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**From curiosity to global acclaim in space imaging**

By Joey Aguilar  
Doha

What began as a childhood curiosity has evolved into a disciplined craft for Rabeea Alkuwari, whose nights spent photographing the universe offer both scientific discovery and a rare escape from the pressures of everyday life.

A mechanical engineer in Qatar's oil and gas sector, Alkuwari has carved out a parallel identity as an astrophotographer, using his technical background to capture distant celestial objects invisible to the naked eye.

His work recently earned global recognition after an image of the Blue Horsehead Nebula was selected as Astronomy Picture of the Day by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) – a distinction that places his work among the most compelling space imagery shared worldwide. The image, captured from the remote desert area of Sawda Natheel in southern Qatar, is the result of seven nights of painstaking imaging.

For Alkuwari, however, the path to such recognition has been shaped as much by persistence as by passion.

"Being in Qatar, we are lucky with many cloudless nights," he told *Gulf Times*, noting that the country's clear skies provide ideal conditions for observing the cosmos. Yet those advantages come with their own set of challenges, he pointed out.

Alkuwari noted that much of the year is marked by high temperatures and humidity, conditions that can make long hours outdoors physically demanding and pose technical challenges for sensitive equipment. **To Page 2**



Rabeea Alkuwari

**Starmmer arrives in Doha**



British Prime Minister Keir Starmer arrived in Doha last evening for an official working visit. Starmer and his accompanying delegation were welcomed upon arrival at Doha International Airport by HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulafaifi and UK ambassador in Doha Neerav Patel. The visit comes amid increased diplomatic engagement between Qatar and the United Kingdom as both sides seek to strengthen co-operation on regional and international issues. **(QNA)**

**All eyes on Islamabad as US, Iran set for talks**

The world's attention will turn today to Islamabad, Pakistan, which will host the first public direct talks between the United States and Iran in many years.

These talks are described as difficult and crucial due to the tense atmosphere, but according to observers, they represent a historic opportunity that could change the entire map of the Middle East, or could return the region to a spiral of tensions and conflicts if they fail.

Delegations are expected to arrive in Islamabad today before negotiators formally sit down at the negotiating table tomorrow, amid reports confirming that the 30-member US negotiating team has already arrived in Islamabad to review security arrangements.

The White House stated that Vice-President JD Vance would lead the American delegation in these negotiations, along with envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, while Tehran announced that its Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and Parliament Speaker Bagher Ghalibaf would lead the discussions in Islamabad, in the presence of mediators and several other figures. **To Page 2**



A security guard stands at Zero Point Bridge yesterday in a high security area as Pakistan gears up to host the US and Iran for peace talks in Islamabad. **(Reuters)**

**Sharif briefs Amir on details of agreement**



**Pakistan PM hails Qatar's restraint**

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani yesterday discussed regional developments in a phone call with Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

The call focused on the latest development in the region, including the announcement of a ceasefire between the United States and Iran. Sharif briefed His Highness the Amir on the details of the agreement and the efforts exerted by Pakistan that contributed to reaching the deal. His Highness the Amir expressed his support for the Pakistani Prime Minister's efforts in this regard. Sharif praised His Highness the Amir's wisdom in dealing with the crisis, commending His Highness's supportive stances in promoting security and stability in the region. The two sides also discussed the attacks on Lebanon and their repercussions on the region's security and stability.

Both sides condemned the series of Israeli raids that targeted multiple areas in Lebanon, stressing the need to support efforts to establish peace and resolve conflicts through dialogue

and diplomatic means. Later, in a post on X following the call, Sharif said His Highness the Amir had offered words of support and encouragement for Pakistan's peace efforts, and that he had conveyed his admiration for Qatar's restraint in the face of recent hostilities.

"I expressed my deep admiration for the wisdom and restraint demonstrated by the leadership of Qatar in the face of recent hostilities and reaffirmed Pakistan's unwavering solidarity with our Qatari brothers and sisters. Together, we remain committed to working closely for lasting peace across the region", Shehbaz tweeted. He described the two leaders as sharing an unwavering commitment to working together for lasting peace across the region.

The call came a day after the US and Iran agreed to a two-week ceasefire, mediated by Pakistan. US President Donald Trump announced the pause on Truth Social, citing conversations with Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Pakistan Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir. **(QNA)**

**Amir condemns Israeli raids in Lebanon call**

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani held a phone call yesterday with Lebanese President General Joseph Aoun. They discussed the situation in Lebanon, especially in light of the current escalation and its repercussions on the security and stability of Lebanon and the region. In this regard, His Highness the Amir expressed his condemnation of the Israeli raids that targeted Lebanon, stressing his rejection

of the violation of its sovereignty, security and territorial integrity. Regional and international efforts to contain the escalation were also discussed during the phone call. His Highness affirmed Qatar's firm position in support of Lebanon and its solidarity with the brotherly Lebanese people, emphasising Qatar's readiness to provide support and assistance and contribute to efforts that would support de-escalation and stability. **(QNA)**

**Qatar's digital leap: Over 2,300 govt services now accessible online**

By Ayman Adly  
Staff Reporter

Residents in Qatar can now access a wide range of key government services online, completing transactions without visiting departmental offices – a number that continues to grow steadily.

Qatar's digital transformation has already covered more than 74% of government services, spanning nearly all vital sectors involved in everyday transactions. Currently, around 2,300 government services are available online, with approximately 1,500 fully digitalised across all sectors. These services are accessible through Hukoomi, Qatar's official online information and e-services portal, which provides an integrated platform for residents, visitors, and businesses. The portal supports a broad spectrum of transactions, including health, labour, traffic, education, visas, and official document processing.

First introduced in 2008, Hukoomi has

expanded significantly over the years; by the mid-2010s, it hosted around 1,380 services, of which about 690 were fully executable online.

This progress is underpinned by strong integration across government entities, enabling secure and seamless data sharing between departments. As a result, ministries operate cohesively whilst maintaining their respective jurisdictions through interconnected systems. For example, data can be automatically verified and exchanged among entities such as the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, the Ministry of Municipality, and the Ministry of Public Health, reducing the time and effort required for applicants to obtain services, certificates, or official documents.

Alongside central platforms, a number of specialised smart applications provide targeted services with enhanced ease, security, and transparency. These include the Kahramaa app by the Qatar General Electricity and Water Corporation for bill payments, consumption monitoring, and



service reporting; the Ministry of Labour's E-Contract system for authenticating employment contracts without in-person visits; and the Oun app by the Ministry of Municipality for services related to pest control, waste management, and park maintenance.

Eskan, launched in February this year, serves as the official digital platform for government housing services, streamlining 15 service categories for Qataris. The Ministry of Justice's SAK app facilitates real estate registration, ownership transfers, and power-of-attorney

services. Mazad AlJomrok, developed by the General Authority of Customs, enables participation in public auctions for seized goods, whilst Court Mzadat, operated by the Supreme Judiciary Council, handles auctions of court-seized assets. Maarif, operated by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, provides access to exam results, school registration, and certificate equivalency services. Meanwhile, Lbahi, launched in July 2025 by Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC), offers direct access to medical records, laboratory results, and prescriptions.

Further enhancing accessibility, Metrash2, the official mobile application of the Ministry of Interior, has become an essential daily tool, offering more than 200 services directly via smartphone. These include a wide range of transactions related to visas, traffic violations, residency permits, and security services, eliminating the need to visit service centres. Users may also opt to have official documents delivered through Qatar Post to their registered address. **To Page 2**



### Qatar takes part in meeting of top GCC information officials

Qatar participated in the 2nd extraordinary meeting of undersecretaries of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) information ministries, held yesterday via video conference. The Qatar Media Corporation (QMC) chief executive, HE Sheikh Khalid bin Abdulaziz bin Jassim al-Thani, represented Qatar at the meeting. The meeting discussed ways to enhance joint Gulf media work. - QNA



HE the Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani.



Portugal's Minister of Foreign Affairs Paulo Rangel.

### Qatar Media Corporation holds semi-annual meeting

The Qatar Media Corporation (QMC) held its semi-annual meeting yesterday under the chairmanship of the chief executive, HE Sheikh Khalid bin Abdulaziz bin Jassim al-Thani. Attended by all department directors, the meeting reviewed key work areas and the level of institutional performance, in addition to strategic plan projects and media initiatives. During the meeting, the QMC reaffirmed its commitment to continuously developing its institutional work system, enhancing efficiency, and strengthening the implementation of strategic plans in both the administrative and media fields. This commitment aims to improve the quality of media production and overall institutional performance. HE Sheikh Khalid commended the efforts of all employees across all departments within the QMC for their dedication and hard work during the current circumstances. - QNA



HE Sheikh Khalid commended the efforts of all employees across all departments within the QMC for their dedication and hard work during the current circumstances. - QNA

### PM receives phone call from Portuguese foreign minister

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani received a phone call yesterday from Portugal's Minister of Foreign Affairs Paulo Rangel. During the call, the latest developments in the region were reviewed in light of the announcement of a ceasefire between the US and Iran, in addition to a number of issues of mutual interest. During the call, HE Sheikh Mohammed reaffirmed Qatar's welcome of the ceasefire announcement and stressed the need to build on it urgently to prevent the escalation of tensions in the region. He also stressed the importance of ensuring the security of maritime routes and the freedom of navigation and international trade in accordance with the rules of international law, in a way that contributes to maintaining regional stability and global supply chains. - QNA

## Qatar hosts high-level panel on security in Arabian Gulf

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has hosted a panel discussion on transformations in regional security in the Gulf amid shifting international dynamics. The session yesterday was organised by the ministry's Diplomatic Institute in Doha and featured senior diplomats and representatives from Qatar's missions abroad. The president of the Council on International Mediation, Sheikh Nawaf bin Mubarak al-Thani, led the discussions, outlining key challenges facing the region. These included regional threat environments, escalation and crisis management, the security of smaller states operating in an unstable context. Sheikh Nawaf also highlighted the growing role of defence diplo-



macy as a tool to reduce tensions and achieve stability in the Gulf region. The session is part of a broader series of specialised dialogue forums hosted by the Diplomatic Institute's Studies and Research Department. The initiative aims at strengthening strategic understanding of evolving regional and international dynamics, and supporting the capacity of diplomatic cadres to analyse contemporary issues. - QNA

### Interior minister and FBI director review situation

HE the Minister of Interior and Commander of Internal Security Force (Lekhwiya) Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani exchanged messages with Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director Kash Patel, reviewing key developments in the region. Patel underscored the importance of enhancing co-ordination between the two friendly countries to address the security challenges facing the region. HE Sheikh Khalifa commended ongoing efforts to strengthen security and stability in the region, highlighting the depth of relations between Qatar and the United States. - QNA

### From curiosity to global acclaim in space imaging

**From Page 1**

To overcome this, the Qatari astrophotographer often travels to remote desert locations, where temperatures can be slightly cooler due to sea breezes. However, isolation introduces new risks. He said that areas such as Sawda Natheel are home to snakes and scorpions, hazards that require careful preparation, especially when working in complete darkness. "In astrophotography, you cannot use lights, otherwise your data is ruined," he said. "The only light helping us to stay vigilant is the light of the Milky Way." Despite these conditions, the solitude of the desert is part of the appeal. What began as a fascination with space during his childhood deepened during his university years in the United States, where visits to observatories further ignited his interest. Today, astrophotography has become both a creative pursuit and a personal retreat. "It helps me to wind down from all the stress that comes with life," he said. "To take a break every now and then and head to a remote location and think about nothing but the universe for a night or more." Alkuwari's approach to astrophotography reflects a careful balance between artistic expression and scientific accuracy. While some photographers prioritise raw data and others heavily enhance their images, he positions himself somewhere in between. "I care about colour accuracy and take the necessary steps to ensure everything is calibrated during processing," he said. "I feel responsible for representing those objects to my audience as they really are." At the same time, he acknowledges the need to make images visually engaging. Subtle enhancements are applied to bring out detail and depth, but without adding elements that are not present in the original data - a distinction he considers essential to maintaining credibility. Beyond personal achievement, Alkuwari sees his work as part of a wider shift. He said astrophotography, once a niche pursuit, is gradually gaining traction in Qatar, supported by the country's natural conditions and growing community of enthusiasts. "I sure hope so," he said when asked whether his recognition could inspire others. "The field of astrophotography is growing in Qatar, and I hope news like this (Nasa recognition) will inspire photographers to explore this rewarding aspect of photography."

### Qatar National Archive board holds first meeting of 2026



The chairman of the Qatar National Archive board of trustees, Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Attiyah, has chaired board's first meeting of 2026. The meeting discussed the topics on its agenda, with Qatar National Archives secretary-general Dr Ahmed Abdullah al-Buainain presenting the key achievements of 2025, in addition to the latest developments, events and plans during the coming period. - QNA

### Qatar's digital leap: Over 2,300 govt services now accessible online

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Similarly, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry provides access to more than 500 digital services through its website and mobile application, allowing users to complete numerous transactions online without visiting its offices. A central pillar of this integrated ecosystem is the national digital identity system, which uses the Qatar ID (QID) as a unique identifier across all services. Linked to the Tawtheeq National Authentication Service, the QID enables Single Sign-On (SSO), allowing users to access multiple government platforms - including Hukoomi and Metrash2 - through a unified login. Whilst the private sector benefits significantly from these digital services, it also plays a key role in developing, operating, and enhancing the ecosystem. Ongoing collaboration between public and private sectors continues to drive improvements, with the government actively encouraging companies to expand their digital offerings, including e-payment systems and online services. Overall, Qatar's digital transformation remains dynamic and forward-looking, steadily expanding to cover all key aspects of daily life, with a focus on ease of use, transparency, and the security of related information.

### All eyes on Islamabad as US, Iran are set for talks

**From Page 1**

These negotiations come in the wake of a two-week ceasefire agreement between Washington and Tehran, brokered by Pakistan, which was announced early on Wednesday. The truce, which averted imminent US strikes on Iran, was based on a 10-point Iranian proposal that Washington accepted as a general framework for talks. This round of negotiations will also take place in the wake of an unprecedented military escalation between the two sides, marked by mutual threats and attacks that have directly affected the security of the region and global shipping traffic. Despite the announcement of a temporary truce, events on the ground quickly deviated from the diplomatic messages. Within hours, the agreement was severely undermined, as Israeli warplanes launched what was described as the largest wave of airstrikes on Beirut, the Bekaa Valley, and southern Lebanon since the start of the conflict, targeting nearly 100 sites within minutes, resulting in the death and injury of hundreds of unarmed civilians. Hezbollah responded by targeting the Manara settlement in northern Israel with missiles, while Tehran threatened to retaliate against the Israeli attacks, signaling the collapse of the truce. Tehran declared that the issue of reopening the Strait of Hormuz would depend on full compliance with the ceasefire, including in Lebanon. Pakistan has condemned in the strongest terms the ongoing Israeli aggression against Lebanon, stressing that Israeli actions undermine international efforts to establish peace and stability in the region and constitute a flagrant violation of international law and basic humanitarian principles. Pakistan urged the international community to take urgent and concrete steps to end the Israeli aggression against Lebanon. While the White House confirmed that the ceasefire was limited to direct hostilities between the United States and Iran, and that Lebanon was not included, Iranian officials rejected this interpretation, stressing that a partial ceasefire was unacceptable, and Tehran threatened that it would withdraw from the ceasefire agreement if Israeli attacks on Lebanon continued. Iran had previously rejected a 15-point US list of demands, stating that it imposed broad restrictions on its nuclear programme, missile capabilities, and regional alliances. Instead, it presented a 10-point counter-proposal emphasising its sovereignty and calling for a broad de-escalation. The Iranian proposal also called for recognition of its right to uranium enrichment, the removal of primary and secondary US sanctions, the termination of UN resolutions, compensation for war damages, and a cessation of hostilities in all fronts, including Lebanon. **Observers and analysts have described the round of talks today and tomorrow as 'decisive' due to its regional and global impact** On Wednesday, Qatar welcomed the ceasefire announcement between the United States and Iran, considering it an initial step towards de-escalation and stressing the urgent need to build upon it to prevent the spread of tension in the region. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed, in a statement, Qatar's appreciation for the efforts of Pakistan, particularly those of Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif and Chief of Army Staff Field Marshal Asim Munir as well as all parties involved in mediation and good offices that contributed to achieving a ceasefire. The ministry emphasised the importance of full adherence to the ceasefire declaration to ensure the consolidation of the truce and create the conditions for dialogue. The ministry also stressed the necessity for Iran to immediately cease all hostile acts and practices that undermine regional stability and respect for the sovereignty of states, thereby preventing the recurrence of such violations. Furthermore, the ministry emphasised the importance of guaranteeing the security of maritime routes and the freedom of navigation and international trade in accordance with international law, which contributes to maintaining regional stability and global supply chains. Despite the diplomatic momentum surrounding the Islamabad negotiations, observers warn that these talks face significant obstacles, as fundamental disagreements persist between the two sides. They consider this a historic opportunity to defuse a crisis that threatened to destabilise the Middle East and the global economy. They believe that the wide gap between Tehran's demands, as outlined in its 10-point plan, and Washington's strategic objectives makes reaching a final and comprehensive agreement within the two-week timeframe an extremely difficult task. They also noted that the success of this round of negotiations will depend heavily on the Pakistani mediator's ability to bridge the gaps and on both sides' willingness to make potentially difficult concessions to avoid sliding into a full-blown military confrontation. Pakistan declared an official holiday to facilitate the US-Iranian talks, and imposed strict security measures in the capital Islamabad, deploying hundreds of police and paramilitary forces to secure the city before the two sides sit down at the negotiating table, awaiting results that could reshape the landscape in the Middle East and the world as a whole, whether towards complete détente or further complications. These are fears that observers and analysts can hardly deny, describing the Friday and Saturday round as a "decisive round" due to its profound and sensitive impact on the geopolitical and security situation in the region, and on the global economy, which is severely affected by the energy supply crisis caused by Iran's halting of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. - QNA

# Israel approves dozens of new settlements in West Bank: watchdog

Reuters  
Cairo/Tayasir, West Bank

Israel has approved the establishment of dozens of new Jewish settlements in the West Bank, an Israeli watchdog group said yesterday, amid a rise in settler attacks on Palestinians across the occupied territory.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government has not formally announced the establishment of the 34 new settlements, many of them outposts in far-flung areas of the mountainous territory, the Peace Now watchdog group said in a statement.

The decision, made by the Israeli cabinet on April 1, was reported widely by Israeli media outlets, which said yesterday that Israel's military censor had approved it for publication.

The Palestinian Presidency's office condemned the plan as a "flagrant violation of international law".

