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BUSINESS | Page 1

Iran war creates opportunity for Doha to reset energy strategy: KPMG

Qatar 'unjustly targeted' in Iran war, say officials

Speakers at a discussion highlight strikes on airport, energy and water facilities despite neutrality

By A Staff Reporter
Doha





"Qatar rejects Iran's claims regarding the use of its territory," al-Ansari said, adding that such assertions were inaccurate and aimed at justifying the shelling

Qatar was "unjustly targeted" during the Iran war despite not being a party to the conflict, officials said at a panel discussion in Doha, citing missile and drone strikes that hit civilian infrastructure and injured residents.

Speakers at the event described the conflict as fundamentally between the United States and Israel on one side and Iran on the other, stressing that Gulf countries were not participants but were nonetheless exposed to repeated attacks. Qatar, they said, had rejected the war from the outset, condemned escalation, and pursued mediation efforts to prevent it.

Despite those efforts, Qatari territory came under direct attack within minutes of the American strike on February 28, according to HE Dr Majed bin Mohammed al-Ansari, adviser to the prime minister and official spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). He said the short timeframe indicated the strikes were premeditated rather than reactive.

"Qatar rejects Iran's claims regarding the use of its (Qatar's) territory," Dr al-Ansari said, adding that such assertions were inaccurate and aimed at justifying the shelling. He noted that communication channels with Iran existed at both military and political levels, and that relevant information was already publicly available, leaving little basis for misunderstanding.

Dr al-Ansari also stressed that Al Udeid is a sovereign Qatari base operated by the Qatar Armed Forces, despite hosting foreign forces, and said that Iranian officials were aware of this. He denied allegations that Qatari territory had been used to launch attacks against Tehran, adding that the strikes extended beyond military considerations to include civilian and strategic sites.

Major General Rakan Shayek Safar al-Hajri, Deputy Chief of Staff for Joint Operations, described the assault as the largest air attack in Qatar's history. A total of 537 strikes were recorded, including 64 ballistic missiles launched on the first day alone.

He said Qatar faced a wide range of aerial threats, including ballistic and cruise missiles and combat aircraft, but that air defence systems intercepted more than 90% of incoming projectiles, limiting the extent of damage. To Page 12

Amir, British PM discuss joint efforts for lasting peace, security in region



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani held talks with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer to discuss the latest regional and international developments. At the beginning of the meeting held in Lusail Palace yesterday, His Highness the Amir welcomed the visiting British PM, expressing his gratitude for the United Kingdom's stance and praising the strong and close relations between the two countries.

For his part, Starmer reiterated his condemnation of the Iranian attacks against Qatar, affirming his country's full solidarity and support for Qatar's measures aimed at preserving its sovereignty, security, and stability. Both sides welcomed the announcement of a ceasefire between the United States and Iran, emphasising its importance in de-escalating tensions and enhancing regional stability.

They also stressed the need for joint efforts with international parties to solidify and build upon the agreement, leading to a lasting peace accord that guarantees regional security, the stability of supply chains, and the continued flow of global energy through the Strait of Hormuz. The meeting was attended by HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani, HE Chief of the Amiri Diwan Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Khulaifi, and a number of senior officials.

Several members of the accompanying British delegation were also present. His Highness the Amir and the British PM also held a bilateral meeting, during which they reviewed ties and ways to enhance them, exchanged views on current issues, and emphasised the importance of continued coordination and consultation. (**QNA**)

Talks 'make or break' for world peace: Pakistan PM

AFP, Reuters
Islamabad

Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said yesterday that leaders of both Iran and the United States would attend ceasefire talks in his country set for today - and warned that progress would be hard work. "In response to my sincere invitation, the leaderships of both countries are coming to Islamabad. There, negotiations will be held for the establishment of peace," Sharif said in an address to the nation. Iranian officials landed late last night at Nur Khan Air Base in Islamabad under Pakistan's Air Force escort, sources involved in the talks said. While US Vice-President J D Vance was on his way to Pakistan, there had been a question mark over the Iran delegation after Tehran set conditions for the start of negotiations.Iran has said a two-week ceasefire in place must apply to Lebanon, where Israel was still carrying out bombing raids on Iran-backed Hezbollah. To Page 12

Islamabad fights the odds for peace sake

By Kamran Rehmat
Doha



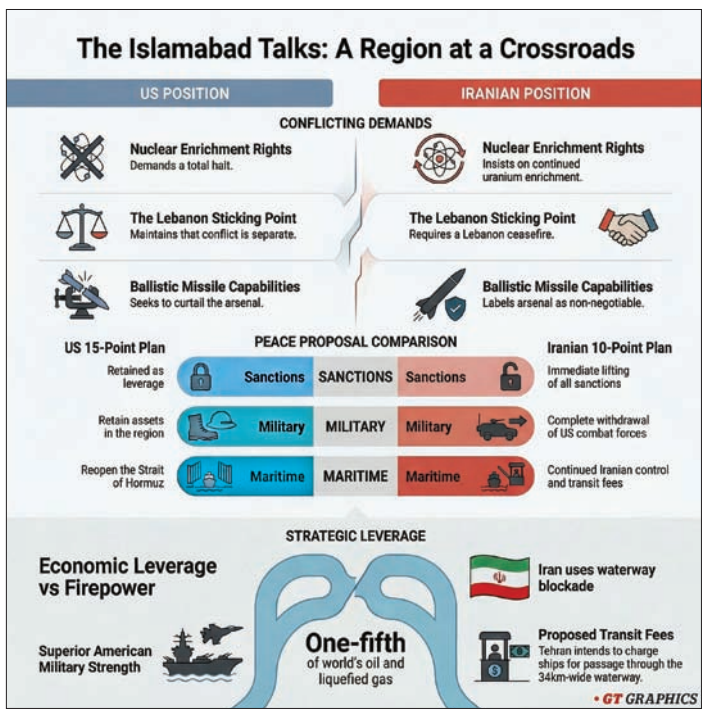
Whatever be the outcome of the Islamabad talks — and undeniably, these remain on highly fragile ground — Pakistan's rearguard diplomacy to even get the US and Iran to come to the negotiating table cannot be credited enough, especially after US President Donald Trump's threat to "wipe out a civilisation" that left the world teetering on the edge.

When the world's most powerful nations cannot speak to each other, they have often found a way to whisper — through Pakistan. It is a role Islamabad has quietly perfected over half a century: the trusted go-between, the carrier of messages that dare not travel openly, the host of conversations that officially never happened. Neither fully Western nor wholly Eastern, neither Arab nor Persian, Pakistan occupies a peculiar diplomatic sweet spot — and it has learned, with considerable skill, to make that ambiguity pay.

The most celebrated example came in 1971, when General Yahya Khan's government shepherded Henry Kissinger through Islamabad on a clandestine flight to Beijing, laying the groundwork for Nixon's historic opening to China. It was a masterstroke of quiet statecraft — Pakistan asking no questions, seeking no credit, content with gratitude and goodwill from two of the world's great powers simultaneously. That currency proved extraordinarily durable.

The pattern repeated across the decades, in different registers and with varying degrees of success. During the Soviet-Afghan War, Pakistan was the indispensable frontline partner in the UN-brokered Geneva talks, coordinating mujahideen pressure and diplomatic suasion in equal measure until Moscow agreed to withdraw. The resulting accords were a genuine achievement. Between 2018 and 2020, Pakistan's stubborn leverage over the Afghan Taliban made it central to the Doha Agreement, the deal that ended America's longest war.

In the chronic cold war between Riyadh and Tehran, Islamabad has positioned itself with particular care. It declined to join Saudi Arabia's Yemen coalition in 2015, a decision that caused diplomatic friction but preserved Pakistan's credibility in Tehran. It then used that credibility to quietly work the phones during successive spikes in Gulf tension offering itself as a de-escalation channel at moments when the alternative was an escalation nobody could afford. These were not headline-grabbing mediations. They were precisely the kind Pakistan does best: discreet and potentially invaluable.



What makes Islamabad useful in these situations is that its relationships run in every direction simultaneously — a sometimes-fractious — but currently, close — partnership with Washington, inseparable ties with Tehran, economic dependency on the Gulf states, and an all-weather strategic alliance with Beijing. Where outside observers see a country pulled uncomfortably in competing directions, Islamabad sees leverage. The contradiction is the asset.

UK, Qatar reaffirm solidarity, push for regional stability

By Noor Al-Rawi
Doha

"Both countries strongly support efforts to reopen the Strait of Hormuz and uphold the principle of freedom of navigation, given the waterway's importance to global energy supplies and trade"

The recent visit of British Prime Minister Keir Starmer to Qatar highlighted strong bilateral relations, solidarity and a shared push for regional stability, with both sides backing efforts to secure energy routes and turn a fragile ceasefire into lasting peace, UK ambassador to Qatar Neerav Patel said.

Speaking to *Gulf Times* on the outcomes of the high-level meeting between Starmer and His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, Patel said the visit carried a clear message of support amid heightened regional tensions. "A key purpose of this visit was solidarity. In difficult times, friends show up," Patel said, noting that the UK prime minister reiterated London's "steadfast support" for Qatar following recent attacks by Iran, while also expressing gratitude for Doha's assistance to UK nationals in recent weeks.

The envoy said the discussions reflected a convergence of views on the urgent need to stabilise the region, particularly amid escalating tensions involving the United States, Israel and Iran. Both sides emphasised that while the current ceasefire has brought some relief, sustained diplomatic efforts are needed to ensure it evolves into a lasting peace.

"They agreed that this is a critical moment not just for the region but globally," Patel said.

Energy security and the protection of key maritime routes also featured prominently in the talks. Patel said both countries strongly support efforts to reopen the Strait of Hormuz and uphold the principle of freedom of navigation, given the waterway's importance to global energy supplies and trade.


British ambassador Neerav Patel.

He added that the UK is working with international partners on political, military and logistical measures to safeguard these objectives, signalling closer coordination with allies, including Qatar. On defence co-operation, Patel underlined the role of the UK-Qatar Joint Typhoon Squadron, describing it as a key pillar of bilateral security collaboration. "It has worked so well to defend us all in a time of need," he said, underscoring its importance in strengthening regional deterrence and readiness.

The envoy pointed to a broader diplomatic role for both countries in de-escalation efforts. He lauded Qatar's continued engagement in international peace initiatives and acknowledged His Highness the Amir's leadership in advancing dialogue and mediation.

Patel also indicated that energy co-operation — particularly in natural gas — remains a cornerstone of the partnership and is expected to deepen despite current geopolitical uncertainties, as both countries seek to ensure stable and reliable supply chains. To Page 12

Qatari rescue team arrives in Lebanon

In implementation of the directives of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, a team from the Qatari International Search and Rescue Group - of the Internal Security Force (Lekhwiya) - arrived in Beirut on the first flight of the Qatari air bridge dedicated to providing relief to those affected in the country as a result of the brutal Israeli aggression. The flight carried a shipment of relief and medical supplies provided by the Ministry of Health and the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD), as part of Qatar's efforts to support its brothers and assist them in facing humanitarian crises. (QNA) ***100 tonnes of aid dispatched*** →Page 2

QATAR

UK PM, delegation leave Doha after working visit



The United Kingdom's Prime Minister Keir Starmer departed Doha yesterday following a working visit to the country.
The prime minister and his delegation were seen off at Doha International Airport by HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz al-Khulaifi and the UK's ambassador to Qatar Neerav Patel. – ***QNA***

PM holds talks with Starmer



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani held talks yesterday with the United Kingdom's Prime Minister Keir Starmer, during the latter's to Doha.
The talks focused on the latest regional developments amid the newly announced ceasefire announcement involving the United States and Iran.
They also discussed bilateral relations and ways to enhance co-operation, particularly in the defence and economic fields.
HE Sheikh Mohammed reiterated Qatar's welcome of the ceasefire announcement and stressed the urgent need to build upon it to prevent further escalation in the region, and emphasised 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, which contributes to maintaining the stability of the region and global supply chains.
HE Sheikh Mohammed expressed appreciation for the UK's support for Qatar and its co-operation in the field of defence.
Starmer reiterated his country's solidarity with Qatar, stressing the need to transform the ceasefire declaration into a permanent agreement that achieves security and stability in the region. – ***QNA***

Education ministry issues guide on alternative assessment procedures

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) has issued a comprehensive guide addressing frequently asked questions from students and parents regarding alternative assessment procedures for midterm exams in the second semester of the 2025-26 academic year.

The move aims to strengthen the education system's readiness by offering flexible evaluation methods that ensure continuity of learning under various circumstances.

The ministry explained that the approved "electronic applications" serving as alternatives to traditional exams consist of short digital learning tasks similar to homework assignments.

These do not require attendance in a formal exam session or adherence to a fixed timeframe.

It also emphasised a decentralised evaluation approach, allowing each school to design its own internal applications in line with the ministry's specific standards and guidelines, ensuring fairness and flexibility.

April 21 has been set as the final deadline for completing all electronic applications.

Students may complete these tasks at their convenience during this period, whether inside the school or at home, using the designated devices to log into the Qatar Education system.

In cases of technical difficulties, the MoEHE advises students to seek assistance from e-learning co-ordinators, subject co-ordinators, or teachers, who will also explain how to complete the applications before they are assigned.

For first- and second-grade students, the guide clarified that midterm grades will be based on continuous assessment, including class participation, homework, projects, and student activities.

The ministry stressed that adopting electronic assessments does not necessarily mean a shift to distance learning, noting that this evaluation method can be applied in both in-person and remote education settings.

It added that these applications are part of an integrated assessment system designed to measure learning outcomes based on approved standards, ensuring fairness and reliability.

It further noted that the assessments have been designed to be clear and structured, helping to reduce academic pressure and ease the stress typically associated with traditional examinations.

Students and parents are encouraged to follow official ministry channels for updates regarding changes in the study system or the related organisational procedures.

In the meantime, the director of the MoEHE's Public Relations and Communication Department, Mariam Abdullah al-Mohannadi, confirmed that detailed guidelines on midterm assessment mechanisms will be provided to schools starting from tomorrow, following the end of the extended break.

She added that schools will receive a circular outlining the operational procedures for implementing the alternative electronic assessments, which she described as closely resembling homework in Qatar's education system.

Students will be able to access and complete them at a suitable time, either at school or from home.

Regarding secondary school certificate exams scheduled for June, al-Mohannadi confirmed that these will be conducted as paper-based, school-administered tests.

She stressed that electronic applications are not tied to a specific mode of learning and can be implemented in both in-person and remote education, depending on prevailing conditions.

Alecso joins Scientific Chairs Forum in Morocco

The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (Alecso) took part in the third session of the Scientific Chairs Forum, which brings together chairs affiliated with partner organisations (Unesco, Isesco, and Alecso).

The forum was held at the National Training and Conference Centre in Rabat.

The forum aims to strengthen communication among scientific chairs affiliated with international organisations.

It facilitates the exchange of expertise and successful experiences across various fields of study, and provides a platform for dialogue and for sharing perspectives on improving the performance of these chairs.

Participants discussed ways to enhance the chairs' contribution to development issues, including how to strengthen their role in keeping pace with current knowledge and societal transformations.

In his address on behalf of Alecso, the head of the National Commissions Department at Alecso, Amin Dahmani, emphasised the importance of scientific chairs.

He described them as strategic platforms for knowledge production and for fostering co-operation between universities, research centers, and policymakers.

Dahmani highlighted Alecso's role in developing the network and expanding its scope.

He pointed to achievements in capacity building, organising scientific events, and disseminating knowledge.

Dahmani noted several challenges, including funding, co-ordination, and linking research to societal needs.

He contrasted these with a future vision focused on strengthening international networking and partnerships.

He also stressed support for innovation and young researchers, and linking research outputs to public policies to contribute to sustainable development in the Arab world.

Dahmani presented a paper in the second session entitled "The Alecso-Affiliated Chairs Network: Reality, Achievements, and Development Prospects".

In the paper, he reviewed the network's role in supporting Arab scientific research, building partnerships, and exchanging expertise.

Dahmani highlighted key achievements, including conferences, workshops, publications, and scientific initiatives. He also noted the network's expanding reach across the Arab world. – ***QNA***

Ministry confirms local soil free from pollutants

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC) has confirmed that a white substance reported in one of the country's areas does not pose any environmental or health risk, following laboratory analysis conducted by its specialist teams.

The ministry stated that it received a report from a citizen regarding this white substance found on a spot of land, which was immediately addressed.

Inspection teams were dispatched to the site, and soil samples collected and taken for detailed laboratory testing.

According to the test results, the white material was found to be rainwater residue from a tanker there, and not a chemical or hazardous substance.

The MoECC stressed that there is no indication of environmental pollution or vegetation degradation in the affected area.









Aircraft from Qatar with over 100 tonnes of aid heads to Lebanon

In implementation of the directives of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, and in continuation of Qatar's role and responsibility towards its brethren in Lebanon, a Qatar Airways plane is heading to Lebanon with over 100 tonnes of humanitarian aid.

This aid includes medical supplies provided by the Ministry of Public Health and the Qatar Fund for Development, in co-operation with the Qatar International Search and Rescue Group (Lekhwiya Internal Security Force).

This initiative aims to address the needs of hospitals in various Lebanese regions, supporting the health sector and strengthening humanitarian response efforts under the current circumstances, in addition to alleviating the repercussions of displacement resulting from recent events. – ***QNA***

Qatar, Lebanon ministers discuss developments

HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz al-Khulaifi discussed the latest regional developments with Lebanon's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants Youssef Raji.

The talks over the phone yesterday put a particular focus on the situation in Lebanon, as well as a range of issues of common interest.

HE Dr al-Khulaifi reiterated Qatar's condemnation of the Israeli raids that targeted multiple areas in Lebanon, describing them as brutal.

