



Travel connected with Call+

Enjoy unlimited calls with Call+ on Passport pack to anywhere in the world. Free with Vodafone Passport This Eid.



Activate exclusively via MyVodafone App T&Cs apply.



ORIX POLYDEX
Durable waterproofing-performance for roof protection
44601602/3

THE PERFECT GIFT?
THE ONE THEY CHOOSE

فاميله Family
عيدنا عيدي عيدنا عيدي
المبارك

Ready to GUAC AND ROLL?
Only on talabat

6THSTREET.COM
1200+ Top Fashion Brands
DELIVERY IN 90 MINUTES
SCAN TO SHOP

Amir hails peace efforts in call with Iranian president

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani held a phone call yesterday with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

They discussed the latest developments in the region as well as efforts aimed at de-escalation, safeguarding regional security, and promoting peace and stability.

His Highness the Amir reaffirmed Qatar's firm position in favour of political and diplomatic solutions and stressed the need for all parties to exercise the utmost responsibility and restraint to spare the region the consequences of further escalation. His Highness also expressed appreciation to the president for the Iranian government's engagement in dialogue and constructive efforts.

His Highness also emphasised the importance of peaceful solutions to contain tensions and safeguard regional security and stability, thanking Pezeshkian for his efforts in that regard and calling for continued posi-



tive engagement in the negotiations being facilitated by Pakistan as well as for broader dialogue, particularly with countries in the region.

The Iranian president praised His Highness the Amir's efforts to promote security and stability in the re-

gion, expressing his appreciation for His Highness's positions supporting de-escalation, and affirming his welcome and interest in His Highness's proposals on advancing an agreement that would promote regional and international stability. (QNA)

PM holds talks with regional counterparts on de-escalation

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jasim al-Thani held a series of phone calls yesterday with senior officials from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Egypt, focusing on the Pakistani mediation efforts between the United States and Iran.

The PM spoke with Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah al-Saud, Deputy Ruler of Abu Dhabi and UAE National Security Adviser Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Jordanian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Ayman Safadi,

and Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, International Co-operation and Expatriates Badr Abdelatty, who initiated his call.

The talks reviewed bilateral co-operation and ways to strengthen and enhance it, alongside the mediation efforts aimed at de-escalating tensions in a manner that reinforces regional security and stability.

The PM stressed the need for all parties to engage constructively in the ongoing mediation efforts to address the root causes of the crisis through dialogue and peaceful means, ultimately paving the way toward a sustainable agreement that prevents renewed escalation. (QNA)

Amir to perform Eid al-Adha prayer at Lusail Prayer Ground

The Amiri Diwan yesterday announced that His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani will perform the Eid al-Adha prayer along with citizens at Lusail prayer ground this morning. It wished that this blessed occasion be full of goodness and blessings for Qatar as well as the Arab and Islamic nations. The Amiri Diwan also announced that His Highness the Amir will receive well-wishers on the occasion at Lusail Palace this morning.

Immediately after the Eid prayer, His Highness the Amir will receive Their Excellencies Sheikhs, ministers, undersecretaries of ministries, the Speaker and members of the Shura Council, and citizens as well as leaders and senior officers of the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Interior, and the state security services, and Their Excellencies the Heads of Diplomatic Missions accredited to the State. (QNA)

Amir exchanges Eid greetings

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has exchanged cables of congratulation with his brothers, their Majesties, Excellencies, and Highnesses, the leaders of sisterly Arab and Islamic countries. His Highness the Amir also received cables of congratulations on this occasion from a number of leaders of friendly countries. His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani has exchanged cables of congratulation with his brothers, Their Highnesses and Excellencies crown princes and vice-presidents of sisterly Arab and Islamic countries, on the occasion of the blessed Eid al-Adha. His Highness the Deputy Amir also received cables of congratulation on this occasion from a number of leaders and vice-presidents of friendly countries. (QNA)

Pilgrims pray on Mount Arafat

AFP Mount Arafat

Massive throngs of Muslims prayed on Mount Arafat yesterday at the climax of the Haj pilgrimage, defying searing temperatures under the desert sun as they fulfilled a lifelong dream.

From daybreak, thousands of worshippers recited Qur'anic verses on the 70-metre rocky hill near Makkah, where the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) delivered his last sermon.

Volunteers handed out bottles of water, parasols and food packages to the tens of thousands of pilgrims as they made their way toward Mount Arafat, as helicopters buzzed overhead regularly.

"It is an indescribable feeling," said Ahmed Abu al-Ezz, a 35-year-old Egyptian engineer, as he approached Mount Arafat for the first time.

More than 1.5mn people have joined the Haj this year under the shadow of the Middle East war sparked by US-Israeli strikes on Iran. During the fighting, Tehran retaliated with waves of drone and ballistic missile strikes, hitting major infrastructure and energy installations across the Gulf, including in Saudi Arabia.

More than 30,000 Iranians have made the journey, about a third of



A pilgrim prays with others on Mount Arafat, also known as Jabal al-Rahma or Mount of Mercy, during the climax of the Haj yesterday. (AFP)

the 86,000 originally expected. Iran's IRNA state news agency said the "war-time situation" explained the drop.

Despite the war, Saudi officials said over the weekend that more pilgrims had travelled from abroad this year than in 2025.

The Haj, one of the five pillars of Islam, must be performed at least once by all Muslims with the means to do so.

With temperatures hitting 44 degrees in Makkah in recent days, Saudi authorities have urged pilgrims to drink plenty of water and protect

themselves from the sun during the mostly outdoor rituals, which can take five days or more to complete.

More than 50,000 healthcare staff and 3,000 ambulances were deployed to help pilgrims in need, the Saudi health ministry said.

After Mount Arafat, pilgrims spent the night in Muzdalifah, where they collect pebbles for the symbolic "stoning of the devil" ritual in Mina, starting today.

The Haj follows the path of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)'s final pilgrimage, about 1,400 years ago.

14 more maritime services automated

By A Staff Reporter Doha

The Ministry of Transport (MoT) has digitised a further 14 maritime transport services, now available electronically through its official website and split between large-vessel transactions and seafarers' affairs.

Ten of the new e-services relate to big vessels, covering ship sanitation, permanent and provisional registration, renewal of provisional registration, annual fees, extension certificate, exemption certificate, certificate of seaworthiness, the issuing of an NOL for announcing a navigational warning, and penalties record and payment.

The remaining four deal with seafarers' affairs, namely the issuance, renewal, amendment and replacement of the endorsement recognising a GMDSS operator certificate. GMDSS, the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System, is an international safety framework mandated by the IMO under the SOLAS convention. Beneficiaries can now apply for any of these services at any time and from anywhere, saving time and effort.

MoT Information Systems Department acting director Dr Ahmad Nasser al-Kuwari said automating the new package advances the ministry's wider push for digital transformation across all its services, with the aim of greater efficiency, simpler and more streamlined procedures, and a better user experience.

He said this was in keeping with a strategy to modernise the transport industry in step with technological advancement and innovation, and to deliver integrated government services that are simpler and more accessible round the clock.

Saudi uses drones to shield pilgrims from extreme heat



With temperatures hitting 45C in Makkah this week, Saudi health workers have increasingly relied on drones to supply a vast array of medical clinics treating heat-stressed pilgrims during the Haj. Technology is rapidly changing the experience for pilgrims and officials alike - with AI, UAVs and mobile apps providing crucial services, logistical support and helping manage the mammoth crowds. Rather than relying on

congested roads filled with over 1.5mn pilgrims, drones in particular have proven to be a technological remedy for helping keep the 127 clinics spread across Makkah, Mina and Arafat adequately provisioned. "The main goal is to provide fast service to the guests of God during the season," Fahd al-Bathi, the chief operating officer at the National Unified Procurement Company (NUPCO), told AFP. Preparations for the medical needs of the Haj season began nine months ago. Standing before a colour-coded map of medical centres dotting the area, the NUPCO operations officer Turki al-Obaidi said his teams work around the clock during the Haj. **To Page 11**

A festive flourish



A henna artist applies an intricate floral design to a woman's palm on the eve of Eid al-Adha yesterday, a cherished tradition that sees women across the region decorate their hands ahead of the festival. The fine handcraft, marked by delicate flowers and trailing patterns, is among the most enduring rituals of the celebrations, which begin today. **PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam

GULF TIMES wishes its readers Eid al-Adha greetings



We extend our heartiest greetings to

His Highness
Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani
Amir of the State of Qatar

His Highness
Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani
Father Amir

His Highness
Sheikh Abdullah Bin Hamad Al Thani
Deputy Amir

and to all the honorable people of Qatar
on the occasion of

EID AL ADHA

We hope for more returns of this memorable occasion and wish that Qatar always enjoys security, welfare and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Highness The Amir



Amir sends condolences to Saudi ruler

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani sent a cable of condolences to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, on the passing of HRH Prince Nawaf bin Naif bin Mamdouh bin Abdulaziz al-Saud.
His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani also sent similar cables of condolences to King Salman. - **QNA**

Amir congratulates Georgia's president

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has sent a cable of congratulations to Georgia's President Mikheil Kavelashvili on the occasion of his country's Independence Day.
His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani sent a cable of congratulations to Kavelashvili of Georgia on the occasion.
Meanwhile, HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent a cable of congratulations to Georgia's Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze. - **QNA**

Amir congratulates Guyana's president

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has sent a cable of congratulations to Guyana's President Dr Mohamed Irfaan Ali on the occasion of his country's Independence Day.
His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani also sent a cable of congratulations to Dr Ali on the occasion.
Meanwhile, HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent a cable of congratulations to Guyana's Prime Minister Mark Phillips. - **QNA**



Ambassador Ashraf Khodjaev delivering his speech during the presentation in Doha.



HE Dr Hamad bin Abdulaziz al-Kawari speaking at the event.



Snapshots from the event.



Uzbekistan's Islamic Civilisation Centre 'boosts cultural ties'

By **Joey Aguilar**
Doha

Newly inaugurated institution preserves the legacy of renowned scholars while strengthening cultural co-operation with Qatar and the wider Islamic world

Uzbekistan's newly inaugurated Islamic Civilisation Centre reflects the country's efforts to preserve the legacy of renowned Muslim scholars while strengthening cultural co-operation with Qatar and the wider Islamic world, ambassador Ashraf Khodjaev has said.

Speaking at a presentation in Doha dedicated to the Islamic Civilisation Centre, the envoy described the institution as a major national project initiated by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2017 and inaugurated recently.

The event was attended by a number of dignitaries, including HE the Minister of State and Qatar National Library (QNL) President

Dr Hamad bin Abdulaziz al-Kawari, HE the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) Secretary-General and Qatar Committee for the Alliance of Civilisations Chairman Dr Ahmad Hassan al-Hammadi, MoFA Protocol Department director Ibrahim Yousif Fakhro, HE the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and chairman of the Board of Directors for the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue Dr Ibrahim bin Saleh al-Nuaimi, and Katara Cultural Village general manager Prof Dr Khalid Ibrahim al-Sulaiti, in addition several ambassadors and diplomats.

