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BUSINESS | Page 1

Commercial Bank announces key senior management appointments to drive next growth phase

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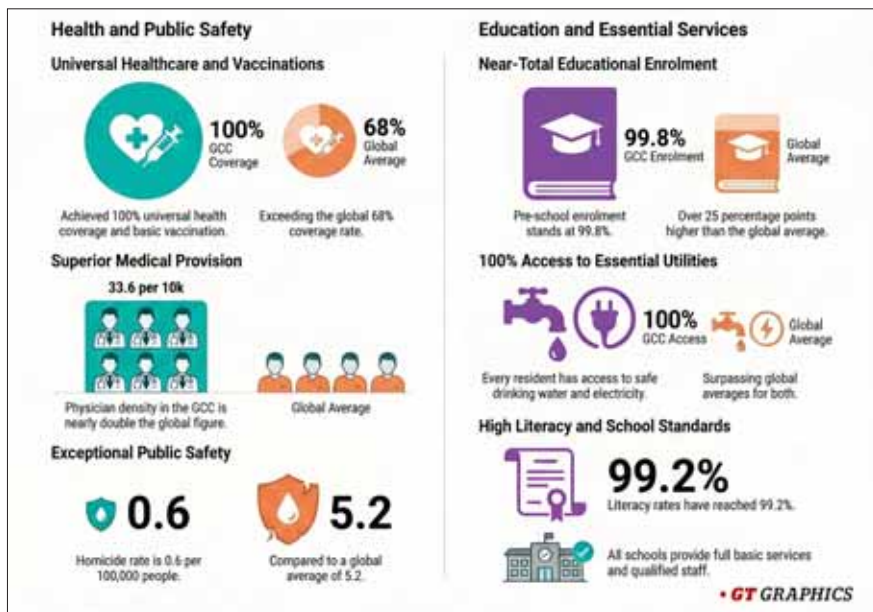
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PM reiterates support for Palestinian cause

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani participated yesterday in a meeting of the ministerial committee tasked by the joint extraordinary Arab-Islamic summit to address developments in the Gaza Strip. The meeting was held on the sidelines of the fifth Antalya Diplomacy Forum. During the meeting, they discussed the latest developments in the Gaza Strip and the occupied Palestinian territories. The prime minister reiterated Qatar's firm and unwavering support for the Palestinian cause and the resilience of the brotherly Palestinian people, based on international law and the two-state solution, ensuring the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. (QNA)

GCC leads the world on key development goals



By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

The six member states of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) have achieved striking progress across a range of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), surpassing global benchmarks by wide margins in health, education, basic services, and public safety, according to data released by the GCC Statistical Center.

The figures stand in sharp contrast to the broader global picture. The UN's own SDG Report 2025 warns that with the 2030 deadline now only five years away, the current pace of change globally is insufficient to achieve the goals in full. Against that backdrop, the Gulf region's performance is all the more notable.

The GCC's health indicators significantly exceed global targets. Maternal mortality in the bloc stands at 19.9 per 100,000 live births – well below the global benchmark of 70 – while the under-five mortality rate of 10.8 per 1,000 live births compares favourably to the world average of 25.

Universal health coverage has reached 100% across GCC states, against a global rate of 68%, and basic vaccination coverage similarly stands at 100% compared to 84 per cent worldwide. Physician density has risen to 33.6 per 10,000 people, nearly double the global figure of 18.7.

These achievements are particularly significant given that UN data shows maternal mortality globally has declined but remains far off the pace required to meet 2030 targets, while under-five and neonatal mortality, though improved since 2000, still require substantial acceleration.

In education, the GCC recorded a literacy rate of 99.2% against a global average of 88%, while pre-school enrolment reached 99.8% – more than 25 percentage points above the world rate of 74.4%. All schools in the region are reported to have full provision of basic services and qualified teaching staff.

Every GCC resident has access to safe drinking water – against a global coverage of 73.7% – and sanitation services are approaching full coverage across the bloc. Electricity access stands at 100%, compared to the global figure of 91.7%. **To Page 3**

Qatar slams attack on Unifil patrol in southern Lebanon

Qatar has condemned the attack that targeted a patrol of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil) in southern Lebanon, which resulted in the death of a French soldier and injuries to several others. Qatar considered the attack a serious violation of international humanitarian law and UN Security Council Resolution 1701. In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated Qatar's complete rejection of any attack targeting Unifil, which plays a vital role in maintaining security and stability in Lebanon. The ministry stressed the need for an immediate investigation into the attack and for those responsible to be brought to justice. The ministry expressed Qatar's condolences to the family of the soldier and to the French government and people as well as its wishes for a speedy recovery for the injured. (QNA)

Media City Qatar, Es'hailSat ink MoU

By A Staff Reporter
Doha

Media City Qatar and satellite operator Es'hailSat have signed an MoU to enhance broadcasting capacity and digital media infrastructure for companies operating under the Media City umbrella. Es'hailSat will draw on its satellite communications expertise to offer licensed entities a range of services covering broadcast and playout, satellite capacity, signal transmission, and backup and disaster recovery.

Iran shuts Strait of Hormuz again after US stays blockade

AFP
Teheran

Iran's military declared the Strait of Hormuz closed again yesterday, prompting ships to abandon attempts to transit the waterway and President Donald Trump to warn Tehran against trying to "blackmail" the United States.

On Friday, Tehran had declared the strait, which usually carries a fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas, open after a ceasefire was agreed in Israel's war with Iran's ally Hezbollah in Lebanon.

This prompted elation in global markets and sent oil prices plunging but, with Trump insisting that a US naval blockade of Iranian ports would continue until a deal to end the wider Middle East war was concluded, Tehran threatened to shutter the strait once more.

Late last morning, Iran's central military command said that, in response to the US blockade, "control of the Strait of Hormuz has returned to its previous status" and "is under strict management and control of the armed forces".

Trump had previously said the two sides were "very close" to striking a deal, but following Iran's announcement yesterday, he insisted Tehran "can't blackmail us", even as he maintained communications were ongoing.

"We'll be talking about Iran later. We have very good conversations going on," he added, accusing Tehran of getting "a little cute" with its recent moves.

Iran's top national security body, meanwhile, said that during a visit by the military chief of mediator Pakistan that concluded yesterday, "new proposals have been put forward by the Americans, which Iran is currently reviewing and has not yet responded to".

It went on to say, however, that Iran's negotiating delegation would not offer "even the slightest compromise, retreat or leniency" in talks with Washington.

A handful of oil and gas tankers crossed the Strait of Hormuz early yesterday during the brief reopening, tracking data showed, but others retreated and tracking platforms showed hardly any vessels crossing the waterway by the late afternoon.

A UK maritime security agency said Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) fired at one tanker, while security intelligence firm Vanguard Tech reported the force had threatened to "destroy" an empty cruise ship that was fleeing the Gulf.

In a third incident, the UKMTO said that it received a report of a vessel in the same area "being hit by an unknown projectile

Iran reopens key airports

GT Report

Six Iranian airports have resumed operations and airlines are readying domestic and international flights, an aviation industry official said yesterday. Maqsood Asadi-Samani, secretary of the Association of Iranian Airlines, told the semi-official Tasnim news agency that the reopened airports include Tehran's two main hubs along with those serving Mashhad, Birjand, Gorgan, and Zahedan – all located in the east of the country. Iran had closed its airspace following US-Israeli airstrikes that began on February 28. The country's Civil Aviation Organisation confirmed earlier yesterday that parts of the airspace and a number of airports had been cleared to reopen.

which caused damage" to shipping containers but no fire.

Speaking at a diplomatic forum in Turkey, Iranian deputy foreign minister Saeed Khatibzadeh said the "Americans cannot impose their will over Iran" with a siege, and suggested the blockade was a violation of the ceasefire that merited "repercussions".

Meanwhile, in a written message, Iran's supreme leader Mojtaba Khamenei, who has yet to be seen since taking power, said Iran's navy "stands ready" to defeat the United States.

There are just four days remaining before the end of the two-week ceasefire in the US and Israel's war on Iran, launched by Washington and its ally on February 28.

Nevertheless, Trump has appeared convinced that a deal could be finished shortly, and has made a series of social media posts praising talks mediator Pakistan.

Egypt, which has also been involved in diplomatic efforts, appeared similarly upbeat yesterday, with Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty saying Cairo and Islamabad hoped to secure a final agreement "in the coming days".

He was speaking at the same event in Antalya as Khatibzadeh, who insisted no date had been set for the next round of talks, though Tehran was "very much committed to diplomacy".

Islamabad has emerged as the lead mediator during the conflict, hosting a marathon first round of talks last weekend, with a second expected in the Pakistani capital this coming week.

5 vessels carrying Qatari LNG approach Hormuz

Reuters
London

Five vessels loaded with liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Ras Laffan, Qatar, are approaching the Strait of Hormuz, ship-tracking data showed yesterday. If the vessels successfully crossed the strait, it would be the first transit of LNG cargoes through the waterway since the US-Israel war with Iran began on February 28. On Friday, Iran reopened the strait, which before the war carried a fifth of the world's LNG trade, following a separate US-brokered ceasefire agreement on Thursday by Israel and Lebanon. A convoy of oil tankers was crossing the Strait of Hormuz yesterday. Data from analytics firm Kpler showed the vessels, Al Ghashamiya, Lebrethah, Fuwairit, Rasheedah and Disha, have moved eastward towards the Strait

of Hormuz. The first four tankers are controlled by QatarEnergy, while Disha is chartered by India's Petronet. "Currently, we see five laden vessels approaching the Strait of Hormuz. All five vessels loaded from Qatar's Ras Laffan plant. Of the five, two are destined for Pakistan, two likely destined for India and one with no clear destination," said Laura Page, manager of LNG Insight at Kpler. "In addition, two ballast Adnoc vessels enter the Gulf of Oman and moor outside Fujairah. The vessel movements align with flaring data which suggests multiple trains at Ras Laffan's north site have restarted as well as UAE's Das Island plant," she added. Qatar is the world's second-largest exporter of LNG, with shipments mostly going to buyers in Asia. Iranian attacks, however, knocked out 17% of Qatar's LNG export capacity, with repairs expected to sideline 12.8mn metric tonnes per year of the fuel for 3-5 years.



Ships and tankers in the Strait of Hormuz off the coast of Musandam, Oman, yesterday. (Reuters)

Prime minister meets Turkish foreign minister, Libyan leader

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met separately yesterday with Türkiye's Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan and the head of the Libyan Government of National Unity, Abdul Hamid Mohammed al-Dbeiba, on the sidelines of the 5th Antalya Diplomacy Forum.

During the meetings, they discussed bilateral co-operation, relations and ways to support and develop them.

They also discussed regional developments, particularly those related to the ceasefire between the US and Iran, and efforts to de-escalate tensions to bolster regional security and stability.

During the meeting, HE Sheikh Mohammed stressed the need for all parties to re-



spond positively to the ongoing mediation efforts, which would pave the way for addressing the root causes of the crisis through

peaceful means and dialogue, leading to a sustainable agreement that prevents renewed escalation. - QNA



Amir sends cable of congratulations to Benin's president-elect

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has sent a cable of congratulations to Romuald Wadagni on the occasion of his victory in Benin's presidential elections, wishing him success in his duties and further progress and development in the bilateral relations between the two countries.

His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani also sent a cable of congratulations to Wadagni on the occasion of his election victory.

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent a cable of congratulations to Wadagni as well to congratulate the latter. - QNA

Al-Khulaifi advocates Qatar's leading role in mediation, global diplomacy

HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi participated in a high-level session on the sidelines of the 5th Antalya Diplomacy Forum (ADF) titled "Emerging Partnerships in International Mediation for Peace".

In remarks delivered during the session, the minister said that mediation is not viewed as a matter of media visibility or international competition, but rather as a responsibility and an effective tool for conflict resolution, emphasising that the guiding principle is the ability to meaningfully contribute to de-escalation and support progress toward political solutions.

HE Dr al-Khulaifi added that leadership in mediation is exercised when trust exists between parties and when a clear diplomatic opportunity is available, noting that trust constitutes the essential currency of mediation.

Over the past two decades, he said, Qatar has invested in building that trust through consistency, prudence and by maintaining open channels of com-



munication with all sides.

The minister pointed to mediation efforts in Africa, including peace processes in Chad, and more recently, the facilitation of dialogue between the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the M23 movement, which resulted in the Doha Declaration of Principles.

These examples, he noted, reflect cases where a credible platform was provided to help parties

reach tangible understandings.

HE Dr al-Khulaifi stressed that escalation inevitably complicates the diplomatic environment, as it hardens positions, deepens mistrust, and shifts priorities toward immediate security concerns rather than long-term political solutions.

It also increases logistical constraints, limits direct engagement, and places additional pressure on stakeholders.

The minister noted that the ongoing war in the region has affected mediation efforts and made negotiations more complex, adding that while conflict complicates mediation, it simultaneously reinforces its necessity.

HE Dr al-Khulaifi further stated that, despite exposure to attacks, commitment to mediation in various international issues has remained firm, underlining that sustaining dialogue and pursuing

peaceful solutions remain essential, particularly during periods of escalation.

He explained that the approach adopted is based on continued engagement, flexibility, and pragmatism, prioritising de-escalation, supporting ceasefires where possible, and maintaining platforms for dialogue even when political conditions are not conducive to immediate breakthroughs.

The minister also highlighted that the most promising opportunities for advancing peace efforts lie in bridging existing gaps, between regions, international actors, states and non-state actors, as well as across political, humanitarian, and development tracks, towards a more integrated approach to conflict resolution.

He concluded that growing recognition of the need to protect mediators and negotiation processes opens important prospects, adding that clearer international frameworks to safeguard dialogue from disruption would help preserve ongoing processes and encourage broader participation in peace efforts with greater confidence and continuity. - QNA



Minister meets officials on sidelines of 5th Antalya Diplomacy Forum

HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi met separately yesterday with Bolivia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Fernando Aramayo, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo, the Presidential Envoy

and Senior Adviser for Africa at the US Department of State Massad Boulos, Armenia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Vahan Kostanyan, Venezuela's Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrea Corao Faria, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Head of the UN Mission in Libya Hanna Tetteh, and Chief Adviser to the President of

Brazil Celso Amorim, on the sidelines of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum.

During the meetings, they discussed the co-operation, relations and ways to support and strengthen them.

They also discussed the latest developments in the region and several topics of common interest. - QNA

QFFD advances youth empowerment at ECOSOC Youth Forum

THE Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD) participated in the 2026 Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.

Convened under the theme *Innovate, Unite and Transform: Youth Shaping the Road to 2030*, the Forum brought together youth, member states, and United Nations partners to advance the 2030 Agenda and accelerate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The QFFD's participation reflected Qatar's commitment to youth empowerment and its leading role in advancing the Youth,



Peace and Security (YPS) agenda globally, recognising young people as key partners in peacebuilding, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

On the sidelines of the Forum,

the QFFD took part in an Expert-to-Youth Dialogue panel as part of the side event "From Doha to the World: Youth-led Partnerships to Advance the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda and Accelerate the

SDGs", organised by Qatar's Ministry of Sports and Youth.

QFFD global advocacy researcher Ibrahim Abdulla al-Baker represented the fund on the panel, highlighting the

QFFD's role in catalysing scalable, innovative solutions that empower youth to contribute meaningfully to peacebuilding and sustainable development, while mobilising resources and strengthening multilateral co-operation in support of shared global youth outcomes.

This engagement contributes to the momentum toward the upcoming Arab Youth, Peace and Security Forum, to be hosted in Doha in November 2026, underscoring Qatar's continued leadership in convening global and regional stakeholders and advancing youth participation in peace and development processes. - QNA

Shura Council members hail adoption of Qatar's emergency item at IPU

Officials and members of the Shura Council have stated that the adoption of Qatar's emergency item at the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) reflects the growing impact of Qatari parliamentary diplomacy and its role in supporting national, Arab, and Islamic positions.

They noted in statements to the Qatar News Agency (QNA) that the success reflects increasing international confidence in Qatar and its strong global reputation.

The emergency item, titled "The urgent need for co-ordinated parliamentary efforts to uphold ceasefire agreements and support the achievement of peace in the Middle East and other regions", received 1,316 votes in favour, three against, and 51 abstentions, surpassing the required two-thirds majority.

It marks the first time an Arab-proposed emergency item has secured the required votes since the mechanism was introduced in 1976.

Qatar presented the initiative jointly

with Australia, Türkiye, France, Brazil, Zambia, Poland, Portugal, Italy and Ireland, with broad backing from Arab, Latin American and Caribbean, and African groups within the union.