Netanyahu's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The Yesha Council, a body that represents West Bank settlers, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Israel's settlements on occupied West Bank land are illegal under international law and must be withdrawn as soon as possible, the United Nations top court said last year.

Some 500,000 settlers live in the West Bank, home to 3mn Palestinians.

Netanyahu's government has overseen a historic settlement construction push that his far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich says is aimed at burying the idea of Palestinian statehood in the West Bank.

His tenure has also seen a sharp rise in settler violence against Palestinians.

On Wednesday, a 28-year-old Palestinian

was killed in a settler attack in the village of Tayasir, near Tubas in the West Bank's north.

The Israeli military said an off-duty soldier fired towards a Palestinian during a stone-throwing incident near Tayasir. It did not immediately clarify whether the soldier was also a settler involved in the attack.

Settlers began attacking Tayasir residents after establishing outposts near the village about a month ago, residents say.

"They don't want to leave any place for us," said Hussam Abdel Latif Wahdan, 65, a farmer who said he was attacked by around 12 settlers late on Wednesday. "If I had not managed to escape they would have killed me."

Wahdan has four children and depends on his farm for his livelihood, but fears it has become the settlers' next target.

Settlers have killed at least six Palestinians in the West Bank since the start of this

year, with rights groups marking a sharp rise in attacks since the outbreak of the Iran war on February 28.

Attacks include arson, beatings and vandalism of Palestinian villages.

Israel has blamed settler attacks on a "fringe minority", a view disputed by most human rights observers and residents.

It also argues that territories it captured in the 1967 war are not occupied in legal terms because they are on disputed lands, but most of the international community regards them as occupied.

The United Nations says settler violence has led to the displacement of at least 700 Palestinians from the start of 2025 through February 2026.

"Israeli settlers are attacking Palestinians throughout the West Bank with impunity, and so viciously that this has led to entire communities being displaced," said Sarit Michaeli of the Israeli rights group B'Tselem.

B'Tselem says settlers have been increasingly pushing to establish settlements in areas under civil management by the Palestinian Authority (PA), which has limited self-rule in parts of the West Bank.

Under 1990s peace accords, the West Bank was divided into Area A, under full PA jurisdiction; Area B, under Palestinian civil but Israeli security control; and Area C, under Israeli civil and security control.

"Since October 7, settlers have deliberately targeted Area B – and now even Area A," said Dror Etkes, of the Israeli rights group Kerem Navot, which tracks settlements.

Palestinian villages in Areas B and C tend to be isolated, far away from major population centres, leaving residents more exposed to settler attacks.

Peace Now said the April 1 cabinet decision did not envisage the establishment of settlements in Areas A or B.

# Israel seeks direct Lebanon talks as its strikes threaten US-Iran truce

AFP/Reuters  
Beirut/Dubai/Islamabad

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ordered his ministers to begin direct talks with Lebanon, pushing for Hezbollah's disarmament amid mounting concern that its ongoing strikes could cause the fragile US-Iran truce to unravel.

A Lebanese government official told AFP shortly after Netanyahu's announcement that Beirut "wants a ceasefire" declared before starting any negotiations with Israel, a day after deadly strikes across the country.

At least 203 people were killed and 1,000 wounded in the bombardment on Wednesday, the Lebanese health ministry said, while Hezbollah said it was engaged in close quarters combat against Israeli forces on the ground in the south Lebanon town of Bint Jbeil.

Netanyahu's order for direct negotiations with Lebanon's government was focused on disarming Hezbollah and establishing peace, according to a statement from his office, but he offered no immediate respite from the bombardment.

"Lebanon wants a ceasefire before starting negotiations," said the Lebanese government official, who has knowledge of the matter and requested anonymity.

Even as Netanyahu spoke, Israel's military issued a new evacuation order for Beirut's southern suburbs, just a day after the wave of strikes.

"In light of Lebanon's repeated requests to open direct negotiations with Israel, I instructed the cabinet yesterday to begin direct negotiations with Lebanon as soon as possible," Netanyahu said. "Negotiations will focus on disarming Hezbollah and establish-

ing peace relations between Israel and Lebanon."

Brussels, Moscow and Ankara demanded that the US-Iran ceasefire be extended to Lebanon.

"We view the situation in southern Lebanon with particular concern," Germany's Chancellor Friedrich Merz said, echoing statements from Paris and London. "The severity with which Israel is waging war there could cause the peace process as a whole to fail, and that must not be allowed to happen."

For their part, Iran's parliamentary speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf said Tehran sees Lebanon as an "inseparable part of the ceasefire" and President Masoud Pezeshkian said Israel's strikes rendered "meaningless" talks with US envoys planned for the end of the week in Pakistan.

Hezbollah said it had fired rockets towards Israel in response to what it called a violation of the ceasefire.

President Donald Trump claimed victory in the Middle East war after agreeing a two-week truce to allow talks between US and Iranian negotiators to end a conflict that has already killed thousands and plunged the global economy into turmoil – but both Israel and the US insist the fighting in Lebanon is not covered by the ceasefire.

"We are continuing to strike Hezbollah with force, precision and determination," Netanyahu said, in a social media post. "Our message is clear: anyone who acts against Israeli civilians, we will strike them. We will continue to hit Hezbollah wherever necessary."

Tehran's ambassador to Pakistan, meanwhile, deleted a social media post saying that an Iranian delegation would arrive in Pakistan.

An official at the Iranian embassy



Heavy machinery operates at the site of an Israeli strike in Beirut's Ain Al Mraieh. - Reuters

in Islamabad told AFP that the post was removed "because of some issues" and refused to say whether the delegation was still expected.

The day after the strikes, rescuers were still hard at work in the rubble of a building hit in the heart of a seafood residential neighbourhood of Beirut.

Half the building had collapsed, some rooms sliced in two by the deadly strike, a dining room and a water fountain exposed.

The other half of the building is nothing but a heap of stone and twisted metal, a school report card here, a law course from Saint Joseph University there, a child's stuffed toy.

According to the civil defence, several bodies are still under the rubble.

"We don't know where my niece is... the rescue teams have been working tirelessly since yesterday, but they haven't found

her," Taha Qarqamaz told AFP.

Another of his nieces died of her injuries in hospital. Two more are in intensive care.

"Look, these are school notebooks, class notes, books! Where is Hezbollah here? There is no Hezbollah in this neighbourhood!" protested his friend, Khalid Salam.

Outside Beirut's Rafik Hariri University Hospital, a steady stream of ambulances arrived throughout the day, full of mangled bodies recovered from the sites of Israeli strikes the previous day.

"We're picking up body parts for the most part. It's very rare that we find entire bodies intact," said a rescue worker on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the press.

One woman, between tears, told Reuters that she had lost her entire family in one of the strikes.

If the Pakistan talks go ahead, a key point of contention remains the Strait of Hormuz, through which a fifth of the world's oil as well as vast quantities of natural gas and fertiliser pass in peacetime.

Iran announced alternative routes yesterday for ships travelling through the strait, citing the risk of sea mines.

However, it was unclear if Tehran was in practice allowing vessels to pass through the strait, following reports on Wednesday suggesting that it was shut – something the White House called "completely unacceptable".

In the first 24 hours of the ceasefire, just a single oil products tanker and five dry bulk carriers sailed through a strait that typically accommodated 140 ships a day before the war, accounting for around a fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) flows.

# Iranians pay tribute to slain supreme leader weeks after killing

Thousands of Iranians rallied yesterday in a tribute to former supreme leader Ali Khamenei, killed on the first day of the war with the United States and Israel, expressing criticism of talks expected in Pakistan this week.

Holding portraits of their deceased leader and waving the national flags of the Islamic republic, supporters of Khamenei took part in rallies across the country after he died in the US-Israeli attack on February 28.

The 40-day mourning period following a death is an important rite of passage for Muslims.

"The killing of our beloved leader was truly cowardly," Maryam Esmaili, a 33-year-old private-sector employee, told AFP, adding that the US and Israel "crossed our red line".

The most notable gatherings took place in the capital Tehran, where strikes have ceased since a fragile ceasefire came into effect on Tuesday night, as well as the northwest city of Urmia and northeast Gorgan.

Khamenei was 86 years old, having led the Islamic republic for more than 36 years.

His son Mojtaba, who succeeded him in early March, was not present yesterday.

He was wounded in a strike, according to Iranian officials, and has yet to appear in public since his appointment.

President Masoud Pezeshkian

participated in the tribute and posed for photos with attendees, according to images broadcast on state television.

The national tribute began at 9.40am (0610 GMT), the same time that strikes killed Khamenei at his residence in Tehran along with dozens of high-ranking officers and officials.

The attack marked the beginning of a conflict that subsequently engulfed the entire Middle East, with Iran retaliating with missile and drone attacks on Israel and Gulf nations it accuses of serving as launchpads for US strikes.

A state funeral for Khamenei was initially announced but could ultimately not be held because of the war.

"The leader is alive, he always prays for us and he is watching all of us now, and victory is definitely ours," said Nastaran Safaie, a 24-year-old university student.

Esmaili said she has little hope for the negotiations expected to take place before the end of the week in Pakistan, accusing the Americans of acting in bad faith.

"What they say about the ceasefire and its violation is a repetition of history," she said. "It should be a lesson for the honourable people of Iran not to be fooled by the empty promises of hypocritical countries."

Others like Mahdi Mohaddes, a 41-year-old engineer, echoed her sentiment.



A boy holds up photos of slain supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (back) and Hezbollah Commander Ali Karaki during an anti-government protest outside the Lebanese governmental palace in Beirut. - AFP

"I hope this (the talks) doesn't happen. If I were in the shoes of the officials, I would reconsider and not participate in these negotiations," he said.

Mohammad Hossein Bonakdar, a 44-year-old institute director, was thinking of Lebanon, where Israel killed more than 200 people on Wednesday in strikes unprecedented in its current war against Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

"Everyone is very upset and sad and expects that appropriate action will be taken," he said. "But ultimately, any decision that the leadership of the revolution announces is obligatory and we will obey."

Mohaddes, surrounded by Hezbollah flags, said the movement allied with Tehran has given "its life and blood" to Iranians.

"Now it is our duty to act in response to this aggression," he said. - AFP

# Lebanon bans non-state weapons in capital Beirut

Lebanon's cabinet has instructed security forces to restrict weapons in Beirut exclusively to state institutions, in a warning to Hezbollah a day after Israel launched strikes across the country including the capital.

"The army and security forces are requested to immediately begin reinforcing the full imposition of state authority over Beirut Governorate and to monopolise weapons in the hands of legitimate authorities alone," Prime Minister Nawaf Salam said at the end of a cabinet meeting.

Information Minister Paul Morcos said the decision prompted objections from Iran-backed Hezbollah's two ministers in the cabinet.

The Lebanese government banned Hezbollah's military activities at the beginning of March, shortly after the start of war with Israel, but the decision has not stopped the Iran-backed armed group and political party – represented in cabinet and parliament – from conducting military operations.

Beirut had also committed in 2025 to disarm the group, the only one to keep its weapons after Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war. - AFP

# Iran rules out curbs on enrichment programme, says nuclear chief

The head of Iran's nuclear energy agency has ruled out any restrictions on the country's enrichment of uranium, saying that the demand by the United States and Israel "will not come true".

"The claims and demands of our enemies to restrict Iran's enrichment programme are merely wishes that will be buried," Mohammad Eslami was quoted as saying by Iran's ISNA news agency.

His remarks came with talks set to take place at the end of the week between Iran and the United States under Pakistani mediation.

"All the conspiracies and actions of our enemies, including this brutal war, have yielded no results. Now they seek to achieve something through negotiations," Eslami said.

The issue of uranium enrichment has been central to Western relations with Iran for more than two decades, with the US and its allies accusing Tehran of seeking atomic weapons, while Iran has always insisted its programme is for civilian purposes only.

US President Donald Trump has insisted "there will be no enrichment of uranium" by Iran after the war.

He argued before the current war that Iran was rushing to build atomic weapons, an assertion not backed by the UN's nuclear watchdog.

The US-Israeli strikes on February 28 that began the latest conflict took place with Washington and Tehran engaged in negotiations that included Iran's nuclear programme.

During last June's 12-day war, Israel and the United States hit Iran's nuclear programme, claiming to have obliterated its ability to enrich uranium.

Nevertheless, the whereabouts of several hundred kilograms of highly enriched uranium remains unknown following the bombing.

Before last year's war, Iran had been enriching uranium to 60%, well above the 3.67% limit allowed by a now-defunct 2015 nuclear agreement and close to the 90% needed to make a bomb, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency. - AFP

# Lebanon's hospitals may run out of vital medical supplies within days

Some of Lebanon's hospitals could run out of life-saving trauma medical kits within days as supplies near depletion following mass casualties from large-scale Israeli strikes over the past day, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said yesterday.

The life-saving trauma kits include bandages, antibiotics and anaesthetics to treat patients who sustained war-related injuries, the WHO stated.

"Some of the trauma management supplies were in short (supply) and we may run out in a few days," Dr Abdinasir Abubakar, the WHO's representative in Lebanon, told Reuters.

Israel bombed more targets in Lebanon yesterday after its biggest attacks of the war on its neighbour on Wednesday killed more than 250 people and more than 1,000 were injured.

"If we have another mass casualty (incident), like what happened yesterday, it will be a disaster," Abubakar said. "Probably we will lose more lives just because we don't have enough supplies."

Shortages of supplies of trauma kits have been driven by a surge in recent casualties – the majority of whom are civilians – with roughly three weeks' worth of supplies being depleted in one day, Abubakar stated.

Medicines to treat patients with chronic disease, such as insulin for diabetes patients, could also run out within weeks after supply chains were disrupted by the war in the Gulf and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, Abubakar said.

Delivery costs of medical supplies into Lebanon have surged three times, while the WHO also faces constrained funding, he added.

The WHO said it and the Lebanese Ministry of Health were planning to move supplies between hospitals to avoid total depletion of stocks, but cautioned that the health system is being stretched to its limit. - Reuters



# Nigerian army general killed in overnight assault on base

Reuters/AFP  
Maiduguri

Religious militant groups Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) launched co-ordinated overnight attacks on multiple locations in Nigeria's northeastern Borno state, killing an army general and several other soldiers, military sources said yesterday.

Nigeria's Defence Headquarters said insurgents attacked a key military base in Benisheikh but were repelled, confirming that soldiers were killed while urging the public to wait for formal notification of next of kin before further details.

Fighters attacked the towns of Pulka and Bakin Ruwa in Gwoza district at about 2130 GMT on Wednesday, before insurgents tried to overrun the headquarters of the 29 Task Force Brigade in Benisheikh at midnight, Defence Headquarters said.

"The troops led by the Commander 29 Brigade, Brigadier-General Oseni Braimah, responded with exceptional courage and superior firepower... and forced (the terrorists) to retreat in disarray," Defence Headquarters spokesperson Major-General Michael Onoja said, adding that clearance operations were ongoing.

However, two military sources told Reuters that the Benisheikh base was overrun, killing Braimah and other soldiers including a captain, and destroying several military vehicles.

Reuters could not independently verify the accounts.

Braimah's death follows the killing of Brigadier-General Musa Uba by ISWAP in November. He was the highest-ranking military official to die in the long-running conflict since 2021.

An officer involved in the Benisheikh reinforcements said air force aircraft evacuated the dead soldiers yesterday morning after helping to drive out insurgents who had operated in the area for more than three hours.

He said the death toll was still being tallied. One intelligence source put the death toll at 18.

A 17-year Islamist insurgency in northeast Nigeria has killed thousands of people and displaced at least 2mn, according to aid groups, despite major military campaigns.

Violence is surging across the country's mostly Muslim north, with at least 90 people killed by gunmen in several remote villages since Sunday night, according to an AFP tally of tolls given by local, humanitarian and church sources.

Boko Haram and ISWAP have intensified attacks on military positions in northeastern Nigeria this year, killing dozens of troops as they continue to exploit the region's difficult terrain, porous borders, and weak state presence.

Researchers have warned of an uptick in violence since last year.

Borno capital Maiduguri has seen two suicide bombings since December – the type of bloody, urban attacks reminiscent of the insurgency's peak a decade ago.

On Wednesday, the US State Department said in a notice it was authorising "non-emergency US government employees" to leave Abuja "due to the deteriorating security situation".

While the insurgency is concentrated in the northeastern countryside, religious militants from Nigeria and the neighbouring Sahel have made inroads in western Nigeria, where organised crime gangs known as "bandits" have been raiding villages and extorting farmers and artisanal miners for years.

The spate of attacks this week included an assault in Kebbi state that police blamed on a local religious militant group known as Mahmuda, which is affiliated with Al Qaeda.

Other assaults included those blamed on bandits, which the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) said launched raids "from one village to the next" over three days, without military intervention.

Father Illah Vincent Iko, CAN co-ordinator for Shanga area in Kebbi, said that there were at least 1,900 people displaced by the attacks.

Kebbi sits on Nigeria's border with Benin and Niger and since 2025 has been targeted by a rising number of religious militant attacks.

In nearby Kwara state, in October, fighters from Al Qaeda-affiliated JNIM claimed an attack after years of researchers warning that the conflict ravaging the Sahel risked spreading south towards coastal west African states.

In December, the United States, with Nigerian assistance, bombed northwest Sokoto state, targeting Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) fighters usually found in neighbouring Niger, along with Mali and Burkina Faso.

Earlier this year, the United States began deploying 200 troops to Nigeria to provide technical and training support to the country's soldiers in fighting religious militant groups.

# Mideast war threatens Africa's supply of humanitarian medicine

By Eleonore Sens  
AFP

The Middle East conflict is exacerbating tensions over the humanitarian supply of medicines in Africa, a sector already severely impacted by funding cuts, with nonprofits warning of emptying shelves.

Rising fuel costs and the logistical difficulty of transport through the Strait of Hormuz are affecting the delivery of medication to crisis and conflict zones in Africa, where the situation is already dire following US aid cuts.

"By the end of April, some of our medicine stocks will be depleted," Rodrigue Alitanou, director of operations for medical non-governmental organisation (NGO) Alima, told AFP from his office in Dakar.

Alima, which operates in 13 African countries, is sounding the alarm.

"If this goes on for a month and a half, two months, the warnings we are sounding will transform into direct impacts on the continuity of our activities," he said.

Africa imports more than 70% of medication and more than 90 percent of pharmaceutical ingredients.

Alitanou is concerned about rising import costs due to soaring fuel prices.

"An extra \$2,000 in costs means 200 fewer children suffering from malnutrition will receive treatment," he said. "We're already seeing it in Sudan, we're already seeing it in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) and it's starting to become apparent in most countries."

Situated at the crossroads between Asia, the world's leading producer of medicines, and Africa, the Middle East serves as the primary gateway for supplying the African continent.