Khodjaev said the centre holds special significance not only for Uzbekistan but also for the broader Islamic world, highlighting the country's rich intellectual and spiritual heritage rooted in the historic cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva.

He noted that the region produced some of the Islamic world's most influential scholars and scientists, including Imam al-Bukhari, Imam al-Maturidi, al-Khwarizmi, al-Beruni and Mirzo Ulugbek, whose contributions shaped the development of mathematics, astronomy, medicine and philosophy.

"The Islamic Civilisation Centre was created to preserve and present this extraordinary legacy in a modern and meaningful way, particularly for younger generations," Khodjaev said.

He described the centre as more than a museum, saying that it is envisioned as a platform for education, research, dialogue and cultural exchange.

Khodjaev also lauded Qatar's role in promoting culture, education and diplomacy, citing institutions such as the QNL, Katara, Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) and Education City.

"Both of our countries recognise that long-term development is ultimately built not only through infrastructure and economic growth, but through investment in people, education, culture and historical memory," he said.

The Uzbekistan ambassador stressed the importance of helping younger generations remain connected to their identity, values and intellectual heritage, especially in a

rapidly changing world.

He also highlighted Central Asia's historical role as a crossroads of civilisations where knowledge, trade and ideas connected different parts of the world.

Khodjaev thanked Al Jazeera Media Network for supporting plans to produce documentary films about the Islamic Civilisation Centre and other historical landmarks and personalities from Uzbekistan.

The ambassador invited people in Qatar to visit Uzbekistan and explore its cultural and historical landmarks, including the newly

inaugurated Imam Al-Bukhari Complex in Samarkand, which he described as one of the region's most important spiritual and cultural projects.

He also revealed ongoing co-operation between the MIA and the QNL on a special publication featuring artefacts and manuscripts linked to Uzbekistan's history that are preserved in museums across Qatar.

Khodjaev thanked Qatari officials and institutions for supporting efforts to deepen cultural and intellectual ties between Uzbekistan and Qatar.

Eid Mubarak

We extend our heartiest greetings to

His Highness

Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani
Amir of the State of Qatar



His Highness

Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani
Father Amir

His Highness

Sheikh Abdullah Bin Hamad Al Thani
Deputy Amir



and to all the honorable people of Qatar

on the occasion of
EID AL ADHA

We hope for more returns of this memorable occasion and wish that Qatar always enjoys security, welfare and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Highness The Amir

Chairman, Board of Directors and all employees of Qatar Navigation Q.P.S.C "Milaha"



Jordan and Qatar have robust and longstanding relations, a senior Jordanian official has said. Speaking to the Qatar News Agency (QNA), Jordan's Minister of Government Communication Dr Mohammad Momani said both countries are keen to further develop bilateral relations and strengthen

Jordan's 'relations with Qatar robust, longstanding'

co-operation across various fields in ways that serve the interests of both peoples. His remarks coincide with Jordan's 80th Independence Day, marked on May 25. Dr Momani said that Jordan has re-

mained committed since its independence to supporting just Arab causes, primarily the Palestinian cause, and safeguarding Islamic and Christian holy sites in occupied Jerusalem. He added that the Independence Day

represents resilience and continuity despite regional challenges, noting that the country has strengthened its constitutional and democratic institutions while pursuing reform and modernisation efforts focused on citizens' welfare. - QNA



Public consultation on private schools draft law is now open

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

The public can now share opinions and suggestions on Qatar's new draft law regulating private schools through the Sharek platform, where the proposed legislation has been published for consultation.

Participation will remain open for 10 days from the date of publication, according to an announcement by the Civil Service and Government Development Bureau in co-ordination with the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE).

The proposed legislation is intended to replace Law No. 23 of 2015, which regulates private schools.

It defines private schools as all non-government educational institutions providing education from kindergarten through secondary school, and establishes a comprehensive legal framework governing nearly every aspect of school operations, including licensing, curriculum standards, staffing requirements, student admissions, disciplinary procedures, financial management, and government intervention powers.

The draft law also proposes establishing a new institutional body, the "Private Schools Affairs Committee", which would operate under the MoEHE.

The committee, comprising between five and seven members, would oversee major regulatory decisions concerning private schools and submit recommendations to the education minister for final approval.

Its authority would extend to licensing, compliance, dispute resolution, investigations, and appeals, making it one of the most significant oversight mechanisms in Qatar's private education sector.

The proposed law states that private schools are expected to support the MoEHE's objectives of delivering high-quality education and a diverse educational system that meets the needs of students from different backgrounds and abilities.

It also emphasises the promotion of ethical values, patriotism, national belonging, innovation, creativity, and the use of modern technologies, while ensuring inclusive educational opportunities for students with disabilities, learning difficulties, and gifted students.

Under the draft legislation, stricter licensing requirements would apply to individuals seeking to establish or operate private schools in Qatar, which include that applicants must be at least 21 years old, maintain a good reputation, and have no final criminal convictions involving dishonesty or moral misconduct.

In addition, owners, managers, and partners would be prohibited from having direct conflicts of interest with the MoEHE or affiliated government entities during the licence's validity.

The minister would also retain the authority to impose additional licensing conditions when

Opinions and suggestions on Qatar's new draft law regulating private schools can be shared through the Sharek platform

deemed necessary in the public interest.

The legislation further introduces stringent operational and infrastructure requirements.

School buildings, facilities, and equipment would need to comply with detailed educational and safety standards set out in the executive regulations.

Schools would also be required to obtain approvals from all relevant government authorities, and school premises could be used only for educational purposes.

Applicants would additionally be required to provide a bank guarantee issued by a local bank as financial security throughout the duration of the school licence.

Under the proposed law, every private school would be required to submit tuition and service fee schedules for official approval before implementation.

Schools would also be prohibited from introducing new fees or modifying existing charges without prior approval from the relevant department within the ministry.

The ministry would retain the authority to adjust school fees whenever deemed necessary in the public interest.



The draft law also tightens oversight of curricula and educational content.

Private schools would be required to obtain prior approval for curricula and educational plans, while any modifications would require written authorisation from the MoEHE.

Authorities would also have the power to require schools to teach additional subjects when necessary.

More notably, all textbooks, educational resources, and teaching materials would need to align with the approved values, customs, and traditions of Qatari society.

The ministry would have the authority to suspend, amend, or cancel any curriculum or educational material deemed inconsistent with those values.

The requirements would extend beyond curricula to include school events, student activities, administrative practices, staff appearance, and student conduct.

The draft legislation also grants the ministry broad powers to supervise student admissions and safeguard access to education.

Authorities could also intervene directly in

cases of admissions violations, including suspending enrolment activities or, when necessary, transferring students to alternative institutions.

Employment standards within private schools would likewise come under tighter regulation.

All staff members would need to meet professional qualification requirements and pass medical examinations approved by the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH).

Further qualification standards for school directors, teachers, and administrative staff are expected to be outlined in the executive regulations.

Financial oversight would be strengthened. Each private school would be required to maintain an independent budget covering annual revenues and expenditures, with all income deposited into a dedicated account at a local bank.

Schools would also need to prepare annual financial statements and final accounts in accordance with approved accounting standards and submit them to the ministry within 90 days of the end of each fiscal year.

The ministry would also be granted the power to investigate school operators, administrators, and staff members regarding complaints or violations.

Investigations would be conducted by ministry-appointed officials, while schools themselves would not be permitted to investigate serious cases handled by the government independently.

The draft law lays out measures the ministry may take in the event of any violation, including temporarily management of a private school until the end of the academic year, either directly or through an appointed external operator, with all related costs charged to the original licence holder.

According to the draft legislation, operating a private school without a licence could result in a prison sentence of up to two years and a fine of up to QR100,000.

Courts would also have the authority to order the closure of offending schools, require repayment of improperly collected funds, and publish judgments in local newspapers at the violator's expense.

Additional fines of up to QR100,000 could be imposed for violations involving false information, unauthorised advertising, breaches of admissions, failure to maintain records, or non-compliance with ministry directives.

Existing private schools would be granted a one-year grace period to regularise their status and comply with the new legislation once it comes into force.

However, the education minister would retain the authority to extend this period if necessary.

Prime minister exchanges Eid greetings with counterparts

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani exchanged cables of greetings with the prime ministers of Arab and Islamic countries on the occasion of Eid al-Adha. - QNA

Exchange houses see heavy rush as expats send Eid remittances

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

Exchange houses across Qatar have witnessed a surge in remittance activity as expatriates rush to send money to their families and loved ones abroad ahead of the Eid holidays.

Alongside the heavy customer turnout at branches and headquarters, many residents have increasingly relied on mobile applications and digital platforms to transfer money conveniently through their smart devices.

Officials at several exchange houses said both online and in-person transactions remain fully secure and easily accessible, noting that companies have made extensive preparations to handle the anticipated seasonal demand.

The beneficiaries of these remittances span a wide range of countries, particularly across the Arab world, Africa, and Asia.

Top destinations for the remittances include Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh.

Exchange houses have also reported rising demand for foreign currencies, especially the US dollar and the euro, as many residents preparing to travel during Eid prefer to carry cash.

Other Gulf currencies likewise recorded strong demand.

Meanwhile, Qatar's local gold market has seen increased activity, driven in part by the decline in global gold prices.

"Gold never loses its appeal, especially in the Middle East. During occasions like Eid, it remains one of the most valued gifts people can offer their loved ones," a gold shop manager said.

Several exchange houses have also reported increased demand for gold bars of various weights ahead of the holidays, as customers seek trusted investment options and safe-haven assets for their savings.

talabat to match customer tips for riders on Eid al-Adha

Mena (Middle East and North Africa)'s leading everyday app talabat will match customer tips for riders today in celebration of Eid al-Adha, doubling gestures of appreciation made through the talabat app.

Customers who choose to tip their rider through the talabat app will have their contribution matched by talabat.

At a time when many people in the community are looking for ways to show appreciation, this initiative offers customers a simple way to thank riders for their continuous efforts in delivering meals, groceries, and everyday essentials across Qatar.



Workers Support and Insurance Fund to organise Eid activities

The Workers Support and Insurance Fund will organise "Eid al-Adha Celebrations 2026 for Communities" at Asian Town, Al Khor Workers Sports Complex, and Kreeq Sports Stadium during the Eid holidays.

Celebrations at Asian Town and Al Khor Workers Sports Complex will take place on the first and second days of Eid from 5pm to 10pm, while activities at Kreeq Sports Stadium, located behind Barwa Village, will run on the first, second, and third days of Eid from 5pm to 11pm.