HE the Deputy Speaker of the Shura Council Dr Hamda bint Hassan al-Sulaiti, who is a member of the IPU Executive Committee and vice-chair of the IPU Arab Group, told the QNA that the item comes at a critical international moment marked by escalating conflicts and worsening humanitarian impacts, where civilian suffering has become a daily reality threatening global peace and stability.

She stressed that expanding conflicts require elevating parliamentary roles to ethical and humanitarian responsibility through co-ordination and strengthened parliamentary diplomacy to halt conflicts and support peace efforts.

HE Dr al-Sulaiti added that the proposal reflects broad international consensus on the urgency of co-ordinated parliamentary

action to sustain ceasefires, protect civilians, ensure humanitarian access, and advance peace negotiations.

Shura Council member Dr Sultan bin Hassan al-Dossari, who is a member of the Executive Committee of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, said that the success of the Qatar-led initiative represents a collective Arab achievement, enhancing Arab parliamentary influence within international institutions and strengthening their global presence.

Shura Council member and member of the IPU Standing Committee on United Nations Affairs, Ahmed bin Ibrahim al-Malki, highlighted that the emergency item addresses pressing global issues affecting humanity.

Shura Council member Eng. Ahmed bin Hitmi al-Hitmi stressed that parliaments, as representatives of peoples, bear moral and political responsibility to push for dialogue over conflict and activate parliamentary diplomacy mechanisms.

Shura Council member and member of the IPU Committee on Sustainable Development, Yousuf bin Ali al-Khater, said that the initiative reflects Qatar's ability to build broad alliances and co-ordinate effectively across geopolitical groups, reinforcing the country's growing diplomatic influence and integration between parliamentary and official diplomacy.

Shura Council Secretary-General Naif bin Mohammed al-Mahmoud expressed appreciation for growing international confidence in Qatar, describing it as expanding diplomatic capital, and commended the professional efforts that secured overwhelming support for the proposal.

The Qatari emergency item was approved by a large majority for inclusion in the agenda of the 152nd IPU Assembly in Istanbul, during a dedicated voting session attended by the delegation led by HE the Shura Council Speaker Hassan bin Abdullah al-Ghanim. - QNA

QF schools prioritise student wellbeing

Qatar Foundation (QF) said schools within its Pre-University Education (PUE) ecosystem continue to foster a stable and supportive learning environment, placing student wellbeing and reassurance at the heart of the educational experience.

The QF said in a statement that "across the schools, leaders are focused on balancing operational readiness with psychological and emotional support, helping students feel comfortable and integrated within the school environment, while encouraging positive interaction and active participation".

"At Qatar Leadership Academy (QLA), this approach is evident in strong engagement levels and community confidence, with student attendance reaching 91%", the QF added.

"We have observed positive engagement from our students over the past days, with clear enthusiasm to be present in the learning environment and connect with their peers and teachers," said QLA director-general Jameel al-Shammari. "We have ensured that this experience supports their emotional wellbeing by providing a stable environment that fosters a sense of belonging and confidence within the academy."

Similarly, the Qatar Academy Msheireb (QAM) continues to prioritise the wellbeing of its school community, with attendance also reaching 91%.

"At our academy, we are committed to building an environment where students feel comfortable and reassured, which is reflected in their positive engagement in the classroom," said QAM director Lina Mouchantaf. "We encourage listening to students and providing space for them to express themselves, as we believe their mental wellbeing is the foundation of a balanced learning experience."

"We are committed to fostering a supportive and flexible learning environment, ensuring every student feels part of a cohesive community that supports them both academically and emotionally," said Qatar Academy Al Khor director Dr Aisha al-Maqbali.

"As our students return to school, we have approached this phase with a sense of calm and responsibility, placing the safety and wellbeing of our students and staff at the forefront of our priorities," said Academy director Elizabeth Kennedy. "We have ensured that all our decisions are carefully considered to provide a stable learning environment that supports students in all circumstances."

"At Awsaj Academy, we are committed to providing a supportive and inclusive environment where every student feels comfortable expressing themselves," said Awsaj Academy director William Vue. "We have observed positive engagement among students, supported by dedicated teams that continuously respond to their needs."

This integrated approach at Qatar Foundation schools reflects a firm commitment to a global education model balancing academic excellence and mental wellbeing, aligned with national visions to build confident, capable generations. - QNA



Qatar Charity flags off new service complex in Ghana

QNA
Accra

Qatar Charity inaugurated a new service complex in North Tongu District in eastern Ghana, comprising a school, mosque, teachers' accommodation, and a borehole providing clean drinking water, benefiting more than 2,000 people, with support from donors in

Qatar. The inauguration took place during an official ceremony attended by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Ghana, Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa, and ambassador of Qatar to Ghana, Khalid bin Jabr al-Musallam. In remarks on the occasion, the Ghanaian FM said the project contributes to the development of minds, hearts, and communities, noting that it includes

classrooms with a capacity of 250 students, administrative offices, supporting facilities, eight housing units for teachers, an automated water and sanitation system, and a mosque at Afemi Batur Technical Secondary School. He praised the impactful partnership with Qatar Charity, describing it as a key pillar in strengthening fraternal and humanitarian relations between Qatar and Ghana, and highlight-

ed the organization's achievements, including the implementation of 1,249 projects that have improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries over the past year. He also underscored Qatar Charity's role in Ghana, particularly its interventions in 2025, which he said serve as a model of translating solidarity into tangible services in water, education, relief, and health sectors, con-

tributing to social stability and local development. For his part, Director of Qatar Charity offices in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, Eng Hassan Ouda, said education is a key driver of development, particularly in underserved and rural communities. He noted that Qatar Charity is committed to expanding access to quality and dignified education through building schools and supporting infrastructure

that ensures students' safety and learning conditions. He reaffirmed the organization's continued commitment, supported by its donors, to addressing key humanitarian and development challenges in Ghana through a wide range of interventions in education, health, water and sanitation, housing, livelihoods, relief, and rehabilitation, in addition to establishing multi-service centers.

GCC leads the world on key development goals

From Page 1

Globally, electrification rose from 84% in 2015 to 91.7% in 2023, with 45 countries having achieved universal access – a group the GCC states are firmly part of – though Sub-Saharan Africa continues to lag significantly. The GCC's homicide rate of 0.6 per 100,000 people is a fraction of the global average of 5.2, while the rate of human trafficking victims stands at 5.5 compared to 38 worldwide. Near-complete birth registration further underlines the strength and reach of the region's institutional infrastructure. The data collectively point to a region that has translated its economic resources into measurable human development outcomes across virtually every dimension measured by the SDG framework – at a time when, based on the rate of progress since 2015, none of the 17 SDGs is on track to be fully achieved globally by 2030.

QIIB names winners of FIFA World Cup Visa campaign

QIIB has announced the winners of its promotional campaign for Visa credit and debit cardholders, launched in collaboration with Visa from February 2 to 28. The campaign offered customers the opportunity to win travel packages to attend FIFA World Cup 2026 matches.

A draw was conducted in the presence of a representative from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and relevant QIIB officials, awarding nine customers exclusive travel packages. These include flights and tickets to selected FIFA World Cup 2026 matches across the group stage, Round of 32, quarter-finals, and semi-finals.

The winners are Murad Zakria Yousef, Saeed Hazzaa al-Marri, Hamad Salem al-Marri, Ali Hassan Alsubaey, Hamad Rashid al-Naemi, Sheikh Mohammad Fahad al-Thani, Hamad Abdulrahman al-Kuwari, Mohamed Elsayed Ahmed, and Ibrahim Tariq al-Mulla.

Khalid Abdulrahman al-Shaibei, chief business development officer at QIIB, said:



Khalid Abdulrahman al-Shaibei, chief business development officer, QIIB

"We congratulate all the winners of this exceptional campaign, which offers them the opportunity to attend one of the world's most prominent football events. We are

also pleased with the strong engagement the campaign has generated, reflecting our customers' confidence in the services and offerings provided by QIIB."

He added: "We are committed to designing innovative campaigns that go beyond the conventional concept of banking offers, creating meaningful and distinctive experiences that deliver real value to our customers' everyday interactions. This campaign was developed to combine the advantages of digital payments with the excitement of following global sporting events."

Al-Shaibei further noted: "Our partnership with Visa represents a successful model of collaboration focused on enhancing the customer experience. Together with our strategic partners, we continue to develop high-quality initiatives that align with our customers' evolving expectations and provide them with exclusive benefits, particularly across travel and lifestyle. This approach reinforces QIIB's position as a bank driven by innovation and a strong commitment to meeting customer needs."

Arab Book Award submissions open

The Arab Book Award announced that submissions for its fourth edition will remain open until May 28 via its official website. The award honours authors, publishers, and institutions. The categories include linguistic and critical studies, focusing on grammar, morphology, and criticism in narrative and theatre; social and philosophical studies, dedicated to Arab-Islamic philosophy and psychology; and historical research covering Arab and Islamic history from the 12th Hijri century to the present. Media advisor for the Arab Book Award, Dr Hanan al-Fayyad, said the award strengthens Arab intellectual life through rigorous evaluation that enhances the value of selected works and supports their academic impact. (QNA)

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Lebanon prepares for Israel talks

AFP
Beirut

Lebanon's president and prime minister discussed on Saturday preparations for the first direct negotiations with Israel in decades, as southerners headed home after the ceasefire in the Israel-Hezbollah war.

In a statement, the office of President Joseph Aoun said he and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam conducted "an assessment of the post-ceasefire phase and the ongoing efforts to consolidate it", and discussed "Lebanese readiness for the anticipated negotiations" with Israel.

Their meeting came a day after a strongly-worded speech to the nation from Aoun stating that the country was entering a new phase to work on "permanent agreements" with Israel and insisting that direct talks were not a "concession" – an apparent rebuttal of Hezbollah criticism.

The 10-day ceasefire seeking to end more than six weeks of war between Hezbollah and Israel has been in place since midnight on Thursday (2100 GMT) after being announced by United States President Donald Trump.

More than 2,300 people have been killed in Israeli attacks and more than a million displaced since Hezbollah dragged Lebanon into



A man drives as he flashes a victory sign following a 10-day ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel went into effect, in Nabatieh, Lebanon on Saturday. (Reuters)

the Middle East conflict last month. Iran-backed Hezbollah and its supporters strongly oppose the negotiations, and have rejected several government decisions over the past year, including Beirut's commitment to disarming the group in 2025.

Addressing Aoun at press conference in Beirut's southern suburbs, senior Hezbollah official Mahmud Qamati said the president "does not respect" Lebanon.

"Defeated, you go to the Israelis and Americans, let's see what you will get out of it."

As the truce entered its second day, displaced people were still flocking to the south, which saw the brunt of the fighting, with roads packed with cars.

Lebanon's military and other local bodies are working to open roads that were blocked due to Israeli strikes.

In the heavily bombed southern suburbs of Beirut, families came to inspect their homes and grab belongings, though neighbourhoods in the area remained largely empty, according to an AFP correspondent, with people hesitant to return.

Among the residents briefly visiting was Samah Hajoul, who is currently staying in a tent on Beirut's seafloor.

"We do not feel safe to return, for fear that something might happen at night and I would not be able to carry my children and flee with them," she told AFP.

She only visited her home, which sustained minor damage, to "bathe the children and get summer clothes" as temperatures started to rise. "We will wait and see what happens during the days of the truce. If the ceasefire

Truce can't be one-sided, vows to respond to Israel attacks, says Hezbollah chief

Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem said on Saturday that the ongoing 10-day truce with Israel cannot be one-sided, vowing that his fighters would respond to Israeli attacks on Lebanon. "A ceasefire means a complete cessation of all hostilities. Because we do not trust this enemy, the resistance fighters will remain in the field with their hands on the trigger, and they will respond to violations accordingly," Qassem said in a statement read out on TV. "There is no ceasefire from the side of the resistance only, it must be from both sides." He also offered his first reaction since the ceasefire went into force on Thursday with the terms shared by the US State Department. Qassem called it "an insult to our country and our homeland, Lebanon, that America dictates its text and speaks on behalf of the Lebanese government".

The truce came days after Lebanon and Israel's ambassadors to the US met in Washington ahead of planned direct negotiations between the two countries, the first in decades. "Enough of subjecting Lebanon to these humiliations by negotiating directly with the Israeli enemy and listening to its dictates, and by the shameful spectacle in Washington," Qassem said. Qassem expressed "gratitude" to Iran "for their support and assistance", saying the country kept the Strait of Hormuz closed until a truce was reached in Lebanon. The Lebanese government has taken several unprecedented steps against Hezbollah over the past year, including vowing to disarm it. Qassem maintained his group was "open to the fullest cooperation with the Lebanese authorities, embarking on a new chapter...".

is consolidated, we will return to our homes," she added, saying that dozens of families staying in nearby tents were doing the same.

During his meeting with Aoun, Salam expressed hope that "the displaced will be able to return safely to their homes as soon as

possible after the ceasefire holds". He stressed that the government was working to "facilitate this return, especially by repairing the destroyed bridges, opening roads, and providing supplies in the areas where the return will be safe and possible".

Iran says reviewing 'new proposals' from United States

Iran's top national security body said that the country was reviewing "new proposals" received from the US, even as it warned that its negotiators would cut no compromises with Washington. "In recent days, with the presence of the commander of the Pakistani army in Tehran as an intermediary and mediator in the negotiations, new proposals have been put forward by the Americans, which the Islamic Republic of Iran is currently reviewing and has not yet responded to," the Supreme National Security Council said in a statement carried by state media. It went on to say that Iran's negotiating delegation "will not make even the slightest compromise, retreat or leniency, and will defend with all its strength the interests of the Iranian nation".

The disclosure of the new proposals after Iran declared that it was reimposing its closure of the Strait of Hormuz over an ongoing US blockade of its ports, prompting a warning from US President Donald Trump not to try to "blackmail" Washington. The Supreme National Security Council said "Iran is determined to enforce supervision and control over traffic through the Strait of Hormuz until the definitive end of the war", insisting the US blockade would preclude even a conditional and limited reopening. (AFP)

French soldier killed in attack on UN mission in South Lebanon

Reuters/AFP
Beirut

A French soldier was killed and three others wounded while clearing a road in southern Lebanon in an attack that UNIFIL peacekeepers and French officials said yesterday was likely carried out by Iran-backed Hezbollah.

In calls with Lebanese President Joseph Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, French President Emmanuel Macron condemned the "unacceptable attack", his office said in a statement.

Three other members of the United Nations' UNIFIL peacekeeping mission were injured, UNIFIL said, two of them seriously.

UNIFIL said initial assessments indicated the fire came from non-state actors, allegedly Hezbollah, and that an investigation had been launched into what it called "a deliberate attack."

Macron also said the evidence so far pointed to the Iran-backed armed group and urged Lebanese authorities to act against those

responsible.

Hezbollah denied any involvement in the attack, expressing its "surprise at positions that rushed to make baseless accusations" against the group.

French armed forces minister Catherine Vautrin said the patrol was ambushed while on a mission to open a route to a UNIFIL post that had been isolated by fighting in the area.

The soldier was killed by direct small-arms fire, she said. UNIFIL said the attack occurred in the southern Lebanese village of Ghandouriyeh.

Lebanon's army condemned the shooting and said it had opened an investigation. President Aoun offered condolences and ordered an immediate probe, while Prime Minister Salam also condemned the attack.

UNIFIL was first deployed in 1978 and has remained through successive conflicts, including a 2024 war during which its positions came under repeated fire.

Separately, the Israeli military said on Saturday it had killed members of a "terrorist cell" that violated a US-brokered ceasefire

and approached its soldiers in southern Lebanon.

It said it was authorised to take necessary self-defence measures against "threats" adding that such actions are not restricted by the ceasefire.

Israel and Lebanon agreed a "cessation of hostilities" on Thursday at 2100 GMT for an initial period of 10 days to enable peace negotiations between the two countries, according to a text of the deal released by the US State Department.

The deal does not require Israel to withdraw from southern Lebanon, where Israeli troops have been destroying villages and infrastructure after ordering residents south of the Litani River to flee. The area makes up about 8% of Lebanese territory and the Israel has been calling the present occupation as a defensive measure on part of its army.

Lebanon president vows to prosecute attackers

President Aoun vowed to prosecute those who targeted French UN peacekeepers. In a statement shared by the presidency, Aoun expressed his condolences to his



United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) peacekeepers and members of the Lebanese army arrive at the site, after an Israeli strike severed the last remaining bridge linking southern Lebanon to the rest of the country, in Qasmieh, Lebanon. (Reuters)

French counterpart Macron in a phone call, condemning the incident and vowing that Beirut "will not hesitate to pursue those involved and bring them to justice".