Several humanitarian supply centres in Dubai's humanitarian free zone have seen their operations disrupted, affecting logistics transport to Africa.

In Dubai, the World Health Organisation's (WHO) logistics hub, which supplies medicines to more than 150 countries worldwide, had to cancel shipments at the start of the conflict due to the closure of airspace and revise routes for delivering supplies.

"Supply lead times are lengthening because we cannot pass through the Strait of Hormuz and have to go via the Cape of Good Hope, particularly with cargo ships, so it is more

expensive and adds 15 days to a month to the supply chain," said Damien Dubois, purchasing and inventory officer at MSF Supply, a supply centre within Doctors Without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres, MSF).

A spokeswoman for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria told AFP that it had observed "delays and cost increases" although the organisation had not yet identified any shortages.

Anne Senequier, co-director of the Global Health Observatory at the Institute for International and Strategic Relations (IRIS), said that "at present we are not talking about a shortage of medicines due to the conflict, we are talking about an additional strain on an already fragile situation, with the risk of shortages emerging in certain vulnerable regions".

Those interviewed by AFP remain cautious regarding the ceasefire agreed on Tuesday between the United States and Iran, with strikes continuing on Wednesday in the Gulf and maritime traffic in the Strait of Hormuz still disrupted.

For Alitanou "this ceasefire is a first step, but it is not enough. Conflicts are ongoing in the Gulf states and continue to undermine our operations".

Agathe Lamouret, shipments coordinator at MSF Supply, said she believes "it's going to remain very unstable, especially as we don't know what will happen" after the two-week truce.

Christian Lindmeier, a WHO spokesman, said that "it will take several weeks to overcome the disruption caused by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz".

Africa, which is heavily reliant on imports, is particularly vulnerable to geopolitical upheavals, said Ines Alaoui, head of international health policy at France-based Coalition Plus, an organisation uniting international HIV health groups.

"On the African continent we operate on a just-in-time basis. We don't produce or stockpile more than is necessary," she said.

The organisations within Coalition Plus were already bearing the brunt of US aid cuts, with shortages of preventative medicines and antiretrovirals observed on the ground.

The new crisis is "further eroding healthcare", Alaoui said, adding "we fear that people living with HIV will have to stop their treatment".

For Senequier of IRIS, "the risk is that certain vulnerable groups will turn to counterfeit medicines, which will put their health at risk".

# Benin faces uneven race for the presidency

By Pierre Donadieu and  
Josue Mehounou  
AFP

Benin's long-serving finance minister and chosen successor of outgoing president Patrice Talon is expected to win elections on Sunday, with the economy booming but religious militant attacks blighting the north.

Talon is barred by the constitution from standing again after two terms spanning a decade in which Benin grew into an attractive destination for investors and tourists but was accused of restricting political opposition and freedom of expression.

Backed by the ruling bloc, Romuald Wadagni, 49, who has been finance minister for 10 years, faces a single rival, Paul Hounkpe, a former culture minister seen as a moderate.

Voter turnout will be key but many in the economic capital Cotonou appeared lukewarm about the polls and suggested they were a foregone conclusion.

"To me, Hounkpe's candidacy is just for show. Everyone already knows how the vote will turn out. Are we still in a democracy?" civil service executive Moufalilou Adeniyi said.

While low-key, Hounkpe, a teacher by training and an ex-mayor, is "steeped in experience", supporters say, but he needed the sponsorship of ruling party lawmakers to allow him to run, elections expert Rufin Godjo said.

"We have a very strong candidate, a well-known financier, running against another who was chosen by those in power just to maintain appearances," he said.

The main opposition party, the Democrats, was barred from running after failing to gather enough signatures and leading members have since thrown in their lot with Wadagni.

The election comes a mere four months after a failed attempted coup, when soldiers on December 7 stormed into television studios to announce the overthrow of Talon.

Loyal Benin soldiers swiftly thwarted the bid the same day, later with support from French and Nigerian forces, and the country quickly turned a page.

"This was quickly forgotten by most Beninese, who believe that whatever the political complications, they must be resolved through dialogue," political analyst Franck Kinninvo said.

Parliamentary elections were held the following month, in which the Democrats lost all their seats after a routing by Talon's ruling bloc.

A challenge facing Benin's new president is the ongoing insecurity in the north where religious militants have increasingly targeted soldiers.

The army suffered its deadliest year in 2025, according to ACLED, an non-governmental organisation (NGO) that monitors victims of conflict.

Security is even worse across its borders in Burkina Faso and Niger, where the military juntas have adopted a policy of sovereignty and condemn their small neighbour over its close ties with Western powers especially France.

If he becomes president, US- and France-educated Wadagni will maintain those close Western relations but also "restore dialogue" with Niger for a "structural" re-



Commuters ride past an election billboard of presidential candidate Romuald Wadagni and vice-presidential candidate Mariam Chabi Talata in Cotonou. - AFP

sponse to the religious militant attacks, his allies say.

He will also see through big infrastructure projects and continue Talon's focus on promoting tourism, especially historic sites linked to the slave trade.

Wadagni has tried to erase his image as a technocrat, adopting a casual style on the campaign trail, where he vowed to tackle deep poverty especially in rural areas.

"He is a statesman in the making. His relative political discretion can also be a strength. He represents a new generation of leadership, less about rhetoric and more about impact," supporter Lucien Fayomi said.

However, Talon's tenure has also seen several leading political opponents jailed for years, even decades, by the powerful Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism.

Others have fled into exile, while reforms of political parties have undermined the opposition.

After Sunday, no elections are now planned until 2033 under the latest constitutional reform adopted at the end of last year.

"The goal is to forge a sacred union around the country's development," Kinninvo, the political analyst, said.

Nevertheless, warned elections expert Godjo, "watch out for the frustrations of those who have no candidate on Sunday".

Talon, 67, insists that he now plans to put his feet up but analysts say he is likely to keep a watchful eye over his legacy under his successor.

"Talon won't be as rude as to give instructions to the new head of state but he will ensure that what he put in place will not be dismantled," Godjo said.

## Over 1mn Sudanese refugees in Chad face drastic aid cuts: UN

More than 1mn Sudanese refugees face drastic cuts in life-saving aid such as food and water unless donors fill a funding shortfall of over \$400mn, two UN agencies said yesterday.

More than 1.3mn Sudanese refugees are living in neighbouring Chad, with most of them arriving since the start of the conflict in Sudan between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023.

Among them are survivors of mass killings and famine from Darfur. The World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN refugee agency do not have enough funds to help them all and envisage further cuts in the coming months unless a \$428mn shortfall can be met, they said in a joint statement.

"...With less than half the resources we require, we cannot deliver sufficient food to the people who need it most," said WFP Chad country director Sarah Gordon-Gibson. "This will force them into devastating coping strategies and put lives at risk" - Reuters

pital in White Nile state, just east of Kordofan, killing 10 people after hitting an operating theatre and a maternity ward, MSF said.

On March 20, another attack attributed to the Sudanese army in RSF-held territory - gutted El-Daein Teaching Hospital in East Darfur, killing 70 people and wounding 146.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), more than 2,000 people have been killed and 720 injured in 213 attacks on health facilities across Sudan since the war began.

In 2025, Sudan accounted for 82% of all global deaths resulting

from attacks on healthcare, the WHO said.

During the same period, MSF documented 100 violent incidents targeting its staff, facilities and medical supplies.

The conflict, now nearing its three-year mark, has already killed tens of thousands, displaced more than 11mn people and created what the UN describes as the world's largest displacement and hunger crises.

The war has effectively divided Sudan, with the army controlling the north, east and centre, while the RSF dominates Darfur and, with allied forces, parts of the country's south.

# Sudan drone strike kills 12 civilians in North Darfur

AFP  
Khartoum

A drone strike on the paramilitary-controlled town of Kutum in Sudan's North Darfur state has killed 12 civilians, including six children, a medical source and local activists said yesterday.

The strike on Wednesday came amid a surge in drone attacks by both Sudan's army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which have been at war since April 2023.

A medical source told AFP that 12 bodies, including six children - three of them female secondary-school students - were brought to the hospital in Kutum.

Sixteen others were injured, including women and children, and are receiving treatment, the source added, speaking on condition of anonymity for safety reasons.

The El-Fasher Resistance Committee, a pro-democracy group, said the strike hit the Al-Salama neighbourhood near Al-Um Girls' School, blaming the army for the attack.

Near-daily drone strikes have

disrupted life across Sudan, especially in Kordofan, now the war's main battlefield, and in the RSF-controlled west, including Darfur, at times killing dozens of civilians.

Doctors Without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres, MSF) said it has treated around 400 people for drone-related injuries since February, after strikes hit civilian areas in eastern Chad near the Sudanese border and several parts of Darfur.

The United Nations has previously said drone attacks across Sudan had killed more than 500 civilians between January and mid-March, warning of "the devastating impact of high-tech and relatively cheap weapons in populated areas".

"The teams are receiving patients with horrific injuries: patients with transfixing wounds, amputated limbs, devastating burns - many of whom are already dead by the time they reach the hospital," said Muriel Boursier, MSF's emergency coordinator in Darfur. "The scale of violence and atrocity we witness is unbearable".

Last week, a drone attack blamed on the RSF struck a hos-

## Kenya disputes findings of UN probe into Haiti mission abuses

Kenya has disputed a UN report saying that an investigation had found substantiated allegations of abuse involving members of a UN-backed anti-gang force in Haiti that is staffed mostly by Kenyan police officers.

In a report dated February 16 and first reported last week, the UN said four allegations of exploitation and abuse from last year against the force had been substanti-

ated by its Human Rights Office.

In a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres this week, Kenya's Foreign Minister Musalia Mudavadi said the allegations had been looked into by a Kenyan board of inquiry and "found to be unsubstantiated".

"Investigations conducted were impartial and shared with all relevant stakeholders, including UN human rights offices," Mudavadi wrote. - Reuters

## Democrats fail in bid to curb Trump's Iran war powers

AFP  
Washington

US President Donald Trump's Republicans yesterday blocked an attempt by the opposition Democrats to curb his authority to wage war in Iran, amid mounting frustration in Congress over his handling of the Middle East conflict.

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries sought to pass a war powers resolution by "unanimous consent" — a procedure that bypasses the need to hold a recorded vote, provided no one objects — but was stopped, as expected, by the Republican majority's presiding officer.

The manoeuvre, staged during a short procedural session while lawmakers remain out of Washington, was largely symbolic but underscored growing Democratic anger over a conflict that has not been

formally authorised by Congress.

Jeffries had urged colleagues to attend the session and press for immediate action, arguing a recently announced two-week ceasefire was "woefully insufficient" and calling for a permanent end to US involvement in the war.

Republicans, however, showed little appetite to challenge Trump's authority.

Some have backed the administration's handling of the conflict, while others — though uneasy about the lack of congressional oversight — have stopped short of supporting measures that could constrain military operations.

The failed push sets the stage for a more consequential showdown next week, when lawmakers return from a two-week recess and Democrats plan to force a recorded vote on the resolution.

Jeffries has said he believes only a small number of Republicans would need to break ranks

for the measure to pass.

In the Senate, Democratic Minority Leader Chuck Schumer has signalled a parallel effort, with a vote expected in the coming days.

Similar measures have struggled to gain traction in the past, and Republican opposition remains strong despite signs of unease within the party.

Under the 1973 War Powers Resolution, Congress is required to act within 60 days of the start of an unauthorised military conflict — a deadline that could intensify pressure on lawmakers if the Iran war continues.

"The American people are with us," Jeffries told left-leaning cable news network MSNBC ahead of the vote.

"They don't want to see billions of dollars being spent dropping bombs in Iran from an administration that's not willing to spend a dime to actually make life more affordable for the American people."

## US House to vote on aviation safety reform bill next week

Reuters  
Washington

The US House of Representatives is set to vote next week on a sweeping aviation safety reform bill to address dozens of recommendations issued after a January 2025 collision of an American Airlines regional jet and a US Army Black Hawk helicopter that killed 67 people.

Two House committees on March 26 voted unanimously on the legislation to require installation of collision-prevention technologies on all military aircraft by 2031, except fighters, bombers and drones, and establish requirements for equipping collision-mitigation technologies for civilian airplanes and helicopters.

The legislation, which is expected to be considered under fast-track House rules that require two-thirds approval, also

### The ALERT bill addresses its 50 recommendations proposed after the 2025 mid-air collision

addresses deficiencies in the Federal Aviation Administration's safety culture, enhances air traffic control training and procedures, and strengthens the safety of airspace around Reagan Washington National Airport, where the fatal collision occurred.

The bill includes a review of flight frequency at Reagan — which has the nation's single busiest runway — to determine if it can handle current traffic.

The House failed to pass a separate aviation bill in February after the Pentagon withdrew its support and despite pleas from lawmakers and relatives of those

killed in the American Airlines collision, the worst US aviation disaster since 2001.

The ROTOR Act passed the Senate unanimously in December but needed a two-thirds majority in the House to pass under fast-track rules and it fell one vote short.

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

National Transportation Safety Board Chair Jennifer Homendy said the ALERT bill addresses its 50 recommendations proposed after the 2025 mid-air collision and said any final legislation must also do so. "Anything less than that would be counter to aviation safety and dishonour the lives of 67 people who died on January 29, 2025, and their families who have fought tirelessly for safety change," Homendy told Reuters.

## White House confident Warsh will lead Fed

Reuters  
Washington

White House economic adviser Kevin Hassett said yesterday that he was confident Kevin Warsh would start as Federal Reserve chairman in May and that he did not expect current Fed chairman Jerome Powell to remain on the board.

"I'm highly confident that that will happen," Hassett told Fox Business Network, adding that he believed a confirmation hearing for Warsh was on track to begin next week.

Hassett said Powell had indicated he would leave the central bank once a new chair was selected.

"He's really signalled that once

there's a confirmed head chair, that he'll step aside, and that's the appropriate thing for him to do," Hassett said on the "Mornings with Maria" programme.

However, Powell said in March he would not leave the Fed at least until a criminal investigation spearheaded by US Attorney Jeanine Pirro is over and that he had not yet decided whether to remain in a governor's seat on the central bank's board that lasts until 2028.

Powell's term as Fed chief ends in May.

A US judge last week upheld a block on subpoenas issued in the investigation into Powell, setting up a likely appeal that could further delay President Donald Trump's move to install a more compliant central bank head.

## Nato chief Rutte tells allies Trump wants Hormuz pledges within days

By Lill Bayer  
Reuters

Nato Secretary-General Mark Rutte has told European governments that US President Donald Trump wants concrete commitments within days to help secure the Strait of Hormuz, diplomats said yesterday, as the alliance faces US threats to leave. Rutte, known in Europe as a "Trump whisperer", is working to defuse a crisis after Trump said he was considering withdrawing from the 32-member transatlantic alliance, arguing that European allies have relied on US security guarantees while providing inadequate support for the US-Israeli bombing campaign in Iran. Three diplomats told Reuters that Rutte, who met with the US president at the White House on Wednesday, conveyed Trump's demands to European countries. European leaders are now under pressure to show they are quickly making tangible plans to help secure the Strait of Hormuz, which is a vital oil transit point that Iran has effectively blocked during the conflict.

Speaking in Washington a day after meeting Trump, Rutte said



Nato Secretary-General Mark Rutte speaks at the Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute in Washington, DC, yesterday. (AFP)

that some alliance members were initially "a bit slow" to provide assistance to the US in Iran and "a bit surprised" but that now there is a "massive amount" of support including basing and logistics. "Nearly without exception, allies are doing everything the US is asking. They have heard and are responding to President Trump's requests," Rutte said in a speech hosted by the Ronald Reagan Institute. Multiple European allies have said they're willing to help in the Strait of Hormuz but only once there is a durable cessation of hostilities and an agreement with Iran that their ships will not be at-

tacked. Nato spokesperson Allison Hart said yesterday: "The secretary-general is in contact with allies about his discussions in Washington" and "it's clear that the US expects concrete commitments and action to ensure freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz".

The tensions over the Iran war follow a series of challenges for the alliance, including Trump's stepped-up threats in January to take Greenland from Denmark.

On Thursday, Greenland's Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen called on Nato allies to stand together to defend international law as he pushed back

against Trump's latest comments about the Arctic island.

In his speech, Rutte said the alliance is undergoing a shift but growing stronger.

"Allies recognise, and I recognise, we are in a period of profound change in the transatlantic alliance. Europe is assuming a greater and fairer share of the task of providing for its conventional defence," Rutte said.

"We note the frustration in Washington, but they did not consult allies either before or after starting this war," said one of the diplomats.

"Nato as such would not play a role in the war against Iran, but allies want to be helpful in seeking longer-term solutions for Hormuz. With negotiations ongoing with Iran, this could be helpful," the diplomat said.

Trump posted on Truth Social after meeting Rutte on Wednesday in capitalised letters that "Nato wasn't there when we needed them, and they won't be there if we need them again".

A senior European official said: "The Nato community is more worried right now than confident," and "the meeting did not take the worry away".

## American Airlines set to resume Venezuela flights as soon as April 30

Reuters  
Washington

American Airlines said yesterday it aims to resume flights to Venezuela as soon as April 30 after winning approval from the US Transportation Department last month.

The airline said it plans to resume services to Venezuela for the first time in more than six years, offering a daily service between Miami and Caracas on an Embraer 175 through Envoy, its wholly owned regional subsidiary, pending additional government approvals.

US Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy lifted a 2019 order in January that had barred US airlines from flying to Venezuela, after President Donald Trump directed him to make the move, and approved American's request for flights in March.

The Transportation Security Administration was in Caracas about a month ago to review air-

port security procedures, sources told Reuters, a necessary step to resume flights.

American announced plans to resume service just weeks after the US military seized the country's leader Nicolas Maduro.

Trump in January asked the Transportation Department to lift restrictions that currently bar US flights after a discussion with the country's acting President Delcy Rodriguez.

American, which started operating in Venezuela in 1987, was the largest US airline in the country before it suspended the service in 2019 after the US ban. It said the planned daily flights will provide the opportunity for business, leisure and humanitarian travel.

The State Department lifted Venezuela from its "Do Not Travel" list for Americans in March, issuing a less serious "Reconsider Travel" advisory due to risk of crime, kidnapping, terrorism, and poor health infrastructure.

## Melania Trump blasts 'lies' linking her to Epstein

AFP  
Washington

US First Lady Melania Trump made a surprise statement yesterday denying any knowledge of Jeffrey Epstein's abuse, or that she herself was a victim.

The 55-year-old's rare on-camera remarks at the White House came out of the blue, in an extraordinary intervention in a scandal that has long haunted her husband President Donald Trump.