An Eid Gah (Eid prayer facility) has also been arranged at the parking area of the cricket stadium in Asian Town in collaboration with the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs.

The prayer venue will open to the public from 4.30am tomorrow, with Eid prayers at 5am.

The Asian Town celebrations will be held at the cricket sta-

dium parking area within Doha Industrial Area.

Meanwhile, a musical concert featuring artists from Pakistan will be staged during the first three days of Eid at Kreeq Sports Stadium, located opposite Madinatna.

Celebrations in Al Khor will be hosted at the Barwa Workers Recreation Complex in Al Khor Industrial Area.

The festivities will feature shows by various communities and school teams, as well as performances by local bands and a popular Pakistani music group.

The Workers Support and Insurance Fund has also arranged raffle draws with prizes, safety and security awareness programmes, and film screenings by the Ministry of Interior.

In addition, private clinics will offer free diabetes and blood pressure check-ups for visitors.

The fund has invited all community members to attend the celebrations. Entry will be free.

Israel targets Hamas's new armed wing chief

Israel said yesterday that it had attacked Hamas's new armed wing chief, who it said was appointed just days earlier after Israel killed his predecessor, as it steps up military pressure in Gaza and expands ground operations in Lebanon (see report on Page 5).

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement that the military had struck Mohammad Odeh, whom he described as Hamas's new armed wing chief in Gaza.

He did not provide details or reveal whether Odeh had been killed.

Netanyahu said Odeh had headed Hamas's intelligence division at the time of the events of October 7, 2023 and was appointed about a week ago to replace Izz al-Din al-Haddad, the group's chief armed commander, who was killed by Israel on May 15.

There was no immediate comment from Hamas.

Sources close to Hamas did not confirm Odeh's appointment as the new military chief but agreed he was seen as Haddad's possible successor, as the group's chief of military intelligence and possibly the last remaining living member of the armed wing's higher leadership council. - Reuters

Iran partially restores Internet access after nearly 3 months

Iranian authorities partially restored Internet connectivity yesterday after an almost three-month shutdown imposed against the backdrop of the war against Israel and the US, said a monitor, a senior official and sources inside the country.

The shutdown left Iranians largely cut off from international networks, with only a domestic intranet working for daily tasks like shopping, ride-hailing and education.

"Live metrics show a partial restoration to Internet connectivity in Iran on day 88" of the shutdown, monitor NetBlocks said on X, saying that it was "unclear" if this meant a permanent end to the "longest nationwide internet shutdown in modern history".

Vice-President Mohammad Reza Aref said in a post on X that the "first step toward free and regulated access to cyberspace has been taken", adding that the demands of Iranians "will be fulfilled".

State news agency IRNA and Fars news agency said "full international Internet connectivity has been restored" for users of fixed broadband services, but this had not been confirmed by NetBlocks.

Witnesses inside Iran also told AFP that mobile Internet remains cut but home Internet with wi-fi had been restored, even though VPNs were still needed to access some social media.

"A few minutes ago I could open international websites using my home Internet provider," said a 22-year-old woman from the western city of Kermanshah, asking not to be named.

A user in Tehran said the Internet service for his company in Tehran has been restored but "mobile connection remained the same" without any access.

Others reported that general access remained extremely patchy.

The shutdown imposed when war erupted on February 28 followed a similar blackout imposed from January 8 as the country was rocked by mass anti-government protests.

Some Iranians expressed glee on social media over the restoration of a degree of connectivity.

"YouTube without a VPN!!! Oh my God, am I dreaming?" wrote one on X.

"Hello my dear Twitter," said another, using the former name for X. - AFP

JOB VACANCY

GULF TIMES

BUSINESS REPORTER

Full-Time | Doha, Qatar | On-site

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Cover economic and financial developments in Qatar & the GCC
- Conduct interviews with industry leaders and officials
- Produce daily news reports and analytical features
- Monitor banking, energy, and corporate sectors

EXPERIENCE

Minimum 5 years of professional journalism experience, preferably in business, financial, or economic reporting; familiarity with regional economic affairs is an advantage.

LANGUAGE

Excellent command of English is a must

APPLICATION PROCESS - HOW TO APPLY

Please Email your CV, cover letter, and three recently published articles or reporting samples relevant to business or economic journalism to hr@raya.com

6

CLOSING DATE:
6 JUNE 2026

JOINING TIMELINE

Preferred candidates should be available to join within one month from the date of offer.

Migrants step up to support community in war-hit Beirut

At a busy Beirut centre, migrant volunteers stirred pots of okra soup and shaped balls of the African staple fufu, keeping food coming for those caught between the latest Israel-Hezbollah war.

Here, Lebanon's migrant workers, among those hit hardest by the fighting, have stepped up to support others in their community now struggling to get by.

People drifted in and out, collecting bags of food or hot plates, as the air filled with the scent of cooking.

"If we don't do it, no one will do it for us," said Viany De Marceau from Cameroon, who runs REMAN, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) supporting African migrant workers.

In recent weeks, De Marceau and her team have



Volunteers prepare croissants at Tres Marias, an organisation supporting migrant workers, in Beirut. -AFP

shifted their focus to help almost 1,500 volunteers - mostly migrants from countries like Ethiopia, Benin, Kenya, but also some Lebanese families displaced or struggling to make ends meet.

Lebanon hosts some 164,000 migrants from more than 80 nationalities, most of them women, according to the UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

At the bustling centre, sewing machines hummed as women stitched blankets, while others stacked thin mattresses ready to be handed out.

"Even in the night we are busy. The phone will not stop ringing," said De Marceau, 33.

Helping others in the community "brings me a kind of happiness", she added.

Across the city in a suburb of Beirut, kitchen shelves were stacked with sauces and tins crowded the walls as volunteers prepared green beans and fried rice balls.

Myra Aragon, 52, from the Philippines, moved between them, helping organise the day's distribution with a smile on her face.

Her Tres Marias organisation, another group supporting migrant workers, has also shifted its focus to the war response.

Aragon said the first calls for help came "as early as 3am" when the war erupted on March 2.

She said she and her volunteers cook around 150 hot meals a day, delivered to people displaced and those in need, helping in whatever way possible despite their limited means.

Outside, migrant women, some with children, left carrying plastic bags filled with basics such as bread and toothpaste.

"We cannot just say to them that, 'sorry, we cannot give you food today because we have nothing to cook'" Aragon said. "We have to make it happen."

Senegal parliament elects ousted PM as Speaker

Senegal's National Assembly has elected ousted prime minister Ousmane Sonko as its speaker, in a move which could challenge the president's ability to govern as he navigates a massive debt crisis.

President Bassirou Diomaye Faye dramatically fired Sonko, his former mentor, and dismissed the cabinet four days ago after months of tension and growing disagreement including over the troubled economy.

Yesterday however lawmakers rebuffed the president by overwhelmingly backing Sonko - the sole candidate - for the powerful position of speaker.

The political divorce between the former allies, both from the same party, risks pitting Faye against the charismatic Sonko and his supporters in parliament.

Sonko remains the undisputed leader of Pastef, the party he founded in 2014 and which controls 130 of the 165 seats in Senegal's only legislative body.

He received a long ovation after securing 132 votes, with no member voting against him and one abstaining, according to the session's presiding member Ismael Diallo.

After being installed in his new position, Sonko promised to "not use this responsibility to orchestrate institutional chaos, to create an institutional crisis, or to cause problems for the president of the republic".

"No member of parliament with me will use this institution for a personal vendetta", Sonko said, speaking in Wolof.

However, he added, the National Assembly will not be "a rubber stamp body".

Emphasising that parliament was a source of checks and balances, he said "we will vote for laws that are in the public interest and reject those that are not".

The opposition, which says Sonko's reinstatement to parliament is illegal, boycotted the vote by walking out of the chamber.

"The parliamentary majority has installed someone, Ousmane Sonko, who has already lost his parliamentary seat and cannot regain it. We will not be associated with this charade," opposition MP Abdou Mbow told reporters.

Aissata Tall Sall, who heads the main opposition, denounced an "institutional coup" which she said had been prepared under "pressure that the majority wants to impose".

Faye appointed Sonko as prime minister in April 2024 just days after being elected president.

On Monday, Faye named senior economist Ahmadou al-Aminou Mohamed Lo as prime minister, saying that the new appointee had the expertise to steer Senegal out of its crippling debt.

As parliamentary speaker, Sonko will have significant scope to block Faye's legislative agenda, according to Signal Risk analyst Greg Musker. -AFP/Reuters

Remnants of Assad's chemical weapons programme 'recovered'

Reuters
Amsterdam

Syria's transitional leadership has located remnants of former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's clandestine chemical weapons programme, including raw materials and munitions similar to those used to carry out deadly gas attacks during the country's long-running civil war, a Syrian official told Reuters yesterday.

Syrian authorities have also taken into custody 18 suspects for alleged involvement in Assad's chemical weapons programme, including top military, political and technical officials, Mohamad Katoub, Syria's permanent representative to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague, said.

The names of the suspects were not made public because the investigation was ongoing, he said, adding that several had served as major generals under the Assad regime.

At least four were on European, UK or US sanctions lists, he said.

Syria, emerging from its 14-year civil war as an ally of the West, has vowed to work with the international community to rid itself of legacy weapons

of mass destruction that pose a proliferation risk.

The OPCW said in a report yesterday that its team in Syria had visited several high-priority undeclared locations in the northern coastal and central areas with Syrian authorities.

The mission was ongoing, it said, but "dozens of undeclared chemical munitions such as aerial bombs and rockets, as well as separately found chemicals and related equipment" had been discovered.

Syrian teams, working for months with OPCW inspectors, located more than 70 rockets and aerial bombs, as well as raw ingredients for the production of sarin, a nerve agent used by Assad's forces in attacks that killed more than 1,300 people in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta in August 2013 and Al-Lataminah in March 2017, Katoub said.

"Despite the secrecy, the danger, and the immense security challenges ... today we delivered for the Syrian people and for the world," he said. "It is the first time such munitions could be recovered before they were used in crimes against the Syrian people."

The OPCW, which oversees the international ban on toxic munitions, has said as many as 100 sites across Syria need to be inspected.

Israel military chief dismisses former top lawyer from ranks

Israel's military has announced the dismissal of its former top lawyer, months after she resigned amid a scandal involving a leaked video appearing to show soldiers severely abusing a Palestinian detainee.

The case, which sparked international outrage as well as protests within Israel, focused on footage taken at the high-security Sde Teiman military base in southern Israel in 2024.

The scandal led to the resignation last year of military advocate-general, MG Yifat Tomer-Yerushalmi, who in her resignation letter acknowledged that her office had leaked the abuse video to the media.

Sde Teiman has been used to hold Gazans since the start of the war in the Palestinian territory, sparked by the events of October 7, 2023.