Hezbollah calls Israel talks a failure

Meanwhile, senior Hezbollah official Mahmud Qamati said on Saturday that his group was not concerned by Lebanon's planned direct talks with Israel, labelling them a failure.

In a press conference in Beirut's southern suburbs, Qamati

said his group was "not concerned with the negotiations being conducted by the state."

He termed the ongoing negotiations as "a failure, weak, defeated... and submissive negotiations".

"The resistance is the one that imposes. We are the land... and we are the ones who draw up the decisions, not those who have an official status," he said.

He added that while his group did not mind Beirut "coordinating with us... not in this way that leads to surrender".

A beautiful game in the land of mutilated hopes



Children play football amid makeshift shelters in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip on Saturday. Since October 10, a fragile US-sponsored truce in Gaza has largely halted the fighting between Israeli forces and Hamas, but both sides have alleged frequent violations. Meanwhile, sources have confirmed to QNA that a Palestinian was killed in Israeli gunfire targeting civilians north of Rafah city in southern Gaza. (AFP)

Libya recovers 17 bodies in Tripoli, six from Tobruk

At least 17 bodies believed to be those of migrants have been recovered in recent days from the shore near a coastal town west of the Libyan capital, Tripoli-based medics said on Saturday. The Emergency Medicine and Support Center, which operates under the health ministry, said the bodies were recovered from the shores of Zuwara, some 117 km (72.7 miles) to the west of Tripoli.

A total of 14 bodies have been buried according to protocols, the centre said, and one body of a Bangladeshi national was identified and received by his family in Tripoli. No further details were provided on the remaining two bodies. Images posted on the centre's verified Facebook page showed medics placing bodies in white plastic bags before loading them into ambulances. Libya has become a transit route for

migrants fleeing conflict and poverty to Europe via dangerous routes across the desert and over the Mediterranean since the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in a NATO-backed uprising in 2011. At least six people died on Saturday after a migrant boat sunk off Libya's Tobruk, two military sources and a medical source told Reuters. Four people were rescued, the medical source said. (Reuters)



QatarEnergy LNG Tender Invitation

No.	TENDER NUMBER / DESCRIPTION	TENDER ISSUE PERIOD	TENDER FEE (QAR)	TENDER BOND (USD)	TENDER CLOSING DATE
1	SUP/C/ITD/7589/26 MANAGED FILE TRANSFER SAAS SOLUTION	19/04/2026 to 04/05/2026	0	0	11/05/2026

Scope of Work:

QatarEnergy LNG seeks to procure and implement a secure, governed, and scalable Managed File Transfer (MFT) to replace existing solution, with the intention of moving relevant services to the Cloud as a SaaS. Duration of the Contract: 5 Years & 9 Months. Tentative award date: 11-Nov-2026.

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

Place for Tender Collection and Bid Submission:

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

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



Pope Leo decries 'despots' who exploit resources

Reuters
Luanda

Pope Leo sharply decried the exploitation of natural resources in Africa on Saturday, blasting "despots and tyrants" who guarantee wealth but do not deliver on their promises, leading to suffering and deaths.

In a speech in oil-rich Angola, the third stop on his four-country Africa tour, Leo called on Angolans to work for a society free from the "slavery imposed by the elite who are laden with much wealth but false joys."

Leo has taken on a new forceful speaking style during the tour this week amid attacks from U.S. President Donald Trump. On the flight from Cameroon to Angola, he sought to downplay their feud, telling reporters that comments he made about "tyrants" earlier in the trip were not directed at Trump and that it was not in the pope's interest to debate him.

Once on the ground in the Angolan capital, Luanda, Leo lamented that "powerful interests lay their claim" on the former Portuguese colony's natural resources, an apparent reference to foreign companies benefiting from Angola's oil and diamond sectors and its nascent critical minerals sector.

"All too often people have looked - and continue to look - to your lands ... in order to take," the pope said in remarks delivered to Angolan President João Lourenço and other political leaders.

"How much suffering, how many deaths, how many social and environmental disasters are brought about by this logic of extractivism!" the pope said.

Leo, originally from Chicago, kept a relatively low profile for a pope in his first 10 months but in recent weeks has become outspoken on a range of issues.

He has issued sharp denun-



Pope Leo XIV is welcomed by Angola's President Joao Lourenco upon his arrival at the "4 de Fevereiro" Luanda International Airport in Luanda on the sixth day of an 11-day apostolic journey to Africa, on Saturday. (AFP)

ciations of war and inequality on the 10-day Africa tour, one of the most complicated ever arranged for a pontiff, with stops in 11 cities and towns in four countries, traversing nearly 18,000 km (11,185 miles) over 18 flights. Despite being one of the leading oil-producing nations in sub-Saharan Africa, Angola's population of 36.6 million people is still confronting extreme poverty, with more than 30% living on less than \$2.15 per day, according to the World Bank.

More than half of the country identifies as Catholic. Leo called on Angolans "to break this cycle of interests, which reduces reality, and even life itself, to mere commodities." He urged the country's political leaders to focus on helping all their people, and not just corporate interests. "History will then vindicate you, even if in the near term some may oppose you," he said.

Earlier on Saturday, before fly-

ing to Angola, Leo celebrated a farewell Mass in the Cameroonian capital, Yaounde, urging participants not to lose hope despite the challenges faced by the Central African country, which include a simmering conflict that has killed thousands.

"In moments when we seem to be sinking, overcome by adverse forces, when everything appears bleak ... Jesus is with us always, stronger than any power of evil," the pontiff told a crowd the Vatican estimated to number 200,000, which would make it the biggest event of his tour so far. "In every storm, he comes to us and repeats: 'I am here with you: do not be afraid.'" Leo said.

Crowds greeting the pope on his visit to Cameroon were enthusiastic, including an estimated 120,000 people who attended a Mass on Friday in Douala, lining the streets along his routes and wearing colourful fabrics featuring images of his face.

Turkiye says Israel using security as a pretext to acquire 'more land'

AFP
Antalya

Turkiye's top diplomat on Saturday accused Israel of creating an international "illusion" and using security concerns as a pretext to seize "more land," in the latest flare up in escalating tensions between the two regional powers.

Israel and Turkiye have been trading near daily diplomatic barbs over a range of regional conflicts, from Israel's war in Gaza to rising tensions linked to Iran.

"Israel is not after its own security. Israel is after more land," Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum (ADF 2026) in the Mediterranean resort city.

"Security is being used by the Netanyahu government as an excuse to occupy more land," he added, referring to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Speaking in English at a panel discussion, Fidan said Israel had created an "illusion" internationally by portraying itself as acting purely in its own defence.

"It has become very clear, especially in recent years, that it is more than that," he said.

From Palestinian lands including Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and now extending towards Lebanon and Syria, Israel was pursuing "an onward occupation and expansionism in the region," Fidan said.

"I think this has to stop."

"Israel has to know that the only way to live peacefully in the region is to let other countries enjoy their own security, territorial integrity and freedom, and



Turkiye's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan greeting Syria's interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa during the ADF 2026 in Antalya. (AFP)

not to use power against them," he added.

Turkiye and Israel have frequently been at odds, including over Israel's military campaign in Gaza and differences over Syria's future.

Relations were severely strained in 2010 when Israeli forces raided a flotilla of ships attempting to breach Israel's naval blockade of Gaza, killing nine Turkish activists and one US national. The flotilla was co-organised by a Turkish aid group.

Move back to Russia-Ukraine talks

Fidan on Friday met the foreign ministers of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt for talks on regional issues, including the Middle East conflict, on the sidelines of the forum.

Asked about the discussions, Fidan said regional countries needed to come together to ad-

dress shared challenges.

"It is time for all of us to come together in a very mature way and own our problems," he said, again singling out Israel as the only country seeking territorial gains.

Commenting on Turkiye's quiet diplomacy over the Russia-Ukraine war, Fidan said those efforts had been overshadowed by tensions involving Iran.

"That has left the Russia-Ukraine war on the side," he said. He added that attention should shift back to Ukraine talks once tensions with Iran eased, warning that the conflict remained open to escalation.

Turkiye, which has hosted several rounds of Russia-Ukraine negotiations, is also hosting Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybha at separate panels during the Antalya Diplomacy Forum.

Social media blackout lifted in Guinea

AFP
Conakry

A blackout on several social media sites in Guinea, which is ruled by an authoritarian government, was lifted Friday, bloggers and other users in the west African nation said.

Guinean authorities have not officially commented on the restrictions, which were first announced Thursday by ABLOGUI, an association of Guinea bloggers.

The group said it had observed a blockage on Facebook, Messenger, YouTube and TikTok starting Wednesday.

Guinea is ruled by President Mamady Doumbouya, a former

army general, who came to power in a 2021 coup and was elected last December in a vote that excluded all major opposition leaders.

Guinea's communications regulator HAC had warned Tuesday about recent "verbal attacks, unverified information and messages harmful to social cohesion," without giving further details.

Baro Conde, president of ABLOGUI, told AFP Friday he welcomed "the restoration of social media access. Citizens will once again be able to enjoy their freedoms of information and expression."

He also issued a warning regarding the possibility of further shutdowns during legislative and

municipal elections scheduled for May 31.

Earlier in the week, singer Yama Segala and influencer Maya La Solution traded insults on social media via video posts.

Faced with an ensuing uproar, they later publicly apologised to "the people of Guinea".

Officials apprehended the two on Friday, however, and they will remain in custody ahead of judicial proceedings Monday, the Office of the Public Prosecutor at the Conakry Court of Appeal said.

In a statement, it said an investigation was instigated "following the dissemination on social media, notably the Facebook platform, of remarks of an insulting, outrageous and degrading nature".

Several Nigeria bus kidnap victims rescued

Several of 14 people who were kidnapped on Wednesday in Nigeria's central Benue State have been rescued, local police said.

Kidnappings for ransom are common in Nigeria, but Africa's most populous country has been faced a surge of such attacks for months, particularly in the northern half of the country.

Such attacks are carried out by criminal gangs known as "bandits". Benue State is in a region which regularly faces tensions between Muslim Fulani herders and predominantly Christian farmers over land and natural resources.

"In a coordinated joint security operation involving the police and other sister security agencies,

operatives are conducting a targeted search-and-rescue mission in Amla Forest and adjoining areas," Benue state police spokesman Udemede Edet said in a statement late Friday.

"The operation has led to the successful rescue of some of the victims, who are currently receiving medical attention."

Edet did not specify the number of people rescued but added that seven suspects have also been arrested.

Police also clarified the kidnapped individuals were not students headed for a university entrance exam, as originally reported, but passengers on a bus bound for the city of Makurdi. (AFP)

Conflict in Sudan: Yearning for normalcy



Local Sudanese residents of Tuti Island, where the White Nile and Blue Nile merge to form the River Nile, stand in a small boat fishing, in Khartoum on Friday. Of the nearly 4mn people - around half Khartoum's pre-war population - who fled during the conflict, more than 1.8mn have returned over the past year. Yet fewer than 80,000 people have come back to central Khartoum, according to the United Nations. (AFP)

Moroccan farms turn to West African migrants to plug labour deficit

Reuters
Ait Amira, Morocco

Deep in Morocco's fertile heartlands, pickup trucks carrying migrants from sub-Saharan Africa roll past a sea of plastic greenhouses producing fresh fruit and vegetables for supermarkets across Europe and West Africa.

Some of these workers - largely from French-speaking West Africa - intended to head to Europe but are now putting that off to take up work in Morocco and plug a growing gap in domestic farm labour.

The trend underscores Morocco's changing role in international migration flows into more of a destination than a transit country, and factors into recent declines in attempted crossings to Europe.

Continued tougher border controls, and opportunities for migrants to work in agriculture as rural Moroccans increasingly migrate to cities for jobs in construction and services, could consolidate the shift.

The Chtouka plains in the Souss-Massa region, 50 km south of the seaside city of Agadir, encapsulate the changing dynamics.

Over 24,000 hectares of greenhouse farming produce more than four fifths of Morocco's fruit and vegetable exports, contributing to a 3.6% rise in the country's agricultural exports to \$4.5 billion last year.

Abdulfattah Aliou, 23, a Togolese migrant, said he had come to Ait Amira, a rural commune in Souss-Massa, after hearing about jobs there. Originally he'd tried to reach a Spanish enclave in northern Morocco but was bussed south by Moroccan authorities.

"Working is better than asking for charity in the streets," he told Reuters after a shift at a tomato farm.

Labour Shortages

The trend, which is hard to quantify since official statistics do not reflect informal migration, has been driven by changing economic and social conditions, according to farmers and officials.

After years of drought, many young Moroccans have moved to cities, attracted by the expanding construction and services sectors.

That has led to fewer Moroccans employed in agriculture, a sector that has shed 1.7 million jobs overall since 2000 as subsistence farming



Sub-Saharan African migrants rest in the shade on a street after a day's work, in Ait Amira. (Reuters)

has declined, according to official statistics. Today just one in four Moroccans work in farming, compared with half of Moroccans two decades ago.

Those who do stay often ask for higher wages or prefer to be paid for "piecemeal" meaning they are paid for each box filled or row of crops harvested, according to farmers.

This can push up wages up to as much as 500 Moroccan dirhams (\$55) per day - more than five times what migrants such as Aliou earn.

At the same time, some farmers

have shifted to more labour-intensive, export-oriented cash crops such as strawberries, raspberries and blueberries.

"Without Sub-Saharan labour, a number of farms could have shut down or been forced to reduce output," said Abdelaziz El Maanaoui, head of a producers' association in the Chtouka plains.

Sub-Saharan labour is mostly informal though more than 50,000 migrants have gained legal status in Morocco since 2013.

El Maanaoui said he supported

easing paperwork to help farms legally hire migrant workers, especially since labour shortages may deepen as Morocco's fertility rates - now below replacement level at 1.9 children per woman - decline.

Morocco's spending on railways, roads, stadiums and airports ahead of the World Cup it will co-host in 2030 is also expected to reach some 190 billion dirhams (\$20 billion) over the next four years, or about 12% of GDP. That will draw even more workers from villages into cities.

"Once people get used to urban life, it is hard to bring them back to work on farms in rural areas," said Rachid Benali, head of the national farm producers' confederation, COMADER. He said a "structural shortage of both qualified and unqualified agricultural labour across the country" risked putting the sector's competitiveness at risk.

"Morocco no longer has the advantage of cheap labour," he said.

Changing Demographics

Aliou Dialou, 48, a Senegalese national who has worked on Moroccan farms since 2008, has seen the changes reshape Ait Amira.

The town's population has quad-

rupled over the past three decades to 113,000, driven in large part by the arrival of migrant labourers.

As Moroccan workers have aged, sub-Saharan migrants have increasingly taken their place, Dialou said, speaking near his home in an informally built neighbourhood in Ait Amira. At dawn, they often gather at a spot known as the "Mouqé" - the "standing place" - on Ait Amira's main road, waiting to negotiate a day's wage with truck drivers who take them to greenhouses.

Many services are lacking in the area, which saw some of the most violent unrest during youth-led protests last October.

Though Dialou once planned to head to Europe, he now intends to stay. He has an 11-year-old daughter in a local school who speaks both Amazigh and Moroccan Arabic.

Some migrants, like Dialou, may settle long-term in Morocco - though others say they still have Europe in mind.

Aliou, who earns about 100 dirhams a day, said he sleeps outdoors as he tries to save money to rent a room, and to buy sturdy shoes and a phone to stay in touch with the family he has not seen in four years.



US renews Russian oil waiver after pressure from countries dealing with war price shocks

Reuters
Washington

The Trump administration on Friday renewed a waiver allowing countries to buy sanctioned Russian oil at sea for about a month, even as lawmakers accused the government of going easy on Moscow as its war on Ukraine grinds on. The Treasury Department's waiver lets countries purchase Russian oil and petroleum products loaded on vessels as of Friday through May 16. It replaces a 30-day waiver that expired on April 11 and excludes transactions involving Iran, Cuba and North Korea. The move is part of the administration's effort to control global energy prices that have shot higher during the US-Israeli war with Iran. It came after countries in Asia, suffering from the global energy shock, pressed Washington to allow alternative supplies to reach markets.

"As negotiations (with Iran) accelerate, Treasury wants to ensure oil is available to those who need it," a Treasury Department spokesperson said. Just two days earlier,

Waiver aims to stabilise energy prices amid Iran war and Middle East tensions; Lawmakers criticise waivers for benefiting Russia during war with Ukraine; Analyst warns energy market tools are 'nearly exhausted'; EU urges no relaxation of Russia sanctions

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said Washington would not be renewing the waiver for Russian oil and another for Iranian oil, which is set to expire on Sunday.