"The lies linking me with the disgraceful Jeffrey Epstein need to end today," she said. "The individuals lying about me are devoid of ethical standards, humility and respect."

It was not clear why the Slovenian-born former model decided to give the public statement, and

she did not detail any specific allegations about her and the late, convicted sex offender.

Melania and Donald Trump had previously been photographed with Epstein, but she said that she had met her husband independently two years prior to meeting Epstein.

"I am not Epstein's victim. Epstein did not introduce me to Donald Trump," Melania Trump said.

She said "fake images and statements about Epstein and me" had been circulating on social media "for years now. Be cautious about what you believe: these images and stories are completely false".

The first lady also urged Congress to hold a public hearing for survivors of Epstein's abuse to "give these victims their opportunity to testify under oath".

Epstein died in federal custody in 2019 while awaiting trial, but the scandal has repeatedly overshadowed Trump's second presidency.

The US Justice Department has over the past year released huge tranches of files related to Epstein. Trump, 79, has also denied any link to Epstein's crimes.

One widely-seen picture in the files showed Donald and Melania Trump at their Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida along with Epstein and his accomplice Ghislaine Maxwell.

"I have never had any knowledge of Epstein's abuse of his victims. I was never involved in any capacity. I was not a participant. Was never on Epstein's plane, and never visited his private island," Melania Trump said.

"I have never been legally accused or convicted of a crime in connection with Epstein trafficking, abuse of minors and other repulsive behaviour."

Speculation ran riot on social media about why the US first lady



US First Lady Melania Trump speaks in the Cross Hall of the White House in Washington, DC yesterday. (AFP)

had decided to put the Epstein scandal back in the headlines after weeks of relative quiet.

But Melania Trump has long been an elusive and often mysterious presence at the White House, who only rarely gives public remarks of the kind she delivered yesterday.

## Artemis crew's families enthralled by messages from space

AFP  
Washington

A week after astronaut Jeremy Hansen blasted off on the historic Artemis II mission to the Moon, his wife Catherine recalled the anxiety and thrill of witnessing the journey from afar.

The Canadian obstetrician-gynaecologist told AFP that she has closely followed the mission carrying her husband among a crew of four, hanging onto every update during family phone calls and from Nasa mission control.

"It's incredible to me to know that they were up close," said Catherine, wearing rocket-shaped earrings during a video call.

Lifting off from Florida, Hansen became the first non-American to journey toward the Moon as the crew reached a record-breaking distance of 250,000 miles

(400,000km) from Earth.

Catherine and her children followed the lunar flyby from Nasa mission control in Houston on Monday, and later heard Hansen share his observations in a family call. "Jeremy was describing... the fact that it looks so three-dimensional, like this globe outside the window," recalled his wife.

"He certainly will continue to describe to us and everyone else what it felt like to be that close to that celestial body."

Catherine said, before liftoff, her husband gave her a pair of powerful binoculars to follow the space voyage. "Our family would lie down and look at various places on the Moon that he would identify based on his mapping and his study guides," she said.

Some of those sites were later observed up close by the Artemis II crew.

As the astronauts flew on the far



Nasa's Artemis II flight director Jeff Radigan (centre), speaks next to Artemis II Vehicle Manager Branelle Rodriguez (right) and Nasa's associate administrator Amit Kshatriya, during a status briefing of the Artemis II crewed lunar mission, yesterday, at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. (AFP)

side of the Moon, they lost connection with Earth for some 40

minutes during an expected communications blackout.

That was the moment Catherine got especially anxious. "I wanted to be there for that, because as someone who has never flown in space, I wanted to make sure they actually reacquired signal."

As onlookers held their breath, she was surprised by the "energy in mission control".

"There was no stress or anxiety. Everyone just trusted that this is what's going to happen: they're going to lose signal and come back again," she said. "It has been a very emotional week."

Catherine and their three children also recorded videos that Jeremy was able to watch near the Moon. "When you're out in deep space by the Moon, and you are listening to a video they recorded for you before you launch. That's something," the Canadian astronaut told a press conference.

"There's been a lot of happiness and excitement, a lot of joy"

but also "some anxiety and some wanting to get him home safely," Catherine said.

She is now preparing for the moment when the crew splashes down in the Pacific Ocean, expected for today.

The Artemis II, the first mission to carry humans around the Moon in more than 50 years, was considered a risky first spaceflight for Jeremy.

Described by Nasa as a "test mission", the flight aimed to verify the reliability of the rocket and Orion capsule, which had not carried humans before.

At the moment of liftoff, Catherine was with her children and the other astronauts' families near the launch pad in Florida.

"It was absolutely incredible. And I think everyone is sort of at a loss for words," she recalled.

"I don't think anyone was quite prepared."



## World Bank trims Latin America growth estimate to 2.1% for 2026

Reuters  
Mexico City

The World Bank trimmed its estimate for economic growth in Latin America and the Caribbean for 2026, citing the region's long-standing structural challenges, compounded by high borrowing costs, weak external demand, geopolitical tensions and persistent inflation.

In its latest Latin America and the Caribbean Economic Update, published on Wednesday, the World Bank forecast the region to grow 2.1%, below the 2.4% growth recorded in 2025 and lower than the 2.5% growth that the group forecast in October.

The report noted that private consumption remains the main driver of demand.

"The binding constraint is investment, which remains subdued as firms wait for clearer signals on the external environment



and domestic policy frameworks," the report said. It highlighted Argentina as the regional exception, "as stabilisation and reforms have improved expectations and financial conditions" in the region's third largest economy.

The World Bank forecast sluggish growth for the region's two largest economies for this year and next, pointing to "slower momentum amid tight domestic financial conditions, limited fiscal space, and trade policy uncertainty."

Gross domestic product (GDP) for the region's largest economy, Brazil, is forecast to grow 1.6% this year, before ticking up to

1.8% next year, the report said.

Growth in Mexico, where the ongoing review of Mexico's trade deal with the US and Canada has fuelled uncertainty and hit investment flows, is forecast at 1.3% in 2026, before rising to 1.7% next year.

On the upside, the region has significant untapped potential for future growth, the World Bank said, emphasising that the region possesses roughly half of the world's lithium reserves, a third of its copper, a clean energy mix and ongoing reform efforts in several nations.

The report advises countries in the region against jumping straight to complex industrial policies to harness that potential. Instead, it urges governments to focus on "getting the basics right first," such as investing in skills, maintaining open economies and strengthening institutions to create an environment where businesses can thrive, ultimately creating quality jobs.

## Brazil's Chief Raoni backs Lula

AFP  
Brasilia.

Brazil's renowned Amazonian tribal chief Raoni Metuktire told AFP on Wednesday he supported the re-election bid of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in October polls, despite criticising him for expanding oil exploration.

Now in his nineties, the Indigenous leader who has spent decades rallying the world to protect the rainforest has forged close ties with the president, known widely as Lula.

At the start of Lula's third term, Raoni — instantly recognisable with his large wooden lip plate — walked alongside him up the ramp of the presidential palace for his inauguration.

"I am going to support him," in October, Raoni told AFP in the Kayapo language through an interpreter on the sidelines of a gathering of Indigenous people in Brasilia.

The Kayapo chief last year said he was prepared to give the president a "talking-to" if he ignored



Brazilian indigenous leader Chief Raoni Metuktire of the Caiapo people, speaks during a press conference in Brasilia on Wednesday (AFP)

concerns over oil exploration near the mouth of the Amazon River.

He demanded the veteran leftist "listen to us... he must respect us!"

Lula is seeking a fourth term in October and his main rival is Flavio Bolsonaro, son of the far-right former president Jair Bolsonaro whose government froze land demarcations — official recognition of Indigenous land — and facilitated deforestation in the Amazon.

Lula "has already demarcated some Indigenous lands, so I support him so that he may continue to be president," said Raoni.

Since 2023, Lula has approved the official demarcation of some 20 territories for the exclusive use of Indigenous communities, and has overseen a dramatic decline in deforestation in the Amazon.

Nevertheless, he has come under increasing pressure to do more from Indigenous groups who are protesting in Brasilia this week to demand the protection of more of their ancestral lands.

In recent months Indigenous groups have also protested the expansion of ports for grain transport along Amazon rivers, as well as plans to build a railway line through the world's largest forest.

"You non-Indigenous people harbour this destructive mindset of destroying nature and polluting rivers, which is what causes this climate crisis," said Raoni.

"This harms all of us in Brazil. It is not only Indigenous people who will feel the effects of climate change"

## Cuba accuses US of 'extorting' Latin America in doctors row

AFP  
Havana

Cuba's foreign minister yesterday accused the US of "extorting" Latin American countries by pressuring them to cancel decades-old deals with Havana for the supply of doctors.

Bruno Rodriguez said the US was trying to "strangle" the economy of the communist island, which earns billions from its foreign medical missions, after several countries stopped deploying Cuban doctors.

Washington says the programme — a major source of pride, and income, in Cuba since the 1960s — amounts to forced labour.

The US stance on the doctors' programme is part of a campaign of maximum pressure on the Cuban regime by President Donald Trump.

Trump has made threats about "taking" the island after ousting Venezuela's leader and attacking Iran.

Countries seeking to maintain strong ties to Washington have started to yield to pressure to pull out of the medical partnerships.

Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, and Guyana have all terminated their agreements with Cuba, which is teetering on the edge of economic collapse, partly due to a US energy blockade.

"The US government is persecuting, pressuring, and extorting other governments to end the pres-

ence of Cuban Medical Brigades in various countries, under false pretenses," Rodriguez said on X.

According to official figures, some 24,000 Cuban doctors and other healthcare professionals were deployed in 56 countries in 2025. Most are sent to remote areas.

Half were deployed to Venezuela, Cuba's top ally for a quarter of a century before the January ouster of socialist president Nicolas Maduro by US forces.

The program was projected to generate \$7bn in earnings for the cash-strapped island last year.

On Tuesday, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights published a report denouncing serious human rights violations in the missions.

The report accused Cuba of withholding doctors' wages, confiscating passports and threatening medics with up to eight years in prison if they defected from their jobs abroad.

In an interview with AFP, IACHR president Edgar Stuardo Ralon said some of the practices could be classified as "forced labour" and "human trafficking."

According to official Cuban statistics cited in the report, the doctors receive only between 2.5% and 25% of what countries pay Cuba for their services.

Cuba has defended the program as a measure of "solidarity" with other countries, designed to bring health services to "hard-to-reach places."

## US claims of Cuba involvement in Florida healthcare fraud rejected

Cuba on Wednesday rejected US allegations of involvement in large-scale health insurance fraud in Florida, amid heightened tensions between Washington and Havana. US Health Secretary Robert F Kennedy Jr in an interview on Tuesday claimed that Cuba's communist government was linked to a network that set up fictitious medical equipment companies "to steal" from the US government.

Mehmet Oz, the TV doctor who is now Trump's administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, told Fox News on Saturday that criminal

networks billed millions of dollars for counterfeit medical equipment and then fled to Cuba with the proceeds.

Cuba's Foreign Ministry dismissed the allegations of official Cuban involvement as "slander" and said that US officials had provided no evidence of their claims.

It expressed willingness to "jointly confront transnational crimes originating in the US" by sharing intelligence.

The ministry added that individuals "linked to Medicare fraud in the United States" had already been prosecuted in Cuba. (AFP)

## Argentine MPs approve bill to allow mining in glaciers

AFP  
Buenos Aires

Argentine MPs approved a bill early yesterday promoted by President Javier Milei that authorises mining in ecologically sensitive areas of glaciers and permafrost, and has outraged environmentalists.

The amendment to the so-called Glacier Law, which was already approved by the Senate in February, would make it easier to mine for metals such as copper, lithium and silver in frozen parts of the Andes mountains.

The Chamber of Deputies, Argentina's lower house of Congress, approved the amendment with 137 votes in favour, 111 against and three abstentions after nearly 12 hours of debate.

Environmentalists say the reforms will weaken protections for crucial water sources.

Thousands of people took part in a demonstration on Wednesday afternoon outside parliament, marked by isolated skirmishes with police.

Some held aloft banners with slogans such as "Water is more precious than gold!" and "A glacier destroyed cannot be restored!"

Seven Greenpeace activists were arrested earlier in the day after scaling a statue outside parliament and unfurling a banner urging lawmakers "not to betray



Demonstrators wearing glacier law in front of the Congress building in Buenos Aires on Wednesday. (AFP)

the Argentine people."

The passage of the amendment is a new coup for Milei, who pushed through looser labour laws in February despite repeated street protests.

Nicolas Mayoraz, an MP from Milei's ruling La Libertad Avanza party, assured lawmakers that combining "environmental protection and sustainable development is possible."

Environmental activist Flavia Broffoni rubbished the government's position. "The science is clear...there is absolutely no possibility of creating what they (the government) call a 'sustain-

able mine' in a periglacial environment," she told AFP after addressing the protest outside parliament.

There are nearly 17,000 glaciers or rock glaciers — a mix of rock and ice — in Argentina, according to a 2018 inventory.

In the northwest of the country, where mining activity is concentrated, glacial reserves have shrunk by 17% in the last decade, mainly due to climate change, according to the Argentine Institute of Snow Science, Glaciology and Environmental Sciences.

Milei, a free-market radical who does not believe in man-made climate change, argues the

bill is necessary to attract large-scale mining projects.

Argentina is a major producer of lithium, which is critical to the global tech and green energy sectors.

The Central Bank has estimated, based on industry forecasts, that the country could triple its mining exports by 2030.

"Environmentalists would rather see us starve than have anything touched," Milei has argued.

Supporters of the reform argue that it will clear up ambiguities in the current law, from 2010, on which periglacial areas — areas on the edges of glaciers — can be economically developed.

"We want legal certainty, we want clear definitions," Michael Meding, director of the Los Azules copper mining project in San Juan, told AFP.

Enrique Viale, president of the Argentine Association of Environmental Lawyers, told AFP that the reform threatened the water supply of "70 percent" of Argentines.

Under the current law, a scientific body designates protected glaciers and periglacial environments.

The reform would give individual provinces more powers to decide which areas need protection and which can be exploited for economic purposes.

It has been backed by the governors of northern Andean provinces with strong mining sectors, namely Mendoza, San Juan, Catamarca and Salta.

## Mexico Senate confirms North America diplomat Velasco as FM

Mexico's Senate confirmed Roberto Velasco, the current undersecretary for North America, to be the new foreign minister, assuming the role at a pivotal moment for regional trade.

President Claudia Sheinbaum tapped Velasco last week after former Foreign Minister Juan Ramon de la Fuente announced he would leave the position for health reasons.

Velasco was confirmed with 81 votes in favour, while 30

senators voted against and zero abstained.

Velasco has managed diplomatic relations with the United States and Canada since June 2020, serving first as the head of the North American unit before becoming undersecretary.

The leadership change comes as the three member nations of the USMCA - Mexico, the United States, and Canada - are conducting a joint review of the trade pact this year. (Reuters)

## Man rescued two weeks after Mexico mine collapse

A worker trapped for two weeks after a mine collapsed in northwestern Mexico has been rescued, the government said on Wednesday. Two other workers died when the gold and silver mine in the state of Sinaloa caved in on March 25, trapping four men.

One miner was rescued on March 30, and a diver located the other survivor on Tuesday night. "Incredibly — and fortunately — he was found alive," President Claudia Sheinbaum told a regular news conference. Hundreds of rescuers had worked day and night for two weeks, using specialised water-extraction equipment to reach the miners.

According to authorities, the mine caved in due to a waterproofing failure which compromised its structure. Accidents are not uncommon in mines in Mexico, where some operate clandestinely or with substandard equipment and safety. In August 2022, a mine collapse in the northern state of Coahuila killed 10 workers. In that same state in 2006, 65 miners died in an explosion at the Pasta de Conchos coal mine. (AFP)

## Corruption, crime top voter concerns in Peru election

Reuters  
Lima

Peruvians head to the polls on April 12, hoping to break a cycle of political turmoil that has prevented any president from completing a full term over the past decade, amid corruption scandals, rising crime and voter frustration.

About 27mm Peruvians are eligible to vote for a new president and a newly reinstated bicameral congress. Polling stations open at 0700 local time (1200 GMT) on Sunday and close at 1700, when paper ballots measuring nearly half a meter (44 centimeters) — the longest in the country's history — will then be counted.

In a busy Lima suburb, campaign posters for dozens of presidential hopefuls crowd round-

**The country has cycled through eight presidents since 2018, as leaders were either impeached, jailed or forced from office**

bouts and lamp posts as a record 35 candidates vie for attention.

"I've seen the ballot and it honestly gave me a headache," said shopkeeper Marlene Jimenez. "I don't know who to vote for."

Opinion polls suggest right-wing candidate Keiko Fujimori holds a narrow lead ahead of Sunday's vote. She is closely followed by at least three contenders, including two former mayors of Lima, the ultra-conservative Rafael Lopez Aliaga and media entrepreneur Ricardo Belmont, and political outsider, Carlos Alvarez, a former comedian.

None of the candidates poll above 15%, making a runoff on June 7 almost certain, analysts said. The

three candidates trailing Fujimori, daughter of late former president Alberto Fujimori, are also in a technical tie, said Urpi Torrado of polling firm Datum Internacional.

"There are four days to go (until Sunday), and the story can change," Torrado said.

The high number of undecided voters means that the second tier of candidates "cannot be ignored," said Nicolas Watson at consultancy Teneo, even if they only garner 4.5-6% support.

Surveys suggested about 13% of voters remained undecided.

For many Peruvians, the fragmented contest reflects deeper institutional decline. The country has cycled through eight

presidents since 2018, as leaders were either impeached, jailed or forced from office.

These elections could mark a break from this cycle of instability, or "keep us trapped in it," said political analyst Fernando Tuesta.

The fight against corruption is a prominent campaign theme. Four former presidents are currently in prison, most linked to bribery cases that involved Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht. Alberto Fujimori served 16 years in jail for human rights abuses and died in 2024 after being released on humanitarian grounds.

Crime, however, now rivals — and in many cases surpasses — corruption as the top voter concern.

Peru was not traditionally associated with organised crime, but homicide and extortion have surged, particularly hitting transport workers and small businesses,



Political advertising is on display ahead of the April 12 general election, in Lima, Peru, on Wednesday. (Reuters)

said professor Paula Munoz at Lima's Universidad del Pacifico.

Official data shows extortion cases were up nearly 20% last year, and homicide rates reached new records.

The rise has fuelled support for tougher, populist responses on the right, Munoz said, reflecting a broader Latin American trend in which crime is increasingly seen as an issue best handled by

hardline leaders, like El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele.

