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BUSINESS | Page 1

UDC posts QR71mn profit on QR459mn revenues in Q1

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Amir, Lebanon, Japan leaders underpin path of diplomacy

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani held a phone call yesterday with Lebanese President General Joseph Aoun. They discussed the latest developments in the region, particularly in Lebanon. In this regard, His Highness the Amir expressed his reassurance about the situation in Lebanon, affirming Qatar's backing for the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The president expressed his thanks and appreciation to His Highness the Amir for his support and Qatar's unwavering stance alongside his country. The call also addressed regional and international efforts aimed at containing tensions and supporting paths toward solutions in a way that contributes to enhancing security and stability in the Middle East. His Highness the Amir also received a phone call yesterday from Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. Discussions addressed bilateral co-operation and ways to support and further develop it. The two sides also reviewed regional and international developments, particularly the ongoing escalation and its impact on energy markets and supply chains, and stressed the importance of maintaining stable energy flows. The Japanese prime minister condemned the Iranian attacks on Qatar, praising the state's successful management of the crisis and commending its efforts to ensure the safety and security of Japanese nationals as well as its role in promoting peace and stability in the region. His Highness the Amir expressed his thanks and appreciation to Japan, affirming Qatar's commitment to the well-being of all residents within its territory and highlighting the longstanding strategic relations between the two countries. Both sides also affirmed their support for the mediation efforts undertaken by Pakistan and underscored the importance of reaching a comprehensive agreement to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, thereby enhancing energy security, stabilising markets and supporting regional stability and the global economy. **(QNA)**

Amir issues 3 decisions on key boards, appointments

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has issued three Amiri decisions establishing boards and making senior appointments across key national institutions. Under Amiri Decision No 20 of 2026, His Highness the Amir established the board of directors for the Qatar Foundation for Supporting Innovation and Scientific Research. HE Dr Hessa bint Sultan al-Jaber will chair the board, with Dr Ahmed Khalifa Elmagarmid serving as deputy chairman. Other members include HE Mohammed bin Khalifa al-Suwaidi, Managing Director of Hamad Medical Corporation; Dr Asma bint Ali al-Thani, Vice-President for Health and Medical Sciences at Qatar University; Abdullah Hamad al-Misnad, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Qal; and Hamad Ali al-Khater, CEO of Qatar Airways. The board will also include a representative

from the Qatar Investment Authority and two experts to be appointed by the chair. Members will serve four-year terms, renewable for similar periods. Amiri Decision No 21 of 2026 constituted the Board of Directors of the Qatar Anti-Doping Agency. Dr Abdulwahab Abubaker al-Musleh was named chairman, with Dr Ahmed Ali al-Mohammed as vice-chairman. The remaining members are Dr Ahmed Abdulrahman al-Emadi, Dr Einas Abdulaziz al-Kuwari, Brigadier General Abdulaziz Ali al-Sulaiti, Mubarak Mohammed al-Ali, and Dr Moza Suleiman al-Hail. The board will serve a four-year term, renewable for one or more similar periods. Amiri Decision No 22 of 2026 appointed Dr Nasser Saad al-Saad as Chief Executive Officer of the Qatar Anti-Doping Agency. All three decisions take immediate effect and will be published in the official gazette.

Amir meets CEO of Shell plc



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani met yesterday morning, in his office at Lusail Palace, with Chief Executive Officer of Shell plc Wael Sawan during his visit to the country. The two sides discussed existing co-operation between Qatar and Shell plc and ways to support and develop it, particularly in the energy sector. **(QNA)**

Qatar in touch with all but backs Pakistan mediation

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

Qatar is maintaining active communication with all concerned international and regional parties, including the United States, to monitor developments and support efforts toward a peaceful resolution of the ongoing crisis, the country's top foreign ministry spokesman said yesterday. Speaking at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' weekly media briefing, Adviser to the Prime Minister and Official Spokesperson Dr Majed bin Mohamed al-Ansari threw Qatar's full weight behind Pakistan's mediation efforts, describing them as a critical pathway toward de-escalation. He cautioned against drawing premature conclusions about the outcome of current negotiations, noting that Gulf states, including Qatar, are in near-daily contact with various stakeholders given the crisis's direct impact on regional security and stability. "The international community is backing these efforts and remains hopeful for their success," he said. On Iran, al-Ansari revealed that during the most recent call



Dr Majed bin Mohamed al-Ansari at the media briefing yesterday. **PICTURE:** Shajji Kayamkulam

between HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, Qatar urged Tehran to halt its attacks on countries in the region and pursue a peaceful solution. He added that beyond that call, there has been no official direct communication between Qatar and Iran. Regarding the Strait of Hormuz, al-Ansari issued a stark warning that any disruption or closure of the vital waterway would transform the crisis from a regional into a global one, given

its centrality to energy supplies and international trade. "The consequences would be felt not only in energy markets but also in households and essential services worldwide, even in countries thousands of kilometres away," he said. He stressed that keeping the Strait open is a shared international responsibility, reaffirming Qatar's commitment to its role as a reliable global energy partner and its continued co-ordination to ensure maritime security and market stability. Al-Ansari praised the Qatari Armed Forces for protecting the country during hostilities that preceded the ceasefire, while reiterating support for international efforts to consolidate the truce and achieve a comprehensive settlement. He cautioned, however, that it remains too early to predict the long-term sustainability of the ceasefire, as this depends on the commitment of the parties involved. Should an agreement prove elusive, he said, Qatar supports extending the ceasefire rather than risking a return to escalation, warning that renewed conflict would have far-reaching consequences for regional populations and the global economy. **To Page 4**

Pakistan prevails on Trump to extend ceasefire

AFP, Reuters
Washington/Islamabad

US President Donald Trump yesterday said he was extending a ceasefire with Iran to give more time for negotiations, but would maintain a US naval blockade of the country's ports. Trump posted on social media that he would "extend the Ceasefire" until Iran came up with a proposal to end the conflict. However, he "directed our Military to continue the Blockade." Trump's ceasefire extension came hours before it was believed to be set to expire. It also came as the White House said Vice-President JD Vance would not be going to Pakistan for what had been expected to be a second round of peace talks. The US president cast the breakdown in more talks as resulting from Iranian infighting, adding that Pakistan's leaders had asked him to extend the truce. "Based on the fact that the Government of Iran is seriously fractured, not unexpectedly so and, upon the request of Field Marshal Asim Munir, and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, of Pakistan, we have been asked to hold our Attila until such time as their leaders and representatives can come up with a unified proposal," Trump posted on his Truth Social site. But the blockade of ports on Iran's coast in the Strait of Hormuz will remain in place, Trump said, while the US military will "in all other respects, remain ready and able."

The ceasefire, he said, will be extended "until such time as their proposal is submitted, and discussions are concluded, one way or the other." The turnaround was in stark contrast from what the American president in the morning had threatened a military attack if Iran did not agree to US demands. "I expect to be bombing," Trump said on CNBC this morning. "The military is raring to go." Iran said yesterday it had still yet to decide whether to attend last-ditch peace talks, after US forces boarded a huge Iranian oil tanker at sea with just a day left before the ceasefire runs out in the war in the Gulf. President Donald Trump said he hoped to reach a "great deal" to end the war, but he did not want to extend the ceasefire, and said the US military was "raring to go" if negotiations were not successful. Vice-President JD Vance, who was due to lead the US delegation, did not board a flight for Islamabad, where the centre of the city has been locked down and a luxury hotel has been cleared out to host the talks. A White House official said Vance would participate in additional meetings in Washington. By the evening yesterday, the spokesperson for Iran's foreign ministry, Esmail Baghaei, told state television Iran had still yet to decide whether to attend. He described the boarding of the tanker, as well as the seizure of a separate cargo ship on Sunday, as "piracy at sea and state terrorism", which he said called into question Washington's seriousness in negotiating. **To Page 4**

Sidra Medicine to deliver first CRISPR gene therapy



Haematology and Oncology and GMP teams.

By A Staff Reporter
Doha

Qatar has taken a landmark step in precision medicine after Sidra Medicine became the first hospital in the country – and one of a select few worldwide – to be qualified by

Vertex Pharmaceuticals to administer Casgevy, a revolutionary one-time gene therapy that uses Nobel Prize-winning CRISPR/Cas9 technology to treat inherited blood disorders. Casgevy is now available in Qatar for patients aged 12 and above living with transfusion-dependent beta thalassaemia

(TDT) and severe sickle cell disease (SCD), with Sidra Medicine having already onboarded its first patient for assessment. Prof Ibrahim Janahi, chief medical officer at Sidra Medicine, said: "We are proud to be chosen as the first hospital in Qatar to deliver a gene editing therapy with the potential for a function-

al cure. This milestone reinforces Qatar's position as a regional leader in advanced medicine and precision health. Through our collaboration with Vertex, we are bringing the world's first approved medicine using the Nobel Prize winning CRISPR/Cas9 technology to treat transfusion-dependent beta thalassaemia and severe sickle cell disease." Approved by the Ministry of Public Health in Qatar, as well as the US Food and Drug Administration, the European Medicines Agency, and other agencies, Casgevy is the first-in-class CRISPR/Cas9 gene-edited therapy that targets the genetic root cause of these inherited blood disorders. The therapy has shown transformative outcomes for patients with sickle cell disease and independence from regular blood transfusions for patients with transfusion-dependent beta thalassaemia. **To Page 4**



Police officers stand guard on a road leading to the Serena Hotel yesterday as Pakistan prepared to host the US and Iran for the second phase of peace talks in Islamabad. **(Reuters)**



Qatar takes part in Arab League Council ministerial meeting on Iranian attacks

Qatar participated in an extraordinary ministerial-level meeting of the Council of the League of Arab States, held via video conference yesterday.

The meeting was dedicated to the “unlawful and reprehensible” Iranian attacks against Arab countries in addition to Iran’s obligations under international law. HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi represented Qatar at the meeting. - QNA

Mental Health Helpline dealt with 19,238 calls last year

The Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) has revealed that its National Mental Health Helpline (NMHH) answered 19,238 calls in 2025, highlighting the need for accessible mental health support across Qatar.

As part of its extended function, the helpline has established a comprehensive triage and assessment service for people referred to psychiatry and/or psychology clinics.

This service ensures that patients who require help are directed to the most appropriate clinic in a timely manner.

Since its launch six years ago, the NMHH has continued to grow and enhance its services, reaching a 90% patient satisfaction rate, according to an anonymous survey of users.

The Helpline Triage Team (HTT) of experienced mental health nurses have guided more than 12,700 callers to appropriate support, ranging from family support and individual psychological support to inquiries and appointments, while the psychology team has ensured rapid access to talking-therapy for nearly 1,400 new patients.

A total of 4225 calls were answered by the rapid intervention

team, with those callers directed to have specialist psychiatric intervention and medication.

The pharmacy team answered 692 calls, while a further 221 calls were handled across various service categories.

This rapid intervention service has been able to respond to early signs of relapse, review of treatment and to stabilise any potential crisis, preventing more than 400 patients attending emergency departments.

The service is the primary point of access for mental health support in Qatar, offering a fully confidential, rapid response service to support anyone needing professional mental health support, irrespective of age, gender, background or nationality.

Experienced mental health professionals including nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists and allied health professionals, are on hand to offer confidential, specialised mental health support to all callers.

The HMC has invited the public to make use of the helpline, which is reachable by calling 16000 and choosing option 4 for Mental Health.

The helpline is available from 8am to 6pm, Saturday to Thursday. - QNA

Municipality minister meets Guinea’s envoy



HE the Minister of Municipality Abdullah bin Hamad bin Abdullah al-Attiyah met yesterday with Guinea's ambassador to Qatar Thierno Abdoulaye Sow. During the meeting, they discussed ways to enhance co-operation between the two countries in areas of mutual interest. - QNA

Qatar condemns storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque compound

Qatar has condemned the storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque compound by Israeli settlers and the raising of the Israeli flag in its courtyards, calling the incident a flagrant violation of international law.

In a statement issued yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) said the act represented a provocation to Muslims worldwide and a breach of the religious and historical status of the holy site in the occupied East Jerusalem.

The ministry affirmed Qatar's categorical rejection of attempts to undermine the status of Al-Aqsa Mosque, stressed the need for the international community to uphold its moral and legal responsibilities towards Jerusalem and its holy sites and to firmly confront the repeated Israeli violations.

It reiterated Qatar's unwavering position on the just cause of Palestine and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, including their full right to practice their religious rites without restrictions and to establish their independent state along the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. - QNA

New tracks, higher stipends in expanded scholarship

By A Staff Reporter
Doha

The government has unveiled its scholarship programme for the 2026-27 academic year, broadening both its scope and financial support to fast-track the development of national talent across key sectors.

Announced at a press conference chaired by Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) Undersecretary HE Dr Ibrahim bin Saleh al-Nuaimi, the plan rests on four pillars - economic growth, equal opportunity, diversity and inclusion, and talent development - framed within Qatar National Vision 2030 and the Third National Development Strategy.

Among the most notable additions is a dedicated scholarship track for students with disabilities, offering pathways to international universities with suitable learning environments.



An academic bridging programme has also been introduced to enable arts-stream students to transition into science disciplines, while new specialised awards covering nuclear engineering and clinical psychology reflect the country's healthcare and environmental priorities.

Assistant Undersecretary for Higher Education Affairs Dr Hareb Aljabri described the programme as a significant step in

building national competencies, with flagship placements at leading global universities and Education City institutions.

Financial packages vary by field, with medical and engineering students entitled to higher monthly stipends.

Government and internal scholarship allowances will similarly be tiered by level and discipline.

Postgraduate scholarships for

government employees come with strict eligibility conditions, including minimum academic performance standards and sign-off from employing entities to ensure alignment with workforce planning and Qatarisation goals.

Applications for external scholarships, Education City placements and private university funding open from July 1 to August 15, with internal public university scholarship registrations running from November 15 to December 30.

The Ministry of Labour said the scheme strengthens the link between education and employment policy, particularly in the private sector.

Officials from the Civil Service and Government Development Bureau added that the updated framework prioritises strategic fields including artificial intelligence (AI), data science and nuclear engineering, with structured post-graduation employment pathways designed to improve workforce integration.

Qatar takes part in 38th session of FAO Regional Conference for NENA



Qatar participated in the 38th session of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)'s Regional Conference for the Near East and North Africa (NENA), held in the UAE via video conferencing.

Qatar was represented by Assistant Undersecretary for Agriculture and Food Security Affairs Eng. Fahad Mohammed al-Qatani.

The conference reviewed progress on the organisation's programmes for the 2024-25 biennium and outlined priorities for the coming phase. - QNA

Arab Parliament lauds adoption of Qatar's emergency item at IPU session

The Arab Parliament has commended the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)'s adoption of an emergency item submitted by Qatar, with the backing of the Arab Group, titled “The urgent need to intensify parliamentary efforts to preserve cease-fire agreements and support the establishment of peace in the Middle East and other regions”.

In a statement on Monday, Arab Parliament Speaker Mohammed bin Ahmed al-Yamahi said that the adoption of the emergency item represented a success for Arab parliamentary diplomacy.

He noted that it followed several sessions during which the IPU had been unable to adopt an emergency item on its agenda.

Al-Yamahi said the move underscored that Arab states consistently support efforts to promote security and stability not only in the Arab region but globally.

At the same time, he said, they reject and condemn any attempts to undermine their security and stability by any party, as well as any threats to Arab national security or to the security and stability of any Arab country.

Al-Yamahi also affirmed the Arab Parliament's support for all efforts by Arab states within international parliamentary forums to co-ordinate positions and adopt unified stances in support of issues that serve the interests of the Arab people and defend their causes. - QNA

Nepal's foreign minister meets Qatar's envoy



Nepal's Minister of Foreign Affairs Shisir Khanal held talks yesterday with Qatar's ambassador to Nepal Mishaal bin Mohammed Ali al-Ansari. The meeting in Kathmandu focused on strengthening bilateral relations. - QNA

Qatar's envoy joins Cote d'Ivoire minister's meeting with diplomats



Qatar's ambassador to Cote d'Ivoire Mubarak bin Hussein al-Marri participated in the meeting of Cote d'Ivoire's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation Niale Kaba with fellow envoys of the GCC countries. Also present were ambassadors Saad bin Bakhit al-Qathami (Saudi Arabia) and Ali bin Yousef al-Nuaimi (UAE). During the meeting, they discussed co-operation, relations and topics of mutual interest. - QNA

McDonald's Qatar Leads Earth Day 2026 with Beach Clean Up and Mangrove Planting



For the second consecutive year, McDonald's Qatar, in collaboration with Mubadara for Social Impact, hosted a dedicated Environmental Day, bringing together more than 100 employees for a day of mangrove planting, beach clean-up, and environmental workshops at the 'Flower Each Spring Camp' in Ras Al Matabkh, Al Khor. The initiative reflects a broader, long-term sustainability strategy embedded across the company's operations, from renewable energy adoption to waste reduction and responsible sourcing, aligned with the environmental pillar of Qatar National Vision 2030.

Across the Al Khor coastline, McDonald's Qatar employees planted 40 mangrove saplings and removed more than 120kg of waste from the surrounding shoreline. Mangroves play a critical role in carbon absorption and coastal protection, sequestering up to four times more carbon per hectare than rainforests, making them among the most ecologically significant habitats along Qatar's coast. The day also included a structured environmental workshop and team-building exercises, reinforcing the company's commitment to embedding environmental awareness across its workforce.