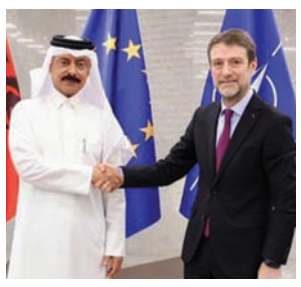
He also expressed Doha's full solidarity with Lebanon in the measures it is taking to maintain its security and stability, and reaffirmed its firm position regarding Lebanon's unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. – ***QNA***



Qatar's envoy joins Korea's deputy PM's meeting with GCC ambassadors

Qatar's ambassador to Korea Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Hamar participated in the meeting of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Economy Koo Yun-cheol with the heads of diplomatic missions of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries accredited to Korea.

The meeting, hosted by the UAE ambassador as dean of the Diplomatic Corps, discussed the latest developments in the Gulf region. – ***QNA***



Albanian minister meets Qatar's envoy

Albania's Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Ferit Hoxha met yesterday with Qatar's ambassador Jabor bin Ali al-Dosari. During the meeting, they discussed co-operation relations between the two countries. – ***QNA***



Qatar backs move to eliminate remnants of former Syrian regime's chemical weapons programme

Qatar stressed the importance of co-ordinated international efforts to eliminate the remnants of the former Syrian regime's chemical weapons programme, praising the co-operation of the Syrian Arab Republic with the organisation and international partners.

This came during the participation of Qatar's ambassador to the Netherlands and representative for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Dr Mutlaq bin Majid al-Qahtani, in a briefing hosted by Syria at the organisation's headquarters, on the objectives of the international "The Breath of Freedom" working group, to eliminate the remnants of the chemical weapons programme of the former Syrian regime.

Dr al-Qahtani stressed the need for partners to contribute to building Syrian national capacities through technical, medical and operational support, in order to achieve sustainable progress towards a Syria free of chemical weapons.

Syria leads the international "The Breath of Freedom" working group, with support from Qatar, Canada, France, Germany, Turkiye, the United Kingdom and the United States. – ***QNA***

Municipality minister says food market stability 'top priority' in Qatar





HE Minister of Municipality Abdullah bin Hamad bin Abdullah al-Attiyah has said that food market stability remains the ministry's "top priority" amid recent regional developments. The remarks were made during onsite inspection tours to a livestock factory and a fresh produce market to monitor food security system and to bolster local production capabilities. HE al-Attiyah, who chairs the Committee for Monitoring the Implementation of Food Security Policies, toured the Alanaam factory for animal production, where he inspected fattening programmes, slaughterhouse production lines, and inventory. The facility plays a leading role in supporting the local market with red meat and livestock products. His Excellency also inspected the availability of high-quality fresh commodities at the Umm Salal Central Market - a key integrated market, acting as a food supply hub for wholesale and retail items. This tour forms part of the ministry's broader strategy to enhance direct field monitoring of the production and supply sectors, contributing to market stability. **(QNA)**

WFP warns Lebanon facing food security crisis

Reuters
Geneva

Lebanon is facing a food security crisis due to Israel's offensive against Hezbollah group, which has disrupted supplies of goods and pushed up prices, the UN World Food Programme said yesterday.

A fragile two-day-old ceasefire has halted the campaign of US and Israeli airstrikes on Iran, but it has not so far calmed the situation in Lebanon, where Israel began pounding the country, in particular the south, on March 2 after Hezbollah fired on it in support of its patron Iran.

"What we're witnessing is not just a displacement crisis, it is rapidly becoming a food security crisis," said World Food Programme country director Allison Oman, speaking via video link from Beirut.

She warned that food was becoming increasingly unaffordable due to rising prices and demand among displaced families.

The Lebanese Ministry of Economy and Trade said in a statement that Lebanon's food stocks on a national level are sufficient for three to four months, and supply chains and import-export operations are functioning normally at ports and land crossings.

However, the price of vegetables has soared by more than 20% and bread prices have increased by 17% since March 2, the WFP said.

"What we're now seeing is a very worrying combination: prices are rising, incomes are disrupted and demand is increasing as displacement continues for many families," Oman stated.

Lebanon faces a two-layered crisis, in which some markets have fully collapsed — especially in the south, where more than 80% of markets are no longer functioning — while those in Beirut are under increasing strain, Oman said.

While markets on a national level are broadly functioning, many traders in conflict-affected areas in southern parts of Lebanon are reporting less than one week of essential food stocks remaining, she added. The trade ministry said that strategic reserves of food and fuel are available. Delivering food aid into hard-to-reach areas in the south was also becoming increasingly difficult.

GCC, League back Lebanese sovereignty

The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) reaffirmed its firm and supportive stance toward the sovereignty of Lebanon, as well as its security, stability, and territorial integrity, in line with the aspirations of the Lebanese people for security, stability, and development, QNA reported from Riyadh.
In a statement yesterday, GCC Secretary-General Jasem Mohamed Albudaiwi welcomed the decision issued by the Lebanese Cabinet, which calls on the army and security forces to immediately begin strengthening and asserting full state control over Beirut Governorate, and to restrict weapons to legitimate state forces only. Albudaiwi stressed that this decision represents an important step toward consolidating Lebanese state sovereignty and strengthening its legitimate institutions, contributing to maintaining security and stability and safeguarding the safety of citizens and residents.
Meanwhile, Arab League also reaffirmed its full solidarity with Lebanon in the face of the Israeli aggression. Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit spoke by phone with Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam and stressed the necessity of including Lebanon in the ceasefire agreement recently reached between US and Iran. **(QNA)**

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- Tender Fee Receipt along with the specified documents shall be submitted to purchase@qafco.com.qa on the dates indicated above, after payment of Tender Fee (nonrefundable).
- After submission of the above documents to the above email, Tender Document will be provided through an electronic platform separately.
- For any queries related to non-receipt of the tender documents after the submission Tender Fee receipt at the QAFCO Housing Section, you may contact at 'purchase@qafco.com.qa' or on 44227797
- Technical & Commercial details and Submission Procedures will be specified in the Tender Documents.
- The Company will not consider any offer without the enclosure of the Tender Bond.
- Bids shall be submitted at QAFCO Tender Office, between 0930 – 1100 hours during the Holy month of Ramadan and 0930 – 1130 hours and 1230 – 1400 hours, of any working day of the Company, on/before the "Tender Closing Date".

Israeli strike in south Lebanon kills 13 security personnel

AFP
Beirut

An Israeli strike, one of multiple on the southern Lebanese city of Nabatiyeh yesterday, killed 13 State Security personnel, the agency said, as Lebanon prepared to start ceasefire talks with Israel.

"This painful loss only strengthens our determination to achieve a ceasefire that will protect Lebanon and our people in the south," Prime Minister Nawaf Salam said in a statement.

President Joseph Aoun called on the international community to "assume its responsibilities in putting an end to the repeated Israeli aggressions".

Naim Qassem, head of Hezbollah, called yesterday for the Lebanese government to stop giving "free concessions" to Israel ahead of talks to try and end the month-long war between Israel and Hezbollah that has left some 1,900 people in Lebanon dead.

The state-run National News Agency (NNA) said "enemy warplanes launched a series of heavy strikes" on Nabatiyeh yesterday and an AFP photographer saw extensive damage at the State Security office, where a fire was still raging.

Israel, for its part, reported 30 rockets from Hezbollah into Israel yesterday.

As the government prepared for talks with Israel, outside the auspices of the US-Iran talks in Islamabad, Qassem called on officials "to stop offering free concessions" and described Israel's military campaign as a failure.

A US official on Thursday said talks would take place in Washington next week.

Hezbollah is represented in Lebanon's cabinet and parliament.

"The Israeli enemy has failed on the battlefield... It has been unable to carry out the ground invasion it repeatedly announced," Qassem said, adding that "the resistance will continue until the last breath".

More than 300 people, mostly civilians according to a Lebanese military source, were killed in a wave of simultaneous Israeli strikes on Lebanon on Wednesday despite the announcement hours earlier of a truce between the United States and Iran, with Israel and the US saying it did not apply to Lebanon.

Iran has insisted on including Lebanon in its ceasefire negotiations with the US.

On Thursday afternoon, the Israeli military issued a warning of incoming strikes for large, densely populated areas of southern Beirut, but had not carried out the threat as of yesterday.

A Western diplomat told AFP yesterday that European and Arab states are pressuring Israel to stop targeting Beirut. The Western diplomat, who asked to remain anonymous in order to discuss sensitive matters, said yesterday "there is ongoing diplomatic pressure from European states, regional states and Egypt on Israel to prevent renewed Israeli airstrikes on Beirut after 'Black Wednesday'".

Thursday's Israeli warning included areas home to major hospitals and the road to the country's only international airport.

Public Works and Transport Minister Fayez Rasamny said in a statement carried by the state-run National News Agency (NNA) on Thursday that he had "received assurances" from foreign diplomats that the airport and the road leading to it would be spared.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Zaatari, director of the country's largest public medical facility, Rafic Hariri Hospital, told AFP: "We have received assurances, including from the International Committee of the Red Cross that the hospital would not be targeted."

The World Health Organisation on Thursday called on Israel to cancel its evacuation warning for the Jnah district of Beirut because around 450 patients were in the Rafic Hariri and Al-Zahraa hospitals in the district, including 40 in intensive care.

The Israeli military said on Friday it had "dismantled" more than 4,300 Hezbollah sites in Lebanon and killed "more than 1,400" Hezbollah fighters.

Hezbollah, for its part, claimed several rocket launches on northern Israel, as well as attacks on Israeli troops advancing in the border area. Hezbollah also said it targeted a naval base in the southern Israeli city of Ashdod on Friday, far from the border, with missiles.



This photograph taken yesterday, during a media tour organised by Hezbollah's media office shows a digger clearing the rubble of a building in Beirut's Hay al-Selloum neighbourhood, that was targeted in an Israeli strike earlier this week. **(AFP)**



Family members are escorted to follow the bodies, transported by ambulances to the burial site, during the funeral service of six women and a man killed in Israeli strikes in Abbasiyeh, in Tyre, Lebanon, yesterday. **(Reuters)**

Iran, Lebanon solidarity march in Yemen



Supporters of the Houthi movement march in solidarity with Iran and Lebanon in the Yemeni capital Sanaa, yesterday. **(AFP)**



Family members and friends mourn outside the Nasser Hospital, the day after a Palestinian was killed in an Israeli strike in Khan Yunis, in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. **(AFP)**

UN slams 'unrelenting' killings in Gaza Strip

AFP
Geneva

The UN yesterday condemned "unrelenting" new killings of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, six months into a fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.

Gazans remain unsafe with Israel staging daily attacks, UN human rights chief Volker Turk said in a statement.

A ceasefire started in Gaza on October 10, but violence has not stopped in the Palestinian territory and both Hamas and Israel accuse each other of truce violations.

"The unrelenting pattern of killings reflects continuing disregard for Palestinian lives, enabled by sweeping impunity," said Turk.

Citing figures from Gaza's Hamas-run health ministry, the UN high commissioner for human rights said that since the start of April, at least 32 Palestinians had been killed by Israeli forces.

"For the past 10 days, Palestinians are still being killed and injured in what is left of their homes, shelters and tents of displaced families, on the streets, in vehicles, at a medical facility and a classroom," said Turk.

He cited the killing on Monday of a contractor working for the World Health Organisation, and the killing of an Al Jazeera journalist on Wednesday.

"The number of journalists and humanitarian personnel killed in Gaza is unprecedented, and further compounds civilian harm as it makes reporting on the situation and responding to its humanitarian implications life-threatening," said Turk,

"Movement itself has become a life-threatening activity. Incidents of Palestinians killed by Israeli forces while walking, driving, or standing outside are recorded nearly every day."

He said suffering had been exacerbated by "persistent Israeli restrictions" on the entry of aid, plus the destruction of civilian infrastructure, and increasing violence by "Palestinian armed actors reportedly backed by the Israeli military".

"Palestinians have no blueprint for survival: whatever they do or don't do, wherever they go or don't go, there is no safety or protection afforded to them. It is hard to square this with a ceasefire," said Turk, pointing to the killing of more than 700 Palestinians and injuries to over 2,000 others in the last six months, according to health ministry figures.

"After two-and-a-half years of repeated crimes under international law, committed with sweeping impunity, and tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians killed, the international community must move beyond words," Turk said.

"It must undertake meaningful actions to end Israel's ongoing violations of international law, ensure accountability for crimes committed by all parties, and guarantee that Palestinians are able to start the recovery and rebuilding of their homes and community."

The war in Gaza began when fighters from Hamas stormed Israel in 2023. Israel's offensive in retaliation since has left at least 72,000 people dead, according to Gaza's health ministry, whose figures are considered reliable by the UN.

Palestinians alarmed as Israel approves new settlements

AFP
Deir Ammar

Israel has approved 34 new settlements in the occupied West Bank, according to an NGO and Israeli media, causing concern among Palestinians that their land could soon be confiscated.

"The security cabinet secretly decided to establish 34 new settlements," said the anti-settlement watchdog Peace Now of the decision taken on April 1.

The 34 settlements come on top of 68 others already approved since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government came to power in 2022.

The decision has not been officially published by any government body, and the defence ministry, in charge of settlements in the occupied West Bank, declined to respond to AFP's questions.

"We are not addressing this issue," a spokesperson for the ministry said.

According to news channel i24News, 10 of the 34 settlements are already existing outposts, which are illegal under Israeli law, but will now be retroactively legalised under the decision.

The remaining 24 are yet to be built. All settlements are illegal under international law. In the Palestinian village of Deir Ammar, residents said they were worried that a settler outpost established on a hilltop near their area about a year ago would be one of the legalised settlements.

According to a list of the 34 settlements published by the Palestinian Authority's Colonisation and Wall Resistance Commission, which deals with settlement matters, the location of the future settlement of Ramatim Tzofim matches that of the outpost near Deir Ammar, whose residents have been attacked at least three times by the new settlers.

Nael Mussa, a farmer whose chicken coop and its adjacent farmhouse were attacked on several occasions, told AFP he feared the government decision would lead to more land grabs.

"We are effectively finished. If this becomes a settlement, we are finished in Deir Ammar. We will have no land left at all," 54-year-old Mussa said.

Palestinian farmer Ismail Awdeh expressed a similar sentiment.

"What we fear is that tomorrow this area will become a settlement and the land will be taken from us... of course it will grow," Awdeh said, referring to the settlement.

"This affects every resident in this area... This land is considered the food basket of the village," he told AFP.

Residents said settlers placed rocks on a road used by farmers to reach their fields near the new outpost, and damaged an olive tree orchard there.

News website Ynet reported that military chief Eyal Zamir warned during the security cabinet meeting on April 1 that the army could "collapse" because of increasing demands on its manpower.

That included the legalisation of dozens of outposts, granting them official settlement status and therefore for protection from Israeli troops.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since 1967. Excluding east Jerusalem, more than 500,000 Israelis now live there in settlements, among some 3mn Palestinians.Settlement expansion has been a policy under successive Israeli governments since 1967, but has accelerated significantly under the current Netanyahu-led coalition, widely regarded as one of the most right-wing in Israel's history. Rights groups say approvals of new settlements, land seizures and settler violence have further increased since the start of the Gaza war in October 2023.

Iran sees mixed sentiment ahead of talks on ending war

AFP
Paris

Everyday Iranians are awaiting planned negotiations between Washington and Tehran with a mixture of scepticism and outright fear, caught between a government they say doesn't understand peace and an American president who has threatened to destroy "a whole civilisation".

Talks between the United States and Iran are being hosted by Pakistan. If they go ahead they could transform a temporary ceasefire in the US-Israeli campaign against the Islamic Republic into a lasting peace.

Residents of Tehran contacted by AFP from Paris — who asked not to be identified out of concern for their safety — have mixed views on that prospect and are far from optimistic, with feelings ranging from anger, to anxiety, to deep disillusionment.

Amir, a 40-year-old artist, said he didn't "think this temporary agreement and negotiation will last even a week".

"The propaganda machine has delivered them such lies that they really believe they have won the war," he said.

For Sheida, 38, the uncertainty around the talks has generated a sense of anxiety.

"We've got so much hardship dumped on us that we don't even know what to worry about first," she said. "Now that the ceasefire has started, everyone's scrambling to settle debts and sort out financial stuff."

A choice between the return of terrifying US-Israeli airstrikes and the preservation of the Islamic republic's long-standing system is no choice at all, according to Sheida.

"I am scared of the war starting again, and at the same time I'm scared of the regime staying," she said.

If the talks do result in an agreement, he continued, it would likely do little to serve the Iranian people.

He pointed to anti-government protests just before the war that were met with a deadly crackdown, saying he and other like-minded Iranians would keep up their opposition, adding: "We will not forgive our murderers."

One Tehran resident, aged 30, said it was difficult to determine what US President Donald Trump hoped to accomplish in the talks.

"I guess you shouldn't take Trump so serious," they said. "He wants to erase a civilisation and he makes a ceasefire built on nothing 12 hours later."

"Most of what he says is just pure noise."

Homemaker Shahrzad, 39, said she had been both terrified and disillusioned by Trump's apocalyptic threat — issued before the ceasefire — that "a whole civilisation will die" if Iran did not reopen the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

"Threatening more than 90 million people with destruction of a civilisation is itself a crime," she said, describing days filled with fear as families "prepared to die" in the wake of the president's ultimatum.

"Now I realise this man is playing the whole world and has no sense of humanity."

Sheida, meanwhile, questioned Trump's sense of strategy, saying he must be "either crazy or inexperienced".

"Did the US president really not realise they could get stuck if the Strait of Hormuz was closed?"

At the outset of the war, both Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had suggested their goals included toppling the regime, though they soon shifted to other aims.