Proposals by some candidates include deploying troops, reinstating the death penalty, withdrawing from international human rights courts, and allowing magistrates handling criminal cases to remain anonymous that would reinstate the country's so-called "faceless judges," which Peru has not had since 1997.

## China bans civil aviation from large area off Shanghai

AFP  
Paris, France

China has banned for 40 days civil aviation from a large airspace off Shanghai without specifying the reasons, according to a notice to aviators published by the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

The aviation notice (NOTAM) announcing the access restriction was posted online on March 27 at 1150 GMT and took effect a few hours later. It will remain in place until May 6 and affects an area twice the size of Taiwan a few hundred kilometres north of the island, covering 73,000sq km in total.

China has not provided any ex-

planation for the ban as of April 8, but “there is no possible use other than military” for this type of airspace restriction, maritime security expert Benjamin Blandin told AFP.

“It could be to fire missiles, carry out air exercises, etc. We don’t know,” he added.

This is “the very first time” that China has restricted access to its airspace in a way that is “so sudden, geographically extensive, prolonged over time, and so poorly documented”, according to Blandin, a researcher at Taiwan’s Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR).

Aviation and defence consultant for Aviation NXT, Xavier Tytelman, also believes that the restriction is “out of the ordinary

in terms of its size, duration and the lack of any limits on altitude, either high or low.

NOTAMs are intended to inform aviators of unusual circumstances affecting certain airspaces.

They are generally issued ahead of military exercises or during exceptional events such as fires or volcanic eruptions.

In this particular case, it means that “the government is reserving a zone for itself,” said Tytelman.

Restricted access applies to civil aviation but not necessarily to military planes, helicopters or drones.

The ban covers two zones over the Yellow Sea, between China and South Korea, and three others straddling the Yellow Sea and East China Sea, between China

and its neighbour Japan.

“Normally this is announced weeks or months in advance, and there are explanations and justifications,” said Blandin, adding that the reserved airspace is limited in altitude “to allow the passage of commercial aircraft”.

The areas closed to civil aviation are separated by an air corridor about 100 kilometres wide, allowing access to Shanghai from the Yellow Sea.

According to a Taiwan senior security official, China is taking advantage of the United States being distracted by the Middle East war to expand its active military presence and conduct harassment in the Indo-Pacific. China aims to deter the US’s allies in the region and



A woman walks along the Huangpu River as the city’s skyline is seen in the background in Shanghai yesterday. (AFP)

weaken the US’s military influence in the Indo-Pacific, he said.

For Blandin this NOTAM is part of a “continuing series of access denials” and “bolsters China’s strategy of nibbling away at the land and sea borders of its neigh-

bour” over the past 15 years.

Tytelman, a former flight navigator for the French navy, expects this type of operation to be repeated in the months and years to come, in order to “lower our guard before an aggressive action.”

## N Korea tests cluster-bomb missile, electromagnetic weapon, carbon-fibre bombs

Reuters  
Seoul

North Korea tested anew cluster-bomb warhead on a ballistic missile and an electromagnetic weapon this week, state media KCNA reported yesterday, in a move seen as part of efforts by Pyongyang to showcase its capacity to fight a modern war. The country’s Academy of Defence Science and the Missile Administration also conducted tests of carbon-fibre bombs and a mobile short-range anti-aircraft missile system, KCNA said.

Kim Jong Sik, a general who oversaw the tests, said the electromagnetic weapon system and carbon-fibre bombs were “special assets” for North Korea’s military, KCNA reported. South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said on Wednesday that Pyongyang had test-fired multiple missiles over several days. Analysts also see the tests as likely to be a show of force in cutting-edge conventional weapon systems by the nuclear-armed North for its adversaries and allies.

There has also been speculation that US President Donald Trump may try to hold a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on the sidelines of his visit to China in mid-May.

Without specifying the number of ballistic missiles launched – a violation of UN sanctions – North Korea said it had tested its mobile short-range anti-aircraft missile system as well as the combat capabilities of its tactical ballistic missile warhead. One test proved the surface-to-surface tactical ballistic missile called Hwasongpho-11 Ka, which is tipped with a cluster-bomb warhead, was able to “reduce to ashes any target” covering an area of up to 7 hectares (17 acres), KCNA said.

The tests also follow North Korea reiterating its characterisation of South Korea as a “hostile enemy,” dashing recent hopes in Seoul

of easing tensions on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea appears to be upgrading its weapon system with cutting-edge technology suited for a modern war, said Lim Eul-chul, a professor at Kyungnam University in South Korea.

The electromagnetic weapon system could have the capacity to disable electronic circuits in the enemy’s assets, with the potential ability to cripple South Korea’s F-35A stealth fighter jet or Aegis-equipped destroyers, Lim said.

Carbon-fibre bombs, which have been developed by advanced militaries such as the US and China, are capable of crippling infrastructure like power plants by sprinkling conductive strands of carbon fibre over a target. Lim said they could be a potent weapon in any conflict.

North Korea also said it conducted a firing drill using “low-cost raw materials,” indicating its target for the mass production of weapons, said Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies.

The unveiling of such weapons would complicate South Korea’s defence strategy against North Korean threats, said Song Seong-jong, a professor at Daejeon University and a former official at Seoul’s Defence Ministry.

Shin Jong-woo, secretary-general at the Korea Defense and Security Forum, said that North Korea was learning lessons from conflicts such as Ukraine and in the Middle East.

For the first time, he said Pyongyang was also openly stating it was pursuing weapons designed to attack South Korea’s industrial infrastructure.

“North Korea appears to be developing these weapons with that asymmetric warfare model very much in mind,” said Shin, noting how it was important to be able to mass produce weapons and also use electronic warfare to disrupt power grids and industrial infrastructure.

## Chinese FM visits Pyongyang to advance bilateral relations

Reuters  
Beijing

Beijing stands ready to work with North Korea to further improve ties, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said during a meeting with his North Korean counterpart on a visit to Pyongyang, China’s state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

Beijing has been trying to draw Pyongyang back into its orbit after ties cooled following the Covid pandemic, which froze exchanges, and as North Korean President Kim Jong-un shored up relations with Moscow by sending troops and weapons in support of Russia’s war in Ukraine.

China is ready “to continue consolidating the positive momentum in the development” of bilateral ties, Wang said in a meeting with North Korea’s Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui, according to Xinhua. Wang’s last publicly known visit to North Korea as China’s foreign minister



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (left) is welcomed by North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui upon arriving on a two-day visit at Pyongyang International Airport yesterday. (AFP)

was in late 2019, following reciprocal visits by the two countries’ top leaders earlier that year.

Chinese ministry spokesperson, Mao Ning, said Wang’s visit – scheduled from April 9-10 – was an important move to advance relations.

Wang’s Pyongyang visit also comes ahead of an expected summit between Chinese President Xi

Jinping and US President Donald Trump next month.

Trump has repeatedly expressed an interest in resuming direct talks with the North Korean leader in his second term, but no meeting has materialised.

Political momentum between China and North Korea gained pace last year, when Kim travelled to Beijing in September on

board an armoured train to join Russian President Vladimir Putin and other leaders for a military parade in the Chinese capital, where Kim met with Xi.

That meeting was followed by a visit to Pyongyang in October by China’s No 2 official, Premier Li Qiang.

China’s exports to North Korea reached a six-year high of \$2.3bn last year, a 25% annual increase, and North Korea in October explicitly endorsed Beijing’s position on Taiwan, shortly before China’s arms white paper dropped calls for “denuclearisation” of the Korean Peninsula.

Passenger train services between Beijing and Pyongyang resumed in March after being suspended for six years since the onset of the pandemic in 2020.

China’s flag carrier Air China has also restarted flights between the two capitals. However, the reopened links have not benefited Chinese tourists so far, with bookings available only for some business travellers and exchange students.

## Taiwan opposition leader talks peace with China

Reuters  
Taipei

Birds not missiles should fly in the skies, Taiwan opposition leader Cheng Li-wun said yesterday in Shanghai in a plea for peace, as government lawmakers in Taipei expressed anger at her party for skipping crucial defence budget talks.

Cheng, chairwoman of Taiwan’s largest opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), is in China on what she has called a “peace” mission to lessen tensions at a time when Beijing has stepped up military pressure against the island it calls its own. China refuses to talk to Taiwan President Lai Ching-te, saying he is a “separatist”. Lai’s administration has called on Cheng to tell China to stop its threats, and says Beijing should engage with the democratically elected government in Taipei.

Speaking to reporters at Shanghai’s Yangshan Port, Cheng said she was fond of how ancient Norse sailors described the sea as the “road of the whale”.

“These words are spoken with such humility, and they are entirely right. What should fly in the sky are birds, not missiles. What should swim in the water are fish, not warships,” she said, in comments carried live on Taiwanese television stations.

Cheng, who flies to Beijing later yesterday for a possible meeting with Chinese President



Kuomintang Chairperson Cheng Li-wun (left) sitting in the cockpit of a display aircraft with Song Tao, Director of the Taiwan Work Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, during a visit to the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China in Shanghai. (AFP)

Xi Jinping, also quoted, in English, part of John McCrae’s World War One poem “In Flanders Fields” – “If ye break faith with us who die, We shall not sleep”.

“We may not have been able to give our ancestors peace, but we can certainly still give peace to the people of today and the people of the future,” she said.

In Taipei, lawmakers from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) condemned the KMT for skipping talks in parliament on how to progress with stalled plans to spend an extra \$40bn on defence.

“Don’t intentionally put this off because of the meeting with Xi Jinping tomorrow. Don’t link this to the Chinese communists,” said the DPP’s Chen Kuan-ting, who is joint head of the defence and foreign affairs committee.

Neither China nor the KMT has confirmed Cheng is meeting Xi today.

The KMT, which says it supports the defence spending but will not sign “blank cheques”, said in response that Cheng’s “Peace Visit to the Mainland has no connection whatsoever with the special defence budget”.

Liang Wen-chieh, spokesperson for Taiwan’s China-policy-making Mainland Affairs Council, said he hoped Cheng could tell China to stop military harassment and to respect the Taiwanese people’s wish to determine their own future.

Beijing has maintained its daily military activities around Taiwan despite Cheng’s presence in China. Taiwan’s defence ministry said yesterday morning that during the previous 24-hour period it had detected six Chinese military aircraft and eight warships around the island.

“The facts prove that the Chinese communists’ military threat against Taiwan is intensifying,” DPP spokesperson and lawmaker Michelle Lin wrote on her Facebook page.

“Cheng Li-wun has been on her trip for two days, and the Chinese communists still have a knife at Taiwan’s throat.”

Lai has repeatedly offered talks with Beijing, whose sovereignty claims he rejects, saying only the island’s people can decide their future.

## Thai PM delivers policy address to parliament

Reuters  
Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul outlined his government’s policy agenda to parliament yesterday, focusing on growth, debt relief and measures to reduce business costs.

In his policy statement, Anutin promised broad economic reforms, including an omnibus bill to be introduced within the year that will scrap outdated laws, as well as a “super licence” expected within 180 days that will streamline approvals and reduce business costs, as Reuters reported on Monday.

“The government will solve the problems we face, especially by restructuring the economy and society so they can adapt to shifting global dynamics and ensure resilience,” Anutin said.

Anutin also said his government would respond to the Middle East conflict by managing fuel and energy prices, boosting bio-fuel use to curb oil imports, enforcing energy-saving measures and accelerating aid for vulnerable groups hit by higher oil costs.

Under Thai law, lawmakers will debate the policy agenda for two days before the cabinet can formally begin carrying out its duties.

The government also pledged to continue a consumer subsidy programme and said it would open up the electricity market,



Thailand’s Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul delivers his government’s policy statement to the parliament in Bangkok, Thailand, yesterday. (Reuters)

establish a carbon credit exchange, provide green financing and encourage consumers to generate clean energy. It will also target investments in artificial intelligence and semiconductors.

Anutin led his Bhumjaithai Party to victory in the February election and formed a coalition with the former ruling Pheu Thai Party and smaller allies, giving the bloc 292 seats in the 500-member lower house.

## Philippines unveils new coast guard command in disputed South China Sea

AFP  
Thitu Island

The Philippine Coast Guard unveiled yesterday its first dedicated command centre in the Spratly island chain, a flashpoint in the disputed South China Sea that has been the site of repeated confrontations with Chinese vessels.

The headquarters of a newly established coast guard district, formerly overseen from neighbouring Palawan, will cover an area of about 68,000sq km (26,000 square miles).

An AFP journalist travelling to the new command centre on Pagasa Island, known as Thitu in the Philippines, saw multiple Chinese Coast Guard vessels patrolling nearby waters. The vessels issued radio warnings to the plane carrying the journalist.

Beijing claims the South China Sea in nearly its entirety, despite an international ruling that its as-

sertion has no legal basis.

Pagasa will now have a commodore-level commander on site, Philippine Coast Guard Commandant Ronnie Gil Gavan told reporters after “activation” ceremony yesterday, along with a permanently stationed ship, more response vessels and an unspecified number of specialists.

“The establishment of the coast guard district here will also enhance the psyche, the mindset of each and every coast guard member, that... the defence of Kalayaan island group is a top priority,” Gavan said, using the Filipino name for the Spratlys.

The move will also include the dredging of a deeper port that will allow for the docking of coast guard vessels, which must currently ferry personnel to and from Pagasa on small boats.

The far-flung Kota and Parola islands will also see their substations raised to full station status, coast guard spokesman Jay Tarriela said.

The Pagasa upgrade, meanwhile,

will mean a bigger budget for greater community assistance to the island’s inhabitants, including more teachers and doctors, he said.

Pagasa Island is home to about 400 Filipinos, mostly fishermen and their families, who China accuses of living there illegally.



The Philippine Coast Guard command centre on Thitu Island in the South China Sea yesterday. (AFP)

The Chinese Embassy in Manila did not immediately reply to a request for comment on Thursday.

The Philippines last month revealed plans to rename more than 100 island features in the Spratlys in a bid to reinforce its “sovereignty” in the South China Sea.

China subsequently accused Manila of breaking international law while threatening unspecified measures to protect its own claims.



## India election roll overhaul sparks anger

AFP  
New Delhi

A key opposition Indian politician has threatened legal action against the election commission after millions of people were struck off electoral rolls, the latest flashpoint over a contentious voter clean-up drive.

A sweeping voter registration overhaul — known as the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) — meant to remove ineligible voters but which critics say is skewed against marginalised and minority communities, kicked off last year in several states and territories.

Many of these regions voted yesterday to elect local governments, with two other states slated to go to polls later this month.

That includes West Bengal, a state with roughly 100mn people led by Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress party, where it has run into furious opposition.

West Bengal is also a crucial election battleground, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has never governed.

Banerjee, the state's chief minister, accused India's Election Commission of "working at the behest of the BJP" to strike off her supporters from the state's electoral rolls.

"We will move court again to resist the exclusion of names," she told her supporters at an election



People travel on a boat across the Brahmaputra River to cast their ballots to vote at a polling booth during the Assam Legislative Assembly election in the Darrang district yesterday. (AFP)

rally on Wednesday.

A previous challenge by Banerjee, one of Modi's most formidable opponents, is pending in the Supreme Court.

Members of Modi's BJP have long claimed that large numbers of undocumented Muslim migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh have fraudulently entered India's electoral rolls. West Bengal shares a 2,217 kilometre (1,378 mile) long border with Bangladesh.

The Election Commission, in its defence of the SIR, has said it is in part to avoid "foreign illegal immigrants" from voting.

The SIR drive in West Bengal was carried out in two phases.

In the first, around 6.3mn names were deleted, with officials citing routine reasons such as deaths or voters having moved out of the state.

A second, more controversial phase, flagged another six mn vot-

ers for "adjudication", a category introduced for the first time in West Bengal, which relied on software to identify anomalies such as spelling mismatches.

Muslims, who make up a quarter of the state's population, were disproportionately flagged for this extra scrutiny, according to at least two independent analyses of Election Commission data.

Of those flagged, about 2.7mn were finally found to be ineligible to vote, the Election Commission's data released earlier this week, raising the total number of exclusions to over nine mn — or roughly 12% of the electorate.

The 2.7mn left out after the second phase can still appeal their exclusion. But with the tribunals set up to adjudicate such matters still not fully operational, a decision is unlikely before voting begins on April 23.

## PM Modi to push bill that will increase number of women in parliament

AFP  
New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said yesterday he is pushing a bill to fast-track a law guaranteeing at least one-third of lawmakers are women, and potentially expanding seats by two-fifths.

If passed, the measure would sharply increase the number of women candidates and elected representatives, potentially reshaping legislative debates and policy priorities.

Modi said that parliament will hold a special session on April 16 "to discuss and pass an important bill that advances women's reservation".

The bill proposes fast-tracking implementation of a 2023 law

in the world's largest democracy, reserving 33% of seats for women both in the national parliament and state assemblies.

Currently, the number of elected women is just 14% in India's Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, or 75 out of 543 seats.

"Society progresses when women progress," Modi said in a statement.

"Yet, their representation in the world of politics and legislative bodies has not always been commensurate with their role in society," he added.

"This is particularly unfortunate because when women participate in administration and decision-making, they bring with them experiences and insights that enrich public discourse and improve the quality

of governance."

The rollout of the 2023 law was stalled pending census data, delayed in 2021 by the Covid-19 pandemic, which was needed to delimit constituency boundaries.

India finally launched its first census in 15 years this month.

But the formidable logistical challenge will take more than three mn officials a year to carry out — and even longer for the data to be processed — meaning implementation of law could be delayed beyond the next general election in 2029.

The government is proposing that delimitation be based on the last completed census, in 2011.

Indian newspapers report that the amendments could raise the number of seats in parliament's lower house from 543 to 816.

## Shallow Indonesian quake damages houses, injures residents

A shallow 4.9-magnitude earthquake struck eastern Indonesia overnight, damaging dozens of homes and injuring multiple people, an official said yesterday.

The jolt struck at a depth of 10.4km (6.46 miles), some 104km east of Maumere, East Nusa Tenggara, shortly before midnight on Wednesday, the US Geological

Survey (USGS) said. Two villages on the small island of Adonara felt the biggest impact, with more than 100 houses damaged and at least 20 people injured, according to local official Ismail Daton Ban.

Indonesia and neighbouring countries experience frequent earthquakes due to their location

in the Pacific "Ring of Fire" — an arc of intense seismic activity stretching from Japan through Southeast Asia and across the Pacific basin.

A 9.1-magnitude quake struck the westernmost Aceh province in 2004, causing a tsunami and killing more than 170,000 people in Indonesia. (AFP)

## UK tracked 3 Russian subs in alleged N Atlantic 'covert' op

AFP  
London

Britain said yesterday it had tracked and "seen off" three Russian submarines on an alleged month-long "covert operation" in Atlantic waters "north of the UK" near vital undersea cables and pipelines.

