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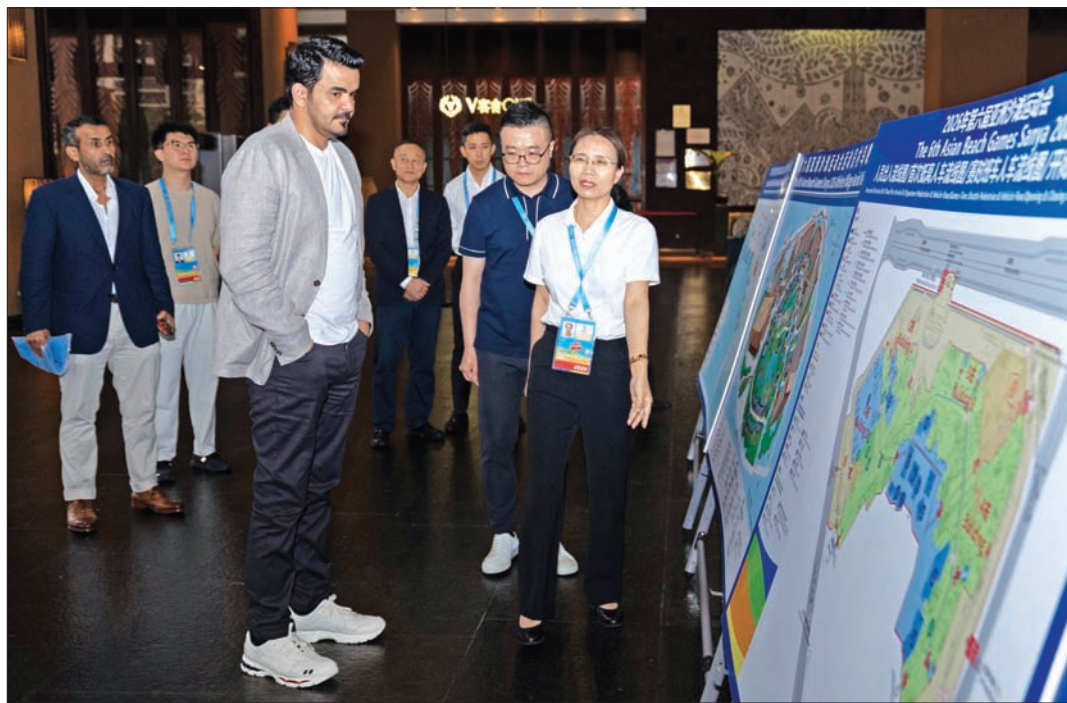
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## Sheikh Joaan visits Athletes' Village



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Olympic Council of Asia and the President of the Qatar Olympic Committee, visited the Athletes' Village at the 6th Asian Beach Games in Sanya, China, as part of his ongoing monitoring of the various organisational aspects of the Games. During the visit, Sheikh Joaan inspected the facilities and services provided to the athletes, including accommodation, recovery areas and logistics centres. He praised the high standard of the facilities and the quality of organisation. HE Sheikh Joaan also met a number of participating athletes, wishing them success in their competitions and commending their sportsmanship, which embodies the values of fair play and unity across the Asian continent.

## Amir backs Pakistan mediation in phone call with President Trump

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani received yesterday a telephone call from President of the friendly United States of America, Donald Trump. The two sides reviewed the latest regional developments, particularly the ceasefire agreement between the United States of America and Iran, and the international efforts aimed at consolidating it. They also discussed the repercussions of the situation on maritime security and global supply chains. His Highness the Amir stressed the need to reduce tensions and support peaceful solutions, reiterating the State of Qatar's continued co-ordination with regional and international partners to support the mediation efforts undertaken by Pakistan, in contribution to enhancing security and stability in the region. (QNA)



## Second round of US-Iran peace talks in the pipeline

- US negotiators Witkoff and Kushner depart for Islamabad today
- Iranian FM Araghchi and delegation land in Pakistan capital
- US Vice-President J D Vance to join talks if there's breakthrough

Reuters  
Islamabad

US President Donald Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner will travel to Islamabad today for talks with Iran mediated by Pakistan, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said yesterday. Speaking to reporters at the White House, Leavitt said the Trump administration has seen "some progress" from the Iranian side in the last couple of days, without elaborating.



Iranian FM Abbas Araghchi in Islamabad yesterday.

"Steve and Jared will be heading to Pakistan tomorrow to hear the Iranians out. We hope progress will be made and we hope that positive developments will come from this meeting," she told reporters yesterday. Leavitt said Vice-President J D Vance, who led a first round of unsuccessful talks with Iran in Islamabad earlier this month, is ready to travel to Pakistan to join talks if they prove successful. "The president, the vice-president, the secretary of state, will be waiting here in the United States for updates and the vice-president, I understand, is on standby and will be willing to dispatch to Pakistan if we feel it's a necessary use of his time," Leavitt said.

In the meanwhile, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi

arrived in the Pakistani capital Islamabad late on Friday to discuss proposals for restarting peace talks with the United States, amid conflicting signals on whether he would meet with US negotiators there. Pakistan's foreign minister said Araghchi would meet with senior Pakistani officials to discuss the peace efforts. Araghchi wrote on X that he was visiting Pakistan, Oman and Russia to co-ordinate with partners on bilateral matters and consult on regional developments, adding that Iran's neighbours remained Tehran's priority. The tour will include consultations on the latest efforts to end the war, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson later told state media.

Two Pakistani government sources aware of the discussions

said Araghchi's visit would be brief and focus on Iran's proposals for talks with the US, which mediator Pakistan would then convey to Washington. US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth told a briefing earlier on Friday that Iran had a chance to make a "good deal" with the United States.

"Iran knows that they still have an open window to choose wisely... at the negotiating table. All they have to do is abandon a nuclear weapon in meaningful and verifiable ways," he said.

Reports on Araghchi's trip in Iranian state media and the Pakistani sources made no mention of Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the Speaker of Iran's parliament, who was the head of its delegation at the talks earlier this month. **To Page 11**

## Oil prices volatile

Oil prices zig-zagged between negative and positive territory yesterday as traders weighed supply disruptions against the potential restart of peace talks between the US and Iran that could help limit those disruptions. Prices rose 2% earlier in the day on fears of renewed military escalation in the region after Iran released footage on Thursday of commandos boarding a cargo ship in the Strait of Hormuz, and as progress stalled on re-opening the key waterway. Crude futures then pulled back after Reuters reported that Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi was expected to arrive in Islamabad late on Friday to discuss proposals for resuming peace talks with the US after talks collapsed earlier this week. Prices fell further after CNN reported that US President Donald Trump was sending special envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner to Pakistan for talks with Iran's foreign minister. Brent crude futures were down 58 cents, or 0.6%, at \$104.49, and US West Texas Intermediate futures were down \$2.31, or around 2.1%, to \$93.54. "Traders are liquidating length ahead of an unusually unpredictable weekend and will readjust their positions Sunday night based on Iranian developments," said Tamas Varga of oil broker PVM. (Reuters)

## Volume-based tax on sugary drinks aimed at improving public health

By A Staff Reporter  
Doha

The newly updated policy of the General Tax Authority (GTA) on applying volume-based excise tax on sugar-sweetened beverages has been widely welcomed by doctors and nutrition specialists, who describe it as a forward-looking move to improve public health and curb excessive sugar consumption.

Under the revised mechanism, the tax applied to sweetened drinks will now be directly linked to the actual sugar content in each product. This means that beverages with higher levels of added sugar will face higher taxes, while lower-sugar alternatives will be taxed less. The concerned entities have also set a deadline of July 6 for businesses to adjust, clear existing stock, and comply with the updated framework.

Health experts say the shift marks a significant evolution in policy design, moving beyond general taxation toward a precision-based approach that aligns economic incentives with health



outcomes. By tying cost directly to sugar content, the policy is expected to influence consumer behaviour and industry practices, encouraging healthier choices and product reformulation.

Dr Mohamed Asha, Consultant Internal Medicine physician, stressed that added sugar is a major contributor to chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and liver disorders. He described the decision as "an investment in the health of society," noting that reducing sugar intake today can significantly lower the risk of serious health complications in the future. **To Page 11**

## EAA project to support over 103,500 direct beneficiaries in Sudan

By Joseph Varghese  
Staff Reporter

A major livelihood and youth employment initiative in Sudan initiated by Education Above All (EAA) Foundation in partnership with the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), is expected to support over 103,500 direct beneficiaries and an estimated 1.7mn indirect beneficiaries.

Aimed at responding to the urgent needs of conflict-affected communities, the programme is helping to create pathways to recovery and self-reliance. The ongoing project focuses on

strengthening employment and self-employment opportunities for vulnerable populations, particularly young people whose lives and livelihoods have been disrupted by conflict.

Noora Faisal al-Thani, head of Employment Programmes, Silatech Programme at EAA Foundation told *Gulf Times* that the project is designed to address critical and closely linked challenges in Sudan.

"Through this partnership, we are investing in the resilience, dignity, and potential of young people in Sudan by creating pathways to employment and self-employment in agriculture. At a time of profound hardship, this initiative aims to support livelihoods,

strengthen food security, and help communities move towards greater stability and recovery," said Noora al-Thani.

The project addresses two major issues of the loss of income and employment opportunities among youth, and the deterioration of food security and agricultural productivity among war-affected households. "Its core objective is to place young people into employment and self-employment opportunities while also improving agricultural production and food availability for vulnerable communities, particularly in the Gezira Scheme in central Sudan," she explained.

A total of 30,955 youth, includ-



Residents attend sessions at Rural Women School in Wad Maqlub village, Al Jazirah State, Sudan.

ing internally displaced persons, are expected to benefit through employment and self-employment opportunities created under the project. This reflects a substantial investment in youth as agents of recovery and community resilience in a context where conflict has sharply reduced economic options.

The programme emphasises on agriculture as both an economic engine and a source of stability. The initiative seeks to equip young people with the means to participate meaningfully in the agriculture and livestock sectors, enabling them to generate income, support their households, and contribute to local food systems. **To Page 11**

## Luxembourg ruler receives credentials of Qatar's envoy



The Grand Duke Guillaume of Luxembourg has received the credentials of Talal bin Almas al-Sulaiti as ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary of Qatar (non-resident) to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. The envoy conveyed the greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, along with his wishes for the grand duke's continued health and happiness, and for Luxembourg's government and people to enjoy sustained progress and prosperity. In response, Grand Duke Guillaume asked al-Sulaiti to pass on his greetings to His Highness the Amir, expressing his hopes for His Highness's wellbeing and for Qatar's continued development and growth. - QNA



## Qatar Post wins top EMS awards

Qatar Post secured two major international honours at the 2025 EMS Awards, winning the Gold Customer Care Award and the Performance Award.

The Gold award recognised outstanding service quality, communication, and responsiveness, while the Performance Award highlighted efficiency in delivery speed, reliability, and adherence to global quality standards.

The awards were presented at the EMS Co-operative Board meeting held at the Universal Postal

Union (UPU) headquarters in Bern, Switzerland, with global postal representatives in attendance.

Qatar Post chief executive Hassan Jassim al-Sayed said that the achievement, marking a third consecutive year of recognition, reflects Qatar Post's sustained commitment to high-quality services and world-class standards.

The accolades reinforce Qatar Post's position as a leading regional and international logistics provider, aligned with Qatar's vision for institutional excellence and sustainable development. - QNA

## QC provides specialised medical initiatives to patients in Ghana

Qatar Charity (QC)'s medical teams have implemented specialised medical initiatives under the "Warding off Calamity" campaign.

These initiatives have had a direct and significant impact in Ghana, where the teams succeeded in performing numerous eye surgeries and cochlear implant operations, restoring sight and hearing for the patients most in need.

This was carried out as part of the "Night 27 Challenge", in which donors raced to help put an end to the suffering and pain of patients in several countries around the world.

The QC teams began implementing an eye-care campaign for a group of patients in Accra, the capital of Ghana.

They carried out early medical screening for a number of eye patients, selected those who required surgery, and then commenced the ongoing procedures in recent days for a large number of them.

Al-Hajj Mohammed Idris, one of the eye patients who benefited from treatment under the "Alleviate Calamity" campaign, said that Qatar Charity had done a wonderful job by helping the blind and those suffering from eye problems to see and return to life once again.

With the participation of senior physicians whom Qatar Charity was keen to bring in from outside Ghana cochlear implant surgeries were performed for children with hearing loss.

These are specialised procedures and are rare in Ghana.

Qatar Charity also took this opportunity to train ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctors so that these operations can be localised within the country, eliminating the need to bring doctors from abroad in the future.



# Good progress in Central Veterinary Laboratory project

Construction and development work on the Central Veterinary Laboratory project in the Old Airport area is progressing at an accelerated pace, as part of an initiative by the Public Works Authority (Ashghal) in collaboration with the Ministry of Municipality.

The project is a key pillar in reinforcing Qatar's animal health infrastructure and advancing national preventative healthcare systems, with the laboratory considered one of the most prominent strategic initiatives supporting health security.

It is expected to be completed within a timeframe of 1-1.5 years, according to the approved schedule.

Upon completion, the facility will house a wide range of specialised units dedicated to conducting advanced laboratory diagnostics.

It is also being prepared to serve as a regional reference laboratory, with plans to integrate it into international laboratory networks accredited by the World Organisation for Animal Health.

Although administratively affiliated with the Department of Animal Resources, the laboratory will extend its services to multiple sectors across the country, including the Ministry of Public Health, particularly in addressing zoonotic diseases, which are transmissible between animals and humans.

This integrated approach is expected to significantly enhance the country's overall health security framework.

The laboratory will be equipped with cutting-edge technologies designed for the diagnosis and classification of viral and bacterial diseases, alongside advanced genetic tracking and analysis tools capable of identifying disease strains with high precision.

The project includes a comprehensive infrastructure upgrade, encompassing structural renovations, modernisation of laboratory units, and the construction of state-of-the-art support facilities.

Among these is a fully integrated veterinary pathology build-



ing, which will boost diagnostic efficiency and scientific research capabilities.

These advanced technologies are expected to directly contribute to selecting the most appropriate treatments and vaccines for livestock within Qatar.

This targeted approach will



generate cost savings by enabling the import of vaccines tailored to local disease strains, rather than relying on broad-spectrum, multi-strain vaccines.

Further, the development plans aim to position the laboratory as a globally recognised reference centre for resolving disputes between countries over disease testing results in animal shipments.

This ambition is particularly significant given the limited number of such reference laboratories in the region, estimated at between 20-30 facilities, enhancing Qatar's prospects of leadership in this specialised field.

In May last year, Ashghal announced the launch of the design and construction project for animal and agricultural research laboratories, in partnership with the Ministry of Municipality.

The initiative represents a strategic step toward strengthening research infrastructure in both the veterinary and agricultural sectors, while advancing national capabilities in these vital fields.

The project encompasses the renovation of the veterinary laboratory building in the Old Airport area, the construction of an agricultural research laboratory in Al Sheehaniya, and the establishment of advanced laboratories at the Qatar Science and Technology Park.



Diyana Noureen

Eshal Ashima

Davis Johny

## Noble International School excels in 2025-26 Class 10 examinations

Noble International School has achieved 100% pass in the All India Secondary School Examination of CBSE Grade 10 in the academic year 2025-26. Diyana Noureen secured 498/500, achieving 99.6%, Eshal Ashima

secured the second position with 98%, while Davis Johny achieved the third position with 97.4%.

Thirty-eight out of 124 students secured 90% and above, with 13 students achieving 95% and above.

## QRCS supports dialysis centres in Syria

As part of a project to provide dialysis supplies for patients with kidney failure in Syria, Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) field personnel are distributing medical supplies to dialysis centres across the country, to ensure sustained access to such life-saving services.

Co-implemented by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society, the project involves the distribution of 115,000 dialysis kits to 87 kidney centres nationwide.

This initiative comes in response to emergency appeals issued by the Syrian ministry of health.

During phase 1 of the project, around 14,000 dialysis kits were delivered to 12 centres, with more supplies to be delivered successively to the other recipient centres, helping them continue to serve patients with kidney failure in many governorates.

This project is part of the QRCS's ongoing efforts to support patients and build the capacity of health facilities in Syria.

Over the past five years, five similar humanitarian projects have been implemented, providing more than 150,000 dialysis kits to specialised centres in various governorates.



More than 40 dialysis machines were also procured to increase operational capacity and take in more patients, in partnership with donors including Qatar's Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, the Islamic Development Bank, and other organisations in Qatar.

## Qatar launches community running sessions

The Qatar Sports for All Federation has launched a new training run as part of its "365 Days of Activity" programme, an initiative aimed at encouraging healthier lifestyles through daily exercise in public parks.

The first session took place on the green fields of Al Rayyan Park, where more than 60 participants of different age groups took part in a community-focused training event.

The atmosphere was marked by enthusiasm and strong engagement, reflecting growing public interest in open sports initiatives.

The session included a variety of fitness exercises and running drills designed to improve endurance and technique.

Certified trainers from the federation supervised the activities, offering tailored guidance to suit different fitness levels and physical abilities.

The initiative is part of broader efforts by the federation to promote community sport and integrate physical activity into daily routines.