The Environmental Day sits within Rahlatuna, 'Our Journey', McDonald's Qatar's CSR platform launched in 2023 which brings together environmental action, community engagement, and youth-focused programs under a single, long-term framework. Among its most standout achievements is the operation of a solar-powered restaurant at Al Wakra Corniche, one of the first of its kind in Qatar's quick service restaurant sector, equipped with 160 solar panels generating approximately 154,127 kWh of clean energy annually and reducing CO₂ emissions by up to 85 tons per year. The platform has also driven the opening of Qatar's first Green McDonald's in Msheireb Downtown Doha and earned the company formal recognition from the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change for its sustainability efforts.

Commenting on the initiative, Sara Abuobeid, Director of Marketing & Communications at McDonald's Qatar, said, “Sustainability at McDonald's Qatar is built on consistent, people-driven action, and this Environmental Day is a direct expression of that. We appreciate the opportunity to collaborate with Mubadara for Social

Impact for the second consecutive year, where more than 100 of our employees came together to plant mangroves and restore Qatar's coastline. This truly demonstrates the culture of environmental responsibility that we have cultivated over three decades. Through Rahlatuna and our partnership with Mubadara for Social Impact, we remain committed to delivering initiatives that create tangible impact in support of Qatar National Vision 2030.”

Dr. Saif Ali Al-Hajari, President of Mubadara for Social Impact, added, “Our collaboration with McDonald's Qatar on this year's Earth Day brings together two organizations that share a clear belief in the value of community-led environmental action. By engaging more than 100 volunteers in mangrove planting and coastal clean-up at A Flower Each Spring camp in Ras Matbakh, we are not only protecting a vital ecosystem but also building a culture of stewardship that reaches well beyond a single day. Initiatives of this scale demonstrate what is possible when corporate leadership and community partners work toward a shared environmental goal.”

Beyond annual initiatives, McDonald's Qatar has embedded sustainability into its day-to-day operations across its 76-restaurant network. The company transitioned to eco-friendly packaging, including paper bags and Happy Meal toys made from paper, plant-based plastics, and certified wood fiber, making it one of the first quick service restaurants in Qatar to do so. In-store waste segregation systems are in place across its branches, used cooking oil has been converted into biodiesel since 2017, and the company is currently implementing advanced Energy Management Systems in standalone locations to further reduce its energy footprint.

As a 100% locally owned and operated business under Al Mana Restaurants & Food Company W.L.L., McDonald's Qatar has been part of the country's growth since 1995. Through sustained investment in renewable energy, responsible sourcing, waste reduction, and structured community engagement, McDonald's Qatar continues to advance the environmental pillar of Qatar National Vision 2030, building on three decades of operational commitment to a cleaner, greener future for Qatar, one meal at a time.

Singaporean Speaker meets Qatar's envoy



The Speaker of the Singaporean Parliament Seah Kian Peng met yesterday with Qatar's ambassador to Singapore Abdulaziz bin Ahmed al-Malki. The meeting discussed bilateral co-operation and relations. - QNA

Qatar emphasises need to co-ordinate global support for Palestinian cause

Qatar participated in the ministerial meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for Co-ordination of International Aid to the Palestinian People (AHLIC), held in Brussels, represented by HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Dr Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad.

In the speech she delivered on behalf of Qatar during the meeting, HE Dr al-Misnad expressed gratitude and appreciation to Norway and the European Union for their leadership and unwavering support for the Palestinian people and their continued efforts to promote peace and stability in West Asia.

She noted that the mediation efforts undertaken by Qatar, in close co-operation with Egypt, the US and Turkiye, contributed to laying the foundation for the 20-point peace plan, which was later adopted by the United Nations Security Council under Resolution 2803.

HE Dr al-Misnad highlighted Qatar's pledge to provide \$1bn in support of the work of the Peace Council, noting that this large contribution aims to reach a final settlement that meets the aspirations of the Palestinian people to establish their independent state on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem (Al-Quds) as its capital.

"As we engage in discussions that focus on the frameworks established by the Security Council Resolution 2803 and the second phase of the 20-point plan, we emphasise that these frameworks represent essential guidelines for re-establishing the necessary foundations for

the recovery of the Gaza Strip and achieving its long-term sustainable development," she said.

The minister stressed the need to establish conditions that ensure transparency in the allocation of funds, guaranteeing that all financial contributions are directed towards pre-defined projects and are subject to regular mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and reporting.

HE Dr al-Misnad emphasised that support should be in line with the provisions of international law to ensure that initiatives respect the fundamental principles established by the UN, underlining the fact that involving local communities and Palestinian authorities in project planning would ensure that initiatives meet the actual needs of the population.

She also pointed out that specific projects that may be of interest to members of the AHLIC for Co-ordination of International Aid to the Palestinian People, include infrastructure reconstruction, strengthening healthcare services and educational programmes, as well as ensuring the promotion of long-term development and the consolidation of community resilience.

Donors, HE Dr al-Misnad continued, can support both existing and new structures by following an integrated approach that combines immediate humanitarian relief with sustainable development efforts, ensuring a comprehensive response to the challenges facing the region.

She affirmed that the international community can support the Palestinian Authority



by providing timely and emergency budgetary support, while focusing on essential services such as health, education and public administration.

By facilitating the provision of emergency grants and loans, donors can address critical financial pressures and avert political and social collapse, the minister said, indicating that it is also essential to support programmes that enhance the institutional capacities and governance of the Palestinian Authority, thereby contributing to the consolidation of the principles of transparency and accountability.

She indicated that collaborative efforts should include working closely with existing groups such as the Palestine Donors Group (PDG), to ensure that financial support is aligned with the Palestinian Authority's reform programme, while also providing sustainable solutions.

In this context, HE Dr al-Misnad pointed out that the AHLIC's work can complement these efforts by promoting dialogue among stakeholders, disseminating best practices in governance, and encouraging collaborative projects that directly support the reform processes of the Palestinian Authority.

The minister reiterated Qatar's commitment to supporting the efforts of the AHLIC and international partners in meeting the urgent and long-term needs and rights of the Palestinian people, which is crucial for achieving peace and security. - QNA



Reyada marks World Health Day with launch of 'Health is Life' drive

Reyada marked World Health Day with the launch of its campaign, "Health is Life" reinforcing the message that maintaining a healthy life balance is essential for overall well-being.

The initiative aimed to inspire individuals to prioritise their health, adopt preventive practices, and make conscious lifestyle choices that contribute to a fulfilling life.

The campaign was inaugurated by Reyada's leadership team, including managing director Jamsheer Hamza and executive director Dr Abdul Kalam, alongside senior clinicians Dr Manjunath and Dr Arun Kumar, specialists in Internal Medicine, and Dr Bishnu Kiran, specialist in cardiology.

Several departments led activities to raise awareness on different aspects of health.

The Gynaecology Department organised an interactive session with the attendees on women's health, encouraging participants to learn more about essential health topics.

The Internal Medicine Department introduced an initiative titled "I Pledge To..." encouraging care seekers to commit to positive lifestyle changes that support better health outcomes.

Through this activity, attendees shared personal pledges toward healthier habits, reinforcing the importance of proactive care, accountability, and self-reflection.



Jumbo Electronics partners up with NSquare Xperts

Jumbo Electronics has announced a partnership with NSquare Xperts, a global digital transformation and enterprise modernisation specialist.

This collaboration represents a step in Jumbo's commitment to enabling enterprise-wide digital innovation and delivering advanced, scalable technology solutions that drive measurable business impact across Qatar's key industries.

The partnership brings together Jumbo's regional footprint, market understanding and enterprise relationships with NSquare Xperts' global expertise in artificial intelligence (AI)-

driven modernisation, cloud-native architectures, enterprise business applications, intelligent automation, and low-code transformation platforms.

Through a unified go-to-market approach, both organisations will jointly design and implement comprehensive digital modernisation programmes aimed at enhancing operational efficiency, accelerating product and platform innovation, optimising business processes, and strengthening long-term scalability for large enterprises.

Initially, the collaboration will focus on strategically important sectors including retail, real estate, manufacturing, utilities, media, and financial services.

"At Jumbo Electronics, we continuously evolve our enterprise portfolio to meet the dynamic digital requirements of the market," said Jumbo Electronics vice-chairman

and managing director Sajed Sulaiman. "Our partnership with NSquare Xperts reinforces our commitment to delivering high-impact transformation initiatives that combine global innovation with local execution excellence."

"Our collaboration with NSquare Xperts reinforces Jumbo's position as a trusted technology transformation partner in the region," Jumbo Electronics director and chief executive C V Rappai said. "By integrating global digital expertise with our strong local execution capabilities, we are creating a powerful platform to accelerate enterprise modernisation initiatives."

"This partnership reflects our long-term vision to empower organisations with scalable, secure, and future-ready digital solutions that enhance competitiveness and sustainable growth," he added.



ICAI Doha Chapter hosts session on 'Refresher on Code of Ethics'

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) - Doha Chapter recently conducted a virtual session on "Refresher on Code of Ethics".

The session began with a welcome address by Chapter chairperson Arun Somanath, who expressed appreciation to both speakers for sharing their expertise.

The session featured Arpit Kabra as the keynote speaker and Ravi Kumar Patwa as the session speaker.

Kabra underscored the significance of upholding integrity and independence in an evolving professional landscape, encouraging members to stay updated and adhere to the highest ethical standards.

He highlighted various initiatives by the ICAI, including

placement drives and recent publications, and encouraged members to actively leverage these platforms.

In his presentation, Patwa highlighted the importance of ethical conduct as the foundation of the profession, emphasising that ethics is not merely about compliance but a mindset that guides professional judgement.

The session covered key updates in the revised Code of Ethics along with recent amendments to the Chartered Accountants Act and Council Guidelines.

Patwa elaborated on critical areas such as changes in professional misconduct clauses, updated provisions relating to contingent fees, independence and fee dependency, and enhanced penalties for non-compliance.

Rayyan Water signs sponsorship agreement with QFA

Rayyan Water has announced the sponsorship agreement with the Qatar Football Association (QFA), naming Rayyan Water as the official sponsor of the QFA's teams and competitions, highlighted by the Qatar National Football Team and the Amir Cup.

"Football is where Qatar's passion, pride, and unity come alive," said Rayyan Water chairman Khalifa Khalid al-Rabban. "This sponsorship is our way of standing behind the national team and the competitions that bring the country together."

"At Rayyan Water, we believe performance starts with the basics, consistency, preparation, and proper hydration," he said. "We are proud to support sports in Qatar



and to be present wherever dedication is being built, on the pitch and in the stands."

As part of the partnership, Rayyan Water and the QFA will collaborate on visible brand presence across the sponsored competitions, alongside fan engagement

initiatives designed to promote healthier match-day habits and reinforce the role of hydration in active lifestyles.

"We welcome Rayyan Water as an official sponsor across key QFA Championships and participations, including the First National

Team and the Amir Cup," said QFA general secretary Mansoor al-Ansari. "Partnerships like this strengthen our ecosystem and contribute to a better experience for fans, while also supporting the broader culture of sport and well-being in Qatar."

Hi-tech methods deployed to fight the spread of mosquitoes

Qatar is implementing a comprehensive, technology-led strategy to combat mosquito spread, protect public health, and improve quality of life across the country, stressed Assistant Undersecretary at Ministry of Municipality Ali bin Mohamed al-Ali.

He explained that this strategy is built on three integrated pillars: smart monitoring, targeted field intervention, and community awareness. Authorities are deploying advanced geo-spatial surveillance systems and smart traps connected to real-time data platforms, enabling precise tracking of mosquito density and distribution. This data is analysed centrally and linked to environmental and climate factors to identify high-risk areas and guide rapid, efficient response. He said that field teams operate daily, targeting breeding



Assistant Undersecretary at Ministry of Municipality Eng Ali bin Mohamed al-Ali

sites at all stages of the mosquito lifecycle using approved pesticides that meet strict health and environmental standards. Operations are coordinated with the Ministry of Public Health of Qatar through a joint task force to ensure a unified national response.

Accordingly, al-Ali noted that



between January 1 and April 17, the ministry handled 25,642 household pest control requests, with the highest numbers recorded in Doha and Al Rayyan. Several factors contribute to this including urban expansion, proximity to farms, and the presence of stagnant water and humid environments that encour-

age mosquito breeding.

Besides, 2,519 mosquito control operations were carried out between September 2025 and March 2026, all digitally documented through an integrated system linking field data to interactive maps. He pointed out that the ministry is also piloting innovative solutions,



including drone-based spraying in hard-to-reach areas and biological control using Gambusia fish (also known as Mosquitofish), which feed on mosquito larvae. Early trials have shown positive results, supporting plans for gradual expansion alongside ongoing re-

search. To strengthen prevention, the ministry has introduced eco-friendly initiatives such as distributing insect-repellent plants, like basil, lemongrass, and rosemary, free to the public via the Oun app and online platforms, encouraging community participation.

Qatar in touch with all but backs Pakistan mediation

From Page 1

On Qatar-Pakistan ties, al-Ansari described the relationship as historic and strategic, rooted in long-standing brotherhood and extensive bilateral co-operation. He stressed that developing Qatar's defence partnerships is a continuous priority under all circumstances and part of a broader policy of diversifying international relations, not a response to any specific crisis.

Turning to Syria, he reaffirmed Qatar's continued support for the Syrian people, noting that Doha was among the first countries

to back the path toward stability there, with bilateral relations now advancing across political and economic dimensions.

On Lebanon, al-Ansari condemned violations and attacks that have resulted in casualties and mass displacement, welcoming the ceasefire as an initial step toward de-escalation. He called for full adherence to the truce and a clear international stance against any violations, expressing hope that ongoing efforts would lead to a lasting agreement. He stressed that all regional crises must ultimately be resolved through negotiation.

Pakistan prevails on Trump to extend ceasefire

From Page 1

"The aggression against Iranian ships and the continued pressure indicate the continuation of the opposing side's contradictory behaviour," Baghaei said.

Pakistan's Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said in a post on X that Pakistan was still waiting for Iran's reply to its invitation: "Pakistan as the mediator is in constant touch with Iranians and pursuing the path of diplomacy and dialogue."

Iranian government spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani said: "We do not want to be attacked again, but if such attacks occur, we will definitely respond more firmly than before," according to the state news agency IRNA.

Iranian officials have publicly cited a US blockade of their ships as a reason not to negotiate.

On social media, Trump said Iran

had carried out numerous violations of the ceasefire, without giving further details. He told CNBC that the blockade had been a success and the US was in a strong position to end up with a "great deal".

The precise timing of the ceasefire's end had been a source of confusion. Trump initially announced it would last two weeks from the evening of Tuesday, April 7 in Washington. But he said this week that it runs until the evening of Wednesday, April 22, effectively giving it an extra 24 hours.

A Pakistani source involved in the talks said it would have expired at 8pm Eastern Time on Wednesday, which is 3:30am Thursday in Iran.

Still, a Pakistani source involved in the discussions told Reuters there was momentum for talks to resume.

Wall Street stocks turned mostly lower.

QRCS empowers Gaza youth to earn livelihood

In partnership with the Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children in Deir Al-Balah, Gaza, Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) is implementing a livelihood project to help improve the economic conditions of the people of Gaza.

Dr Akram Nassar, head of QRCS's representation office in Gaza, explained, "The project provides training for 60 graduates to qualify them to work freelance, including e-marketing, graphic design, UI design, and smartphone application development."

He revealed arrangements to secure four-month internships for the graduates under the supervision of specialised trainers, helping them develop their practical skills and become self-employed workers. According to Dr Nassar, another component of the project is temporary employment for 23 graduates, by engaging them in psychosocial support programs with local NGOs in Gaza serving children, women, older persons, and other vulnerable groups.



Aya is one of the beneficiaries of a graphic design course held as part of QRCS's project. Illustrating the humanitarian impact of vocational training on the lives of beneficiaries amidst difficult conditions, she described this

experience as a "big asset" that would help her get design work with private-sector companies, both in and out of Gaza.

"At university, I studied graphic design," said Aya. "But this training introduced me to totally new skills of visual branding, stronger digital visibility, AI design tools, project marketing, and how to sell my creative ideas to the clients."

The \$234,000 project falls under an entire portfolio of humanitarian interventions aimed at strengthening the resilience of the Palestinian people and allowing youths to unlock their potential.

In the context of economic empowerment for entrepreneurial families in Gaza, QRCS plans to establish and support 500 productive gardens with agricultural tools, irrigation water, seeds, and fertilisers, as well as rehabilitate agricultural land and secure greenhouses, irrigation networks, solar panels. These projects will serve 600 farming families, at a total cost of QR 6.4mn.

Sidra Medicine to deliver first CRISPR gene therapy

From Page 1

Hisham Hagar, executive country manager at Vertex GCC, said: "The launch of the CRISPR/Cas9 therapy in Qatar represents a significant leap forward in our efforts against serious diseases. This achievement is a direct result of our invaluable partnership with Sidra Medicine and reinforces Vertex's mission to transform lives through scientific innovation."

Sidra Medicine currently follows approximately 150 to 200 children in Qatar diagnosed with thalassemia and sickle cell disease. While not all of them need gene therapy, Casgevy is reserved for patients with the most severe form of SCD or TDT – those still experiencing frequent pain crises, stroke risk, or the cumulative burden of lifelong transfusions despite the best medical care.