Sara, a 44-year-old graphic designer, said Iran's "government is an ideological one, and it's not going to collapse easily".

"Its mindset exists all the way down to the lowest levels, so it's really not simple to change," she added.

Amir said he believed the country's remaining leaders would continue fighting.

Kuwait says drone attack injured National Guard members

AFP
Kuwait City

Kuwait's defence ministry said yesterday that several members of its National Guard have been wounded, after the country's air defences responded to a drone attack the previous day.

The regional countries have been targeted by hundreds of Iranian missiles and drones since the beginning of the war, which was triggered by Israeli-US strikes on Iran on February 28.

Kuwait's defence ministry said in a statement that "Iranian aggression" had targeted several vital installations belonging to the National Guard, injuring some members.

It said they were receiving treatment and were in stable condition.

It added that the armed forces had "detected and intercepted, over the past 24 hours, seven hostile drones in Kuwaiti airspace".

The National Guard specified on X that some of its members had been wounded "in the line of duty at one of their sites" while others were wounded "while taking part in extinguishing a fire started by the drone attack".

Uganda ex-minister sentenced to four years in corruption scandal

AFP
Kampala

Former Ugandan state minister Agnes Nandutu was sentenced yesterday to four years in jail for stealing thousands of roofing materials for the poor in a scandal that has outraged graft-weary citizens.

In 2022, several senior government officials diverted 14,500 iron sheets that were meant for vulnerable communities in the north-eastern Karamoja region.

Nandutu, former state minister for Karamoja affairs, was found guilty of stealing 2,000 of the sheets, which she allegedly used for personal purposes.

She was handed four years behind bars, according to the ruling seen by AFP.

Corruption is endemic in the east African country, where it is rare for senior officials to face prosecution for graft.

Currently a lawmaker allied with the ruling party, Nandutu was also banned from holding public office for 10 years.

During her court appearance, Nandutu apologised for the theft of the iron sheets, the court noted, calling it her "saving grace".

"A fine alone, the highest of which is a paltry" 3.2mn Ugandan shillings (less than $1,000) "would be inadequate", judge Jane Okuo Kajuga wrote in the ruling.

"It is important to send (the) message that corruption does not pay and that dealing with proceeds of corruption is punishable," she added.

After the ruling, Nandutu's lawyer told AFP it was "the harshest punishment handed over to someone who was misled, and apologised for the mistake she made". He added he was considering an appeal.

Prosecutors said in a statement the sentence was "both just and proportionate", reflecting the "seriousness of the offence, the responsibility attached to the office held, and the need to deter similar conduct".

Nandutu was placed in pre-trial detention in 2023 and dismissed from her ministerial post the following year. President Yoweri Museveni, who has ruled the country since 1986, has personally assured that "all those involved will be handled appropriately".

Djibouti counts votes as leader seeks new term

AFP
Djibouti City

Djibouti began counting votes yesterday in a presidential election expected to hand a sixth term to 78-year-old Ismail Omar Guelleh, who faces just one little-known opponent in the small but highly strategic Horn of Africa nation.

Guelleh has ruled the east African country of about 1mn people for 27 years, leveraging its key location to turn it into an international military and maritime hub.

Its mere 23,000 square kilometres host military bases and contingents from France, the United States, China, Japan and Italy, generating substantial financial, security and political benefits.

Guelleh had announced he would step down this year but a constitutional amendment in November removed the upper age limit of 75 for presidential candidates, clearing the way for him to run again.

Catching up after a delayed opening yesterday morning, some polling stations in the capital Djibouti closed around 7:00 pm (1600 GMT), an hour after the official end of voting, AFP journalists saw.

The first official results were expected later. "I'm not going to vote, it's pointless. He's been in power for 27 years and the city is dirty," a taxi driver said.



A voter casts her ballot at a primary school serving as a polling station, during the 2026 Djiboutian presidential elections, yesterday. **(AFP)**

Just over 256,000 people were eligible to choose between Guelleh and Mohamed Farah Samatar, leader of the Unified Democratic Centre (CDU), a party with no seats in parliament.

Amid heavy security, Guelleh, widely known by his initials IOG, voted before noon at City Hall alongside his wife, while Samatar cast his ballot earlier.

"By the grace of God, we have arrived here, and we hope that this will end in victory," Guelleh told reporters.

After trickling in throughout most of the day, voter numbers picked up in the late afternoon at polling stations in the capital, although no queues formed.

Turnout ranged from 36 to 58% at several polling stations visited by AFP, but it exceeded 90% at one where soldiers were voting.

Guelleh has plastered the capital with campaign posters and drawn thousands to his rallies, while Samatar has struggled to gain support.

The national broadcaster aired one of Samatar's rallies, with only a few dozen people present.

"I'm going to vote for Ismail Omar Guelleh because he has a good programme for young people. I don't even know what his opponent looks like," said Deka Aden Mohamed, 38.

In the last presidential election in 2021, which the opposition largely boycotted, Guelleh won more than 97% of the vote.

He has faced little opposition since succeeding the country's first president, Hassan Gouled Aptidon, in 1999. He had been Aptidon's chief of staff.

In 2005, he was re-elected unopposed.

His candidacy is seen by some as offering "stability" in the troubled Horn of Africa region, but analysts say it is driven by the absence of a unanimously accepted successor. The health of the president has come under scrutiny.

Despite claims by the Djibouti League of Human Rights that the vote is a "masquerade", people told AFP they were eager to vote.

"It's a duty to go vote," said Yussuf Mohamed Hussein. "I'm going to vote for the president; Samatar, I don't even know him."

Around 70% of young Djiboutians are unemployed and the country's development has come at the cost of substantial debt, particularly to China.

Djibouti is situated on the key Bab al-Mandeb strait, which divides the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and is one of the world's busiest shipping routes.

Without agriculture to rely on, the country depends on ports for 70% of its gross domestic product, with Ethiopia its main maritime outlet.

Turkish ship docks for Somalia's first offshore oil drilling

AFP
Mogadishu



Turkish drilling vessel Cagri Bey, which is set to conduct Turkiye's first deep-sea drilling operation abroad, docks in the Indian Ocean near the Mogadishu sea port in Somalia, yesterday. **(Reuters)**

A Turkish drilling ship docked at the port of Mogadishu yesterday ahead of Somalia's first offshore oil drilling project, the two countries announced.

A hydrocarbon development deal signed in 2024 granted Turkiye's state-owned energy company the right to explore three offshore blocks of around 5,000 square kilometres each.

In late 2024, another Turkish vessel carried out seismic surveys in the three blocks to identify drilling sites. The Cagri Bey, featuring a red bow emblazoned with a white star and crescent and topped by a drilling derrick, arrived in Somali waters Thursday and docked in the capital's port yesterday.

"It docked this (Friday) morning... the ship is very big, we have never seen anything like this at the port before," said Abshir Yare, a port employee. The vessel will carry out "Somalia's first-ever offshore drilling operations", the African nation's state news agency Sonna reported Thursday. It will also conduct Turkiye's "first overseas deep-sea drilling" operations outside its own waters, Turkish Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar said on X. Bayraktar was due to attend a ceremony at the Mogadishu port yesterday alongside Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, according to Sonna.

Turkiye is one of Somalia's main military and economic partners, with Ankara inaugurating its largest overseas base in Mogadishu in 2017.

Eswatini top court rules US deportees entitled to lawyer access

AFP
Johannesburg

Eswatini's top court has ruled that migrants deported from the United States to the African kingdom last July are entitled to visits from a local lawyer, a judgment seen by AFP yesterday showed.

The tiny country has taken in 19 men as part of US deals with several African nations to accept migrants under a third-country deportation programme widely criticised by rights groups.

The government lost its appeal against an earlier ruling allowing Eswatini human rights lawyer Sibusiso Nhlabatsi to visit the first group of five deported men. One of them, a Jamaican national, has since been returned to the Caribbean island.

"The issue of access per se is not challenged on appeal but the court finds itself compelled to comment that ultimately, there can be no real harm in granting the respondent access to the detainees," the three-judge panel said in a ruling issued Thursday.

"It then will be up to the detainees, if they do not wish to see the respondent, to tell this to the respondent to his face," they said, referring to Nhlabatsi.

Eswatini, Africa's last absolute monarchy, confirmed in November that it had received around $5.1mn from the United States to accept the deportees.

According to a document revealed by Human Rights Watch in September and seen by AFP, Eswatini agreed to take 160 deportees in exchange for funds to strengthen its border and migration management capacity.

A Cambodian man was repatriated last month, leaving 17 men at the high-security Matsapha Correctional Centre outside the capital Mbabane.US-based migration lawyer Alma David, who represents some of the other detainees, said "the fact that it took nearly nine months of litigation" and a decision by the top court to achieve these visits "speaks volumes about how hard the government of Eswatini is fighting to deny these men the most basic of rights".

Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland and landlocked between South Africa and Mozambique, has been led by King Mswati III since 1986, and his government has been accused of human rights violations.

US President Donald Trump has overseen a drastic expansion of the practice of deporting migrants to countries other than their own.

Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda and South Sudan have also accepted US deportees.

Armed gangs kill, kidnap in latest Nigeria violence

AFP
Jos

Armed gangs in northern Nigeria have killed around 12 people and kidnapped many more, local sources said yesterday, the latest in a surge of violence that has killed dozens just this week.

The raids by criminal gangs known as "bandits" in Sokoto state on Thursday followed several days of attacks in the country's north.

Since Sunday, more than 100 people had already been killed by militants and criminal gangs, who have stepped up their attacks since last year against military bases and villages.

"At least 12 people have been killed, 43 others have been kidnapped across villages in Isa and Sabon Birni local government areas," said Ahmad Yahaya, a local community leader in Dan adua village.

"The attack was carried out by many armed bandits, on Thursday," he said.

A lawmaker representing the Isa and Sabon Birni areas, Muhammad Saidu Bargaja, confirmed the incident."The security situation was highly devastating" Wednesday and Thursday, he said.

"Gunmen have killed 11 people across various villages. They also kidnapped 41 people," he added.

The two areas are under the control of a notorious bandit leader, Bello Turji, whose group imposes taxes on local communities and carries out raids against those that refuse to pay.

Shippers weigh unusual routes as high air cargo rates, ocean gridlock persist

Reuters
Los Angeles/Montreal



File photo shows a view of a cargo ship with shipping containers at the port of Oakland, California, US. **(Reuters)**

Some shippers caught between high jet fuel prices and congestion in vital Middle East waterways are now looking for transport routes in unexpected places, with a recent ceasefire between Iran and the US unlikely to offer quick relief.

Clients that once moved electronics and other fast-selling consumer products from Asia to Europe through Middle East hubs are now going so far as to transport their goods by ship and plane via Los Angeles to secure lower rates, one US freight forwarder said.

"It's a lot faster than going by ocean around (the southern tip of Africa), but much, much cheaper than doing air direct," Flexport CEO Ryan Petersen said.

The cost to ship air cargo has soared due to strong demand and high jet fuel prices in the wake of Iran's continued blockage of the vital Strait of Hormuz shipping corridor.

According to WorldACD Market Data, air cargo capacity to the Middle East has shrunk by more than 50% on an annual basis over the last two weeks.

Meanwhile, air cargo rates on long-term contracts from Vietnam to Europe have almost doubled to $6.27 per kilogram, compared with before the war, Flexport said.

By contrast, rates for Los Angeles to Paris air cargo are up only 8% as airlines add more passenger flights due to strong demand, opening up belly capacity for cargo.

"We could see a bump if trade disruptions persist in the Middle East," said Noel Hacegaba, CEO of the Port of Long Beach, which is part of the busiest US seaport complex in Los Angeles.

LOST AIR CAPACITY

Global air cargo capacity, once expected to grow by 5.5% this year, has so far fallen 1% due to the Iran conflict that started in late February, said Marco Bloemen, managing director of consulting firm Aevean.

How the year turns out will depend in part on the restoration of the major Gulf carriers' widebody passenger aircraft, which account for roughly half of the region's air cargo capacity, he said.

Niall van de Wouw, chief air freight officer at transportation pricing platform Xeneta, said a delayed recovery in tourism to the Gulf after the fighting ends could lead carriers to cut passenger capacity, which would impact air cargo. "Gulf carriers such as Emirates and others operate some of the world's most important air freight networks," he said.

British Airways said on Thursday it would cut flights to the Middle East when services resume, in a sign that heightened regional tensions would weigh on demand.

Dedicated cargo companies like UPS are still operating in the region using "contingency plans" as their pilots are not currently flying to hubs like Dubai.

Third-party charter aircraft have moved in to pick up some of the flying but jet fuel supplies are expected to remain tight and costly for months.

"The major issue for everyone is the massive hike in fuel prices," said Dan Morgan-Evans, group cargo director at Air Charter Service.

A client of AIT Worldwide Logistics spent at least five to six times more to move oil drilling equipment bound for Saudi Arabia by air and truck after its planned ocean voyage from Houston was cancelled due to the war, said Ryan Carter, the freight forwarder's Americas executive vice president.

Still, many companies feel they have no choice but to pay extra to ship by air.

"Sometimes the cargo just has to move," Morgan-Evans said.

Seized illicit wildlife meat destroyed



An official from the Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS) disposes of rancid game meat that was seized while it was being trafficked in Nairobi, yesterday. A taxi was nabbed with six occupants suspected to be poachers earlier this week along the Garissa-Dadaab road with at least 200 kilos of Giraffe carcass. **(AFP)**

Illegal industrial vessels devastate Senegal's fishing communities

AFP
Rufisque





Fisherman Ibrahima Mar, who lives in a fishing village in the Dakar suburb of Rufisque, says the lack of fish off Senegal's coast is causing people to lose hope. **Right:** Fishmongers and processors, among the many professions affected by declining fish, are generally women. **(AFP)**

Ibrahima Mar first lost his livelihood then lost his son when the fish off Senegal's coast began to disappear, rupturing a way of life that had sustained his family for generations.

Industrial and illegal fishing, among other factors, have contributed to a sharp decline in the region's fish stock, robbing the west African nation of a traditional source of nutrition and income.

In recent years, fish have been "increasingly plundered", said Mar, who lives in a fishing village in the Dakar suburb of Rufisque.

The 55-year-old fisherman, a member of the Lebou ethnicity, a traditional fishing people, spoke to AFP from one of Rufisque's boat landings, explaining that the fish had been "taken from our path. So, there's no hope left".

Bottom trawlers and other industrial ships, generally flagged to Senegal but whose owners' real nationalities are difficult to trace, send their catches abroad.

"If you dig a little deeper into the ultimate beneficial ownership" the boats are Spanish, Italian, French, Chinese and Turkish, among other nationalities, said Bassirou Diarra, country manager for Senegal at the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF).

"Not only is there a shortage of fish for the Senegalese market, for food security, but the money that should come back in terms of currency for the national economy isn't coming back," he said.

Destructive and illegal practices meanwhile include "fishing in prohibited areas, nets that do not comply with regulations, MPA (marine protected area) rules that are not respected, and the abusive granting of licences", Diarra said.

A 2025 EJF report suggests that 57% of fish populations exploited in Senegal are in a state of collapse.

Members of coastal fishing communities have become increasingly desperate, illegally immigrating in traditional wooden canoes called pirogues along the deadly Atlantic migration route to Europe. That includes two of Mar's sons, both fishermen.

After one succeeded, Mar received a call several years ago from his other son, in his late teens. He phoned "to tell me he was in a pirogue heading for Spain. That pirogue had 140 people on it," Mar said.

The family waited the five to six-day journey for news of his arrival, then 15 days, 20 and 30. But they never heard from him again.

Colourful pirogues are ubiquitous along Senegal's 700-kilometre coast.

"What a pirogue used to catch in two months, now that same pirogue can fish for six or seven months to catch the same amount, which is a problem," Mamadou Diouf Sene, president of the Fishing Wharf Revenue Commission of Rufisque, told AFP from the city's wharf.

A web of professions from cart driver to ice seller, as well as fishmonger and processor, depend on fish. Fishmonger Fatou Seck, 39, sat at the Rufisque wharf alongside several other women with small trays of sea bream, white carp and mullet.

"Times are really tough right now," the mother of six told AFP, adding that "many of us base our hopes on this work, which is our only source of income to feed our children".

More than 82,000 people in Senegal work in fishing according to latest census information, comprising some 2% of the workforce in 2023. A surge of artisanal fishermen has additionally contributed to fish population decline, as people flock to the profession which requires minimal training.

Estimates on pirogue numbers in Senegal vary but generally fall between 12,000 to 19,000.

Meanwhile, climate change is pushing west Africa's small pelagic fish — smaller, often schooling species caught by artisanal fishers — to move northward, according to research.

Fish have declined for some 40 years but artisanal fishers really took note when small pelagics like sardinella and horse mackerel started vanishing some 15 years ago. The prospect of Senegal having to import fish, a part of its cultural identity and a major natural resource, "is catastrophic", Mar said.

Cheikh Salla Ndiaye of Senegal's Directorate of Fisheries Protection and Surveillance described monitoring the sea as "very difficult", even with assistance from the navy and air force. Mar recently spent time on a Greenpeace ship with four other fishermen learning how to better spot and report illegal fishing.

"We used to call the high seas like the Wild West because there was no way to see what was happening out there," Sophie Cooke, a fishing vessel analyst with Greenpeace, told AFP aboard the ship.

But technologies such as tracking devices, satellite radar and even smartphones, which fishermen can use to take pictures and pinpoint boats' locations, are changing that, she said.

Mar intends to take these tools back to his community. With his two fishermen sons now gone, one in Spain and the other taken by the sea, Mar's experience with declining fish stocks is deeply personal.

As for his third son, Mar said: "I put him in a training centre. He's learning metal welding."