Weekly running sessions are set to continue every Thursday evening, providing an ongoing opportunity for participants to improve fitness and engage in group exercise in an inclusive and supportive environment. - QNA



## Statement issued by 5th Joint Oversight Committee meeting for DR Congo-Rwanda Peace Agreement

The following joint statement was issued by the governments of Qatar, the US, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), Rwanda and Togo (as African Union mediator), along with the African Union Commission, on the occasion of the fifth meeting of the Joint Oversight Committee held this week in Washington, DC.

The statement reads as follows: "On April 23, 2026, representatives from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) and the Republic of Rwanda, along with the State of Qatar, the United States of America, the Republic of Togo (as the Af-



دولة قطر  
State of Qatar

rican Union mediator), and the African Union Commission convened to assess implementation of the Peace Agreement, signed on June 27, 2025, in Washington,

D.C., during the fifth meeting of the Joint Oversight Committee (Committee).

"The Committee reviewed the progress achieved following the March 17-18, 2026, meetings in Washington, DC.

"Both Parties presented updates on the implementation of their efforts to de-escalate tensions and advance progress on the ground.

"The State of Qatar provided an update on the ongoing negotiations between the DRC and AFC/M23.

"The Committee expressed strong support for these efforts, thanking Switzerland for hosting

the latest round of Doha talks, and emphasised the critical role of the Doha process in advancing the broader implementation of the Peace Agreement.

"The Parties expressed a shared commitment to maintaining momentum in the peace process and continuing to build on the progress achieved.

"The governments of the DR Congo and Rwanda expressed their gratitude to the United States, Qatar, the African Union Commission, and Togo for their steadfast support in advancing peace and stability in eastern DR Congo and the broader Great Lakes region." - QNA

## UAE says rebuilding trust with Iran will take 'ages'

Rebuilding trust between Abu Dhabi and Tehran will take "ages and ages", UAE presidential adviser Anwar Gargash said yesterday, after Iran targeted the United Arab Emirates during the Middle East conflict.

"You can't be attacked with 2,800 missiles and drones and then talk to me about trust. That will take ages and ages," he said at a World Policy Conference in the town of Chantilly north of Paris.

The top official said that 89% of the Iranian attacks targeted "civilians, civilian infrastructure, energy infrastructure".

"Tehran was telling the Arab Gulf countries that 'you don't matter in my calculations, and I think this is going to last for a very long time,'" Gargash said. "To the region - to the United Arab Emirates and other countries, Iran will be seen as a strategic threat."

Israeli-US strikes on Iran in late February sparked region-wide conflict, with Tehran targeting US allies in the Gulf.

A ceasefire was agreed at the start of the month, but peace talks in Pakistan have stalled in recent days.

Since the truce, the United States and Iran have shifted their focus to the Strait of Hormuz, a waterway through which a fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas exports ordinarily flow.

Iran has all but closed it in retaliation for the war, while the US has imposed a blockade of its own on Iranian ports.

Gargash said earlier this month he thought Israeli influence in the Gulf would increase as a result of Iran's strategy in the region. - AFP

## Only five ships pass through Strait of Hormuz in 24 hours

Reuters  
London

Only five ships, including one Iranian oil products tanker, have passed through the Strait of Hormuz in the past 24 hours, shipping data showed yesterday, after Iran seized two container ships this week and the US continues to blockade Iranian ports.

Shipping traffic passing through the crucial waterway at the entrance to the Gulf during an uneasy ceasefire between Washington and Tehran represents a fraction of the average 140 daily passages before the Iran war began on February 28.

"For most shipping companies, they will need a stable ceasefire and assurances from both sides of the conflict that the Strait of Hormuz is safe to transit," said Jakob Larsen, chief safety and security officer at shipping association BIMCO.

"In the meantime, shipping will be restricted to using routes close to Iran and Oman," he added. "Due to their confined nature, these routes cannot safely accommodate the normal volumes of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz."

The Iranian-flagged oil products tanker Niki, which is subject to US sanctions, was among the few vessels that sailed out of the strait with no destination listed, Kpler analysis and track-

ing data on the MarineTraffic platform showed yesterday.

It was unclear what would happen if it continued to sail further east towards the blockade line imposed by the U.S. Navy.

Nearly two months after the US and Israel launched strikes on Iran, there is little sign of peace talks resuming.

Container shipping group Hapag-Lloyd said yesterday that one of its ships has crossed the strait but did not provide any information on the circumstances or timing.

The Comoros-flagged supertanker Helga arrived at an offshore oil loading terminal in Iraq's southern Basra port yesterday, the second vessel to reach Iraq since the strait's closure.

Iran's use of a swarm of small, fast boats to seize two container ships near the strait on Wednesday has heightened concerns among many shipping and oil companies.

"The latest seizures make clear, even an 'open' Strait of Hormuz is not a safe Strait of Hormuz for seafarers, ships and cargo," Peter Sand, chief analyst with ocean and air freight intelligence platform Xeneta, said in a note.

Between April 22 and early April 23, seven vessels transited the strait, six of which were involved in Iran-related trade, analysis from Lloyd's List Intelligence showed.



This photo obtained by AFP from the Iranian news agency Tasnim shows an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) boat allegedly taking part in an operation to seize ships attempting to cross the Strait of Hormuz. - AFP

## Two drones coming from Iraq targeting border posts: Kuwait

The Kuwaiti military said yesterday that two drones coming from the direction of neighbouring Iraq struck border posts on its northern frontier with the country, causing damage but no casualties.

"This morning, two of Kuwait's northern land border posts were targeted in a criminal act of aggression involving two explosive-laden drones guided by fibre-optic cables, originating from the Republic of Iraq, resulting in material damage but... no human casualties," the military said in a statement on X.

After the Middle East war began on February 28, pro-Iran

armed groups began claiming daily attacks on "enemy bases" in Iraq and the wider region, but said they were suspending their actions after a ceasefire was announced.

Gulf countries, however, have summoned Iraqi representatives to protest attacks from these groups even after the ceasefire came into place.

Along with the Gulf states, Iraq was dragged into the war between the US, Israel and Iran, with strikes repeatedly targeting both US interests - especially the embassy in Baghdad - and pro-Iran groups in the country. - AFP

# Lebanon truce extended amid moves to revive US-Iran talks

AFP/Reuters  
Beirut/Jerusalem

Israel and Lebanon extended their shaky ceasefire by three weeks yesterday as Iran's foreign minister prepared for meetings with officials in Pakistan, which has been mediating efforts to end the wider Middle East war.

US President Donald Trump announced the truce had been extended after he met Israeli and Lebanese envoys in Washington, and described himself as confident that a peace deal in that conflict would be an "easy one".

However, there was no sign of a breakthrough in the stand-off between rival US and Iranian blockades of the Strait of Hormuz, which has all but choked off maritime trade through a channel that before the war carried around a fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplies.

No date has yet been set for a second round of direct US-Iran talks in Islamabad, but Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi was expected to arrive in the Pakistani capital, an official source in Pakistan said, without providing details about who he was likely to meet.

It was not clear whether US Vice-President JD Vance or other senior administration officials were planning to return to Pakistan, after he announced he was leaving without a deal after a previous round of talks, but American logistics and security teams are present in Islamabad, the Pakistani official source said.

In Lebanon, despite Trump's announcement of a renewed ceasefire, Israel confirmed a claim by Hezbollah that it had shot down an Israeli drone with a surface to air missile.

Mohammed Raad, the head of Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc, urged the Lebanese government to withdraw from direct talks with Israel and warned that a lasting peace deal of the kind sought by Trump "will in no way enjoy Lebanese national consensus".

Hezbollah lawmaker Ali Fayyad said "it is essential to point out that the ceasefire is meaningless in light of Israel's insistence on hostile acts, including assassinations, shelling, and gunfire" and its demolition of villages and towns in the south.

"Every Israeli attack... gives the resistance the right to a proportionate response," he added.

Hezbollah is not a party to the ceasefire agreement, and has strongly objected to Lebanon's face-to-face contacts with Israel.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has vowed to destroy the Iran-backed movement, said: "We have started a process to reach a historic peace between Israel and Lebanon, and it's clear to us that Hezbollah is trying to sabotage this."

The April 16 agreement does not require Israeli troops to withdraw from the belt of southern Lebanon seized during the war.

The zone extends 5-10km (3 to 6 miles) into Lebanon.

Israel says the buffer zone aims to protect northern Israel from attacks by Hezbollah, which fired hundreds of rockets at Israel during the war.

Hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel reignited on March 2, when the group opened fire in support of Iran in the regional war.

Nearly 2,500 people have been killed in Lebanon since March 2, the Lebanese health ministry says.

The continued fighting has angered war-weary Lebanese, who say they want to see a



Resident Mohamad Ali Hijazi (left) stands next to an excavator clearing the rubble of destroyed buildings at a residential area in Tyre. - AFP

genuine ceasefire put a full halt to violence.

"What's this? Is this called a ceasefire? Or is this mocking (people's) intelligence?" said Naem Saleh, a 73-year-old owner of a newsstand in Beirut.

Residents of northern Israel had mostly returned to daily life, but expressed pessimism about the longevity of the ceasefire with Lebanon.

"I believe that the ceasefire is so fragile, and unfortunately it won't stand long, in my opinion," said Eliad Eini, a resident of Nahariya, which lies just 10km (six miles) from the border with Lebanon.

In south Lebanon's Tyre, a man named Mohamad Ali Hijazi was searching a mountain of rubble for mementos of his family, killed in an Israeli airstrike minutes before the ceasefire took hold.

"I'm trying to find my mother's hairbrush... and a bottle of perfume that she loves," said Hijazi, 48 - some of the last things he sent her from France, where he has long lived with his wife and two daughters.

"My life has been destroyed. I haven't slept for five days," he told AFP, repeatedly fighting back tears.

In Washington, Trump spoke in glowing terms of peace prospects for Lebanon, voicing hope for a three-way meeting with the Lebanese and Israeli leaders.

The two countries have been officially at war for decades and until last week had not met so directly since 1993.

A meeting between the leaders, let alone a peace treaty, would be historic.

The envoys' meeting came after Trump said he was in no rush to end the parallel war with Iran, adding that "the clock is ticking" for the Islamic republic.

"I have all the time in the World, but Iran doesn't," Trump said on social media.

The USS George HW Bush aircraft carrier has arrived in the Middle East, the US military said on Thursday, bringing to three the number of these floating American arsenals operating in the region.

## UN peacekeeper dies of wounds suffered in Lebanon last month

The UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon, Unifil, announced yesterday that an Indonesian blue helmet died in hospital of wounds suffered on March 29 in an attack on his base.

"Unifil deplores the passing today of Corporal Rico Pramudja, who was critically injured following a projectile explosion in his base in Adchit Al Qusayr on the night of 29 March," the force said in a statement. His death brings to six the number of peacekeepers killed since the start of the most recent war between Israel and Hezbollah on March 2.

A ceasefire has been in effect since April 17. Unifil said at the time of the March 29 attack that one Indonesian soldier was killed and another wounded.

A preliminary investigation by the UN found that the soldier was killed by an Israeli tank shell.

The following day, two more Indonesian blue helmets were killed by an improvised explosive device.

The same UN investigation found that Hezbollah was likely responsible. Indonesia has already urged the UN to launch a thorough investigation into both incidents.

Two French soldiers serving in Unifil were killed in an ambush on April 18, which French authorities and the UN have blamed on Hezbollah. - AFP

A second carrier was operating in the Red Sea on Thursday, while a third is also in the region, according to social media posts by US Central Command (Centcom).

Iran has vowed it would keep the strait closed to all but a trickle of approved vessels for as long as the US Navy blockades its ports, brushing off demands from Trump to both reopen Hormuz and surrender its enriched uranium.

## Syria arrests main suspect in 2013 massacre in Damascus

Syria has arrested the main suspect in the 2013 Tadamon massacre, when soldiers of the former government murdered dozens of civilians in the Damascus neighbourhood, the interior ministry said yesterday.

The ministry said in a statement that it had arrested Amjad Youssef, who appeared in a leaked video ordering handcuffed, blindfolded men to run, then opening fire on them.

The victims are seen falling into a mass grave where 41 bodies pile up and are then burned.

A few days after the fall in December 2024 of Syria's former autocratic ruler Bashar al-Assad, Human Rights Watch (HRW) teams discovered what they called "a significant number of bodies" in Tadamon.

Families from the neighbourhood also informed the new authorities of several more massacres committed by Assad's forces during the early years of the civil war.

The interior ministry said it would continue to pursue other perpetrators of the massacre.

In a social media post, Interior Minister Anas Khattab said "the criminal Amjad Youssef is now in our hands after a well-prepared security operation".

US Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack welcomed the arrest in a post on X, calling it an important step towards accountability for atrocities committed during Syria's war.

The Syrian war that broke out in 2011 has claimed more than half a million lives.

The new Islamist authorities have announced the arrest of several officials from the former government but the fate of tens of thousands of people remains unknown.

Yousef, 40, a former member of military intelligence under Assad, was thrust into the spotlight in April 2022 when the UK's Guardian newspaper published videos provided by two academics that they said showed him forcing blindfolded civilians to run towards a pit in the Tadamon neighbourhood of southern Damascus before shooting them.

Annsar Shahoud, a researcher at the University of Amsterdam Holocaust and Genocide Centre and one of the academics, spent four years documenting the massacre.

Posing as an online fangirl, Shahoud gained Yousef's trust and ultimately obtained his confessions both on video and audio recording. - AFP/Reuters



Residents gather after Friday prayers to celebrate the arrest of a key suspect in the 2013 Tadamon massacre, in Syria. - Reuters

## Nigeria sets up court martial for 36 accused in coup plot

The Nigerian armed forces swore in yesterday the justices for the military court that will try three dozen officers accused of a botched coup plot, the country's Defence Headquarters said.

The government had initially denied the existence of the alleged putsch attempt late last year, before announcing in January that it had foiled a plan to overthrow the government.

If successful, it would have brought an end to a quarter-century of democracy in Africa's most populous country.

The Defence Headquarters "inaugurated a General Court Martial to try 36 serving military personnel over alleged mutiny, aimed at overthrowing the government of the day", spokesman Major-General Samaila Uba said in a statement.

The statement did not specify a timeline for the trials, but said that "proceedings of the court will be conducted with the highest standards of fairness".

The government-owned News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) reported that the accused officers were brought to a military facility in the capital Abuja yesterday morning for the inauguration of the court martial, though it is unclear when prosecutions will get underway in earnest.

Yesterday's inauguration was held behind closed doors, NAN reported.

Separately, six civilians, including a retired major-general, were charged over the alleged coup plot at the Abuja Federal High Court earlier this week.

They pleaded not guilty. Those charges named retired major-general Mohammed Ibrahim Gana, retired captain Erasmus Ochejobia Victor, Ahmed Ibrahim, Zekeri Umoru, Bukar Kashim Goni and Abdulkadir Sani.

They are accused of conspiring "with one another to levy war against the State to overawe the President of the Federal Republic", according to the charging documents, seen by AFP.

The six were also accused of knowing that Colonel Mohammed Alhassan Ma'aji "and others intended to commit treason" and did not alert authorities.

Ma'aji has been named in previous Nigerian press reports as the "mastermind" of the coup.

The names of the officers being tried in the court martial were not released yesterday.

Last year, it was announced that 16 officers were arrested over "issues of indiscipline".

Despite official denials at the time, sources across the Nigerian government and military told AFP the arrests were linked to a foiled coup plot.

In January, in a reversal, the military announced that it would be trying "a number of the officers with allegations of plotting to overthrow the government".

Nigeria has seen several military takeovers in its history and spent much of the 20th century under junta rule after its independence from Britain in 1960. - AFP

# Two-thirds of world's hungriest live in 10 countries: UN-backed report

AFP/Reuters  
Rome

Conflict, drought and shrinking aid will keep global hunger at critical levels in 2026, with food insecurity expected to worsen in some of the world's most fragile countries, according to the 2026 *Global Report on Food Crises*.

And two-thirds of people facing food crises globally last year lived in just 10 countries, with a third of them in Sudan, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), a UN-backed yearly report said yesterday.

Conflict remained the main driver of acute food insecurity, according to the report, based on data from the United Nations, the European Union and humanitarian agencies.

And with conflicts and climate extremes "likely to sustain or worsen conditions in many countries", the outlook for 2026 is "bleak", it said.

"Acute food insecurity remains highly concentrated (in) 10 countries - Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Sudan, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen," the report said.

Improvements in some countries, such as Bangladesh and Syria, were "almost fully offset by notable deteriorations" in Afghanistan, DR Congo, Myanmar and Zimbabwe, it said.

For the first time in the report, which is in its 10th edition, famine was confirmed in two separate contexts - in Gaza and parts of Sudan - in the same year.

In total, 266mn people in 47 countries and territories faced high levels of acute food insecurity in 2025, while 1.4mn people faced catastrophic conditions in parts of Haiti, Mali, Gaza, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen.

In 2025 alone, 35.5mn children worldwide were acutely malnourished, including nearly 10mn suffering from severe acute malnutrition.

Looking at this year, the report said severity levels remained critical, with only Haiti expected to escape from the worst "catastrophic" band thanks to a slight improvement in security and increased humanitarian aid.

It also warned about the sharp decline in international aid and said the Middle East war risked aggravating existing crises by increasing the numbers of displaced in a region already hosting millions of refugees, and driving up fertiliser costs.

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

"Now we're in planting season," Alvaro Lario, head of the UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), told AFP. "So for sure this current food shock - both with the energy prices going up and also fertilisers going up - I think it's going to have a massive impact in terms of production."