Dr Chiara Cugno, acting chief of paediatric Haematology, Oncology and Bone Marrow Transplant and director of the Advanced Cell Therapy Core at Sidra Medicine, said: "The introduction of Casgevy marks a historic advancement for people living with transfusion-dependent beta thalassemia and severe sickle cell disease. This therapy offers not only hope but the potential for a functional cure, by addressing these diseases at their genetic origin."

Sidra Medicine's approval as a Casgevy treatment centre means that eligible patients in Qatar will now have access to this one-time, potentially curative therapy closer to home.

Dr Ahmed al-Hammadi, chair of paediatric medicine at Sidra Medicine, said: "Our goal is to ensure that every child treated at Sidra Medicine receives not only the most advanced therapies but also compassionate,

family-centred care throughout their journey. Casgevy represents more than a scientific breakthrough. It embodies our commitment to improving the lives of young patients living with these challenging conditions."

Prof Khalid Fakhro, chief research officer at Sidra Medicine, added: "This milestone exemplifies our precision health vision, where treatment is guided by each patient's unique genetic makeup. By bringing transformative gene therapies like Casgevy to Qatar, Sidra Medicine is leveraging cutting-edge research and clinical practice to deliver personalised care for children living with rare and inherited diseases."

Casgevy has already been successfully administered to patients globally outside of clinical trials, achieving transfusion independence and significant improvements in quality of life.

Qatar attends WIPO meeting

Qatar participated in the 67th Series of Meetings of the Assemblies of the Member States of World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), dedicated to confirming the appointment of the director-general of the organisation, held yesterday in Geneva. HE Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the UN Office in Geneva Dr Hind Abdulrahman al-Muftah led Qatar's delegation at the meeting. In her speech on behalf of Qatar during the meeting, HE al-Muftah voiced Qatar's support for the reappointment of Daren Tang of Singapore as director-general of the WIPO for a second term, commending his leadership and noting that the renewal of international confidence in him is an appreciation of his efforts in strengthening the role of the organisation, especially the unprecedented diplomatic success in concluding two historic treaties in one year, namely the 'Treaty on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources' and the 'Design Law Treaty'.

She highlighted the bilateral relations between Qatar and the WIPO, stressing that the director-general's first term witnessed exceptional development in the strategic partnership between Qatar and the organization. HE al-Muftah appreciated the continued support for Qatar's efforts to modernise the intellectual property system, which culminated in important steps, particularly working on developing the "National Intellectual Property Strategy," and Qatar's accession to a number of new intellectual property agreements, in addition to signing memoranda of understanding to enhance academic and technical co-operation. (QNA)



Tender - Waseef

Waseef Asset Management (Waseef) would like to invite competent Service Providers for the below Open Tender:

Tender Number	Subject	Bid Bond (QAR)	Non-refundable Tender Fee (QAR)	Bid Submission Closing Date
GTC/WSF/LPG-SNG/09/2026	TENDER FOR THE PROVISION OF THREE (3) YEARS OF LPG/SNG SYSTEM MAINTENANCE SERVICES FOR VARIOUS PROJECTS MANAGED BY WASEEF	65,000	1,000	May 21, 2026
GTC/WSF/MAW/LLS /10/2026	TENDER FOR SUPPLY, INSTALLATION, TESTING AND COMMISSIONING OF SOFT LANDSCAPE LIGHTING SYSTEM INCLUDING ELECTRICAL WORKS AT MADINAT AL MAWATER PROJECT	15,000	500	May 21, 2026

The Tender Document will be available from April 22, 2026 onwards upon submission of the below documentation to tender@waseef.qa.

To collect please provide the following:

- Authorization Letter on Company letterhead, copy of Commercial Registration and valid Identification of the representative.
- Bank deposit slip carrying tender number and subject details. Tender fee shall be deposited to Account Name – Waseef Asset Management Co., Account Number 0002-105222-200 with Al Rayan Bank.

Minimum requirements to be eligible for obtaining the Tender Documents:

GTC/WSF/LPG-SNG/09/2026

- The company shall have a valid Commercial Registration in Qatar.
- The bidder shall be included in the WOQOD-approved GAS contractor list for installation and maintenance.

GTC/WSF/MAW/LLS /10/2026


- The company shall have a valid Commercial Registration in Qatar.
- Bidder shall be Kahramaa Approved Contractor with valid Kahramaa license to work on 415 Voltage with minimum 5 years of experience in Electrical Works.

Please note the following:

- Bidders should submit a bid bond issued by a bank operating in the State of Qatar, valid for 120 days from the tender closing date, corresponding to an expiry date of 21 September 2026.
- Technical and Commercial offers must be submitted in separate sealed envelopes and delivered to the below-mentioned address: GTC Secretary, 3rd floor, Waseef Head Office, New Waseef Tower (formerly Alaqaria Tower), Museum Park Street, Doha, Qatar



LET US MANAGE YOUR WORLD



QAPCO
شركة قطر البتركيماويات
QATAR PETROCHEMICAL COMPANY

Invites qualified bidders to participate in the following tender:

Effective from 01st July 2023, Bids from Local Suppliers and Contractors (companies established under the Law of State of Qatar) who are not in possession of an ICV score in the ICV portal (<https://icv.qa/en-US>) by Tender closing date (or commercial bid submission date if separately mentioned / notified) will not be accepted. Local companies that have been established for less than 2 years are exempted from this requirement. For further details, please visit ICV portal (<https://icv.qa/en-US>).

Sl No.	Tender Reference and Description	(i) Deadline for Submission of Information & Interest for Bidding	(ii) Tender fee (non-refundable); Date	(iii) Tender Publication on ARIBA	(iv) Tender Bond	Bid Closing Date
1	RFQ: P05-01-211 5 years contract for rental of mobile equipment (mobile cranes, forklifts, boom trucks, trailers, etc.) in QAPCO complex on call off basis	29 th April 2026	QAR 1000. 00 29 th April 2026	30 April 2026	QAR 150,000.00	20 May 2026, 12:00 Noon
2	RFQ: P04-01-187 Long Term Contract for Provision of Manpower services for QAPCO Project Division Note: Experience in Oil & Gas / Petrochemical field is a mandatory requirement.	29 th April 2026	QAR 1000. 00 29 th April 2026	30 April 2026	QAR 250,000.00	20 May 2026, 12:00 Noon

- Interested bidders to communicate their willingness to bid and contact details to QAPCO Procurement (procurement@qapco.com.qa) indicating company name, address, telephone, official E-mail, etc. latest by the deadline for Submission of Information & Interest for Bidding indicated above. Reference Number and Description of the tender must be mentioned in the email.
- Non-refundable tender fee as indicated above is payable to QAPCO through QNB account # 0013-001688-060 only at any QNB branch by 29 April 2026. (Tender Number, Subject and bidder name are to be stated in the payment receipt)
- Tender link will be sent via email notification from ARIBA system to the confirmed bidders. Tender Document will be accessible only after attaching the evidence of the tender fee payment in ARIBA by the bidder followed by Qapco approval. QAPCO shall reply with the access to "ARIBA eSourcing RFP event" along with necessary instructions and guidelines for the bid submission.
ARIBA Registration: Bidders who are not registered in QAPCO are requested to complete the registration process during the tendering period (Details on ARIBA registration can be accessed via QAPCO website www.qapco.com)
- Tender Bond (Bank Guarantee):** Original tender bond must be submitted by hand to the following address latest by the Bid closing date & time:
Qatar Petrochemical Company (QAPCO) P.O. Box 756,
QAPCO HEADQUARTERS, P.O. Box 756,
Building: 12, Zone No. 92, Street No. 556, Muaitheer Leafawiyat Street
Mesaieed, Qatar
Tel: 4033 8109
Attention: Procurement Group Manager

Bidder to attach copy of tender bond to the offer in ARIBA. Offer without Tender Bond will not be considered.
Tender Clarifications: Please send your queries with tender reference and description to email procurement@qapco.com.qa
Notes:
1. ARIBA Registration: Bidders who are not registered in QAPCO are requested to complete the registration process during the tendering period (Details on ARIBA registration can be accessed via QAPCO website www.qapco.com)

For more information about QAPCO, please visit our website: www.qapco.com



Lebanese president wants end of hostilities with Israel

AFP
Beirut

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun said Monday that planned talks with Israel aim to end hostilities and the occupation in southern Lebanon, even as Hezbollah and its supporters rejected the negotiations. Iran-backed group Hezbollah has sharply criticised the Lebanese government's negotiations with Israel, which are set to enter a second round on Thursday.

After the first round of talks last week, US President Donald Trump announced a 10-day truce pausing more than six weeks of war between Hezbollah and Israel, an explosive front in the broader Middle East war.

Hezbollah lawmaker Hassan Fadlallah told AFP it was in Aoun's and Lebanon's "interest" to withdraw from the talks, however adding that his group also wanted the ceasefire to last.

New talks between Lebanon's and Israel's US ambassadors will take place Thursday in Washington, a US State Department official told AFP, after the first direct talks between the two countries in decades was held on April 14.

But Lebanon's official National News Agency (NNA) reported an Israeli drone strike in Qaqaiyat al-Jsir in the country's south on Monday, and Israeli artillery shelling on the border town of Hula.

The Lebanese health ministry said six people were wounded in Qaqaiyat al-Jsir.

Israel's army said in a statement that soldiers "identified terrorists" in the Bint Jbeil and Litani areas of southern Lebanon "who violated the ceasefire understandings", adding that that the air force "eliminated" them.

The UN Security Council condemned on Monday the killing of a French peacekeeper in Lebanon, whose death France blamed on Hezbollah.

The Frenchman was killed and three others wounded when their unit was ambushed on Saturday as it headed to a UN Interim Force



Mourners attend the mass funeral of Hezbollah members and others killed during the conflict with Israel in Kfar Sir, Lebanon on Tuesday (Reuters)

in Lebanon (UNIFIL) outpost cut off from the fighting between Hezbollah and Israel.

"The members of the Security Council condemned in the strongest terms the attack... (and) reaffirmed their full support for UNIFIL" a statement from the UN body said.

The NNA also reported Israeli army "detonations... in parallel with extensive demolition" operations in Mais al-Jabal, decrying "the systematic destruction impacting homes and livelihoods, buildings and infrastructure" in the town and several other border villages.

In his comments to AFP, Fadlallah said that "it is in the interest of Lebanon, the president of the republic and the government to move away from the path of direct negotiation and return to a national understanding about the best option for Lebanon".

"Perhaps through indirect negotiations, even via the United States of America, we can

Hezbollah buries fighters killed in war with Israel

Hezbollah held a mass funeral in south Lebanon's Kfar Sir yesterday for more than a dozen fighters killed during more than six weeks of war with Israel.

Iran-backed Hezbollah has not provided the total number of its fighters killed since Israel last month launched a massive wave of strikes and a ground invasion of Lebanon. But it said it would hold funerals for fighters in the town of Kfar Sir on Tuesday, returning "a group of blessed souls to the soil of the south".

Men, women and children thronged the streets as 14 coffins, covered in Hezbollah flags, entered on an open truck adorned with flowers, before being taken in a procession to the cemetery. (AFP)

achieve" Lebanon's goals, Fadlallah said.

Aoun said the aim of negotiations was to "stop hostilities, end the Israeli occupation of southern regions and deploy the (Lebanese) army all the way to the internationally recognised southern borders".

Fadlallah said regional powers including Iran, Pakistan and

Saudi Arabia have worked to build a US-Iran diplomatic track, creating "a regional umbrella that can provide a kind of guarantee for Lebanon.

"Going into direct bilateral negotiations, alone, amid deep Lebanese divisions and internal disagreements, constitutes a threat to internal consensus."

Aoun on Friday had said that

"we negotiate for ourselves... we are no longer a pawn in anyone's game, nor an arena for anyone's wars, and we never will be again."

Tehran had insisted that a Lebanon truce was among its conditions for a ceasefire with the United States in the Middle East war.

On the road to Beirut airport, in the southern suburbs where Hezbollah holds sway, AFP images showed fresh graffiti attacking Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam following their endorsement of negotiations.

"Joseph is a traitor, Nawaf is a turncoat," said one spray-painted sign.

"Dealing with Israel is forbidden... no to normalisation," another read.

'Sacrifices'

Hezbollah supporters also heaped scorn on Aoun on social media.

"After all our sacrifices this guy wants to speak for us?" another user posted on X, with their profile picture showing a photo of Aoun and Salam with the words "they do not represent me".

Israeli attacks killed more than 2,300 people in Lebanon and displaced more than one million, according to Lebanese authorities.

"Any outcome of direct negotiations cannot be imposed on the people who made these sacrifices," Fadlallah told AFP.

Aoun on Monday named former Lebanese ambassador to Washington Simon Karam to head the negotiations with Israel. Lebanon has no diplomatic relations with its southern neighbour. In December, Karam became the first Lebanese civilian representative to directly speak with Israeli representatives in decades, as part of a committee to monitor a 2024 ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah.

Aoun said Monday that Lebanon faced two options: ongoing conflict "or negotiations to put an end to this war and achieve lasting stability".

"I have chosen negotiations, and I am full of hope that we will be able to save Lebanon," he said.

Iran condemns detention of people UAE said were linked to Tehran

Iran condemned on Tuesday the United Arab Emirates for detaining people under what Tehran described as false pretexts, Iranian state media reported, citing the foreign ministry.

The UAE said on Monday it had dismantled a terrorist cell linked to Iran and arrested its members over a plot to undermine stability.

"Making baseless claims and creating an anti-Iranian atmosphere cannot distract people from the direct responsibility of the supporters of the U.S. and Israeli aggressors," Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Esmaeil Baghaei was quoted by state media as saying. (Reuters)

Jordan signs final deal for \$5.8bn National Water Carrier Project

Jordan has signed the final technical and legal agreement for its national water carrier project, paving the way for financial close in July and construction to begin this summer. The project, valued at around \$5.8 billion, aims to desalinate and transport 300 million cubic meters of water annually from the Gulf of Aqaba to regions across the country. Officials said the scheme will be delivered under a build-operate-transfer model, with full ownership returning to the government after 26 years. The initiative will be funded through a mix of international donors, private sector investment, and government contributions, and is seen as a key step in addressing Jordan's long-term water shortages. (QNA)

UAE asks US for a wartime financial lifeline, WSJ reports

The United Arab Emirates has begun discussions with the United States about securing a financial backstop, in case the US-Israeli war with Iran sends the Gulf nation into a deeper crisis, the Wall Street Journal reported on Sunday. Reuters could not immediately verify the report. (Reuters)

Iraq reopens Rabia border crossing to boost fuel oil exports via Syria

Iraq has reopened the Rabia border crossing with Syria after more than a decade to accelerate overland fuel oil exports and revive cross-border trade amid disruption to Gulf shipping following the Iran war, Iraqi border officials said on Monday. The crossing, located in Iraq's northern Nineveh province, will allow fuel oil shipments to be trucked through Syria while also reopening the route to commercial trade traffic that has been halted since the conflict that followed Syria's civil war, officials said.

The head of Iraq's Border Ports Commission, Omar al-Waeli, said reopening Rabia would ease pressure on fuel shipments to Syria by allowing more fuel oil trucks to cross, with most convoys currently backed up at the al-Waleed crossing in western Iraq, the only operating border point.



Iraq is struggling to clear swelling fuel oil inventories after maritime exports badly hit due to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Iraq's state oil marketer SOMO has recently turned to overland routes through Syria, despite higher costs to keep exports flowing.

Convoys of tanker trucks loaded with Iraqi fuel oil are expected to begin crossing in the coming days, adding capacity to an operation that energy officials say has already stretched Iraq's trucking and border infrastructure. (Reuters)

Three killed in Israeli strike in Gaza

Gaza's civil defence agency said Tuesday that an Israeli strike killed three people in the Palestinian territory overnight, with Israeli warplanes seen soaring over the region after the assault, according to AFP journalists.

Despite an October 10 ceasefire, Gaza remains gripped by daily violence as both the Israeli military and Hamas accuse one another of breaching the truce.

"Three people were killed as a result of an Israeli strike at midnight in the vicinity of the Al-Zaqzouq junction in Al-Amal neighborhood, northwest of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip," spokesman for Gaza's civil defence agency Mahmoud Bassal told AFP.

Israel and Hamas regularly accuse each other of violating the ceasefire, which came into effect after two years of war triggered by Hamas' storming of Israel in October of 2023.

More than 770 Palestinians have been killed since the truce began,



Sister and wife of Khamees Al-Qassas, killed on Tuesday in an Israeli airstrike at Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis in Gaza. (Reuters)

according to Gaza's health ministry, which is under Hamas authority and whose figures are considered reliable by the United Nations.

The Israeli army has reported five soldiers killed in Gaza since the

start of the truce.

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

Gulf energy infrastructure faces expensive repairs

AFP
London

The lack of agreement on extending the US-Iran ceasefire raises fears of new strikes on Middle East energy infrastructure, which has been damaged in the war and needs tens of billions of dollars worth of repairs.

AFP examines the outlook on fully restarting Gulf oil and gas production, some of which is forecast to take years.

Since the start of the conflict in the Middle East at the end of February, more than 150 attacks have targeted energy sites in the region, including nuclear ones, according to an AFP estimate based on data from the American NGO Aclad.

Among them, at least 44 facilities linked mainly to oil and gas — depots, refineries and extraction

fields — have suffered damage, as well as a dozen energy transport sites.

The cost of repairing the infrastructure could be between \$34 bn and \$58 bn, according to an estimate from Rystad Energy.