WORLD

Brazil, US launch joint action to fight organised crime

Reuters
Sao Paulo/Brasilia

The Brazilian government yesterday announced a joint initiative with the US to combat organised crime, involving the integration of data from Brazil's federal tax authority with US Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

The move comes as President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva steps up efforts on public security, a key issue in Latin America's largest economy, as he seeks a new term in October's general election.

Lula has seen his lead in opinion polls evaporate, with surveys now pointing to a run-off tie with his main rival, right-wing Senator Flavio Bolsonaro.

Since last year, Brazil's tax authority has played a central role in major operations uncovering money laundering schemes linked to criminal organisations in the fuel sector, identifying multiple operations abroad.

Lula has publicly called on US President Donald Trump to arrest the owner of Refit, one of the main companies involved in the scheme, who resides in the US.

Still there are tensions between the US and Brazilian governments regarding the best approach to tackle organised crime. Last year, US officials had asked Brazil to label major gangs terrorist organisations, but Brazilians refused to do so.

According to a government statement yesterday, the joint initiative aims to integrate intelligence efforts to intercept illicit shipments of weapons and narcotics.

Brazil's tax revenue secretary, Robinson Barreirinhas, said more than 1,100 weapons arriving from the US had been seized over the past 12 months, adding that authorities confiscated more than 1.5 tonnes of drugs in the first quarter alone, mainly synthetic drugs and hashish.

Finance Minister Dario Durigan said the agreement was made possible after talks between Lula and Trump gained momentum.

The Brazilian government had hoped the announcement would coincide with an in-person meeting between Lula and Trump, originally expected in March. The meeting did not materialise and now has no clear timeline following the outbreak of the US-Israeli war with Iran.



Brazil's Finance Minister Dario Durigan (right) speaks during a meeting with the US Embassy Chargé d'Affaires Kim Kelly (left), before signing a co-operation agreement between the Brazilian Federal Revenue Service (RFB) and US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to combat transnational crime, in Brasília, yesterday. (**AFP**)

Venezuela police tear gas protesters demanding salary, pension rises

AFP
Caracas

Venezuelan police fired tear gas yesterday to disperse around 2,000 protesters who marched towards the presidential palace to demand salary and pension increases, AFP reporters saw.

In a sign that the fear that gripped Venezuelan society under ousted leader Nicolas Maduro has begun to subside, the protesters chanted "Yes, we can!" as they pressed long-standing demands for increases to wages so low that many struggle to survive.

Others shouted "Let's go to Miraflores!" referring to the presidential palace in the centre of Caracas.

Dozens of riot police with helmets and shields attempted to drive back the protesters as they made their way through central Caracas, a few kilometres from the presidential palace.

The clashes reflect growing anger in Venezuela over the perceived failure of acting President Delcy Rodriguez, who replaced Maduro after his overthrow in January, to address a cost-of-living crisis.

On Wednesday, she went on television to announce an increase in wages on May 1 but did not disclose the amount. The monthly minimum wage in Venezuela is 130 bolivars (US$0.27), unchanged since 2022, and roughly 330 times lower than the UN poverty line of $3 a day.

While public sector wages can reach around $150 with government bonuses, they remain a fraction of the $645 that, according to various estimates, families need to cover their basic food needs in the face of annual inflation of over 600 percent.

The protesters demanded increases to baseline salaries and not just to their bonuses, which have been increased in the past even as wages remained stagnant.



Opponents to the government of Venezuelan interim President Delcy Rodriguez clash with the police as they demonstrate in demand of salary and pension raises in Caracas. (**AFP**)

"Enough of this deception about salary increases. They want to pass off our government bonuses as a salary. That is completely unheard of," Mauricio Ramos, a 71-year-old retiree, told AFP.

Rodriguez, who succeeded former leader Nicolas Maduro after his capture by US forces in a January 3 raid, has advocated a "responsible" increase in salaries that does not cause a spike in inflation.

The former vice-president received the nod from US President Donald Trump to succeed Maduro, provided she gave Washington access to Venezuelan oil.

Under pressure from Washington to ease repression, she has pushed through several major economic reforms, as well as an amnesty for political prisoners.

But she faces growing impatience from Venezuelans struggling to pay for food, medicine and other basics.

Thursday's protest was the biggest anti-government demonstration since August 2024, as Venezuelans showing growing assertiveness after largely refraining from protesting over the past two years following successive crackdowns on dissenters.

The August 2024 protests, which followed Maduro's disputed claim of victory in August 2024 presidential elections, were brutally repressed.

Venezuelan opposition demands elections after Maduro ouster

Venezuela's opposition yesterday called for presidential elections, noting that the 90-day legal period for organising a vote to replace ousted leader Nicolas Maduro had elapsed.
In a statement, the Vente party of opposition leader Maria Corina Machado noted the "absolute absence" of Maduro, who was captured by US forces in a January 3 raid.
"Therefore, presidential elections must be called within 30 days of this declaration," Nobel Peace Prize laureate Machado's party said.
Maduro's former vice-president Delcy Rodriguez was sworn in as interim president on January 5, two days after longtime socialist leader Maduro was flown out of Venezuela by US forces to face trial in New York.
He has appeared in court twice since then to answer drug trafficking charges.
The Venezuelan constitution says that "temporary absences of the president of the republic shall be filled by the executive vice president for up to 90 days, extendable by decision of the National Assembly for an additional 90 days."
"If a temporary absence lasts for more than 90 consecutive days, the National Assembly shall decide by a majority vote of its members whether it should be considered a permanent absence," says Article 234 of the constitution, which was cited by Vente. (**AFP**)

Brazil inflation rises as fuel costs surge amid Iran war

AFP
Brasília

Inflation in Brazil edged higher to 4.14% year-on-year in March, official data showed yesterday, driven by higher fuel costs amid a global energy shock prompted by the war in the Middle East.

The main driver of higher inflation was the price of gasoline, which rose 4.59% in March, driving up transport costs, according to the IBGE statistics agency.

Diesel — essential for freight transport — rose 13.9%. Brazil imports nearly 30% of the diesel it consumes.

The cost of food, which is driven upward by higher transport costs, rose 1.56%.

"In certain sub-categories — particularly fuels — the impact of uncertainties in the international landscape is already being felt," IBGE manager Fernando Goncalves said in a statement.

Iran has blocked traffic through the Strait of Hormuz — a waterway used to carry a fifth of the world's oil and gas deliveries — since the US and Israel began bombing the country in February.

According to the Capital Economics consultancy, the rise in Brazil's inflation "was driven almost entirely by the energy shock" worldwide.

In March, Brazil's Central Bank lowered its benchmark interest rate for the first time in nearly two years, to 14.75% from 15%.



A salesman is seen at his vegetable stand at the supply centre (CEASA) in Brasilia. (**Reuters/File Photo**)

Capital Economics said that if global energy prices fall as hoped due to a two-week US-Iran ceasefire, this easing cycle may continue.

This week President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva signed a package of measures aimed at curbing the rise in fuel prices, including subsidies for diesel.

At gas stations, diesel prices have climbed by nearly 24% since the outbreak of the conflict in late February, according to the National Petroleum Agency.

Lula's package also provides aid to the aviation sector, where rising fuel costs are expected to trigger a sharp rise in air fares.

The 80-year-old veteran leftist is running for a fourth term in office in October elections.

Polls show he faces stiff competition from his main rival, senator Flavio Bolsonaro — son of far-right former president Jair Bolsonaro, who is in jail for an attempted coup attempt.

Cuban president tells NBC he won't resign under US pressure

AFP
Washington

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel said Thursday that he would not resign under US pressure and called for open dialogue in his first television interview with an American broadcaster.

"We have a free sovereign state, a free state. We have self-determination and independence, and we are not subjected to the designs of the US," Diaz-Canel told NBC News, according to their translation of his remarks.

"The US government that has implemented that hostile policy against Cuba has no moral to demand anything from Cuba," the 65-year-old leader added.

"The concept of revolutionaries giving up and stepping down — it's not part of our vocabulary."

Washington has waged a pressure campaign on communist-ruled Cuba, imposing a virtual oil blockade on the island by threatening tariffs on any country that attempts to sell oil to the island.

Cuba has been in the throes of an energy crisis since January when its main supply from Venezuela was cut off with the ouster of Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro.

The Caribbean island has been under a US trade embargo for more than six decades.

Trump has openly floated the idea of "taking" Cuba — as he has with Greenland, Canada and Venezuela — and his administration labels leaders in Havana a "threat" to US national security.

Last month, Diaz-Canel vowed "unbreakable resistance" to any such takeover effort.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who is of Cuban descent, has taken the reins of negotiations with Havana and has called for major changes to Cuba's leadership, which he deems incompetent.

But Rubio denies calling for Diaz-Canel's resignation.

The Cuban leader told NBC that Havana wants "to engage in dialogue and discuss any topic without any condition — not demanding changes from our political system, as we are not demanding changes from the American system, about which we have a number of doubts."

Cuba's Deputy Foreign Minister Josefina Vidal told AFP on Tuesday that talks with the US were "in a very preliminary, very initial phase."

Despite bilateral tensions, the US allowed a shipment of crude oil from a Russian tanker to be unloaded in Cuba over a week ago.

Russia deputy FM hails 'special' relations on Cuba visit



Cuba's President Miguel Diaz-Canel (*right*) and Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov meeting in Havana. (**AFP**)

AFP
Havana

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov hailed the "special nature" of relations with Cuba on a visit Thursday, where he met President Miguel Diaz-Canel as tensions simmer between Washington and energy-starved Havana.

"Russia is not going to leave the western hemisphere, no matter what they say in Washington," Ryabkov told a press conference after the meeting, according to Russian state news agency TASS.

"Our relations with Cuba are of a special nature... We can't just betray Cuba, it's completely out of the question, we can't leave it to its fate."

The meeting, confirmed by Diaz-Canel's office on X, came 10 days after a Russian oil tanker arrived in Cuba despite a de facto US fuel blockade.

"We take this opportunity to send a hug to our dear friend, President Vladimir Putin," Diaz-Canel said in the meeting, according to his office.

Ryabkov said Cuba's economic issues, including its energy security, were among the main topics of discussion, TASS reported.

Under President Donald Trump, the United States has threatened tariffs on any country that attempts to sell oil to Cuba, resulting in an energy crisis on the communist island that has worsened since January.

The US labels Cuba a threat to US national security, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who is of Cuban descent, has demanded changes to the island's leadership.

Earlier on Thursday, Diaz-Canel told US-based NBC News that he would not resign under US pressure.

Rubio has denied calling for Diaz-Canel's resignation.

"At the present moment, Russia is one hundred percent in solidarity with Cuba; despite the complexity the country is going through, we are by your side, said the deputy foreign minister," the Cuban president's office wrote on X on Thursday.

Ecuador to hit Colombia with 100% tariffs

AFP
Quito

Amounting diplomatic row between Ecuador and Colombia intensified on Thursday, with Bogota recalling its ambassador after Quito announced 100% tariffs on imports from its South American neighbour.

The two countries have been engaged in a trade war for months, with Ecuador accusing Bogota of failing to combat drug trafficking and illegal mining along their shared border.

"Our ambassador to Ecuador must return immediately," Colombian President Gustavo Petro said in an X post responding to Ecuador's leader Daniel Noboa, a staunch ally of US President Donald Trump.



This aerial view shows the International Bridge San Miguel closed at the border between Colombia and Ecuador due to the commercial tax dispute between both countries. (**AFP/File Photo**)

"The next cabinet meeting will be held at a location on the border with Ecuador," Petro added.

The diplomatic tit-for-tat escalated after Petro referred to a jailed former Ecuadoran vice-president as a "political prisoner" this week.

The left-wing Petro was referring to Jorge Glas, who was vice-president under firebrand former socialist leader Rafael Correa and Correa's successor Lenin Moreno.

Glas was sentenced to 13 years in prison last year for corruption, his fourth conviction since 2017.

That prompted right-wing Noboa to recall his envoy from Colombia for consultations on Wednesday and announce the tariffs starting in May.

Petro earlier called the threat of a 100% tariff "a monstrosity" and threatened to withdraw Colombia from the Andean Community of Nations, a trade bloc which also includes Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru.

"It's just simply a monstrosity, but this signifies the end" of the grouping, "in which we already no longer participate," Petro earlier said on X.

Noboa responded that "it is not possible to reach agreements with someone who does not share the same commitment to fighting narco-terrorism."

"In the future, it will be possible to talk with a government that is truly committed to combating crime and drug trafficking," Noboa said.

The right-wing Ecuadorian leader kicked off a trade war with Colombia in January over the alleged lack of co-operation in combating drug trafficking.

US Army veteran charged with leaking classified information to journalist

Reuters
Washington

A US Army veteran was charged on Wednesday with providing classified information to a journalist for a book that alleged drug trafficking, murder and corruption at a military base where she had worked, the Department of Justice said.

Courtney Williams, 40, of Wagram, North Carolina, was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges related to "her alleged transmission of classified national defence information to individuals not authorised to receive it, including a journalist," the Justice Department said in a statement. Prosecutors alleged Williams violated a provision of the US Espionage Act.

The case comes as free-speech advocates have raised concerns about the Trump administration's aggressive posture toward media leaks from government employees upset with US policies and actions.

Williams worked from 2010-2016 for a special military unit at the US Army base in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and held a "Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information security clearance," the Justice Department said.

Prosecutors allege that between 2022 and 2025, Williams repeatedly communicated by phone and text message with a journalist who was seeking information for an article and book about the unit. Williams and the journalist spent more than 10 hours on phone calls and exchanged more than 180 messages, the department said.

While court filings did not identify the reporter, journalist Seth Harp wrote a book published last year titled *The Fort Bragg Cartel: Drug Trafficking and Murder in the Special Forces* and an accompanying article that named Williams as a source and attributed specific statements to her.

The Justice Department alleged that some of those statements contained "classified national defence information." Prosecutors also said Williams made what they called unauthorised disclosures of national defence information through her social media accounts.

A representative for Williams could not immediately be reached for comment.

Harp said after the indictment that Williams was a "courageous whistleblower who exposed rampant gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the US Army's Delta Force." He also said Williams wanted to be quoted by name in his work and cast the charges against her as "vague and weak."

The Justice Department cited messages from Williams to the journalist from the time of the book's release in which she expressed concerns "about the amount of classified information being disclosed." She also messaged another person the department did not identify expressing fear that she might get arrested for the disclosure, prosecutors said.

Williams signed a classified information non-disclosure agreement when she joined the special military unit in 2010 and again when she left that job, according to the complaint filed against her. Prior US administrations have on rare occasions also pursued legal cases against sources of leaks to the media that have aimed to expose government wrongdoing, dating as far back as the "Pentagon Papers" from the Vietnam War and as recently as the Iraq war logs in this century.

Pay fears grow for US security employees in shutdown

AFP
Washington

Thousands of US homeland security employees are facing growing uncertainty over their pay after being told yesterday's check could be their last until a record-long partial government shutdown is ended.

A memo from the federal government warned staff that without congressional action, funding gaps could halt future checks, US media reported, deepening anxiety among workers already strained by weeks of disruption.

The warning appeared to apply broadly across the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), though confusion quickly emerged over whether Transportation Security Administration officers — who screen passengers at US airports — would be affected.

The DHS is one of the largest government agencies, employing more than 260,000 people across a wide range of roles including airport security, border enforcement, disaster response and cybersecurity.

President Donald Trump ordered the department to find funds to compensate essential workers required to stay on the job, allowing some back pay to be issued in recent weeks. But officials say those stopgap measures may not be sustainable if the shutdown drags on.

Union representatives say mixed messaging has left employees unsure whether they can rely on upcoming paychecks.

"There is a feeling of increasing anxiety and uncertainty," a spokesperson for the American Federation of Government Employees told politics news outlet The Hill.

The shutdown, which enters its eighth week today, stems from a standoff in Congress over immigration enforcement and border security funding, with Democrats seeking new limits on federal agencies and Republicans pushing to secure longer-term financing.

The impasse means tens of thousands of federal workers have either been sent home or are working without guaranteed pay, with some relying on loans, food banks or second jobs to make ends meet.

At the TSA, the strain has already disrupted operations. Absences surged at major airports earlier in the shutdown, and hundreds of officers have resigned since February, according to officials.

DHS workers have been informed in a memo from department heads that they are slated to receive a check on Friday for back pay up until April 4.

But they were warned not to expect further pay until Congress restores DHS funding.

Authorities warn that continued uncertainty could trigger further staffing shortages, potentially disrupting travel in the coming months, including during major events such as the FIFA World Cup.

Congress is set to return from recess next week, when lawmakers will face renewed pressure to reach a deal.

Republican leaders are weighing a party-line funding package for parts of DHS, though divisions within the party and uncertainty over White House support could complicate efforts to end the shutdown quickly.

Harris teases comeback as Democrats eye 2028 election

AFP
New York

Former US vice-president Kamala Harris yesterday delivered her clearest signal yet that she may mount another bid for the White House, telling a Democratic audience she is thinking about running in 2028.

Speaking at a convention hosted by civil rights leader Al Sharpton's National Action Network, the 61-year-old stopped short of a formal declaration but left little doubt she is weighing a third campaign.

The Democrat — defeated in 2024 by Donald Trump in a tumultuous presidential election — was asked if she would run again in 2028 and electrified the crowd of party activists in New York when she replied: "I might, I might — I'm thinking about it."

Having served four years a "heartbeat away" from the presidency under Joe Biden, Harris said she understands the demands of the job — and argued that the current political and economic landscape is failing many Americans.



Former US Vice-President Kamala Harris reacts during the National Action Network (NAN) National Convention in New York City, yesterday. (**Reuters**)

"I spent countless hours in my West Wing office, footsteps away from the Oval Office. I spent countless hours in the Oval Office, in the Situation Room. I know what the job is. And I know what it requires," she said.