He called for more help to small-scale farmers, for example by investing in water- and climate-resilient crops.

Crises could be eased by farmers producing fertiliser locally as well as improving soil health so that less of it is needed, he added.

Even before the added stress of this latest war, West Africa and the Sahel looked likely to remain under heavy pressure this year from conflict and persistent inflation, particularly in Nigeria, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Nigeria alone is projected to see one of the largest increases in food insecurity in 2026, with 4.1mn more people expected to face acute hunger.

In East Africa, failed rains across much of



This picture taken last year shows Palestinians waiting for food from a charity kitchen in Gaza. - Reuters

Right: This picture taken last year shows a Sudanese orphaned child refugee from al-Fashir eating food provided by the 'Group Kitchen Project', inside the Tine transit camp in eastern Chad. - Reuters

the Horn of Africa are expected to deepen suffering in Somalia and Kenya, where drought, insecurity, high food prices and reduced humanitarian aid are likely to drive worsening conditions.

The report also warned that humanitarian and development financing for food sectors in crisis fell sharply in 2025 and is projected to decline further.

Humanitarian food-sector funding is estimated to have dropped by some 39% last year from 2024 levels, while development assistance contracted by at least 15%.



The IFAD is also working on boosting investment by local private sectors. "Creating the instruments and incentives for the local private sector... is a very important way of making that sustainability and that development money go a longer way," Lario said.

## South Africa promises crackdown on xenophobic attacks after Ghana protests

Ghana summoned South Africa's envoy over several "xenophobic incidents", including one in which a legal Ghanaian migrant was asked to return home and "fix his country".

South Africa, the continent's most industrialised economy, has long been a destination for both legal and undocumented African workers.

However, now saddled with an unemployment rate of over 30%, it has seen repeated spurts of xenophobic and anti-migrant protests, and occasionally violence.

Videos online have circulated in recent days showing Ghanaians and other migrants being harassed.

South Africa's acting police minister condemned the incidents yesterday, saying that attacks on foreign nationals were "unlawful" and violated the country's constitutional values of dignity and equality.

"Acts of xenophobia, violence, looting, or intimidation will not be tolerated under any circumstances," Firoz Cachalia said in a statement, adding that police have "been instructed to act decisively and without hesitation



This picture taken in 2022 shows a child next to her mother holding a placard, during a march organised by a South African anti-xenophobia group in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. - Reuters

in addressing these incidents".

Foreign Minister Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa spoke of an incident in the southeastern KwaZulu-Natal province in which a Ghanaian, "a legal resident was confronted... (and) instructed to leave South Africa and 'fix his country'", the foreign ministry said in a statement late on Thursday.

It also further warned of "escalating tensions, with foreign nationals, including Ghanaians, being advised to remain

indoors for their safety".

In his meeting with South Africa's acting high commissioner Thando Dalamba, Ablakwa "underscored... Ghana's support for the anti-apartheid struggle" and "emphasised that the unprovoked harassment and attacks on law-abiding individuals are contrary to the principles of African solidarity".

There are more than 3mn for-eigners living in South Africa, or 5.1% of the population, according to the statistics agency.

More than 63% come from countries in the 16-member Southern African Development Community (SADC) bloc.

In January, South Africa's border management agency said it had intercepted more than 530,000 people attempting to enter the country illegally since July 2022.

Campaigners for migrant rights say foreigners have been scapegoated in South Africa for its economic woes.

South Africa's police ministry said in a statement that all those found participating in or inciting xenophobic acts would be identified, apprehended and brought before the courts.

"Acts of lawlessness, intimidation and violence against migrant communities have no place in our constitutional democracy," South Africa's Foreign Affairs Minister, Ronald Lamola, told a meeting of government officials.

Violence against migrants was a threat to South Africa's constitutional order, Lamola added.

The police asked community leaders and civil society groups to help prevent further attacks and promote dialogue. - AFP/Reuters

## Benin confirms Wadagni's election win

Benin's finance minister Romuald Wadagni was officially confirmed to have won the west African country's presidential election, according to final results on Thursday.

The Constitutional Court confirmed the provisional tally announced last week, which gave outgoing president Patrice Talon's hand-picked successor a landslide win.

Many observers believe that the outcome of the April 12 vote was a foregone conclusion.

Teacher and former minister Paul Houkpe was the only opposition candidate, while the main opposition party, The Democrats, was unable to take part due to an insufficient number of sponsorships.

"The court hereby definitively declares Mr. Kossi Mbueke Romuald Wadagni elected president of the Republic, and Ms. Mariam Chabi Talata vice president," the president of the Constitutional Court, Cossi Dorothe Sossa, announced at the institution's headquarters.

Wadagni will take office on Sunday, May 24, Sossa added.

According to him, the court "has not identified on its own any irregularity of a nature to warrant the annulment of the electoral process" and has recorded no challenges to the provisional results.

He did not give Wadagni's final tally or voter turnout figures, which the provisional results had reported at 94% and 58.8% respectively.

Houkpe, who took just under 6%, conceded defeat before the results were out.

Under Wadagni's 10-year stint as finance minister, Benin's public finances have been cleaned up and the deficit cut by a third to reach 3% of GDP.

He embodies continuity with the Talon era, which has seen the country enjoy rapid economic growth, an expansion in tourism and the completion of numerous infrastructure projects.

He nonetheless faces major challenges, including a huge wealth gap and insecurity in the north due to attacks blamed on religious militant groups. - AFP

## Passengers, crew unharmed after plane skids off runway in Kenya

Reuters  
Nairobi

A passenger plane overran the runway and careered into roadside bushes at a remote airstrip in northeastern Kenya yesterday, but all 36 people on board escaped without injury, an aviation official said.

The Embraer aircraft operated by Kenyan carrier EBB Air had taken off from Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport at 6.56am carrying 32 passengers and four crew members, a source at the Kenya Airports Authority told Reuters.

An official at the airline said they did not have an immediate comment.

The plane skidded after landing at Mandera airstrip about 8.30am, overshot the runway and plunged into a thicket, the source said.

Pictures shared online showed the tail end of the plane sticking out while the rest of the body was buried in the bushes.

Reuters has not verified the pictures. "Everyone was accounted for, and we are waiting for the relevant authorities to investigate the cause of the accident, which also caused significant damage to the aircraft," the aviation source added.

Local media outlet Daily Nation also reported that all on board escaped unharmed, citing the Mandera County police commander.

Mandera airstrip, near Kenya's borders with Somalia and Ethiopia, is mainly used by humanitarian flights supplying aid to refugee camps hosting displaced Somalis, as well as chartered services for government officials and business travellers.

EBB Air operates domestic routes, mostly between Nairobi and Mandera County.



The Embraer plane, operated by Kenyan carrier EBB Air, is seen after it overran the runway and plunged into a thicket while landing in Mandera, Kenya. - Reuters

## Eswatini celebrates Mswati III's 40 years as monarch

Marching bands blew horns, women ululated and men cheered yesterday to celebrate King Mswati III's 40 years on Eswatini's throne, an institution still revered despite criticism of the high luxury that sub-Saharan Africa's last absolute monarch enjoys.

A choir decked in yellow, blue and red to form an image of the national flag sang the king's praises and held up a sign wishing him a happy 58th birthday in the national stadium.

"We have been through thick and thin as a nation," Mswati told the crowd. "It is important we remain united."

Speech-makers praised the king's efforts to develop the mountainous, southern African nation of 1.5mn, which well-wisher Shabuswa Sibambo, 19, said included free school since 2022 and mobile clinics in operation since the following year.

"We are proud of our culture," she told Reuters, as the king passed in an open-top car in a British military-style scarlet tunic.

Critics say Mswati's and his dozen wives' lavish lifestyle comes at the expense of a population, a third of whom live below the \$2.15-a-day World Bank poverty line.

His upkeep costs tens of millions of dollars and this month the government awarded an extra \$3mn for it. - Reuters

## S Africa court halts return of Lungu's remains, again

A South African court has blocked the repatriation of the remains of former Zambian president Edgar Lungu, halting fresh plans for a state funeral and deepening a dispute that has dragged on for nearly 10 months.

It marks the latest setback for President Hakainde Hichilema's government, which wants him buried in Zambia, against the family's preference for South Africa, where he died in hospital on June 5.

Zambia's attorney-general Mulilo Kabesha said on Tuesday that a court had formally handed the remains to the government after the family failed to appeal.

Lungu's family swiftly sought an injunction, with

the High Court in Pretoria saying that the application was "dealt with as one of extreme urgency".

The court ordered the government of Zambia to return the remains to the private funeral home or another facility of the family's choosing.

The order will remain in force until May 21, Judge Rochelle Francis-Subbiah said.

Lungu's family has repeatedly blocked efforts to repatriate his body, saying that he would not have wanted his successor Hichilema at his funeral, setting off a protracted legal battle.

Lungu was a political rival to Hichilema, to whom he lost power by a landslide in 2021. - AFP

# Spain's Nato ouster on cards?

Reuters  
Washington

An internal Pentagon email outlines options for the United States to punish Nato allies it believes failed to support US operations in the war with Iran, including suspending Spain from the alliance and reviewing the US position on Britain's claim to the Falkland Islands, a US official told Reuters.

The policy options are detailed in a note prepared by Elbridge Colby, the Pentagon's top policy adviser, who expressed frustration at some allies' perceived reluctance or refusal to grant the United States access, basing and overflight rights — known as ABO — for the Iran war, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe the email.

Colby wrote that ABO is “just the absolute baseline for Nato,” according to the official, who added that the options were circulating at high levels in the Pentagon.

One option in the email envisions suspending “difficult” countries from important or prestigious positions at Nato, the official said.

President Donald Trump has harshly criticised Nato allies for not sending their navies to help open the Strait of Hormuz, which was closed to global shipping following the start of the air war on February 28.

He has also declared he is considering withdrawing from the alliance.

“Wouldn't you if you were me?” Trump asked Reuters in an April 1 interview, in response to a question about whether the US pulling out of Nato was a possibility.

But the email does not suggest



Nato and US flags fly at the entrance to the venue, on the first day of a Nato summit, in The Hague, Netherlands June 24, 2025. (Reuters/File Photo)

that the United States do so, the official said. It also does not propose closing bases in Europe.

The official declined to say whether the options included a widely expected US drawdown of some forces from Europe, however.

Asked for comment on the email, Pentagon Press Secretary Kingsley Wilson responded: “As President Trump has said, despite everything that the United States has done for our Nato allies, they were not there for us.

“The War Department will ensure that the President has credible options to ensure that our allies are no longer a paper tiger and instead do their part. We have no further comment on any internal delibera-

tions to that effect,” Wilson said.

The US-Israeli war with Iran has raised serious questions about the future of the 76-year-old bloc and provoked unprecedented concern that the US might not come to the aid of European allies should they be attacked, analysts and diplomats say.

Britain, France and others say that joining the US naval blockade would amount to entering the war, but that they would be willing to help keep the strait open once there was a lasting ceasefire or the conflict ended.

But Trump administration officials have stressed that Nato cannot be a one-way street.

They have expressed frustra-

tion with Spain, where the Socialist leadership said it would not allow its bases or airspace to be used to attack Iran. The United States has two important military bases in Spain: Naval Station Rota and Morón Air Base.

The policy options outlined in the email would be intended to send a strong signal to Nato allies with the goal of “decreasing the sense of entitlement on the part of the Europeans,” the official said, summarising the email.

The option to suspend Spain from the alliance would have a limited effect on US military operations but a significant symbolic impact, the email argues.

The official did not disclose how

the United States might pursue suspending Spain from the alliance, and Reuters could not immediately determine whether there was an existing mechanism at Nato to do so.

The memo also includes an option to consider reassessing US diplomatic support for longstanding European “imperial possessions,” such as the Falkland Islands near Argentina.

The State Department's website states that the islands are administered by the United Kingdom but are still claimed by Argentina, whose libertarian President Javier Milei is a Trump ally. Milei was upbeat about the prospects.

“We are doing everything humanly possible so that the Argentine Malvinas, the islands, the entire territory return to the hands of Argentina,” Milei said in a radio interview he posted on his X account on Friday.

“We're making progress like never before.”

Britain and Argentina fought a brief war in 1982 over the islands after Argentina made a failed bid to take them. Some 650 Argentine soldiers and 255 British troops died before Argentina surrendered.

Trump has repeatedly insulted British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, calling him cowardly because of his unwillingness to join the US war with Iran, saying he was “No Winston Churchill” and describing Britain's aircraft carriers as “toys.”

Britain initially did not grant a request from the US to allow its aircraft to attack Iran from two British bases, but later agreed to allow defensive missions aimed at protecting residents of the region, including British citizens, amid Iranian retaliation.

## Canada approves \$4 bn natural gas pipeline expansion

Canada has approved a \$4 billion natural gas expansion of an Enbridge pipeline in British Columbia, Canadian Minister of Energy and Natural Resources Tim Hodgson said yesterday. The Sunrise Expansion Program is designed to add about 300 million cubic feet per day of natural gas transportation capacity to the southern portion of the Westcoast pipeline system, Enbridge said. Construction is scheduled to begin in July 2026, with a targeted in-service date in late 2028. (Reuters)

## Russia concerned due to US-Japanese navy joint drills

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said yesterday that the participation of the Japanese navy in joint drills with the US is a cause for concern and increases tensions. Philippine and US forces began annual exercises on Monday in which Japan is taking active part for the first time.

The April 20 to May 8 exercises known as “Balikatan”, or “shoulder-to-shoulder”, are the largest yet in terms of participating countries, also including Australia, Canada, France and New Zealand. (Reuters)

## King Charles to meet New York Mayor Mamdani

Britain's King Charles is set to meet New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani during his visit to the United States next week, Politico reported yesterday, citing two people familiar with the planning. Mamdani's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment. (Reuters)

## US does not object to Iran's participation in World Cup



A general view of SoFi Stadium as it prepares for its use as Los Angeles Stadium for the FIFA World Cup 2026 in Inglewood, California. (AFP)

Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on Thursday Washington had no objections to Iranian players participating in the 2026 FIFA World Cup but he added the players will not be allowed to bring with them people with ties to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

“Nothing from the US has told them they can't come,” Rubio told reporters. President Donald Trump also said his administration “would not want to affect the athletes” in comments he made at the White House. The 2026 soccer World Cup is set to begin on June 11 across the US, Mexico and Canada.

Paolo Zampolli, a Trump envoy who has no official connection with the World Cup, had earlier suggested that Italy should replace Iran at the tournament. “The problem with Iran would be not

their athletes. It would be some of the other people they would want to bring with them, some of whom have ties to the IRGC. We may not be able to let them in but not the athletes themselves,” Rubio said, adding: “They can't bring a bunch of IRGC terrorists into our country and pretend that they are journalists and athletic trainers.”

Washington has designated the IRGC as a “foreign terrorist organisation.” Currently, there is no suggestion Iran will withdraw or be banned from the tournament that Italy missed out on. After the start of the Iran war, Iran requested that FIFA move the team's three group matches from the US to Mexico, which was rejected.

The US and Israel attacked Iran on February 28 and in response Iran launched strikes on Israel and Gulf states with US bases. (Reuters)

# US, EU deepen co-operation on critical minerals to counter China

Reuters  
Washington

The US and the European Union on Friday deepened their co-ordination on critical minerals as part of a broader push by Western allies to loosen China's grip on materials crucial to advanced manufacturing. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and European Union Trade Commissioner Maros Sefcovic signed a memorandum of understanding for a partnership on producing and securing critical minerals.

Rubio did not mention China in his remarks, but said the preliminary agreement with Brussels reflected growing awareness among Western allies of the importance of supply chains and critical minerals for their economic success.

China has used its chokehold on the processing of many minerals as geo-economic leverage, at times curbing exports, suppressing prices and undercutting other countries' ability to diversify sources of the materials used to make semiconductors, electric vehicles and advanced weapons. “The over-concentration of these resources, the fact that they're dominated by one or two places, is an unacceptable risk. We need diversity in our supply chains,” Rubio said before signing the memorandum. US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer, who will meet with Sefcovic separate-



Maros Sefcovic and Marco Rubio at the State Department in Washington DC yesterday. (AFP)

ly on Friday, announced a separate action plan to co-ordinate trade policies on critical minerals to address what they called “the non-market policies and practices that have distorted critical minerals supply chains.”

Greer said Washington and Brussels would explore how trade measures, such as border-adjusted price floors, could strengthen domestic critical minerals industries and downstream sectors critical to industrial competitiveness.

Sefcovic told reporters at the State Department that the agreements would strengthen the

transatlantic relationship and ensure faster work on their joint goals.

“I totally agree with Mr. Secretary (Rubio) that now the real test will be the execution of this project. How can we transform these agreements which we are signing into concrete, tangible projects to deliver for our business operators?”

Washington and Brussels first announced their intent to develop an action plan in February when US Vice-President JD Vance unveiled plans to create a preferential trade bloc for critical minerals, potentially with coordinated

price floors. Washington already has signed similar action plans with Japan and Mexico.

The US-EU action plan said it was imperative to address “pervasive non-market policies and practices (that) have left critical minerals supply chains of market-oriented economies vulnerable to a myriad of disruptions, including economic coercion.”

The plan said the longer-range view was on developing a plurilateral initiative with like-minded partners on trade in critical minerals that could bolster supply chain resilience for critical minerals for all.