In February 2025, the military announced that five reservists had been charged over the alleged abuse of a Palestinian detainee in July 2024 at the detention centre near the Gaza Strip.

In March, the military said it had dropped charges against the five soldiers, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hailing the decision. -AFP

Ramaphosa seeking to clear his name over cash-in-sofa scandal

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa sought to clear his name over a scandal in which bundles of cash were stolen from a sofa on his farm by challenging a panel report that found he may have violated the constitution.

In court papers filed yesterday and seen by Reuters, Ramaphosa argued the 2022 report was "seriously flawed" and should be set aside as the panel misunderstood its mandate and relied on hearsay evidence.

Ramaphosa said he would seek an urgent court order to

halt any impeachment process if parliament were to move ahead while his legal challenge is still pending.

Ramaphosa, in office since 2018, has always denied wrongdoing in the affair, dubbed "Farmgate" by local media.

The theft raised questions about how Ramaphosa acquired the \$580,000 in cash that he said had been stolen from his farm in 2020, whether it was properly declared, and why it was stashed in furniture rather than deposited in a bank. -Reuters

A time to celebrate



A family get-together to apply the traditional henna as they prepare to celebrate the joyous occasion of Eid al-Adha. PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam

Israel expands ground operations in Lebanon

AFP/Reuters
Beirut

Several strikes hit the southern Lebanese city of Nabatieh yesterday after an Israeli evacuation warning, an AFP correspondent said, as an Israeli military official confirmed ground operations had expanded deeper into the country.

The latest strikes came after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday ordered his military to intensify attacks on Hezbollah to "crush" the Iran-backed group, the same day at least 11 people were killed in a strike in eastern Lebanon.

An AFP correspondent in Nabatieh reported airstrikes following the warning yesterday and saw plumes of smoke rising from various locations within the city.

An Israeli military official told

AFP that troops had begun operating beyond the Israel-announced "Yellow Line" in south Lebanon, which runs around 10km deep inside Lebanese territory.

The line, separate from the UN-demarcated "Blue Line" marking the frontier between Lebanon and Israel after Israel's withdrawal in 2000, forms part of a proposed buffer zone extending 5-10km into southern Lebanon, where Israeli troops continue to operate in dozens of largely abandoned villages.

As Israel's operations moved deeper into south Lebanon, Hezbollah said its fighters confronted Israeli troops trying to advance into a town that overlooks Nabatieh city.

Hezbollah said in a statement that its fighters repelled an Israeli force early yesterday that had advanced toward Zawtar al-Sharqiyah following airstrikes

and heavy artillery fire.

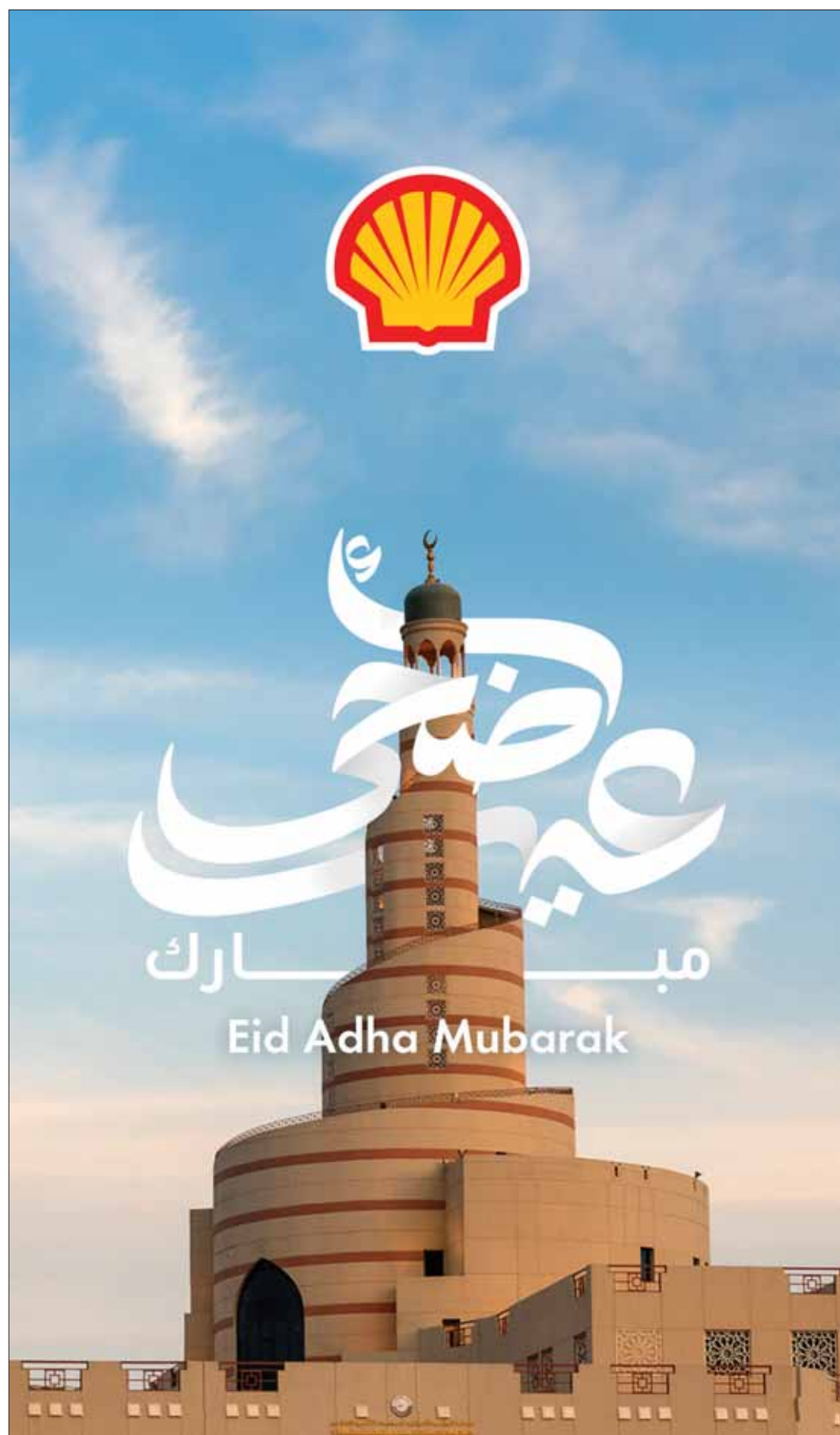
The group said it used drones and was fighting with Israeli soldiers in the town.

Largely deserted since the start of the latest Israel-Hezbollah war on March 2, Nabatieh has faced relentless strikes despite an April 17 truce.

Avichay Adraee, the Israeli military's Arabic-language spokesman said on X yesterday that residents of the entire city "must evacuate your homes immediately and move north of the Zaharani River".

In eastern Lebanon, the health ministry said "yesterday's Israeli enemy airstrike on the town of Mashghara in West Bekaa resulted in a preliminary toll of 11 martyrs, including two girls and a woman, and 15 wounded, including a child".

Rescuers were still clearing the rubble in the eastern town, the ministry added.





Pentagon, SpaceX spar over Starlink price hike

Reuters
New York

As US kamikaze drones guided by Elon Musk's Starlink network began to make visible gains in the war against Iran, senior SpaceX officials reached a conclusion: The Pentagon should be paying more for access to their satellite Wi-Fi network.

Within weeks of the United States launching its bombing campaign, SpaceX executives met Pentagon officials and argued the military had been paying about \$5,000 for connection per terminal while effectively using a higher tier of service worth closer to \$25,000, according to two sources familiar with the matter and Pentagon documents reviewed by Reuters.

The disagreement over Starlink's use on LUCAS suicide drones — a cheap US model comparable to Iran's Shahed that can circle over a target area before diving to detonate on impact — is part of increasing tensions between SpaceX and the Pentagon over Starlink pricing in recent months, according to interviews with five people familiar with the matter and the documents. The Pentagon, which is seeking to help Iranians bypass government-imposed communications blackouts, has also been at odds with SpaceX over pricing for a plan to provide the populace direct-to-cell connections with Starlink akin to 5G service, two of the sources said.

The ongoing disputes, which have not previously been reported, underscore how the Pentagon's growing reliance on SpaceX is handing Musk greater leverage over a critical layer of US national security — at a time when SpaceX is seeking to boost revenue ahead of an IPO next month that could be among the biggest in history.

Unlike consumer Starlink terminals available at stores including Walmart, SpaceX sells a military-specific version called Starshield to the Pentagon under a 2023 agreement. Starshield terminals can connect to both commercial Starlink satellites and a separate, more secure constellation, also called Starshield, according to a person familiar with the matter.

SpaceX argued the LUCAS drones were operating under conditions that aligned more closely with its aviation tier subscription rather than a lower priced land or mobility service. Pentagon officials argued that the \$25,000 price tag — a monthly fee — was designed for aircraft, not kamikaze drones that used Starlink connection for



Aerial view of the US military headquarters, the Pentagon, (Reuters)

a matter of minutes or hours, according to one of the sources.

The Pentagon, which was ramping up strikes on Iran, ultimately agreed to pay SpaceX's proposed price increase, almost doubling the cost of each LUCAS drone. The Pentagon was initially paying about \$30,000 per unit.

The Pentagon declined to comment on Reuters reporting that SpaceX increased its pricing, its decision to pay, or the plan to provide Iranian citizens with Starlink cell service. In a statement, a Pentagon official said the office responsible for acquiring the terminals, the Commercial Satellite Communications Office, is working to find other competitors.

"The Department of War is committed to fostering a competitive environment for commercial satellite communications," an official said. But no other company provides a comparable alternative to Starlink, which has become an increasingly critical tool in modern warfare since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The satellite network provides global coverage, enabling battlefield communications and precision targeting even in remote areas. SpaceX's constellation of roughly 10,000 satellites accounts for more than 60% of those in orbit — dwarfing the constellations being built by other companies, including OneWeb and Amazon Leo. The risks of reliance on Starlink were first thrown into sharp focus during the Ukraine war, when Musk ordered Starlink service switched off in parts of the country in 2022 as Ukrainian forces advanced on Russian positions, disrupting a key counteroffensive, Reuters previously reported. More recently, US Navy tests were dis-

rupted last summer when a global Starlink outage cut off connection to unmanned military boats, leaving them bobbing in the ocean.

Unlike traditional defense contractors, SpaceX holds greater leverage over the Pentagon because it also has a large commercial market for Starlink, alongside its rocket launch and artificial intelligence businesses, said Clayton Swope, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a national security-focused think tank. SpaceX generates about 20% of its total revenue from the US government, according to an SEC filing.

SpaceX "certainly has the US government over the barrel," Swope said. At the outset of the Iran war, Starlink was already a core part of US military operations. In testing and early deployments, it supported a range of systems, from aerial attack drones such as the LUCAS to unmanned surface vessels used for maritime surveillance and strike missions.