Harris has maintained a relatively low profile since her 2024 defeat, but has been easing back into the spotlight with a series of appearances and trips across southern states.

Allies say she remains undecided but is taking steps to preserve the option of a campaign.

The National Action Network event has emerged as an early proving ground for 2028 hopefuls, with Black voters — a cornerstone of the Democratic base — expected to play a decisive role in choosing the party's nominee.

Harris used the platform to launch a broad critique of Trump's leadership, telling the crowd: "The status quo is not working, and hasn't been working for a lot of people for a long time."

Early polling suggests that she begins the shadow 2028 race with a significant advantage in name recognition. But with several prominent Democrats testing the waters, her path to the nomination — if she runs — is far from guaranteed.

"The American people have right to expect that anyone who wants to run for office and be a leader, that it can't be about themselves and what they want for themselves," Harris added.

"It's got to be about the American people, and that's how I think of it."

Biden Jr challenges Trump sons to cage fight

AFP
Washington

US politics already feels like a contact sport, but one of Washington's most bitter political feuds may literally be headed to the mat after former president Joe Biden's son challenged the two eldest Trump brothers to a cage fight.

After years of verbal sparring, Hunter Biden said in a video posted online Thursday he would be "100% in" for a bout against President Donald Trump's sons Don Jr and Eric, potentially turning the long-running grudge between the families into a pay-per-view spectacle.

Channel 5, run by left-wing social media influencer Andrew Callaghan, posted a video to its Instagram Thursday featuring the younger Biden explaining that he would be appearing in several venues on the media company's upcoming US tour.

"I think he's trying to organise a cage match, me versus Eric and Don Jr. I told him I'd do it — 100% in, if he can pull it off," Biden said.

Details of the proposed showdown remain hazy, including whether the elder Trump brothers would fight together or separately, and where such an event might take place.

There has so far been no public response from Don Jr or Eric — who, at 48 and 42 respectively, have an age advantage over their 56-year-old putative opponent.

The rivalry between the current White House occupant and his predecessor — sharpened when Biden beat Trump in the 2020 election — has been marked by unusually personal attacks and escalating rhetoric.

Trump has repeatedly derided his Democratic foe with nicknames such as "Sleepy Joe" and accused his administration — without evidence — of fixing the 2020 election and "weaponising" federal agencies against Republicans. Biden, for his part, has cast Trump as a threat to democratic norms and once said he would have wanted to "beat the hell" out of the billionaire Republican over his crude comments about women if they'd been at high school together.

Suspect arrested after Molotov cocktail attack at OpenAI CEO Altman's home

Reuters
San Francisco

San Francisco police arrested a person for allegedly throwing a Molotov cocktail at OpenAI CEO Sam Altman's home and for making threats outside the artificial intelligence startup's headquarters, the company said yesterday.

"Thankfully, no one was hurt. We deeply appreciate how quickly SFPD responded and the support from the city in helping keep our employees safe," an OpenAI spokesperson said.

The company is assisting law enforcement agencies with their investigation, it added.

In a post on X, the San Francisco police department said an unknown male subject threw an incendiary device at a North Beach residence, and then went on to make threats about burning down a building, following which the suspect was immediately detained.

The department said its officers developed probable cause to place the 20-year-old under arrest during the investigation.

The post did not give further details about the attacks or threats and did not name Altman or OpenAI.

The startup has recently faced backlash over its move to strike a deal with the US government to let it use its technology in classified military operations, after rival Anthropic and Washington got into a dispute.

A recent NBC News poll found that AI is less popular than US Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

US loans 8.5mn barrels of SPR oil in second batch since Iran war

Reuters
Washington

The US Department of Energy said yesterday it had loaned 8.48mn barrels of crude oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to four oil companies, the second allotment under the Trump administration's effort to curb fuel prices that have surged during the US-Israeli war on Iran.

The companies that have been awarded SPR loans are Gunvor USA, Phillips 66 Company, Trafigura Trading and Macquarie Commodities Trading, the DoE said. The US had offered on April 1 to loan up to 10mn barrels in the second batch.

Ultimately, the US aims to lend 172mn barrels from the SPR for delivery throughout this year and into 2027. It is part of a wider agreement with 32 countries in the International Energy Agency to release 400mn barrels.

The release of oil reserves is meant to control oil prices that have surged during the war, which the IEA said has led to the biggest oil disruption in history.

In the first batch from the US SPR, energy companies last month only took 45.2mn barrels, or about 52% of what the DoE offered.

Oil from the SPR is being released in the form of loans that companies will return with extra barrels as a premium, a system the DoE says will help stabilise markets "at no cost to American taxpayers."

Remains of 11 people found in graves in western Mexico

The remains of at least 11 people were found in hidden graves in the western Mexican state of Jalisco, local authorities said Thursday.

The skeletal remains were found in a rural lot in Ixtlahuacan, a suburb of Guadalajara, the state capital, the local prosecutor's office said.

Another 12 bags containing human remains were found at a construction site in nearby Tlajomulco, Blanca Trujillo, the deputy prosecutor for missing persons, told a press conference.

Guadalajara is one of three Mexican cities hosting World Cup soccer matches this summer.

The total number of victims from the two sites is still unknown, Trujillo said, adding that in both cases the remains appear to be from a long time ago, without specifying a timeframe.

The state of Jalisco has been hit hard by drug-related violence over the years.

In February, Mexican military forces killed Nemesio "El Mencho" Oseguera, leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and one of the United States' most-wanted drug lords.

After the incident, World Cup organiser FIFA reaffirmed its confidence in Guadalajara as a host city.

The Mexican federal government announced the deployment of nearly 100,000 troops to guarantee security in all three host cities, which also include Monterrey and Mexico City. Mexico is hosting the soccer tournament with the US and Canada.

According to official figures, Mexico has more than 130,000 missing persons, most of them in the last two decades amid drug-related violence. (**AFP**)

Mexico's Pemex douses fire at Dos Bocas refinery

Reuters
Mexico City

Mexican state oil firm Pemex said it put out on Thursday a fire at its Dos Bocas refinery in southern Mexico, with no injuries reported in the second such blaze within less than a month.

It did not detail the damage or a possible cause of the fire in a warehouse at the site, also known as the Olmeca refinery, one of Mexico's largest, where 150 emergency specialists helped to tackle the flames.

"The director of Pemex and the manager of the Olmeca refinery have informed me the fire is confined solely to a coke storage area and is under control," President Claudia Sheinbaum said on social media.

Navy and defence ministry personnel helped Pemex workers fight the blaze, she added.

Images on social media showed billowing black smoke and a large fireball at the refinery in the Gulf port of Dos Bocas, but Reuters was unable to immediately verify the images.

Pemex said its director, Victor Rodriguez, would visit the site to supervise recovery efforts.

Thursday's incident followed a March 17 fire that killed five people after "oily waters" burst into flame around the refinery's perimeter.

The refinery, which cost $21bn to build, more than double its original budget, was a flagship project of former president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador intended to help reduce Mexico's dependence on fuel imports.


Smoke and fire rise out of Pemex's Olmeca refinery in Dos Bocas, following a fire at its facilities in Paraiso, Tabasco state. (**Reuters**)

However, it has a history of problems since operations began in 2024, and has missed the production targets promised at its 2022 inauguration.

In January, the refinery produced 205,000 barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil, 77,520 bpd of gasoline and 78,500 bpd of diesel.

Its maximum processing capacity is 340,000 bpd, which the Lopez Obrador administration said would be sufficient to ensure "energy sovereignty."

WORLD

Myanmar junta chief sworn in as president, sees challenges ahead

AFP
Naypyidaw

Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing was sworn in as president yesterday, continuing his rule from a civilian post five years after snatching power in a military coup.

Min Aung Hlaing said yesterday his government has many challenges to overcome and seeks to improve the country's international standing, including normalising ties with Southeast Asian bloc (Asean) after five years in the cold.

As the nation's armed forces chief, Min Aung Hlaing ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2021 — detaining the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and triggering a civil war.

After a half-decade of ruling by diktat, he organised an election concluding in January excluding her party and securing a walkover win for military allies in civilian politics who backed him into the top office.

"Myanmar has returned to the path of democracy and is heading toward a better future," the 69-year-old said in a speech, after reading aloud the presidential oath to start his five-year term at a triumphant parliamentary ceremony in the capital, Naypyidaw.

Min Aung Hlaing has resigned as top general to take over as president of the new government ahead of Myanmar's Thingyan holiday starting Monday, which celebrates the new year with water-splashing ceremonies of renewal and rejuvenation.

Democracy watchdogs deride the transition as a rebranding of military rule in an unconvincing civilian disguise.

More than two-thirds of Min Aung Hlaing's 30 ministers, also sworn yesterday, are either retired or serving members of the military.

A similar proportion served in the post-coup junta leadership, while more than ten have been subject to international sanctions.

The lead-up to Min Aung Hlaing's swearing-in has seen some political prisoners from Suu Kyi's administration pardoned and government workers blacklisted for quitting in protest over the coup invited to return to their jobs.

Critics likewise dismissed those steps as cosmetic measures, but Min Aung Hlaing said his government will "grant appropriate amnesties to support social reconciliation, justice and peace".

He did not mention Suu Kyi — held incommunicado since the putsch, serving a 27-year sentence on charges that rights groups dismiss as politically motivated.

The junta trumpeted the election as a return of power to the people and a chance for reconciliation in the civil war.

Myanmar's post-coup leaders have been considered pariahs by many nations abroad.

Analysts say another aim of the election was to normalise their image with a veneer of legitimacy, unfreezing foreign engagement — including investment projects.

Min Aung Hlaing said his government will "work to restore normal relations" with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) regional bloc which has ostracised Myanmar's leaders since the coup.

Yesterday's ceremony was attended by representatives from the neighbouring nations of China, India and Thailand — as well as 20 other countries, according to parliamentary officials.

Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul this week sent a congratulatory message, saying that under Min Aung Hlaing's "able leadership" the nations' relations would "grow from strength to strength".



Former Myanmar military chief and Myanmar president Min Aung Hlaing (centre) and vice-presidents Nyo Saw (left) and Nan Ni Ni Aye attend a sworn-in ceremony in Naypyidaw yesterday. (**AFP**)

China FM calls for closer ties with N Korea in Kim meeting

AFP
Beijing

China and North Korea should "enhance co-ordination" on international and regional issues, Beijing's Foreign Minister Wang Yi told North Korean leader Kim Jong-un during talks yesterday, according to Chinese state media.

Wang is on a two-day trip to the diplomatically isolated nuclear state — his first visit since 2019 — to step up ties between the East Asian neighbours following their resumption of transport links halted since the Covid-19 pandemic.

China is North Korea's top trading partner and a vital source of diplomatic, economic and political support.

"China and North Korea should, while firmly safeguarding their respective sovereignty, security and development interests, further enhance communication and co-ordination in major international and regional affairs," Wang said during a meeting with Kim in Pyongyang yesterday, Xinhua reported.

"China is willing to work with North Korea to... maintain close communication and interaction, promote practical cooperation, and infuse new contemporary meaning into the traditional friendship between China and North Korea," Wang said.

Wang's visit comes as the administration of US President Donald Trump mounts a push to revive high-level talks with Pyongyang, eyeing a potential summit this year, potentially during Trump's visit to Beijing in May.



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (left) shaking hands with North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui at the Geumsusan Guesthouse in Pyongyang on Thursday. (**AFP**)

China criticises US pressure on N Korea on trip to Pyongyang

AFP
Seoul

China's top diplomat criticised US pressure on North Korea, Pyongyang state media reported yesterday, after he vowed to deepen ties with the diplomatically isolated nuclear state during a visit.

The US has for decades led efforts to dismantle North Korea's nuclear programme, but summits, sanctions and diplomatic pressure have had little impact.

Beijing is North Korea's top trading partner and a vital source of diplomatic, economic and political support for the secretive nation.

Wang Yi told a banquet at the Kumsusan State Guesthouse on Thursday that Pyongyang had made "new achievements in socialist construction", despite what he described as "intensifying schemes of isolation and strangulation" from the US and Western powers, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported.

The two-day official visit by Wang — his first since 2019 — comes shortly after the neighbours resumed transport links that had been halted since the Covid-19 pandemic.

He told North Korea's Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui on Thursday that China was "willing to work with North Korea" to "enhance dialogue and practical co-operation at all levels and across various fields, (and) deepen people-to-people and cultural exchanges," according to Chinese state news agency Xinhua.

The visit comes as the administration of US President Donald Trump mounts a push to revive high-level talks with Pyongyang, eyeing a potential summit this year, potentially during Trump's visit to Beijing in May.

Choe said it was Pyongyang's "consistent policy" to maintain friendly relations with Beijing, which have "overcome all kinds of historical storms and carried on a great tradition of unity and cooperation with socialism as their core."

Chinese, Taiwanese will unite, Xi tells Taiwan's Cheng Li-wun

AFP
Beijing

China's President Xi Jinping met Taiwan's opposition party leader in Beijing yesterday, telling the visiting delegation he had "full confidence" that Taiwanese and Chinese people would be united.

Kuomintang (KMT) chairwoman Cheng is the party's first leader to visit China in a decade, but her trip has sparked debate in Taiwan with critics accusing her of being too pro-Beijing.

China severed high-level contact with Taiwan in 2016 after Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won the presidency and rejected Beijing's claims that the self-ruled island is part of its territory.

Xi told Cheng as the two met yesterday that "the general trend of compatriots on both sides of the Strait getting closer, edging nearer and becoming united will not change".

"This is an inevitable part of history. We have full confidence in this," Xi said during the talks carried by Taiwanese media.

He also said China was willing to strengthen dialogue with groups in Taiwan, including the KMT, on the "common political foundation of... opposing Taiwan independence".

The KMT supports closer relations with China, which claims Taiwan is part of its territory and has threatened to use force to seize it.

Cheng echoed Xi's stance at a press conference after their meeting, stressing the need for younger generations to understand "what challenges we face at this stage" and "how, by adhering to the 1992 Consensus and opposing Taiwan independence, we can avoid war".

The so-called consensus suggests there is "one China" without specifying which is its rightful representative.

Earlier, she told Xi that the Taiwan Strait would "no longer be a focal point of potential conflict" and "both sides should transcend political confrontation".

She also said Xi had responded "positively" to her proposal that the sides work toward Taiwan participating in international organisations such as Interpol and regional trade agreements.

A spokesman for Taiwan's ruling DPP said China should respect Taiwan's "commitment to freedom and democracy, rather than interfering in the choices of the Taiwanese people through division and inducement".

"Differences between the two sides must be handled through peaceful and equal means, rather than by using suppression and intimidation," spokesman Lee Kuen-cheng said.

Beijing has ramped up military pressure around Taiwan in recent years, conducting near-daily deployments of fighter jets and warships near the island and regular large-scale military drills.

Taiwanese lawmakers have been at loggerheads over the government's plan to spend NT$1.25tn ($39bn) on defence, which has been stalled for months in parliament, controlled by opposition parties including the KMT.

Cheng's trip comes a month before US President Donald Trump is scheduled to visit Beijing for a summit with Xi.



Kuomintang Chairperson Cheng Li-wun (left) shaking hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping at Great Hall of the People in Beijing, yesterday.(**AFP**)

Australia, Singapore boost ties on fuel, LNG security

AFP
Singapore

Australia and Singapore agreed to the continued flow of refined fuel and liquefied natural gas (LNG) yesterday as the trading partners boosted ties amid a shaky ceasefire between the US and Iran.

Australia relies on imports for an estimated 90% of its refined fuel products, of which around a quarter comes from Singapore.

Singapore, in turn relies on LNG from Australia, with Canberra sending around 32% of the city-state's needs as its largest supplier.

The two countries signed a non-binding agreement yesterday, saying they would make "maximum efforts to meet each other's energy security needs" as the Strait of Hormuz remains largely closed.

"I have assured Prime Minister Albanese that Singapore will continue supplying refined fuels to Australia," Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said at a press conference.

He added: "We will keep these flows going as long as upstream supplies continue."

Albanese, who earlier on Friday visited a refinery and LNG terminal on Singapore's strategic Jurong Island, said it was vitally important for Australia and its Asian partners to coordinate a mutual response to the crisis.

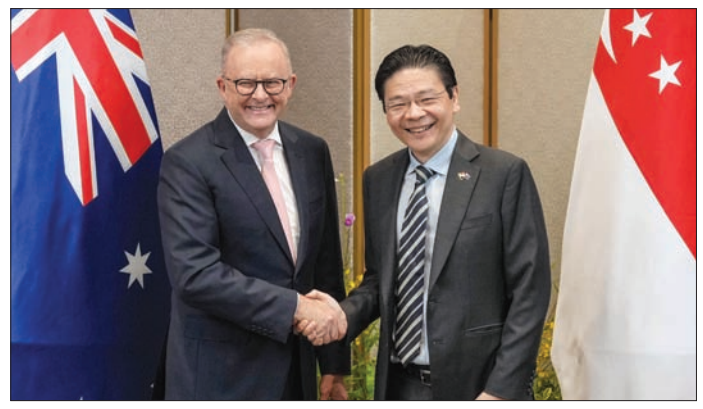
Albanese said just as Singapore undertook to send fuel supplies, Australia, as a reliable LNG supplier, "gives Singapore confidence to be able to engage... as an important part of... the region's economy."

"This is an important relationship at a time where fuel security is on the agenda, right around the globe due to the conflict in the Middle East," the Australian leader said on arrival in Singapore on Thursday.

3% of service stations across Australia were reported this week to have run out of diesel.

Energy Minister Chris Bowen said Thursday that 216 service stations across Australia were without diesel — roughly 2.7% of the total.

The country has 39 days' worth of petrol, he added.



Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese (left) shaking hands with Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong during their meeting at the Istana presidential palace in Singapore, yesterday. (**AFP**)

Indonesia urges 'thorough' probe on Lebanon peacekeeper deaths

Indonesia said yesterday it had submitted a joint statement on peacekeeper security with dozens of allied nations to the UN after three of its blue helmets were killed in Lebanon. In the joint statement, the countries urged the UN Security Council to conduct a thorough investigation into the incidents in Southern Lebanon that killed three Indonesian peacekeepers and wounded several others, including from France, Ghana, Nepal, and Poland.

The Foreign Ministry in Jakarta said 73 countries and UN observer nations supported the statement, delivered by Indonesia's permanent representative to the UN, Umar Hadi, in New York.

"The safety and security of UN peacekeepers are non-negotiable. We urge the UN Security Council to use all available instruments to strengthen protection for peacekeeping forces amid an increasingly dangerous situation," the ministry quoted Umar as saying.

"Troop-contributing countries also call for an end to violence in Lebanon, de-escalation of tensions, and encourage all parties to return to the negotiating table to achieve a peaceful settlement," it added.

The deadly incidents sparked calls from Indonesian authorities for an investigation and security guarantees for peacekeeping forces.

The Foreign Ministry has called the attacks "unacceptable". It urged the UN Security Council "to immediately convene a meeting of troop-contributing countries to Unifil (the UN Interim Force in Lebanon) to conduct a review and take measures to enhance the protection of personnel serving with UN Interim Force in Lebanon".

President Prabowo Subianto has said he "strongly condemns every heinous act that undermines peace and causes the deaths of our nation's soldiers". (**AFP**)

South Korea justice minister reassures investors on corporate governance reform

Reuters
Gwacheon

South Korean Justice Minister Jung Sung-ho said the country's regulations will remain transparent for investors, stressing that President Lee Jae Myung's government would continue to take on corporate governance reform despite stiff opposition from businesses.

Since Lee took power last year, the ruling party has passed a series of stock market reforms aimed at addressing the "Korea Discount" — the tendency for local companies to have lower valuations than global peers, partly reflecting the opaque structures of the country's dominant, family-owned conglomerates.

Jung said recent amendments to commercial law — including stronger board accountability, mandatory treasury share cancellation and new independent director requirements — reflected changes investors had sought for nearly two decades.

"When we amended the commercial law... there was enormous opposition from the business community," Jung told a small group of reporters on Thursday. "But ultimately, doesn't raising a company's governance raise its value?"

Still, Jung said balancing reform with local corporate culture remained necessary, noting that founding family members at chipmakers Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix , two of South Korea's largest companies, had taken investment risks professional managers might not have.

"When SK acquired Hynix, everyone said why are they doing this... But that's what SK lives on now."

South Korea's stock market, led by Samsung and SK Hynix, surged nearly 50% in early 2026, driven by an AI chip boom and market-friendly reforms, before high volatility in March due to Middle East conflict.

"The issue is not breaking up the ownership structure itself... Maximising investment returns is the purpose of investment," Jung said, adding that the issue is about improving the current system to make the most profit for people when they invest in Korea.

When asked whether minority shareholders could rely on Korean regulators to act impartially against powerful conglomerates, Jung pushed back against the notion that government-business collusion remained a structural risk.

The era of the state directing corporate outcomes had effectively ended, he said, adding that scandals under president Park Geun-hye were an aberration, rather than the norm.

South Korea has been involved in several investor-state disputes, which some critics have seen as an outcome of foreign investors experiencing challenges from South Korea's country-specific regulatory framework.

"Foreign investors are watching every move of this government. They don't miss a thing," Jung said.

The country achieved victories in three cases against US private equity fund Lone Star, US hedge fund Elliott Management, and Swiss elevator maker Schindler, and was formulating new regulation to coordinate future strategy for such cases across the government, Jung said.

"Elliott has succeeded in defending against South Korea's attempt to entirely set aside its more than $100mn arbitration Award in the High Court in London. The matter will now be remitted to the Tribunal of Permanent Court of Arbitration... for further consideration," a spokesperson for Elliott said.

Lone Star and Schindler did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Indian auto hub hikes wages after protests over soaring living cost

Reuters
Manesar

India's auto-making state of Haryana ordered a 35% hike in minimum wages yesterday, after factory workers boycotted work and staged protests this week over rising living costs as a result of the US-Israeli war on Iran.

Haryana's government said it was raising the minimum wage for unskilled workers to $165 per month, from roughly $120, effective April 1, a move that helps workers but will raise cost pressures for India's auto industry at a time of rising input prices and supply chain disruptions.

The decision comes a day after clashes between the police and workers in Manesar, located 30 miles (48.28km) south of New Delhi and home to companies like Maruti Suzuki, as well as hundreds of ancillary units that feed into it.

"We urge the workers to... peacefully carry on their work," Ajay Kumar, a state official, said in a video address yesterday.

Factory workers have been hit hard as prices at eateries have surged due to disrupted supplies of gas in recent weeks, prompting some to return to their villages.

India is the world's second-largest liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) importer and is battling its worst gas crisis in decades, with the government cutting supplies for industries to shield households from any shortage of cooking gas.


Factory workers hold a protest demanding wage hikes from their company, in Manesar, Haryana. (**Reuters**)

The government's move will increase costs for India's car industry, already dealing with higher raw material prices stemming from the Iran war. While the likes of Tata Motors and Mahindra have raised car prices, Maruti has warned of a similar move.

India's heavy reliance on gas across the economy — businesses of all sizes, households, agriculture, public transport — makes its factories as well as lower-income earners among the most vulnerable in Asia.

Akash Kumar, 25, who works at Munjal Showa, a supplier to motorbike maker Hero MotoCorp, said street vendors were charging him double the price for a meal of bread, curry and yogurt.

Yesterday's decision, he said, will bring some relief. "Whatever we get, we have to be happy," he said, adding that workers have resumed duties after being told about the pay hike.

Industrial unrest in Manesar affected various auto suppliers this week, according to Reuters' interviews with more than 30 workers. Workers said they were demanding pay rises to sustain their livelihoods as food was becoming expensive and gas supplies were erratic.

The federal government maintains there is no shortage of cooking gas for households and it is increasing availability of smaller cylinders for daily-wage earners and migrants.

Munjal Showa told Reuters its production was partially impacted this week.

At Roop Polymers, a supplier to Maruti and Honda, notices on the factory-gate wall warned of disciplinary action against absent workers, and a company executive said "work was heavily disrupted inside" due to the protests.

Roop, Maruti, Honda and Hero did not respond to requests for comment.

While talks between Iran and the US have raised hopes of de-escalation, auto industry executives said supply chains could take weeks to normalise, as a growing number of migrant workers head back home.

India has about 400mn local migrant workers heading to places such as Manesar to earn a minimum wage for an average 48 hours a week.

"Most employers are trying hard to hold on to the workforce that is running back by offering two meals a day or paying a small bonus," said Vinod Kumar, president of India SME Forum which represents thousands of small and medium-sized businesses.

The group is seeking government help to implement "emergency" measures and establish cluster-based common kitchens, as Kumar said "once labour leaves, it is very difficult to get them back."

India permits Iranian oil tankers to berth for Reliance, sources say

Reuters
New Delhi

India's shipping ministry has granted special permission to four vessels carrying Iranian oil — as requested by Reliance Industries — to berth at the western Indian port of Sikka, three industry sources said.

India's oil ministry, shipping ministry and Reliance did not respond to Reuters e-mails seeking comments.

Iranian oil is often transported by a so-called shadow fleet of vessels that lack internationally recognised insurance and safety certifications.

But this requires special permission from the government as exemptions are required under Indian rules for the berthing of ships.

One of the sources said the shipping ministry has granted a special one-time exemption to vessels requested by Reliance, operator of the world's biggest refining complex, due to the emergency situation created by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

However another source said, despite the grant of permission, it was not definitely clear that Reliance would process Iranian oil, as it wants to ensure that transactions are sanctions-compliant and are in line with Indian rules.

India, the world's third-biggest oil importer and consumer, has not received a cargo from Tehran since May 2019 following US pressure not to buy Iranian crude. However the US last month temporarily waived sanctions on the purchase of Iranian oil at sea to ease oil prices.

The waiver is due to expire on April 19.

Indian Oil Corp, the country's top refiner, has purchased Iranian oil carried in sanctioned tanker Jaya, ship tracking data shows.

At least 10 dead after boat hits bridge in India: police

At least 10 people were killed yesterday when a boat carrying dozens of passengers in northern India hit a pontoon bridge and capsized, police said. The incident occurred on the Yamuna river in the town of Mathura. "So far, 10 bodies have been recovered," senior police officer Shailesh Kumar Pandey told reporters. The vessel was carrying 27 passengers when it overturned. It was not initially clear how many people were missing. Rescuers from the fire department and divers were deployed to search for those who remained missing. Additional teams from the National Disaster Response Force were also rushing to the scene to assist in rescue efforts.
Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered condolences, saying he was "deeply pained" by the tragedy and wished the injured a speedy recovery. "The local administration is assisting those affected," he said in a statement on social media. (**AFP**)

Irish govt to meet farmers, hauliers over fuel cost fears

AFP
Dublin

The Irish government was set to hold talks yesterday with agricultural and haulage representatives, as days of protests over spiralling fuel prices sparked warnings over supplies, including for emergency services.

The demonstrations began Tuesday over the soaring cost of petrol and diesel amid the Middle East war, with protesters partly blocking Ireland's only oil refinery and restricting access to at least two other fuel depots.

Demonstrators, many organising online outside of formal representative bodies, have also used convoys on motorways to snarl traffic and tractors to gridlock central Dublin on occasions.

Industry group Fuels for Ireland said 100 petrol retailers have run dry, mainly in the west of Ireland, after customers started panic buying.

It has warned of "real significant life-death problems" with supplies for emergency service vehicles, while Ireland's emergency planning group echoed the comments with "serious concern" about the situation.

Irish police warned Thursday the protests had become "blockades" which were putting critical supplies of food, fuel, clean water and animal feed at risk.

"This is not tolerable and is against the law," the country's national force, known as the Garda, said in a statement.

It added officers were "now moving to an enforcement phase" and those involved would "face the full rigours of the law".

Ireland's armed forces have been put "on standby" to assist with clearing the blockades, defence minister Helen McEntee has said.

Ministers were set to meet later Friday with 10 representative organisations for farmers, agricultural contractors and haulage operators, but it was unclear if protesters would be present.


Fuel protesters block the motorway outside Dundalk as protests continue against the rising cost of fuel due to the Middle East crisis across the country. (**AFP**)

Representative bodies recognised by the government, including the Irish Road Haulage Association and the Irish Farmers' Association, are not officially involved in the protest.

Those bodies and protesters have made varying demands around lowering the cost of fuel, in particular urging cuts to fuel taxes.

Demonstrators also want fuel prices to be capped and oil exploration off the west coast of Ireland to begin.

Government leaders have condemned the protests as "wrong" and "not in our national interest", and said the fuel blockades were holding the country to "ransom".

In March, Dublin announced a EUR250mn package to reduce fuel costs, notably including a diesel rebate for road hauliers

IMF strikes staff-level deal with Sri Lanka

Reuters
Colombo

The International Monetary Fund reached a staff-level pact with Sri Lanka, which will unlock financing of about $700mn once approved, the lender said on Thursday, calling for reforms, including in fuel levies, to ensure stability and growth.

The deal comes as the island nation recovers from its worst economic crisis in decades, which led to a foreign debt default in 2022 and a $2.9-billion IMF bailout programme.

Sri Lanka's economic reforms have supported the recovery, but it has been significantly exposed to the Iran war and needs to "build back better" after Cyclone Ditwah, the IMF added.

The Middle East conflict caused a surge in energy prices, disrupted a key air hub for tourists, and affected Sri Lankans working in the region, said Evan Papageorgiou, the IMF's mission chief for Sri Lanka.

"The staff-level agreement will go before the IMF executive board at the end of May or early April," he added.

Sri Lanka will need to raise power tariffs further and carefully manage its finances to navigate the Middle East crisis, the IMF said, adding it could revisit reserve targets under the programme to help Sri Lanka pay for higher fuel costs.

US-Israeli strikes on Iran disrupted energy flows from the Middle East before Tuesday's ceasefire, crimping supplies and spurring efforts by Asian nations to tackle energy supply shortages and higher prices.

The deal comes as higher energy prices have put pressure on the foreign exchange reserves of Sri Lanka, which has ordered public holidays on Wednesdays, rationed fuel, and raised pump prices by about 35% last month to rein in consumption.

Sri Lanka is in talks with China, India and Russia to ensure uninterrupted fuel supplies, and aims to spend $600mn to buy refined fuel for April.

Sudanese man arrested after 4 die trying to cross Channel

AFP
London

UK police yesterday said they had arrested a Sudanese man a day after four migrants died attempting to board a small boat off the coast of northern France.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) said the 27-year-old man was detained yesterday morning at a migrant processing centre in southeastern Kent on suspicion of endangering life.

The two men and two women who died were swept away by the current as they tried to board the boat with dozens of other people.

The northern French coast is the main point of departure for migrants hoping to reach Britain, usually risking the journey in flimsy, overcrowded boats.

The fatalities bring the number of small boat deaths this year to six.

The suspect was detained on suspicion of "endangering another during a journey by sea to the UK", the NCA said in a statement.

He was being held in police custody and being interviewed by NCA officers, who are also speaking to those who made the journey, it said.

Some 74 migrants went on to make the Channel crossing yesterday although 38 were returned to the French shore, it added.

Sri Lanka repatriates 125 telecom fraud suspects to China

Sri Lankan police repatriated 125 people to China suspected to be involved in telecom fraud, China's Ministry of Public Security said on Thursday, adding that the move comes after deepening law enforcement co-operation between the two countries.
The suspects were repatriated to China on March 29 with the support of the Chinese embassy in Sri Lanka and the Chinese police in the country's central province of Hubei, the ministry said.
Since the start of the year, China and Sri Lanka have stepped up co-operation in response to telecom fraud and related "underground industries relocating from other countries to Sri Lanka."
Sri Lankan police carried out "multiple crackdown operations, dismantled several fraud dens and apprehended a number of individuals involved in telecom fraud", the ministry said. Authorities in Hubei are investigating the fraud cases, the ministry said. (**Reuters**)

Prince Harry sued for libel by his former charity Sentebale

Reuters
London

A charity co-founded by Prince Harry in honour of his late mother Princess Diana, which he quit following a high-profile dispute, is suing the British royal for libel at the High Court in London, a court record showed yesterday.

Harry, the younger son of King Charles, co-founded Sentebale in 2006 to help young people with HIV and Aids in Lesotho and Botswana but resigned as a patron in March 2025 after a public falling-out with its chair of the board, Sophie Chandauka.

According to a record made public yesterday, Sentebale lodged a defamation claim last month at the High Court against Harry and one of his close friends Mark Dyer, who was also a trustee of the charity.

There were no details as to what the lawsuit involved. Neither Harry's spokesperson nor the charity immediately responded to a request for comment.

The charity's co-founder Prince Seeiso of Lesotho and the board of trustees joined Harry in leaving Sentebale, which he helped set up nine years after Diana was killed in a Paris car crash and which means "forget-me-not" in the local language of Lesotho in southern Africa.

The 41-year-old prince called the breakdown in the relationship with Chandauka devastating, while she reported him and the trustees to Britain's charity regulator for alleged bullying and harassment.

After a review, the Charity Commission reported it had found no evidence of bullying, but said there had been weak governance and criticised all parties for allowing an internal dispute to become public.

Vaccine gaps fuel Bangladesh's deadly measles crisis

AFP
Dhaka

Rocking her baby to soothe his searing pain and gasping breaths, 18-year-old Rubia Akhtar Brishti recounts how her son nearly died in Bangladesh's deadly measles outbreak.

"The boy had (a) high fever and found it hard to breathe," Brishti told AFP, mopping the fevered brow of one-year-old Minhaz, cradled in her arms. "His whole body had rashes."

At least 143 people have died in the outbreak since March 15, the vast majority children, with more than 12,000 suspected cases — the worst in the South Asian nation for 20 years.

Brishti, like dozens of others, rushed from her village seeking help in the capital Dhaka, where the DNCC Hospital in Mohakhali, set up originally for Covid-19, is flooded with cases.

The ward is filled with the sounds of coughing and cries of pain, as mothers hold nebulisers over their children's mouths to help their little lungs gulp for air, their tiny bodies marked by a searing rash.

Measles is one of the world's most contagious diseases, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), and spreads via coughs or sneezes.

While it can affect people of any age, it is most common among children and can cause complications, including brain swelling and severe breathing problems.

"Both of my children are sick now," said Nusrat Jahan, who had lost her vaccination cards and therefore missed getting her infants a shot. "Both the babies are suffering."

Her children were in different wards in the hospital.

"One is admitted on (the) first floor and another is on (the) second floor," she said. "I am caught in between (them), as both children cry for me."

Bangladesh has made significant advancements in vaccinations to tackle infectious diseases.

But a measles drive due in 2024 was delayed by the deadly uprising that toppled the autocratic government of Sheikh Hasina.

Many of the families with sick children in the ward say they come from areas where vaccine coverage was limited.


Children diagnosed with measles receive treatment inside a paediatric ward at a hospital in Dhaka. (**AFP**)

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GULF TIMES

Holiday rush in Thailand



A couple holds an infant as they wait to board a bus at Mo Chit bus terminal to travel back home during the Thai traditional New Year Songkran holiday, in Bangkok. (**Reuters**)

Why the bond market won't bounce back to pre-war levels

Global bond markets may rebound after the US-Iran truce but are unlikely to fully recover from the war-driven selloff because, even if there is peace, energy prices and inflation will run hotter for longer. The US and Iran negotiated a ceasefire late on Tuesday, with President Donald Trump announcing a two-week pause in attacks and the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz a condition of the agreement. But renewed attacks by Israelon Lebanon along with further strikes attributed to Iran against regional targets have raised questions about the viability of the ceasefire deal.

