almighty has doubled the reward of the sincere adviser who gives his advice hoping for the wellbeing of other Muslims. It was narrated on the authority of 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar, may Allah be pleased with him, that the Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "If a slave sincerely advises his master and worships Allah properly, he will have his reward doubled." Moreover, he will be one of the first people to enter Paradise. He, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, also said: "I have been shown the three types of people who will enter Paradise first: A martyr; a chaste person who sought chastity; and a slave who worshipped Allah properly and gave sincere advice to his masters."

Etiquettes of sincerely giving advice

Advice has a sublime position in Islam. A beneficial sincere advice is the one in which the advisor abides by the etiquettes of the Shari'ah that the scholars have mentioned. Among those etiquettes are:

- 1- The adviser should give his advice sincerely for the sake of Allah The Almighty, without seeking ostentation, fame, worldly gain or showing superiority.
- 2- The adviser should have enough knowledge about the advice which he is giving. This is because advising is a form of enjoining the good and forbidding the evil.

If a person does not have enough knowledge about what he is advising about, he may forbid the good, thinking that he is forbidding an evil, and vice versa.

3- He should give it privately. Giving advice publicly is a reproach and rebuke that is disliked. Mis'ar ibn Kidam, may Allah have mercy upon him, said: "May Allah have mercy upon a person who presented my faults to me in secret, for giving advice in public is a rebuke."

4- Gentleness in giving advice and avoiding excess and rebuke. The Prophet, sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Gentleness does not enter anything except that it adorns it."

On his part, the one being advised should listen to the advice, apply the good that it contains and rid himself of the evil desires of the self. The righteous predecessors would consider advice a gift that the adviser had presented them. 'Umar, may Allah be pleased with him, said: "May Allah have mercy upon a person who gifted me my faults!" Also one should not let harshness of the adviser deprive him of benefiting from the advice.

We ask Allah The Almighty to make us all from those who listen to speech and follow the best of it.

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

**CHAIRMAN**

Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Attiyah

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka

Deputy Managing Editor

Kamran Rehmat

📍 P.O.Box 2888, Doha, Qatar
 ✉ editor@gulf-times.com
 ☎ 44350478 (News),
 ☎ 44466404 (Sport),
 ☎ 44466636 (Home delivery)
 📠 44350474
 📘 facebook.com/gulftimes
 🐦 twitter.com/gulftimes_Qatar
 📷 instagram.com/gulftimes
 📺 youtube.com/GulftimesVideos

GULF TIMES

Brazil enlists bank managers to combat deforestation

After struggling for years to track and punish deforestation across the world's largest rainforest, Brazil is recruiting new allies in the battle to protect the Amazon: bank managers. A new rule taking effect this week requires banks to check if rural loan applicants have any deforestation on their farms using government tools that provide data about them based on satellite imagery.

If bank managers detect any clearing since 2019 in the Amazon or woodlands, farmers applying for government-funded rural credit must show proof of deforestation permits to get their loans approved. "We turned every bank manager who handles subsidized credit into an inspector of illegal deforestation," said Andre Lima, who leads efforts to fight deforestation in Brazil's Environment Ministry.

The new policy has drawn blowback from Brazil's powerful agribusiness sector, whose deep pockets and growing opposition to the government may shape October elections. The Agriculture Ministry itself argued to scrap the rule late last year. But advocates argue that the government needs more weapons in its anti-deforestation arsenal. As on-the-ground enforcement has become more difficult, the rule change aims to bring deforesters to heel by withholding billions of dollars of subsidized public credit.

The new policy has drawn blowback from Brazil's powerful agribusiness sector, whose deep pockets and growing opposition to the govt may shape October polls

About 17% of all rural lending disbursed from 2020 to 2024 went to farms on land deforested between 2020 and 2023, according to an analysis of public data and satellite images by the Climate Policy Initiative, a think tank in Rio de Janeiro. The new rule will cover about \$53bn in loans to farmers with federal subsidies, or roughly a third of rural credit in Brazil, central bank data show.