Disclosing details of the joint mission with Norway and other unspecified allies, British Defence Secretary John Healey said there was no evidence the Russian vessels had damaged the subsea infrastructure.

"I deployed our armed forces to track and to deter any malign activity by these vessels," Healey told a Downing Street news conference.

"Our armed forces left them in no doubt that they were being monitored, that their movements were not covert, as (Russian President Vladimir) Putin planned and that their attempted secret operation had been exposed."

Healey said he was unveiling details of the monitoring operation, which involved British warships and military aircraft, "to call out this Russian activity" and send Putin a message.

"We see your activity over our cables and our pipelines, and you



An undated British Royal Navy handout shows the Russian submarine Krasnodar sailing at an unknown location. (Reuters)

should know that any attempt to damage them will not be tolerated and will have serious consequences," he added.

Britain and its allies monitored an Akula-class Russian nuclear-powered attack submarine and two specialist submarines from Russia's Main Directorate of Deep Sea Research (GUGI), as they sailed "in and around wider UK waters", according to Healey.

The attack sub was "a likely de-

coy to distract" from the other two vessels, which are "designed to survey underwater infrastructure during peacetime and sabotage it in conflict", he said.

UK warships dropped sonar buoys "to demonstrate to them that we were monitoring every hour of their operation", the defence secretary added.

"We wanted to ensure that we could warn them that their covert operation had been exposed and re-

duce the risk that they may attempt any action that could damage our pipelines or our cables," he said.

"I'm confident we have no evidence that there has been any damage."

The mission involving around 500 British personnel saw UK aircraft fly more than 450 hours while a navy frigate covered several thousand nautical miles, Healey said.

Separately, he responded to criticism in the Daily Telegraph that London was not making good on recent threats to stop sanctioned vessels from Russia's sanctions-busting "shadow fleet" from transiting through UK waters.

It followed the newspaper photographing a Russian frigate escorting at least one sanctioned Russian-linked tanker through British waters this week without interference from the UK navy.

"We have the military options and we're ready... to interdict shadow fleet vessels," Healey said. He added London's stance was "making Russia reroute its shadow ships... or escort its shadow ships with its own warships" and there by "making it harder for Putin to pursue his illegal oil revenues".

"We aim, with others, to put more pressure in the coming weeks and months on that activity."

## Indonesia probes torpedo-like object found in its waters



A torpedo-like 3.7m-long and 65cm-wide object, discovered by a fisherman near the Lombok Strait after being towed ashore onto a beach on Gili Trawangan, West Nusa Tenggara. (AFP)

AFP  
Jakarta

The Indonesian navy said yesterday it was investigating a torpedo-like object discovered by a fisherman near the Lombok Strait, a key maritime route connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The 3.7m-long and 65cm-wide object was fished from the ocean on Monday about 10km from the popular tourist island of Gili Trawangan, West Nusa Tenggara, the navy said.

A 28-year-old fisherman immediately reported the unusual find to the local authorities, who retrieved it.

"The Indonesian navy will promptly carry out an in-depth examination... of the device to determine its origin, function, and the data contained within it," navy spokesman Tunggul, who like many Indonesians has only one name, told AFP.

"The Indonesian National Armed Forces will remain fully committed to safeguarding the

sovereignty and security of Indonesia's territorial seas from all forms of unauthorised activities, including the use of underwater devices or equipment by unauthorised parties in Indonesian waters."

Mataram naval base chief Asep Tri Prabowo told reporters Wednesday the object was under strict supervision and would be sent to Jakarta for further investigation. An initial examination by the West Nusa Tenggara Police's bomb squad confirmed it did not contain any explosive or radioactive substances, he added.

Indonesian media reported that lettering on the object suggested it may have been manufactured by the China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation. It appeared to be a device to measure the speed of currents.

This was not the first time a foreign object has been found in Indonesian waters.

In 2021, a fisherman discovered a seaglider in the Selayar Islands, South Sulawesi that the military suspected was being used for oceanographic research.

## Nepal ex-PM Oli gives defiant message after release from custody

AFP  
Kathmandu

Nepal's ex-prime minister KP Sharma Oli offered a defiant message yesterday after he was released from custody following questioning over his alleged role in a deadly 2025 crackdown on protesters.

Oli and former interior minister Ramesh Lekhak were arrested on March 28, a day after Prime Minister Balendra Shah took office following the first elections since the September uprising brought down Oli's government.

Lekhak was also released from custody yesterday, police said. Neither man has been formally charged, and both deny responsibility for the violence.

"Although the government filed a criminal case with prejudice and vindictiveness and



Nepal's former prime minister KP Sharma Oli is escorted by police as he is brought to the hospital from the Kathmandu district police station following his arrest. (AFP/File Photo)

illegally detained me... I have finally been released after not having enough grounds and evidence to prosecute," 74-year-old Oli said in

a statement posted on social media.

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

The commission's report said 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 was taken to hospital soon after his arrest for what police described as a procedural check-up, adding that he suffers from heart and kidney problems.

"Due to my health condition, I will remain in the hospital for a few more days for treatment," Oli added.

"At this moment, I extend my heartfelt thanks to all party leaders, cadres, and well-wishers for their goodwill and support."

## Bangladesh schools to go online in energy crunch

AFP  
Dhaka

Bangladesh will launch a hybrid school system with virtual and in-person classes on a pilot basis next week to help with the energy crunch sparked by the Middle East war. The South Asian nation of 170mn people imports 95% of its oil and gas needs, much of it from the Middle East, where supplies have been restricted after weeks of conflict.

Education Minister ANM Ehsanul Hoque Milon said that switching half the school days to online

teaching — where institutions have the ability — would help save energy.

"Under the proposed schedule, classes will be held physically on Saturday, Monday and Wednesday, while virtual classes will be conducted on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday," Milon told reporters in Dhaka yesterday.

"It is blended education," Milon added. "Only institutions that have the capacity to conduct virtual classes, have a reputation, and draw enough students — and where students mostly come to school by car — will be included." The education minister said the government has also made it tax free to import of electric

buses for schools.

The government has already taken several measures to curb fuel consumption, including setting limits on fuel purchases, and has ordered civil servants to switch off the lights and turn down air conditioning to save power. Bangladesh is facing multiple challenges. "A protracted conflict in the Middle East could have significant implications for Bangladesh, including higher inflation, reduced fiscal space due to rising energy subsidies, and a weaker current account caused by high import costs, weaker exports and lower remittances," the World Bank warned on Wednesday.

## Bangladesh sentences policemen to death

AFP  
Dhaka

Bangladesh sentenced two former policemen to death by hanging yesterday for murdering student protester Abu Sayeed, whose killing escalated the 2024 uprising that toppled the autocratic government of Sheikh Hasina.

Sayeed died aged 23 in the northern city of Rangpur, the first student demonstrator killed in the police crackdown on protests.

Footage of his last moments on July 16, 2024 — standing with his arms outstretched before he was shot at close range — was shown repeatedly on Bangladeshi television after Hasina's downfall.

Prosecutors charged 30 people in connection with the killing, ranging from murder to command responsibility and criminal enterprise. Only six are in custody — including the two men sentenced to death.

"All 30 were convicted," chief prosecutor Aminul Islam told reporters. "Abu Sayeed sacrificed his life to free the country from autocratic rule."

Death sentences were handed down to two former low-level policemen, Amir Hossain and Sujon Chandra Roy, who are both in court to hear the verdict.

Their lawyer, Azizul Haque Dulu, told reporters he would file an appeal.

The court handed down prison terms to 28 others, including several senior police officers, a doctor, as well as former staff at Begum Rokeya University, where Sayeed was studying — including its vice-chancellor.

A leader of the now-banned Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of Hasina's Awami League, was also sentenced.

Some must serve as much as 10 years in prison, but Sayeed's brother, Ramzan Ali, said the family wanted heavier sentences.

"The court handed lighter sentences to senior police officials and the Chhatra League leader," he told AFP. "We will file an appeal."



# Loving and glorifying the Sunnah

**D**o you truly love the Messenger of Allah, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam? A fundamental of our religion, and a tenet of our faith, is to love him.

Allah Says what means: "Say [O Muhammad]: 'If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your wives, your relatives, wealth which you have obtained, commerce wherein you fear decline, and dwellings with which you are pleased are more beloved to you than Allah and His Messenger and Jihaad in His cause, then wait until Allah executes His command. And Allah does not guide the defiantly disobedient people.'" [Qur'an 9: 24]

Al-Fudhayl ibn 'Iyaadh said: "This verse is enough of an evidence to prove the obligation of loving the Prophet because Allah dispraised in it those whose wealth, family or children are dearer to them than the love of Allah and His Messenger describing them as defiantly disobedient at its conclusion."

Love of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, branches from Allah's love of him; our love of the Prophet is due to the fact that Allah loves him, and because Allah sent him to us as His Messenger, as well as the fact that Allah instructs us to make him dearer to our hearts than our own souls. He Almighty Says what means: "The Prophet is more worthy of the believers than themselves..." [Qur'an 33: 6]

This means that the believer should love the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, more than he loves his own self.

This love entails full obedience, submission and acceptance; it also entails favouring the Prophet over oneself, one's family and one's wealth, and to surrender to the Prophet the controlling direction that one has over himself.

The influence that the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, should have over us is greater than that which a master has over his slave, or a father has over his child. We should have no control over ourselves except in acting in accordance with the way he directed us to.

It is for every Muslim to prove his love for him, which can be determined according to the following narration of the Prophet: "There are three qualities; whoever has them will taste the sweetness of faith: To love Allah and His Messenger more than anyone else..." [Al-Bukhari & Muslim]

One will never taste the sweetness of



faith except after achieving this, as the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said in another narration: "I swear by the One in whose Hand my soul is! None of you will truly believe until I become dearer to him than his child, his father and all of mankind." [Al-Bukhari & Muslim]

This love is not simply an emotion that is confined to the heart, but rather it has implications and effects. This love makes the slave achieve a rank that he would not otherwise achieve by means of his bodily deeds, as in the narration of Ibn Mas'ood radhiallah 'anhu who said: "A man came to the Messenger of Allah, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, and said: 'O Messenger of Allah! When will the Hour (i.e., the Day of Resurrection) come?' He replied: 'What have you prepared for it?' The man said: 'Only my love of Allah and His Messenger.' The Messenger of Allah then said: 'You will be with those whom you love'"

[Al-Bukhari & Muslim]

It is not as important to know when the Hour will occur as it is to prepare for its arrival, and this is the reason why the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, drew this to the attention of the man by asking him that question.

Anas, radhiallah 'anhu, said: "After being blessed by embracing Islam, we never rejoiced at anything as much as we did about this answer of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, to that man. I love Allah, His Messenger, Abu Bakr and 'Umar and hope to be with them (in the Hereafter) even if I cannot perform the good deeds they did." [Al-Bukhari & Muslim]

The Companions had great love for the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, to the extent that they would face arrows that were being fired in his direction to shield him. They would risk their lives for him and sacrifice everything for his

rescue. 'Amr ibn Al-'Aas radhiallah 'anhu said: "There was no one dearer to me or more glorified than the Prophet; I could never look him directly in the eye due to the extent of my glorification, and if someone were to ask me to describe him, I would not be able to, as I never looked at him for long enough to be able to describe him." [Muslim]

When Abu Sufyaan, radhiallah 'anhu, was still a disbeliever, he asked Zayd ibn Thaabit, radhiallah 'anhu, who was taken as a hostage and being brought out by the people of Makkah to execute: "Do you not wish that Muhammad was in your place and that we killed him instead, while you could go to your family and be with them?" He replied: "I swear by Allah! I would rather be here facing this than have him even being pricked by a thorn." Upon hearing this, Abu Sufyaan, radhiallah 'anhu, said: "I never saw a people who

love a man more than the Companions of Muhammad love him."

Such incidents greatly affected the disbelievers and caused many of them to embrace Islam.

A man from the Ansaar came to the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, and said: "You are dearer to me than myself, my child, my family and my wealth, and I feel as if I am dying when I do not see you." Then he began to cry. The Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, asked: "Why are you crying?" The man replied: "I remembered that we will die and you will die, then you will take your place in Paradise with the other Messengers and Prophets, while we, if indeed we do enter Paradise, will be lower in rank than you, and thus we will not be able to see you in Paradise."

Note how much they loved him; they were worried about not seeing him, despite the fact that they may also be in Paradise.

The Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, did not comment on his words until Allah revealed the following verses which mean: "And whoever obeys Allah and the Messenger - those will be with the ones upon whom Allah has bestowed favour of the prophets, the steadfast affirmers of truth, the martyrs and the righteous. And excellent are those as companions. That is the bounty from Allah..." [Qur'an 4: 69-70] Thereupon the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, summoned him and said: "Glad tidings to you!" [Al-Bayhaqi]

Once, a female companion was waiting at the approach to Al-Madinah for the return of the Muslim army from the battle of Uhud. She was informed that her husband, brother and father were killed, but her only reply was: "What happened to the Prophet?" They told her that he, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, was fine and unharmed, but she insisted to seeing him so that she would be sure that he was truly safe. When she did see him, she remarked: "Any affliction, after seeing that you are safe, is minor."

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



## Signs of one's love for the Prophet

**S**igns that prove one's love for the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam:

1. Mentioning him frequently and exalting his mention. Allah Says what means: "Indeed, Allah exalts the mention of the Prophet, and His angels [ask Him to do so]. O you who have believed! Ask [Allah to] exalt his mention!" [Qur'an 33: 56]

There are many times and occasions when this is legislated to be done, such as during supplication. Ubay ibn Ka'b, radhiallah 'anhu, reported: "I (once) said: 'O Messenger of Allah! I frequently invoke Allah to exalt your rank; how much of my supplication should I devote to you?' He, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: 'You may devote as much as you wish.'" When I suggested a quarter, he said: "Do whatever you wish, but it would be better for you if you were to increase upon that." I suggested half, and he, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Do whatever you wish, but it would be better for you if you were to increase upon that." I suggested two-thirds, and he, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Do whatever you wish, but it would be better for you if you were to increase upon that." I (finally) said: 'Shall I devote all of my supplication to invoke Allah to exalt your rank?' He, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "You would then be freed from your worries, and your sins would be forgiven.'" [Ahmad & At-Tirmithi]

2. Longing to see him: The Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "I swear by the One in whose Hand the soul of Muhammad is! A day will come when not one of you will be able to see me (i.e., after my death) and seeing me then would be dearer to a person's heart than his family and wealth." [Ahmad & At-Tirmithi]

Losing one's family and wealth is a minor issue in comparison to the great bounty of being a companion, whose sins are forgiven, of the Prophet.

3. Being sincere to the Prophet: Imam al-Maroozi said: "This was done during his lifetime by exerting all efforts to obey him, supporting him, helping him, sacrificing one's wealth for his sake if he were to demand it, and hastening to attain his love. After his death, it is expressed by learning his Sunnah, his manners and etiquette, glorifying his commands and adhering to them, becoming angry at those who live according to anything other than his way, and loving those who adhere to it, as well as loving those who are from his descendants, those who migrated with him and those who supported him, and indeed anyone who was in his company even for as brief a period as an hour. Additionally, it entails imitating him in the way he dressed."

Imam al-Qurtubi added: "It is to believe in his prophethood, to love those who supported him, to hate those who hate him, to glorify his Sunnah and revive, defend and spread it, as well as calling people to it and imitating him in his morals and conduct."

4. Loving those whom he, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, loved: If he loved Al-Hasan, Al-Husayn, 'Ali and Faatimah, may Allah be pleased with them, then we also love them, and Allah is our witness to this love. Likewise, we love those who follow his Sunnah and his household, and they are, as Zayd, radhiallah 'anhu, said when clarifying the narration of the Prophet: "My household; I remind you to fear Allah with regards to my household; I remind you to fear Allah with regards to my household; I remind you to fear Allah with regards to my household." Zayd was asked: "Who are his household? Are his wives included in it?" He replied: "Yes (i.e., his wives are included), as are all those who are forbidden from taking Zakaah after his



death, namely: the family of 'Ali, the family of 'Aqeel, the family of Ja'far and the family of Al-'Abbaas." [Muslim]

We pray for all of them during our daily prayers; thus if somebody's lineage is known to originate from the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, and they are a pious person with sound creed, and not a Sufi, a deviant or an innovator, then they should be loved for two reasons: One being their piety and the other being their relationship to the Prophet.

Loving his wives, who are the mothers of the believers, is also part of this, as Allah Says what means: "The Prophet is more worthy of the believers than themselves, and his wives are [in the position of] their mothers..." [Qur'an 33: 6]

His wives were: Khadeejah bint Khuwaylid, 'Aa'ishah bint Abu Bakr, Hafsa bint 'Umar, Umm Habeebah bint Abu Sufyaan, Umm Salamah, Zaynab bint Jahsh, Zaynab bint Khuzaymah Al-Hilaaliyyah, Juwayriyyah bint Al-Haarith, Safiyyah bint Huyay and Maymoonah bint Al-Haarith Al-Hilaaliyyah - may Allah be pleased with them all.

A sign of loving the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, is to love the mothers of the believers and not to harm or slander them in any way.

Loving his Companions accepting the guidance they conveyed to us, and emulating them.

Many are those who claim to love the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, even from amongst the innovators, but the "proof" of their love for him is that they worship him alongside Allah, and supplicate to him instead of Allah, and seek forgiveness from him; these people exclude and forget Allah. Is this love, or is it association with Allah, which he, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, hated more than anything else? He alluded to this when he said: "Do not praise me as the Christians praised the son of Maryam." [Al-Bukhari]

By this statement, he did not forbid all types of praise for him, but rather only the type that the Christians did (and do) for Jesus ('Eesaa), which is where they raise his rank to one above that which Allah granted him, which is that of a slave and a messenger, and they worship him instead of Allah. This is similar to what the deviant Sufis and other sects did and do.

On the other hand, Ahlus-Sunnah Wal-Jamaa'ah prove their love for the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, by obeying his commands, following his Sunnah and adhering to his guidance; this is how one follows his way, as Allah Says what means: "Say [O Muhammad]: If you should love Allah, then follow me, [so] Allah will love you and forgive you your sins..." [Qur'an 3: 31] This is real love!