The US and EU will discuss various measures and mechanisms, it said, including coordinated trade policies and mechanisms based on reference prices, such as border-adjusted price floors, standards-based markets, price gap subsidies, or offset agreements, focusing on mutually agreed select critical minerals and associated supply chains.

They also agreed to examine other possible measures, including standards for mining, processing, recycling, or trade in critical minerals; technical and regulatory co-operation; investment promotion and screening co-operation; and coordinated rapid responses to prevent disruptions and crises. Stockpiling co-operation is another possible measure, it said.

# Children's lives at risk from US funding cuts to vaccine alliance: CEO

AFP  
Nairobi

The head of a global vaccine organisation told AFP on Friday that aid cuts by the United States and other donors have forced it to slash its malaria programme in Africa, threatening tens of thousands of children's lives.

Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, brings together government and private donors to help developing countries acquire jabs for key diseases at affordable prices.

Last year, the United States pulled support worth \$1.58 billion, with its vaccine-sceptic health secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr claiming without evidence that there were safety concerns.

“Our malaria programme has taken the heaviest cuts,” Gavi CEO Sania Nishtar told AFP in an interview from Rwanda.

Gavi has been supporting the rollout of the malaria vaccine, approved in 2021, in 25 countries across Africa, where the disease claims some 600,000 lives a year, mostly children.

The goal of reaching 85 percent coverage in the targeted countries by 2030 has been reduced to 70 percent, she said.

Gavi had projected the rollout would prevent 180,000 deaths, and while final spending choices still rest with African governments, the impact of the cuts “will likely be tens of thousands of children's lives lost”, said Nishtar.

“This is hugely disappointing,” she added.

“If you've ever seen a child with malaria convulsions in a hospital, you know what this means. It's a horrible sight.”

### African vaccines

Nishtar also told AFP of the



challenges in its effort to develop vaccine manufacturing in Africa — an issue brought into stark relief during the Covid pandemic when developed countries

hoarded jabs, leaving Africans last in line.

Gavi announced a \$1 billion subsidy programme in 2024 to help potential African vaccine-

makers get up and running.

But 18 months later, “none of the manufacturers have been able to redeem a subsidy as of now”, said Nishtar.

Firms in South Africa, Senegal, Morocco and Ghana are among those in the hunt but Nishtar said it was clear they needed more upfront financing and support to get labs and production lines off the ground, and she would be proposing that to Gavi's board in July.

“We are bending backwards to help but we don't have a magic wand,” she said, calling on African governments to help with tax breaks and investments of their own.

### Silver lining

Gavi had aimed to collect \$11.9 billion for its 2026-2030 strategy but is still short by \$1.9 billion, mostly due to the US withdrawal but also caused by reductions

from other Western donors.

Nishtar was reluctant to criticise Washington, which she hopes can still be convinced to rejoin the alliance.

“We are very hopeful of a renewed partnership with the US because they are so important to Gavi,” she said.

The cuts also had a “silver lining”, she said, by encouraging African governments to invest more in their health systems despite financial challenges.

“Africa needs help at this point in time, and we should all support them,” said Nishtar.

“But African heads of states are allocating monies towards health and finding innovative ways of doing that: earmarked taxes, special levies... There is a willingness to invest,” she said.

“Last year, we ended with \$300 million in co-financing contributions (from Africa) tangibly in our bank account.”



# Scandals plague Lula camp

AFP  
Brasilia

Four months ago, the stars seemed to be aligned for veteran left-winger Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in his quest for an unprecedented fourth term as Brazilian president.

The 80-year-old was riding high in polls after staring down US President Donald Trump in a spat over the coup trial of former far-right president Jair Bolsonaro.

The economy was growing and unemployment was falling to record lows.

But a flurry of financial scandals and growing discontent over a cost-of-living crisis have eroded his lead over his right-wing rival, Flavio Bolsonaro, son of Jair Bolsonaro, now sitting in prison.

A survey by the polling firm Datafolha published on April 11 sent alarm bells ringing throughout the Lula camp.

For the first time it showed Bolsonaro edging out the incumbent in a presidential runoff, with the senator garnering 46% to 45% for Lula, although the pair remained locked in a statistical tie.

Worryingly for Lula, the Datafolha poll showed 51% of voters disapproving of his performance.

"It's a warning sign, obviously," said Jilmar Tatto, vice president of the Workers' Party, which former metalworker Lula co-founded in 1980.

The younger Bolsonaro is running as a more moderate version of his father, who is serving a 27-year sentence for plotting to cling onto



Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva at Sao Bento Palace in Lisbon, Portugal. (Reuters/File Photo)

power after losing elections to Lula in 2022. Lula has launched a counter-offensive, highlighting improvements in health, education, and infrastructure since he succeeded Trump ally Bolsonaro.

The publicity effort is taking place on several fronts. To allay concerns about his age, Lula has released videos of him lifting weights, using a treadmill and sprinting to meetings.

He has also issued a new call to arms in the face of Trump's intimidation of friend and foe alike.

"We cannot allow the world to bow down to the behavior of a president who believes that he can impose tariffs on products, punish countries, and wage war by email or Twitter," Lula said recently in Germany.

## Barely surviving

Defending Brazil's sovereignty

gave Lula a poll bump last year, when the United States slapped tariffs on its longtime ally for putting Trump's friend Bolsonaro in prison.

But in the months since, the mood in Brazil has shifted.

Rising prices for essentials like food and energy have taken center stage, particularly among younger voters.

"The market is incredibly expensive. Buying clothes is very expensive too. It's very shocking because you're not really living, you're just barely surviving," Yohana Freitas Barbosa, a 27-year-old administrative assistant in the capital Brasilia, told AFP.

Mariano Machado, an analyst at the consulting firm Verisk Maplecroft, warned that "any gap between the macroeconomic situation and voters' everyday experience with the cost of living will influence the vote, and Lula knows it."

## Lula has surgery to remove skin lesion from scalp

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva underwent surgery Friday that removed a lesion on his scalp, less than six months before the presidential elections. The lesion — clearly visible in recent weeks — was a basal cell carcinoma, a type of skin cancer, said dermatologist Cristina Abdalla, who led the procedure at the Sirio-Libanes Hospital in Sao Paulo. "It is a common lesion, caused by sun exposure," Abdalla said. Lula, 80, left the hospital shortly before noon, his office said. Cardiologist Roberto Kalil Filho

told reporters at the hospital that the surgery proceeded "without any complications" and healing will take about one month. Lula was also given an injection in his right wrist to treat tendinitis in his thumb. "He should not participate in large-scale events over the coming days, but this will not impact his schedule for next week," Kalil Filho said. Lula plans to run for a fourth term as president in October elections, where he is likely to face Senator Flavio Bolsonaro, 44, the eldest son of imprisoned far-right former president Jair Bolsonaro. (AFP)

To curb rising fuel prices caused by the Middle East war, the government has temporarily reduced taxes on diesel to zero. But Lula has failed to quell feverish speculation about his poll slump.

For the first time, newspaper columnists are pondering a hypothetical scenario in which he might withdraw from the election.

The ruling party has dismissed the idea and doubled down on its social agenda, which includes a proposal to cut the working week by four hours to 40 total.

"We are going to set the country's agenda and win the elections," Tatto said.

A series of high-profile financial scandals have added to the president's woes.

Police and Congress are investigating a major alleged pension fraud scheme, from which one of Lula's sons is believed to have benefited.

Another probe is looking at the links between a businessman at the heart of a major banking scandal and high-ranking public officials.

While none of the investigations target the president, Brazilians' weariness with corruption "ends up tainting those in power," Edinho Silva, head of the Workers' Party, lamented.

For many on the right, Lula remains poisoned by the corruption scandals that marked his first two terms as leader between 2003 and 2010. Lula himself spent 580 days in prison for corruption as part of the sprawling Lava Jato (Car Wash) probe, although his convictions were later annulled.

The lingering perception among some voters is "that the (Workers' Party) is more corrupt than the rest," Creomar de Souza, a politics professor at the Dom Cabral Foundation, told AFP.

## Canada hails G7 meet despite no climate talks to appease the US

Canada's environment minister Julie Dabrusin yesterday said that G7 nations made progress for nature at a meeting in Paris, even as climate change was absent to keep the United States on board. The threat of global warming was kept off the formal agenda at the G7 environment ministers dialogue to avoid a clash with the United States.

France, which hosted the meeting, defended the decision as necessary to keep the peace among G7 nations and reach agreement on a number of other initiatives. Dabrusin said the nature and climate "went hand in hand" and ministers canvassed both themes over two days of discussions behind closed doors.

"Protecting nature is part of how we fight climate change," Canada's minister for environment, climate change and nature told AFP on the sidelines of the meeting. "And also, climate change has an impact on nature. So the conversation is deeply intertwined. And I think that they were important conversations for us to have."

In his second term, Donald Trump — a sceptic of climate change — has pulled the United States from the Paris Agreement and the bedrock treaty underpinning global climate action. Activists had criticised France's decision. (AFP)

## Military base in Colombia attacked



Colombian bomb disposal officers inspect a bus bomb yesterday after an explosion near a military base in Cali, Valle del Cauca department, Colombia. One person was injured in an attack on a military base in southwest Colombia, according to the local health authority ahead of the presidential election. (AFP)

## Court blocks Trump from barring asylum seekers at US borders

A US federal appeals court ruled yesterday that President Donald Trump cannot prevent migrants from seeking asylum at the border. The Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia upheld a lower court ruling that Trump exceeded his legal authority by banning migrants who have illegally crossed the US-Mexico border from making asylum claims.

"Congress did not intend to grant the Executive the expansive removal authority it asserts," the judges said.

"Congress enacted the asylum statute... to grant all foreign individuals 'physically present' in the United States a right to apply for asylum and have their individual applications adjudicated," they said.

"If the Government wishes to modify this carefully structured and

intricate system, it must present those arguments to the only branch of government able to amend the INA (Immigration and Nationality Act): Congress."

District Judge Randolph Moss had ruled last year, in a case brought by immigrant rights groups and asylum seekers, that Trump's proclamation barring asylum requests was a violation of the INA. (AFP)

## Justice Dept ends criminal probe into Fed chair Powell

AFP  
Washington

The US Justice Department dropped a criminal probe against Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell yesterday, clearing the way for his replacement's Senate confirmation, amid concerns over President Donald Trump's attacks on the independent central bank.

"I have directed my office to close our investigation," US Attorney Jeanine Pirro announced on X.

Pirro said the inspector general for the Fed would instead look into renovation cost overruns at its headquarters, which the Justice Department had been probing — under heavy pressure from Trump.

However, she added that she would "not hesitate to restart a criminal investigation should the facts warrant doing so." Trump has upended Washington norms by routinely criticising the Fed for not following his calls to cut interest rates more rapidly, while making personal attacks on Powell in particular.

The probe into Powell, whose term helming the Fed expires May 15, looked likely to hold up the Senate's confirmation of Trump's pick for a new chairman. Now, Pirro's announcement is set to ease that path.

The Trump administration "remains as confident as before that the Senate will swiftly confirm Kevin Warsh as the next Federal Reserve Chairman," White House spokesman Kush Desai said soon after the Justice Department probe was dropped. The investigation had been criticised by former Fed chiefs and lawmakers as an attempt to undermine the central bank's independence from politics.

At Warsh's confirmation hearing this week before the Senate Banking Committee, Republican senator Thom Tillis reiterated that he would continue blocking new appointments to the Fed if the Powell investigation were not resolved.

Tillis's vote against the appointment would have



US Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell (AFP/File Photo)

been enough to set up an impasse on the panel, which Warsh needs to clear to become the next Fed chief. But the top Democrat on the Banking Committee, Senator Elizabeth Warren, warned that the closure of the investigation does not end political pressure on the Fed.

"Let's be clear what the Justice Department announced today: they threatened to restart the bogus criminal investigation into Fed Chair Powell at any time while failing to drop their ridiculous criminal probe against Governor Lisa Cook," she said. Warren was referring to a separate attempt by Trump to fire Cook over allegations of mortgage fraud.

Apart from Tillis's objections on the Senate panel, Powell himself said last month that he would not leave his post on the Fed's board of governors until the Justice Department probe involving him was "well and truly over, with transparency and finality."

It is rare for a former Fed chair to remain on its board after stepping down as chief, and Powell's Fed governor term ends in 2028.

## Havana property market stirs as investors bet on political change

AFP  
Havana

Havana's real estate market is showing glimmers of revival as investors bet that a political and economic revolution is coming to the Communist-governed island.

Prices are ticking up, and brokers are getting busier as something stirs Cuba's real estate market, long battered by sanctions, recession and mass emigration.

That something is acute US political pressure coupled with an oil blockade, and a belief among some Cuban-Americans that the Communist Party could reform or be toppled after six decades in power.

"The market is moving on expectations not supply and demand," said Luis Mijail Lopez, owner of a construction firm in Havana. He said there is suddenly "a great deal of interest" from clients, including emigres and foreign residents, willing to invest.

In the words of one 48-year-old

Cuban living in Miami who asked a family member to look for an apartment, "changes are coming."

Cuba's housing market emerged only in 2011, when the government legalised home sales. For decades before that residents were limited to swapping properties.

In theory, foreigners are still barred from buying homes unless they hold permanent residency or use proxies. No private real-estate agencies operate, although self-employed brokers exist.

Broker Yovanni Cantillo said the market has regained momentum in recent months, particularly Havana's most desirable neighborhoods. Prices have increased in places like Miramar, Nuevo Vedado and Vedado — neighborhoods with neoclassical mansions, embassies and art deco jewels.

It is "a recovery in its flow, in its dynamics" said Cantillo, while acknowledging that values remain 40 to 50 % below levels seen during the diplomatic thaw between Havana and Washington under former US president Barack



A tricycle goes past a house under renovation in a neighborhood of Havana. (AFP)

Obama. Obama's rapprochement triggered a tourism-linked property boom after Airbnb began operating in Cuba.

Tougher US sanctions fol-

lowed under his successor Donald Trump, and the Covid-19 pandemic halted the surge. A mass exodus of more than 1.5 mn Cubans since 2020 then flooded the

market with homes, driving prices sharply lower.

Cantillo said now buyers are multiplying and sellers have pulled listings or raised prices in

anticipation of a broader rebound.

Expectations have been fueled by talks between Washington and Havana, and by a draft law that would allow Cubans to own two urban homes and take out mortgages.

The legislation, which could be approved in July, would make it possible to "do business with those properties," according to an architect who asked not to be identified.

Small and medium-sized private companies were authorised in 2021 and are expanding, often operating from homes in a capital with virtually no office market.

Private construction firms that manage their own imports have also improved access to building materials, making renovations easier.

In this context, interest from Cuban-Americans is "essential," Cantillo said.

The prospect of change is also reviving hopes among some exiles of recovering properties nationalized after the 1959 revolution.

## Dozens of Thai opposition figures to go on trial over bid to amend royal insult law

Reuters  
Bangkok

Thailand's Supreme Court said yesterday that 44 current and former opposition lawmakers will go on trial over an attempt to amend a law that protects the monarchy from criticism, in another blow to the country's progressive movement.

The 44 facing trial from June 30 for alleged ethics violations include serving and former lawmakers of the People's Party and its disbanded predecessor Move Forward, who each face the maximum penalty of a lifetime ban from office if found guilty.

Hundreds of people have been

prosecuted in recent years under Thailand's lese-majeste law, which is among the strictest of its kind in the world, with punishments of up to 15 years in prison for offenders.

On the back of massive anti-government, youth-led street protests that included calls for the reform of the monarchy, Move Forward tried to amend the law in parliament in 2021, arguing it had been misused to stifle political opponents.

Thailand's constitution enshrines the king in a position of "revered worship" and royalists regard the palace as sacrosanct.

The liberal agenda of the People's Party and its forerunners created powerful enemies among Thai-



Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, People's Party leader, meets with supporters in Bangkok, Thailand. (Reuters/File photo)

land's conservative establishment, with the movement on the wrong end of a multiple court rulings, in-

cluding two party dissolutions.

The 44 include People's Party leader Natthaphong Ruengpan-

yawut, four deputy leaders and former Move Forward leader Pita Limjaroenrat, who is currently serving a 10-year ban from politics.

"We will pursue our legal fight in the Supreme Court to the fullest extent, in order to defend the legitimacy of the representative mandate in a parliamentary democracy," People's Party leader Natthaphong told a press conference yesterday. The progressive movement's hugely popularity among young and urban Thais swept Move Forward to victory in the 2023 general election, but it was blocked from forming a government by lawmakers allied with the royalist military. A court in 2024 ruled that Move Forward's attempt to reform the

royal insult law was unconstitutional and undermined the democratic system. It was later dissolved by the same court and its top leaders banned, but members regrouped days later as the People's Party.

The Supreme Court case stems from a petition lodged by Thailand's National Anti-Corruption Commission, which has a wide investigative remit beyond graft. The court said serving lawmakers among the 44 implicated would not be suspended.

Despite big leads in opinion polls, the People's Party was the surprise runner-up in February's general election to Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul's Bhumjaithai Party.

## China slaps export curbs on European firms over Taiwan arms sales

AFP  
Beijing

China has imposed restrictions on seven European entities related to the defence sector, Beijing said Friday, citing their involvement in alleged arms sales or "collusion" with Taiwan.

The measures, which took effect immediately, are needed "to safeguard national security and interests and fulfil international obligations such as non-proliferation", the commerce ministry said in a statement.