It will also affect a fast-growing type of private lending for farmers known as agribusiness letters of credit, a popular asset for individual investors exempt from income taxes, because around half of it goes through the same rural credit channels in banks. By

2025, investment in letters of credit had grown to \$114bn. Farmers use the funds to invest in their farms and to cover operational costs, like planting new crops. "This signals to the sector: look, the financial system will no longer be a partner in these (deforestation) activities," said Juliano Assuncao, the executive director of the Climate Policy Initiative.

The policy and its blowback reflect President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's commitment to one of his most globally salient pledges: to end deforestation in Brazil by 2030 - an ambitious goal in a country that still records the most tropical forest loss every year. Denying public credit to some farmers on Brazil's fast-expanding agricultural frontier may stir deeper resistance from rural powerbrokers already skeptical of the leftist Lula, and hurt his appeal in farm states such as Mato Grosso and Goias as he runs for re-election. The new policy includes a provision blocking subsidized credit to farms if those funds would be used to clear native vegetation, even where farmers have permits to deforest.

"You can still do it, but with your money, not with public money," Lima said. Debate over the new rule may wind up in Congress, where Lula has already lost many battles over the environment, including over a law that gutted the country's permitting process. Brazil's National Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock (CNA), the biggest farm lobby group, said it will work to change the rule in Congress, which has a powerful farm caucus.

In a statement, the group said that government tools using satellite images to detect deforestation make mistakes and could lead banks to withhold credit unfairly. Data from two academic studies between 2019 and 2021 pointed to 93% accuracy in the government satellite system tracking deforestation, known as Prodes. The studies found that Prodes errs more often in ignoring deforested lands than in reporting deforestation where it never happened.

Financial industry groups have not complained about the new rule, saying the measure reinforces sustainability commitments they already have. Banking lobby Febraban said in a statement that the measures strengthen its sustainability commitments and ensure bank decisions about operations are made safely. — Reuters

To Advertise

✉ gtadv@gulf-times.com

Display☎ 44466621
☎ 44418811**Classified**☎ 44466609 ☎ 44418811
✉ gtcad@gulf-times.com**Subscription**

✉ circulation@gulf-times.com

© 2026 Gulf Times. All rights reserved


 Reynold
 GULFTIMES
 03-04-2026

"YES SIR,
 WE'RE AIMING AT THEIR
 URANIUM, NOT URANUS."



Central banks' inflation mood puzzle: more judgment than science

- Interest rates set to rise when price expectations jump
- Central banks roll out host of new measures to capture changes
- All measures have shortcomings, making judgment call necessary

By Balazs Koranyi and Howard Schneider
 Reuters

The world's central bankers may be attempting the impossible: to get into the psyche of business executives, labour unions and ordinary households in real time to understand how they are navigating their finances through yet another energy shock.

Policymakers are contemplating whether to jack up interest rates to combat rising inflation. But they will only pull the trigger if they think a surge in energy costs induced by the Iran war will filter into other prices, lifting inflation expectations across the entire economy.

The problem is that measuring such expectations is notoriously difficult. Central banks have a trove of surveys, gauges and indicators at their disposal but all of them have blind spots if not outright faults.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, they have developed new tools to fill gaps in data about behaviour. But measuring expectations remains more an art than an exact science.

That could raise the bar for rate hikes as policymakers are wary of gut-feeling decisions and usually prefer to wait for more evidence to narrow the risk of a policy error.

BEHAVIOURS HAVE CHANGED SINCE 2022 INFLATION SPIKE

Policy-makers at the Bank of Canada acknowledged that global uncertainty meant they "would need to rely on judgment more heavily than usual" to plot the path of economy, according to



A shopper browses the coffee aisle at the Northern store in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, Canada. Policymakers will only hike rates if they think a surge in energy costs induced by the Iran war will filter into other prices, lifting inflation expectations across the entire economy. (Reuters/File Photo)

minutes of its March 18 meeting at which it kept rates on hold.

Others describe the effort involved in the process.

"I try hard to get into the thoughts of price-setters and how they are seeing it - trying to calibrate their confidence in pricing power," Richmond Federal Reserve Bank President Tom Barkin told Reuters.

"The 'hike' case would be around inflation expectations starting to finally move," he said. "I don't have a sense that they've broken out at this point."