Global oil prices tumbled 9% on Friday to about \$90 a barrel after Iran temporarily reopened the Strait of Hormuz, an oil choke point in the Gulf. But the war has already created the worst global energy supply disruption in history, the International Energy Agency has said.

The war, which enters its eighth week on Saturday, has damaged more than 80 oil and gas facilities in the Middle East, and Tehran has warned it could close the strait again if the recent US Navy blockade of Iranian ports continued.

High oil prices are a threat to President Donald Trump's fellow Republicans ahead of November's

midterm elections. Trump has also faced pressure from partner countries on the oil price. A US source said partner countries on the sidelines of Group of 20, World Bank and International Monetary Fund meetings in Washington this week had requested the US extend the waiver. And he spoke about oil this week in a call with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, a big purchaser of Russian oil.

The waiver on Iranian oil, which the Treasury Department issued on March 20, allowed about 140mn barrels of oil to reach global markets and helped relieve pressure on energy supply, Bessent said last month.

US lawmakers from both political parties had slammed the administration over the sanctions waivers, saying they stood to help the economy of Iran while it was at

war with the US and of Russia as it was at war with Ukraine.

The waivers could impede the West's efforts to deprive Russia of revenue for its war in Ukraine and put Washington at odds with its allies. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said now is not the time to relax sanctions against Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy Kirill Dmitriev said an extension of the US waiver will affect another 100mn barrels of Russian oil, bringing the total volume affected by both waivers to 200mn barrels. Dmitriev, who travelled to the US on April 9 for meetings with members of the Trump administration ahead of the previous waiver expiry, said on his Telegram channel that the extension faced "active political opposition."

Brett Erickson, a sanctions expert at the consulting firm Obsidian Risk Advisors, said Friday's renewal is likely not the last waiver Washington will issue.

"The conflict has done lasting damage to global energy markets, and the tools available to stabilise them are nearly exhausted," Erickson said.

Trump ballroom construction allowed for now: US appeals court

Reuters
Washington

A US appeals court allowed President Donald Trump's administration on Friday night to continue construction of a \$400mn ballroom on the site of the White House's demolished East Wing, setting a June hearing to review a Washington judge's order halting the project.

An order by a three-judge panel of the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit put the lower court's preliminary injunction on hold for now, giving the panel time to consider the US Justice Department's request for a longer pause while the appeal is pending.

The appeals court said it will hear arguments on June 5 on whether construction should be stopped during the appeal. The order did not address the merits of the underlying lawsuit, which challenges the Trump administration's authority to build the ballroom.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation, which filed the lawsuit last year, and the White House did not immediately respond to requests for



The demolition of the East Wing of the White House during construction of US President Donald Trump's proposed ballroom. (Reuters/File Photo)

comment after business hours.

Friday's ruling temporarily blocks a decision issued a day earlier by U.S. District Judge Richard Leon in Washington, who said the ballroom project was unlawful without approval from the US Congress.

The National Trust sued Trump and several federal agencies in December after the administration demolished the East Wing to make way for the ballroom, arguing the president and the National Park Service lacked authority to tear down the historic structure.

Trump has championed the ballroom as a defining addition to the White House and part of his broader push to reshape Washington.

Cuba authorises investments by diaspora members

AFP
Havana

The Cuban government has approved a measure allowing Cubans living abroad to invest in their home country, according to media reports on Friday, as the communist island seeks a way out of a severe economic crisis.

The new decree, approved on Thursday by the Council of State, allows "Cuban citizens living abroad... to participate in the Cuban economic model."

The move comes at a time when Cuba, under a US embargo since 1962, is facing a severe energy crisis that has crippled its economy after a de facto oil blockade by the US.

The energy crisis has prompted the Cuban government to expand the private sector, ending its state monopoly on fuel imports and allowing private entities to carry out direct imports.

Last month, the Cuban government authorised partnerships between public and private companies for the first time in nearly 60 years, though the communist

government will maintain a state monopoly in the health, education and defence sectors.

In 2021, the Cuban government authorised the opening of private enterprises with up to 100 employees for certain sectors of the economy, and by last year, they employed more than 30% of the active population and represented about 15% of the country's GDP.

Until recently, nearly 80% of the Cuban economy was based on a centralised production system under the control of state-owned enterprises.

Mexico mends ties with Spain in first presidential visit in 8 years

Reuters
Barcelona

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum and Spain's Pedro Sanchez met in Barcelona yesterday after a summit of progressive leaders, signalling a rapprochement during the first presidential visit to the Mediterranean country in eight years.

The meeting took place during Sheinbaum's visit to Barcelona to attend the fourth "In defense of democracy" summit, a gathering of global leftist leaders to mobilise advocates of these movements against the far right.

Sheinbaum's trip marks a softening of previously strained ties and was the first visit by a Mexican president to Spain since the ruling Morena party came to power in 2018.

Relations deteriorated under her predecessor and mentor, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who in 2019 demanded an apology for abuses committed during Spain's colonial rule in Mexico, a request that was not met at the time.

"There has already been a rapprochement from both the Spanish president and the king himself, which we acknowledge," Sheinbaum told reporters as she left the event, noting that she still outlined Mexico's stance on the importance of acknowledging the abuses committed during the colonisation of Latin America during her meeting with Sanchez. She said she had invited



Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum (left) greets Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez at the "Meeting in Defence of Democracy", a meeting of leftist leaders seeking to rally against the threat to democracy from the far-right in Barcelona yesterday. (AFP)

Sanchez to attend the fifth edition of the summit, to be held in Mexico next year.

"I believe that President Sheinbaum's presence here is a very important and positive sign of a rapprochement between the two countries," Spain's economy minister, Carlos Cuerdo, told reporters at the summit, highlighting the importance of boosting trade and investment ties, particularly in the energy, infrastructure and financial sectors.

Sheinbaum, meanwhile, thanked Sanchez for the invitation and noted that "there is no diplomatic crisis (with Spain); there never has been one."

Her administration last month invited Spain's King Felipe VI to attend the World Cup opening ceremony that will take place in June, a thawing after she did not invite him to her inauguration ceremony last year.

Felipe VI last month acknowledged abuses in his country's colonial past, softening the prior declination from the monarch to apologise for colonial-era abuses.

Spain ruled one of the world's largest empires between the 16th and 18th centuries, stretching across five continents, where colonial rule involved forced labour, land expropriation and violence against Indigenous peoples.



Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado gestures on stage in front of supporters in Madrid's Puerta del Sol yesterday. (AFP)

I don't regret gifting Nobel prize to Trump: Venezuela's Machado

AFP
Madrid

Venezuela's opposition leader Maria Corina Machado said yesterday she had "no regrets" about symbolically handing over her Nobel Peace Prize to US President Donald Trump in January.

"There is a leader in the world, a head of state in the world who risked the lives of his country's citizens for Venezuela's freedom," she told a news conference in Madrid.

Machado presented her Nobel prize to Trump when she met him in the White House just two weeks after he ordered US forces to attack Caracas and snatch Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro.

Trump, who has long coveted the award, is currently embroiled

in the Middle East war he started with his ally, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with air strikes on Iran at the end of February.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee, which awards the peace prize, made clear after Machado handed her 2025 Nobel medal to Trump that the actual honour it represents "cannot be revoked, shared, or transferred to others."

Machado said Trump's military operation to snatch Maduro, who is currently detained in New York facing US drug charges, was "something we Venezuelans will never forget."

"Consequently," she said, "no, I have no regrets" about gifting her Nobel medal to Trump.

Machado, who was in hiding before leaving Venezuela in December to collect her Nobel prize

in Oslo, said she was organising her return to the country in coordination with Washington.

Later, she told thousands of supporters at a gathering in Madrid that they should be preparing to go back home.

"Everything we have done over these long 27 years has been to prepare ourselves for a moment of reunion and of building a nation that will be free forever," she said, referring to the period under Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chavez.

Venezuela's opposition last week called for presidential elections.

Machado, who has not yet said if she would run in a future poll, was banned from running for president in the 2024 election that resulted in Maduro claiming a re-election victory that opposition groups say was rigged.

Peruvian prosecutors raid election records warehouse

AFP
Lima

Prosecutors on Friday raided a warehouse that houses the ballots cast in Peru's presidential election — a vote that ended in chaos, with complaints against officials and allegations of missing voter materials.

The raid was conducted at the National Office of Electoral Processes (ONPE), which organises the vote, "in order to determine whether it has fulfilled its duties regarding the election materials used," officials said on social media. Sunday's and Monday's votes are still being tallied, with partial vote counts progressing very slowly because almost all the remaining tally sheets have been challenged

and must undergo review from electoral courts.

About one million votes hang in the balance. With 93.3% of ballots processed, right-wing candidate Keiko Fujimori leads with 17%.

The top two candidates go to a runoff election, and a close race has emerged between leftist candidate Roberto Sanchez, who pulled 12% of the vote, and ultra-conservative Rafael Lopez Aliaga, with 11.9%.

The gap between them is around 13,000 votes. On Thursday, four boxes containing 1,200 ballots were discovered in a Lima trash bin, deepening doubts about the election, which was also marked by delays in the delivery of election materials that forced

authorities to extend voting. Roberto Burneo, president of the National Jury of Elections (JNE), Peru's highest electoral justice authority, told a congressional committee that "there are serious irregularities in the management and performance" of ONPE in the election.

ONPE chief Piero Corveto and three other officials have been reported to JNE for alleged crimes against the right to vote. A record 35 candidates ran for president of the chronically unstable Andean nation, where four of the last eight presidents were impeached by Congress. The campaign was dominated by a flurry of headline proposals from the right on how to combat a surge in extortion and contract killings.

Reuters
Madrid

US pressure on dissenting Latin American leaders could lead to a "rebellion" against Washington's influence, Colombian President Gustavo Petro warned in an interview with Spanish newspaper El Pais published yesterday.

Petro, a former member of the leftist M-19 guerrilla, has frequently clashed with President Donald Trump, whose administration placed him on a sanctions list, compiled by the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, for alleged involvement in the global illicit drug trade.

The 65-year-old, who travelled to Barcelona for a summit alongside the leaders of Spain, Brazil and Mexico, told El Pais the OFAC sanctions were being used



Colombia's President Gustavo Petro speaks to the press as he arrives at the summit "In defence of democracy" in Barcelona, Spain, yesterday. (Reuters)

as a political instrument to extort "those of us who espouse dissenting politics".

"It's a system like the one the Spanish king had a few centuries

ago. And what was Latin America's response? Rebellion. That's what will happen now if the US government isn't capable of rethinking its ties to Latin America," he said.

According to Petro, the US bombing of the Venezuelan capital, Caracas, in the operation to capture President Nicolas Maduro in January instilled fear in many leaders.

However, Petro said that his personal relationship with Trump was good. The two had spoken twice recently and shattered false narratives about each other, he said, adding he had not gone to Washington to "get on his knees to beg" but they instead met as equals.

Petro, who was elected in 2022, is set to leave office in August, as the Colombian constitution bars presidents from serving more than a single term.

New Zealand rejects military surveillance in Chinese airspace

AFP
Wellington

New Zealand rejected yesterday Beijing's allegations of "disruptive and irresponsible" military surveillance in Chinese airspace and insisted its maneuvers were part of UN-backed efforts to enforce sanctions against North Korea.

Beijing said on Friday that a New Zealand P-8A anti-submarine patrol aircraft had engaged

in "close-in reconnaissance and harassment in the airspace" in the Yellow and East China seas.

A spokesman for China's foreign ministry told reporters at a press briefing that the moves "undermined China's security interests, increased risks of misunderstanding and miscalculation, and gravely disrupted the order of civil aviation in relevant airspace".

In response the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) said the aircraft had been carrying out UN-mandated monitoring of North

Korean sanctions in the region.

"These activities are not directed at China but rather aim to monitor evasions of United Nations sanctions on North Korea, which do occur in the Yellow Sea and East China Sea," an NZDF spokesperson said. "The New Zealand Defence Force crew operated professionally and in accordance with international law and civil aviation procedures for the region," they added. "NZDF has reviewed the routes flown. We have no data which indicates they disrupted civil aviation."

China says its military activities around Taiwan 'entirely justified, reasonable'

Reuters
Taipei

China's regular military activities around Taiwan are "entirely justified and reasonable" and any tensions are the fault of the government in Taipei, the Chinese defence ministry said in a rare comment on Friday.

China, which views democratically governed Taiwan as its own territory, sends its warships and warplanes into the waters and skies around the island on an almost daily basis, to the condemnation of the Taiwanese government.

China generally does not provide regular commentary on its daily activities near Taiwan.

Chinese Defence Ministry spokesperson Zhang Xiaogang told reporters that Taiwan was an "inalienable part of Chinese territory".

"The People's Liberation Army organises training and exercise activities in the waters and airspace around the Taiwan island to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity, which is entirely justified, reasonable, and a matter of course," he said.

It was Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party which "distorts" Chinese activities, "peddling war anxiety, intimidating the people on the island, and stoking confrontation and antagonism across the Taiwan Strait", he added.

China refuses to speak to Taiwan President Lai Ching-te, saying he is a "separatist". He says only Taiwan's people can decide their future.

Speaking at a military base in southern Taiwan earlier on Friday, Lai said while everyone hoped for peace, only through strength can

true peace be achieved, and reiterated a call for the opposition-dominated parliament to pass his stalled \$40bn special defence budget.

"Only through continuous preparedness can we deter threats — by being ready to fight in order to avoid fighting, and by being capable of fighting in order to stop war," Lai said.

The US, Taiwan's main source of arms, has backed Lai's defence spending push.

China has repeatedly called on Washington to stop selling Taiwan weapons.

Zhang said Lai was using Taiwan's people's money to "pledge loyalty to and curry favour with the United States".

"What they truly care about is whether they can make more money, and they are not above profiting from war," he added, referring to the US.

China hits food delivery platforms with \$527mn fine

China has issued fines totalling 3.6bn yuan (\$527mn) to seven major e-commerce platforms for food safety violations, the State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR) said on Friday.

The regulator said platforms, including Alibaba-owned Taobao, JD.com, Meituan, Temu-owner Pinduoduo and Douyin — China's version of TikTok — had failed to check the licenses of stores on their apps and allowed "ghost food deliveries" from unverified vendors.

SAMR said in a statement it had "ordered seven e-commerce platforms to rectify their illegal activities... and imposed fines and confiscations

totalling 3.597bn yuan". The legal representatives of the companies were also fined a total of 19.7mn yuan (\$2.9mn), the market regulator said.

An investigation showed the platforms had "not strictly reviewed and checked the licenses of food operators entering their networks, and failed to fulfil the obligation of qualification review in accordance with the law," SAMR said.

They had also signed agreements with order-transfer platforms, which infringed on consumers' rights, SAMR said. (AFP)

Escaped wolf in S Korea recaptured

AFP
Seoul

A wolf that escaped from a South Korean zoo was recaptured on Friday, authorities said, after he caused a school closure, a huge nine-day search and a government gaffe over an AI-generated image.

The young male canine, named Neukgu, dug himself out of his enclosure in the central city of Daejeon on April 8 and had been on the run ever since.

Authorities deployed hundreds of officers, drones and thermal cameras to track down the elusive runaway, who kept slipping through the net despite several sightings.

He was finally caught in the early hours of Friday, with the Daejeon city government writing on X: "Welcome back, #Neukgu!"

Authorities finally caught up with the 30-kilogramme fugitive after receiving a tip about a sighting in a park in Daejeon, the Yonhap news agency reported, citing city officials.

Officials shot Neukgu with a tranquilliser dart and captured him alive, it said.

The city government posted a video of night-time rescuers hauling a sleepy-looking Neukgu onto a sack and heaving him into a crate.

It posted photos on X of the shaggy returnee lying asleep on a veterinary bed with a muzzle over his snout.

"Veterinary examination results: Both pulse and body temperature are within normal range," the post added.

"We would like to thank everyone who offered their support to ensure Neukgu's safe and healthy return. We also apologise to the public for the anxiety and concern (this incident) has caused," the government said in a statement.

Neukgu, who was born in 2024, made his daring breakout by digging out of his enclosure and damaging a fence on his way to freedom.

His escape prompted a local elementary school to close over safety concerns, and the local government dispatched hundreds of firefighters, police officers and military troops in a bid to get him back.

Animal rights activists called for better animal protection measures after the wolf's return, noting a 2018 escape from the same facility in which a puma, Bborong, was reportedly shot dead.



Veterinarians and other staff members examining the condition of a wolf named Neukgu after it was recaptured following its escape from a zoo at O-World Theme Park in Daejeon on Friday. (AFP)

"The fact that Neukgu has returned to his cage at the zoo does not signify a 'happy ending' to the incident," the Korean Animal Welfare Association said in a statement.