When the US launched its bombing campaign, Starshield terminals were being used across more than a dozen drone systems, according to a source familiar with the matter. But tensions between the Pentagon and SpaceX emerged quickly after the US launched its February 28 assault on Iran. On March 1, SpaceX chief Elon Musk responded on X to a user's post featuring an image of the LUCAS drone that said it "appears to have an integrated Starlink" terminal.

"It is a violation of commercial Starlink terms of service to use the terminal for weapon systems. This applies to all users and is shut down when discovered," Musk posted.

"There is a separate network called Starshield, which is operated by the US government."

The Pentagon official, in a statement to Reuters, denied any violation of its agreement with SpaceX. In the days that followed, SpaceX executives met Pentagon officials and argued the military was underpaying for the service, two sources familiar with the matter said. Although the Pentagon initially agreed to the higher fee for satellite Wi-Fi connections used by attack drones, senior officials including Deputy Secretary of Defense Steve Feinberg remained uneasy about the arrangement, one of the sources said. Pentagon officials, during an April ceasefire, met to revisit the pricing with Terrence O'Shaughnessy, a retired four-star Air Force general who now leads SpaceX's defense business.

Still, the Pentagon is currently considering an additional purchase of more than 3,500 Starshield terminal subscriptions, including 100 with the higher-priced aviation tier, according to Pentagon documents reviewed by Reuters. The deal could generate hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue for SpaceX, though Reuters could not determine whether an agreement has been finalized, or what price is being discussed.

Starlink has also proved crucial to other operations. After Iran cracked down on protests in January, killing thousands of people, the Trump administration smuggled in more than 6,000 Starlink terminals to provide internet access to citizens, the *Wall Street Journal* previously reported. As the war intensified, however, Iranian authorities confiscated the terminals and deployed jamming devices across major cities to disrupt connections, according to a source familiar with the matter. Within a week of the conflict beginning, Pentagon officials began discussions with SpaceX about deploying direct-to-cell service that could bypass those disruptions, two people familiar with the matter said. The capability, similar to a 5G connection, would allow users to connect without terminals on the ground. SpaceX, which generated \$11.4 bn in revenue from Starlink in 2025, proposed charging as much as \$500 mn to launch the capability, along with a \$100 mn monthly fee to operate it, according to one of the people and Pentagon documents — prompting alarm from defense officials over the price.

Reuters could not determine whether an agreement has been reached.

US picks partners for using plutonium from Cold War-era

Reuters
Washington

The US said yesterday it had chosen five companies, including Oklo, to enter advanced talks over potentially using its Cold War-era plutonium as a nuclear reactor fuel. Reuters reported last year that the Trump administration plans to make about 20 metric tons of plutonium from dismantled nuclear warheads available to US power companies. President Donald Trump last May ordered the halt of much of a program to dilute and dispose of surplus plutonium, and instead provide it as a fuel for advanced nuclear technologies. The Energy Department holds surplus US plutonium, which has a half-life of 24,000 years and must be handled with protective gear, at heavily guarded weapons facilities in states including South Carolina, Texas and New Mexico.

Oklo, whose stock price was up more than 5.5% to \$69.51 per share, said it plans to develop the fuel with newcleo, a European company that aims to build high-tech nuclear reactors.

The other companies are privately held Exodys Energy, SHINE Technologies, Standard Nuclear and Flibe Energy, the

US Energy Department said in a statement.

Oklo said in a statement that newcleo would bring fuel experience and potential project capital, subject to agreements, approvals and US security and safeguards requirements.

"This program creates a pathway to use existing surplus material as bridge fuel for advanced reactors to bring more reactors online sooner," said Oklo co-founder and CEO Jacob DeWitte. "Material that has been set aside for disposal can instead be converted into fuel to produce electricity."

Stefano Buono, newcleo CEO and founder, said using the plutonium as fuel would reduce US nuclear liabilities. Democratic lawmakers have urged Trump to cancel his surplus plutonium plan, saying it represents a proliferation risk and involves enough plutonium to make 2,000 atomic bombs.

US Energy Secretary Chris Wright was on Oklo's board of directors before joining Trump's cabinet.

The department said the Surplus Plutonium Utilization Program should help companies secure private funding. It did not immediately respond to a request for comment about how the program would ensure the materials are handled safely.

Trump to meet cabinet at Camp David on Iran

US President Donald Trump is set to hold a rare cabinet meeting at the Camp David presidential retreat today as Iran talks near a critical point, a White House official told AFP.

The choice of the secluded retreat in the Maryland mountains — which Trump hardly ever visits, in a break with previous presidents — reflects the sensitive nature of discussions.

The New York Post reported that Iran was set to dominate the meeting, which was expected to be attended by all cabinet members. The economy was also on the agenda, it said.

Trump said Saturday that a deal with Tehran to end the Middle East war was close but negotiations are still tense, with the

US leader warning that strikes on Iran could resume.

Camp David has been the scene of major US-led diplomatic developments in the past, including the 1978 accords between Israel and Egypt under President Jimmy Carter and a failed 2000 Israeli-Palestinian summit under Bill Clinton.

Trump has however been an infrequent visitor.

It will be only the second time that Trump has gone to Camp David in his second term. The first was just days before the US launched strikes on Iran's nuclear program in June 2025.

During his first term Trump said he had canceled a planned summit with Taliban leaders at the retreat following an attack on US forces. (AFP)

Mexico captures nephew of drug lord 'El Chapo'

Mexican security forces captured the US-wanted nephew of drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman in the border state of Sonora, authorities said Tuesday.

Omar Garcia Harfuch, secretary of security, said on X that the suspect is the "nephew of 'El Chapo,'" the former leader of the Sinaloa cartel now serving a life sentence in US prison. He said the nephew is also wanted by the United States.

Though authorities identified the suspect only as Isai "N," Mexican media identified the suspect as Isai Martinez Zepeda.

The press contact for the sec-

retary of security told AFP they didn't have further details on Mexican media reports that the suspect was captured in 2008 in possession of high caliber weapons. It was not immediately clear when he had gotten out of captivity. El Chapo was extradited in 2017 after escaping twice from Mexican prisons. He is imprisoned at a maximum security facility in Colorado on multiple charges including drug trafficking and money laundering.

Two of the sons of El Chapo, Ovidio and Joaquin, are also imprisoned in the United States on narco-trafficking charges. (AFP)

Disinformation distorts election campaigns in Colombia

Disinformation relating to armed groups has plagued Colombia's presidential election campaign ahead of a ballot that will determine the South American country's strategy to deal with guerrilla violence.

Elections beginning on May 31 are taking place as violence in Colombia has surged to its highest levels in a decade, and experts warn that fearful voters are more likely to believe false claims.

Colombians are "more sensitive" to conflict, and "that's useful for people who spread disinformation," according to Camilo Rincon, a political psychology expert at Universidad de La Sabana. False content about candi-

dates and their alleged links to drug traffickers, paramilitaries and guerrillas is circulating ferociously on social media.

While leftist candidate Ivan Cepeda proposes doubling down on current leader Gustavo Petro's "total peace" strategy of negotiating the disarmament of criminal groups, right-wing candidates Abelardo de la Espriella and Paloma Valencia have both pledged to pursue militarisation and the construction of mega-prisons.

Each position has been distorted in one way or another by social media users who benefit from a cover of anonymity, said Frey Munoz, deputy director of the

civil society organisation Electoral Observation Mission (MOE).

Another complicating factor is armed groups' historical intervention in politics and their movement into the digital world via websites, WhatsApp groups and TikTok accounts.

On top of "spontaneous" users spreading disinformation, there are also "coordinated accounts with clear interests that pay money to a platform" to increase their reach, Munoz told AFP.

Cepeda, the son of an assassinated communist senator, frequently appears in false content related to rebels.

In one AI-altered video, he says he will incorporate guerrilla

fighters into the military forces, while in a doctored image he is seen receiving instructions from Ivan Mordisco, Colombia's most-wanted criminal.

Just weeks before elections, media outlets and rival campaigns circulated information about an audio recording in which an alleged rebel leader threatened those who did not vote for Cepeda in southern Colombia.

An investigation conducted by the defense ministry revealed that an imprisoned extortionist had authored the recording.

One photo posted online meanwhile falsely identifies De la Espriella as a man standing next to a drug cartel member. (AFP)

US Supreme Court won't hear Meta's challenge to social media addiction lawsuit

Reuters
Washington

The U.S. Supreme Court declined yesterday to hear a bid by Meta Platforms to avoid a lawsuit brought by Vermont's attorney general accusing the company of designing its Instagram social media app to be addictive to young users, as big technology companies face mounting legal risks over child and teen safety.

The justices turned away Meta's appeal of a lower court's ruling that let the lawsuit proceed, rejecting the company's argument that courts in Vermont lack jurisdiction over the dispute.

The case is part of a wave of litigation by individuals, municipalities, states and school districts nationwide amid a global backlash over the effects of social media on young users, with lawsuits focusing on the way companies designed and operated their platforms.

Vermont argued that Instagram was designed to "exploit teenagers' developing brains" to foster addiction and sell more advertising space, including ads that target Vermont markets and teens, and that Meta also intentionally misled consumers about the safety of its product.

Meta said the state did not allege that it designed the app or its features in Vermont, or that any of the alleged misrepresentations about Instagram's safety or addictiveness were made in Vermont. Testifying in February at a youth social media addiction trial in California, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg denied that Instagram targets kids.

Vermont's Democratic Attorney General Charity Clark sued Meta in 2023 in state court under the state's consumer protection law, claiming that Instagram has even studied teens' neurological, cognitive and psychological vulnerabilities to cause them to use the



Instagram app icon on a smartphone. (Reuters/File Photo)

app compulsively and excessively, harming their mental health.

The lawsuit was part of a coordinated effort involving 42 state attorneys general filing enforcement

actions in both state and federal courts around the country.

Meta sought to have the Vermont case dismissed. Meta has argued that allowing the case to pro-

ceed in Vermont is unfair, violating its right to due process under the U.S. Constitution's 14th Amendment, because it could subject the company to such legal challenges in all 50 states.

The Vermont Supreme Court rejected this concern in 2025, noting that because the state sued Meta for allegedly pushing a harmful design and misleading users about it — harnessing personal information and generating revenue as a result — any due process concerns are "clearly extinguished."

"A company that reaches out and purposefully avails itself of a forum state's market for its own economic gain can expect to be haled into court in that jurisdiction to account for its conduct related to those business activities," the Vermont Supreme Court said.

Meta's appeal at the U.S. Supreme Court follows recent, unfavorable outcomes for the company in state courts.

In April, the top court in Massa-

chusetts ruled that Meta must face a similar youth addiction lawsuit by that state's attorney general.