One complication is that behaviours change.

In 2022, consumers and firms had little experience with rapid inflation, making price- and wage-setting a rather rigid exercise.

"But now people have lived through a painful episode of inflation, and this may mean that inflation expectations are more fragile, and so they could be more sensitive to such an energy price shock," European Central Bank board member Isabel Schnabel

said in a university lecture earlier this week.

For companies, changing their selling prices was a cumbersome process before the pandemic and so they limited adjustments, often to once a year. This became untenable and the frequency of changes sky-rocketed, Schnabel argued.

This makes the frequency and not just the magnitude of such changes a good indicator that expectations are shifting.

Traditionally, central banks relied on surveys and market indicators to assess expectations. But surveys are not done frequently enough to capture rapid changes and their time horizon is often out of sync with that of policymakers.

Market indicators of expected inflation are also imperfect because they include the extra return, or risk premium, investors demand for holding a particular financial instrument. This changes with market sentiment, blurring shifts in actual price expectations.

The stakes are high: investors now expect the ECB to raise rates two or three times this year, the Bank of England twice, and have given up on any Fed rate cuts in 2026.

CENTRAL BANKS INNOVATE TO COVER KNOWLEDGE GAPS

To compensate for such information gaps, central banks have developed an array of new tools. They track expected wage changes, including via major pay deals announced by unions, which may be a signal to others negotiating their own pay.

They survey firms directly and speak to executives to gauge expected behaviour, and they take on board ever-larger numbers of external surveys with forward-looking indicators.

Central bank staff track the frequency of price changes, correct existing surveys to fill data gaps and have revised their own projection models to address shortcomings that missed 2022's inflation surge caused by the pandemic and Ukraine war.

Also key to their judgment call is trying to understand how this inflation shock differs from four years ago.

The consensus on this seems firm: conditions are fundamentally different.

Interest rates are already higher, government purses are tighter, there is growing slack in the labour market and - unlike during the pandemic, when they were unable to spend - households are not sitting on piles of cash.

"We're coming into this situation with the gradual disinflation that we were having, the labour market is softening (and) growth is a little bit below potential," Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey told Reuters.

"And one of the consistent messages we get from businesses is, for most sectors of the economy, a real lack of pricing power."

Using their enhanced insight, central banks are for now confident that longer-term inflation expectations are holding firm around their targets.

But the longer the war drags on, the longer energy prices will stay high - and as consumers see everyday costs like fuelling their cars rise, the more likely it is that inflation expectations will move upwards. When exactly this happens will not be clear, leaving policymakers to judge for themselves.

"Economics itself is not an exact science," ECB policymaker Primoz Dolenc said. "It's of course based on analytics but by definition there is also a perception and judgment element."



A view of the European Central Bank (ECB) headquarters in Frankfurt, Germany. (Reuters/File Photo)

Qumra 2026 goes virtual, but storytelling remains powerful amid regional tensions

By Shaima Sheriff
Staff Reporter

Despite regional tensions prompting a last-minute shift to a virtual format, Qumra 2026 successfully brought together filmmakers and global media, highlighting Qatar's commitment to sustaining creative dialogue under all circumstances.

Organised by the Doha Film Institute (DFI), the session maintained its momentum online, with filmmakers presenting deeply human stories that resonated across borders. Participants noted that while the physical experience was missed, the transition demonstrated adaptability without compromising the essence of engagement.

"It was a difficult decision... but because of the situation and security of everyone, Qumra decided to turn it to an online ver-

sion," said Qatar-based filmmaker Hamad Salem al-Hajri. He added that despite the shift, "the team have done a great job... it was a very successful meeting," highlighting the effectiveness of the digital format.

Al-Hajri presented his project 'When the News Breaks You', a film exploring the realities faced by journalists working in conflict zones across the Middle East. The film captures "the struggles... how they put their lives while they are covering news," shedding light on the sacrifices made to deliver truth from the ground.

He emphasised that the project aims to reshape perceptions, noting that the goal is "to show... how professional our Arab journalists are, and how they suffer to cover these news." The film reflects the human cost behind headlines, particularly in regions marked by instability.