After his escape, an image purporting to show a light-brown wolf trotting through a Daejeon intersection was shared widely online.

The city government and several major media outlets widely shared the image, which turned out to have been generated by artificial intelligence.

An AFP analysis confirmed that the image was inauthentic. AFP had initially redistributed the image and later withdrew it.

Australia extends relaxed fuel standards to bolster supply

Reuters
Sydney

Australia extended an easing on fuel-quality standards until September, Energy Minister Chris Bowen said yesterday, as the nation grapples with the impact of the Iran war on its fuel supply.

"I've decided to extend the period of higher sulphur for petrol in Australia," Bowen said in televised remarks.

The relaxation, announced in March, increases the amount of sulphur permitted in fuel to 50 parts per million from the usual 10 parts.

Australia, which imports most of its fuel, has experienced localised shortages as the war, which entered its eighth week on Saturday, has disrupted supply chains.

Production of diesel, jet fuel and petrol at a fire-hit oil refinery owned by Viva Energy (VEA.AX) in Victoria, Australia's second-most-populous state, remained un-

changed from Friday, Bowen said.

"The Geelong refinery is working at 80% capacity for diesel and jet fuel and 60% capacity for petrol — that is still the case," he said.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said on Friday the fire would not trigger any fuel restrictions.

Also this week Albanese secured a deal with Malaysian state energy firm Petronas to supply excess fuel to Australia after trips to Singapore and Brunei aimed at strengthening energy supplies.

Australia, Japan ink \$7bn warship deal

AFP, Reuters
Sydney

Japan agreed yesterday on a landmark A\$10bn (\$7bn) deal to provide Australia's navy with the first of almost a dozen stealth frigates, part of a wider military build up by Canberra aimed at boosting its long-range firepower to deter China.

Defence Ministers Richard Marles and Shinjiro Koizumi signed a memorandum "reaffirming the Australian and Japanese governments' shared commitment to the successful delivery" of the warships, Marles said in a statement.

Under the deal announced last year and billed as one of Japan's biggest defence export deals since World War II, Australia will pay A\$10bn over the next 10 years to acquire the fleet of stealth frigates.

The deal struck in August anchors Japan's push away from its post-war pacifism to forge security ties beyond its alliance with the US to counter China.

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries is to supply the Royal Australian Navy with three upgraded Mogami-class multi-role frigates built in Japan from 2029. Eight more frigates will be built in Australia.

Japan's Defence Ministry posted on X that Koizumi and Marles welcomed the "conclusion of contracts for General Purpose Frigates, and confirmed to further strengthen bilateral defence ties" in the signing in Melbourne.

Japan's Defence Minister Koizumi Shinjiro attended the signing of the contract to deliver the first three of the ships, Australia's defence ministry said.

"This is the fastest acquisition for the Royal Australian Navy in peacetime," Australia's Minister for Defence Industry Pat Conroy said.



Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Richard Marles (left) and Japan's Minister of Defense Shinjiro Koizumi shake hands during a Defence Ministers' Meeting at the Commonwealth Parliament Offices in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

"We are working closely with Japanese and Australian industry partners as we acquire one of the most, if not the most, advanced general-purpose frigates in the world," he added.

Australia is striving to expand its fleet of major warships from 11 to 26 over the next decade.

Mogami-class warships are advanced stealth frigates equipped with a potent array of weapons.

Japan is deepening co-operation with US allies in the Asia-Pacific region that, like Tokyo, are involved in territorial disputes with China.

Both Japan and Australia are members of the "Quad" group alongside India and the US.

Wikimedia to hold talks with Indonesia after blackout threat

The Wikimedia Foundation said yesterday it will hold talks with the Indonesian government after Jakarta threatened to block Wikipedia over registration rules the firm says "departs from international human rights norms". A meeting will take place next week to discuss Indonesia's demands for Wikimedia to register as an "electronic system provider" (PSE), the Wikipedia parent company said in a statement sent to AFP.

Under a 2020 regulation, all PSE companies, including those based outside the country, are required to register for what the government says are for legal and user protection purposes.

Critics have pointed to a provision that requires registered PSEs to take down content deemed as "causing public unrest and disturbing public order" as a free speech restriction.

The government on Wednesday

gave the foundation seven days to register or face its services, including Wikipedia Indonesia, being blocked in the country of 284mn people. "We intend to explain the Foundation's unique position as a nonprofit technology host for Wikipedia... and the significant ways that registration under Indonesia's MR5 regulation departs from international human rights norms and threatens the privacy and security of Wikipedia editors," the foundation's statement said. It added "we will resist inappropriate orders, and we push back on laws that require very rapid and guaranteed disclosure of user data without the ability to raise appropriate legal objections". A blockage of Wikipedia in Indonesia will "deny the fourth most populous country in the world access to the largest free knowledge repository", the statement said. (AFP)

Thai farmers pin hopes on microbes to end annual burning crisis

AFP
Chiang Rai, Thailand

Rice farmers Siriporn and Amnat Taidee used to burn their paddy fields between plantings — a common method of clearing crop residue partly blamed for toxic smog that blankets much of Thailand every spring.

A quick and affordable way to prepare for a new growing cycle, the practice has long been seen as the only feasible option for millions of Thai rice farmers.

But for the couple from Chiang Rai, abandoning what Amnat called "the old way of doing things" for new microbial solutions has been a boon.

Thanks to the hungry bacteria that chew up post-harvest leftovers — their soil is softer, their yields are up and their fertiliser bills are down.

"My life has changed," said Siriporn, 63, as she sloshed through a verdant paddy field in Chiang Rai. "I'm so happy... we don't have to burn anymore."

Every year between January and April, smoke from crop residue, for-

est fires and industrial emissions — compounded by smog drifting over from neighbouring countries — pushes Thailand's air quality to dangerous levels.

Bangkok has restricted burning for years, but a recent crackdown has put government environmental goals on a collision course with traditional agricultural practices.

The threat of heavy fines and even prison has frightened farmers — but many feel they still have no alternative.

"It simply pushes the burden onto farmers," Witsanu Attavanich, an environmental economist at Kasetsart University, said of the ban on open burning.

The Taidees were early converts, using a product called Soil Digest developed by a Thai scientist using five strains of Bacillus bacteria — one of which is derived from traditional fermented soybeans.

Siriporn said the solution decomposed the "terrible" stubble on the fields in a matter of days and helped restore the soil.

"The rice is coming in great and the soil is healthy," she says. "This microbial stuff is a game-changer!"



A farmer inspecting a rice field that has recently been treated with microbial solution Soil Digest, in Chiang Rai province, Thailand. (AFP)

Last year, authorities in Chiang Rai — one of Thailand's main rice-growing provinces — began encouraging local farmers to try microbial solutions.

So far, around 2,000 have made the switch — a fraction of the province's 100,000 rice farmers, but a start.

"If we are to stop the burning, we must provide them with multiple alternatives," said Orracha Wongsa-roj, a provincial agricultural official. Microbial products have long

been used in Thai agriculture, but demand for newer formulations targeting straw decomposition has grown sharply since the burning crackdown intensified a few years ago.

The Thai government promotes free access to microbial products for farmers — but officials told AFP that stocks had run out and they were struggling to scale up supply.

For those who cannot access government supplies, private market alternatives can be pricey.

In Pathum Thani, a rice-growing province in central Thailand, farmer Samart Atthong spent 1,200 baht (\$37) hiring an agricultural drone to spray Soil Digest over his fields.

"People may only see the extra cost of the microbes, but they should look in the long run," Samart said.

"Once the soil heals, we won't need nearly as much fertiliser," he said. "Where I live, burning has dropped to nearly zero."

Striding through air thick with dust from yeast, retired professor Wichien Yongmanitchai watches the whirring machines producing his microbial concoction.

He started by isolating local bacterial strains, convinced that native ones would work best in Thailand's tropical environment.

He hopes his invention — sold as Soil Digest — will fix Thailand's annual air crisis for good.

Without microbial treatment, rice straw takes around 30 days to soften enough to till — his solution works in five to seven days.

Early trials show yield increases of up to 20%. Wichien also said the bacteria can reduce methane emis-

sions from paddy fields by at least 20%, helping Thailand meet its climate commitments.

"This is one of the biggest benefits to make (for achieving) carbon neutrality in the rice field."

But Wichien knows his small operation cannot reach Thailand's 20mn farmers alone. And without government and corporate backing, the gap may prove too wide.

Independent experts agree the technology shows promise — but warn the system around it must change.

"The government wants to reduce straw burning — but there is no one-size-fits-all solution," said Nipon Poapongsakorn, an agricultural policy expert at the Thailand Development Research Institute.

To start with he suggests conditional subsidies tied to a no-burn commitment, combined with machinery access and farmer education.

Wichien is already thinking beyond Thailand to paddy fields across Southeast Asia and ultimately Africa. "I don't want anything else. I just want to make it work."

Myanmar release of Suu Kyi top ally spurs small democracy hope

AFP
Yangon

The release of Myanmar's ousted former president has piqued speculation about the fate of detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi, but little optimism among citizens and analysts watching for a democracy comeback.

"I don't expect much from this release," said one 50-year-old Yangon resident, speaking on condition of anonymity for security reasons.

"There is no reason to be thankful because he was arrested unjustly in the first place," she added.

Myanmar's military swept aside the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in a 2021 coup, detaining the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and senior aides including her ceremonial president Win Myint.

His pardon on Friday was the biggest concession yet by the country's post-coup leadership headed by Min Aung Hlaing, who ruled for five years as military chief before last week being sworn in as civilian president.

The release has raised the ques-

tion of whether 80-year-old Suu Kyi may soon be freed or shifted to house arrest.

"This is definitely a possibility," said International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) research fellow Morgan Michaels, while cautioning "such measures should not be misconstrued as a genuine turn toward peace or reconciliation".

Suu Kyi's family mansion in Yangon witnessed no security buildup on Friday or yesterday morning, AFP journalists saw, hinting she remains sequestered in the sprawling military-dominated capital Naypyidaw.

"There is no sign of moving auntie back to her home yet," a source from her dissolved National League for Democracy (NLD) party told AFP anonymously for security reasons on Saturday, using the affectionate term followers refer to her by.

'Bargaining chips'

Min Aung Hlaing's pardon of Win Myint was one of his first acts as civilian president and on its face would seem to soften his stance.

But analysts argue it is actually a sign of the unassailed strength of his post-coup leadership.



Relatives surround a bus carrying released prisoners as it drives out from Insein Prison during an amnesty to mark Myanmar's new year in Yangon on Friday. (AFP)

"Using political prisoners as bargaining chips for Min Aung Hlaing's political manoeuvring should not be seen as reform or opening, but a measure of confidence in the new regime's stability," said independent Myanmar analyst David Mathieson.

When Min Aung Hlaing launched his coup he made allegations Suu Kyi's landslide majority of MPs had won their seats through massive voter fraud in 2020 polls.

The putsch triggered a civil war, and after five years of ruling by dik-

Min Aung Hlaing oversaw a rerun of the vote — barred from rebel-held territory, excluding Suu Kyi's party and punishing criticism of the poll with prison time.

In January it delivered a walkover win for the military's allies in civilian politics, who backed Min Aung Hlaing to serve as president in a transition democracy watchdogs have derided as a rebranding of military rule.

For analyst Mathieson, Win Myint's release is just another part

of that "authoritarian theatre".

"This isn't a genuine amnesty, it's character laundering," he said.

IISS fellow Michaels said forgiveness orders are a key survivalist strategy for the leadership as it makes a bid to recover from its post-coup pariah status in some quarters.

"Min Aung Hlaing's decision to release President Win Myint is part of a conflict management strategy designed to reduce domestic and international pressure," he said.

The military leadership "has a long history of offering limited concession or compromise when the costs of its draconian rule and violent repression become prohibitive to institutional objectives," he added.

'Watched closely'

Win Myint was a close confidante to Suu Kyi, barred from holding the presidency under a constitution drafted during a stint of military rule prior to her ascendancy — a rare decade-long interlude when control was ceded to civilians.

Friday's mass amnesty saw all prisoners with sentences under 40 years have one-sixth of their remaining terms reduced.

A source close to Suu Kyi's legal case requesting anonymity for security reasons told AFP the blanket measure cut a chunk off her 27-year term for convictions rights groups say were fabricated to sideline her.

Meanwhile Win Myint was freed and "in good health" at his daughter's house in the capital Naypyidaw, according to an NLD spokesman, but has yet to make any public remarks.

Michaels said releases such as his "may offer opportunities for savvy opponents".

"If some opposition groups agree to 'play the game' and shift contest into the political arena, even partially, they will have a good chance at winning more concessions," he said.

"At present, however, most opposition groups and the activist community insist that the ongoing transition offers no such opportunity".

One Myanmar citizen in Yangon was cynical the released but isolated president Win Myint could become a rallying figure.

"He will still be watched closely," said the 27-year-old, speaking anonymously for security reasons.

Kashmiris depart for Haj



A relative hugs a Kashmiri Haj pilgrim outside the Haj House before she departs for Makkah for the annual pilgrimage, in Srinagar, yesterday. (Reuters)

New Delhi protests attack on Indian-flagged ships in Hormuz

AFP
New Delhi

New Delhi summoned the Iranian ambassador yesterday to lodge a protest over a "shooting incident" involving two Indian-flagged ships in the Strait of Hormuz, the foreign ministry said.

Iran has reversed its pledge to reopen the strategic trade route to commercial traffic during a ceasefire in the Middle East war in protest at a US counter-blockade of the waterway, a crucial passage for crude oil and gas.

Security monitors said several commercial ships came under fire and threats from Iranian forces yesterday as they tried to cross the strait.

India's foreign ministry said in a statement that Secretary

views to the Iranian authorities".
Monitoring site TankerTrackers.com said in post on X that "two Indian vessels were forced back west out of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran's Sepah (IRGC) Navy", adding one of the vessels was "an Indian-flagged VLCC supertanker carrying 2 mn barrels of Iraqi oil".
India, the world's second-largest buyer of liquefied petroleum gas, has managed to secure passage for several Indian-flagged vessels in recent weeks.
India imports about 60% of its LPG needs and has been grappling with a gas crunch since the war in the Middle East began on February 28.
New Delhi maintains strong relations with Tehran but has steadily expanded co-operation with Iran's rival Israel in defence, agriculture, technology and cybersecurity.

Vikram Misri summoned the Iranian ambassador and "conveyed India's deep concern at the shooting incident earlier today involving two Indian-flagged ships in the Strait of Hormuz".

New Delhi also urged Iran to "resume at the earliest the process of facilitating India-bound ships across the Strait", the statement said, adding that the envoy "undertook to convey these

Irish alleged crime boss Kinahan arrested in Dubai

Irish suspected cartel boss Daniel Joseph Kinahan was arrested in Dubai on Friday on foot of a warrant issued in Ireland over alleged serious crime offences, according to Irish broadcaster RTE.

Irish police said in a statement they were aware of "the arrest of an Irish national in the United Arab Emirates".
"The male, in his late 40's, was arrested on foot of an arrest warrant issued by the Irish courts in relation to alleged serious organised crime offences," said a statement.

Dubai police announced on social media on Friday "the arrest of 'D.J.K.' — an Irish national and a member of a gang implicated in international criminal offences".
The Irishman's arrest came "just 48 hours after the Public Prosecution issued an arrest warrant on April 15," said the statement. Irish Justice Minister Jim O'Callaghan welcomed the arrest. "Today's arrest

follows my request to the UAE for extradition of this individual to face charges in Ireland," he said.
Based out of Dubai, a group allegedly run by Kinahan known as the Kinahan Organised Crime Group (KOCG), has been linked by US and European authorities to a vast criminal enterprise encompassing drug smuggling and money laundering. The transnational group, also known as the 'Kinahan cartel', is alleged to be the most powerful organised crime in Ireland.
The US government imposed sanctions on him in 2022 after he and other members of his family were identified as leaders of the Kinahan cartel.
"The arrest is in accordance with the bilateral agreement on extradition between Ireland and UAE," said Irish police.
Kinahan's detention "remains a matter for the authorities in the UAE at this time," it added. (AFP)

UK counter-terror police probe another arson attack

UK counter-terror police were yesterday investigating an arson attack on a London building that was formerly used by a Jewish charity, following similar incidents in recent weeks.