In March, a jury ordered Meta to pay \$375 million in civil penalties in a lawsuit by New Mexico's attorney general, accusing the company of misleading users about the safety of Facebook and Instagram and of enabling child sexual exploitation on those platforms.

Also in March, a separate jury in Los Angeles found Meta and Alphabet's Google negligent for designing social media platforms that are harmful to young people, awarding a combined \$6 million to a 20-year-old woman who said she became addicted to social media as a child.

In May, Meta settled a lawsuit brought by a school district in Kentucky, one of thousands seeking to make social media companies cover the costs that schools say they have incurred to combat a mental health crisis allegedly fueled by platforms.

Hidden tunnels, fake doors: China probes mining tragedy

Reuters
Beijing

Unmarked tunnels, missing trackers and fake doors have been uncovered during an initial probe into the deadliest mining tragedy in China in over 15 years, with the government vowing to leave no stone unturned, state media reported yesterday.

At least 82 people were killed by a gas explosion late on Friday at the Liushenyu mine in the coal-rich province of Shanxi in northern China. Two remained unaccounted for with a further 128 hospitalised, state media said.

The blast is the deadliest mining accident in China since 2009, when a gas explosion at the Xinxing Mine in Heilongjiang province killed 108 people.

While the cause of Friday's incident remains under investigation, the official Xinhua news agency yesterday said concealed mining tunnels, falsified drawings and outsourced and unregistered miners, who had not been provided with required life-saving location trackers, were contributing factors to the deadly incident.

The mine, controlled by Shanxi Tongzhou Coal Coking Group, maintained two separate sets of plans and surveillance systems, Xinhua said. One set matched the actual operations while the other



Rescuers work at the site following a gas explosion at Liushenyu coal mine in Qinyuan county, Shanxi province. (Reuters/File Photo)

was used to deal with official inspections, with some mining areas hidden from regulatory oversight.

Reuters was not able to contact officials from the company, as according to state media they have been detained.

Coal mined from the concealed and unregulated tunnels is not included in the official production figures and went untraced.

The two sets of plans are known colloquially as "yin-yang drawings": one kept in the open for inspectors to scrutinise and the other kept in the dark.

Similar profit-driven practices are not uncommon in coal mines across China despite crackdowns,

the national mine safety administration has said.

The Liushenyu mine "used wire mesh and woven plastic sacks sprayed with mortar, to make fake doors that looked very much like the rock wall of the mine tunnel," Xinhua said.

Workers would be tipped off by someone outside whenever inspectors came, and they would shut the fake doors, smear coal ash to blend them in with the rest of the underground passage.

In order to evade detection, the mine operator hired subcontracted labour to work in the concealed tunnels without providing them with required identification-location trackers or logging

them in the official entry record. Authorities would have been able to monitor where the miners were underground had they been equipped with trackers, including in emergency situations.

When the blast occurred on Friday, the official log showed only 124 workers had gone underground, according to footage shown on state broadcaster CCTV on Monday. In fact a total of 247 workers were working in the mine, suggesting that 123 had been untracked in tunnels outside official purview.

The lack of accurate maps and miners' location information has severely hampered rescue operations, state media said.

The Liushenyu mine – classified as a "high-gas mine" with elevated blast risk – also deliberately avoided installing gas-monitoring equipment to further evade authorities' supervision, the state radio broadcaster said in a separate report yesterday.

The issues were not unknown to authorities before Friday's tragedy. In 2025, the mine operator was "fined after regulators discovered concealed working faces, but the penalty failed to serve as an effective deterrent, and the company continued illegal production," Xinhua said.

Some mines across China have halted or reduced production following the incident for safety inspections.

China, Pakistan aim to revamp economic corridor, Gwadar port

Reuters
Karachi

China and Pakistan have reached a "new broad consensus" on deepening strategic ties to beef up development of a joint economic corridor and establish the port of Gwadar as a regional connectivity hub, the neighbours said yesterday.

The remarks came in a joint statement as Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif wrapped up a visit to Beijing at a time when Islamabad is seeking investment while navigating tension with Afghanistan and mediating in the Iran war.

"Both sides welcomed third parties to participate in the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor under the model agreed," they said in the statement, issued after Sharif met Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang.

They agreed to promote "high-quality" development of CPEC, a flagship project of China's Belt and Road initiative, develop Pakistan's port of Gwadar, and strengthen road and port links.

These plans encompass the Khunjerab Pass and an upgrade of the Karakoram Highway, the

main overland link between China and Pakistan.

Pakistan also promised targeted steps to boost security and co-operation to ensure the safety of Chinese workers and investments in Pakistan, a key concern for Beijing after repeated militant attacks on its nationals and projects.

China said it appreciated Pakistan's efforts in easing the temporary US-Iran ceasefire and hold talks in Islamabad. Both reiterated support for early adoption of a five-point initiative to restore Middle East peace, offering to make positive contributions towards it.

Pakistan reaffirmed its commitment to the one-China principle, calling the democratically-governed island of Taiwan, claimed by China, an "inalienable" part of China and saying it opposed any form of Taiwan independence.

Taiwan rejects China's claims, saying only the island's people can decide its future.

Pakistan welcomed China's efforts to boost its dialogue with Afghanistan. Both opposed the use of territory by groups, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, to imperil regional security or launch attacks.

N Korea fires ballistic missile into Yellow Sea, says Seoul

AFP
Seoul

North Korea launched several projectiles including a ballistic missile into the Yellow Sea yesterday, Republic of Korea's military said, the latest in a flurry of tests this year.

Analysts have said that by conducting a series of missile tests in recent months, Pyongyang may be trying to take advantage of eroding international norms to cement its nuclear status.

The diplomatically isolated North has also repeatedly shunned efforts by the Republic of Korea government to improve relations, calling Seoul its most "hostile" adversary.

Republic of Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said they had detected the launches of "several projectiles" at around 1:00pm (0400 GMT) from the North Korean city of Chongju into the Yellow Sea, the body of water separating the Korean peninsula from China.

The launches included a short-range ballistic missile, Seoul's military said.

The missiles flew about 80 kilometres (50 miles), the military said, adding that it was analysing their specifications and flight range, and had "strengthened surveillance and vigilance in preparation for possible additional launches".

Seoul's foreign ministry spokesperson Park Il said at a regular news



A woman watches a television screen showing a news broadcast with file footage of a North Korean missile test, at a train station in Seoul yesterday. (AFP)

briefing that the government once again urges North Korea to respond to their peace policy and efforts to ease tensions.

"As we firmly support nuclear non-proliferation, we will continue our efforts to achieve substantive progress in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue through a step-by-step and pragmatic approach, while adhering to the goal of complete denuclearisation," he said.

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

Republic of Korea, along with its main security partner the United

States and Japan, were "maintaining a state of full readiness" and closely sharing intelligence, Seoul's military said.

Yesterday's launches were North Korea's first in 37 days and its eighth test this year. In April, Pyongyang conducted a ballistic missile test to "verify the characteristics and power of a cluster bomb warhead," its state media said at the time.

Republic of Korea's Yonhap news agency reported last week, citing unnamed government sources, that Chinese President Xi Jinping would likely visit North Korea this week.

China is North Korea's main economic and political backer, though Pyongyang has drawn closer to Russia in recent years.

Korea says it will build submarines at home

AFP
Seoul

Republic of Korea will build its nuclear-powered submarines at home, the defence minister said yesterday, with a plan to launch its first vessel in the mid-2030s.

Seoul is seeking to bolster deterrence against nuclear-armed North Korea, with the

Republic of Korea set to join a small circle of countries that operate nuclear-powered submarines after receiving US approval for the supply of restricted nuclear fuel.

"We will develop and build nuclear-powered submarines with our own technology to launch the first vessel in the mid-2030s," Defence Minister Ahn Gyu-back told a defence

strategy meeting attended by President Lee Jae-myung.

Ahn said the first submarine would enter operational service "in the latter half of the 2030s".

Republic of Korea has long sought to acquire nuclear-powered submarines to counter North Korea's growing military threats, although it had been constrained by a nuclear co-operation agreement with the US.

Lee said in November Seoul had received Washington's approval for the construction of nuclear-powered submarines as part of a long-awaited security and trade agreement.

That included US approval for uranium enrichment and re-processing spent fuel.

However, there had not yet been any firm indication about where the submarines would be

built, with Trump saying they would be built "right here in the good ol' USA".

Republic of Korea, which possesses nuclear reactors, said it would fulfil its nuclear non-proliferation obligations throughout the process of securing and managing low-enriched uranium for the submarines.

"The Republic of Korea maintains a firm stance that it does not possess any form of nuclear weapons and will not develop them," Ahn said.

Lee said after Ahn's briefing that nuclear-powered submarines would be "a symbol of our determination to take responsibility for peace and security on the Korean Peninsula".

US nuclear submarine technology is considered among the most sensitive and tightly guarded military secrets.

2 arrested in Vietnam over shooting of Australians

AFP
Hanoi

Two men were arrested in Vietnam over the murder of an Australian reportedly linked to organised crime, police said yesterday.

Lorenzo Lemalu was shot dead on Thursday outside a seafood restaurant in Ho Chi Minh City, police said in a statement, adding that another Australian was seriously wounded in the same incident.

Lemalu was suspected by Australian police of being a senior member of a Sydney organised crime group, according to Australian media reports.

Vietnamese police arrested two suspects in the shooting, both of Samoan nationality.

They "were apprehended while hiding in the border area between Vietnam and Cambodia less than 72 hours after committing the crime", according to the police statement.

Police said the two suspects confessed, admitting they carried out the shooting under the direction of an individual abroad.

Eight Vietnamese were arrested in the same case for helping in the escape and failing to report the crime.

Shootings are rare in communist Vietnam, where ownership of guns is illegal and people are encouraged to surrender weapons to authorities.

Thai authorities impose 21-day Ebola quarantine

AFP
Bangkok

Thailand imposed yesterday a 21-day quarantine order for people travelling from or having transited through the Democratic Republic of Congo or Uganda, where a deadly Ebola crisis is surging.

The eastern DRC is ground zero for an Ebola outbreak which has sparked an international health alert by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Since Kinshasa declared an outbreak on May 15, the illness has caused 204 deaths and 867 suspected cases, according to a toll given over the weekend by the DRC's health ministry.

In neighbouring Uganda, one person has died, with a further six confirmed infected.

Travellers with or without "symptoms of Ebola infection must be quarantined at least 21 days", Thailand's public health ministry said in a statement yesterday.

Ebola is a deadly viral disease that spreads through direct contact with bodily fluids. It can cause severe bleeding and organ failure.

Thailand has not reported any Ebola-affected travellers but there was risk from global population movement, senior public health ministry official Somlerk Jeungsmarn said in the statement.