Meanwhile, filmmaker Jeissy Trompiz Alborno introduced 'The Language of Water', a project centred on the last speak-



er of an indigenous language in Venezuela. She described the theme as universal, stressing that "we always hear about animals or plants in danger, but we don't use

to talk about language in danger... we are talking about memory."

Alborno underlined the urgency of cultural preservation, noting that "every month... two languages die," framing the issue as a global crisis that transcends geography. Her work seeks to bridge fiction and documentary while amplifying marginalised voices and identities.

Both filmmakers reflected on the challenges of producing meaningful cinema in complex environments. From filming across multiple countries to navigating political sensitivities and funding limitations, the process remains demanding. Yet, Qumra's platform continues to provide critical support.

Al-Hajri noted that Qumra and DFI were instrumental in enabling his project, particularly as "most of the parties refused to fund it," emphasising the importance of such initiatives in supporting bold storytelling.

Macron says it is unrealistic to open Strait of Hormuz by force

AFP
Seoul

French President Emmanuel Macron said yesterday that a military operation to liberate the Strait of Hormuz is "unrealistic", while lamenting Donald Trump's differing daily statements on the Iran war and Nato.

"There are those who advocate for the liberation of the Strait of Hormuz by force through a military operation, a position sometimes expressed by the US," Macron said during a visit to South Korea.

"I say sometimes because it has varied, it is never the option we have chosen and we consider it unrealistic," he said.

Macron said such an operation would take excessive time and expose those crossing the strait to "coastal threats", particularly from Iran's Revolutionary Guards "who possess significant resources as well as ballistic missiles".

"This can only be done in concert with Iran," the French leader added, calling first for a ceasefire and a return to negotiations.

The Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping route for oil, has been virtually paralysed for weeks by the Middle East war, pushing up prices for crude and related products worldwide.



French President Emmanuel Macron speaks to the press during a visit at the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul yesterday. (AFP)

Iran's Revolutionary Guards have vowed to keep the strait shut to the country's "enemies" while Trump has made reopening it a condition for a ceasefire.

US President Trump in a prime-time White House address on Wednesday again said that countries that receive oil through the strait "must take care of that passage".

In earlier comments he singled out European and Asian countries.

"You know, we only have 45,000 soldiers in harm's way over there, right next to a nuclear force. Let South Korea do it," Trump said, referring to North Korea.

"Let Japan do it. They get

90% of their oil from the Strait. Let China do it. Let them all do it. What the hell are we doing it for?"

The US has around 28,500 troops in South Korea.

Macron, who landed in South Korea yesterday after visiting Japan, also expressed frustration at Trump's statements on the conflict.

"You have to be serious. When you want to be serious, you don't say the opposite every day of what you said the day before. And perhaps you shouldn't talk every day," Macron said.

The French president also said that Trump - who on Wednesday poked fun at Macron's marriage and accent - was undermining the Nato alliance.

"If you create daily doubt about your commitment, you hollow it out," Macron said, adding that there is "too much talk... going off in all directions".

The comments about his marriage were "neither elegant nor up to standard" and "do not merit a response".

Macron's two days in South Korea includes talks with President Lee Jae-myung, a visit to a war memorial to pay tribute to French soldiers who fought in the Korean War, as well as an economic forum and dinner with K-pop stars and filmmakers.

In Japan, Macron signed a roadmap on critical minerals and defence co-operation and met Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi as well as the emperor.

In an opinion piece in *Le Figaro*, Lee called for stronger co-operation with France, particularly in key areas such as artificial intelligence, nuclear energy, hydrogen technologies and space.

The war has already prompted South Korea to impose a fuel price cap to ease pressure on its energy supply, the first such measure since 1997, and put forward a special "wartime" extra budget.

"The current crisis is not like a passing shower that will stop, but rather like a massive storm that could last indefinitely," Lee told the National Assembly yesterday.

German customs raid companies over suspected exports to Russia

AFP
Frankfurt

German customs have raided three companies suspected of illegally exporting machine components and chemicals to Russia in violation of EU sanctions, according to a statement released yesterday.

On March 27, investigators searched 14 residential and commercial locations in the region around Frankfurt, according to the local customs office.