Oil prices tumbled, while both stocks and bonds rallied following the temporary truce.

However, pre-war wagersfor interest rate cuts this year in places such as the US, Britain and oil-rich Norway have gone and won't return, investors say. Some argue the ceasefire may even tilt risk towards higher rates, as the likelihood has lessened of severe oil shortages slowing global growth.

The energy shock has thrown inflation into sharp relief, highlighting how major economies have not managed to get inflation back to target for years, analysts say. The result has been a reckoning for bond investors. The FTSE World Government Bond Index slid more than 3% in March, its sharpest monthly drop in 1 1/2 years. "Sometimes these events, even when unwound, have changed the psyche of what the likely next move is for most central banks," said Andrew Lilley, chief rates strategist at Barrenjoey, a Sydney-based investment bank. "This temporary oil price shock has brought investors closer to the truth, which is that actually inflation has been persistently high for the last three years."

Policymakers are leaning away from rate cuts, preferring a mostly wait-and-see stance

Uncertainty still loomsover energy security, with real-world oil prices - which hit record highs earlier this week - staying elevated amid tight supply. More than two-thirds of central banks see geopolitics as the top risk, according to a new survey by Central Banking Publications.

On Wednesday, policymakers in India and New Zealand left key policy rates unchanged, at 5.25% and 2.25% respectively, but laid the groundwork for their next moves to be hikes.

"The balance of risks has shifted, and there are likely to be differences between the near term and medium term," the RBNZ said in a statement explaining its decision.

"Any signs of significant second-round inflationary effects or increases in medium-term inflation expectations would require decisive and timely increases in the OCR to re-anchor inflation expectations."

Broad markets were ebullient about the ceasefire, with stocks surging, the safe-haven dollar sinking and Brent crude futures below $100 a barrel for the first time in two weeks. Treasuries and bond markets in Europe, Britain and Australia also rallied strongly, although yields only fell back to mid-March levels, with benchmark 10-year Treasury yields at 4.23% and two-year yields at 3.65% — broadly in line withthe current Fed funds rate's target range .

"Central banks will be on high alert that this supply shock does not feed into higher inflation expectations," said Prashant Newnaha, senior rates strategist at TD Securities in Singapore.

"Rate cuts should be off the table." The path to higher rates also looks clearer in Japan, with the ceasefire easing some of the worries over the supply of Gulf energy, on which the East Asian economy depends.

"The BOJ was totally willing to raise rates without this Middle East uncertainty. And now this ceasefire will give a good reason for them to go ahead and raise rates in April," said Naka Matsuzawa, chief strategist at Nomura Securities in Tokyo. "All the other conditions, including wages and inflation, were all met already."

Even for China, which has long struggled with deflation, global investment banks are removing earlier calls for rate cuts this year. To be sure, there is room for bonds to rally, particularly because selling was so heavy in March and positioning was aggressive in implying a series of rate hikes in Europe and Britain. However, with the ceasefire reducing the risk of a global recession, policymakers are leaning away from rate cuts, preferring a mostly wait-and-see stance. As India's central bank Governor Sanjay Malhotra put it on Wednesday, "Risks are on the upside." —Reuters

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After years of war with Russia, now Ukraine's farmers hit by Iran conflict

- **Middle Eastern conflict drives fuel and fertiliser costs higher**
- **Ukrainian farmers predict exports will fall this year due to rise in costs**
- **Farmers already face labour, transport, energy challenges due to war with Russia**

Reuter
Ukraine

Mykola Maliienko, who farms the rich, black soil of central Ukraine and exports crops to Europe, is sowing 100 fewer hectares of corn this spring. The 70-year-old needs to save money after fertiliser prices soared following the war in Iran. His biggest worry is about buying the diesel he will need to harvest his 1,200 hectares later this year.

The cost of fuel has nearly doubled since US-Israeli strikes on Iran led to unprecedented disruption of energy supplies. Despite its four-year war with Russia, Ukraine is still a major producer of grains, oilseeds and vegetable oils. Ukraineexports its food products to 150 countries, economy ministry data showed, down from around 190 countries before Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

The geographical distribution of shipments has changed as shipments to Asia, Oceania and the Middle East have declined, exports to Europe have increased and analysts say Russiahas taken market share from Ukraine, especially for wheat. The risk for Ukraine is that the Middle Eastern conflict is increasing Russia's economic advantage. As a major oil and gas producer, Russia stands to gain from high energy prices and its farmers have cheap domestic supplies of the fertilisers and diesel Ukraine has to import.

Maliienko expects his production costs to climb by at least 10-15%. Unless a rapid resolution is achieved to the Middle Eastern conflict, they could soar by 60%. "Our export potential could fall substantially," Maliienko said, standing before a row of tractors and seeders at his farm outside the village of Malopolovetske, less than 100km (62 miles) southwest of Kyiv. "This year it will decline by 15% to 20%, and if the situation continues that could reach as much as 40%."

FARMING IS VITAL FOR UKRAINE

After Russia invaded and the Black Sea ports through which 90% of agricultural exports flowed, Ukraine's farmers rerouted cargoes through small Danube River ports and by rail to Eastern Europe. As a result, logistics costs rose, exports fell and grain surpluses mounted at home. Domestic prices fell and farmers made losses.

The situation began to stabilise in 2023, when a UN-brokered grain corridor opened, allowing shipments to recover. Last year, farm exports generated more than $22bn for Ukraine, according to governmentfigures, over half of its total export revenues - a vital source of hard currency and tax for President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's government. But exports totalling 47mn metric tonnes of grain and oilseeds last season were down by a quarter from before the war. Russia's invasion means farmers face a catastrophic labour shortage, as well as disrupted transport links and power supplies.

Russian drone and missile strikes have also destroyed Ukraine's refineries, leaving the country dependent on imports from Europe of the diesel needed to run farm machinery —and for its military. Diesel demand in Ukraine peaks in the northern hemisphere spring when farmers sow crops, during the harvest in late summer, and in early autumn when winter grains, mainly wheat, are planted.

Maliienko said diesel prices have already nearly doubled to 92 hryvnias ($2.11) a litre since the end of February. The dilemma is whether to buy fuel now in case it runs out or prices rise further or wait in the hope the markets will cool. "I don't want someone calling me and saying, 150 hryvnias, when grain is falling from the ear and I have nothing to harvest it with," said Maliienko. He spoke at the start of this week, before Iran and the US agreed a two-week ceasefire on Tuesday, prompting a drop in oil prices.

International oil prices are volatile, however, as oil analysts say it will take months for supplies to recover from the current disruption even if the fragile ceasefire holds. The trade division of Ukraine's major farmers' union,UAC, predicted on Tuesday that high fuel and fertiliser prices would last at least three months. The UAC said expensive oil had already been purchased and was being refined, whileoil has also been contracted for future processing at high prices.

LESS GRAIN AND LOWER EXPORTS

Many farmers say high fertiliser prices —due to shortages of natural gas used to make nitrogen fertilisers —will also squeeze their budgets. "The increase in average production costs will probably be around 20%, maybe 30% in the short term," said Dmytro Skorniakov, CEO of Ukrainian agricultural company HarvEast, which farms tens of thousands of hectares of land, exporting grain and oilseeds. Skorniakov forecast a 5% to 10% drop in Ukraine's farm output this season. "There will definitely be a decline, unless we're extremely lucky with the weather," he said.

In the longer term, a rise in food prices would help to maintain the value of Ukraine's exports, he said. "This will be a delayed effect, and so there may be a negative impact this year and a positive one next year."

The government, meanwhile, predicts a stable harvest. It is trying to support farmers by selling cheap fuel via state oil company Ukrnafta. Deputy Economy Minister Taras Vysotskyi said grain output would not decline from last year, when Ukraine harvested about 60mn tonnes. France, the European Union's largest grain producer, harvested 63mn tonnes in 2025.

"Weather conditions this year are better than last year, so they may offset the reduction in fertiliser use," Vysotskyi told Reuters.

A LACK OF FUEL STORAGE ADDS TO THE PROBLEM

Maliienko and Skorniakov said modern technologies can reduce the impact of using less fertiliser, but there is little farmers can do to offset fuel costs, particularly at harvest time.

"We need to be stockpiling fuel for the harvest already," Maliienko said, predicting that some producers could go bankrupt. "If we cannot bring the crop in, that will lead to a total collapse."

Skorniakov said fuel prices could force farmers to cut the area planted with winter grains. Some may abandon winter sowing altogether. Russia has attacked Ukrainian fuel depots, forcing suppliers to avoid building up large stocks - which Skorniakov called "a huge disadvantage".

"That's actually the biggest problem in Ukraine, because fertiliser can be bought ahead of time - there is storage capacity, there are long-term agreements - but in Ukraine it is practically impossible to buy fuel far in advance," Skorniakov said.



A car drives along a road covered with a net protecting from drone attacks at an undisclosed location in the Zaporizhzhia region in Ukraine. (**AFP**)

Lufthansa strike disrupts travel for thousands

Reuters/AFP
Berlin

Tens of thousands of passengers faced travel disruption across Germany yesterday as cabin crew at Lufthansa and its regional unit Lufthansa CityLine staged a day-long strike, while the group's newest subsidiary, Lufthansa City Airlines, signed its first labour agreement.

The industrial action was organised by union UFO.

Fraport, the operator of Frankfurt Airport, said yesterday morning that about 580 flights were cancelled, affecting roughly 72,000 passengers out of 1,350 scheduled flights and 155,000 passengers expected for the day.

The figures, Fraport noted, cover all airlines operating at the airport, not just Lufthansa, and may evolve as the day progresses.

Yesterday's strike is the fourth stoppage that Lufthansa has experienced this year and comes at a key travel period as Easter holidays draw to a close in most regions of Germany.

UFO called the strike saying that there had not been enough progress made on issues such as "avoiding overwork" and lengthening redundancy notice periods.

Lufthansa for its part called on the union to return to negotiations, saying that "only dialogue" can lead to "lasting solutions".

The latest Lufthansa strike impacted Munich as well as Frankfurt, its main hubs, while CityLine cabin crew walked out at nine airports.

Lufthansa brand chief Jens Ritter criticised the action as "completely disproportionate".

The walkout stands in sharp contrast to developments at Lufthansa City Airlines, the group's newest and smallest subsidiary, where the rival union Verdi secured the carrier's first collective wage agreement covering 500 cockpit and cabin staff.

The deal, reached after marathon talks last week, will lift basic salaries by between 20% and 35% in three stages through March 2029, and includes extra days off, more vacation, improved roster planning and expanded pension support, Verdi said.

The diverging fortunes of the two subsidiaries reflect a broader restructuring underway inside the Lufthansa Group.

Lufthansa operates long-haul and major European routes through its mainline airline, while short-haul feeder flights have historically been handled by CityLine.

The group has said it plans to close CityLine by year-end, with its feeder operations transitioning to City Airlines, which was founded in 2022 as a cost-efficient alternative amid growing competitive pressures in Europe's aviation industry.

The closure plan has sparked anger among CityLine's staff, who fear job losses and uncertain futures.

Vance leaves for Islamabad talks as Iran sets conditions

Reuters/AFP
Islamabad/Dubai/Tehran/Washington

US Vice-President JD Vance departed yesterday for "make-or-break" negotiations with Iran, even as Tehran insisted on measures before peace talks could take place, throwing last-minute doubt over the meetings scheduled in Pakistan.

While Pakistan had said the discussions would start yesterday, Vance is not expected to arrive until today.

In Islamabad all routes leading to the Serena Hotel, the expected venue for the talks, were blocked off with heavy security, while a large banner and digital signs along the expressway heralded the "Islamabad Talks".

US President Donald Trump announced a two-week ceasefire in the six-week war on Tuesday, just hours before a deadline after which the US president had threatened to destroy Iran's civilisation.

The ceasefire has halted US and Israeli airstrikes on Iran.

However, it has not ended Iran's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, which has caused the biggest-ever disruption to global energy supplies, or calmed a parallel war between Israel and Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Iran's parliamentary Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf said on X that Washington had previously agreed to unblock Iranian assets and to a ceasefire in Lebanon, and added that talks would not start until those pledges are fulfilled.



A police officer stands guard in front of a digital screen displaying news of US-Iran peace talks along a road in Islamabad. – *AFP*

His position was echoed by Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi, who also demanded an end to Israeli airstrikes on Lebanon.

Both officials are expected to be at the talks, Pakistani sources said.

While there was no immediate comment from the White House, Trump said in a social media post that "the Iranians don't seem to realise they have no cards, other than a short term extortion of the World by using International Waterways".

Vance, who will lead the US delegation, said he expected a positive outcome as he headed to Pakistan, but added: "If they're going to try to play us, then they're going to find the negotiating team is not that receptive."

Iran has been unable to obtain tens of billions of dollars of its assets in foreign banks, mainly from exports of oil and gas, due to US sanctions on its banking and energy sectors.

Estimates vary on the value of Iranian assets frozen abroad because of US sanctions, but the UN special rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures, Alena Douhan, put the figure at $100-120bn during a visit to Tehran in 2022.

Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, in a national address last night, laid out the stakes of the talks.

"The permanent ceasefire is the next difficult phase, which is to resolve the complicated issues through negotiation. This, as called in English, is a make-or-break phase," he said.

The hard line taken by Iran's leaders ahead of the negotiations followed a defiant message from its new Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei on Thursday.

Khamenei, yet to be seen in public since taking over from his father, who was killed on the war's first day, said Iran would demand compensation for all wartime damage.

"We will certainly not leave unpunished the criminal aggressors who attacked our country," he said.

Although Trump has declared victory and degraded Iran's military capabilities, the war has not achieved many of the aims he set out at the start: to deprive Iran of the ability to strike its neighbours, dismantle its nuclear programme, and make it easier for its people to overthrow their government.

Iran still possesses missiles and drones capable of hitting its neighbours and a stockpile of more than 400kg (900 pounds) of uranium enriched near the level needed to make a bomb.

Its clerical rulers, who faced a popular uprising just months ago, withstood the onslaught with no sign of organised opposition.

Tehran's agenda at the talks includes major new concessions, including the end of sanctions that crippled its economy for years, and acknowledgment of its authority over the strait, where it aims to collect transit fees and control access in what would amount to a huge shift in regional power.

Iran's ships were sailing through the strait unimpeded yesterday, while those of other countries remained hemmed inside.

Disruption to energy supplies has fed inflation and slowed the global economy, with an impact expected to last for months even if negotiators succeed in reopening the strait.

Russia adds Stanford to list of 'undesirable' organisations

Russia has added Stanford to its "undesirable organisations" blacklist, essentially outlawing any study in the prestigious US university for Russians.

Being declared "undesirable" effectively bans entities from operating in Russia and makes anyone who co-operates with them liable to prosecution.

The list includes more than 300 rights groups, nonprofits, academic institutions and independent media outlets.

Among its most prominent entries are the US universities Yale and Berkeley, as well as the rights group Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the anti-corruption non-governmental organisation (NGO) Transparency International.

Under a law passed in 2015 – but rarely used before the war on Ukraine – Russia can ban overseas organisations deemed a threat to national security.

Since sending troops to Ukraine in 2022, the Kremlin has not only suppressed opposition to the war but has also carried out a wider crackdown on dissent on a scale unseen since Soviet times.

The law specifies prison terms of up to five years for funding "undesirable" activity, or six years for organising it.

Stanford University has produced 36 Nobel Prize winners since it was founded in 1885. – ***AFP/Reuters***

French teenager stabs schoolmate

A 15-year-old at a French school stabbed and gravely wounded a female schoolmate yesterday over a "personal dispute", officials said, in the latest knife attack in the country.

The teenager stabbed the girl, also 15, in a stairwell of the high school in the western town of Ancenis, gravely wounding her in the stomach, a local prosecutor said, adding his office had opened a probe into "attempted murder".

The suspect "was quickly subdued and disarmed by the headmaster", said Antoine Leroy, the prosecutor in the nearby city of Nantes.

The teenager, who had previously showed suicidal tendencies, "may have had quite a strong friendship" with the victim, Leroy said.

A local state official earlier mentioned a "personal dispute".

Students gathered outside the school gates, which were guarded by police officers, an AFP journalist observed.

"I was confined to the gym for an hour or an hour and a half... it was very distressing," a 17-year-old student told AFP.

Police seized the knife and a pair of scissors from the scene, as well as several other knives discovered in the suspect's bag, the prosecutor said.

Police put the school on lockdown as they responded. Around 700 pupils were confined to classrooms and 150 to the gym, a source with knowledge of the matter said.

Several school stabbings have rocked France in recent months.

In February, a 14-year-old stabbed an art teacher in southern France at least three times, leaving the 60-year-old in critical condition.

A 14-year-old student in June last year fatally stabbed a teaching assistant in eastern France.

In another, a student carried out a stabbing spree in several classrooms in April last year, wounding a girl and three other pupils. – ***AFP***

Thousands denied entry into EU since rollout of EES border system

Thousands of people were refused entry to the EU and almost 700 identified as "a security threat" since the phasing-in of a new border check system that became fully operational yesterday, Brussels said.

The so-called Entry/Exit System (EES) replaces passport stamps with a digital registration in a bid to make travel to Europe more efficient and secure, according to the European Commission.

More than 52mn crossings were registered since its initial launch in October last year, the commission said. Entry was refused more than 27,000 times, including to almost 700 people who "were identified as posing a security threat to the Union", it added.

"With the EES, we are taking control of who enters and leaves the EU, when and where," commented Magnus Brunner, the European Union's commissioner for internal affairs.