The curbs apply to companies including Belgian guns manufacturer FN Herstal and German defence electronics firm Hensoldt, as well as the national aerospace research and development centre in the Czech Republic, VZLU Aerospace.

They prohibit exports of "dual-use items" to the seven named entities or transfers of such items that originated in China by "foreign organisations and individuals", the statement said.

"Any ongoing related activities must be immediately ceased," the statement said.

Applications could be submitted to the commerce ministry "in special circumstances where export is truly necessary", it added.

Beijing claims self-ruled Tai-

wan as part of its territory and has vowed to take control of it one day — by force if necessary.

In a separate statement, an unnamed commerce ministry spokesperson said that the measures target "only a small number of EU entities involved in military-related activities, specifically those that have participated in arms sales to Taiwan or engaged in collusion with Taiwan".

"Law-abiding and trustworthy EU entities have absolutely no cause for concern," the statement added.

Beijing has tightened export controls in recent years, complicating access overseas to Chinese technology and products in certain strategic areas.

In February, the commerce ministry imposed export controls against 20 Japanese entities, ramping up pressure on Tokyo in the midst of heightened political tensions sparked by comments on Taiwan in November by Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi.

Prior to that, China's curbs on rare earth exports last year sparked global concerns over supply, also giving Beijing crucial leverage in trade talks with Washington.

The European Union Chamber of Commerce in China warned in a report earlier this month that Beijing's stringent export controls — particularly on rare earths — are posing a "long-term business risk".

## China holds live-fire drills in waters near Luzon Island

Reuters  
Beijing

China conducted military drills recently including live-fire exercises in waters east of the Philippines' Luzon Island, it said yesterday, as Manila and Washington host annual drills that extend to disputed areas of the South China Sea. Over 17,000 troops from the US, the Philippines and allies began their annual Balikatan military exercises this week, with combat troops from Japan joining for the first time amid persistent strains between Tokyo and Beijing.

The Chinese military's Southern Theater Command (STC) said yesterday its Naval Task Group 107 carried out activities that focused on live-fire shooting, sea-air coordination, rapid ma-

Beijing calls drills 'necessary' in current situation; Philippines, US and allies start annual military exercises that extend to disputed areas of the South China Sea

noeuvres and maritime replenishments to test integrated joint combat capabilities.

The Philippine embassy in Beijing did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Chinese military did not provide further details on the timing or exact location of the drills, but said in a statement its exercises were a "necessary operation" in response to the current regional situation and were in full compliance with international law and practice.

"Forces of the STC will regularly conduct corresponding military operations based on the need of the security situation to safeguard national sovereignty and

security as well as regional peace and stability," it said.

China has repeatedly criticised the Philippines for conducting defence exercises with its allies, saying they risk raising regional tensions.

The Balikatan exercises, running from April 20 to May 8, include drills in Luzon. The Philippines and U.S. will for the first time hold maritime strike drills on the island of Itbayat, the northernmost point of the Philippines about 155 km (96 miles) from Taiwan, which China views as its own territory.

Taiwan's government rejects China's sovereignty claims.

Counter-landing live-fire drills will also take place in the Philippines' Zambales province on the South China Sea, about 230km (143 miles) from the hotly contested Scarborough Shoal, a strategic atoll controlled by China.

The Philippines and China have been locked in a series of maritime confrontations in recent years with China claiming almost the entire South China Sea, a waterway supporting more than \$3tn of annual commerce. Beijing has been stepping up its long-term campaign to strengthen maritime power, pursuing marine economy growth and expanding its naval force. At a cabinet meeting on Friday, China's Premier Li Qiang called for efforts to strengthen China's maritime capabilities and technological innovation, as well as to protect its maritime rights and strategic security.

## China calls US accusations of AI technology theft 'baseless'

Beijing yesterday refuted accusations made by the White House that Chinese entities were involved in "industrial-scale" efforts to steal US artificial intelligence (AI) technology. The charges were made Thursday in a post on X by White House science and technology chief Michael Kratsios, who also warned that Washington would "be taking action to protect American innovation". Asked about the matter at a regular news conference in Beijing on Friday, Chinese foreign

ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun said: "The US claims are entirely baseless." "They are a slanderous smear against the achievements of China's artificial intelligence industry. China firmly opposes this," he said. "We urge the US side to respect the facts, abandon prejudice, cease technological containment and suppression of China and do more to facilitate technological exchange and cooperation between the two countries," Guo added.

The rebuttal comes hours after Chinese startup DeepSeek released a new and long-awaited AI model, more than a year after it stunned the world with a low-cost reasoning model that matched the capabilities of US rivals. The post by Kratsios accused "foreign entities, primarily in China" of "distillation", a common practice within AI development, often used by companies to create cheaper, smaller versions of their own models. (AFP)

## South Korea prosecutors seek 30 years for ex-president over drone flights into North

AFP  
Seoul

South Korean special prosecutors requested a further 30-year term for jailed ex-president Yoon Suk-yeol yesterday for allegedly sending military drones into North Korea in 2024.

Yoon is accused of ordering the incursion to help create the pretext for his failed declaration of martial law that year, which resulted in his impeachment, removal from office and life imprisonment for insurrection.

Special prosecutors said in a statement that they were seeking the new sentence on charges of aiding the enemy, adding that Yoon's effort to "fabricate wartime conditions" had undermined state security.

They also argued that the operation heightened tensions with North Korea and led to the leak of classified information — including details about force capabilities — after the drones



Former S Korean president Yoon Suk-yeol. (Reuters/File Photo)

crashed, the Yonhap news agency reported.

Yoon was sentenced to life in jail in February for leading an insurrection to "paralyse" South Korea's National Assembly.

He has appealed against the conviction, insisting that he declared martial law "solely for the sake of the nation".

Yoon's legal team denied the new charge and said there was "no prior order or subsequent approval" by him for the drone operation cited by prosecutors.

They said the operation was in response to North Korea sending balloons carrying trash across

the border that year and was "a legitimate act of self-defence" unrelated to Yoon's martial law declaration.

His lawyers dismissed the prosecution's claims as a "speculative and false novel".

Drone flights remain a flashpoint in tensions between the two Koreas, which remain technically at war.

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung expressed regret this month after an investigation found government officials had sent drones into the nuclear-armed North in January.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's powerful sister called Lee's statement "wise behaviour", but hopes for a rapprochement faded after the diplomatically isolated nation returned to calling the South its "most hostile" enemy.

Lee has vowed to mend ties with North Korea by halting the kind of provocations carried out under his predecessor, and has suggested a rare apology could be warranted for Yoon's use of the drones.

## Asean chair urges Myanmar to free more prisoners including Suu Kyi

Reuters  
Manila

The Philippines, chair of the regional bloc Asean, yesterday encouraged more prisoner releases in Myanmar, including ousted former leader Aung San Suu Kyi and said a recent amnesty was a positive step towards inclusive national dialogue.

"We reaffirm our commitment to assisting Myanmar, as an integral part of Asean, to achieve a peaceful and durable solution to the political crisis in the country," the Philippines said in statement as chair of the 11-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean). Aung San Suu Kyi has been in detention since her



elected government was toppled in a 2021 coup and her welfare was discussed this week by Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow when he met Myanmar's new President Min Aung Hlaing.

Sihasak said Min Aung Hlaing, who led the 2021 coup, told him Aung San Suu Kyi, 80, was being "well looked after" and "good things" for her were being considered, without elaborating. Sihasak said he had conveyed Asean's concerns about her welfare.

Aung San Suu Kyi has been serving a 27-year sentence after being convicted of multiple offences based on charges her allies said were politically motivated to keep

her at bay, ranging from incitement and corruption to election fraud and violating a state secrets law. Her sentence was commuted by one-sixth as part of an amnesty last week for thousands of prisoners that included the release of her ally, Win Myint, the ousted former president and co-defendant in many of her trials.

Former military chief Min Aung Hlaing led the coup that ended a decade of tentative democracy in Myanmar and triggered mass protests and a civil war, prompting an intervention by Asean and its exclusion of the then ruling generals from its summits. During his recent inauguration, Min Aung Hlaing said his priority was peace and reconciliation in Myanmar and he would seek to normalise ties with Asean, which Thailand has pledged to support.

## Indonesia reaffirms it has no plan to impose tolls in Malacca Strait

Reuters  
Jakarta

Indonesia has no plan to impose tolls on ships passing through the Malacca Strait, its finance minister said yesterday, after his comments about monetising the strategic sea route made waves earlier this week.

Purbaya Yudhi Sadewa reiterated a clarification made by the country's foreign minister on Thursday that southeast Asia's largest economy would not impose tariffs in the Malacca Strait.

Purbaya told a press conference Indonesia would abide by the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS, which outlines rules that govern waterways used for international navigation.

On Wednesday, Purbaya caused a stir by openly musing about ways countries could impose tolls on ships as a way to monetise the strait, before noting that such an arrangement was not possible.

The effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz in the Middle East has forced policymakers in Asia to face questions

over the security of other maritime chokepoints. The 900km (550-mile) long Malacca Strait, described by the U.S. Energy Administration as the world's largest "oil transit chokepoint", is bound by Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore and provides the shortest sea route from East Asia to the Middle East and Europe.

More than 102,500 ships, mostly commercial vessels, transited through the Malacca Strait in 2025, up from around 94,300 in 2024, data from Malaysia's Marine Department showed.

## Wildfires spread towards northern Japan town

Flames from raging wildfires in northern Japan were spreading towards the centre of a town yesterday, with authorities urging more than 2,500 people to evacuate their homes, media reports and the government said.

As of yesterday morning, fires in the mountainous areas of Iwate region had burned over 400 hectares (988 acres) since breaking out two days ago, government spokesman Minoru Kihara told reporters.

Flames could be seen encroaching on homes in Otsuchi Town as smoke billowed from a nearby forest. Increasingly dry winters have raised the risk of wildfires. A blaze that broke out in the Iwate city of Ofunato early last year was Japan's worst in over half a century. Kihara said the flames prompted authorities to issue evacuation advisories to more than 2,500 people, and they were upping measures to extinguish the blaze, with around 700 firefighters and 13 aircraft mobilised. As of 5:00am yesterday, 329 residents were taking shelter, public broadcaster NHK said. "The sound was crazy. All these cedar trees were cracking as they burned, sending flames and smoke soaring," a local firefighter told major broadcaster TV Asahi. (AFP)



A wildfire burns near the Kirikiri district of Otsuchi, Iwate Prefecture, Japan, yesterday. (Reuters)



# Workers at Australian LNG plant vote for strike

Reuters  
Perth/Tokyo

Workers at Inpex's Ichthys liquefied natural gas facility in Australia have voted in favour of strike action over pay and conditions, union group the Offshore Alliance said yesterday, in a decision that could exacerbate already tight energy supplies globally.

Over 98% of workers who voted were in favour of strike action, a

spokesperson said in a statement.

"The results of the ballot are clear: a huge majority of Offshore Alliance members are in favour of exercising their right to take strike action in pursuit of their bargaining claims," the statement said.

Offshore Alliance members have endorsed various forms of potential industrial action including work stoppages ranging from 30 minutes to 24 hours.

Workers at the facility are theoretically able to commence strike

action from May 7, though the union group said it had agreed to hold off on any action until May 15 while the two sides engage in 6 days of talks.

A strike at the 9.3 million metric-tonne-a-year facility in Darwin is being closely watched by Japanese power and gas utilities that buy from it.

Australia is Japan's largest LNG supplier, and the country is already facing a possible supply crunch due to the Iran war and rising air-conditioning demand as Japan

heads into summer.

An Inpex spokesperson said in a statement the company was aware of the vote outcome, adding it had not yet received any notice of industrial action and would continue to engage in negotiations with workers.

"Inpex remains focused on maintaining safe operations at Ichthys LNG, reaching a fair and equitable agreement with employees - and importantly, ensuring reliable energy supply to our key trading partners in the Indo-

Pacific region amid disruption to global energy markets," the statement added.

Inpex said last Friday a majority of eligible employees had rejected a pay deal it tabled.

The Offshore Alliance, a grouping of the Maritime Union of Australia and the Australian Workers Union, had previously flagged that its 430 members would vote against the new contract, which it said does not meet benchmark industry standards for wages and conditions.

The Ichthys workforce is around 95% unionised, according to a union representative. The protected action ballot was given approval by Australia's Fair Work Commission earlier in April.

In 2023, a strike by Offshore Alliance members at Chevron's Wheatstone facility in Australia tightened global LNG supply.

More than 20% of the world's LNG supply has been constrained by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz since the start of the Iran war on February 28.

## Giant ice tower delays opening of Everest climbing route

Reuters  
Kathmandu

Hundreds of mountaineers are stranded at the Himalayan base camp for Mount Everest as a crevasse strewn with chunks of ice, including one towering block, delays the opening of the route to the world's tallest peak, officials and climbers said yesterday. The annual climbing season for the 8,849-metre (29,032-foot) summit runs from April to May, when the weather conditions are most suited to reaching the windswept, icy peak.

But a 100-foot (30-metre) serac, or dangerous chunk of ice, blocks the path above base camp this year. Seasoned Sherpa climbers, known locally as "icefall doctors", have so far been unable to fix their ropes, place ladders and carve a safe route through the treacherous Khumbu icefall to Camp II. Meanwhile the climbers, chafing to start their ascent while the weather is at its best, can only wait.

"Expeditions are all being delayed because of the impasse," Garrett Madison of US-based Madison Mountaineering told Reuters from base camp.

"It looks likely to fall imminently, however, it could take some



Members of an expedition team hike at Khumbu Icefall, as the route to Mount Everest Camp One has not yet been opened for the season in Solukhumbu district, also known as the Everest region. (Reuters/File Photo)

time," said Madison of the ice tower. He is leading a team of international climbers on his 16th ascent.

The route typically opens by the third week of April, said Himal Gautam of Nepal's Department of Tourism.

"If the serac melts or collapses now, allowing the 'icefall doctors' to open the route, climbers could still make their summit bids on

schedule," Gautam added.

If not, he said, authorities would send more Sherpa climbers to assess the risk and explore alternative routes. Officials said a team of eight "icefall doctors" is at base camp.

Mingma Sherpa, an 11-time Everest summiteer leading an international team at base camp, said acclimatisation rotations and the

ferrying of gear to upper camps have been delayed.

Everest straddles the border between Nepal and China's Tibet region and can be climbed from both sides, though most climbers approach from the Nepali side. Mountain climbing is a major source of income and employment for Nepal, home to eight of the world's 14 highest peaks. Authorities have issued 410 Everest permits so far this season, at a cost of \$15,000 each. There is no limit on how many permits are issued, which has led to criticism from mountaineering experts about the risk of long queues forming in what is known as the death zone because the air is dangerously thin.

Among those waiting to ascend were 98 climbers, including 24 women, from China, the most from any country so far.

Official data also showed 49 from the US and 46 from India.

Lukas Furtenbach of Furtenbach Adventures, based in Austria, who is leading a group of 40 international climbers, said he expected the number of climbers from the Nepal side to rise as China has closed the Tibetan side for climbers this year for unknown reasons, prompting them to come to the south.

## India rebukes Trump for sharing remarks on citizenship

Reuters  
New Delhi

India has dismissed as "uninformed" comments shared by US President Donald Trump that described the country as a "hellhole", saying they were inappropriate and inconsistent with the strong relationship between the two countries.

The comments were made by conservative commentator Michael Savage in an episode of The Savage Nation talk radio show. Trump posted a transcript of the show on his Truth Social account on Thursday without any comments. "A baby here becomes an instant citizen, and then they bring the entire family in from China or India or some other hellhole on the planet," Savage said, according to the transcript.

"That there's almost no loyalty to this coun-

try amongst the immigrant class coming in today, which was not always the case. No, they're not like the European Americans of today and their ancestors."

Reuters could not immediately contact Savage. Trump has issued a directive seeking to restrict birthright citizenship in the US, a move that has been challenged in the US Supreme Court. Earlier this month, he attended a hearing on the issue in a historic visit to the court.

India's foreign ministry late on Thursday reacted strongly to the comments.

"The remarks are obviously uninformed, inappropriate and in poor taste," Indian foreign ministry spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, said in a statement.

"They certainly do not reflect the reality of the India-US relationship, which has long been based on mutual respect and shared interests."

The US embassy in New Delhi said: "The president has said 'India is a great country with

a very good friend of mine at the top'"

China's foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment.

India's main opposition Congress party called the "hellhole" remark "extremely insulting and anti-India. It hurts every Indian".

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi should take up this matter with the US President and register a strong objection," the party said on X.

Indian government data shows nearly 5.5mn people of Indian origin live in the US. Indian Americans and Chinese Americans are the two biggest groups of Asian origin in the US. Trump and Modi enjoyed warm ties during Trump's first term, but relations cooled after India was hit last year with some of the highest US tariffs, many of which were rolled back this year. India and the US are now working on a trade deal aimed at preventing any renewed increase in tariffs and boosting sales to each other.

## Indian court extends detention of officials in bribery case

Reuters  
New Delhi

An Indian court yesterday extended the pre-trial detention of an aviation regulator official and a Reliance Industries executive to May 6 in a bribery investigation linked to approvals for drone imports.