The European Union placed strict sanctions against Russia in the wake of the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including bans on exporting goods that could be used by the Russian military or munitions industry.

The investigation, led by the Frankfurt public prosecutor's office, is targeting the managers of three companies in particular. Customs officers seized "vo-

luminous" business documents and storage equipment during the raids and approximately one million euros (\$1.2 million) from two of the companies as a "precaution".

The statement also said two of the companies "allegedly exported various machine components and chemicals to Russia on a commercial basis, in violation of an existing ban".

They allegedly used a transport company and other foreign logistics firms to organise the sales through neighbouring countries, obscuring the ultimate destination of the exports.

This clandestine trade was uncovered following a customs inspection of a company that had reportedly supplied Russian buyers.

In a separate case in February, German authorities arrested five people on suspicion of exporting goods worth roughly 30 million euros to Russia, including to arms companies.

Storm batters Greece, killing one, flooding homes



Emergency crews work at a road cut in two, after heavy rain and gale-force winds battered Greece, leaving flooded houses and the authorities rushing to repair damage, near Rafina, Greece, yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters
Athens

A man died and dozens of homes were flooded after heavy rain and gale-force winds battered Greece, leaving authorities rushing to repair damage yesterday.

Greek authorities have recovered the body of a man in the seaside holiday town of Nea Makri, 35 kilometres (21.7 miles) northeast of Athens, a fire brigade official told Reuters yesterday. The man was believed to have been carried away by a torrent and trapped under a car as he attempted to cross a flooded street, local media reported.

The fire brigade said it has received hundreds of calls to rescue people trapped in floodwater and help clear roads of

fallen trees as the Erminio storm swept through Athens and several islands in the Aegean sea on Wednesday.

Early yesterday, crews were still removing debris, pumping water from flooded buildings and repairing damaged infrastructure east of the capital. Authorities also banned some ferries from sailing from the port of Piraeus near Athens to the Greek islands.

On the Mediterranean island of Crete, skies turned an eerie orange on Wednesday as winds of up to force 9 on the Beaufort scale carried dust from North Africa, disrupting flights.

Greece, which sits at Europe's southernmost tip, has suffered destructive floods and wildfires in recent years, which analysts attribute to a rapidly warming climate.

Russia woos students for its drone forces in Ukraine

Reuters
Moscow

Students across Russia are being offered large financial incentives to join drone units fighting in Ukraine as operators and engineers, while companies in Russia's central Ryazan region have been given quotas to sign up workers for the army, documents show.

The recruitment effort, which comes as Russian forces continue to grind forwards on the battlefield in Ukraine and as US-brokered peace talks are on ice due to the Iran war, suggests Moscow is diversifying its push to replenish its army's ranks in what is the fifth year of its war. But it is not part of a general mobilisation drive, something the Kremlin said this week was not on the agenda. Nor, say top officials, is Russia running short of recruits despite Ukrainian claims - dismissed by Moscow - that Kyiv is eliminating Russian troops faster than they can be recruited.

Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chair-



A digital screen displaying an ad promoting contract military service in the Russian army's unmanned systems forces, with payment details and contact information, in Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Reuters/File Photo)

man of the Security Council, told state media last Friday that Russia's rolling recruitment system, which offers substantial financial packages to volunteers who sign up, continues to deliver. More than 400,000 people had signed up last year and over 80,000 so far this year, he said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said yesterday that he had not seen the official documents concerning student recruitment and corporate recruitment quotas in Ryazan, but confirmed that students were being encouraged

to join Russia's drone forces, a new division of the armed forces set up at the end of last year at President Vladimir Putin's behest.

"This (recruitment) offer exists; it is, as they say, on the market, and it applies equally to everyone: to workers, to students, to the unemployed, and so on and so forth. This is a completely open offer, an offer to join a new type of unit," Peskov told reporters when asked about the matter.

Russia's move to target students suggests that Moscow is keen to

pour more skilled human resources into its drone forces which - like those of Ukraine - play an increasingly pivotal role in what has long become a grinding war of attrition.

Drone operators from both sides typically work some distance from the front line but are regarded as high-value targets who are hunted down and killed if their positions are revealed.