Its most severe scenario forecasts that the bill for fixing oil and gas facilities alone could reach \$50 bn.

If the ceasefire is not extended, "the long-term consequences of the war will be more serious", Arne Lohmann Rasmussen, an analyst at Global Risk Management, told AFP.

Liquefied natural gas (LNG), as well as certain petroleum products such as kerosene or diesel, are particularly exposed to shortages, he added.

The key to returning to normal production remains the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately 20% of global oil and LNG production was



Cargo ships in the Gulf, near the Strait of Hormuz, as seen from northern Ras al-Khaimah in March. (Reuters/File Photo)

transported before the war and a near halt to flows.

But even a reopening of the waterway would not allow an immediate return of all barrels to the market.

"It could take months, or even longer," Saxo Bank analyst Ole Hansen of Saxo Bank told AFP.

"The process of restoring flows is unlikely to be smooth," he said, pointing to tankers being out of position as well as dislocated supply chains. Production is unable to resume until the storage tanks in which the Gulf countries have had to store their oil "have been sufficiently drawn down", Hansen said.

"In the last seven weeks, the world has lost more than 500 mn barrels of production," the analyst pointed out, adding that the strategic reserves of importing countries, which have been dipped into during the war, will have to be restocked.

These factors combined should keep oil prices elevated, possibly between \$80 and \$85 a barrel, compared with around \$70 pre-war, Hansen estimated.

Should oil production resume, "about 70 to 80% of supply can return within weeks", noted Homayoun Falakshahi, an analyst at energy intelligence firm Kpler.

For the remaining amount, restarting output is a more challenging and therefore should take longer, he said, pointing to differences among producing Gulf nations.

"In Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, things can go pretty quickly. They can restore their

production in a few weeks," Falakshahi told AFP.

In Iraq and Kuwait, however, a return to normal could take several months owing to their oil being heavier and therefore harder to prepare for the international market.

Total restoration of production capacities in Iran and Qatar could meanwhile take years.

"Iran accounts for the highest number of impacted facilities and the widest spread across asset types, with repair costs potentially reaching up to \$19 bn under a high-damage scenario," estimated Rystad Energy.

In Qatar, the region's main LNG exporter, gas infrastructure has mainly been impacted.

State-owned QatarEnergy said on March 20 that it had lost 17% of its export capacity, with repairs likely to last up to five years after missile attacks on its Ras Laffan complex, the world's largest LNG production site.



Israel hindering Gaza aid access despite court ruling, says NGO

AFP
Paris

Foreign aid groups are struggling to work in the occupied Palestinian territories including in war-torn Gaza despite Israel's top court lifting a ban against them, a director at one of the charities said Monday.

Israel in December said it was banning 37 non-governmental organisations unless they provided detailed information on their Palestinian staff, in a move humanitarian organisations warned would further curtail already inadequate aid to Gaza.

Israel's Supreme Court in February froze that ban, theoretically allowing the NGOs to continue working in Gaza and the occupied West Bank until a final ruling.

But foreign "staff continued to be rejected, supplies continued to be rejected", said Alan Moseley, Danish Refugee Council director for the Palestinian territories.

He said almost no international NGO targeted by the Israeli ban had managed to transport aid into Gaza in recent months.

While commercial trucks were allowed to bring in basic supplies under a fragile ceasefire deal agreed in October, these are often far too expensive for Gazans after months of war, he said.

Some charities had managed to deliver aid via UN trucks still allowed in or had bought goods directly in Gaza to distribute them.

But this was "very difficult" and "very expensive", with some vital goods – including medical supplies – being very hard to find, he added.

Israel continued to block the entrance of aid worth "millions of dollars", Moseley said.

"There's tonnes of supplies sitting over the border, in Egypt and in Jordan, and



Palestinian children play on a street in Gaza City. 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 violations. (AFP)

there's a huge amount of energy put into trying to unblock these supplies," he added.

Israel has opposed so-called dual-use material and equipment, which it says could be used for military purposes.

"You hear that things can be used for making weapons or something else – but we see wheelchairs, prosthetics, school supplies, children's clothing, everything can be blocked," the aid worker said.

'Obligations of an occupying power'

Moseley said Israel's Supreme Court, at a hearing on March 23, gave NGOs petitioning against the ban the opportunity to revoke their request or submit the requested Palestinian staff data.

"But we decided not to do that and we requested a full judgment by the court," he said.

The NGOs argued that they should be

There's tonnes of supplies sitting over the border, in Egypt and Jordan. There's a huge amount of energy put into trying to unblock these supplies. You hear that things can be used for making weapons or something else – but we see wheelchairs, prosthetics, school supplies, children's clothing, everything can be blocked

– Alan Moseley, Danish Refugee Council director for the Palestinian territories

protecting their Palestinian staff's data, that they had already registered them with the Palestinian Authority, and that the Israeli ministry of diaspora affairs and combating antisemitism demanding the information "doesn't have jurisdiction".

They also stressed "the obligations of an occupying power to actually facilitate provision of humanitarian assistance, not to obstruct it", Moseley said.

Gaza is under a fragile ceasefire agreed last October, which followed two years of devastating conflict sparked by Palestinian militant group Hamas storming of Israel.

That attack resulted in the deaths of 1,221 people in Israel, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally of official Israeli figures. Palestinian militants also abducted 251 hostages.

Israel's retaliatory military campaign has killed more than 72,000 people in Gaza, also mostly civilians, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry, whose figures the United Nations considers reliable.

Re-election of Djibouti president confirmed with 97% votes

Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh was officially confirmed as winner of a sixth straight election with a final tally of 97.01% of the vote, the Constitutional Council said Tuesday.

Guelleh, 78, has ruled the small, strategically important country in the Horn of Africa unchallenged since 1999.

The outcome of the election was never in doubt. Initial results a few hours after the April 10 vote showed he had taken 97.81%, against just one largely unknown opponent.

"In this election, President Guelleh obtained 97.01% of the vote, for a total of 204,874 votes cast. His main opponent, Mohamed Farah Samatar, received 6,318 votes, or 2.99% of the total," said Djibouti's official press agency, citing the Constitutional Council.

The former French colony borders the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which provides access to the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden, through which passes a large portion of trade between Asia and the West.

Djibouti has just over a million inhabitants, but has leveraged its location to turn it into an international military and maritime hub, hosting military bases and contingents from France, the United States, China, Japan and Italy.

Guelleh had vowed his fifth term would be his last, but he ultimately had the constitution altered to allow him to run past the age of 75. (AFP)

Remembering Khamenei



A structure adorned with the national flag and a portrait of the late Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as a young man at a park in northern Tehran. With the ceasefire extended, a great contingency awaits in Islamabad where a fresh round of negotiations brokered by Pakistan to end the US-Iran conflict is expected to take place. The ensuing conflict has sent crude prices soaring – leaving the world in the grip of inflation fears. (AFP)

Nigeria charges six over coup plot to overthrow Tinubu

Nigeria's government filed 13 criminal charges against six former security officials accused of plotting the violent overthrow of President Bola Tinubu's government last year, court documents showed on Tuesday. Prosecutors charged a retired army major-general and others with treason, terrorism and terrorism financing. A seventh suspect, a former state governor, remains at large. Attorney-General and Justice Minister Lateef Fagbemi filed the case

on Monday at a federal court in Nigeria's capital Abuja. The suspects are due to be arraigned on Wednesday.

The case is the most serious treason prosecution since Tinubu took office in 2023, reflecting a push to tighten internal security at a time of economic strains, insurgency in the north, and political frictions. In October, Tinubu suddenly replaced the military's leadership in a sweeping shake-up – a move to bolster security. (Reuters)

Pope Leo calls for 'law and justice' on his sojourn to Equatorial Guinea

AFP
Malabo, Equatorial Guinea.

Pope Leo XIV on Tuesday urged Equatorial Guinea to place itself "in the service of law and justice", on the first day of his visit to the authoritarian country, which is one of the most closed-off states in Africa and regularly accused of human rights abuses.

The US-born pontiff arrived in the Spanish-speaking nation for the fourth and final stage of his marathon 11-day tour of the continent.

In Malabo, the former capital on Bioko island in the Gulf of Guinea, he was welcomed by Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who has been in power since 1979 and at 83 is the world's longest-serving head of state who is not a monarch. At the presidential palace, the pope used a less sharp tone than on his previous three stops, calling on authorities in the country to "evaluate its own paths of development and the positive opportunities of positioning itself on the international stage in the service of law and justice".

"It is even more evident today than in years past that the proliferation of armed conflicts is often driven by the exploitation of oil and mineral deposits, occurring with no regard for international law or the self-determination of peoples," he said in a speech. Hydrocarbon production accounts for 46.1% of GDP and more than 90% of exports in Equatorial Guinea, the African Development Bank said in 2024. According to Human Rights Watch, "vast oil revenues fund lavish lifestyles for the small elite surrounding the president, while a large proportion of the population continues to live in poverty".

The leader of the world's Catholics voiced regret that "the gap between a 'small minority' – 1% of the population – and the overwhelming majority has widened dramatically" while the country was bogged down in endemic corruption. Leo has to strike a delicate balance in Equatorial Guinea: supporting the faithful without backing the regime, which is regularly accused of authoritarianism



Pope Leo XIV walks at the Leon XIV campus of the National University of Equatorial Guinea in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea on Monday. (Reuters)

and human rights violations, particularly in its treatment of opponents and independent media.

International NGOs accuse the government of arbitrary detentions and restrictions on public freedoms. Leo wore a stern expression but a walkabout through the city centre streets on foot, surrounded by heavy security as well as hundreds of followers, brought back a smile to his face.

He was following in the footsteps of John Paul II 44 years ago, who was the first pope to set foot in oil-rich Equatorial Guinea, 80% of whose two million people are Catholic – a legacy of Spanish colonisation.

At Semu market, in central Malabo, reactions to the visit were mixed, with some vendors hoping to profit from the pope's arrival, while others voiced reservations. The majority of the population remains poor despite one of the highest per capita incomes in Africa, due in particular to oil revenues. Some feared that the country's people will have to foot the bill, including Andres Esono Ondo, who heads the country's only approved opposition party, the Convergence for Social Democracy.

Going electric: Iran conflict speeds up energy transition plans

AFP
Paris

Painful surges in oil prices are spurring countries to quickly rethink how to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, as shortage risks from war in the Middle East grow greater by the day.

Britain's government on Tuesday was the latest to unveil its plans, vowing to "massively expand renewables" as a way of bolstering energy security while denting the impact of higher electricity and petrol costs.

Around 60 governments worldwide have announced strategic responses or reviews since US and Israeli forces began striking Iran on February 28, according to Carbon Brief, a specialised news site.

Using data from the International Energy Agency, Carbon Brief found many countries promising short-term relief such as cuts on fuel taxes or warning of rationing of fossil fuels. But others have responded with plans to accelerate their green energy transitions toward low-carbon sources.

France

France announced on April 10 a range of measures to speed up the electrification of construction, transport and other industries, to reduce the share of fossil fuels in the country's energy mix to just 29 percent by 2035 from 60 percent today.

Electric vehicles should make up two out of every three new car sales by 2030, Prime Minister Sebastian Lecornu said.

The government is also providing aid to spur the installation of one million heat pumps a year, reducing reliance on imported natural gas.

EU

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has promised to propel the continent's electrification with an announcement planned for April 22.

Sweden

Sweden's environment minister announced on April 7 that "electrification is the future" to protect citizens from surging oil and natural gas prices.



A customer inspects an electric scooter of Chinese e-bike maker Yadea at a showroom in Dhaka on April 21, 2026 amid Bangladesh's fuel crisis triggered by the Middle East war. (AFP)

The two key measures were increased aid for using renewable energies by government employees and household subsidies for EV purchases.

China

President Xi Jinping promised this month that "A greener, more diversified and resilient new energy system will provide a strong

guarantee for China's energy security and economic development," state-controlled CCTV said.

Philippines

Energy Secretary Sharon Garin said in late March that "amid the Middle East conflict, accelerating the development of renewable energy and storage is both a strategic necessity and a national im-

perative". The archipelago nation relies on coal for about 60 percent of its electricity generation, and President Ferdinand Marcos has declared a "national energy emergency" due to risks to the domestic fuel supply.

Japan

Even as it authorised more burning of coal for power plants in response to soaring oil prices, Japan's government reiterated plans to "maximise the use of both renewable energy and nuclear power" to ensure its economic growth. It announced on March 20 a \$40 billion project with Washington to build next-generation small nuclear power plants in Tennessee and Alabama, which could expand Japan's own network of nuclear plants.

India

After cutting fuel taxes in late March to soften the blow at petrol stations, the Indian government said it would speed up permit grants for wind turbine and battery electricity storage projects.

Cambodia

Cambodia, which imports all its consumer fuel, announced in late March it was cutting import tariffs from 35 percent to zero on electric vehicles, electric kitchen stoves, and solar energy.

It also cut tariffs on rechargeable hybrid vehicles to just seven percent from 35 percent.

Barbados

The Caribbean island's government unveiled in early March a \$81 million plan to shift away from fossil fuels with heavy investments in renewable sources, in particular wind farms.

The goal is also to reinforce energy stockpile capacities.

Kenya

President William Ruto announced in late March a plan to triple electricity production in the next five to seven years, with nuclear energy accounting for just under a third of the country's needs. "We have made a deliberate and strategic decision to significantly expand our energy capacity," Ruto said.

Apple's Tim Cook to step down as chief executive after 15-year run

AFP/Reuters
San Francisco

Apple's Tim Cook will step down as the California tech giant's chief executive (CEO) this year, handing the top job to a company veteran as it navigates a technology landscape being upended by artificial intelligence (AI).

The 65-year-old Cook, who ran Apple after taking the reins from its visionary co-founder Steve Jobs, will be succeeded by John Ternus, a senior vice-president of hardware engineering.

Cook, a supply-chain genius who boosted Apple's market value by \$3.6tn in his 15 years at the helm, will stay on as executive chairman when Ternus takes over on September 1, Apple said in a statement.

The announcement on Monday answered long-simmering questions about who would replace Cook, who said he will step down in September to become the



John Ternus

board's executive chairman.

"It has been the greatest privilege of my life to be the CEO of Apple and to have been trusted to lead such an extraordinary company," Cook said in a statement.

Cook joined Apple in 1998, rising through the ranks and helping drive its success as chief operating officer co-ordi-

nating the iPhone maker's complex supply chain.

He became chief executive in 2011 after Jobs left because of health issues.

Cook is credited with expanding Apple's product line and ramping up the company's value to around \$4tn based on current share prices.

Ternus joined Apple's product design team in 2001 and became a senior vice-president of hardware engineering over the next two decades.

He is credited with playing roles in several products including iPhones, iPads, the Apple Watch and Mac computers.

"Having spent almost my entire career at Apple, I have been lucky to have worked under Steve Jobs and to have had Tim Cook as my mentor," Ternus said in the statement.

Apple marks its 50th anniversary this year as AI challenges the Silicon Valley legend to prove it can deliver yet another culture-changing innovation.



Tim Cook

"Ternus is not an unexpected choice, and he has a pedigree in hardware engineering, which will be critical for Apple's future foray into AI," said Kathleen Brooks, research director at the trading platform XTB.

"There is also anticipation of new Apple products to boost their offering, and

there is some expectation that Ternus could move fast to put his own stamp on the company," she wrote in a research note.

"Apple is making a major transition on its AI strategy and longtime CEO and legendary Cook leaving now is a surprise," Wedbush analyst Dan Ives said in a note to investors. "There will be a lot of pressure on Ternus to produce success out of the gates especially on the AI front."

Integrating AI into the iPhone - the most successful consumer product in history - may be Ternus's hardest challenge.

Despite introducing a form of AI to the public imagination in 2011 with Siri, Apple has not yet scored a hardware or software product hit centered on new AI technologies, while emerging rivals such as OpenAI's ChatGPT have attracted hundreds of millions of users.

In particular, Siri has not yet become an "agent" - the term that AI firms use for systems that carry out complex tasks like a human assistant.



Trump's Fed chair pick Warsh says he'll stay independent

President Donald Trump's nominee to head the US Federal Reserve told lawmakers at a tense confirmation hearing yesterday that he will retain independence from the White House.

"I'll be an independent actor if confirmed," Kevin Warsh (pictured above) told the Senate Banking Committee, as he faced sharp queries on his assets and views on central bank independence at a time when Trump is constantly seeking to influence monetary policy.

"I'm committed to ensuring that the conduct of monetary policy remains strictly independent," he said.

Warsh also expressed commitment to fighting inflation.

The hearing will be scrutinised as it marks a key hurdle that Warsh must overcome to succeed Fed Chair Jerome Powell when his term ends on May 15.

However, it comes as Trump has escalated criticism of the Fed for not cutting interest rates more aggressively.

Earlier, Trump told CNBC that he would be disappointed if the new Fed chair did not lower rates swiftly, and again slammed Powell for renovation costs at the bank's headquarters.

"We should have the lowest interest rate in the world," Trump said.

The session will be tense, with all 11 Democrats on the Banking Committee last week urging for a delay in Warsh's nomination proceedings until separate investigations into Powell and Fed governor Lisa Cook are closed.

Republican Senator Thom Tillis, who sits on the panel led by his party, has also vowed to block all Fed nominees - including Warsh - until the Justice Department probe involving Powell is resolved.