India's top crime-fighting agency said on Sunday it had arrested Mudavath Devula, a deputy director general of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, and Reliance senior vice-president Bharat Mathur, accusing them of

agreeing to a \$16,000 bribe to clear drone import applications by Asteria Aerospace, a unit of billionaire Mukesh Ambani-led Reliance.

The agency did not disclose the supplier of the imports.

The two men appeared briefly before a New Delhi district court yesterday, accompanied by officials from the Central Bureau of Investigation and dressed in formal shirts.

The judge ordered both to remain in judicial custody until May 6.

Devula's lawyer, K Kiran Kumar, and Mathur's counsel, Ashish Batra, told Reuters after the hearing that their clients deny all the allegations.

Reliance has said Mathur was engaged as a consultant and the company neither knew of nor approved "any such unauthorised transaction".

During yesterday's hearing, Mathur's lawyer sought access to certain medicines, while Devula requested limited access to his laptop.

Asteria is a subsidiary of Reliance's digital arm Jio Platforms and describes itself as a drone technology company providing "actionable intelligence from aerial data".

Asteria's revenue rose to 400mn rupees (\$4.24mn) in fiscal 2024 from 11mn rupees in fiscal 2020.

## India climbers face obstacles in race to the top

AFP  
Pune

Blind and you might miss Indian speed climber Deepu Mallesh scaling a wall five buses high in five seconds.

India, a country obsessed with cricket, has seen a surge in popularity in climbing but those who want to compete internationally have had to crowdfund and there is little government recognition or help.

Some have had to quit the sport they love.

"What I like most about climbing is how raw and honest it is," said 28-year-old Mallesh, who has climbed for his country and dreams of being the first Indian climber to qualify for the Olympics. "It's just you, the wall and the clock."

Mallesh works part-time as a climbing instructor while pursuing his goal of reaching the 2028 Los Angeles Games.

"I have to somehow make some money. That is the only way for me to survive in this sport," he said.

The Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF) estimates there are tens of thousands of people who sport-climb regularly, with more than a dozen climbing gyms opening in the last decade.

But the rise in those picking it up as a professional career is slow - high costs and scarce sponsorship deals hold back many.

There are about 3,500 climbers who compete across various levels in the country and among them, about 60 participate internationally annually.

Mallesh didn't win at the world

championship in China this month, but at 5.39 seconds he set a national record in men's speed climbing.

He also qualified for the Asian Games in Japan in September-October.

Mallesh only manages to compete with support from the IMF.

Previously he raised the cash to compete via crowdfunding. Two years ago he collected about one mn rupees (\$10,500) to attend six international competitions.

"I have had to miss competitions because I could not gather the requisite amount," he said.

"If I get proper funding and proper support I might see my career through till the Olympics. Otherwise I will have to find something else to do."

Since 2002, India have won nearly 70 medals in international

climbing competitions, including in the Asian youth championships.

Among them is Joga Purty, who won silver in 2024.

Purty, 19, said she was lucky because she was sponsored by the Tata conglomerate.

"If I didn't have this I also would be one of those who quit the sport," she said.

A decent pair of shoes and a harness cost about 10,000 rupees (\$106) each. A chalk bag, used to dust the hands for grip, costs 5,000 rupees.

"The shoes also will only last three to six months, sometimes even less depending on the athlete's use," she said. "And we have to carry an extra pair of shoes."

Unlike many other sports in India, there is little government support.

## Sovereignty of Falklands rests with Britain

Reuters  
London

The sovereignty of the Falkland Islands rests with Britain, a spokesperson for Prime Minister Keir Starmer said yesterday after an internal Pentagon e-mail suggested reviewing the US position on the Falklands as punishment for Britain's stance on the Iran war.

"We could not be clearer about the UK's position on the Falkland Islands. It is long standing, it is unchanged," the spokesperson told reporters.

"Sovereignty rests with the UK and the islands' right to self-determination is paramount. It's been our consistent position and will remain the case," the spokesperson said, adding that Britain had expressed that position "clearly and consistently to successive US administrations".

## UK health data of people listed for sale in China

Anonymised medical data of half a million members of UK health database Biobank was temporarily listed for sale on an Alibaba-owned Chinese website, the British government said on Thursday. Data minister Ian Murray told parliament that the breach involved the information of all 500,000 Biobank members.

"This has been an unacceptable abuse of the UK Biobank charity's data," he said, adding that the data was downloaded legitimately by three research institutions in China.

Asked about the issue at a news conference yesterday, Beijing's foreign ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun said China "has always protected personal information rights and interests in accordance with the law", without providing specific details.

Biobank uses medical data from volunteers to help researchers make scientific discoveries,

such as improving the detection and treatment of dementia and cancers.

The organisation said in a statement that "de-identified participant data made available to researchers at three academic institutions were listed for sale on a consumer website in China, owned by Alibaba."

"Alibaba swiftly removed those listings before any sales were made," Biobank chief executive Rory Collins added, confirming that the data did not include personally identifying information. The three Chinese research institutions identified have had their access suspended.

"We are still working with Biobank to ascertain from them the specific detail of what has happened," Murray said.

"We have asked them to investigate how this data ended up for sale online as a priority," he added. (AFP)

## Bangladesh sweats as fuel shortages force power cuts

Bangladesh is battling a heatwave and frequent power cuts, as soaring electricity demand outstrips limited generation capacity constrained by shortages linked to the Middle East war. Temperatures have hit 40C across a swathe of the country of 170mn people, forcing the government to impose load-shedding as demand exceeds supply. The South Asian nation imports 95% of its oil and gas, much of it from the Middle East, where energy shipments through the Strait of Hormuz have been disrupted since war began in late February.

"We have a huge electricity generation capacity, but due to shortages of gas and fuel, we are unable to utilise it," senior energy ministry official Umme Rehana told reporters on Thursday. Anindya Islam Amit, the junior power minister, told parliament yesterday that electricity demand was 16,000 megawatts, against generation of 14,126 megawatts. "Limited load-shedding was required," Amit said. "To maintain fairness, we have decided to introduce limited, experimental load-shedding of 110 megawatts in Dhaka. (AFP)



Climbers scaling a rock wall during a rock climbing festival at a sandstone cliffs site in Karnataka's Badami town. (AFP)

The IMF's Keerthi Pais, 50, said the organisation was in talks to get the sport recognised under the National Sports Governance Act.

"This recognition will help them continue their climbing career," Pais said.

Mallesh said wider recognition "would definitely help".

"It's not just about validation, it directly impacts support, funding, infrastructure and sponsorship opportunities," he said.

Pais said government support to make it easier to build climbing gyms would help too.

"That will be the game-changer... this is how it will grow."

# Germany launches spying probe into Signal attacks targeting MPs

AFP  
Berlin

German prosecutors yesterday launched a spying investigation into phishing attacks targeting lawmakers on the Signal messaging app, with an MP saying the latest Russia-directed plot against Germany was a “wake-up call”.

The wave of attacks has allegedly been directed at MPs from several parties including the speaker of parliament, a senior member of Chancellor Friedrich Merz’s CDU party, as well as civil servants, diplomats and journalists.

Germany, Kyiv’s biggest provider of military aid, has been battling a surge of cyberattacks, as well as espionage and sabotage plots since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Moscow denies being behind any such actions.

The German Federal Prosecutor’s Office told AFP it had launched an investigation into the phishing attacks “based on an initial suspicion of espionage”.

It did not name Russia or give more details, but suspicion quickly fell on Moscow.

“The latest phishing attempt from Russia targeting German politicians and journalists is a wake-up call for all of us,” said Marc Heinrichmann, a CDU lawmaker who heads a committee overseeing the country’s intelligence services.

The attack makes “painfully



Germany’s chancellor-in-waiting and leader of the Christian Democratic Union party (CDU) Friedrich Merz uses a mobile phone next to Christian Democratic Union’s (CDU) Julia Kloeckner, as they attend the inaugural session of the German lower house of Parliament, the Bundestag in Berlin. (Reuters/File Photo)

clear” that everyone “must remain vigilant,” he said.

“What may seem like a harmless message at first glance could, in today’s world, be a targeted espionage attempt by foreign powers.”

The attacks work by sending messages purporting to come from Signal support.

Victims are urged to hand over sensitive account information, which the attackers can then use to gain access to the victim’s chat groups and messages.

When the scam is successful, the hackers gain access to photos and files shared on Signal and can also impersonate the person whose account was compromised.

tions is still guaranteed,” he said.

Merz’s centre-right CDU party has so far not commented on how many of its lawmakers have been affected.

But earlier this week Der Spiegel news outlet reported that parliament speaker Julia Kloeckner’s Signal account had been compromised.

Kloeckner is a member of the CDU’s executive committee, whose members – including Merz – reportedly communicate via a Signal chat group, although no irregularities were detected on the chancellor’s phone.

His centre-left coalition partner, the SPD, and the far-left Die Linke have also said “a few” of their lawmakers have fallen victim.

Asked about the issue at a regular press briefing on Friday, a spokeswoman for the interior ministry said the attack is “probably led by a state actor”, adding that official warnings had been issued at the beginning of February and again last week.

Russia-linked hackers have been accused of being behind a string of cyberattacks in Germany.

Earlier this month, Germany intelligence services accused hackers associated with Russian military intelligence of infiltrating internet routers to obtain sensitive information.

The same group has also been accused of targeting air traffic control and of spreading disinformation ahead of last year’s general elections.

# Danish government talks deadlocked

Reuters  
Copenhagen

Talks on forming a new Danish government are in stalemate one month on from the country’s parliamentary election, slowing decision-making amid efforts to resolve a crisis in ties with US President Donald Trump’s administration over Greenland.

Caretaker Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, armed with a royal mandate, is leading coalition talks among the 12 parties in parliament but has so far only won support from left-wing groups, which is not enough to secure a parliamentary majority.

Frederiksen’s centrist coalition lost its majority in the March 24 election as voters revolted over a cost-of-living crisis, although her Social Democratic Party remains the biggest group in parliament with 38 out of 179 seats.

“There is no end date to the negotiations (on a new government), this must take the time that it takes,” Frederiksen told reporters late on Thursday during an EU summit in Cyprus.

The centrist Moderates Party and the right-wing Liberal Party, both members of Frederiksen’s outgoing coalition, have so far rejected the idea of relying on far-left parties to secure a majority.

While Frederiksen’s government stays until a new cabinet

is appointed, it has limited decision-making powers at a time when it must also handle pressure from Trump to take over Greenland, which is part of the kingdom of Denmark. Denmark, Greenland and the US launched diplomatic talks to resolve the crisis in January but the conflict flared again earlier this month when Trump in a social media post called the island he covets a “BIG, POORLY RUN, PIECE OF ICE”, drawing a rebuke from Greenland’s prime minister.

Commenting on the coalition efforts, Moderates Party leader Lars Lokke Rasmussen told TV2 on Thursday that a deal remained “far away”, while Conservative Party leader Mona Juul said Frederiksen should no longer be leading the negotiations.

“With the results we have seen from the current royal investigator, I believe that the ballot should be passed on,” Juul told TV2 yesterday, referring to Frederiksen’s formal role of leading the talks. While talks are mostly taking place behind closed doors, it seems likely that Frederiksen will have to abandon her campaign pledge to levy a wealth tax on Denmark’s richest citizens.

“There’s not a majority for the economic policy that (Frederiksen) wanted,” said Andreas Thyrring, a partner at Ulveman & Borsting, a public affairs advisory firm.

# Spain is ‘reliable’ Nato member, PM says

AFP  
Nicosia

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez yesterday stressed Spain was a “reliable member” of Nato, after a report the US was considering trying to suspend it over its refusal to support military operations against Iran.

The Reuters news agency cited an anonymous US official as telling it that the Pentagon had outlined the suspension option in an e-mail looking at ways to punish Nato allies that steered clear of the US-Israeli war against Iran.

“Spain is a reliable member within Nato” which is fulfilling all its obligations, Sanchez told reporters in English during a visit to Cyprus for an EU summit.

“As a result, I am absolutely not worried,” he said.

The Socialist leader added in Spanish: “We don’t work on the basis of e-mails, we work off official documents and the position that the US government has set out in this case.”

There is no provision in the Nato treaty allowing for the suspension or expulsion of a member of the world’s most powerful military alliance.

Responding to a question about the Reuters report, Pen-



Spain’s Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez attends a summit of the European Union and regional partners’ leaders in Nicosia, Cyprus, yesterday. (Reuters)

tagon Press Secretary Kingsley Wilson said the Defence Department “will ensure that the president has credible options to ensure that our allies are no longer a paper tiger and instead do their part,” but did not provide further details.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly railed against Nato allies for refusing to join the war that engulfed the Middle East, saying he viewed it as a betrayal.

Some of them – France, Spain and Italy – did not allow US military aircraft deployed for the war to overfly their territories or to use bases.

Trump also tried, in vain, to get European Nato members to send warships to the Strait of Hormuz, the key waterway for Gulf energy exports, which Iran has effectively closed with military threats and attacks.

Washington’s expectation that Nato members’ facilities and territories should be available to the US without question has added to strains within the alliance.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni told reporters in Cyprus that “Nato must remain united. I believe it is a source of strength.”

Sanchez said his government’s stance was “absolute co-operation with allies, but always within the bounds of international law”.

Sanchez has repeatedly found himself in Trump’s crosshairs since the Republican president returned to office in January 2025.

Last year, he refused to agree to ramp up Nato defence spending to five % of GDP as demanded by Trump, who then suggested expelling Spain from the alliance.

Sanchez condemned the US military intervention in Venezuela on January 3 that captured the South American country’s strongman socialist president Nicolas Maduro and is a virulent critic of Washington’s ally Israel.

Nato is to hold its next summit in Türkiye on July 7-8.

# Nato ‘must remain united’, says Meloni

AFP  
Nicosia

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni yesterday urged Nato allies to stick together, after a report that the US was mulling action against Spain over its refusal to support operations against Iran.

“Nato must remain united. I believe it is a source of strength,” Meloni told reporters as she attended an EU summit in Nicosia, Cyprus.

The Reuters news agency cited an anonymous US official saying the Pentagon had outlined potential measures to punish allies over their response to the Iran war, including suspending Spain from the alliance.

There is no provision in the Nato treaty allowing for the suspension or expulsion of one of the alliance’s members.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly railed against Nato allies for refusing to help out more with the Iran war, saying he viewed it as a betrayal.

Some of them – France, Spain and Italy – did not allow US military aircraft deployed for the war to overfly their territories or to use bases.



Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni on the day of a summit of the European Union and regional partners’ leaders in Nicosia, yesterday. (Reuters)

Britain initially also refused, but later allowed US flights from its bases for “defensive” missions in the conflict.

Trump also tried, in vain, to get European Nato members to send warships to the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran has effectively closed with military threats and attacks.

Meanwhile, as Trump deepens questions over whether Washington would help defend

Nato allies, the EU is set to lay out a “blueprint” for how its own mutual assistance clause works if a country is attacked.

Meloni insisted that Nato would remain central to Europe’s defence, but that European nations needed to play a bigger role in their own security.

“We must work to strengthen Nato’s European pillar which must clearly complement the American one,” she added.

# France, Germany still developing European fighter jet, says Macron

AFP  
Nicosia

French President Emmanuel Macron denied yesterday that a troubled fighter jet programme with Germany was dead, telling reporters Paris and Berlin were still working on that and other defence projects.

The multi-billion-euro project has faltered as disagreements persist between the firms involved – France’s Dassault Aviation and Airbus, which represents Germany and Spain.

Speaking ahead of a EU summit in Cyprus, Macron said that after morning talks with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, the pair had instructed their respective defence ministries to carry on work on a range of issues, including the fighter jet.

“No, not at all,” Macron replied, asked by a journalist whether the European FCAS warplane programme was dead in the water.

“We had a good discussion this morning with the Chancellor and we have instructed our defence ministries to work on a number of areas, covering various topics – not just the fighter jet,” Macron said.



France’s President Emmanuel Macron attends a summit of the European Union and regional partners’ leaders in Nicosia, yesterday. (Reuters)

“We are continuing to move forward. Europe has never needed unity, greater independence and greater sovereignty more than it does now,” he added.

The Future Combat Air System (FCAS) programme was launched in 2017 to replace France’s Rafale jets and the Eurofighter planes used by Germany and Spain.

It is often seen as a bellwether of defence and security co-operation between France and Germany as the two EU powerhouses seek to put up a united front in the face of a hostile Russia and wavering US security commitment.

Mediators tasked with salvaging the struggling initiative requested ten more days to deliver their conclusions, the French government said this week after reports suggesting the effort had failed to bear fruit.

A German government spokeswoman confirmed Macron and Merz discussed the fighter jet programme yesterday morning and instructed defence ministers to continue work “on various aspects of co-operation and to agree on the next steps”.

“This work will be completed in the coming weeks,” she said.

# Norway to ban social media for under-16s

AFP  
Oslo

Norway said yesterday it will present a bill this year making it the latest country seeking to ban social networks for under 16s, adding that technology companies will be responsible for verifying the age of its users.

“We are introducing this legislation because we want a childhood where children get to be children. Play, friendships, and everyday life must not be taken over by algorithms and screens,” Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store said in a statement.

“This is an important measure to safeguard children’s digital lives,” he added.

Several European countries, such as France, Spain, and Denmark have already said they will introduce a digital age of majority for social networks and others like Australia and Türkiye have already done so.

The European Commission has also made clear its determination to take action to protect children and adolescents, notably by unveiling in mid-April an age-verification app that will soon be made available to European citizens.