No one was injured in the fire late Friday in Hendon, in the northwest of Britain's capital, the Metropolitan Police said in a statement, without specifying the premises targeted. Officers stood guard outside an empty office that still contained the sign Jewish Futures, an educational organisation, an AFP photographer saw.
"We are aware of what appears to be another attempted arson, this time targeting a premises in north London previously used by the Jewish community," the Community Security Trust charity, which provides safety advice to Jewish groups, said in a statement. "It caused minimal damage to a nearby doorway and no injuries."

The incident comes after police arrested two people over a separate arson attack on a synagogue in nearby

Finchley, on Wednesday.

In late March, four Jewish community ambulances were torched in Golders Green, also in north London.
"At this stage last night's arson is not being linked to other incidents in the northwest London area over the last week or last month's arson in Golders Green, but counter-terror officers are leading due to the similarities of each attack," Helen Flanagan of the Met's counter-terrorism unit said in a statement.
Police were called to the scene shortly after 10:30pm (2130 GMT) on Friday after a man was spotted approaching a row of shops carrying a plastic bag later found to contain three bottles containing "fluid", the Met said. He placed the bag by a building before lighting the items inside, it added. When they failed to fully ignite, the man fled the scene. The shopfront sustained minor damage and no arrests have been made, the force added. (AFP)

Tweed-clad cyclists pedal through London in vintage style parade

Reuters
London

Tweed jackets fluttered and bowler hats bobbed as hundreds of cyclists took to London's streets yesterday for the city's annual Tweed Run, a leisurely ride that focuses more on sartorial splendour than speed.

The event, which wound through central London past landmarks including Big Ben, had participants don their finest vintage British attire for what amounted to a rolling fashion parade on wheels.

"It's a bit like Goodwood Revival, isn't it? It's a bit sort of heritage. Everyone has to make an effort, otherwise you'd stand out. And there are some fantastic outfits here today," Chris Edworthy, a rider from Sussex, told Reuters.

Goodwood Revival is an annual festival at the Goodwood Circuit featuring classic racing cars and motorcycles.

The Tweed Run was established in 2009. The organisers say "proper attire" is expected

and the term 'overdressed' does not exist in their vocabulary. Tweed suits, plus fours, bow ties and jaunty flat caps are encouraged.

From waistcoats to pantafoons, riders embraced the nostalgic aesthetic with gusto while one participant even rode the

iconic penny farthing, a popular bicycle in the 1800s that features a massive front wheel.

"For me, it's the attention to detail," said Steve Clyde, another cyclist from Sussex. "You look at everyone's outfits and you think they've really put some thought into that."



People ride their bicycles during the annual Tweed Run across London, yesterday. (Reuters)

China touts Italy trade ties even as data casts doubt on rebalancing plan

Reuters
Beijing

China touted closer trade ties with Italy during talks with its visiting deputy prime minister, even as official data showed Beijing's surplus with the eurozone economy has continued to widen and a 2027 deadline to "rebalance" ties approaches.

Trade between the world's second-largest economy and Europe's third-biggest market has topped \$70bn in each of the past five years.

The trade partners agreed the

rebalancing effort during a 2024 visit by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni after Italy quit China's flagship 'Belt and Road' programme, partly because of insufficient Chinese investment to offset the trade gap.

"China is willing to work with Italy to further tap into the potential for co-operation," Commerce Minister Wang Wentao told Antonio Tajani on Thursday, his ministry said in a summary.

"Italy is expected to play a constructive role in promoting the healthy and stable development of China-European Union economic and trade relations," Wang added, in a nod to Rome's key role for Beijing's

dealings with the 27-nation bloc.

TRADE SURPLUS HAS WIDENED, CHINESE CUSTOMS DATA SHOWS

But Chinese customs data shows the trade surplus with Italy has only widened over the past three years, with its exports of \$51bn last year up from \$45bn in 2023, while imports from Italy slipped to \$25bn from \$27bn.

China's top export to Italy last year was smartphones, of which it sold \$2.5bn, followed by low-value consignments at \$2.3bn, typically consisting of cheap items from e-commerce platforms such as Temu and Shein.

Medicines and handbags account for Italy's biggest sales in China, although demand for luxury items appears to be slowing as the Chinese economy struggles to build momentum.

"It is essential to continue along a path towards a more balanced economic relationship," Tajani told state-owned China Daily in an interview published on Friday.

He singled out fashion, machinery, pharmaceuticals and chemicals as potential growth areas.

KICKING THE CAN DOWN THE ROAD

Italy was the only member of the Group of Seven nations to sign

up to the BRI, pursuing membership despite appeals by the US to steer clear of Chinese President Xi Jinping's main foreign policy programme in 2019.

From Beijing's perspective, that raises the prospect of Italy again diverging from Washington and its EU counterparts, particularly as differences over the Iran war have recently strained ties between US President Donald Trump and Meloni, one of his closest European allies.

Analysts said Meloni's 2024 visit and the adoption of the action plan helped China soften the diplomatic embarrassment after Italy's withdrawal from the Belt

and Road programme.

But with the plan's 2027 deadline looming, China is in the spotlight to meet targets and fend off European accusations that it is delaying reshaping its economic model, in the struggle to revive domestic demand and lean on exports of cheap goods.

Rome backed European Commission-proposed tariffs in a bloc-splitting 2024 vote, aiming to avert a "flood" of Chinese electric vehicles Brussels had warned against.

But it has signalled it would welcome more sales by Chinese automakers investing in manufacturing in Italy.

Pakistan military chief, PM head home after Iran war diplomacy blitz

AFP
Islamabad

Pakistan's powerful military chief and prime minister concluded yesterday separate visits aimed at ending the Iran war, with Field Marshal Asim Munir leaving Tehran and premier Shehbaz Sharif headed home from Turkiye.

Munir met Iran's top leadership and peace negotiators during a three-day visit to Tehran, a Pakistani military statement said.

The visit showed Pakistan's "unwavering resolve to facilitate a negotiated settlement... and to promote peace, stability, and prosperity"; the military said ahead of expected US-Iran talks in Islamabad in the coming days.

The Pakistani military chief held negotiations with the country's president, foreign minister, parliament speaker and the head of Iran's military central command centre.

Parliament speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi led the Iranian delegation to Islamabad for peace talks with the US last week, the highest level face-to-face con-

tact between the two countries in decades.

Those talks ended without an agreement, but diplomacy continued thereafter, with Pakistan's prime minister undertaking a three-country tour to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkiye to push the peace process.

That visit also concluded yesterday, with Sharif and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar departing a diplomacy forum in Antalya, ac-

ording to statements from both officials.

A second round of talks between the United States and Iran is expected in Islamabad this coming week.

In Tehran, "the Field Marshal underscored the need for dialogue, de-escalation, and peaceful resolution of outstanding issues through sustained diplomatic engagements", the Pakistani statement said.

Greek deputy minister quits in row over qualifications

Greek deputy agriculture and food minister Makarios Lazaridis has resigned, following accusations that he was unqualified and had only been nominated because of close connections to the ruling conservatives.

Lazaridis stepped down yesterday just two weeks after he was appointed in a cabinet reshuffle triggered by an investigation into alleged embezzlement of European agricultural subsidies, which has caused a major row.

In his letter to Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who is also from the New Democracy (ND) party, Lazaridis said he had "led a life of honesty" and "dignity" which he did not want tarnished.

He added he had "repelled, with reasoned arguments and political dignity, the attacks of a toxic opposition which rely on muck-raking and slander over a matter that, moreover, dates back some 20 years".

The left-wing opposition and the media recently revealed that Lazaridis, a 56-year-old member of parliament, had also used his ND connections in 2007 to secure a position as an expert at the ministry of education without having appropriate university qualifications.

"How much longer will Mr Mitsotakis continue to use his personal connections?" Socialist main opposition party PASOK recently asked.

The resignation is the latest blow to the Mitsotakis government which took office in 2019.

Two weeks ago three government officials resigned, including the minister for agriculture, after the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPPO) sought a waiver of parliamentary immunity amid an investigation into fraud involving European agricultural subsidies paid to Greek farmers. - AFP

Austria recalls baby food jars in health scare

An entire range of HiPP baby food jars is being recalled from more than 1,000 SPAR supermarkets in Austria over safety concerns, the baby food maker and the supermarket chain said yesterday.

The HiPP brand said it was recalling its "entire line of baby food jars sold at SPAR Austria" as "it cannot be ruled out that a hazardous substance was introduced into the 'HiPP Carrot/Potato - 190 grams' product through tampering, and consumption could be fatal."

A spokesperson for SPAR supermarket told Reuters that the mass recall was a precautionary measure and affects 1,500 of the retailer's stores in Austria, with no impact on outlets elsewhere.

"According to our current knowledge, this critical situation involves an external criminal interference that affects the SPAR Austria distribution channel," a HiPP spokesperson told Reuters, adding that its production and quality assurance remained unchanged.

Customers were asked not to consume the product, which can be identified by a white label with a red circle on the bottom of the jar, and instead return it to the store of purchase.

Police in the eastern Burgenland region have put out a call for witnesses, according to the statement, but declined to comment when contacted by AFP.

SPAR and HiPP said customers would receive a full refund on returned products.

Police in the Austrian region of Burgenland are seeking information from the public, HiPP said.

No further details were available, notably regarding the nature of the deadly substance mentioned and the events which sparked the investigation.

In February, French food giant Danone recalled more than 120 batches of infant milk formula in Austria and Germany, according to Austria's Ages food agency. - Reuters/AFP



Peter Magyar

Magyar's parliamentary majority in Hungary rises after final count

Reuters
Budapest

Hungarian election winner Peter Magyar's Tisza party has increased its parliamentary supermajority to 141 seats out of 199 after the processing of postal, foreign mission, and transferred votes, the election office said yesterday.

Centre-right Tisza (Respect and Freedom) won a landslide victory in last Sunday's election, ending the 16-year rule of right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban that became a template for many conservative rulers across the West.

Orban quickly conceded after Magyar unexpectedly secured a sweeping majority amid record turnout, a result that could allow him to overhaul Orban's contested rule-of-law reforms.

"An unprecedented majority, an unprecedented mandate, and at the same time, responsibility," Magyar said in a statement on the final result.

Highlighting the scale of the political shift, Orban's Fidesz party, which won 87 of 106 single-member constituencies at the 2022 election, won just 10 last Sunday and will have 52 lawmakers in parliament.

Magyar's victory has triggered a rally in Hungarian assets on hopes for a reset in EU ties strained by years of conflict under Orban and the possible release of billions of EU fund-

ing suspended over reforms that Brussels says undermine democracy.

"While a successful unlocking of EU funds would support investment and lower sovereign risk premia, the impact on growth will materialise primarily over the medium term," Capital Economics analyst Liam Peach said in a note. "In the near term, the outlook remains shaped by external factors - notably the Iran conflict - and domestic fiscal policy."

A preliminary tally had put the number of Tisza lawmakers at 138, already exceeding the two-thirds majority Magyar needed to undo Orban's constitutional overhaul and tackle corruption.

The final count rose to 141 once all votes were tallied.

Magyar has pledged to launch a sweeping anti-corruption drive after taking office on May 9 or 10 as part of wider efforts to secure the release of EU funds and revive an economy that has been near stagnation for the past three years.

Orban has regularly denied any wrongdoing and said Hungary was no more corrupt than other European countries.

However, in an online interview on Thursday, the veteran leader said widespread media reports about wealth accumulated by businessmen close to Fidesz had likely contributed to his defeat.

He did not comment on the accuracy of the reports.

Man in his 80s first in France to formally apologise for family's slavery links

A man in his 80s issued yesterday what is believed to be the first formal apology by someone in France for their family's role in transatlantic slavery, saying that he hoped others - including the government - would follow.

Pierre Guillon de Prince's ancestors, based in Nantes, France's largest port for transatlantic slavery, were shipowners who transported around 4,500 enslaved Africans and owned plantations in the Caribbean.

Guillon de Prince said other French families must confront their historical ties to slavery and the state should go beyond symbolic gestures to address the past, including through reparations.

"Faced with the rise of racism in our society, I felt a responsibility not to let this past be erased," the 86-year-old said, adding he wanted to pass the family history on to his grandchildren.

He delivered the apology to a gathering in Nantes ahead of the inauguration of an 18m replica ship mast, alongside Dieudonné Boutrin, a descendant of enslaved people from the Caribbean island of Martinique.



This picture taken in March last year shows Pierre Guillon de Prince and Dieudonné Boutrin, a 59-year-old descendant of enslaved Africans in Martinique, president of the association La Coque Nomade-Fraternité, a human rights association in Nantes which campaigns on slavery and reparations, at the Memorial of Slavery in Nantes, France. - Reuters

The two work together at Coque Nomade-Fraternité, an association dedicated to "breaking the silence" around slavery, and said the mast would serve as a "beacon of humanity".

"Many families of descendants of slave traders don't dare speak out for fear of reopening old wounds and anger," said Boutrin, 61. "Pierre's apology is a courageous act."

From the 15th to the 19th century, at least 12.5mn Africans were abducted and forcibly transported, mostly on European ships. France trafficked an estimated 1.3mn people.

Ukraine strikes Russian refineries, Crimea oil depot, Baltic Sea port

Reuters
Kyiv/Moscow

Ukrainian drones struck a handful of Russia's oil facilities overnight, including two oil refineries in the Samara region, an oil depot in Crimea and a Baltic Sea port that exports petroleum products, Russian local governors and a Ukrainian army official said yesterday.

Kyiv's troops have in recent weeks stepped up attacks on Russian oil depots and refineries - key sources of revenue for Moscow's war budget - sometimes targeting sites thousands of kilometres from Ukraine's borders.

In the Leningrad region, which surrounds St Petersburg and borders Finland, Governor Alexander Drozdenko said a fire had been put out at Vysotsk port, which houses a terminal operated by Lukoil handling exports of fuel oil, naphtha, diesel and vacuum gas oil.

In a statement on the Telegram messaging app acknowledging the port attack, Ukraine's drone forces commander, Robert Brovdi, said Ukrainian forces also attacked oil refineries in the cities of Novokuibyshevsk and Syzran in the Samara region.

Both sites have been repeatedly struck in the course of Russia's war in Ukraine.

"Make Russian Oil Great Again," he wrote sarcastically.

Brovdi also criticised the US decision to renew a waiver allowing countries to buy sanctioned Russian oil at sea.

Vyacheslav Fedorishchev, the Samara regional governor, said industrial targets came under attack. He did not name the facilities.

On the Russian-occupied Crimean peninsula, the Moscow-backed governor of Sevastopol said that 22 drones had been downed, with incidents of damage across the city, including a fire at a fuel tank.

Ukraine's Brovdi said Kyiv had targeted an oil depot.

Ukraine's SBU security service said it also struck two Russian landing ships and a

warship based on the peninsula.

According to Brovdi, a series of recent strikes on Russia's oil logistics at Primorsk, Ust-Luga, Sheskhari and Tuapse reduced total daily oil shipments by about 880,000 barrels.

Reuters could not immediately verify the figure.

Separately, authorities in the southern Krasnodar region said yesterday that a fire at an oil depot in Tikhoretsk, and another at an oil terminal at the Black Sea port of Tuapse, which had burned since Thursday, have been extinguished.

Both fires, authorities have said, were caused by Ukrainian drone strikes.



A Rapid Operational Response Unit member stands by an armoured vehicle outside a supermarket, where police killed a man who opened fire in a city district and barricaded himself into the supermarket in Kyiv. - Reuters

Six killed in rare shooting, hostage situation in Kyiv

Reuters/AFP
Kyiv

Ukrainian police killed a man alleged to have opened fire yesterday at passersby in a Kyiv district before barricading himself into a supermarket with hostages and refusing to negotiate in an incident that killed six people.

An AFP reporter saw the supermarket - which had blood stains on its shop window - cordoned off by a heavy security presence, with officers wearing bulletproof vests and crime investigators arriving at the scene.

The assailant's motive was not immediately known.

Ukraine's Security Service said the shooting was being investigated as a terrorist act.

President Volodymyr Zelensky, speaking in his nightly video address, said that the shooting happened in the leafy Holsiivskyi district, injuring 14 people, including a 12-year-old boy.

"He took hostages and unfortunately, one of them was killed," Zelensky said. "Four people died simply on the street. One woman died in hospital after being seriously wounded."

An employee of the supermarket, Tetyana, told AFP that she had heard sounds "in the store, like champagne being popped or balloons bursting several times. Then the customers started shouting, 'Run!'".

"There's a spot where you can hide behind the refrigerators, and we ran there. I heard a man moaning," she recounted, her voice trembling.

Shootings of this nature are extremely rare in Ukraine.

Video from the scene showed emergency crews loading at least one body into an ambulance.

Unofficial Telegram channels quoted witnesses as saying that the suspect had moved down a street and shot and killed people at point-blank range without warning before entering the supermarket.