The Far Eastern Federal University in Vladivostok is promising students who sign up for a minimum of one year extendable academic leave and a guaranteed exemption from any education fees on their return, plus free accommodation and grants. It is also pledging to cover the costs of any military equipment and weaponry needed. That is on top of what, by local standards, is a substantial financial package: a first-year salary from 5.5mn roubles (\$68,433), a one-off payment of 2.5mn roubles after free training, a monthly allowance of 240,000 roubles, and a one-off payment of 200,000 roubles from the university.

Ancient Romanian artefacts recovered after Dutch heist

Reuters
Amsterdam

A 2,500-year-old golden helmet and two other ancient Romanian treasures stolen from a museum in the Netherlands have been recovered with the help of information from the suspected thieves, Dutch prosecutors said yesterday.

The artefacts, from Geto-Dacian communities, were presented at a heavily guarded press conference at the Drents Museum in

the northern Dutch city of Assen where they had been on loan. They were stolen when thieves broke into the museum in January last year.

The golden Helmet of Cotofenesti is one of Romania's most important archaeological objects. The two gold bracelets recovered date back to 50 BC. Another bracelet remains missing, lead prosecutor Corien Fahner told reporters.

Romania's Foreign Minister Oana Toiu described the artefacts as being of "inestimable value" for Romanian identity and universal

heritage, and said it had been essential to Romania that they were found.

Fahner said the prosecutors were thrilled to have recovered the treasures. She said the months of uncertainty about their whereabouts had been a rollercoaster.

Dutch Prime Minister Rob Jetten praised the police for their determination, and said the theft had been "a massive blow" to Romania.

Security footage shared by Dutch police last year showed three men gaining access to the museum at night, as they used

explosives and a crowbar to force a large door. Three suspects were arrested within days and have been in custody since. They gave the information that led the missing artefacts to being found as part of a deal in relation to their trial, the prosecutor said, without giving more details.

The artefacts belong to the National History Museum in Bucharest and will be returned to Romania as soon as possible.

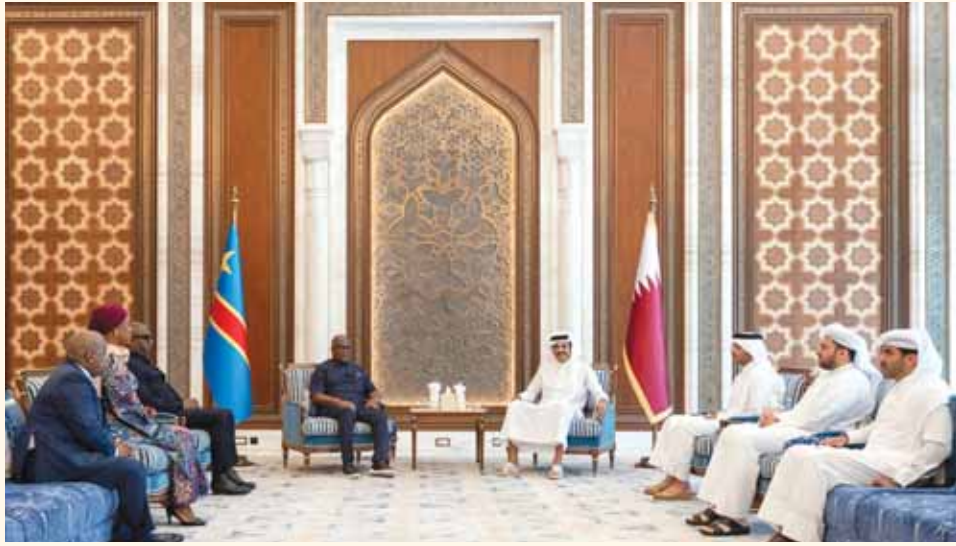
The Dutch government last year paid 5.7mn euros (\$6.6mn) to compensate Romania for the theft.