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

## Examples set by the Companions

Abdullaah ibn Mas'ood, radhiallah 'anhu, reported that the Messenger of Allah, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Never has a Prophet been sent before me by Allah to his people except that he had, among his people, disciples and companions who followed his way and obeyed his command. Then there came after them their successors who proclaimed what they did not practice, and practiced what they were not commanded to do. (He) who strove against these (people) with his hand was a believer; he who strove against them with his heart was a believer; and he who strove against them with his tongue was a believer; and beyond that there is no grain of faith." [Muslim]

The Companions comprehended this very well and also kept in mind the saying of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, which was reported by Anas: "He who shuns my Sunnah is not from me." [Al-Bukhari] These sayings made them love the Sunnah of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, and spread and propagate it amongst their successors.

The Companions fulfilled their duty and played their expected role in spreading and propagating the Sunnah of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam; they taught it to others with sincerity and advised those who shunned it to adhere to it, warning them against their actions. Huthayfah, radhiallah 'anhu, once saw a man rushing during his prayer and failing to be tranquil in his bowings and prostrations; so he said to him: "You did not pray! Had you died in that state then you would have died upon other than the way of Muhammad." [Al-Bukhari] He was bringing his attention to the fact that being tranquil and submissive during prayers was how the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, would perform them.

'Abdullaah ibn 'Umar, radhiallah 'anhu, would sit on his buttocks during the Tashahhud in his prayer, so his son began imitating him; when 'Abdullaah saw this, he forbade him from doing so and informed him that this was not how the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, performed his prayers, so his son said to him: "I saw you praying this way." His father informed him that his legs were injured from the time of the Battle of Khaybar, and that he could not therefore adhere to the Sunnah in this position of prayer. [Al-Bukhari]

'Abdullaah ibn 'Umar did not consider this part of prayer a minor or trivial issue which he could overlook when seeing someone performing it a way other than that of the Prophet's; compare this to the way some people consider certain acts of the Sunnah to be minor, thereby undermining them.

Taawoos said: "We asked Ibn 'Abbaas about sitting in the position of Iq'aa' between the two prostrations (which is to sit with one's buttocks on his heels while bending his toes and directing them towards the Qiblah). He informed them that it was the Sunnah, but they remarked: 'We do not see it befitting a man to sit in such a manner.' But he repeated and emphasised to them the fact that the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, would sit this way." [Muslim]

This is one of the ways he, sallallaahu 'alaihi

wa sallam, would sit, while the other and most common practice of his was that he would sit on his left foot and have his right foot raised while having its toes pointing towards the direction of the Qiblah.

These were some examples of how the Companions would propagate the Sunnah of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, and they would also openly forbid those who contradicted the Sunnah, as in the story when Marwaan ibn 'Abdul-Malik delivered the Khutbah of 'Eid before the prayer, which is directly contrary to the Sunnah, so a man stood up whilst he was delivering the Khutbah and told him that he had opposed the way of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, by doing what he did. Marwaan paid no attention to what the man said, and so Abu Sa'eed said: "This man (i.e., the one who spoke to Marwaan) has fulfilled his duty by informing him of the Sunnah and attempting to forbid him from continuing; I heard the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, say: "He who sees an evil must change it with his hands (i.e. physically); if he is unable to, then he must change it with his tongue (i.e. verbally), and if he is unable to, then with his heart (i.e., hating it) - and this is the weakest level of faith." [At-Tirmithi]

Acts of worship were not the only thing which the Companions learned the ways of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, - he even taught them their manners. Anas, radhiallah 'anhu, said: "Once the Prophet came to our house and asked for something to drink, so we milked a sheep for him and I gave him the milk to drink while Abu Bakr, 'Umar and other senior companions were sitting to his left, and a Bedouin was sitting to his right. When he finished drinking, 'Umar said: 'O Messenger of Allah! Abu Bakr is to your left' in an attempt to bring that to his attention, but he turned to the Bedouin and handed him the container to drink from, saying: "It is the right of those to your right, it is the right of those to your right, it is the right of those to your right." [Muslim]

All the Companions old and young, were keen to adhere to the Sunnah of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam; it was never reported from a single one of them that they said about any part of it: "This is only a Sunnah and is not mandatory... this is only recommended and not obligatory... this is a minor issue and not a major one, and we should not waste our time in it... this is a trivial matter" quite unlike what many people say nowadays about the Sunnah, thereby giving it a low ranking in their list of importance. Instead, the Companions would apply anything that came to them from the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, and would practise it fully and very precisely. Even in matters that were related to man's natural disposition, such as growing the beard, using the Siwaak (a special twig that is used as a toothbrush) and so on.

Is it not time for us to apply the Sunnah in our practices and actions, our families, the way we dress, our children, our homes, our prayers and all other affairs?

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**GULF TIMES**

## From Australia to Europe, countries move to curb children's social media access

Australia in December became the world's first country to ban social media for children under 16, blocking them from platforms including TikTok, Alphabet's YouTube and Meta's Instagram and Facebook. The ban comes amid mounting concerns over the impact of social media on children's health and safety. Here is a summary of what countries and companies are doing to regulate access to social media.

Austria will ban social media for children up to the age of 14, the conservative-led, three-party government said on March 27. Vice Chancellor Andreas Babler and junior digitisation minister Alexander Proell said draft legislation for the ban would be finalised by June.

Similarly, Britain is considering an Australia-style ban on social media and tighter AI chatbots safety rules for children under 16 as early as this year, technology minister Liz Kendall said in February. Social media bans, curfews and app time limits will be tested in the homes of 300 teenagers to gauge the impact on children's sleep, family life and schoolwork, the government said on March 24.

In Asia, China's cyberspace regulator has put in place a so-called "minor mode" programme that requires device-level restrictions and app-specific rules to restrict screen time depending on age.

In the Indian state of Karnataka, home to the tech hub of Bengaluru, on March 6 became the first Indian state to ban social media for children under 16. Neighbouring states of Goa and Andhra Pradesh are also weighing restrictions. India's chief economic adviser called for age restrictions on social media platforms in January, describing them as "predatory" in how they keep users engaged online.

### Social media platforms including TikTok, Facebook and Snapchat say people need to be at least 13 to sign up

Indonesia will restrict access to social media platforms for children under 16, its communications and digital ministry said on March 6. From March 28, accounts owned by children under 16 on "high risk platforms", including TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and Roblox, will be gradually deactivated, Communications and Digital Minister Meutya Hafid said.

France's National Assembly in January approved legislation to ban children under 15 from social media amid growing concerns about online bullying and mental health risks. The bill needs to pass through the Senate before a final vote in the lower house.

In Germany, minors aged 13-16 are allowed to use social media only if their parents provide consent. But child protection advocates say controls are insufficient.

Greece will ban access to social media for children under the age of 15 from January 1, 2027, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said on April 8.

Children under the age of 14 in Italy need parental consent to sign up for social media accounts, while no consent is required above that age.

Malaysia said in November it would ban social media for users under the age of 16 starting from 2026.

Spain will ban access to social media for minors under 16 and platforms will be required to implement age verification systems, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said early in February.

It was unclear if the proposed ban would require approval by the country's highly fragmented lower house.

The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act in the US prevents companies from collecting personal data from children under 13 without parental consent. Several states have passed laws requiring parental consent for minors to access social media, but they have faced court challenges on free speech grounds.

The European Parliament in November agreed on a resolution, which is not legally binding, calling for a minimum age of 16 on social media. It urged a harmonised EU digital age limit of 13 for social media access and an age limit of 13 for video-sharing services and "AI companions".

Social media platforms including TikTok, Facebook and Snapchat say people need to be at least 13 to sign up. Child protection advocates say the controls are insufficient, and official data in several European countries shows huge numbers of children under 13 have social media accounts. — Reuters

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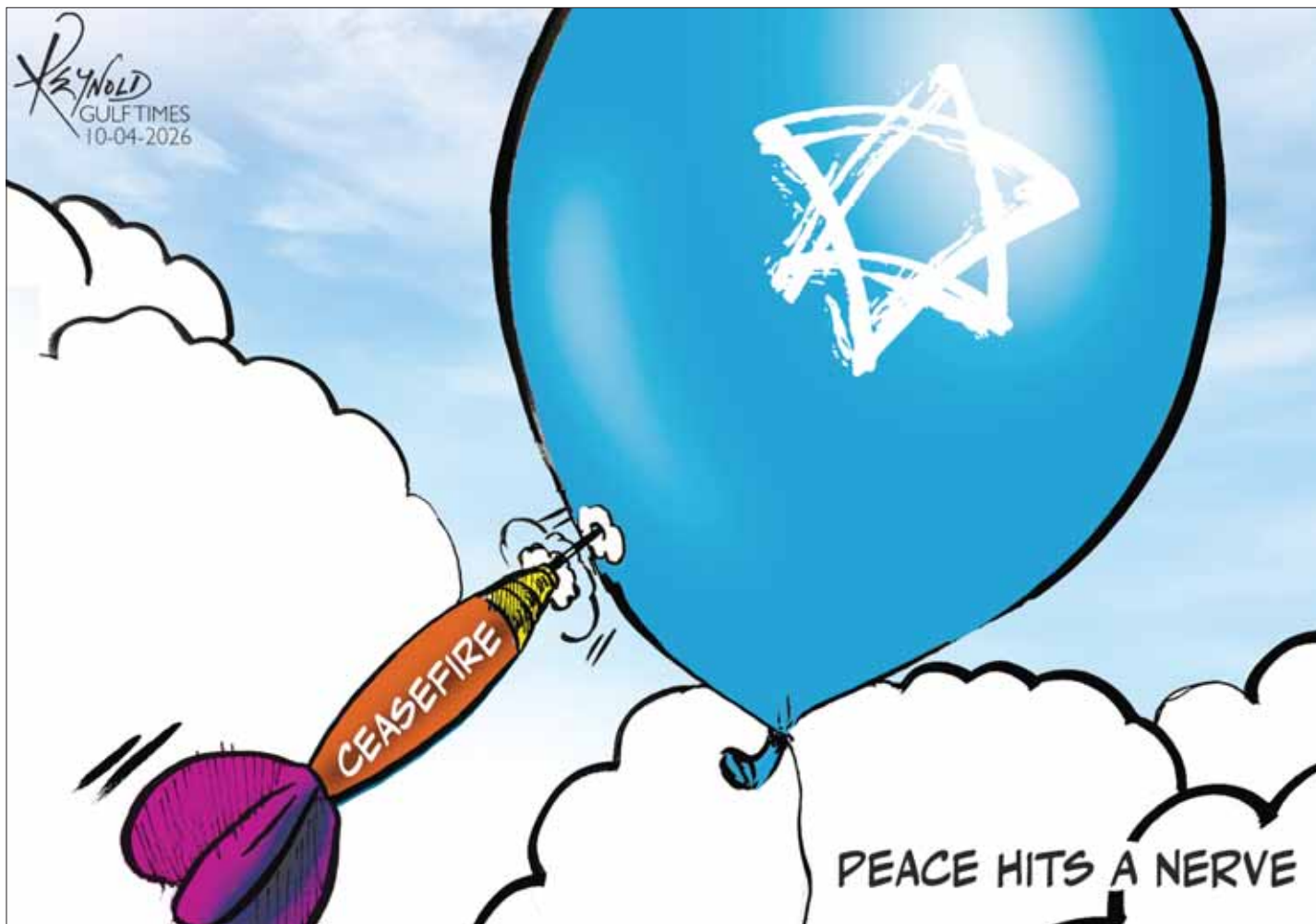
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## Nasa's lunar success sharpens focus on China's 2030 crewed landing goal



- China aims to land astronauts on the moon by 2030
- US expects to return astronauts to moon's surface by 2028
- Analysts say Beijing's 2030 crewed landing plan is plausible

By Eduardo Baptista  
Reuters

**A**s Nasa's record-breaking Artemis mission bolsters the US path back to the moon, China's bid to land astronauts there by 2030 is taking on greater geopolitical significance and putting pressure on Beijing to meet or beat its timetable.

Four US astronauts on the Artemis II mission this week flew past the moon's shadowed far side, travelling deeper into space than any humans before them and setting the stage for Artemis IV to land on the moon in 2028. The planned US return after more than half a century is being closely watched in China, which is developing the full architecture for its first crewed landing on the moon, from the Long March-10 rocket to the Mengzhou spacecraft and Lanyue lunar lander.

Beijing has made significant advances in recent years by becoming the first country to return robot-taken samples from both the near and far sides of the moon, and its crewed spaceflight programme has become proficient in operating space stations and handling emergencies in orbit.

"There is no bigger prize for China on the table today than landing people on the moon, this is the essential next step for China on the road to preeminence in space," said Clayton Swope, deputy director of the Aerospace Security Project at the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Washington and Beijing are also competing in institution-building efforts in preparation for a future when humans have a permanent presence on the moon, with the US-led Artemis Accords on lunar exploration matched up against



The Orion spacecraft on the sixth day into the Artemis II mission, photographed from one of the cameras mounted on its solar array wings, earlier this week. (AFP)

the Chinese and Russian-led International Lunar Research Station (ILRS).

"The question now is no longer simply who gets there first, but who can stay longer and do more," Kang Guohua, an aerospace professor at the military-linked Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, told China's state-backed Global Times last week.

**ENTIRELY NEW HARDWARE**

A major hurdle for Beijing will be proving an entirely new lunar mission architecture within the next four years, demonstrating all of the hardware being developed for the 2030 mission, from heavy-lift rockets to spacesuits, can work reliably on first use.

China's manned space agency said in 2023 that the mission would rely on two Long March-10 rockets, one launching a crewed spacecraft and the other a lunar lander. The two vehicles would rendezvous and dock in lunar orbit. Two astronauts would descend to the surface on the

lander, collect samples, then return to lunar orbit, redock with the spacecraft and head back to Earth.

The Mengzhou spacecraft can carry up to seven astronauts, according to China's manned space agency, which has not yet announced the size and members of the 2030 mission team.

China's recent robotic lunar missions have given it valuable experience in communications, rendezvous, and docking operations around the moon. But crewed missions impose far stricter safety requirements and critical parts of the mission chain are still being tested, including the rocket and spacecraft.

In February, China carried out the first low-altitude escape test for the Long March-10 with a Mengzhou spacecraft aboard it at a launch site on Hainan Island. The vessel's return capsule successfully separated after an abort command and splashed down safely at sea.

Last year, the Lanyue lunar lander's ascent and descent

capabilities were also tested in Hebei province. While these were important milestones, the pace of testing will need to accelerate if China is to certify the system for a crewed landing by 2030. Still, CSIS' Swope said China appeared to be making steady progress and it seemed "very plausible" it would meet its deadline.

"China has a history of setting deadlines for space activities and closely meeting those deadlines, there are no public signs of any missteps or setbacks to Beijing's crewed lunar landing plans," he said.

**GEOPOLITICAL STAKES**

The stakes are not only technical but geopolitical. As the US-China rivalry deepens across trade, technology and military power, lunar exploration has become another arena of competition. US analysts point to China's rising defence spending, use of space diplomacy to increase its influence overseas, growing private launch sector and successful robotic lunar missions as evidence that Beijing is highly motivated to reach the moon quickly, even if it avoids race rhetoric in public.

"China might avoid directly using language that suggests there is a lunar or space race, but their overall strategic goal is to be the hegemon in space," said Kathleen Curlee, a research analyst at Georgetown University's Center for Security and Emerging Technology.

At the same time, China may be moving faster than it admits. Wu Weiren, chief designer of China's lunar exploration program, told Reuters last year that the 2030 goal was intentionally conservative. "Eastern peoples always leave a little room when they speak," he said. "If I can do a 10, I tend to say eight or nine."



Flight controllers monitor the Artemis II Orion spacecraft from the White Flight Control Room at the Nasa Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. (AFP)

# Pakistan praises 'restraint', slams Lebanon strikes ahead of talks

AFP  
Islamabad

Pakistan praised "restraint" in the Middle East war yesterday, but condemned ongoing Israeli attacks on Lebanon as Islamabad prepared to host expected talks between Iran and the US.

Both Washington and Tehran have confirmed their participation in peace talks brokered by Pakistan, although the schedule is still to be confirmed.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met yesterday with the country's army chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, who jointly "appreciated the restraint demonstrated by all sides", according to the premier's office.

The pair "expressed satisfaction over the de-escalation achieved so far", the statement said.

US President Donald Trump agreed a two-week truce to allow talks between US and Iranian negotiators, but Washington's ally Israel has kept up its attacks on Lebanon.



Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif (right) speaking with Army Chief and Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir at the Prime Minister House in Islamabad yesterday. (AFP)

Iran has said Lebanon was a key part of the ceasefire and argues Israeli attacks breach the truce.

Iran's deputy foreign minister, Saeed Khatibzadeh, said "Iran was on the verge of responding to the ceasefire violation last night".

Such a move was avoided because "Pakistan intervened", Khatibzadeh told ITV News, according to excerpts from Iran's Tasnim news agency.

Pakistan's premier spoke yesterday to his Lebanese counterpart, Nawaf Salam, and "strongly condemned Israel's ongoing aggression against Lebanon", the prime minister's office said.

Pakistani officials announced a public holiday for the capital area yesterday and today, a step often taken ahead of high-profile diplomatic events.

Essential services, including police, hospitals, and power and gas utilities, will remain operational, the deputy commissioner's office said.

The White House has said Vice-President JD Vance will lead US negotiations over the Middle East war in Islamabad "this weekend".

Iran's ambassador to Pakistan deleted a social media post saying an Iranian delegation would arrive in Islamabad yesterday night, a move an embassy official later told AFP had been sent prematurely.

Ambassador Reza Amiri Moghadam said in a post on X yesterday morning that an Iranian delegation would arrive "tonight in Islamabad for serious talks based on 10 points proposed by Iran". The post was deleted shortly after.

An official at the Iranian embassy in Islamabad told AFP the post was removed "because of some issues", declining to say whether the delegation was still expected on Thursday.

When asked further, the official said: "Timing – we were not supposed to send it."

# Italy pledges emergency funds to reopen rail, motorway after landslide



Damage caused by a landslide in a residential area in Petacciato, in the province of Campobasso. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Rome

Italy's government moved yesterday to limit disruption from a major landslide that cut rail and motorway links along a key north-south transport corridor, declaring a state of emergency and pledging millions towards transport restoration efforts.

Visiting the area, Infrastructure Minister Matteo Salvini said an initial 10mn euros (\$11.68mn) would be earmarked for repairs, with the emergency declaration and funding to be formalised later yesterday.

He pointed to the partial reopening of motorway traffic and the expected resumption of rail services today as signs of progress, saying: "No one thought the roads would be opened so quickly, what we've done is miraculous."

Tuesday's landslide in Petacciato, a small town in the south-eastern region of Molise, forced the temporary closure of the

A14 motorway and the rail line linking Bologna in the north to Taranto on the southern Adriatic coast.

Triggered by heavy rains in an area with a history of hydrogeological instability, the landslide stretches for around two kilometres to the sea, and forced the evacuation of around 50 people.