With 13 Republican members on the committee, Tillis' vote against Warsh's confirmation could be enough to set up an impasse.

Warsh will likely face sharp questioning from lawmakers on issues ranging from his wealth to past connections with the late US sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, alongside his views on economic issues.

"It will be his first chance since he was nominated by the president to demonstrate that he intends to be a credible, independent central banker," Brookings senior fellow David Wessel told AFP.

Banking Committee chairman Tim Scott called the hearing an "opportunity to refocus" the Fed on its dual mandate of price stability and low unemployment.

However, Elizabeth Warren, the top Democrat on the panel, cautioned that probes on Powell and Cook were designed to pressure Fed policymakers into doing Trump's bidding.

She warned against having "a sock puppet" of the president in charge at the central bank.

Trump has repeatedly clashed with Powell over monetary policy since naming him Fed chief in his first term in the White House.

Powell's tenure as head of the central bank formally ends on May 15, but he could conceivably remain longer in the office if Warsh's confirmation is delayed.

- AFP/Reuters

Gunman kills Canadian at Mexico's Teotihuacan pyramids, injures 13

Mexican security officials said yesterday that a recent shooting at the world-famous Teotihuacan pyramids that left one person dead and 13 others wounded "wasn't spontaneous".

As authorities grappled with the security breach that occurred just weeks before Mexico hosts several World Cup football matches beginning in June, President Claudia Sheinbaum called for tighter gun controls at tourist areas.

The suspect, identified as 27-year-old Mexico City resident Julio Cesar Jasso Ramirez, "made preliminary visits on multiple occasions to the archaeological site, stayed in hotels near the site ahead of time, and from there planned his violent acts", Mexico State Prosecutor Jose Luis Cervantes Martinez told reporters.

The Mexican attacker shot dead a Canadian and then died by suicide on the pyramid - less than an hour's drive from Mexico City - after military operatives approached and began to engage him.

At least 13 people were injured as they fled the chaos, including some who suffered gunshot wounds.

Following the shooting, Sheinbaum urged that gun controls be tightened at tourist sites.

"We need to have better security to make sure someone can't enter an archaeological site, a tourist site, with a firearm," she said at her morning press conference yesterday, barely seven weeks before Mexico City hosts the World Cup's opening match on June 11.

The shooting began at just after 11am at the Pyramid of the Moon, one of the most prominent structures at the site outside Mexico City, according to a witness, who had just descended from the temple's mezzanine when they heard "pops" and saw a stampede of visitors.

Bystanders, including some with medical training, provided first aid to the injured, using water bottles and clean cloth to slow bleeding until paramedics arrived, the witness added.

Security authorities said some of the injured had been taken to hospitals, including three Colombians, one of whom was a six-year-old child, as well as US, Russian and Brazilian nationals.

A second Canadian was also wounded in the attack, according to a post on X from Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister Anita Anand.

The pre-Hispanic city of Teotihuacan was one of the most important cultural centres in Mesoamerica and it is one of Mexico's most popular tourist sites, receiving 1.8mn visitors last year.

While Mexico has many shooting incidents due to cartel activity, violence at tourist attractions is rare. - AFP/Reuters

El Salvador holds mass trial of 486 alleged gang members

Nearly 490 alleged members of the powerful Central American gang Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), including several alleged leaders, went on trial collectively in El Salvador on Monday, accused of thousands of murders.

El Salvador is conducting mass trials of thousands of suspected gang members, many of whom have spent years in prison without charge or visiting rights, as part of iron-fisted President Nayib Bukele's anti-gang crackdown.

The Attorney-General's Office said 486 suspected MS-13 members were on trial for 47,000 crimes committed between 2012 and 2022, including 29,000 homicides.

Bukele in 2022 imposed a state of emergency, which has been used to arrest more than 91,000 suspected gang members, including thousands of people who were later declared innocent. - AFP

Virginians vote on US House map expansion

AFP/Reuters
Washington

Virginia voted yesterday in a referendum that could hand Democrats four extra seats in the US House of Representatives, turning President Donald Trump's redistricting push into a potential liability for Republicans in upcoming midterm elections.

The battle over "gerrymandering" - the long-established but widely criticised US practice of drawing electoral boundaries to benefit one party - has become one of the defining fights of the campaign for November's congressional contests.

The ballot measure would temporarily let Virginia redraw its congressional map before the next scheduled nationwide redistricting in 2030, giving Democrats a strong advantage in 10 of the state's 11 House districts, up from their current 6-5 edge.

With control of the House on a knife edge, the vote could help determine whether Trump finishes his term with a compliant Republican Congress or a Democratic chamber empowered to block his agenda and investigate his administration.

Trump, who lost Virginia in all three of his presidential campaigns, joined a telephone rally on Monday night with House Speaker Mike Johnson to urge a "no" vote, warning Virginians: "The whole country is watching."

After polls opened at 6am, the president followed up yesterday with an all-caps social media post urging the state to vote no to "save your country".

Redistricting usually follows the national census every 10 years, but Trump last year urged Republican-led states to redraw maps mid-decade to protect the party's fragile House majority.

That triggered a tit-for-tat contest as both parties raced to squeeze out extra seats before November.

Texas moved first, adopting a map that could add up to five Republican seats. California an-



Stickers for Virginia voters are seen at a polling location at Washington-Liberty High School in Arlington, Virginia. - AFP

swered with a ballot measure designed to give Democrats five of their own.

Virginia is now one of Democrats' last major chances to gain ground through redistricting before voters decide control of Congress.

Democratic groups have poured money into the state, making the referendum one of the most expensive redistricting fights in US history.

The main campaigns on both sides have raised nearly \$100mn, much of it from "dark money" groups - nonprofit organisations that can spend heavily on politics without publicly disclosing their donors.

The pro-redistricting campaign, Virginians for Fair Elections, has raised the lion's share - nearly \$65mn, according to The Hill.

The leading Republican-led opposition group, the similarly named Virginians for Fair Maps, had brought in nearly \$20mn as of April 13.

Former president Barack Obama, still one of the Democratic Party's most influential campaign voices, has urged Virginians to vote yes.

Rover discovers more building blocks of life on Mars

AFP/Reuters
Paris/Washington

Nasa rover has discovered more building blocks of life on Mars after carrying out a chemistry experiment never before conducted on another planet, scientists said yesterday.

Like Earth and the solar system's other planets, Mars formed roughly 4.5bn years ago. Early in its history, Mars was warmer and wetter than the cold and arid place it is today.

The organic molecules are not definitive evidence of past life, the Nasa-led team emphasised, because they could also have formed on the red planet or crash-landed on meteorites.

However, it proves that these important clues to Martian history have been preserved on the surface for more than 3bn years, they added.

Back then, the surface of Mars was thought to have been dotted with huge lakes and rivers full of liquid water, a key ingredient for life as we know it.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa)'s Curiosity rover landed in a former lake bed called the Gale crater in 2012, and has been searching for signs of possible past life since.

The car-sized rover carried two tubes of a chemical called TMAH, which can break apart organic matter to see what it is made out of.

"This experiment's never been run before



This Nasa photo released in 2018 shows a low-angle self-portrait of Nasa's Curiosity Mars rover vehicle at the site from which it reached down to drill into a rock target called 'Buckskin' on lower Mount Sharp. A Nasa rover has discovered more building blocks of life on Mars after carrying out a chemistry experiment never before conducted on another planet, scientists said yesterday. - AFP

on another world," Amy Williams, an astrobiologist working on the Curiosity mission told AFP.

The team were under pressure because they only had "two shots to get it right", added Williams, the lead author of a new study describing the results.

The experiment, conducted in 2020, detected more than 20 organic molecules, including several that had never before been confirmed on Mars.

These included a molecule called benzothiothiophene, which has also been found in meteorites and asteroids.

"The same stuff that rained down on Mars from meteorites is what rained down on Earth, and it probably provided the building blocks for life as we know it on our planet," Williams said.

Another molecule containing nitrogen "is a precursor to how DNA is eventually built", she added.

"We're seeing the building blocks for life - prebiotic chemistry on Mars - preserved in these rocks for billions of years," Williams said.

However, none of this can prove that life - even tiny, microbial organisms - once flourished on Mars.

One way to potentially make such an "extraordinary claim" would be to bring some Martian rocks back to Earth so scientists can study them more closely, Williams said.

Nasa's Perseverance rover has already collected a bunch of rocks for such a mission, called Mars Sample Return.

However, the mission has effectively been cancelled by the administration of President Donald Trump following a US Congress vote in January.

Future missions could still benefit from Curiosity's demonstration that experiments using the TMAH chemical work on other worlds, the new study in *Nature Communications* said.

The European Space Agency (ESA)'s Rosalind Franklin rover, which has a much longer drill than Curiosity, will take the chemical to Mars.

After years of delays, Nasa announced last week that the ESA's rover is now scheduled to blast off towards the red planet in late 2028.

The chemical will also be on board the Dragon rotorcraft, which is planned to launch in 2028 on a mission to explore Saturn's moon Titan.



Japan eases weapons export rules

AFP
Tokyo

Japan will ease decades-old arms export curbs, the government said yesterday, in a major policy shift that paves the way for the sale of lethal weapons overseas as Tokyo ramps up its defence ambitions.

The new rules end Japan's self-imposed curb on sales of lethal arms as Tokyo seeks to enter the international arms market, hoping to bolster national defence as well as boost economic growth.

The move, which provoked an angry reaction from China, comes as anxiety increases over Beijing's escalating military activity in the region, as well as persistent security threats from North Korea and Russia.

"Given that the security environment is becoming increasingly challenging, I believe that no country can now safeguard its own peace and security on its own," Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi told reporters.

"In this context, I believe it is important to have partners who support one another in the area of defence equipment," she said.

Still, she stressed that Japan's "core principles" and "history" as a pacifist nation remain unchanged.

China was "seriously concerned" by the changes and would "firmly resist Japan's reckless new-style militarisation", foreign ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun told a news briefing.

Exports had previously been limited to equipment classified under five categories: search and rescue, transportation, warning, surveillance and minesweeping.



Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi attends a cabinet meeting at the Prime Minister's Office in Tokyo yesterday. (AFP)

However, Takaichi said on X that "with this amendment, transfers of all defence equipment will in principle become possible".

Proponents of the policy shift argue the change should further integrate Tokyo in the international defence supply chain, deepening defence, diplomatic and economic ties with partner nations as regional instability grows.

But the decision has caused unease among some members of the Japanese public, with critics accusing Takaichi of eroding the proud history of the nation's staunch pacifism.

"As a Hiroshima native, I grew up being taught the importance of peace, and I believe that the horror and devastation of the atomic bomb remain relevant today," 56-year-old Junichi Kikuta told AFP, explaining that he was against the move.

"I still hope Japan, as the only country ever hit by a nuclear weapon, will continue to uphold its stance of relinquishing weapons and opposing wars."

The policy change has been approved by the Cabinet and the National Security Council, Chief Cabinet Secretary Minoru Kihara told a news conference.

Heigo Sato, an expert on defence issues and arms control at Takushoku University, said Japan must use this time of peace to ensure combat readiness by establishing "a system that ensures the smooth exchange of weapons and ammunition" between allies.

He told AFP that exports require routine maintenance, providing defence contractors with steady business while also strengthening ties with buyer nations.

By making the arms trade a two-way exchange, Japan might improve the chances of receiving help from allies in the event of an unexpected, prolonged conflict, he said.

The new rules are part of an incremental easing of the blanket export ban on weapons that was first introduced in 1976.

Under the new rule, Japan would export weapons only to countries that pledge to use the equipment

in a manner consistent with the UN Charter.

However, the Japanese public appears uneasy about the prospect of exporting lethal arms.

A March survey by national broadcaster NHK showed that 53% of participants opposed the step, while only 32% supported it.

Peace activists have staged rallies across the nation over concerns that Takaichi's hawkish world views and open support for US President Donald Trump could drag Japan into conflicts. Some appeared to be protesting against the easing of arms export rules.

Veteran activist Koji Sugihara warned that the change was "a historic turning point", arguing that Japan's pacifist reputation has historically aided its diplomatic and business relations. "People do not want Japanese-made products to be used to kill people in foreign countries," Sugihara told AFP.

Japan previously exported bullets and military supplies to boost its economy, particularly during the Korean War in the 1950s, but adopted a conditional weapons export ban in 1967 before a total ban came in a decade later.

Tokyo has made exceptions to the rules in recent decades, especially when joining international weapons development projects, before it opened the door to exports in 2014 in the five non-lethal military product categories.

Five Japanese firms — Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, NEC, Kawasaki Heavy Industries, Mitsubishi Electric and Fujitsu are among the world's top 100 arms companies, according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

PM Takaichi sends offering to war shrine

AFP
Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi sent a ritual offering yesterday to a shrine honouring the country's war dead that has long angered neighbouring countries but did not visit in person, media reports and an unidentified source close to the matter said.

The Yasukuni Shrine in central Tokyo is dedicated to 2.5mn war dead, mostly Japanese, who perished in conflicts since the late 19th century. That number includes senior military and political figures convicted by an international tribunal of war crimes prior to and during World War II. A Japanese prime minister has not visited the shrine since 2013, but Takaichi's predecessors Shigeru Ishiba and Fumio Kishida regularly sent offerings for the biannual spring and autumn festivals.

Dozens of lawmakers pay their respects every year during the festivals and in August for the anniversary of the emperor announcing Japan's surrender in 1945.

Former prime minister Shinzo Abe visited the shrine in 2013, sparking fury in Beijing and Seoul and earning a rare diplomatic rebuke from close ally the US.

Takaichi sent a "masakaki" tree offering, the source told AFP, while public broadcaster

NHK and Jiji Press also reported that she sent the offering.

China reacted angrily, calling the shrine a "spiritual instrument and symbol of the wars of aggression launched by Japanese militarism."

"China firmly opposes and strongly condemns the negative moves by Japan regarding the Yasukuni Shrine, and has made solemn representations and a strong protest to the Japanese side," foreign ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun said. South Korea expressed "deep disappointment and regret" yesterday over the offering.

"Our government urges Japan's responsible leaders to face history squarely and to demonstrate, through action, a humble reflection on and a sincere remorse for its past," foreign ministry spokesman Park Il told reporters.

"We reiterate that this serves as an important foundation for building a future-oriented South Korea-Japan relationship grounded in mutual trust," he said.

Japan's top government spokesman Minoru Kihara declined to comment on the reports. Takaichi visited the shrine in August last year, before she became prime minister, and told local media: "Honouring the spirits of those who devoted their lives for their country is something each individual should do in accordance with their own conscience."

Taiwan blames Chinese pressure for cancelled Africa trip

Reuters
Taipei

Taiwan President Lai Ching-te said yesterday he had cancelled his trip to Eswatini this week, after his government accused China of pressing three other African countries to revoke permission for his aircraft to fly over their territories.

The small southern African nation of Eswatini is one of only 12 countries to retain formal ties with Chinese-claimed Taiwan. Lai was due to leave today for the 40th anniversary of King Mswati III's accession.

Presidential Office Secretary-General Pan Meng-an said the Seychelles, Mauritius, and Madagascar unilaterally revoked flight permits for the presidential aircraft to cross their countries on his journey without prior warning.

"The actual reason was intense pressure exerted by Chinese authorities, including economic coercion," he told a hastily called news conference in Taipei.

China's foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment. China, which has deep economic and political ties with Africa, says Taiwan is one of its provinces with

no right to call itself a country. Speaking to Mozambique's President Daniel Chapo in Beijing yesterday, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged support for the continent and its development needs, according to a state media read-out that did not mention Lai's cancelled visit to Eswatini.

Lai, in a post on his Facebook page, said China's "suppressive actions" demonstrate the threat that authoritarian states pose to the international order, peace, and stability.

"No threat or suppression can change Taiwan's determination to engage with the world, nor can it negate Taiwan's ability to contribute to the international community," he added.

Seychelles' foreign affairs ministry told Reuters that the Taiwanese president's plane had not been granted clearance for overflight or landing, in line with the government's longstanding policy of not recognising Taiwan's sovereignty.

"The decision was taken independently and in accordance with established procedures," Aline Morel, senior protocol officer at the ministry, said in an e-mail.

A Madagascar foreign ministry official also confirmed having denied an overflight request. "Malagasy diplomacy recognises only one Chi-

na. The decision was made in full respect of Madagascar's sovereignty over its airspace," the official said.

Mauritius did not immediately respond to requests for a response.

It would be the first time a Taiwan president has had to put off an overseas trip due to Chinese pressure. Taiwanese presidents normally have no problems overflying countries with which the island does not have formal relations, but China harbours a particular dislike of Lai, whom it calls a "separatist".

Lai says only Taiwan's people can decide their future, and rejects Beijing's sovereignty claims.

A senior Taiwan security official told Reuters that the government's understanding was that China applied pressure on the Seychelles, Madagascar and Mauritius, threatening economic sanctions including revoking debt relief.

This would have been Lai's first trip outside Taiwan since November 2024, when he visited the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and Palau, and transited through Hawaii and the US territory of Guam.

The last time a Taiwanese president visited Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland and home to around 1.3mn people, was in 2023, when Tsai Ing-wen made the journey.

US limits intel sharing on North Korea

AFP
Seoul

The US has partly restricted the sharing of satellite intelligence on North Korea with South Korea due to remarks by Seoul's unification minister about one of Pyongyang's nuclear facilities, reports said yesterday.