"The shooter in Kyiv was liquidated during the arrest," Interior Minister Ihor Klymenko said on Telegram. "Special forces of the... national police stormed the store where the attacker was. He took people hostage and shot at a policeman during his detention. Before that, negotiators tried to contact him."

Klymenko told reporters at the scene that officers had tried for 40 minutes without success to negotiate with the suspect.

"We tried to persuade him. Realising that there was likely an injured person inside, we offered to bring in tourniquets to stop the bleeding... But he didn't respond," he said. "That's why

the order was given to eliminate him."

Klymenko said the man had owned a registered weapon and secured a medical certificate to use it.

Prosecutor-General Ruslan Kravchenko said the shooter had been identified as a 58-year-old native of Moscow.

Zelensky said the suspect had a criminal record and had set fire to the apartment where he was registered before going into the street with the gun.

The president said he had lived for some time in the eastern Donetsk region, one of the focal points of the four-year war with Russia.

Kravchenko said the suspect had brandished an automatic weapon.

He posted a photo showing a blurred prone figure covered in blood inside a store, a weapon lying nearby.



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GULF TIMES

What's in the Lebanon ceasefire deal and will it hold?

Israel and Lebanon have agreed to a US-backed ceasefire in fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, a deal meant to enable broader US-Iran negotiations but one that will see Israeli forces maintain positions deep inside southern Lebanon.

Israel and Lebanon agreed to implement a "cessation of hostilities" on April 16 at 2100 GMT for an initial period of 10 days to enable peace negotiations between the two countries, according to a text of the deal released by the State Department.

The deal says Lebanon's government, with international support, would take "meaningful steps" to prevent Hezbollah and other groups from carrying out attacks against Israeli targets.

It also says that Israel and Lebanon recognise the country's security forces "as having exclusive responsibility for Lebanon's sovereignty and national defence", a reference to a bid by the government since 2025 to disarm Hezbollah.

Under the agreement, "Israel shall preserve its right to take all necessary measures in self-defence, at any time, against planned, imminent, or ongoing attacks."

Beyond this, "Israel will not carry out any offensive military operations against Lebanese targets, including civilian, military, and other state targets, in the territory of Lebanon by land, air, and sea," the deal says.

The 10-day period can be extended by mutual agreement as talks progress and depending on whether "Lebanon effectively demonstrates its ability to assert its sovereignty", it adds, in another reference to Lebanon's efforts to disarm Hezbollah.

The deal does not require Israel to withdraw from southern Lebanon, where Israeli troops have been destroying villages and infrastructure after ordering residents south of the Litani River to flee. The area makes up about 8% of Lebanese territory.

While the deal grants Israel the right to take defensive measures against planned attacks, it does not include similar terms for Lebanon

Israeli defence officials say troops are holding positions as far as 10km inside Lebanon as part of a "buffer zone" to prevent Hezbollah attacks on Israel, viewing the area and many of its villages as strongholds for the Iran-backed group.

While the deal grants Israel the right to take defensive measures against planned attacks, it does not include similar terms for Lebanon. That marks a contrast to a 2024 deal to halt Israel-Hezbollah fighting, which said: "(These) commitments do not preclude either Israel or Lebanon from exercising their inherent right of self-defence, consistent with international law."

Notably, the deal does not explicitly require Lebanon to disarm Hezbollah, although it does spell out which six Lebanese state security forces are allowed to carry arms. The disarmament of Hezbollah has been a key demand by Israel. The group rejects calls to disarm, viewing its weapons as an element of national defence against Israeli attacks.

After a war sparked by Israel's assault on Gaza, Israel and Lebanon agreed in November 2024 to an open-ended, US-brokered truce that called on Lebanon's government to disarm Hezbollah.

That deal also committed Lebanon to restricting arms to specific state forces, and further stipulated that it should confiscate unauthorised weapons and prevent rearmament by non-state groups. In June 2025, the US proposed a roadmap to Lebanese officials to fully disarm Hezbollah in exchange for Israel halting its strikes and withdrawing its troops from five points they still occupy in southern Lebanon.

But Hezbollah and its main ally, the Amal Movement led by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, have said the sequencing should be reversed, with Israel withdrawing and halting strikes before any talks on Hezbollah's arms.

Following the 2024 deal, Israel continued to carry out strikes on what it said were Hezbollah depots and fighters, in attacks that Medecins Sans Frontieres says killed 370 people in Lebanon.

In Gaza, Israel and Hamas agreed last October to a US-brokered deal to halt fighting and deliver aid into the territory. It was followed by a US plan aimed at disarming Hamas in exchange for Israeli troop withdrawals and reconstruction of Gaza, much of which was destroyed by Israeli bombardment.

Many aspects of that plan have so far failed to take shape. Israel has continued attacks on Gaza, killing more than 750 Palestinians since the ceasefire. Israel says it aims to thwart attacks by Hamas and other factions, but rarely provides verifiable evidence. At least four Israeli soldiers have been killed by Gaza fighters since October. — Reuters

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Iran war has revealed Trump's pressure point: the economy

- Allies and rivals question US reliability, analysts warn of long-term economic, geopolitical fallout
- Russia and China could draw lessons about US pressure points

By Matt Spetalnick and David Brunnstrom
Reuters

Seven weeks of war have failed to topple Iran's rulers or force them to meet all of President Donald Trump's demands, but for US adversaries and allies it has cast a spotlight on one of his central vulnerabilities: economic pressure. Even with Iran's announcement on Friday that it was reopening the Strait of Hormuz to shipping, the Middle East crisis has revealed the limits of Trump's willingness to tolerate domestic economic pain.

Trump joined Israel in attacking Iran on February 28 based on what he said were imminent security threats, especially over its nuclear program. But now, with US petrol prices high, inflation rising and his approval ratings down, Trump is racing to secure a diplomatic deal that could stem the fallout at home.

Iran has taken a beating militarily, but demonstrated it can exact economic costs that Trump and his aides underestimated, unleashing the worst-ever global energy shock, analysts say.

RIISING ENERGY COSTS, RECESSION RISK

Trump has often publicly shrugged off domestic economic concerns driven by the war. But he can hardly ignore that though the US does not depend on the one-fifth of global oil shipments that were effectively blocked by Iran's chokehold on the strait, surging energy costs have hit US consumers. The International Monetary Fund's warning of a risk of global recession adds to the gloom.

Pressure for a way out of the unpopular war has mounted as Trump's fellow Republicans defend narrow majorities in Congress in the November midterm elections. None of this has been lost on Iran's leaders, who have used their grip on the strait to push Trump's team to the negotiating table.

Analysts say US rivals China and Russia may draw their own lesson: while Trump has shown an appetite for military force in his second term, he looks for a diplomatic off-ramp as soon as the economic heat becomes uncomfortable at home. "Trump is feeling the economic pinch, which is his Achilles heel in this war of choice," said Brett Bruen, a former foreign policy adviser in the Obama administration who heads the Global Situation Room strategic consultancy.

White House spokesman Kush Desai said that while working toward a deal with Iran to resolve "temporary" energy market problems, the administration "has never lost focus on implementing the president's affordability and growth agenda." "President Trump can walk and chew gum at the same time," he said.

FEELING THE PRESSURE

Trump's abrupt shift on April 8 from airstrikes to diplomacy followed pressure from financial markets and parts of his MAGA base. Some of the economic pain is borne by US farmers, a key Trump constituency, due to disrupted fertiliser shipments, and is also reflected in higher airfares from increased jet fuel prices.

With the clock ticking on a two-week ceasefire, it remains to be seen whether a president who embraces unpredictability will reach a deal that meets his war goals, extend the truce beyond April 21, or relaunch the bombing campaign.

But global oil prices fell sharply and financial markets, which Trump often sees as a barometer of his success, flourished on Friday after Iran said the strait would be open for the remainder of a separate US-brokered 10-day truce between Israel and Lebanon.

Trump was quick to declare the strait safe as he touted a deal-in-the-making with Iran that he said would be completed soon and mostly on his terms. But Iranian sources told Reuters gaps remained to be resolved. Experts

have warned that even if the war ends soon, the economic damage could take months if not years to fix.

A key question is whether any deal achieves the objectives Trump has laid out, including closing Iran's path to a nuclear weapon, which Tehran has long denied it is seeking. Iran has a stockpile of highly enriched uranium believed buried by US-Israeli strikes in June. Trump told Reuters on Friday the emerging deal calls for the US to work with Iran to recover the material and bring it to the US. Iran denied agreeing to a transfer anywhere outside its territory. A senior Trump administration official said the US was maintaining "several redlines" in negotiations with Iran.

At the same time, Trump's call at the war's outset for Iranians to overthrow their government has gone unheeded. Allies from Europe to Asia were initially stunned by Trump's decision to go to war without consulting them or seeming to take into account the risk to them of Iran closing the strait.

"The alarm bell ringing for allies right now is how the war has highlighted that the administration can act erratically, without much regard for consequences," said Gregory Poling, an Asia expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. After Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, former Democratic President Joe Biden was cautious about imposing sanctions on Moscow's energy sector out of concern for reducing oil supplies and inflating US gas prices.

But Trump, who ran for a second term on promises of cheap gas and low inflation, has shown himself sensitive to accusations that his policies raise prices. An example was when he reduced tariffs on China last year after it retaliated.

MISCALCULATIONS

Just as Trump misjudged Beijing's

response in a trade war, he seems to have miscalculated how Iran might strike back economically in a shooting war — by attacking energy infrastructure in Gulf states and blocking the strategic waterway between them.

Trump mistakenly believed the war would be a limited operation like the January 3 lightning raid in Venezuela and June's strikes on Iran's nuclear sites, US officials have said privately. But this time the repercussions are more far-reaching. The message to Asian allies such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan may be that Trump, who is looking for warmer ties with China, can be expected to pursue his regional goals with less regard for their geopolitical and economic security.

Analysts believe those governments will adjust for any contingency, such as a Chinese bid to seize Taiwan, out of concern over Trump's reliability. European countries, annoyed they are bearing so much of the economic brunt of a war that they never asked for, are likely to be even more nervous about Trump's commitment to continued aid to Ukraine in its war with Russia, analysts say.

Gulf Arab states want the war to end soon, but will be unhappy if Trump cuts a deal without security guarantees for them.

"An end to this conflict should not also create a continuous instability in the region," said Anwar Gargash, diplomatic adviser to the president of the United Arab Emirates. Most MAGA supporters have stuck with Trump despite some prominent dissenting voices. But there are growing doubts whether he can help his party recover lost ground, especially with independent voters, in time for the midterms.

"He's aware that a significant portion of the country outside his MAGA base, and even some within the MAGA base, are vehemently opposed to what he's done," said Chuck Coughlin, an Arizona-based political strategist. "And I think the price is going to come due."



A vessel at the Strait of Hormuz, off the coast of Oman's Musandam province, earlier this week. Iran's control of Strait of Hormuz exposed US economic vulnerability, raising domestic pressure on Trump. (Reuters/File Photo)

Thousands protest in Germany urging faster green shift

AFP
Berlin

Thousands of people demonstrated across Germany yesterday, urging a faster shift to renewable energy and accusing conservative Chancellor Friedrich Merz's coalition of putting the brakes on the transition.

In Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg and Munich, crowds took to the streets waving placards emblazoned with slogans including "renewables are our life" and "escape the fossil fuel trap".

A coalition of campaign groups organising the demonstrations said about 80,000 people took part nationwide, although police gave lower figures.

"The war in Iran and exploding energy prices make it very clear once again that we need to free ourselves from fossil fuels as quickly as possible," Christoph Bautz from campaign group Campaign, which helped organise the protests, told AFP at the Berlin demonstration.

He claimed that Economy Minister Katherina Reiche, from Merz's centre-right CDU party, was seeking to slow down the shift to renewables, which he said is "completely out of touch with the times and serves only the oil and gas industry".

Merz's coalition, and in particular Reiche – a former energy company executive – have come under fire over various policies, including support for watering down EU-wide car emissions rules and their plans to build more gas-fired power plants.

The chancellor argues steps need to be taken to relieve the burdens on Germany's struggling manufacturers, and help revive Europe's biggest economy whose heavy industry has suffered from high energy costs.

While Germany has greatly expanded solar and wind power, with most of the country's electricity now provided by renewables, the new government's actions have fuelled fears it will miss its ambitious climate targets.

Luisa Neubauer, a leading figure in the "Fridays for Future" movement in Germany, told AFP at the Berlin demonstration that she is "positively surprised" by how many people had turned up.

"I'm surprised that the federal government thinks it can get away with its lame excuses and its obstruction of the energy transition," she said. "No one here is buying that."

The organisers, who included groups like Greenpeace and WWF, said about 24,000 people demonstrated in Berlin, 30,000 in Cologne, 15,000 in Hamburg and 12,000 in Munich.

Police in Berlin gave an initial estimate of 9,000, and in Cologne 4,500.

Leftist leaders in Barcelona to rally against the global rise of far-right

AFP
Barcelona

Leftist leaders from around the globe met in Barcelona yesterday to rally against the threat to democracy from the far-right, with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum displaying closer ties.

The gathering comes as democratic institutions and values are under pressure from advancing authoritarian and far-right forces, including in the West, where US President Donald Trump's influence looms large.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was co-chairing the "Meeting in Defence of Democracy" alongside Sanchez.

Attendees included South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, European Council chief Antonio Costa, Colombian President Gustavo Petro, Irish President Catherine Connolly, Britain's Justice Secretary David

Lammy and German Vice-Chancellor Lars Klingbeil.

Klingbeil said that the meeting "is an important signal at a time when the world is becoming increasingly divided and when politics is also being conducted in a very swaggering manner".

He said that it showed that the attendees "stand together in solidarity and that we are seeking co-operation".

Sanchez and Sheinbaum warmly greeted each other in another sign of thawing relations.

It was the Mexican leader's first visit to Spain since taking office in October 2024.

Ties have been on the mend between their two countries after strains caused by Mexico in 2019 that Madrid apologised for historical abuses during the Spanish conquest and subsequent colonisation of the Americas.

Spain's King Felipe VI last month acknowledged "a lot of abuse" had happened in the colonial period in the Americas.

Sheinbaum, on arrival for the meeting,

told journalists that there had never been a "diplomatic crisis" between the two countries.

Sanchez, opening the meeting, underlined a need for reform of the United Nations, whose role has been sidelined in recent wars, most notably in the Middle East and in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

"We think the time has come for the United Nations to be renewed, reformed and – why not of course – headed by a woman. It's not only a question of justice, but a question of credibility," he said. "The context is clear: democracy cannot be taken for granted."

Sanchez, one of the most vociferous critics of the Middle East war, already on Friday called for a reshaped multilateral order to challenge "those who... consider it dead or work to undermine its foundations".

In an interview with Spanish daily newspaper *El Pais* ahead of the gathering, Lula stressed the Barcelona gathering was "not going to be an anti-Trump meeting".

The event was being held the same day as a meeting of far-right European leaders in Milan in Italy ([see report on this page](#)).

It follows the defeat of Hungarian nationalist leader Viktor Orban in a general election last Sunday, seen as a setback for Europe's far-right parties that had looked to him as a model.

Progressives have hailed the result as proof that entrenched populist governments can be defeated at the ballot box.

The Barcelona event was launched by Brazil and Spain in 2024 after far-right parties made significant gains in European Parliament elections.

The first two editions of this event were held at the United Nations and the previous one was held in Chile last year.

Sanchez, in power since 2018, has emerged as a prominent figure for Europe's disillusioned progressives, who see him as one of the few remaining openly leftist voices in a continent increasingly dominated by right-wing politics.



Dissent folk

Activists (above) attend a protest in Berlin to demand the acceleration of Germany's renewable energy transition. - Reuters

Right: Protesters wave flags and placards during the demonstration 'Croatia Together for Higher Wages and Pensions', in downtown Zagreb, organised by trade unions and pensioners against low incomes and the highest inflation in the eurozone. - AFP



People take part in a demonstration in Milan organised by the Patriots for Europe group (PFE) at the European Parliament and titled 'Without Fear: in Europe, Masters in our Own Home'. - AFP



A protester lights a Molotov cocktail near the Prime Minister's Office building during a protest in Tirana late on Friday. - AFP

Europe's far-right leadership rails at migration 'tsunami'

AFP
Milan

Far-right leaders from Europe gathered in Milan yesterday for a rally attended by thousands against irregular immigration and Brussels bureaucracy, the first since the electoral defeat of nationalist Viktor Orban in Hungary.

Supporters of the Patriots for Europe party, the third-largest bloc in the European Parliament, rallied in front of Milan's Duomo cathedral, separated by a significant police presence from a likewise thousands-strong rally by anti-fascist groups.