Those with Ebola symptoms must quarantine at a designated state hospital, while those without symptoms would be required to stay at an unspecified quarantine site, the ministry said.

The WHO has recorded 10 confirmed Ebola deaths and 220 suspected deaths in the DRC since mid-May, while also recording a further 900 suspected cases.

The UN agency said the true spread of the virus – which experts suspect was circulating under the radar for some time – was probably much wider.

Philippines ends rescue efforts for victims of building collapse

Reuters
Angeles

Lea Casilao and her husband usually began each day exchanging text messages: "Good morning" from her, and his usual reply of "Good morning, love".

But on Sunday morning, no reply came.

Casilao said she knew her husband, Joselito, had been staying at the workers' barracks on Saturday night because they had been messaging until the evening, making it likely that he was among those trapped after a building under construction in the city of Angeles, north of Manila, collapsed at dawn on Sunday.

Authorities called off search and rescue operations on Monday evening after rescuers, using life locator equipment, determined there were no longer signs of life beneath the rubble.

The focus shifted yesterday to recovering the remains of the victims.

"My hope of still finding him alive has collapsed," Casilao said, her voice breaking.

Casilao said she and her husband had planned to meet at the construction site on Sunday afternoon, with her husband supposed to pick her up. When she was unable to reach him, she went straight to the site and saw the tangle of concrete, mangled metal, and collapsed scaffolding.

"I kept calling his number, but nothing," said Casilao, 47, sitting in a makeshift tent as a bulldozer outside began clearing debris from the road.

Beside her were other families waiting anxiously for news of their loved ones.

"We know how hard this is for you," Maria Leah Sajili, information officer at the regional Bureau of Fire Protection, told a press briefing yesterday.

"We sympathise with what you are going



A view of the collapsed nine-storey building that was under construction in Balibago, Angeles City, Pampanga, yesterday. (Reuters)

through. Rest assured, we did everything we could to save lives, and now we have to move forward," she said.

At least four people have been confirmed dead, including a Malaysian national whose body was recovered on Sunday from a neighbouring hotel building that had also been hit by the collapse. Another 16, mostly construction workers, remain missing.

One of those who died was the father of 19-year-old Evelyn Alicaway. She said she learned of the accident from her uncle, and after seeing a video on social media she knew it was her father that rescuers were attempting to pull from the rubble.

"Even with his face blurred, I knew right away it

was him. It hurt me so much to see my father like that," Alicaway said in tears at her father's funeral.

Authorities have launched an investigation into why the building collapsed, and whether or not it violated the terms of its construction permit: though only nine storeys were approved, a swimming pool was under construction on the 10th floor.

The Philippine labour agency stopped work at the site in September 2025 over safety violations, but lifted the order a month later after the company complied with regulations.

"We hope the owner will take responsibility and address what happened to the workers. The families are also suffering. This is not what we wanted, but they need to co-ordinate with us," Alicaway's mother, Rosenda, said.



Rubio revives Asia Quad amid US policy doubts

AFP
New Delhi

The US, India, Australia and Japan announced new maritime and critical minerals co-operation yesterday, reviving a forum viewed suspiciously by China following questions over the US commitment and disagreement on Iran.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio took part in the meeting in New Delhi, 10 days after President Donald Trump paid a friendly state visit to China and spoke glowingly of the two powers working together as a "G2" — a concept that the US partners, which view Beijing's rise warily, fear could shut them out.

Meeting his counterparts in the Indian capital, Rubio said the Quad comprised countries "who share strong values — strong, vibrant democracies" and have "many aligned interests".

The Quad said in a joint statement members would together mobilise \$20bn in government and private money to strengthen critical mineral supply chains, including by identifying projects in the four countries. It was unclear if that would be entirely new funding.

Critical minerals mark a rare area in which the Trump administration has turned to the more traditional diplomacy of building networks with allies, alarmed at the dominance of China in resources central to the high-end technology sector.

The four powers said they would also work together on two maritime initiatives — one that combines their surveillance capabilities, and another that will provide enhanced real-time information to commercial traffic at sea.



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanya Jaishankar attend a joint press conference after attending the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi, yesterday. (Reuters)

In a first, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said the Quad was co-operating on assisting port development in Fiji — a key island nation in the South Pacific, where China has made a concerted push for greater influence.

"We recognise our obligation — our responsibility — to provide real choices, particularly as strategic circumstances in our region are deteriorating," Wong said.

The Quad in a statement also set a goal of connecting South Pacific islands through undersea cables by the end of the year, integrating them economically to the four democracies rather than China.

Reacting to the meeting, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said that co-operation "should not be directed against any third party".

"We also do not support exclusive cliques or bloc confrontations," she told reporters.

Trump has been dismissive of

major allies, repeatedly saying they unfairly burden the US financially.

While Rubio held two Quad meetings last year, including one hours after taking office, Trump declined to commit to a four-way leaders' summit.

It marked a contrast to his predecessor Joe Biden, who put a priority on alliances and vowed that Quad summits were "here to stay".

Rubio said the Trump administration wanted the Quad to focus more on deliverables than meetings, and said co-operation was progressing "pretty aggressively".

Freedom of navigation has long been Washington's codeword for opposing China's assertiveness at sea, a particular concern for Japan.

The Quad ministers said in a joint statement they were "seriously concerned" about the South China Sea and East China Sea and opposed "destabilising or unilateral actions" — a clear reference to Beijing.

The US has recently pointed to

the principle of freedom of navigation as it tries to rally allies to counter Iran, which has exerted control over the strategic Strait of Hormuz in response to the US-Israeli war launched on February 28 and which sent global oil prices spiralling.

No US ally other than Israel has robustly supported the decision to attack Iran, enraging Trump, who has questioned the reliability of US partners he had not consulted beforehand.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is one of the few world leaders who has voiced some understanding for the Iran war, citing concerns about Tehran's disputed nuclear programme, but he has not assisted the war effort and Trump said he was "not happy with Australia".

Japan and India have historically both maintained cordial relations with Iran, although they grudgingly complied with US sanctions on Iranian oil.



A Border Security Force (BSF) official walks into a Border Outpost (BOP), a self-contained defence outpost situated near the India-Bangladesh international border in Petrapole, India. (Reuters/File Photo)

Dhaka tightens border over forced crossings from India

Reuters
Dhaka

Bangladesh's border guards have intensified patrols and launched public awareness campaigns along parts of the frontier with India because of concerns India has illegally forced people into Bangladesh, officials said. India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, which governs the border states of Tripura, West Bengal and Assam, has said it would tackle undocumented migration as a priority.

Earlier this month, India's foreign ministry told reporters that India has asked Bangladesh to verify the nationality of more than 2,860 people suspected of being Bangladeshis and of living illegally in the country. India's foreign ministry did not respond to a request for comment yesterday.

The 60th Battalion of Border Guard Bangladesh began campaigns on Sunday in border areas of the Brahmanbaria district, using loud speakers to warn residents and urging them to remain alert to attempts to push people across the border.

"We have started miking in border villages to raise awareness among residents and ask

them to stay vigilant against any illegal crossings or push-ins attempts," Lieutenant Colonel S M Shariful Islam, commander of the battalion, told Reuters.

"Our patrols and surveillance have been strengthened across the border areas. Intelligence operations are also continuing to prevent illegal push-ins, human trafficking, and the smuggling of drugs and other goods," he said.

Bangladesh and India share a border that stretches over more than 4,000 kilometres (2,485 miles), one of the longest land frontiers in the world.

Three sub-districts in Brahmanbaria district in eastern Bangladesh account for around 73 kilometres of the border with the Indian state of Tripura. India's northeastern state of Assam which shares its border with Bangladesh has, since May 2025, pushed back hundreds of people into Bangladesh out of the 30,000 people tribunals have declared to be foreigners. Several human rights groups have said the authorities have arbitrarily thrown people out of the country.

Dhaka has repeatedly said any repatriation must follow formal bilateral procedures and has warned against unilateral push-ins across the border.

Ireland to ban goods from Israeli settlements in West Bank

Reuters
Dublin

Ireland aims to pass a law curbing goods trade with settlements in the Israeli-occupied West Bank by mid-July with Israel, some US lawmakers and business groups opposing the move, Foreign Minister Helen McEntee said yesterday.

Ireland's government, one of the most outspoken critics of Israel's war in Gaza, first promised to sanction Israeli settlements in October 2024. The legislation has since been held up by pressure from opposition politicians who aimed to extend the ban also to services trade, on one side, and international company lobbyists seeking to scrap the bill, on the other. Sources told Reuters last October that the bill was set to be limited to goods. Prime Minister Micheal Martin confirmed that last week and said widening the scope to services was neither

"implementable" nor "viable." Limiting the bill to goods only will impact just a handful of products imported from Israeli-occupied territories such as fruit that are worth just 200,000 euros (\$234,660) a year, Ireland's Central Statistics Office said.

Business groups warned that the wider category of services could pull foreign multinational companies into unworkable sanctions.

"We have consistently advocated for a peaceful solution... but it's very clear from the actions taken most recently by the Israeli government, but in particular the continued increase in settler violence, the escalation in settler violence in the West Bank, the continued violence in Lebanon, that they have no desire to take this particular road," McEntee told reporters.

Israel's far-right governing coalition has enabled a rapid expansion of settlements, with some ministers openly advocating for the annexation of the West Bank.

Settler violence against Palestinians in the

Israeli-occupied West Bank has surged since the Gaza war began in October 2023.

McEntee said last week she hoped to pass the law in tandem with Belgium, the Netherlands and possibly Slovenia, which have also committed to introducing bans. Spain has already introduced similar curbs, the only European Union member to so far do so. A group of US lawmakers wrote to Martin last year, warning that passing the bill would damage US-Irish relations and impact American companies in Ireland.

Ireland is particularly sensitive to pressure from the US as mainly US-owned foreign multinationals are a major part of the economy and employ around 11% of Irish workers.

Most of the international community considers Israeli settlements in the West Bank illegal under international law. Israel disputes this, citing historical and biblical ties to the area and that they provide strategic depth and security.

Second group of women linked to ISIS return from Syria

Reuters
Sydney

A cohort of Australian women and children linked to the Islamic State (ISIS) militant group has returned home from a Syrian refugee camp, the second such group to arrive back in Australia this month.

Local media reported two women and seven children landed in Melbourne yesterday afternoon via Doha. Another flight carrying four women and six children arrived in Sydney in the evening.

Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke said the government was not assisting their travel and that any who had committed crimes "can expect to face the full force of the law".

"These are people who have made the horrific choice to join a dangerous terrorist organisation and to place their children in an unspeakable situation," Burke said in a statement.

The latest arrivals come after four women and nine children returned to Australia earlier this month after more than seven years in a Syrian camp. Two of the women were arrested at Melbourne Airport and charged with slavery offences, while one in Sydney was charged with terror-related offences, including allegedly joining Islamic State.