Chung Dong-young told South Korea's parliament last month that North Korea was suspected of operating a uranium enrichment site — a key step in making a nuclear bomb — in the northwestern Kusong region.

Washington, South Korea's security ally, lodged protests over Chung's comments, saying they disclosed sensitive information from US intelligence without authorisation, according to the South's Yonhap news agency and multiple local outlets.

It has "limited" some satellite information on the North that was previously routinely handed over to Seoul, the reports said.

The restrictions have applied "since the beginning of this month" but "(do) not significantly affect military preparedness", an unnamed South Korean military official was quoted as saying by Yonhap yesterday.

"Intelligence collection and sharing regarding North Korea's military activities are proceeding normally between South Korean and US authorities, just as before," the official reportedly said.

Neither South Korean nor US authorities have explicitly denied that restrictions have been imposed.

US Forces Korea (USFK), Washington's military presence in the country, told AFP yesterday that it was "aware of the media articles" and had "nothing to add".

A spokesperson for South Korea's unification ministry said Monday that Seoul "did not receive any information" about the Kusong facility "from any other agency". North Korea is known to operate uranium enrichment facilities in Yongbyon, in the north, and Kangson, near the capital Pyongyang.

Chung has come under pressure from opposition parties over the disclosure and its repercussions for ties with Washington.

He said on Monday it was "deeply regrettable" that his remarks had been interpreted as a leak of classified information, insisting that they were based on publicly available information and had been raised at his confirmation hearing in July.



South Korea's Unification Minister Chung Dong-young speaks to reporters as he arrives at the Government Complex in Seoul. (AFP)

President Lee Jae-myung has defended Chung, writing on X that it is a "clear fact" the existence of the Kusong facility was already widely known through academic papers and media reports.

"Any claims or actions premised on the assumption that Minister Chung leaked classified information provided by the US are wrong," Lee added.

South Korea explicitly denied a Yonhap report, citing an opposition lawmaker, saying that USFK Commander Xavier Brunson had lodged a protest with Defence Minister Ahn Gyu-back over Chung's remarks.

It would not have been diplomatically "appropriate" for Brunson to make such a complaint, the defence ministry said, without mentioning the reported satellite intelligence sharing curbs.

North Korea is subject to multiple UN sanctions banning its nuclear weapons development and use of ballistic missile technology, restrictions it has repeatedly flouted.

Pyongyang is showing a "very serious increase" in its ability to produce atomic weapons, the head of the UN nuclear watchdog said during a visit to Seoul last week.

It is believed to gather intelligence through satellites, electronic intercepts and other means, and share it with Seoul.

Russia, North Korea connect road bridge

AFP
Moscow

Russia and North Korea held a ceremony yesterday to mark the joining of the first road bridge connecting the countries, set to open for traffic this summer, Moscow said.

Ties between the two heavily sanctioned countries have surged amid Russia's war on Ukraine, with Moscow and Pyongyang deepening economic, political, cultural and military links.

South Korea warned last week that Chinese and Russian support was helping revive the North Korean economy, which has struggled for years under sweeping international sanctions, almost complete international isolation and huge military investment.

Moscow's foreign ministry said the opening of the bridge would "become a truly landmark stage in Russian-Korean relations. Its significance goes far beyond a purely engineering task".

The bridge, which crosses the Tumen river that marks the border between the two countries, will be able to handle up to 300 vehicles and 2,850 people a day, Russia's transport ministry said.

Russia and North Korea inked



A ceremony marking the connection of the two sides of the new Russia-North Korea road bridge over the Tumen River, set to open this summer. (AFP)

a defence treaty in 2024 that calls for military support in the case of either country being attacked.

Pyongyang that year sent thousands of troops to Russia to support its war on Ukraine. They were deployed to the western Kursk region to help fend off a months-long counter-offensive by Kyiv's troops.

Several senior Russian officials have visited North Korea recently, including the interior minister, currently in the country.

Russia's foreign ministry said the bridge would help "develop trade, economic and humanitar-

ian exchanges" between Russia's Far East and North Korea. North Korea does not publish official data on the size of its economy.

Its nominal gross domestic product was equivalent to about \$30bn in 2024, according to Seoul's official estimate — a tiny fraction of the South Korean economy, one of the most developed in the world.

North Korea has long faced shortages. A famine in the mid-1990s killed hundreds of thousands of people, and reports indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic also pushed many into extreme hunger.

Russian interior minister arrives in N Korea for talks

Russian Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokolitsev arrived in North Korea for talks on co-operation between the two allies, the ministry's spokeswoman Irina Volk said early yesterday.

"Issues of co-operation between the two countries in the field of law enforcement will be considered,"

Volk wrote on Telegram. Pictures showed the minister being greeted on arrival in Pyongyang. Russia and North Korea have forged closer relations since Moscow's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and in 2024 signed a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty" during a visit to Pyongyang by

Russian President Vladimir Putin. The pact includes a mutual defence provision. Under the terms of the treaty, North Korea sent some 14,000 soldiers to fight alongside Russian forces in western Russia's Kursk region after a large Ukrainian incursion. (Reuters)

King Charles pays tribute to late queen on 100th birthday

AFP
London

Britain's King Charles yesterday paid a heartfelt tribute to his mother, the late queen Elizabeth II in a video message on what would have been her 100th birthday.

The king's moving homage came as the final plans for a memorial for the nation's longest serving monarch were unveiled.

Referring to Elizabeth as "darling mama", Charles, 77, said she had "remained constant, steadfast and wholly devoted to the people she served" throughout her long life.

The monarch died aged 96 in September 2022, after a 70-year reign.

"Much about the times we now live in, I suspect, may have troubled her deeply, but I take heart from her belief that goodness will always prevail and that a brighter dawn is never far from the horizon," the king said in his message.

"For as a young Princess Elizabeth put it in her first ever public broadcast, aged just 14, we can each play our part 'to make the world of tomorrow a better and happier place'.

"It is a belief which I share, with all my heart," he added.

The memorial to the queen will



Britain's King Charles and Queen Camilla, with architect Norman Foster and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, attend a presentation on the final design for the national memorial to Queen Elizabeth II at the British Museum, on the 100th anniversary of the late queen's birth, in London, yesterday. (Reuters)

feature a statue by sculptor Martin Jennings of her as a young woman dressed in ceremonial robes.

The bronze likeness will take inspiration from a celebrated 1955 portrait of her by Italian artist Pietro Annigoni.

The combined statue and plinth will stand 7.3 metres (24 feet) high at the entrance to the memorial in London's St James's Park, close to Buckingham Palace.

The king told architect Norman Foster during a viewing at the Brit-

ish Museum that the design was "fantastic".

The memorial will feature a family of gardens through the park with meandering paths and a new translucent glass unity bridge, inspired by Elizabeth's wedding tiara.

There will also be a smaller statue of her late husband Prince Philip dressed in his naval uniform looking up at his wife.

Charles and other members of the royal family viewed maquettes

of the planned statues and a scale model of the wider memorial on a visit to London's British Museum yesterday.

Elizabeth, who was born on April 21, 1926, was not expected to become queen.

An accident of history brought her to the throne after her uncle Edward VIII abdicated in order to marry the twice-divorced American Wallis Simpson in 1936.

After the abdication, her reluctant father, who suffered from a severe stammer, became King George VI.

But his death in 1952 saw the young princess accede to the throne aged just 25, setting the stage for her record-breaking reign.

Since her death, the royal family have endured a turbulent time as a result of illness, family estrangement and scandal.

Both Charles and his daughter-in-law Catherine, wife of his elder son Prince William, have battled cancer, while his younger son Prince Harry wrote a wounding tell-all memoir after quitting royal duties with his wife Meghan.

William and Catherine, the Prince and Princess of Wales, paid their own tribute to the late queen yesterday with a message praising her on social networks for "inspiring generations through a lifetime of duty".

Facial recognition critics lose UK court challenge

AFP
London

A man falsely identified as a suspect by London police's live facial recognition cameras lost a legal action yesterday over its adoption, in a setback for opponents of the technology.

Shaun Thompson, a volunteer who helps young people affected by street crime, launched the lawsuit alongside Silkie Carlo, director of civil liberties campaigning organisation Big Brother Watch.

But the High Court in London sided with the capital's Metropolitan Police, concluding it had "adequate safeguards against abuse" and was not breaching human rights legislation.

The Met scans the faces of passers-by and compares their biometrics with thousands on a watchlist, under its usage policy. The UK is the only European country to deploy the technology on a large scale.

After High Court hearings earlier this year, a two-judge panel rejected various arguments against it, including that officers were free to deploy the technology "wherever they choose" and without constraints.

"The court concluded that the policy does not authorise arbitrary decision-making," a summary of their ruling said.

It added the Met's use has "sufficient clarity and foreseeability, and provides adequate safeguards against abuse" and does not contravene various European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) articles.

Thompson said in a statement he would appeal the decision "to protect Londoners from facial recognition being used for mass surveillance and leading to situations like mine, where I was misidentified, detained and threatened with arrest".

Carlo called the ruling "disappointing" but also insisted "the fight against live facial recognition mass surveillance is far from over".

Met Commissioner Mark Rowley hailed the court decision as "a significant and important victory for public safety", calling the technology "one of the biggest breakthroughs for policing".

He insisted the force was "acting lawfully to use the best modern technology to reduce crime and keep pace with the evolving threats we face".

Thompson brought the legal challenge in the wake of being questioned by police in 2023 after the technology wrongly identified him as on a watchlist.

The Met's lawyer argued in court that the technology only "minimally" intrudes into the privacy of the public, in part because it is required to be clearly signposted.

New Zealand PM Luxon survives vote of confidence

Reuters
Wellington

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon yesterday said he received the support of National Party lawmakers after calling a confidence vote on his leadership, following days of speculation that some within the party were seeking to replace him.

"I moved a formal motion of confidence in my leadership and that motion was passed," Luxon said in a prepared statement that he read after a party room meeting. "I have the support of my caucus as their leader. Caucus has answered clearly and decisively and has backed my leadership and that matter is now closed."

After reading the statement, Luxon left the room and refused to answer questions. No details were given on whether the vote in support was unanimous or the size of the majority.

Luxon leads the National Party, the biggest party in New Zealand's three-party ruling coalition, and serves as prime minister. If his party were to replace him as leader, he would also lose the premiership. Confidence votes are rarely aired publicly in New Zealand, where party caucus deliberations are usually secret. In addition, while parties choosing to replace their prime minister are not uncommon in some countries, it has not happened in New Zealand since 1997.

Luxon, a former airline executive, has seen both his personal and his party's popularity fall



New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon speaks at a press conference besides National Party deputy leader Nicola Willis in Wellington yesterday. (AFP)

over the past year as the economy has failed to gain steam, unemployment has remained high and inflation has started to pick up again. Several polls have shown Luxon's National Party struggling to exceed 30%, with some polls indicating the ruling coalition might not have the numbers to win an election.

In a INews Verian poll released late on Sunday, support for the National Party fell 4 percentage points to 30% and indicated that if the election were held today, the current coalition

government would not win sufficient seats to retain power. Support for Luxon as the preferred prime minister also fell 4 points to 16%. Support for Chris Hipkins, leader of the Labour Party and a former prime minister, fell one point to 19%.

This is a particular concern for lower-ranked National Party lawmakers and those in marginal electorate seats, who fear that if the party can't turn its fortunes around ahead of a November 7 election, they will lose their jobs.

UN urges Sri Lanka to deliver results in bombing probe

AFP
Colombo

The UN urged Sri Lanka yesterday to deliver concrete results after long-running investigations into the 2019 Easter Sunday suicide bombings that killed 279 people, including 45 foreigners.

The UN's top envoy to the country, Marc-Andre Franche, said survivors and families of victims were still waiting for answers, despite multiple probes and renewed political pledges following the formation of a new government in September 2024.

"Public commitments by the government to pursue justice are important and must be welcomed," he said, as the nation marked seven years since the bombings yesterday.

"But what matters now is results," he said at a remembrance service in Colombo.

Bombers struck three churches and three hotels on April 21, 2019, in the island's deadliest ever attack on civilians.

Several investigations, including a parliamentary probe, have pointed to the involvement

of state intelligence units.

In October 2021, Sri Lanka's state prosecutor indicted 25 people, accusing them of being co-conspirators in the bombings. The case is ongoing.

Police enquiries took a new turn in February with the arrest of the former head of the State Intelligence Service, retired army major general Suresh Sallay, who is accused of aiding and abetting the attackers.

Sallay has denied the allegations and is being held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Investigators have also alleged a plot to exploit the attacks to create instability and pave the way for Gotabaya Rajapaksa to win power.

Rajapaksa, the younger brother of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, announced his presidential bid two days after the bombings and won the November 2019 election.

However, he was toppled in July 2022 after being accused of corruption and mismanagement, which contributed to the country's worst economic meltdown.

Rajapaksa has also denied involvement in any conspiracy.

Myanmar president seeks peace talks

Reuters
Naypyidaw

Myanmar's new military-backed government wants to hold peace talks with opposition armed groups by the end of July, the country's junta leader-turned-president said, but two key rebel groups rejected the offer yesterday. State media reported that President Min Aung Hlaing, who led a coup five years ago that plunged the Southeast Asian country into a civil war that continues to rage, told a government meeting that he wanted rebel groups that were not part of a ceasefire deal to join talks to be held within 100 days.

"For groups that have not yet engaged in dialogue and negotiation, we also invite them to come participate in discussions by the final deadline of July 31," he said, and mentioned opposition groups such as the Karen National Union, the Chin National Front, and the All Burma Students' Democratic Front.

Min Aung Hlaing referred to signatories of the Na-

tionwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in his remarks, a deal that was in place before the 2021 coup threw it into question. Saw Law Nee, a spokesperson for the KNU, dismissed the government proposal. "The KNU has already withdrawn from the NCA since the 2021 coup. We have no plans to return to negotiations or follow the NCA path," he said.

CNF spokesman Salai Htet Ni said his group was seeking a federal democratic system free of the influence of the military.

"Since we are fighting a military-political battle for this, we have nothing to discuss with those who currently call themselves an 'administration' after merely changing their appearance from the military," he said. Myanmar has been in turmoil following the coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, who was subsequently imprisoned for 27 years on charges her allies were politically motivated. Last week, the government cut the 80-year-old's sentence by one-sixth.

The new military-backed administration has only been recognised by a few countries.

Nepal resumes issuing permits for workers

Nepal has resumed issuing permits for its nationals to work in the Middle East, an official said yesterday, six weeks after suspending the procedure because of conflict in the region.

About 75% of all Nepali workers abroad work in Middle East nations, mainly as labourers at building sites, and experts say remittances from workers make up more than a quarter of the \$42-billion economy of the cash-strapped Himalayan nation.

Permit resumption "follows advice from the foreign

ministry and high demand from workers", Pitambar Ghimire, a labour ministry spokesperson, told Reuters. Nepal requires citizens to secure a work permit from the government in order to take up jobs in a foreign country, but suspended their issue for Gulf countries on March 1, a day after the US-Israeli war on Iran began. Nepal's youth unemployment stands at 20.6% among a population of 30mn for the highest such figure among all South and Southeast Asian countries, World Bank data shows. (Reuters)

India firecracker warehouse blaze kills eight

A firecracker storage facility in southern India caught fire yesterday, killing at least eight people, police said, the second such incident in three days.

Nakul Rajendra Deshmukh, police chief in Kerala state's Thrissur district, told AFP that rescue operations were "over" after the deadly fire, which also left 15 people injured including two in critical condition.

The cause of the fire was being ascertained, he added. Local media said it broke out during preparations for a Hindu festival.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a social media post that he was "saddened" by the loss of lives and offered his "deepest condolences" to the families of the victims. (AFP)

Tourists trickle back to Indian Kashmir, year after deadly attack

AFP
Srinagar

Hoteliers are switching on the lights to welcome a trickle of visitors back to the once-booming resort towns of India-controlled Kashmir, a year after militants opened fire on holidaymakers in an attack that killed 26 people.

The disputed region, which India and Pakistan both claim in full, used to attract millions of Indian visitors flocking to take in its famed wooden houseboats on Dal Lake in the centre of the main city Srinagar.

However, dozens of tourist

sites across the Himalayan territory closed for security reasons after one of the deadliest attacks on civilians in decades in Indian-run Kashmir on April 22, 2025.

A year on, hoteliers are still feeling the repercussions.

"It used to be full for months on end before the attack," said Younis Khandey, the owner of a 10-room guesthouse in the resort town of Pahalgam, near the site of the attack.

India blamed Pakistan for backing the gunmen, charges Islamabad rejected.

A shadowy group called The Resistance Front (TRF) - described by the US as a "proxy" of UN-designated terrorist group

Lashkar-e-Taiba - initially claimed responsibility for the attack. The group later retracted its claim. Two weeks later, anger between India and Pakistan erupted into a four-day conflict in which the nuclear-armed neighbours deployed drones, missiles and fighter jets, killing at least 70 people on both sides.

The small mountain meadow of Baisaran, where the gunmen stormed out of pine forests and fired on crowds, remains closed.

Other sites are now open, but travel operators say bookings are still far down from usual.

"Business has been down about 60%, even after many spots were reopened for tourists," said travel

agent Tanvir Ahmed. "But arrivals are picking up again now." Before the attack, Kashmir welcomed hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visiting sacred shrines.

In 2024, a record number of more than 23mn tourists - including 65,000 foreigners - visited the region of some 12mn people, according to the Indian government.