The system was officially deployed at all external border crossings of the 29 nations involved yesterday.

It is used by the EU's 27 countries – with the exception of Ireland and Cyprus – as well as by Norway, Iceland, Switzerland and Liechtenstein, which are not EU members but are part of the Schengen free movement area.

Under the scheme, non-EU travellers arriving for short stays are asked for their passport number, to provide fingerprints and have their photo taken at automated kiosks.

The related information is recorded in a digital file, allowing authorities to better share information and know when people entered and exited a country.

"It will enable authorities to identify risks in real time, tackle overstays more effectively," said the EU's executive vice-president for security and democracy, Henna Virkkunen.

However, the system has raised concerns among transport providers and passengers, who feared longer queues at airports and train stations.

The commission said it remained in close contact with member states on the implementation, adding registration took on average "only 70 seconds, which is a very short time period for non-EU citizens". – ***AFP***

Michael Jackson fans swarm Berlin for biopic premiere

AFP
Berlin

Thousands of Michael Jackson fans descended on Berlin yesterday for the premiere of a new biopic about the "King of Pop".

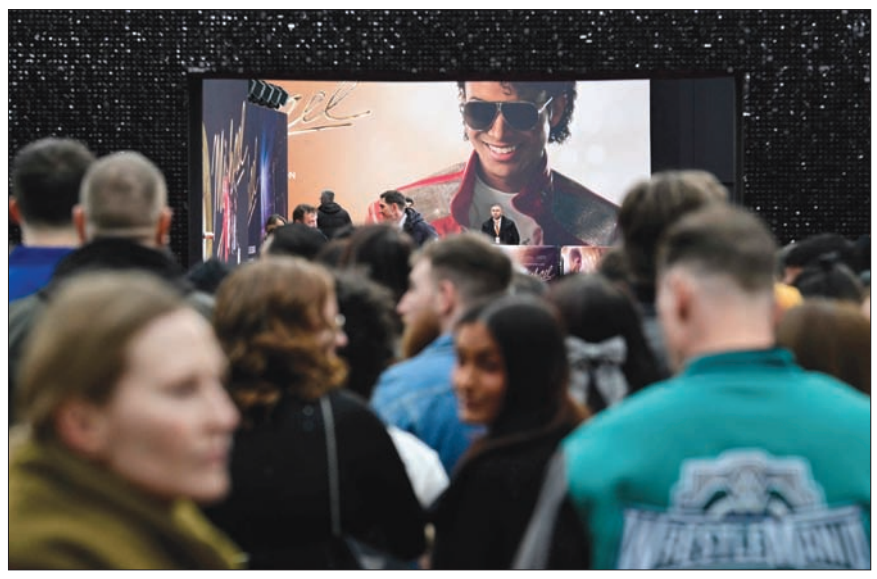
Michael, in which the singer is portrayed by his nephew Jaafar Jackson, is expected to be one of the highest-grossing films of its kind in history.

In the queue for the screening, Andy Escobar, a 31-year-old aircraft mechanic from the United States, said his nickname at school was MJ – "because everybody knew that I was a Michael Jackson fan".

Only around 4,000 fans will actually be able to watch the film yesterday evening, two weeks before its official release, after being allocated seats via prize draws.

For the rest, there will be Michael Jackson-themed activities throughout the weekend including panel discussions with the film crew, an exhibition dedicated to the singer and themed parties.

Jackson, who died aged 50 in 2009 from an overdose of propofol, faced multiple allegations of child abuse during his lifetime.


Fans wait for guests to arrive on the red carpet for the world premiere of the Michael Jackson biopic *Michael* at the Uber Eats Music Hall in Berlin. – *AFP*

Despite his 2005 acquittal in a criminal trial for child abuse, the star never managed to restore his image while alive.

Other alleged victims filed civil lawsuits after his death and several proceedings are ongoing.

The artist has never been convicted in a criminal or civil court.

Asked about the child abuse allegations, fan Escobar said simply: "We know that's not true."

"He was found not guilty," added Megane Kittler, a 31-year-old educator from France who lives in Berlin.

Michael was originally intended to explore the impact of the allegations on the star, according to industry magazine *Variety*, citing unnamed sources "with knowledge of the production".

However, a third of the film was cut after lawyers for the Jackson estate realised there was a clause in a settlement with one of the singer's accusers that barred any mention of him in a film, the magazine said.

As a result, large parts of the film had to be rewritten and the release – originally scheduled for April 18, 2025 – was pushed back.

Film studio Lionsgate is banking on making $700mn in global box office receipts for the feature-length film.

That figure would far surpass other productions in the same genre except for the Freddie Mercury-inspired *Bohemian Rhapsody*, which took in $910mn.

Russia jails another general in military corruption clampdown

AFP/Reuters
Moscow

Russia has jailed a former top general to 19 years in prison for embezzlement, the latest prison sentence meted out as part of a purge of the defence ministry's top brass.

After months of setbacks in its Ukraine offensive, the Kremlin launched an overhaul of the defence ministry's leadership in mid-2024, resulting in many generals and officials being sacked, arrested and jailed.

He joins at least a dozen officials who have been caught up in the biggest wave of corruption scandals to hit the Russian defence ministry in years.

The arrested men are all closely tied to former defence minister Sergei Shoigu, whom President Vladimir Putin unexpectedly removed two years ago and replaced with economist Andrei Belousov in what was widely seen as a move to ensure tighter management of Russia's vast defence budget and eliminate waste and graft.

Yesterday a military court in Moscow sentenced former defence minister Pavel Popov to 19 years in a high-security prison.

It was the harshest verdict yet in a string of similar cases that have rocked the highest echelons of the Russian military establishment.

The court found Popov guilty of embezzling around 25mn rubles ($300,000) of state money earmarked for the construction of the Patriot military theme park.

The park outside Moscow regularly hosts shows and exhibitions to promote the army and houses a church dedicated to the military that glorifies battlefield victories.

Popov, 69, rejected the charges against him.

The Russian army has long been plagued by corruption scandals.

Another former senior defence ministry official, Major-General Vladimir Shesterov, was jailed for six years last July in connection with fraud at the park.

Ocean temperatures near record high

Ocean temperatures hit near-record highs for March this year, the Copernicus Climate Change Service said yesterday, signaling a likely shift toward El Nino conditions that can amplify heat extremes on an already warming planet. Copernicus said average sea surface temperatures were 20.97° Celsius in March, the second-highest value ever for the month, and the hottest since 2024. – ***AFP***

Afghan government says gunmen kill seven in Herat attack

Gunmen in western Afghanistan killed at least seven people yesterday in an attack targeting civilians at a recreational spot in Herat province, the interior ministry said.

"Preliminary information indicates that seven people were killed and 13 others were wounded, some of whom are reported to be in critical condition," ministry spokesman Abdul Mateen Qani wrote on X.

"Unidentified armed men riding motorcycles" targeted civilians near a village southwest of Herat city, Qani said.

A Herat official said the attack happened on the outskirts of the Sayed Mohammad Agha Shia shrine.

"Security forces responded immediately after the incident, arresting one suspect," the officialsaid. – ***AFP***

QATAR

Qatar-Canada and Mexico 2026 Year of Culture marks 100 days

In just over three months, the Years of Culture partnership with Canada and Mexico has already begun to demonstrate the value of sustained cultural dialogue, setting the tone for a year rooted in discovery, mutual understanding, and human connection.

HE Mohammed al-Kuwari, Years of Culture adviser on Latin America and Qatar's former ambassador to Mexico, said: "This commitment to understanding one another is made even more important amid today's global conflicts. That is what 100 days of culture means right now: a different answer to the old yet urgent question, How do we continue to live together when so much seems determined to pull us apart?

"Programmes taking place as part of the Qatar Canada and Mexico 2026 Year of Culture invite people to glimpse the world through someone else's eyes and, in doing so, recognise something of themselves."

In remarks shared on social media, Canadian ambassador Karim Morcos said: "In these challenging times as the world faces uncertainty and conflict, cultural connection feels more important than ever. Culture reminds us of our shared humanity through food, art, and the simple act of coming together."

In these first 100 days, starting with the opening collaborations at the Qatar International Food Festival and the region's very first Art Basel Qatar, where chefs and artists from Canada and Mexico brought their traditions to Doha, a foundation of understanding has already taken shape through food, storytelling, and shared public experiences.

Beyond the food festival, early planning and creative collaborations for exhibitions in Mexico and Canada have begun. Years of Culture looks forward to photography, sport, and design-led projects that build on the legacy of Qatar's role in hosting the FIFA World Cup 2022.



From left: Mohammed al-Kuwari, Yasir Abbas Naqvi and Tariq Ali Faraj al-Ansari.



From left: Emilio Cabrero, Andrea Cesarman, Lupita Vidal, Mohammed al- Kuwari and Fahad al-Obaidly.

For Qatar, this partnership carries particular resonance. In 2022, the nation stood at the centre of the world as host of the FIFA World Cup, an event that brought millions together through shared moments of joy, excitement, and human connection. It was an undertaking that required vision, commitment, and unwavering belief.

Today, Qatar continues to invest in opportunities that create meaningful connections across borders and communities. It remains firmly committed to the belief that understanding must be continually nurtured, and that the spaces where dialogue and connection can flourish must be actively sustained and protected.

Canada and Mexico, too, have chosen to invest time and resources in creating space for genuine cultural exchange, making them great partners for the 2026 Year of Culture. Together, the three nations are making a collective statement: that culture still has the power to bring people together.

Aspetar research to help overcome FIFA World Cup 2026 environmental challenges



By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

With the FIFA World Cup 2026 set to take place in North America from June 11-July 19, Aspetar, Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine Hospital, has published a couple of research papers to protect players' health and performance from environmental challenges and to help overcome several adverse conditions.

The research papers focus on providing teams with a practice-compatible framework for implementing evidence-based strategies to protect player health and optimise performance at the 2026 FIFA World Cup. As conditions will vary significantly between host cities, the reports suggest that teams have to adopt and adapt strategies to best protect player health and performance.

The research papers published in collaboration with world-leading experts examine the major environmental stress factors expected to affect players and support staff throughout the tournament, including heat, altitude, air pollution, allergens and long-haul travel to the World Cup and frequent travel between host cities.

"The geographical distribution exposes players to environmental challenges that can negatively impact their health and performance, including extreme heat, altitude, air pollution, seasonal allergens and travel," highlights the report.

According to the research papers, the Football World Cup Championships have never been presented the combination of such extreme environmental factors. "Extreme heat is expected in 14 out of the 16 host cities, with historical maximum wet-bulb globe temperatures," one of the reports says.

The report added that in six of the host cities, temperatures can reach 30-35C based on historical weather data, and these conditions can negatively affect players' health and performance.

Prof Marco Cardinale, executive director of research and scientific support, Aspetar, said: "These research papers led by Dr Christopher Esh are a collaboration with colleagues from different international institutions and reflect Aspetar's long-standing experience in major international tournaments and underline the hospital's leadership in translating scientific research into practical knowledge."

"We place player health at the core of our mission, and we are committed to providing evidence-based guidance that helps teams respond more effectively to heat, altitude, air quality and travel-related challenges. These extensive reviews contribute to informing the global sporting community about the risks expected at FIFA World Cup 2026 and how to prepare for them in a scientifically sound and professional manner," he added.

The findings from the research highlight how the extraordinary geographic breadth of the competition will expose players to markedly different climate and environmental conditions across venues, making this edition of the World Cup one of the most complex in history from a health and performance perspective. The guidelines also provide practical advice for teams preparing for this major event.

The research papers also provide practical recommendations for players and officials on heat acclimation/acclimatisation, hydration planning, workload management, altitude adaptation, air-quality monitoring, and integrated travel, sleep, and recovery strategies.

The research reports say that teams adopting evidence-based guidelines to mitigate the impact of these environmental challenges will be best prepared to protect player health and performance during the tournament. The reports also explore the impact of air pollution and seasonal allergens, especially given the tournament's large geographic footprint and the diversity of environmental conditions across host cities.

In response to the challenges, FIFA has announced that all matches at the 2026 World Cup will include three-minute cooling breaks, regardless of weather conditions, as a precautionary measure to reduce heat-related risks.

Art and diplomacy converge in Doha

Creative exchange strengthens global dialogue

By Shaima Sheriff
Staff Reporter

Doha's growing cultural landscape is emerging as a platform for global dialogue, with art and fashion playing a key role in fostering understanding, according to cultural diplomat and artist Rodica Grigorita.

Grigorita, secretary-general of Art, Fashion and Cultural Diplomacy (AFCD) in Doha, believes that art and fashion are powerful tools in building bridges between nations, particularly in diverse, multicultural environments such as Qatar.

"I strongly believe that creative industries play a vital role in strengthening international relations," she said. "They help build empathy, challenge stereotypes, and foster mutual understanding across borders."



Rodica Grigorita

A multi-award-winning Moldovan-Romanian artist and fashion designer based in Doha, Grigorita's work spans contemporary lace creation, mural art, curation, and cultural programming. Her artistic language, she explained, is rooted in "spiritual, mystical, and philosophical expression", reflected through "radiant colours, strong structures, and innovative techniques".

Her role within AFCD places her at the centre of a growing cultural movement in Qatar. Established two years ago, the group encourages members of the diplomatic community to engage in artistic expression and cultural exchange.

"The vision was to encourage diplomats based in Doha to express themselves through art, promote their cultures, and engage with the intangible heritage of Qatar," she noted.

Through exhibitions, workshops, and collaborative projects hosted across institutions including museums, embassies, and cultural centres, AFCD has created platforms for dialogue that transcend political boundaries.

"Through artistic exchanges, countries can showcase their identities and values, facilitating dialogue and cooperation, even in times when political relations may be strained," she added.

One such example includes collaborative murals involving diplomats. "We created two murals with the participation of 16 ambassadors, contributing to a unique collective artwork," she said, highlighting how shared creative processes can foster deeper understanding.

Grigorita emphasised that art and fashion offer inclusive spaces for communication. "They transcend language barriers and challenge stereotypes," she said. "Cultural preservation is a collective effort."

In Qatar, where cultural diversity is central to national identity, such initiatives align with broader efforts to promote dialogue and mutual respect across communities.

Looking ahead, she underscored the importance of engaging younger generations. "Stay curious, remain actively engaged, and strive to contribute positively to the world," she advised. "Let kindness, respect, sustainability, and empathy guide your journey."

Qatar 'unjustly targeted' in Iran war, say officials

From Page 1

Nonetheless, several critical facilities were hit. These included Hamad International Airport, gas infrastructure in Ras Laffan, water and energy facilities in Mesaieed, and areas in Lusail City. Debris and shrapnel also fell in residential neighbourhoods, though authorities were able to contain the situation and maintain public order.

Officials said the targeting of such sites raised questions about the stated objectives of the attacks. While Iran has maintained that it was striking US-linked targets, the damage on the ground in Qatar largely affected civilian infrastructure and assets central to daily life and economic activity.

The discussion highlighted that attacks on energy facilities and desalination plants carry wider implications for the Gulf region, where water and power systems are closely linked to national security. Disruptions to these sectors can directly affect homes, hospitals and essential services, making them particularly sensitive targets.

Authorities said the response focused on protecting both citizens and residents, with the Qatar Armed Forces playing a key role in intercepting threats and the Ministry of Interior (MoI) ensuring rapid alerts, on-ground response and public safety measures.

Speakers also warned that targeting strategic infrastructure could be intended to undermine Qatar's broader capabilities, including its role in supporting regional and global energy needs. They noted that such actions reflect a broader pattern extending beyond immediate military objectives.

The panel concluded that the attacks underscored a central contradiction in the conflict narrative. Although framed as a response to foreign military presence, the strikes, in practice, affected a country that had not taken part in the war, impacting its infrastructure, economy and population.

Officials reiterated that Qatar's position remains focused on de-escalation and diplomacy, while maintaining readiness to protect its sovereignty and ensure stability at home.

Talks 'make or break' for world peace: Pakistan PM

From Page 1

Iran also called for its assets frozen abroad because of US sanctions to be unblocked. Sharif sounded a more positive note, thanking both sides for agreeing to meet, but said the hard work was still to come. "A temporary ceasefire has been announced, but now an even more difficult stage lies ahead: the stage of achieving a lasting ceasefire, of resolving complicated issues through negotiations," he said in his televised speech. "This is that stage which, in English, is called the equivalent of 'make or break'."

He said his government would "make every possible effort to make these talks successful".

Iran's parliament speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf said on X that the two above measures had been previously agreed with Washington and that talks would not start until they are fulfilled, amid mounting dispute over the ceasefire terms. This was echoed by Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi, who also demanded an end to Israeli airstrikes on Lebanon. Both officials are expected to be at the talks, Pakistani sources said.

Trump, who did not specifically address the Iranian demands, earlier told the New York Post that US warships were being reloaded "with the best ammunition to resume strikes on Iran if peace talks in Pakistan fail". Vice President JD Vance, who will lead the US delegation, said he expected a positive outcome as he headed to Pakistan, but added: "if they're going to try to play us, then they're going to find the negotiating team is not that receptive".



Pakistani troops escort a vehicle carrying US security officials as it makes its way toward the venue of the US-Iran talks in Islamabad.

Iran has been unable to obtain tens of billions of dollars of its assets in foreign banks, mainly from exports of oil and gas, due to US sanctions on its banking and energy sectors.

UK, Qatar reaffirm solidarity, push for regional stability

From Page 1

He said there is a shared commitment to expand collaboration across multiple sectors, including defence, economic growth and political co-ordination, while exploring opportunities to support stability and potential reconstruction efforts in the wider region. "They committed to further strengthen the relationship in all domains," Patel said, describing the UK-Qatar partnership as "indispensable" in navigating an increasingly complex and evolving geopolitical landscape.