The disruption forced thousands of motorists onto lengthy country-road detours, adding several hours to journeys, while coastal rail services were suspended and partially rerouted via Rome.

In an interview with daily Corriere della Sera, Civil Protection agency chief Fabio Ciciliano said the landslide appeared to have stabilised and ruled out a worst-case scenario of closures lasting weeks or months.

A main road will remain closed due to a collapsed bridge, whose reconstruction was expected to take six to seven months, potentially affecting the tourist season in the nearby coastal area, he added.

# Spain ramps up criticism of Israel, US

Reuters  
Madrid

Spain decried Israeli strikes on Lebanon as well as the broader war on Iran yesterday, cementing Madrid's role as an outspoken critic of the US and Israeli military campaigns despite US threats to punish uncooperative Nato allies.

Spain's opposition to the Iran conflict has further strained its relations with Washington, and figures within President Donald Trump's MAGA movement are increasingly urging the US leader to punish Madrid.

In remarks to lawmakers, Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares described the conflict as an attack on civilisation, echoing scathing criticism heaped by Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez on Trump's decision to attack the Islamic Republic.

"We're facing the greatest assault on the civilisation built upon the humanist ideals of reason, peace, understanding and universal law over the abuse of



Spain's Minister of Foreign Affairs Jose Manuel Albares Buena speaks to the press following talks at the "Weimar+" group focused on Ukraine and the future of European security at Lancaster House in London. (Reuters/File Photo)

power, brute force and arbitrariness," Albares said.

He accused Israel of violating international law and the newly brokered two-week ceasefire after a massive wave of air strikes across Lebanon killed more than 250 people on Wednesday.

Sanchez, who has emerged as a leading opponent of the war, has closed Spanish airspace to any aircraft involved in a confrontation he

has described as reckless and illegal.

On Wednesday night, he reiterated his call for the European Union to scuttle its association agreement with Israel, urging an end to "impunity for (Israel's) criminal actions". In a post on X, Sanchez said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's "contempt for law and international law is intolerable".

Sanchez has welcomed the Paki-

stani-brokered ceasefire, but said Spain would "not applaud those who set the world on fire just because they turn up with a bucket," in reference to the US administration. Also on Wednesday, Spain and Italy both summoned Israeli envoys in protest at separate incidents involving UN peacekeepers in Lebanon. Madrid said a Spanish UNIFIL member had been unjustly detained by the Israeli army.

Spanish ties with the US took a hit last year when Madrid rejected Trump's demand that Nato allies ramp up their defence spending to 5% of gross domestic product. Madrid's stance led Trump to threaten to cut off all trade.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said in March the US should pull out from two jointly operated air bases in southern Spain and move "to a country that will allow us to use them".

Earlier this week, Albares said Trump publicly mulling a withdrawal from the alliance was prompting European countries to consider alternative security arrangements.

# Trump, Vance not 'meddling' in Hungary vote: envoy

AFP  
Brussels

Donald Trump's ambassador to the EU denied in an AFP interview yesterday that the US leader or his vice-president were "meddling" in Hungary's election by endorsing nationalist incumbent Viktor Orban.

Speaking two days after JD Vance travelled to Budapest to stump with Orban, US envoy Andrew Puzder noted that both Trump and his vice-president had "been very vocal on their support" for the Hungarian prime minister.

Trump last month pledged his "complete and total" support for Orban's bid to secure a fifth term on Sunday.

But the ambassador pushed back at the charge that the visit by Vance – who railed against Brussels "bureaucrats" he accused of pushing for Orban's ouster – amounted to interference.

"I do not believe that what the vice-president or the president did was meddling in the Hungarian election," Puzder said, adding of Vance: "I think he was careful not to be coercive, or make economic

threats, or do the kinds of things that could be coercive."

The EU leader with the closest ties to both Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Orban faces an unprecedented challenge to his 16-year rule in Sunday's vote.

His conservative rival Peter Magyar – well ahead in the polls with three days to go – warned ahead of Vance's visit against any US attempt to tip the scales, while also pushing back at the narrative casting him as the candidate of Brussels.

"No foreign country may interfere in Hungarian elections," he wrote on X Tuesday, adding: "Hungarian history is not written in Washington, Moscow, or Brussels."

Trump's administration has embraced as part of its national security strategy the promotion of hard-right forces in Europe – casting migration and "woke" values as a "civilisational" threat to the Old Continent.

Pressed on why Washington has swung in so hard behind Orban when his conservative challenger Magyar espouses many of the same policy positions – particularly



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban gets in his car in a tank station during his way to Debrecen for an election rally yesterday, near Polgar. (AFP)

on Ukraine – Puzder suggested it came down to a tougher line on migration and "family values".

"I think on immigration, he's been very consistent that his position is much closer to the president's," he said of Orban.

Ultimately, Puzder said, Trump "feels that prime minister Orban is a good ally".

Orban's warm relationship with the US – whose top diplomat Marco Rubio also visited in February to boost his re-election bid – stands in stark contrast to his fraught relations with EU partners.

Since coming to power, the Hungarian nationalist has increas-

ingly locked horns with Brussels, which accuses him of quashing dissent and eroding the rule of law, and has frozen billions of euros in funding.

The closest ally in the bloc to Putin's Russia, Orban has defied consensus on Ukraine, stymieing sanctions and blocking billions of euros in aid for Kyiv's war effort.

Raising the stakes in the run-up to Sunday's vote, the European Commission demanded an explanation from Hungary Thursday over media reports it had been feeding Moscow "direct-line" access to strategic EU information.

# Europol smashes ring smuggling Vietnamese people to Europe

European Union police force Europol said yesterday they had smashed a criminal gang smuggling Vietnamese people into Europe, with a final destination of Britain via small boats across the Channel. Europol said they had made eight arrests and seized passports, vehicles and cash in a French-led sting that took place on March 30. Among the arrests was a network leader nabbed in Germany under a European warrant. Police arrested another high-level organiser in Hungary before the March 30 swoop. The Vietnamese people entered the EU's borderless Schengen Area in Hungary, with short-stay visas or residence permits, before travelling to France by air. Once in France, they were held for a time in Paris before being transported to northern France and handed to a Kurdish-Iraqi group that arranged the dangerous Channel crossing in small boats.

"The members of this migrant

smuggling network organised the entire journey, including logistics, accommodation, and transport, relying on complicit drivers and facilitators," Europol said in a statement.

They said the network transported at least 15 migrants per month, charging them up to 22,000 euros (\$25,700) for the full journey.

The plight of Vietnamese migrants making the hazardous trip to Europe was highlighted when 39 people suffocated to death in a refrigerated container on their way to Britain. The bodies of the migrants – two of whom were just 15 years old – were discovered inside the sealed unit at a port near London in October 2019.

Europol had announced on April 3 a similar operation targeting a different smuggling gang transporting Vietnamese migrants. That operation, which also took place on March 30, resulted in 19 arrests (16 in France, three in Britain). (AFP)

# EU seeks explanation from Hungary on alleged intel sharing

The European Union yesterday demanded Hungary "explain itself as a matter of urgency", after fresh media reports that Budapest passed on EU information to Russia.

A consortium of Eastern European media outlets – The Insider, VSquare and Delfi – claimed last month that Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto had provided Moscow with "direct-line" access to "strategic information on crucial issues".

In a second part of their investigation published Wednesday, they claimed Szijarto offered to "immediately" send an EU document to Russia through the Hungarian embassy in Moscow about Ukraine's accession talks into the bloc.

The claims have sparked outrage in Europe, ahead of elections on Sunday in Hungary, where nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban is seeking a fifth term.

The EU said the reports based on leaked calls between the Hungarian and Russian foreign ministers raised the "alarming possibility" of a member state "actively working against the security and the interests of the EU and all its citizens."

"This is therefore extremely concerning, and it is for the member state government in question to explain itself as a matter of urgency," European Commission spokeswoman Paula Pinho told a press conference.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot earlier yesterday accused Hungary of "betrayal" when asked about the telephone conversations. "This is a betrayal of the solidarity required between the countries of the European Union," Barrot told broadcaster France Inter. (AFP)



A woman with a baby stands next to rescue units after an attempt to cross the English Channel illegally turned tragic with several migrants found in cardiac arrest, in France's Pas-de-Calais northern coastal city of Equihen-Plage yesterday. (AFP)

# Four migrants die trying to cross Channel: French officials

AFP  
Equihen-Plage

Four people died yesterday off the coast of northern France as they tried to board a small boat to cross the Channel to England, taking the number of such deaths this year to six.

The two men and two women were swept away by the current near the village of Equihen-Plage, said regional official Francois-Xavier Lauch.

Another person was treated for hypothermia, he said, while 37 people were taken into the care of the emergency services.

France has long been a launchpad for migrants hoping to cross the Channel and start a better life in Britain, usually risking the journey

in flimsy, overcrowded vessels.

Lauch said the nationalities of the four dead in yesterday's disaster were not yet known.

Two children were taken to hospital as a "precaution", the prefecture said in a later update.

AFP saw a large number of emergency service vehicles and rescuers gathered on the beach yesterday morning.

People stood by a first aid post nearby, many wrapped in thermal blankets and a few wearing life jackets, with one woman carrying a baby.

Some were gathering up their possessions before boarding a bus to a reception centre.

Lauch told reporters at the scene that the death toll was still "provisional".

The migrants were trying to board a so-called "taxi boat", officials said, referring to dinghies that leave shore discreetly and almost empty

before picking up dozens of migrants wading into shallow waters.

The method has been used to try and avoid security forces on the coast from stopping the boats launching.

Local prosecutor Cecile Gressier confirmed that the victims were all adults.

She added that the boat had "continued on its way" after the failed attempt by the other migrants to board it, carrying around 30 other people.

The latest deaths show that smugglers continue to "enrich themselves" by "exploiting the misery and distress" of migrants trying to reach Britain, she said.

A UK government spokesperson said they would "continue working relentlessly with the French" to prevent these "perilous journeys".

Light to moderate showers in the early morning across Doha yesterday. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

## Weather to swing from mist to thunderstorms over weekend

By Joey Aguilar  
Doha

Scattered rain and a noticeable drop in temperatures marked the start of the weekend in Qatar yesterday, with unsettled conditions expected to continue through Saturday, according to the Department of Meteorology.

Light to moderate showers were recorded across parts of Doha from around 6am yesterday, bringing temperatures down to about 23°C. Humidity levels ranged from 30% to 50% by midday, resulting in relatively cooler conditions than on recent days. The Department of Meteorology's advisory, posted on X, warned of thunderstorms accompanied by sudden strong winds from

noon until late evening. Motorists were seen exercising caution, particularly on slick roads and at busy intersections. Reduced visibility and sudden gusts were also reported in some areas.

Across the city, dry golden-yellow leaves were seen scattered along streets and sidewalks, likely blown down by shifting winds ahead of the rain. Despite

the weather, commercial activity remained steady. Shops in busy districts such as Mansoura, Matar Qadeem and Al Sadd saw good footfall, with many residents heading out to run errands or shop as the weekend began.

Conditions remained cloudy with scattered thundery rain over some areas, clearing later in the night with relatively cooler tem-

peratures. Winds were moderate to brisk, mainly southeasterly to northeasterly, with stronger gusts during thunderstorms. Friday may begin with poor horizontal visibility, with misty to foggy conditions early in the day before temperatures turn moderate under partly cloudy skies.

By tomorrow, forecasters expect another round of unsettled

weather, including thundery rain, strong winds and high seas. Conditions will be hazy at first, becoming partly cloudy to cloudy, with a chance of rain that could intensify in some areas. Residents are advised to stay updated on weather alerts, particularly those planning outdoor activities or travel, as conditions may shift quickly over the weekend.

## Revisiting Souq Waqif Art Centre

**A living canvas through changing times, the Art Centre stands out as a space that has endured, adapted, and quietly thrived despite the odds it has faced, from pandemic to regional tensions**

By Joey Aguilar  
Doha

In the heart of Doha's historic marketplace, revisiting the Souq Waqif Art Centre feels less like stepping into a gallery and more like entering a conversation already in progress. Brushes hover mid-air, paint palettes remain open, and artists, often just an arm's length away, continue their work as visitors quietly observe.

A number of captured scenes reveal intimacy: compact studios with easels placed opposite empty chairs, inviting participation; walls layered with paintings that range from intricate realism to bold abstraction; and worktables scattered with colour, evidence that art here is never entirely finished.

At a time when global uncertainties, from the Covid-19 pandemic to regional tensions, have reshaped cultural engagement, the Art Centre stands out as a space that has endured, adapted, and quietly thrived. The Art Centre's identity is inseparable from its setting. Souq Waqif itself, as documented in Qatar Museums' historical publications, stands as one of the country's most important heritage sites, embodying Doha's early trading life and architectural traditions.

For more than a century, the souq served as a meeting point for traders, Bedouins and residents, a place of exchange rooted in daily life. That role has not disappeared; it has simply evolved. Today, amid cafés, craft shops and cultural venues, the Art Centre continues that tradition in a different language: art.

The centre describes itself as an "artistic cultural landmark of Qatar,"



The Souq Waqif Art Centre reveals a space where art continues to grow and change, blending Qatar's heritage with modern expression. Visitors have the chance to explore paintings, sculptures, and crafts inspired by Qatar's heritage and modern life. **PICTURES:** Joey Aguilar

drawing inspiration from Islamic and Middle Eastern traditions while embracing contemporary expression. Walking through its rooms, one can feel that duality is unmistakable. Paintings of falcons, horses and desert landscapes, dubbed as visual markers of Qatari identity, sit alongside abstract compositions and experimental colour work. Tradition and modernity are not in competition here; they coexist.

What distinguishes this Art Centre is not just what it displays, but how it functions. Unlike conventional galleries, where finished works are carefully curated and kept at a distance from the viewer, this is a working environment. According to official tourism descriptions, workshops surround the exhibition spaces, allowing visitors to watch artists at work or even participate in classes.

The photographs underline that



vance, offering something increasingly valuable: a calm, indoor cultural retreat that remains accessible year-round. While outdoor areas of the souq bustle with seasonal festivals and activities, highlighted by 'Gulf Times' in previous reports as key attractions during events such as Eid and spring celebrations, the Art Centre provides a quieter counterpoint.

During the height of the pandemic, when travel slowed and indoor cultural experiences became more intentional, such spaces gained renewed importance. Even now, amid shifting regional dynamics, the centre continues to draw both residents and visitors seeking a more reflective encounter with culture. "It's peaceful," Filipino expatriate Catherine said, adding: "You can step away from everything outside and just focus on the art."

That feeling of refuge is backed by the space itself. The interiors, with carved wood, simple patterns, and colourful lanterns, create a warm and welcoming atmosphere that feels both traditional and inviting. The Art Centre's deeper significance lies in its role as a bridge—connecting Qatar's cultural heritage with its contemporary artistic landscape.

Many of the works reflect themes

deeply embedded in local identity: desert life, traditional markets, Arabian horses and everyday scenes from the Gulf. These are not merely aesthetic choices; they are visual narratives that preserve memory through art. In addition, the diversity of styles signals an openness to global influences. The centre serves as a platform for both local and international artists, highlighting Doha's position as a growing cultural hub.

This aligns with broader cultural strategies, in which Qatar Museums' initiatives have been recognised for promoting cultural diplomacy and showcasing artistic heritage on both regional and global stages.

One of the Art Centre's most understated strengths is its consistency. Unlike seasonal attractions that depend on weather or events, it offers a year-round experience. In summer, its indoor studios provide relief from the heat. In winter, it complements the lively outdoor atmosphere of the souq. Throughout the year, it remains dynamic, shaped by the artists who work within it. "There's always something new," said Rajesh M, a frequent visitor. "Even if you come back after a few weeks, the paintings, the artists,

the mood – it changes."

This constant evolution makes revisiting not just worthwhile, but essential to fully appreciating the space. Souq Waqif has long been celebrated as a place where Qatar's past and present intersect, a living heritage site that continues to attract residents and tourists.

The Art Centre enhances that appeal by adding a deeply personal dimension. It does not rely on scale, spectacle or technology. Instead, it offers something simpler and arguably more powerful: authenticity.

Here, art is not removed from everyday life. It is part of it. Visitors do not follow a prescribed path. They wander, pause, observe and engage. They might watch an artist mix colours, ask about a technique, or simply stand in quiet appreciation. And in doing so, they become part of the experience.

To revisit the Souq Waqif Art Centre is to recognise its subtlety. It does not demand attention. It earns it, slowly, through detail, atmosphere and human connection. In those small rooms, captured in the images, filled with colour and conversation – the story of Qatar's cultural journey continues to unfold. Not as a finished masterpiece, but as a work in progress.

## QU's Al Bunyan Club wins Akhlaquna award in Al Shabab Category

Qatar University (QU) announced that the Al Bunyan Club won the Akhlaquna Award in the Al Shabab Category (18-25) during Akhlaquna Day, in recognition of its initiatives promoting ethical values and community engagement among youth. The club's recognition results from its ongoing efforts to translate ethical values into impactful practices through initiatives focused on social and volunteer work. These initiatives actively engage youth in creating a positive, sustainable impact within the university environment and the wider community.

Al Bunyan Club, a student club dedicated to community service and social engagement, also distinguished itself by emphasising the value of ihsan (excellence and

benevolence) as a central principle guiding its programs and activities, reinforcing its role in serving society.

Al Bunyan Club is one of the active student organisations at QU, focusing on social work and strengthening social engagement on the university campus and within the Qatari community. It also seeks to highlight key social issues and contribute to developing practical solutions through a range of initiatives and impactful activities.

Abdullah al-Mulla, director of the Student Activities Department, stated: "This achievement reflects the commitment of Qatar University students to strong ethical values and highlights the vital role that student clubs play in raising community awareness and fos-



Al Bunyan Club's latest achievement highlights QU's commitment to supporting meaningful student activities and strengthening its role in advancing the pillars of Qatar National Vision 2030.

tering a spirit of initiative among youth.

"We are proud to support such

efforts, which contribute to preparing an aware and responsible generation capable of contributing

to the development of society."

Al Bunyan Club president Mohammed al-Jabri said: "This rec-

ognition reflects the collective efforts of the club's members and their strong belief in the importance of social work in building a cohesive society. This award represents not the end of the journey but the beginning of further initiatives that aim to create positive and sustainable community impact."

Rawdha al-Jaber, deputy chair of the Events Committee at the club, added: "My experience with Al Bunyan Club has been a valuable opportunity to contribute to meaningful community impact. This award motivates us to continue developing initiatives that serve society and reflect the values we believe in. We dedicate this success to everyone who supported us and look forward to achieving even greater accomplishments in the future."