Statistics for 2025 have not been released in the wake of the attack. "The tourism sector is not back on track yet," said Syed Qamar Sajjad, director of the region's tourism department.

India has at least 500,000 soldiers permanently deployed in Kashmir.



Tourists ride Shikara, a traditional wooden boat at the iconic Dal Lake in Srinagar. (AFP)



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Lasting impact: A food crisis due to fertiliser crunch is not far behind

There is now a growing consensus across public panels and private discussions among policy makers and experts that the impact of the conflict in the Middle East on the global economy is likely to get significantly worse before it gets better – even if lasting peace is negotiated soon.

And a food crisis stemming from a fertiliser crunch won't be far behind.

The World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the UN World Food Programme warned last week that sharp increases in oil, natural gas and fertiliser prices triggered by the war will inevitably cause rising food prices and food insecurity.

In a joint statement, the leaders of the global institutions said the burden would fall most heavily on the world's most vulnerable populations, particularly in low-income, import-dependent economies. They said their institutions would continue to monitor developments closely and "coordinate the use of all available tools to support those impacted by the crisis."

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva has said the Fund is engaging with the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation on food security. The WFP said in mid-March that millions of people will face acute hunger if the war continues into June.

The World Bank, IMF and WFP have warned that sharp increases in oil, natural gas and fertiliser prices triggered by the war will inevitably cause rising food prices and food insecurity

The conflict in the Middle East could push millions more towards hunger as its economic fallout reverberates further around the globe, according to the World Bank's chief economist. "You have about 300mn people who suffer from acute food insecurity already," Indermit Gill said. "That'll go up by about 20% very, very quickly," as knock-on effects grow.

The blocking of the Strait of Hormuz, a key oil supply route, has sent fertiliser prices soaring since they rely on oil-based inputs. Higher prices for fertilisers,

which are used in agriculture, may entice countries to halt food exports and hoard more food for themselves, further driving up food prices.

Low-income people across the world tend to spend a larger share of their earnings on basic needs like food and fuel. After downgrading its forecast and predicting the slowest growth the world has seen since the pandemic on Tuesday, the IMF's chief economist, Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas, foreshadowed more downgrades to come. "Even if the war ends tomorrow, it would take quite some time for the recovery to kick in," Georgieva told Bloomberg Television. "The impact is already baked in."

The price of fossil fuels and fertilisers are intimately linked, says the UN Conference Trade and Development: Oil and gas processes provide inputs to its manufacture. Natural gas is used in the Arabian Gulf region to create urea, used in the nitrogen fertiliser that is critical to boosting agricultural yields.

Hormuz is a key choke point for exporting it.

This latest crisis – after the Ukraine war energy shock and the global health emergency of Covid – is also hitting "at a time when many developing economies struggle to service their debt".

Rising global interest rates, in response to soaring inflation expectations, could exacerbate that struggle – making it hard for governments to take action to cushion the blow for vulnerable consumers. Import-dependent countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are particularly exposed to fertiliser shortages and rising input costs, according to the FAO.

While farmers in rich nations can count on support from their governments, concerns are mounting over some of the poorest economies. Higher food prices will complicate efforts by central banks to get a post-pandemic wave of inflation back under control.

The situation also presents a challenge for politicians, especially in emerging-market economies where food eats up a greater proportion of household incomes than it does in more industrialised nations. As many as 45mn more people could face acute hunger if the conflict in Iran doesn't ease by the middle of the year, taking the total number to a record high, the WFP has warned.

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Against all odds



A Great Wall Motor branded Ora 5 model undergoes extreme weather testing at Great Wall Motor's technical centre in Baoding, China, yesterday. (Reuters)

Qatar seeks to consolidate itself as a regional hub for innovation

President of Arab Federation for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Programming Dr Badr bin Dalham al-Hajri speaks to QNA on World Creativity and Innovation Day

QNA
Doha

The world celebrated World Creativity and Innovation Day yesterday as the United Nations designated April 21 of each year as a global day to highlight the use of creative thinking and technology towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

On this occasion, President of the Arab Federation for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Programming Dr Badr bin Dalham al-Hajri confirmed in an exclusive statement to Qatar News Agency (QNA) that the Arab world is currently experiencing a delicate transitional phase between possessing the tools of the modern age and being able to employ them to produce real value. There has been a remarkable development in digital infrastructure and investments related to innovation, he added, noting that a gap still exists in terms of knowledge production and transforming ideas into globally competitive products.

Dr al-Hajri said that Qatar is presenting an advanced model, as it has moved from adoption to the initiative stage, and is now seeking to consolidate its position as a regional centre for innovation, not only through investment in technology, but also through building an integrated system that links education with scientific research and industry, which is what the federation is currently working towards.

Advanced infrastructure

Regarding the role of cultural and creative infrastructure in Qatar in this direction, Dr al-Hajri affirmed that the country possesses an advanced infrastructure at the regional level, whether in terms of cultural institutions or initiatives supporting innovation. There is a clear investment in education and research, along with a regulatory environment that encourages experimentation and creativity. These are very significant efforts that cannot be overlooked, he added.

Regarding the role that AI can play in protecting Arab cultural diversity, he explained that AI can become a pivotal tool in preserving Arab cultural heritage through digitising content, analysing cultural data, and presenting it in ways that suit new generations. It can also support Arabic languages in all their diversity, and provide wider and more interactive access to cultural content.

However, this role requires clear policies that ensure the use of technology in the direction of protection and promotion, he pointed out. Regarding whether AI can redefine the concept of creativity itself,



especially in the fields of arts and cultural industries, Dr al-Hajri pointed out that AI does not redefine creativity as much as it expands its boundaries and changes its tools. He added that there is a qualitative shift from individual, talent-based creativity to collaborative creativity that combines human sensibility with the immense computational capabilities of machines. In the arts and cultural industries, it has become possible to produce more diverse and complex works, he added.

He said that the human element is what gives work its meaning and value, and therefore, AI frees the creator from technical constraints, but it cannot replace human experience or emotional depth.

Regarding the relationship between the creative economy and smart technologies, Dr al-Hajri described it as a relationship of strategic integration, where technology represents a tool to increase efficiency and expand markets, while creative content provides added value. He pointed out that in the Arab region, there is vast cultural and human wealth that can be transformed into economic products with a global reach, if AI is employed in fields such as digital production, marketing, and audience behavior analysis.

He said that the challenge lies in building flexible work systems that accommodate integration and sustainable investment, and even achieve economic benefits capable of competing and asserting themselves in global circles, which can be achieved in the future thanks to the Arab efforts currently being made to be part of this path.

Young creators

Regarding the possibility of employing AI in supporting young creators in the Arab

world, President of the Arab Federation for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Programming Dr Badr bin Dalham al-Hajri affirmed to QNA that AI plays a prominent role in empowering young creators by providing low-cost production tools and smart platforms that help them reach a wider audience, and analytical techniques allow for a more accurate understanding of market trends and audience needs, which enhances the chances of success and continuity. It can also contribute to reducing the gap between talent and opportunity, which is one of the most prominent challenges facing young people in the region.

Regarding the policies necessary to integrate AI into the creative economy without harming its human nature, he stressed the importance of the need for a balanced legislative and ethical framework that guarantees the protection of creators' rights, promotes transparency in the use of AI technologies, as well as investing in education and training to build a generation aware of the dimensions of this technology and capable of employing it responsibly.

He said that preserving the human character of creativity does not mean rejecting technology, but rather directing it in a way that serves cultural and social values, indicating that it cannot be assumed that modern technologies, which have become an urgent necessity in the current era, will come at the expense of humanity, but rather they will only exist with the presence of humanity itself, which leads and directs them.

Regarding whether AI can contribute to reshaping Arab cultural identity, he explained that AI may influence the tools for expressing identity, but it does not have the ability to

formulate it in the first place, pointing out that cultural identity is formed through history and societal experience, not through algorithms. The real challenge lies in using this technology to enhance the presence of Arab identity in the digital space, rather than leaving it vulnerable to being absorbed into dominant global cultural models, al-Hajri added.

Regarding how cultural institutions can benefit from AI to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, he affirmed that these institutions can employ AI in developing cultural education, expanding access to knowledge, and supporting initiatives aimed at empowering women and youth, and it can also be used in analysing the cultural and social impact of projects, which helps improve their efficiency and sustainability, and all of this makes AI a means to promote cultural justice and equal opportunities.

On the other hand, he stressed the importance of the need for an integrated partnership model, in which roles are distributed between humans and machines in a way that enhances the capabilities of both parties, expressing that humans will remain the visionary and imaginative ones, while the machine will take over the tasks of implementation, analysis, and expansion.

He noted that this relationship will not be based on replacement as much as it is based on co-operation, which may open new horizons for creativity that were not possible in the past.

World Creativity and Innovation Day is celebrated on April 21 of each year, pursuant to a resolution of the UN General Assembly issued on April 27, 2017, to contribute to turning ideas into reality and finding solutions to the challenges facing societies around the world. It is an occasion to celebrate new and innovative ideas that promote social, economic and environmental development towards building a sustainable and prosperous future for humanity.

World Creativity and Innovation Day is also an invitation to think outside the box and go beyond the usual boundaries. It encourages taking tangible risks and exploring new opportunities, making them available to everyone, including women and young people. It also helps in finding solutions to important crises and problems such as eliminating poverty and hunger.

The Arab Federation for AI and Programming is affiliated with the Council of Arab Economic Unity in the League of Arab States, and aims to promote Arab co-operation in the fields of AI and programming, and to support digital transformation and sustainable development efforts in the region.

Ukraine set to restart oil supplies to Europe

AFP
Kyiv

Ukraine has repaired the damaged Druzhba pipeline that carries Russian oil to Europe and is ready to resume supplies — unblocking what Kyiv hopes was the last hurdle to securing tens of billions of euros in support from Brussels.

The pipeline has been at the centre of a standoff between Hungary and Slovakia, which still import Russian oil via the pipeline, Ukraine, and the European Union.

Kyiv can restart pumping Russian oil to the two EU countries as soon as it gets a formal request, a source in Kyiv told AFP.

Hungary's outgoing nationalist leader Viktor Orban had held up a much needed 90-million-euro (\$105mn) loan for Ukraine as leverage to pressure Kyiv to resume deliveries, accusing it of stalling repairs.

His defeat in elections earlier this month was seen as paving the way for the money to be unlocked.

"Ukraine has completed repair work on the section of the Druzhba oil pipeline that was damaged by a Russian strike," Zelensky wrote in a statement published on social media.

"The pipeline can resume operation," he added.



The Druzhba oil pipeline between Hungary and Russia is seen at the Hungarian MOL Group's Danube Refinery in Szazhalombatta. (Reuters/File Photo)

Ukraine said the pipeline was damaged late January by Russian strikes.

Kyiv had vowed to repair it, but Zelensky warned yesterday that Moscow's forces could attack the pipeline again.

Hungary and Slovakia — among the most Kremlin-sympathetic EU member states — had accused Kyiv of dragging its feet over the repairs.

Zelensky has made no secret of his staunch opposition to the fact that some EU members still buy Russian oil and gas — a key source of revenue for Moscow to fund its invasion launched more than four years ago.

Shortly after confirming re-

pairs had been complete, Zelensky spoke with EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen over the fate of the long-delayed 90-billion-euro loan.

"It is important that we begin receiving them soon. All necessary steps on Ukraine's side have been taken," he said on social media after the call.

Talking to reporters in Luxembourg, EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said: "We expect an agreement in 24 hours. So I don't want to jinx it. I hope that everything goes well."

"Hopefully all the obstacles are removed," she added.

A source in Zelensky's office told AFP Kyiv could start pumping

oil immediately.

"It's a technical matter — once there is a request for pumping, it will start working," they said.

Kyiv has also stepped up its aerial attacks on Russian energy sites in recent months with the aim of bleeding Russian exports — an effort Kyiv refers to as its own "long-range sanctions."

Kyiv needs the EU funds to plug looming holes in its budget, but has managed to secure enough money from other backers while Budapest stalled the loan.

The bloc's 27 members need to unanimously approve an amendment to its budget to get the loan going.

EU chief Antonio Costa welcomed Zelensky's announcement.

"Thank you President (Zelensky) for delivering, as agreed: repairing the Druzhba pipeline and restoring its operation," he said on social media.

Despite announcing the reopening of the pipeline, Zelensky called on Ukraine's allies to step up sanctions on Moscow and to source new energy suppliers.

"We must continue systematic sanctions pressure on Russia over this war and work on further diversifying energy supplies to Europe," Zelensky said in the statement.

"Europe must be independent from those who seek to destroy or weaken it," he added.

EU civilian mission launches in Armenia

AFP
Luxembourg

The EU yesterday established a mission to help Armenia tackle foreign interference, as Russia is suspected of conducting a growing wave of disinformation ahead of June elections.

The vote comes at a pivotal time for the south Caucasus nation, as it looks to reorientate its foreign policy away from long-standing ally Moscow towards the West.

"Today, ministers agreed to establish a new EU civilian mission for Armenia. It will strengthen the country's resilience against massive disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks," EU top diplomat Kaja Kallas said after a meeting of the bloc's foreign ministers.

"When Armenians go to the polls in June, they alone should choose their future."

Armenia is set to host its first-ever summit with the European Union's top officials

next month, before welcoming leaders from across the continent for a gathering of the European Political Community.

Russia's influence across the former Soviet Union has been strained since its invasion of Ukraine, which has spooked many of the countries that were for decades ruled by Moscow.

Armenia is formally an ally of Russia but has suspended its participation in a regional security pact over allegations Moscow did not come to its aid in its conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan.

Armenia's foreign intelligence service said in a report this year that large-scale "malign information operations by external actors" were under way, including the circulation of false information and conspiracy theories aimed at "influencing" the elections.

Analysts are in little doubt about where the campaigns come from and accuse Moscow of seeking to prevent Armenia's attempt to bolster its ties with the West.

EU imposes sanctions on two Russian entities

Reuters
Brussels

The European Council has imposed sanctions on two Russian entities that it said yesterday were linked to propaganda and disinformation from Moscow.

The sanctions were placed on media platform Euromore and the Foundation for the Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad (Pravfond), which the Council said in a statement makes "legal and analytical output (that) is systematically used to reinforce key Kremlin disinformation points."

Russian officials say the EU has repeatedly curbed freedom of expression by banning media which dare to challenge the EU's own perceptions of the world. Moscow denies that it spreads disinformation and says EU leaders are intentionally exaggerating the threat from Russia for their own political ends.

Euromore and Pravfond did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The designation subjects the entities to an asset freeze and bars EU citizens and companies from making funds, financial assets or economic resources available to them.

The EU has imposed sanctions on 69 people and 19 entities over Russian activities that it says "undermine the fundamental values of the EU and its member states, their security, stability, independence and integrity."

Russia has taken 1,700sq km of Ukraine this year

Reuters
Moscow

Russian forces have taken 1,700 square km (656 square miles) of territory in Ukraine this year and are advancing on its so-called fortress belt in Donbas, Moscow's top general said while inspecting his forces. Russia has since its 2022 invasion been seeking to take the whole of the Donbas area in eastern Ukraine, where Kyiv's forces have been pushed back towards a line of cities in grinding fighting. Kyiv has also reported some gains in the deadliest war in Europe since World War Two. Top Ukrainian commander Oleksandr Syrskyi said in mid-April that Kyiv's forces had regained control of nearly 50 square km of its territory in March.

"Since the beginning of this year, a total of 80 settlements and more than 1,700 square kilometres of territory have come under our control," Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, said in footage released by the defence ministry yesterday.

Reuters was unable to verify the battlefield accounts, and a spokesperson for Ukraine's General Staff said he would not comment on the claim. Pro-Ukrainian maps indicate Russia has taken around 600 square km this year.

Gerasimov said Russia's Southern Grouping of forces was attacking the Donetsk fortress belt comprising the cities of Sloviansk, Kramatorsk and Kostiantynivka, and that Russian forces were about 7 to 12km (4.3 to 7.5 miles)



Firefighters extinguish burning cars at the site of a residential area which was hit during overnight Russian drone strikes, in Sumy, yesterday. (Reuters)

from Sloviansk and Kramatorsk.

Russian units were already fighting in parts of Kostiantynivka, he said. In addition, Gerasimov said, Russian forces were advancing in Sumy in the north and Kharkiv in the northeast to create what he called "a security zone."

Kyiv's military said yesterday that its forces had stopped two Russian attempts to advance around villages near Sloviansk over the past 24 hours, and that Moscow had carried out 19 attacks near Kostiantynivka and eight nearby villages.

It also said Russian forces had made five attempts to break Ukrainian defences around several settlements near the Russian border in

the Kharkiv region.

According to Russian estimates, Russia controls about 90% of Donbas, about 75% of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, and slivers of the Kharkiv, Sumy, Mykolaiv and Dnipropetrovsk regions in Ukraine.

Russia also controls Crimea, which it annexed in 2014 after earlier fighting. The Black Sea peninsula is internationally recognised as part of Ukraine by most countries.

Pro-Ukrainian maps show Russia controls 116,793 square km, or 19.35%, of Ukraine, but that Russia's advance has slowed this year.

German police launch raids against Syrian trafficking ring

AFP
Berlin

German police launched mass raids yesterday targeting a trafficking ring accused of fraudulently using Syrian refugees' residency documents to enable compatriots to come to Germany.

Around 1,000 officers were deployed to search more than 50 residential and business premises in and around the eastern city of Leipzig, said the federal police office in Halle an der Saale.