Organiser Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's nationalist League party, has deemed that "symbol of Christianity" ideal for the event billed as "Without Fear – in Europe Masters in our Own Home".

France's Jordan Bardella and the Netherlands' Geert Wilders were in attendance at the invitation of Salvini, who is also deputy prime minister in the coalition

government of Giorgia Meloni.

"Today, the tragedy we predicted has become a reality. Our people, the original inhabitants of Europe, have been hit by a tsunami of mass immigration, illegal immigration, mostly from Islamic countries," Wilders told supporters.

However, the Hungarians were conspicuous by their absence after Orban, one of the co-founders of the Patriots, was voted out of power after 16 years in a crushing election defeat to pro-EU opposition figure Peter Magyar.

"Dear Viktor, you have defended the borders and fought human traffickers and arms traffickers. Let us all continue this fight together, for freedom and the rule of law," Salvini told the rally.

Ahead of last week's election, the president of France's National Rally, Marine Le Pen, went to Budapest to try and shore up Orban, stressing that 2027 was shaping up to be "absolutely fundamental" for the far-right.

Major upcoming elections in France, Italy, Spain and Poland would give poten-

tial far-right winners "the means to radically change the course of the European Union from within", she said.

"I've come here to Milan to reassure you: our victory in the upcoming presidential election is within reach. And we're getting ready to say goodbye to Macron," her lieutenant, Bardella, told the rally yesterday.

Also yesterday, progressives including Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva were set to gather in Barcelona.

In line with Meloni, the League has also called for the EU to soften budget deficit rules due to the energy crisis triggered by the Middle East war.

"We are going to address all the issues that are affecting European societies, in particular the issue of immigration and the ever-increasing regulations imposed by the European Commission and the European Union on European industry and on the economies of the eurozone," Bardella told journalists ahead of the rally.

Farmers in tractors protesting against free trade agreements and motorcyclists opposed to traffic restrictions were to lead the way this weekend for a short march from eastern Milan to the Duomo.

The far-right rally is also a show of force for the League in its stronghold of Lombardy and in Italy as a whole, at a time when it can count only on around 6-8% of voting intentions, according to the latest polls.

The League's popularity has been on a downward trajectory, scoring 17.4% in the 2018 elections and 8.8% in the last ones in 2022.

Salvini's party is under pressure from the new "National Future" party founded by retired general Roberto Vannacci, who defected from the League in February and already has about 3% of voting intentions.

Despite being the League's coalition partner in Meloni's government, Forza Italia is also planning an event for its Milan chapter, dedicated to the "social and civic engagement" of children of immigrants in Italy.

Thousands of Croatians protest for higher wages and pensions

AFP
Zagreb

Thousands of Croatians protested yesterday in the capital Zagreb to demand higher salaries and pensions amid rising inflation in the EU nation in recent months.

The protest dubbed "Croatia Together for Higher Wages and Pensions" was held as the country registered inflation of 4.89%, the highest in the euro-zone.

Carrying banners saying "Stop the tax of poverty" and "If everything got more expensive, why didn't our salaries?" protesters marched through downtown Zagreb before gathering at the main Jelacic square.

"I have a pension of €620. We came to protest in order to improve the situation of pensioners and workers," Slobodanka Andric, a 69-year-old pensioner from Vukovar, told AFP.

"The government needs to see more clearly that our pensioners

and workers on a minimum wage are barely surviving," Ivan Vecerin, 40, a technician in Dubrovnik hospital, told AFP.

The rally was organised by three main unions' and one pensioners' associations with many participants coming from other Croatian cities.

The president of Croatia's SSSH union federation Mladen Novosel said the demands were "not unreasonable" and offered the government a two-part settlement.

"At the end of the year, when the minimum wage increases, raise it by €250 gross and do the same next year. That way we will reach the salary we are asking for," said Novosel.

Unions want the net minimum and average wage to be raised to €1,100 and €2,200 respectively (currently around €800 and €1,500).

They also want average pensions to be raised to €1,100 from the current €700.

The main goal of the protest,

according to organisers, is to "wake up Croatian workers, people, pensioners, and students" and restore their belief that they should stay and fight for better conditions in Croatia, rather than moving abroad.

Croatia, an EU member since 2013, had the bloc's sixth-highest food prices, but ranks 19th in terms of average monthly wages.

Food takes a 26.7% share of living costs, compared to 16.5% in neighbouring Slovenia and 12.5% in Germany.

Mediation fails in row over joint jet project, says report

Mediators have failed to resolve a dispute between the companies involved in the Franco-German FCAS fighter jet project, though political leaders still have scope to intervene, *Handelsblatt* reported yesterday.

Citing people familiar with the talks, the newspaper said the mediators – one from France and one from Germany – would submit separate reports on their efforts.

A person familiar with the matter told Reuters that the German mediator would conclude that building a joint fighter jet, once a key pillar of the project, was no longer feasible.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz is to be briefed on the status of the dispute today, the person added.

Sources familiar with the project have previously told Reuters that Germany and France were likely to abandon development of the joint piloted jet but to continue co-operation on related software and data systems as well as on drones.

Merz is set to meet French President Emmanuel Macron at the informal European Union summit in Cyprus on Thursday and Friday next week.

The risk of failure or scale-back of the FCAS project comes as Europe seeks to boost unity and collaboration amid threats from Russia and waning support from the United States.

The project has been stalled by a dispute over control between France's Dassault Aviation and Airbus, which represents Germany and Spain in the €100bn project.

The head of Dassault Aviation said on April 1 that he was giving his company two to three weeks to see whether a deal could be reached on the air combat system.

Late last month, Merz said he was doing everything in his power to salvage the programme and that two mediators had been appointed to overcome differences.

An Airbus spokesperson in France declined to comment.

The German government, the French presidency and Dassault did not immediately respond to requests for comment. - Reuters

Netherlands to activate energy crisis plan

The Dutch government will activate the first phase of an energy crisis plan tomorrow, Dutch news agency ANP reported yesterday, citing government sources.

It is the first time the government will have activated the plan, which was designed during the energy crisis triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The government was not immediately available for comment.

Activation of the first stage means fuel markets are distorted, without immediate shortages.

In this stage, energy markets will be closely monitored, while government and industry prepare for a worse situation. - Reuters

ABP achieves record placements for students in prestigious universities

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

The Academic Bridge Programme (ABP) under Qatar Foundation has been excelling in supporting high school students from Qatar and the region to get admissions in prestigious universities across the globe with record number of placements in the recent years.

"As for the statistics, I would say in the last academic year, about 97% of our students have got admission in various universities globally. Out of these students, 65% got admitted within the Education City in Qatar, which is a high number, considering that Qatar Foundation universities are top universities globally," Dr Saheim K al-Temimi, director of ABP told *Gulf Times*.

"We have tie up with various other universities around the world especially in the US and the UK. Many of our students get admissions in these universities which proves that the programme is highly successful," he continued. ABP, established in 2001, is a premier pre-university pro-



ABP campus at Education City, Qatar Foundation.

gramme meant for high school students from Qatar and other countries in the region to help them for a smooth transition from school to university education. So far, the institute has graduated over 4,000 students and 90% of them have gone on to study in various universities around the world.

Dr al-Temimi said that ABP has been scoring a steady success with the number of successful students going up every year. "Now that we

have got 97%. Our target is that all our graduates, I mean 100% of students to get the opportunities. Two years back, we achieved 96%. Last year, we achieved 97%, and it shows the success and quality of the programme," explained Dr al-Temimi.

The director said that ABP aims to provide comprehensive academic coverage to its students to enable them with great opportunities. "So, we have made the admission criteria as 70% or what

is equivalent of it in high school, in addition to a score of 4.5 and above of IELTS proficiency or what is equivalent to IELTS, such as Duolingo and TOEFL tests. Through this programme, we are actually playing a very important role to complement and to complete the educational ecosystem within Qatar," noted the official.

"We are enablers, and supporters for students. We aim to create top calibre students in the country and the region and equip them

with all the skills to go to the top universities. We work very closely with the top-rated universities nationally and internationally," he highlighted. As for the future plans of the centre, the director said that ABP has recently introduced three academic tracks.

He stated: "Instead of having like one programme, now we have started three specialised, educational tracks. They are STEM track, social sciences track and humanities and visual arts track.



Dr Saheim K al-Temimi

We are expanding our partnerships and in the recent years we have signed many educational agreements with the well-recognized universities."

"We also offer credit transfer. We have signed a special academic collaboration with some universities of what we call 'One plus Three! Through this agreement, students can complete the ABP programme here and which will be considered as one year at the academic branch, credit year. Then, they can complete the whole university programme in another three years," revealed the director.

"We have many partnerships to offer for the students. To enable them to start the university life at the earliest. We can say with pride and confidence that ABP is providing great guidance for high school students in the country and beyond for higher education. Therefore, we are proud that the centre has become a great beacon of education excellence in the country," he added.

Souq Waqif traders report stable business amid regional tensions

By Shaima Sheriff
Staff Reporter

Dry fruit traders in Souq Waqif say business remains steady despite regional tensions, citing strong stock levels, stable imports from key countries, and consistent demand beyond seasonal fluctuations.

Amid ongoing regional uncertainties, traders at Souq Waqif say business continues as usual, with dry fruit and nuts shops reporting minimal disruption to both supply and sales. Shopkeepers across the traditional marketplace indicated that strong inventory management and diversified sourcing have helped them maintain stability.

"Not many of them are affected. They had enough stock even if transportation or shipments were stopped," a shop representative said, highlighting preparedness against potential supply chain disruptions.

Much of the dry fruit supply in the market is imported from countries such as Turkey and India, key trade partners known for producing high-quality nuts and dried produce.

Traders noted that, so far, imports from these regions have not



A fully stocked shop at Souq Waqif. PICTURE: Shaima Sheriff

been significantly interrupted. While acknowledging the reliance on imported goods, vendors expressed optimism about replenishing stock in the coming weeks.

"They are in hopes of new stock coming in so that they can refill everything," the shopkeeper said, underlining expectations of continued supply flow.

In terms of sales, traders pointed out that the dry fruit business naturally follows seasonal trends, particularly during peak periods such as Ramadan and festive occasions.

However, outside these peak times, demand remains stable.

"Usually they aren't affected much... because they have a seasonal set of business or else it's normal business that takes place," the trader explained.

The situation at Souq Waqif reflects a wider narrative of resilience within Qatar's retail sector, where strategic stockpiling and diversified sourcing continue to cushion businesses against external pressures.

Despite global and regional uncertainties, the steady rhythm of trade within the souq underscores confidence among merchants, offering reassurance that everyday commerce remains largely uninterrupted.

Parrotfish spotted in local waters



The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change has recorded the presence of parrotfish, locally known as "Al-Qin," in one of the country's marine areas, considered an encouraging environmental indicator that highlights the health of its coastal ecosystems, particularly the coral reefs. According to the ministry's Wildlife Development Department, the appearance of this species reflects a balanced and thriving marine habitat.

Parrotfish are considered vital to reef sustainability, using their beak-like teeth to scrape algae from the coral surfaces. This natural behaviour prevents algae from smothering live corals, allowing reefs to grow and regenerate. Beyond reef maintenance, parrotfish also contribute to the formation of Qatar's distinctive sandy beaches. By feeding on dead coral, they break it down into fine particles that are later expelled as sand,

playing a quiet but essential role in creating the country's white shorelines. Accordingly, the ministry stressed that this finding highlights the ongoing conservation efforts and continuous monitoring of marine wildlife. The ministry reaffirmed its commitment to protecting biodiversity and preserving natural resources, ensuring that Qatar's marine environment remains resilient for the future generations.

Admissions surge as applications in GU-Q nearly double for class of 2030

By A Staff Reporter
Doha

Georgetown University in Qatar (GU-Q) has reached a new level of selectivity for the Class of 2030, with applications rising 92%. The surge marks the most competitive admissions cycle in the university's history and brings the admit rate to a record low.

The admitted class reflects exceptional academic strength and global reach, bringing together some of the most accomplished students from around the world. These are high-achieving students who have distinguished themselves in the classroom and beyond, across debate, research, and community service, with a clear record of excellence and impact.

Accepted students represent more than 66 nationalities across nearly every region of the world, including Africa, East and South Asia, the Americas, and the Gulf. Qataris are the largest group of admitted students, making up around 40%. Women make up approximately two-thirds of admitted students.

To maintain its rigorous academic standards, the Qatar campus of Georgetown University has kept the number of admitted students intentionally limited, supporting small class sizes and close engagement between students and faculty.

GU-Q dean Safwan Masri said: "This year's admissions cycle is a

Accepted students represent more than 66 nationalities across nearly every region of the world. Qataris are the largest group of admitted students, making up around 40%. Women make up approximately two-thirds of admitted students



GU-Q dean Safwan Masri.

resounding affirmation that our efforts to elevate GU-Q's reputation and deliver excellence in our academic offerings have borne fruit. I am deeply grateful to everyone across our community who has contributed to this achievement."

The rise in applications comes amid growing demand for education in international affairs, alongside major shifts in international student mobility, expanding educational options, and increasing interest in global experiences. At the same time, with multiple global polarities and ongoing wars in Ukraine, Sudan, Palestine, Iran, and Lebanon, demand is rising for graduates with the analytical rigour, regional expertise, and global perspectives to navigate growing uncertainty.

GU-Q's Bachelor of Science in Foreign Service programme is designed to meet that need. The programme is ranked No 1 among international relations schools by 'Foreign Policy' magazine. The curriculum spans international politics, economics, history, and culture, with a focus on critical thinking, interdisciplinary analysis, and engagement with real-world challenges.

The introduction of the Science, Technology, and International Affairs major promises to further expand student interest and the breadth of curricular offerings in Doha. The new major responds to a world reshaped by ecological and technological disruption, ensuring graduates remain well positioned for careers across government, diplomacy, international organisations, and the private sector.



WCM-Q seminar series highlight medical career paths

Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar (WCM-Q) recently hosted the spring edition of its Medical Career Seminar series, during which medical professionals shared their career experiences with foundation and pre-medical students.

The series featured presentations by Dr Nayef Mazloum, associate professor of microbiology and immunology and associate dean for student research at WCM-Q, along with four distinguished WCM-Q alumni. Each seminar offered insights into the speaker's career path and specialty, followed by a Q&A session.

The series opened with WCM-Q alumna Dr Ameneh Amini, a paediatric emergency physician at Sidra Medicine, who shared details of her training and medical career. Dr Amini is the first female physician from Qatar to complete paediatric emergency medicine training in North America and the first WCM-Q alumna to specialise in this field.

The next seminar featured Dr Mazloum, who reflected on his personal and professional journey, having joined WCM-Q in January 2011 from Weill Cornell Medical College in New York. During his session, he highlighted his research on molecular

pathways in metabolic disorders, including obesity, diabetes and age-related diseases. His lab employs a combination of in vitro cellular models, mouse models and human data to uncover novel mechanisms that modulate metabolism.

Alumna guest speaker Dr Noor al-Nassr (Class of 2024), a recent WCM-Q graduate and current dermatology resident at Hamad Medical Corporation, shared insights into her transition from medical school to residency. In her session, she also discussed her involvement in clinical research focusing on inflammatory skin diseases and severe cutaneous adverse reactions.

Alumnus Dr Mohammed al-Hijji (Class of 2011), a senior consultant in interventional and structural cardiology at the Heart Hospital, part of Hamad Medical Corporation, and an assistant professor at WCM-Q, reflected on his training and career in cardiology. In his session, he discussed his clinical work and research interests in developing advanced valvular solutions to improve longevity and performance. Fellow alumnus, Dr Abdulrahman al-Abdulmalek (Class of 2018), a hematology fellow at McGill University in Montreal, spoke about his clinical training

and focus on hematologic malignancies, bone marrow transplantation and cellular therapies. Dr al-Abdulmalek is especially interested in bridging translational research with clinical care to improve outcomes in high-risk and relapsed hematologic cancers.

Dr Marco Ameduri, associate professor of physics and senior associate dean for pre-medical education and Education City collaborative curricular affairs, said: "I sincerely thank all our expert speakers for taking the time to share their experiences and professional journeys with our students. Hearing firsthand from our alumni about the wide range of training and specialization opportunities available both in Qatar and abroad is truly invaluable."

Dr Rachid Bendriss, associate dean for foundation, student outreach and educational development programs, added: "Our Medical Career Seminar series reflects our commitment to giving students early exposure to the wide variety of career possibilities in medicine. By engaging directly with practicing medical professionals, students can hear diverse experiences, ask questions, and gain valuable insights into potential training and career paths."