The recovered golden helmet of Cotofenesti and two gold bracelets that were stolen from the Drents Museum are displayed in a glass box in Assen yesterday. (AFP)

Amir, DRC president discuss regional developments, expanding ties

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani reviewed regional and international developments with President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Felix Tshisekedi, during a meeting held at Lusail Palace yesterday. The DRC president expressed his country's solidarity with Qatar in light of the continued Iranian aggression against Qatar and several countries in the region, as well as his support for the measures it is taking to protect its sovereignty, security, and the safety of its citizens. For his part, His Highness the Amir welcomed the president and his accompanying delegation, expressing his thanks and appreciation for the stance and solidarity of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and commending the growing co-operation between the two countries. — **QNA**



City lit up in blue for World Autism Awareness Day



Qatar Foundation (QF) is marking World Autism Awareness Day, observed annually on April 2 by lighting its headquarters, along with Education City Stadium and Sidra Medicine, in blue over three consecutive evenings. This initiative underscores QF's ongoing commitment to raising awareness and supporting the development of a more inclusive society for individuals with autism. World Autism Awareness Day is a global initiative proposed by Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of QF, to the United Nations in 2007, and first observed in 2008. QF's participation in Autism Awareness Day is deeply rooted in the work of Renad Academy, a specialised school within its Pre-University Education. Renad Academy not only leads awareness initiatives but also embodies QF's commitment to inclusion. The academy delivers a range of awareness activities and events aimed at enhancing understanding of autism, and engages students with autism in community activities, fostering direct interaction with society, developing their social skills, and supporting their active integration within the community.

Qatar ministries and public institutions join sea of blue



Qatar has marked World Autism Awareness Day with a number of ministries and public institutions participating in the event by lighting up their headquarters in blue. Held under the theme 'Autism and Humanity - Every Life Has Value', the event aims to raise awareness of autism spectrum disorder and promote greater understanding and integration. **(QNA)**



The Qatar News Agency (QNA) has marked World Autism Awareness Day by illuminating its headquarters in blue, joining state institutions in raising awareness. The annual event, observed on April 2, aims to promote awareness and global support for those affected. QNA said its initiative is intended to highlight the importance of awareness and encourage broader support and inclusion for individuals with autism, including access to care and resources. It added that its participation comes in line with the State of Qatar's comprehensive development process as outlined in the Qatar National Vision 2030. World Autism Awareness Day was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007 following a proposal by Qatar. **(QNA)**

Hot Wheels Speed City drives family fun and safe entertainment in Qatar

By Shaima Sheriff
Staff Reporter

The Hot Wheels Speed City event is drawing large crowds in Qatar, offering families a vibrant and safe environment where children can explore their passion for cars while parents enjoy quality time with their loved ones. The event has quickly become a popular destination for residents, combining interactive activities with a strong emphasis on safety, organisation, and inclusivity — elements that visitors say define Qatar's growing family entertainment scene.

For many children, the experience is both exciting and memorable. "I'm enjoying myself so much, it's really amazing here," said 10-year-old Abdel-Jabbar Ayman al-Bayati, who described his favourite activity as the driving challenge. "It was so cool, so fast and amazing," he added, reflecting the thrill that the event brings to younger visitors.

Parents attending the event echoed similar sentiments, highlighting the welcoming atmosphere and thoughtful organisation. One mother described the event as "an amazing environment for family to have a wonderful and lovely time together," noting that it caters to children of all ages.

She said that "it's a safe place, enjoyable," adding that her child especially valued the opportunity to experience driving for the first time in a controlled setting. The event's appeal also extends to Qatar's diverse expatriate community. Priya, a resident from India, described the experience as "a dream

come true" for her son, a passionate Hot Wheels fan. "He is having a great time and we didn't expect this event to happen in Qatar," she said, adding that the scale and organisation exceeded expectations. "It is worth the money, we were just expecting some small games, but it is too good."

Safety and organisation emerged as consistent themes among attendees. Visitors repeatedly pointed to Qatar's infrastructure and event management standards as key factors contributing to their positive experience. Long-term residents lauded the inclusivity of the event. Danny, a Filipino living in Qatar since 2011, said the experience was "well-organised" with "many activities" suitable for all age groups. "It's not just for kids, it's for all ages," he noted, adding that he was "enjoying it a lot" alongside his son.



Abdel-Jabbar Ayman with his mother at the event.



Priya and her son.



Spectators at Hot Wheels Speed City.