“I expect technology companies to ensure that the age limit is respected. Children cannot be left with the responsibility for staying away from platforms they are not allowed to use,” added Norwegian Minister of Digitalisation and Public Governance Karianne Tung.

“That responsibility rests with the companies providing these services. They must implement effective age verification and comply with the law from day one”.

The government said the number of children with phones or using social media had declined due to a host of measures it had already taken, including “national screen-time guidelines and recommendations for mobile-free schools”.

# France charges 88 over crypto kidnappings

AFP  
Paris

French prosecutors said yesterday they had charged 88 people over a spate of kidnappings related to cryptocurrency, including more than 10 minors.

The charges related to 12 cases of kidnapping for crypto extortion, chief organised crime prosecutor Vanessa Perree said in a statement, without giving a time period.

French authorities have been

dealing with a string of kidnappings and extortion attempts targeting the families of wealthy individuals dealing in cryptocurrencies.

Victims are kidnapped and held for hours or days, sometimes under threat of violence, with demands made for ransoms paid in cryptocurrency.

Two men kidnapped in separate incidents in January and May 2025 had fingers cut off by the captors, who demanded vast sums for their release.

Six people, including a minor, were arrested in February this

year over the kidnapping of a magistrate and her mother in another crypto ransom plot.

The woman’s partner had a leading position at a cryptocurrency startup.

Authorities are dealing with a “significant volume of suspects”, Perree said yesterday, saying that “more than 135 cases of this kind have been recorded since 2023”.

She said that prosecutors had “identified people involved repeatedly in multiple cases, revealing the existence of structured networks” behind the crimes.



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## Iran economy looks set to withstand naval blockade

A US naval blockade of Iranian ports is likely to squeeze Iran's oil output in the coming weeks but claims it will throw the Islamic republic into economic free fall remain premature, analysts say. After weeks of bombing and counter-strikes, focus has shifted to the standoff in the Strait of Hormuz, which ordinarily carries around a fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas.

In response to Iran's blockade of the strait since the start of the Middle East war, the US imposed a counter-blockade of the Islamic republic's ports, a push to force its leaders into a compromise in peace talks.

That bid, however, looks set to fail, at least in the short term. "If the blockade lasts for more than two or three months, it can cause more damage" to Iran, economic analyst and professor at Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran Saeed Laylaz told AFP. "If Iran suffers any damage, the damage to the countries in the southern Persian Gulf will definitely be greater," he added. There's a limit on how long Iran can bide its time, however.

Arne Lohmann Rasmussen, chief analyst at Global Risk Management said Iran "was expected to run out of storage capacity within approximately one month, but it may already be forced to shut in part of its oil production within a couple of weeks".

Trump said Tuesday that Iran was "collapsing financially" under the blockade imposed by the US Navy on April 12, claiming that the country was "starving for cash". Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said the blockade meant storage at Iran's Kharg Island, the main export terminal through which most of the country's crude is shipped, "will be full and the fragile Iranian oil wells will be shut in". Jamie Ingram,

**"Iran's leadership has previously shown a high threshold for pain even if the pressure on ordinary Iranians increases"**

managing editor of Middle East Economic Survey (MEES), told AFP it was likely the timeline for Iran to hit its oil storage limits would be measured in "weeks rather than days".

He added it was likely that "Iran will slightly reduce production before getting to the stage where storage constraints start to bite". According to analysis by oil expert Homayoun Falakshahi shared by energy intelligence firm Kpler, Iran's crude production has already slowed since the start of the war.

Output fell by around 200,000 barrels per day in March to 3.68mn bpd and is expected to drop a further 420,000 bpd in April to about 3.43mn bpd, reflecting "the broader impact of export disruptions and refining constraints linked to the ongoing conflict," Falakshahi said.

But Laylaz in Tehran said beyond the psychological effect of the blockade, the "real material effect has been small so far".

Ingram said Kharg Island "shouldn't be a particular bottleneck," for Iran. "This is the final storage facility used before oil is exported and Iran can divert crude oil to other facilities rather than straight to Kharg," he said.

The MEES expert also said Iran's dependency on oil exports via Hormuz had "deepened due to the damage caused by US and Israeli strikes to other sections of the Iranian economy".

"But Iran has also proven its ability to withstand huge oil-revenue declines during previous rounds of sanctions. I would not underestimate the regime's resilience in this regard," he added.

As the initial two-week truce between Iran and the US was set to expire Trump had said Tuesday he would maintain the ceasefire to allow more time for peace talks. Iran said it welcomed the efforts by mediator Pakistan but made no other comment on Trump's announcement, while vowing not to reopen Hormuz so long as the US blockade remains in place.

Ali Vaez, Iran project director at the International Crisis Group, said "Iran's economy was battered before the war, is contending with added strains caused during it, and now faces the combination of sanctions, seizures and potential strikes".

"Iran's leadership has previously shown a high threshold for pain even if the pressure on ordinary Iranians increases. It also likely calculates that its own efforts to subdue traffic through Hormuz act as a sort of mutually assured disruption," he added. — AFP

## Fishing in troubled waters



Iranian men fish at Suru Beach in Bandar Abbas along the Strait of Hormuz. (AFP)

## Qatar's efforts to boost biodiversity, combat climate change in spotlight

**As countries celebrated Earth Day earlier this week, Qatar's Ministry of Environment and Climate Change showcased various green initiatives that serve the goals of this major event – ensuring a healthy and safe environment and a more stable world**

**QNA**  
Doha

**Q**atar along with many countries celebrated Earth Day earlier this week to raise awareness to preserve the environment and reduce pollution, while highlighting the challenges facing the planet, and emphasizing the importance of preserving the Earth to ensure a healthy and safe environment and a more stable world.

This year's celebration was held under the theme 'Our Power, Our Planet', the same theme as last year. The event, which involves more than 1bn people around the world, focuses on accelerating the transition to renewable energy sources, combating various forms of pollution, and promoting environmental protection efforts.

This year's Earth Day came amidst unprecedented and accelerating climate change, with 2025 on track to be one of the hottest years on record. This makes Earth Day a renewed global call to action, urging individual and community efforts to protect the environment. As ecosystems face increasing degradation, with oceans filled with plastic waste, rising acidity and salinity levels, and escalating heat waves, fires, and floods, the urgent need to restore ecological balance is paramount. The health of ecosystems is fundamental to the sustainability of life and human well-being on Earth.

In his remarks to Qatar News Agency (QNA), Director of the Wildlife Development Department at the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC) Khalid Jumaa Bojamhoor al-Mohannadi said that the department is implementing various initiatives as part of the MoECC's programs to serve the goals of the Earth Day. These initiatives include protecting species and their habitats, restoring ecosystems, and raising environmental awareness. He added that these efforts encompass protecting endangered wildlife species, implementing breeding and rehabilitation programs, and working to restore coastal ecosystems, particularly mangroves.

**Annual opportunity**

The department also conducts campaigns to clean up natural areas and continues its project to reduce and control invasive species, such as the common myna. He pointed out that the department's role is not limited to field work, but extends to documenting biodiversity through the national database, in parallel with initiatives such as planting 10mn trees by 2030, which contributes to enhancing biodiversity and implementing nature-based solutions.

Al-Mohannadi emphasised that Earth Day is not just an occasion for celebration, but an annual opportunity to review the efforts made in Qatar on land, sea and coasts and to expand participation with various segments of society, the private sector, universities and scientific research institutions.

Regarding the department's efforts over the past years and its role in raising community awareness, the Director of the Wildlife

**April 22**  
"Earth Day"

**1+**  
Billion  
People involved  
around the world

**10**  
million trees  
Scheduled to be  
planted by 2030



**Khalid Jumaa Bojamhoor Al Mohannadi**  
Director of the Wildlife Development Department at the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MOECC)

**Special remarks to Qatar News Agency (QNA)**

The occasion provides an opportunity to review the efforts made in the State of Qatar across land, sea, and coastal areas, and to expand participation among various segments of society

The involvement of schools, universities, and other entities in sustainability and biodiversity initiatives

The Qatari Desert Rehabilitation Project is a large-scale national program aimed at addressing the deterioration of desert environments

Initiatives include national afforestation programs aimed at increasing vegetation cover, improving air quality, and enhancing ecosystems' ability to absorb carbon emissions



**This year's celebration is held under the theme "Our Power, Our Planet,"**

Development Department at the MoECC indicated that work has focused on providing awareness programs that are more accessible and relevant to the public. This has been demonstrated through campaigns to clean up natural areas and wildlife habitats, sea turtle conservation seasons, and the dissemination of awareness messages clarifying regulations for hunting, transporting, and selling wildlife. He also noted the involvement of schools, universities, and various other entities in sustainability and biodiversity initiatives.

He highlighted that these efforts have contributed to making environmental information clearer and more accessible, serving researchers and decision-makers and raising public awareness of the importance of species and habitats in the country. He added that the results have been reflected in tangible indicators, particularly the progress in combating invasive species. The national project to control and contain the Myna bird resulted in the capture of 52,067 birds during the past period, leading to a significant decrease in their numbers in the targeted areas.

He pointed out that the department continues to implement programs to protect species and habitats of high environmental value, such as sea turtles, dugongs, whale sharks and mangrove trees, as part of integrated efforts that include monitoring, protection, rehabilitation and propagation, in partnership with the relevant authorities.

He pointed out that the Wildlife Development Department at the MoECC is implementing a package of integrated projects and programs in the fields of propagation and rehabilitation, which represent a fundamental pillar within the state's efforts to preserve ecosystems and ensure the sustainability of its natural resources. He noted the national project for fencing and rehabilitating the grasslands, which focuses on protecting them from human encroachments, such as overgrazing and vehicle entry, in addition to carrying out cleaning work and replanting them with local plant species, which contributes to restoring vegetation cover and improving the natural habitats of wildlife.

**Afforestation initiatives**

The Qatari Desert Rehabilitation Project is a large-scale national program aimed at addressing the deterioration of desert

environments, through the replanting of local plants, improving soil properties, and restoring the ecological balance of areas affected by human activities. This project is integrated with the plant propagation programs implemented by the administration through nurseries and seed banks, where local species such as acacia, jujube, ghafl, and mangrove are produced and propagated, ensuring a sustainable source of seedlings used in rehabilitation projects and preserving the genetic diversity of local plants.

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change highlighted ongoing efforts to expand green spaces, protect wildlife, and strengthen biodiversity conservation as part of wider sustainability goals.

Al-Mohannadi said initiatives include national afforestation programs aimed at increasing vegetation cover, improving air quality, and enhancing ecosystems' ability to absorb carbon emissions. He also highlighted wildlife breeding and reintroduction programs, particularly for endangered species such as sea turtles, where nesting sites are protected and hatchlings are released into their natural habitats.

In addition, conservation efforts include managing invasive species that threaten ecological balance, alongside the development of national biodiversity databases to support environmental planning and decision-making. Al-Mohannadi said these initiatives are aligned with broader climate and environmental objectives, including ecosystem restoration and biodiversity protection, marking Earth Day as a reminder of the importance of environmental sustainability.

He stressed that combating invasive species requires coordinated action, early monitoring, public awareness, and data-driven interventions involving both government and society.

He further noted improvements in biodiversity management through expanded field programs and enhanced monitoring systems, including marine species protection and habitat restoration projects.

Al-Mohannadi urged the public to take part in environmental protection efforts, emphasizing that safeguarding nature is a shared responsibility that contributes to Qatar's environmental identity and long-term sustainability goals.

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## EAA project to support over 103,500 direct beneficiaries in Sudan

From Page 1

The delivery model of the project is practical and field-based by supporting young people through access to diverse seeds, livestock inputs, and improved agricultural practices, while also helping rehabilitate critical irrigation systems that are essential for restoring production in affected areas.

A key feature of the initiative is the use of Farmers Field Schools which provide community-based learning and skills development to strengthen agricultural knowledge, productivity, and sustainability. Through this combination of input support, technical assistance, and infrastructure rehabilitation, the project aims not only to create jobs, but also to improve the quality and viability of agricultural livelihoods.

Beyond youth employment, the project has a wider humanitarian and development impact. Al-Thani noted: "This broader impact comes from the project's role in restoring agricultural production, improving local food availability, and helping stabilise communities affected by displacement and crisis. By increasing productivity and strengthening livelihoods, the initiative contributes not only to household survival but also to wider community recovery." An important dimension of the project is its contribution to food security, social cohesion and resilience. It aims to strengthen the resilience of both displaced and host communities by improving their ability to sustain agricultural activity, restore productive assets, and rebuild a degree of economic stability. In doing so, it supports conditions that can contribute to greater peace, stability, and recovery at the local level.

The initiative also has a strong community development dimension. By investing in farmers, agricultural production, infrastructure rehabilitation, and practical capacity-building, it supports a more durable foundation for self-reliance. Through its integrated design, the initiative helps communities move beyond short-term coping toward stronger local production systems and better economic prospects for youth and vulnerable households alike.

"The Sudan project reflects EAA Foundation's broader commitment, to creating meaningful opportunities for young people in crisis-affected settings," added al-Thani. "It demonstrates how targeted support to agriculture and livelihoods can serve as a powerful platform for youth employment, food security, and resilience-building in one of the world's most challenging humanitarian contexts."

## Volume-based tax on sugary drinks aimed at improving public health

From Page 1

Dr Zuhair al-Arabi, Nutritional Therapy Consultant, noted that the impact of the policy extends beyond consumers to manufacturers, who will now face a new phase requiring greater responsibility, flexibility, and innovation. He explained that the market is likely to undergo a period of rebalancing, as companies adapt to evolving regulations while maintaining competitiveness.

He pointed out that linking taxation to actual sugar content presents companies with a clear choice: reduce sugar levels or face higher tax burdens, which may ultimately affect retail prices. He pointed out that similar policies in other countries have proven effective, prompting gradual and thoughtful product reformulation.

He further stressed that the measure reinforces the concept of preventive nutrition, which

focuses on reducing risk factors before disease develops rather than relying solely on treatment afterward. He said such policies would help create a healthier food environment that supports individuals in making better choices without feeling deprived, which is an essential pillar in combating chronic diseases and achieving long-term public health sustainability.

Christina Lotfi, a clinical nutritionist, noted the role of the policy in elevating public awareness about nutrition, stressing that its impact will be immediate and cumulative over time. "When consumers notice a clear price difference between products based on sugar content, it encourages them to ask questions, seek information, and read nutrition labels more carefully. This behaviour alone represents a crucial step toward building a healthier food culture," she explained.

She added that lasting dietary change requires consistent mo-

tionation, and the new tax structure provides exactly that. With healthier alternatives becoming more accessible and competitively priced, individuals will find it easier to make better decisions for their well-being.

Dr Omar Habib, General Practitioner Physician, described the policy as a sophisticated preventive health strategy that addresses the root causes of disease rather than merely treating outcomes. He noted that in daily medical practice, there is a growing link between conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and metabolic disorders and the excessive consumption of sugary beverages.

"What distinguishes this policy is the direct link it creates between consumption behaviour and financial cost. This is one of the most effective tools for driving real and sustainable change, as it encourages individuals to rethink their dietary choices," he said.

## Second round of US-Iran peace talks in the works

From Page 1

The Iranian parliament's media office denied a report that Qalibaf had resigned as head of Iran's negotiating team, and added that there was no new round of talks scheduled yet.

Pakistani sources said earlier that a US logistics and security team already was in place in Islamabad for potential talks.

The last round of peace talks had been expected to resume on Tuesday but never took place, with Iran saying it was not yet ready to commit to attending and a US delegation led by Vance never leaving Washington. Trump unilaterally extended a two-week ceasefire on Tuesday at the 11th hour to allow more time to reconvene the negotiations.

# Putin's approval rating falls to lowest since before Ukraine war

Reuters  
Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin's approval rating has fallen for a seventh week in a row to 65.6%, its lowest level since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, according to state pollster VTsIOM.

Russia's paramount leader, who was appointed acting president by Boris Yeltsin just eight years after the fall of the Soviet Union, has ruled the country since 1999 either as president or prime minister.

A former KGB lieutenant colonel who watched the Soviet Union collapse while based in East Germany, Putin will overtake Josef Stalin and become Russia's longest-serving ruler since Empress Catherine the Great if he completes his current six-year term.

But his ratings, though still high by Western standards, have taken a hit in recent weeks. Putin's approval rating is down from 73.3% in March, while trust in him has slipped over the same period to



Russian President Vladimir Putin, accompanied by Speaker of State Duma lower house of parliament Vyacheslav Volodin and head of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia Leonid Slutsky, visits an exhibition dedicated to the life and career of politician and LDPR long-time leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who died in April 2022, in Moscow, yesterday. (Reuters)

71% from above 77%, according to VTsIOM. It was not immediately clear why Putin's rating, though still very high, was falling. Last week he ordered his top officials to come up with ways to kick-start the economy after a contraction in the first two months of the year. A crackdown on the mobile Internet,

messengers and VPNs has caused frustration for many Russians in the past few months. Putin said on Thursday that the Internet outages were necessary for security reasons, but that law enforcement officials must show "ingenuity" to find solutions and guarantee the functioning of vital services.

Amid war and state censorship, the question of what Russians truly think is the subject of considerable debate. Putin's supporters point to polls showing widespread approval of his rule but opponents question how truthful people are when speaking to pollsters in such a controlled environment.