Police believe the ring operated by using genuine residency documents issued to Syrian refugees in Germany, which were sent to people in Syria with a similar appearance.

Most of those targeted in the raids were suspected of allowing their documents to be used in the scheme, with a smaller number suspected of allowing "unauthorised entry" to Germany.

Police said they seized evidence including mobile phones, residency documents, records of flight bookings, and at least 93,000 euros (\$109,000) in cash.

In addition, "violations of narcotics and ex-

plosives laws" were identified and police said there were indications that some of the suspects had connections to organised crime.

Forty-four suspects underwent formal identification measures.

Many of the suspected cases of fraud were identified by "document and visa advisers" from the German police working at various airports in the Middle East.

Seventy-one such advisers have been deployed by the German federal police outside the EU since 2024 to help the visa sections at German embassies and consulates, as well as airlines at major international airports.

Minority rights resurface in Slovak-Hungarian relations

Reuters
Budapest

The rights of Slovakia's ethnic Hungarian minority have resurfaced as a thorn in bilateral issues after Hungarian election winner Peter Magyar (pictured) protested Slovak legislation reinforcing post-World War Two retribution acts in his first phone call with Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico.

The dispute focuses on post-war decrees that applied collective guilt to take away property and citizenship from ethnic Germans and Hungarians living in what was then Czechoslovakia for alleged wartime wrongs.

The "Benes Decrees", named after Czechoslovak President Edvard



Benes, periodically return to cloud relations between EU neighbours Hungary and Slovakia. The Hungarian minority makes up about 9% of Slovakia's population of 5.5mn.

Last year, Fico's leftist-nationalist government tightened legislation around the decrees by making it a criminal offence to question them.

Hungary's outgoing leader Viktor Orban, a close ally of Fico, let the issue lie but it was picked up by Magyar in the campaign before his landslide victory in the April 12 election.

Magyar stuck to his views yesterday in his first contact with Fico since the election.

"I told him clearly that we would be able to negotiate on any policy issue if we received a guarantee that Slovakia would repeal the legislation that threatens Hungarians living in Slovakia with imprisonment," Magyar told Fico.

"And if it was stipulated that in the future the lands of our Hungarian compatriots in Slovakia would not be confiscated on the basis of the Benes Decrees based on collective guilt."

Fico said he told Magyar that Slovak-Hungarian relations had

for years not been an issue of contention and that he wanted to focus on co-operation in energy. The two countries continue to rely on Russian oil and gas and have formed a common front in a dispute with neighbouring Ukraine over a damaged Soviet-era pipeline carrying Russian oil.

"It clearly emerged from the discussion that Peter Magyar's priority in Slovak-Hungarian relations are, and will be, the Benes Decrees, where we have fundamentally differing positions," Fico said in a statement.

The Slovak leader, who endorsed Orban before Hungary's election, said he would meet Magyar at an EU summit in Brussels prior to any bilateral visit. Magyar is expected to form a new Hungarian government by mid-May.

Germany, Italy reject suspending Israel deal

AFP
Luxembourg

Germany and Italy yesterday rebuffed calls to suspend an EU co-operation deal with Israel, despite rising anger over the war in Lebanon and the situation in the West Bank.

Spain and Ireland had put the issue of halting the June 2000 agreement back on the table at a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg.

German Foreign Minister Johann Wadepuhl called the proposal "inappropriate".

"We have to talk with Israel about the critical issues," he said, adding: "That has to be done in a critical, constructive dialogue with Israel."

Italian counterpart Antonio Tajani pushed back as well, saying that "no decision will be taken today".

Attitudes towards Israel among EU member states, already hardened over its conduct in the war in Gaza, have stiffened further after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and a new law on the death penalty for Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

"We need to act. We need to make sure that our fundamental values are protected," Irish Foreign Minister Helen McEntee said.

Facing alarm at the civilian toll exacted in the Gaza war, the EU last year already put on the table a raft of potential measures to punish Israel, including cutting trade ties or sanctioning government ministers.

But so far none of the steps laid out by Brussels has garnered enough support from member states to be put into action.

Suspending the entirety of the EU's co-operation agreement requires unanimity among the bloc's 27 countries and would almost certainly

"The measures that we have already on the table that require qualified majority will require states shifting their position"

be blocked by allies of Israel. More feasible could be suspending the part of the deal facilitating closer trade ties, a move that only requires support from a weighted majority of EU countries.

But that would require a shift in position from EU heavyweights Germany or Italy.

Rome had appeared to signal it could be open for a tougher line on Israel after it suspended a defence agreement.

"The measures that we have already on the table that require qualified majority will require states shifting their position," Kallas said after the meeting.

"We didn't see that today, but these discussions will continue."

Meanwhile, there were efforts to advance smaller measures instead.

France and Sweden re-upped an earlier call from some other EU countries for the bloc to consider halting the import of goods from Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, which are considered illegal under international law.

A separate proposal for sanctions on "extremist" Israeli settlers in the West Bank had been vetoed by Hungary for months.

But the recent ouster of staunch Israel backer Viktor Orban in Hungarian elections has raised hopes among other EU countries that those could soon go into force.

Qatar turns to AI, digital mapping to safeguard heritage: QM official

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Qatar is increasingly turning to digital mapping, artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced documentation systems to safeguard its cultural heritage from environmental and urban pressures, while stressing that technology should support – not replace – human judgment, a senior Qatar Museums (QM) official has said.

Abdullatif al-Jasmi, director of Cultural Heritage Protection, told Gulf Times that technological tools are becoming central to how heritage sites are monitored, managed and preserved across the country.

“Technology is becoming essential to heritage protection,” al-Asmi said, noting that digital mapping, GIS systems and enhanced documentation are enabling authorities to track changes in sites, plan conservation work, and guide urban development more responsibly.

He added that such tools allow for earlier intervention and more informed long-term decision-making, particularly as Qatar continues to balance rapid development with the preservation of historically significant locations.

Museum archives have also been fully digitised, expanding access for researchers and visitors while strengthening protection measures. According to al-Jasmi, digital systems improve the interpretation of collections, help combat illicit trafficking

of cultural property and support the creation of richer exhibition content.

However, he cautioned against overreliance on automation. “What is increasingly clear is that technology must support better judgment, not replace it,” he said, underlining the continued importance of human expertise in assessing cultural value and making conservation decisions.

Al-Jasmi’s remarks come as Qatar takes on a more prominent role in the global heritage sector, following his recent election to the ICCROM Executive Council. The appointment, he said, reflects growing international confidence in the country’s approach to heritage protection.

“It strengthens our connection to global expertise, training and best practices,” he said, adding that Qatar aims to both raise domestic standards and contribute more actively to regional and international efforts.

Rather than replicating a single model of conservation, Al-Jasmi stressed the importance of adapting successful approaches to local contexts. “Heritage protection is not about copying models, but about using them to challenge our own understanding and improve how we work,” he said.

He said Qatar is also pushing to reframe heritage protection as a broader ethical responsibility. Through partnerships with organisations such as UNESCO, he pointed out that the country is promoting the idea that safeguarding cultural property, particularly in times of conflict, should be seen as a “core moral duty”.



Abdullatif al-Jasmi

“Heritage is more than buildings or objects, it holds identity, memory and history,” Al-Jasmi said. He noted that efforts are focused on awareness, preparedness and stronger international cooperation, shifting the approach from reactive protection to what he described as “self-triggered resilience” in the face of instability.

At the local level, authorities are working to balance conservation with relevance, ensuring that heritage sites remain meaningful to contemporary communities. Al-Jasmi said protection and “activation” must go hand in hand.

“A site is best protected when people

understand its value and feel connected to it,” he said. Conservation measures safeguard authenticity, while education, storytelling and community engagement help integrate heritage into modern life, he added.

Al-Jasmi said cultural assets are increasingly being positioned as drivers of economic diversification, contributing to financial sustainability while preserving identity. “Rather than seeing heritage as an obstacle, we see it as an instrument.”

He noted that this dual approach extends to Qatar’s efforts to preserve intangible heritage, including oral traditions, children’s rhymes and traditional games. Unlike physical monuments, such cultural expressions depend on active participation for survival.

“The biggest challenge is that intangible heritage depends on people,” Al-Jasmi said. He stressed the importance of community involvement and intergenerational learning, noting that traditions must be practised and passed on to endure.

At the same time, he acknowledged the delicate balance required. Intangible heritage must be allowed to evolve naturally, without excessive control, while still receiving enough support to prevent its disappearance. “It exists within a very thin margin between being overly protective and being completely hands-off,” he said.

According to al-Jasmi, Qatar’s heritage strategy is also closely tied to its international cultural diplomacy efforts, particularly through the Years of Culture ini-

tiative, which has linked the country with partners worldwide since 2012.

Reflecting on recent programmes in Chile, al-Jasmi described heritage as a “practical bridge between nations”. Workshops and collaborations in Valparaíso brought together experts from Qatar, Chile and international organisations to exchange knowledge on conservation, risk management and site protection.

“This kind of cooperation builds trust and establishes active networks,” he said, highlighting the shared responsibility of protecting heritage across cultures.

Similar principles underpin initiatives such as the Design in Dialogue residency in Mexico City, which promotes integrating traditional crafts with contemporary design. Al-Jasmi said such programmes are vital to keeping heritage relevant for younger generations.

“Traditional crafts should not only be preserved in museums but kept alive through modern practice,” he said, adding that innovation helps ensure sustainability while maintaining cultural identity.

Asked to identify a site that embodies the spirit of World Heritage Day, Al-Jasmi pointed to the Al Zubarah Archaeological Site, Qatar’s UNESCO-listed heritage site.

He described Al Zubarah as a testament to trade, community life and resilience in the Gulf, with a story that resonates beyond national borders. “It is deeply connected to Qatar’s identity while also holding universal value as part of our shared human history,” he said.



Ashghal chief inspects work at Sidra project in Education City

HE Mohammed bin Abdulaziz al-Meer, president of the Public Works Authority (Ashghal) visited Qatar Academy – Sidra project in Education City, accompanied by Nasser Mohammed al-Hajri, executive director of operations at Qatar Foundation to review the progress of work and follow up on the latest developments in the project implementation.

During the inspection tour, al-Meer and the accompanying delegation reviewed the level of progress in the project, praising the speed of completion and the quality of implementation, directing the need to continue accelerating the pace of work to

complete the remaining stages according to the highest standards, expressing his appreciation for the efforts of all those working on the project.

Ashghal explained that the construction work of the project is about 94% nearing completion, as the project is scheduled to be completed during the second half of 2026.

The project covers a total area of 74,000 square meters, of which 33,000 square meters is built-up area, and aims to accommodate approximately 1,800 male and female students. The project also includes a main two-story building containing classrooms, multi-pur-

pose halls, and administrative offices, in addition to facilities designated for receiving students and visitors.

Saoud al-Dosari, an engineer on the project, confirmed that the academy will include 60 classrooms to meet the needs of various educational levels, in addition to integrated educational and service facilities, a theatre, arts and activities rooms, a library, scientific laboratories, as well as sports facilities, including indoor halls, outdoor playgrounds, a swimming pool, and a cafeteria, which contributes to providing an integrated and modern educational environment.

VCUArts Qatar presents Aghrab Idrak

Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar (VCUArts Qatar), a Qatar Foundation partner university will showcase Aghrab Idrak: Thresholds of Perception, a collateral event at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, marking a distinction that places the University among the world’s leading cultural institutions.

“La Biennale di Venezia marks a significant milestone in VCUArts Qatar’s international engagement and offers an opportunity to situate our work within a truly global conversation,” said Amir Berbi, dean of VCUArts Qatar. “Our participation reflects our investment in research-driven creative practice and interdisciplinary collaboration while showcasing how VCUArts Qatar, as a higher education institution, is redefining how universities contribute to global cultural production.”

The Collateral Event, Aghrab Idrak: Thresholds of Perception, is co-curated by Dr Hesperia Iliadou, director of the Museums & Exhibitions Study Society in Venice, and Chase Westfall, head of Gallery at VCUArts Qatar. It will showcase faculty-led creative research from across VCUArts Qatar’s Institute for Creative Research’s interdisciplinary labs featuring projects developed by (In)>Tangible Lab,



TypeAraby, GA:MA Lab, AlBokeh Lab, xLab, Water With Water, Sonic Jeel, Boost Lab, Mesh Lab, and Anthro-tech Atelier.

Projects include: Mapping Migration Memories – a multimedia installation that traces Qatar’s historic journeys between desert and sea through sound, light, and oral histories, preserving intangible cultural practices and generational knowledge.

Bandhani Arabi: From Thread to Word – a blend of South Asian textile traditions and Arabic calligraphy, that celebrates craft, language, and intercultural exchange across the Indian Ocean.

Oceans & Lands: Drifting Senses and Knowledges – an immersive sound environment that reimagines histories of movement, culture, and connection between Asia and Africa.

...and I Was Left Behind, an intimate, large-scale film installation that reanimates personal memories of home, loss, and generational bonds between women.

Preceding Emptiness – a kinetic



light installation that explores the Arabic language as a living, evolving form that carries heritage into the future.

The Gulf Between Us – a photography zine and sculptural installation capturing everyday life and unheard stories from across the Arab Gulf.

Sonic Fields – a sound installation that transforms the traditional majlis into a sonic lounge, inviting visitors into an ever-changing soundscape shaped by field recordings and generative audio.

Chrysalis – a kinetic air-cleaning sculpture that transforms fabric and structure into a beautiful “breathing” system.

A Monocular Monologue – an AI-powered, single-eyed robot that interacts with visitors to explore how people connect with machines.

Whisper from United Geekdom – a series of video portraits celebrating Qatar’s “geek” communities, challenging stereotypes and amplifying underrepresented voices.

Charting out Qatar’s strategy for protecting ecosystems

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC) has intensified its efforts to protect wildlife, expand vegetation cover, strengthen environmental oversight, and further develop the country’s natural reserves, a report by MoECC has revealed in its achievements during the first quarter of 2026.

The report was issued by MoECC Sector of Protection and Natural Reserves, the report underscores a comprehensive strategy aligned with Qatar National Vision 2030, combining field inspections, regulatory enforcement, and public awareness initiatives to advance environmental sustainability across the country.

A central pillar of the report focuses on land protection efforts. The Department of Land Protection carried out 100 inspection campaigns, leading to dozens of environmental violations. These included illegal grazing of camels and sheep, improper waste disposal, unauthorised entry into sensitive meadows (Rawda) soil excavation, and tree cutting without permits. In total, 581 violations were recorded, including the use of bird-calling devices, littering, and



the establishment of unlicensed camps.

The department also stepped up its community engagement, participating in major national events such as the Qatar Camel Festival “Jazilat Al Atta” while organising awareness campaigns across northern, central, and southern regions. It also marked key occasions like Qatar Environment Day and World Wildlife Day, reinforcing environmental consciousness among the public.

On the marine front, the Department of Marine Protection conducted 837 inspection tours, identifying 105 violations. These ranged from the use of illegal fishing tools that harm marine life to

coral reef damage, banned nets, and unauthorised fishing within protected areas – reflecting continued pressure on marine ecosystems.

Efforts to restore and expand vegetation were also prominent. The Department of Wildlife Development planted 600 seedlings and supplied 200 more to the Al Ghishamiyah nursery. Restoration projects included fencing and rehabilitation of key rawda sites such as Rawdat Umm Al Qaham, Rawdat Umm Al Jarathim, and Wadi Athna. The department also removed 150 invasive Ghaf-related trees (Prosopis cineraria), maintained damaged vegetation, irrigated new plantings, and col-



lected native seeds for future cultivation.

In addition, the department organised 32 environmental events, conducted 587 inspection tours, and carried out 143 field visits to meadows’ areas, resulting in 36 violations related to unauthorised landfilling, dust pollution, and quarrying activities. It also assessed 68 development projects for environmental impact and issued 669 permits and 359 licenses tied to activities in vegetation zones.

The wildlife and border control division reported significant regulatory activity, issuing 329 falcon transit permits, 261 CITES import certificates, and 37 re-export certificates, alongside 40 permits for non-CITES wildlife imports. A total of 252 licenses were granted in this domain, with authorities recording the import of 11 live wild



animals and 166 related products, derivatives, and taxidermy items.

As part of its invasive species control program, the Ministry continued its campaign against the common myna bird, capturing 2,912 birds using modern methods, including specially designed traps to curb its spread.

Meanwhile, the Natural Reserves Department conducted 630 inspection tours within protected areas, documenting 333 violations such as illegal fires, littering, poaching, and damage to plant ecosystems. While 10 permits were issued, several applications were rejected due to environmental concerns.

Cleanup operations also formed a major component of the ministry’s efforts. More than 120 tonnes of waste were removed from key coastal and desert ar-



reas such as the Sealine Beach and Khor Al Adaid through field campaigns and volunteer initiatives, helping restore these ecologically sensitive areas.

Encouragingly, the report highlighted positive developments in biodiversity conservation. A total of 87 wildlife births were recorded within reserves, including 46 Arabian Oryx, 13 sand gazelles, 6 pygmy goats, and 4 North African Oryx, alongside the successful hatching of 26 ostrich chicks, marking a significant boost to Qatar’s conservation efforts.

The ministry further stressed that these achievements reflect a growing commitment to environmental protection, sustainable resource management, and biodiversity preservation, reinforcing Qatar’s position as a regional leader in ecological conservation.