His approval rating jumped after the invasion of Ukraine, rising to just below 80% from 64.3%, and has stayed well over 75% for most of the war, albeit with brief dips after mobilisation to the army was announced in 2022, according to VTsIOM.

Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin's trust rating fell to 53.8%, former president Dmitry Medvedev's rose to 36.8%, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov's rating rose to 32.7% and just Russia leader Sergei Mironov's rating rose to 29.8%. Ahead of a parliamentary election due by late September, there have been a number of unusually public warnings by some bloggers and politicians that there must be change in Russia to avoid the risk of unrest.

## Russia, Ukraine swap PoWs



Ukrainian prisoners of war (PoWs) pose for a picture after a swap, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, at an unknown location in Ukraine yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters/AFP  
Kyiv/Moscow

Ukraine and Russia conducted a prisoner of war swap yesterday, sending back 193 captured personnel each in an exchange both sides said was facilitated by the United States and the United Arab Emirates.

"It is important that there are exchanges and that our people are returning home," said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in a post on Telegram.

His chief of staff, Kyrylo Budanov, and Russia's defence ministry said the US and the UAE had assisted with the exchange. Russia and Ukraine have conducted many prisoner swaps over four years of war, exchanging thousands of captives in total.

Zelensky said some of the returned captives, who included soldiers, border guards and police, had injuries, while others had faced criminal charges in Russia.

In Ukraine, returning captives streamed off buses, many draped in their country's flag and overwhelmed with emotion.

"It still hasn't sunk in that I'm home, I was in captivity for three years... our Ukrainian sky, our trees - this is happiness," said Serhiy, a soldier, who gave only his first name.

"193 Ukrainian warriors are returning home as part of a prisoner exchange," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on social media.

"We remember each and every one and continue working

every day to bring our people home from Russian captivity," he added.

AFP journalists at the scene of the swap in northern Ukraine saw dozens of exchanged Ukrainians pour off busses looking pale but relieved after long stints in Russian detention.

They wrapped themselves in blue and yellow flags, embraced each other, or cried on the phone to loved ones.

A representative of Kyiv's Co-ordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War told AFP that most of the released military personnel had been held in the southern Russian republic of Chechnya, and that many months of negotiations were needed to secure their release.

The official, Petro Yatsenko, said that two of the exchanged Ukrainian prisoners were celebrating their birthday yesterday.

The youngest in the group of freed Ukrainians was 24 and the eldest was 60.

The Russian defence ministry also confirmed the swap had taken place, adding that its troops were undergoing medical checks in Belarus, a Moscow-allied country bordering Ukraine.

"The United Arab Emirates and the US provided humanitarian mediation efforts to facilitate the return of the Russian servicemen from captivity," Russia said.

US-led talks aimed at ending the four-year conflict were already stalled before the war in the Middle East effectively put them on ice.

## Echoing Diana, Prince Harry visits Ukraine's deminers

AFP  
Kyiv

Britain's Prince Harry yesterday visited deminers from the HALO (Hazardous Area Life-support Organisation) Trust charity - made famous by his mother, Princess Diana - near the Ukrainian town of Bucha, where he tested how drones and AI-powered robots are transforming mine-clearance work.

Russian troops occupied the Kyiv suburb for a month after they invaded in February 2022, killing hundreds of civilians in a massacre that was met with outrage and a hardening of support for Kyiv.

When Moscow's forces withdrew they left large areas around the town contaminated with unexploded missiles, bombs and grenades.

HALO said most of the land there is now safe after four years of work clearing the area.

"It's amazing to see how tech-



Britain's Prince Harry, the Duke of Sussex, controls an AI-powered unmanned ground vehicle as he visits members of the HALO Trust, a non-commercial charity organisation for demining, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, yesterday. (Reuters)

nology is transforming the work of the HALO Trust - making demining smarter, faster and safer," Harry said.

Wearing a virtual reality headset, Harry piloted an AI-powered drone designed to detect and map

explosives, and later operated a robot used to retrieve them.

The prince hailed his mother's work to raise awareness of mine-clearing efforts in Africa some three decades ago.

"When my mum visited An-

gola nearly 30 years ago, deminers were doing their work on their knees to find hidden explosives," he said.

Diana had in 1997 visited HALO Trust sites in Angola, where she was famously walked through a minefield wearing body armour.

"Now they also use drones, artificial intelligence and robots for greater accuracy and protection," Harry said, highlighting the role now played by technology in mind-clearing efforts.

The Ukrainian government estimates that 23% of its total territory - around 137,000 square kilometres, an area larger than Greece - is contaminated by land mines and other unexploded ordnance.

Harry arrived in Kyiv for a surprise visit Thursday.

In a speech at a security forum he urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to halt the invasion and called on Washington to step up its efforts to secure an end to the war.

## Merz says no 'immediate' Ukraine EU membership

AFP  
Nicosia

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said yesterday there was no prospect of Ukraine's "immediate accession" to the EU, but suggested Kyiv could join meetings of the bloc's members without voting rights.

Ukraine is pushing to speed up its bid to join the 27-nation European Union as it fights Russia's invasion on the battlefield.

Kyiv's progress has been blocked by Hungary's nationalist premier Viktor Orban, but his defeat in elections earlier this month raised hopes it can move to the next step.

EU leaders broadly back moving Ukraine forward by opening the first of the so-called negotiating "clusters".

But there is little appetite to fast-track Kyiv to full membership - causing some to pitch possible interim benefits in the meantime.

"It is clear to everyone that an immediate accession of Ukraine to the EU is, of course, not possible," Merz said after an EU summit in Cyprus that Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky attended.

"I also want to enable closer integration into the European institutions, for example through participation in European councils without voting rights," Merz added.

Just ahead of the gathering in Cyprus, Zelensky appeared to pour cold water on any plans to grant Kyiv some form of lesser status instead of full membership.

He insisted that Kyiv "does not need symbolic EU membership".

"We are defending common European values. I believe that we deserve full-fledged EU membership," Zelensky told journalists.

Ukraine is desperate to keep up momentum towards joining the bloc and fears that any suggested interim solutions will see it stranded in a halfway house.

Kyiv sees membership of the bloc as vital to its future recovery and security, as the US has essentially closed the door on it joining Nato.

EU diplomats say Orban's outspoken opposition to Ukraine's membership meant that other leaders also reluctant to admit the country could hide behind him.

Now that he is on his way out, diplomats say others could come out of the shadows to hold up Ukraine's push.

Beyond Ukraine, there are eight other countries that are formally candidates to join the EU. Montenegro and Albania, among those seen as closest to membership, have been applying for over a decade.

European Council chief Antonio Costa, who chairs EU summits, said that the strides Kyiv had made on reforms even during wartime were "very impressive".

But he called the painstaking negotiations towards membership "a long process, a very hard one."

## Moldova parliament votes to end energy state of emergency

Reuters  
Chisinau

Moldova's parliament voted to lift the country's energy state of emergency from today, which had been imposed after Russian attacks in neighbouring Ukraine knocked out a power line providing most of Moldova's needs.

Moldovan officials have said that Russian attacks in March put out of action the Isaccea-Vulcanesti line, which carries power from Romania to Moldova, passing through 40km (25 miles) of Ukrainian territory. The line provides up to 70% of Moldova's electricity needs.

Deputies approved the lifting of the emergency measure, with 69 votes in favour in the 101-member chamber.

"The declaration of a state of emergency was not a whim. It was a carefully considered decision taken at a crucial, critical moment," Prime Minister Alexandru Munteanu said.

He added that at the time, Moldova faced two serious risks - pressure on the electricity grid and disruptions in the fuel market.

Thanks to the measure, the government managed to avert a fuel shortage, he said.

Opposition parties, however, had earlier questioned its merits.

## Hot, windy weather forecast for today



Partially cloudy and windy weather was observed at times across the country yesterday with moderate temperatures during the day. The weatherman has forecast relatively hot day for today with chances of strong winds at certain areas. **PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam

## Baladna signs \$635mn deal



Baladna has signed over \$635mn in second-phase contracts and launched a 109-flight airlift to transport 30,000 high-yield Holstein dairy cows from nine US states to Algeria, marking a key milestone in its \$3.5bn integrated dairy project.

In a statement, Baladna said the initiative aims to build a herd of 270,000 cows, covering

up to 50% of Algeria's powdered milk demand, while creating more than 15,000 jobs locally and around 1,200 in the United States.

Spanning 117,000 hectares, the project stands among the world's largest integrated dairy developments, boosting food security, local production, and long-term agricultural co-operation. (QNA)

# Katara Tech Forum discusses role of AI in treatment of autism

The Katara Cultural Village organised a specialised session as part of the 29th edition of the Katara Tech Forum, titled "The Role of Artificial Intelligence and Technology in the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Autism Spectrum Disorder".

The event, organised to mark the World Autism Awareness Day, brought together a group of experts and practitioners from leading institutions, including Reenaz Specialised Center for Child Health, The Shafallah Center for Persons with Disabilities, Dakkaken Group, Metaverse Learning and MCARE360. Participants reviewed a range of innovative solutions and advanced technologies that support individuals with autism spectrum disorder and enhance their quality of life, in line with the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence and digital systems.

In his opening remarks, Dr Thamer al-Qadi, director of Information Systems Department at Katara and chairman of the forum, underlined the importance of addressing a topic that intersects humanitarian and health-care priorities. He said the fo-



cus on artificial intelligence (AI) and technology reflects growing awareness of their role in serving people, noting that technology is no longer merely supportive but has become a key partner in developing impactful solutions that enable individuals with autism to integrate more effectively into society. He added that the forum embodies Katara's commitment to its cultural and knowledge-based mission by providing a platform for dialogue, exchange of expertise and exploration of international best practices.

The forum featured several expert contributions addressing both clinical and technological dimensions. Dr Mohamed Tolefat, director of Therapeutic Services at the Shafallah Center, presented on the integration of technology into autism assessment and clinical



practice, highlighting how digital tools can improve diagnostic accuracy and efficiency. Aaliyah Abdul Kabeer from Reenaz Specialised Center discussed the role of artificial intelligence and digital tools in moving from early screening to ongoing support, emphasising data-driven approaches to diagnosis. Dr Nazem Abdelati also addressed the incorporation of innovation into clinical evaluation, while Umira Niaz explored how technological interventions can help bridge communication gaps for individuals with autism. Ahmed Zidan highlighted the importance of integrating medical and technological expertise to develop intelligent tools that enhance early diagnosis and intervention, ultimately supporting individuals with autism and their families.

Accordingly, the participants stressed that early intervention remains critical to improving rehabilitation outcomes, noting that while technology has advanced considerably, it does not replace the role of specialised clinicians but rather strengthens their capabilities. They explained that artificial intelligence can analyse behavioural and interactional

data to identify early indicators of autism and support the development of personalised intervention plans tailored to each child's needs. They also highlighted the role of smart applications and interactive robotics in developing communication and social skills in a safe and engaging way, particularly for children who find direct interaction challenging. Furthermore, artificial intelligence enables continuous monitoring of progress, allowing specialists to assess the effectiveness of treatment programmes and refine them accordingly, which contributes to improving service quality and accelerating rehabilitation.

The discussions concluded with an emphasis on the importance of integrating medical and technological expertise to build more effective and inclusive support systems. Participants noted that artificial intelligence offers precise and customised solutions that take into account individual differences, helping to detect autism early and design appropriate interventions. They agreed that such initiatives contribute to creating a more supportive environment for individuals with autism, reinforcing a broader vision.

## Falcons breeding spotted atop a building in Doha

**'Historically, this is the first instance of its kind recorded in such manner'**

Peregrine falcons breeding atop a building in the heart of Doha have been spotted by the Qatari Society of Al Gannas at a wildlife development in the country.

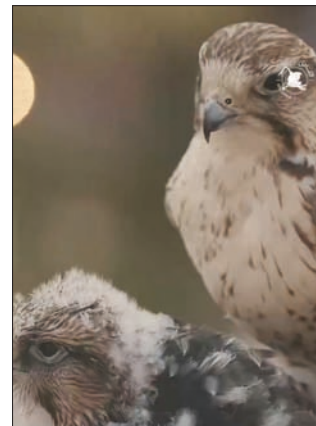
A team from the society has documented this rare and unprecedented case in Qatar, which is considered the first recorded instance of falcons exhibiting reproductive behaviour in an urban environment within the country.

According to Mohamed bin Abdullah al-Misnad, vice-chairman of the Qatari Society of Al Gannas, the observation represents a unique milestone in local wildlife documentation. He explained that the team successfully recorded the full breeding behaviour of the falcons in a densely built area, which is an occurrence that has not previously been documented in Qatar.

"This is a truly exceptional case, as for the first time in Qatar, we have been able to document a falcon's nest in Doha in a natural setting within the city. Historically, this is the first instance of its kind recorded in such manner," al-Misnad said.

Accordingly, experts noted that this rare event highlights the growing adaptability of birds of prey to urban environments. The ability of falcons to nest and reproduce on a high-rise structure suggests a shift in behavioural patterns, as wildlife increasingly interacts with modern city landscapes.

Specialists also view the incident as a promising indicator of biodiversity resilience, demonstrating that certain species can adjust to human-altered habitats. The case opens the door for further field research into raptor behaviour in urban settings, particularly in



rapidly developing cities like Doha.

This could also stress the ecological significance of urban spaces while reinforcing the importance of continued monitoring and conservation efforts, as Qatar's natural heritage finds new expressions within its modern skyline.

## Small moments, soft paws: cats reclaim the outdoors

By Joey Aguilar  
Doha

As Qatar's winter comes to an end, a quieter and more personal side of city life is becoming visible across Doha — one shaped not by tall buildings or busy streets, but by the gentle presence of community cats enjoying the outdoors.

"I see them every winter, but this time it feels different, like they're more relaxed and more present," said Nasser, a resident who walks around Msheireb Downtown Doha most evenings. "Maybe it's the weather. You can tell they're enjoying it as much as we are."

Cats in public spaces are nothing new in the city, but their increased presence in recent weeks shows something more: a growing acceptance of shared spaces between people and animals. Along the Doha Corniche, where the late afternoon sun casts a warm golden light over the water, a lone cat sits upright on the pavement, almost like a statue. Around it, families gather, joggers pass, and conversations continue. Yet, the cat remains still and calm, untouched by the movement around it.

This sense of calm can be seen across the city. From quiet neighbourhoods to busy urban areas, cats have become a familiar sight in Doha, especially during the softer sunlight and cooler evenings

at the end of the season. Whether they are walking around or simply resting, they bring small moments of stillness to a fast-moving city.

In residential areas, this shared space shows itself in simple, everyday ways. A cat stretches out comfortably on the hood of a parked car. It stays relaxed despite people walking by or cars passing. For that moment, the car becomes more than just a vehicle; it becomes a place to rest.

These scenes show how much these animals are part of the city. They are not just strays but "community cats," cared for by residents who feed them, provide water, and sometimes arrange vaccinations or neutering through small community efforts.

Animal welfare advocates say the change in season plays a big role



Residents bring food during walks, while others leave water in shaded areas. **PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam

in why cats are more visible now. Cats are sensitive to heat and usually hide during the long summer months. But winter and early spring give them a chance to move around more freely and comfortably.

In Msheireb Downtown Doha, known for its modern design, a ginger-and-white cat lies on a low concrete bench under soft lights. It occasionally looks at people passing by before settling back into a relaxed position. The scene feels calm and balanced, blending the city's design with everyday life.

For many residents, these moments offer more than just something nice to look at. They create a sense of calm and connection.

"There's something soothing about seeing them," said Prakash, a long-time Indian resident at Al Hilal. "In a fast-moving city like



**PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam

Doha, these cats remind you to slow down. They're just living in the moment."

Others have made caring for these cats part of their routine. Some bring small amounts of food during walks, while others leave water in shaded areas.

"It's become part of my routine," said James, a Filipino expatriate living in Al Hilal. "There are a few cats



A cat, named Gart, stretches out comfortably on the hood of a parked car. **PICTURE:** Joey Aguilar



**PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam

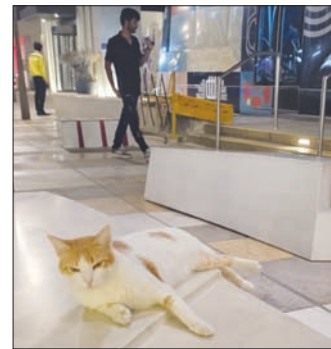
I see regularly. They even recognise me now, or at least, I like to think so."

These small acts of care have grown over time, showing a wider change in how people view these animals. Instead of being ignored, they are now seen as part of the city's daily life, something shared and cared for.

However, challenges remain. As summer approaches, animal welfare groups remind residents to prepare. The rising heat will make it harder for cats to stay outdoors, and access to shade and water will be essential.

"Enjoying their presence is wonderful," Aneeta, an Indian expatriate, said. "But it's also important to think ahead. Simple actions like leaving water or creating shade can make a big difference."

Meanwhile, a restaurant employee at Souq Waqif observes a cat as it stands up, stretches and slowly walks away from a local crepe vendor. But for a brief



In Msheireb Downtown Doha, a cat stretches out on a low concrete bench, resting quietly beneath the soft glow of evening lights. **PICTURE:** Joey Aguilar

moment, everything feels still, a shared space between people and animals, shaped by quiet and simple coexistence.

"It's a simple thing, but it makes the city feel more alive," the employee said.