New South Wales state police told media waiting at Sydney airport for the latest returnees that none would be arrested. It was unclear whether arrests would be made in Melbourne.

News of the women's return has drawn criticism from political opponents, who say the centre-left government failed to stop their travel to Australia. The government has said there were "very serious limits" on preventing citizens from re-entering the country. One woman from western Sydney was issued a temporary exclusion order by the government, preventing her from returning, public service broadcaster the Australian Broadcasting Corp reported. Her child was not covered by the order, but decided to stay, the report added.

Law enforcement and intelligence agencies have prepared for such returns for more than a decade and have plans to monitor those arriving, the government said.

"Any breaches of the law will mean that these people will face the full force of the law to the extent available upon the advice of the security agencies," Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said during parliamentary question time.

Between 2012 and 2016, some Australian women travelled to Syria to join their husbands who were allegedly members of ISIS. Following the group's territorial collapse in 2019, many were detained in camps.

In January, the US began moving detained ISIS members out of Syria after the collapse of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which had been guarding around a dozen facilities holding fighters and affiliated civilians, including foreigners.

Cambodian king pardons former opposition leader

Reuters
Phnom Penh

Cambodia's king has pardoned former opposition leader Kem Sokha for a treason conviction, just weeks after he lost an appeal to overturn that verdict, according to a royal decree released on Monday. Kem Sokha, 72, co-founder of the defunct Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), has been held under house arrest since he was found guilty of treason in March 2023. He was accused of conspiring with a foreign power to topple then-premier Hun Sen.

Last month a court in Phnom Penh upheld his 27-year sentence and banned him from leaving the country for five years once that term ends. The royal decree said the pardon only applied to the original sentence.

A lawyer for Kem Sokha did not immediately answer phone calls seeking comment on the pardon. Kem Sokha's case was among the

most prominent in a sweeping crackdown on opponents of the Cambodian People's Party, which has ruled Cambodia for more than four decades.

The US said at the time that his conviction was based on "fabricated conspiracy theories".

He was among only a few remaining opposition figures in the Southeast Asian country, after many others fled in the wake of a 2017 Supreme Court ruling that banned the CNRP.

The Khmer Movement for Democracy, an organisation led by one of those exiled figures, Mu Sochua, said in a statement that the pardon was an attempt to whitewash the government's campaign against its political opponents.

"The decision to mitigate only the prison sentence while maintaining the ban on political activity and restricting freedom of travel abroad is merely shifting the form of detention from house arrest to political confinement," it said.



Former CNRP leader Kem Sokha arrives at the Phnom Penh Municipal Court for the hearing of the verdict in his treason case, in Phnom Penh. (Reuters/File Photo)

Poland, Britain to sign defence treaty

AFP
Warsaw

Poland and the United Kingdom will sign a defence treaty in London today, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said yesterday.

"This is a historic moment because, after having signed a treaty in Nancy with the French Republic, Poland will sign this treaty with the United Kingdom tomorrow," Tusk told reporters in Warsaw.

The security and defence pact, which Tusk will sign with his British counterpart Keir Starmer, paves the way for joint military exercises and information-sharing, and will also cover co-operation in cyber and health security, according to the Polish government.

Poland — an EU and Nato member state — shares its eastern border with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. But that geography means instability has become

a reality for the former Warsaw Pact country, Tusk said.

"Certainly not for a month, but for years, given the neighbourhood," he added.

As a result, Poland's defence pacts with European countries, alongside its alliance with the US, are designed to guarantee "total security," he added.

Poland, the most populous country on Nato's eastern flank, spends the most in the alliance on defence — more than 4.8% of its gross domestic product this year alone.

At the beginning of May, Warsaw signed a loan agreement with the European Commission to finance the modernisation of its army and arms industry, under which it will receive nearly 44bn euros.

Last year, Poland and France signed a treaty of friendship and enhanced co-operation, which includes defence and mutual assistance clauses that France, a nuclear power, reserves for its closest allies.

Britain targets Russian cryptocurrency networks

Reuters
London

Britain yesterday targeted Russian-linked cryptocurrency platforms, banks and financial networks that it said were used to bypass sanctions, freezing their assets and barring UK firms from processing payments and holding correspondent banking ties.

The measures focus on what London described as "shadow financial systems" underpinning Russia's war economy, including the Kremlin-backed A7 network, which it said had been used to route funds, finance procurement and exploit foreign banking systems to evade restrictions.

The package also targets crypto exchanges and entities operating Russia-focused platforms, including a Kyrgyz bank and multiple firms registered in jurisdictions including Georgia and the United Arab Emirates, alongside individuals tied to the network.

Britain said it was "tracking down and shutting off" pay-

ment routes fuelling Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

"We will continue to act fast and decisively, alongside our allies, to expose, disrupt and dismantle these networks, and ensure those enabling Russia's aggression face consequences," foreign minister Yvette Cooper said in a statement.

The Russian embassy in London did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Among those sanctioned was Huobi Global S.A., one of the world's largest crypto exchanges, founded in China in 2013 and now known as HTX.

Britain's sanctions list said Huobi was involved in providing funds, economic resources, goods or technology to individuals and entities in Russia's financial sector.

The Financial Conduct Authority, Britain's markets regulator, filed a lawsuit against HTX last October, accusing it of unlawfully promoting crypto asset services to British consumers.

Neither HTX nor the FCA immediately responded to requests for comment.

Nato to beef up forces to defend Baltic nations



German Army servicemen attend Nato Innovation Range demo day in Latvia yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters
Berlin/London

Nato will strengthen the defence of its eastern flank with a new structure that would facilitate the rapid deployment of forces in Latvia and Estonia in the event of a war with Russia, two sources familiar with the matter told Reuters.

At present, Nato forces in all three Baltic nations as well as northern Poland come under the command of a single multinational headquarters in the Polish city of Szczecin. The planned change underlines the strategic importance of the Baltics, which have been in focus since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Assigning a second corps for the region will allow Nato to bring in "mass at speed", as one military official described it, addressing the region's limited strategic depth and vulnerability. When fully operational, an army corps

typically commands three divisions, or 40,000 to 60,000 troops. In peacetime, it normally exists as a skeleton command structure, with specialist functions such as artillery, air defence and medics in place to allow rapid deployment of troops when needed.

Germany and the Netherlands, in coordination with Nato, have reached agreement to assign the German-Netherlands Corps, based in the German city of Muenster, to the defence of Latvia and Estonia, the military sources told Reuters yesterday.

European allies are assuming more responsibility for their own security, amid fierce criticism from US President Donald Trump who most recently accused European Nato members of a lack of support in the Iran war and announced Washington would withdraw 5,000 US troops from Germany.

The deal cleared the last hurdle, which consisted of a lack of corps troops, the sources said, alluding to the critical capacity any corps

needs in areas such as long-range artillery, air defence, as well as engineers and medics.

Together with other partners, Germany and the Netherlands will now build up these forces, the sources said.

It was not immediately clear when the decision would take effect and how many troops would fall under the command of the new headquarters unit in any conflict.

The Dutch defence ministry said assignment of the corps was "currently being further elaborated" and declined to give details. The German defence ministry declined to comment, citing ongoing coordination efforts with Nato.

Nato said it would respond later. Nato officials have warned for years of an increased threat from Russia, which they say could potentially mount a large-scale assault on allied territory as early as 2029. Moscow denies aggressive intentions and accuses the alliance of stoking tensions by expanding into neighbouring territory.



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen addresses a joint press conference after talks on the security in the region yesterday. (AFP)

Russia 'trying to destabilise' European democracies with drone alerts: EU chief

AFP
Vilnius

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen on Tuesday accused Russia of "trying to destabilise" European democracies by triggering recent drone alerts in Baltic states.

The European Commission president, speaking at a news conference with leaders from the region, conceded that the spate of air raid alarms had "exposed vulnerabilities" in the continent's defences.

Her visit came a week after Lithuanians were ordered to head for the bunkers following a brief drone alert in the capital Vilnius, a first for the general population since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

"People in the Baltic countries have been experiencing what many believed belonged to an-

These are not isolated incidents. This is a deliberate strategy from Russia, trying to destabilise our democratic societies. — Ursula von der Leyen

other era," von der Leyen said, standing alongside the presidents of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

"Air raid alerts, families sheltering, schools closing, transport interrupted. This is the reality on Europe's eastern border in 2026," she said.

"These are not isolated incidents. This is a deliberate strategy from Russia, trying to destabilise our democratic societies. But very much like on the battlefields of Ukraine, Russia is failing."

Drone alerts have become increasingly common in recent months in the Baltic states as Ukraine steps up strikes against Russian targets in the Saint Petersburg region, close to Estonia

and Finland.

The ex-Soviet Baltic countries have accused Russia of deliberately diverting Ukrainian attacks intended to strike industrial facilities and fossil fuel infrastructure.

While the incidents have caused neither casualties nor material damage, they have demonstrated the inability of the Baltic countries' air defences to intercept every drone.

At Tuesday's briefing, von der Leyen admitted that "these incidents have exposed vulnerabilities" — and warned that Moscow's use of the tactic could spread westwards.

"What you are experiencing today, the rest of Europe could face tomorrow," she said.

Von der Leyen vowed stepped-up efforts to tackle the problem, "starting with more unified alert systems and improved cross-border coordination".

EU seeks details on Czech PM's business safeguards

Reuters
Prague

The European Commission has asked the Czech government for information on arrangements designed to prevent conflicts of interest over EU subsidies linked to companies in the business empire of Prime Minister Andrej Babis, a Commission spokesperson said yesterday.

Czech Radio's iRozhlas.cz and Czech news site Seznam Zpravy earlier reported the Commission was seeking further analysis of a plan to shift Babis' shares in

Czech conglomerate Agrofert into a special trust.

The Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy also wants assurances that companies linked to Babis but outside the trust — including an investment fund operating dozens of fertility clinics across Europe — are not receiving EU funds, according to iRozhlas.cz.

Babis told Czech news agency CTK he had fulfilled laws.

"I resolved the alleged conflict of interest far beyond the scope of Czech and European laws," he was cited as saying. "I do not own Agrofert and I will not get my shares back until the end of my

life, I do not benefit from it either, and this will apply even when I am no longer in politics."

A Commission spokesperson told a briefing that a letter had been sent on May 20, without providing further details.

"We are in contact with the Czech authorities to seek information on what measures are in place to avoid the conflict of interest," the spokesperson said, adding there were regular controls to protect EU financial interests.

Seznam Zpravy reported the Commission advised Czech authorities not to seek reimbursement from the EU budget for any

subsidy payments to the businesses concerned until the issue is resolved. The Commission spokesperson declined to comment.

The government office and development ministry did not respond to questions.

Billionaire Babis controls a vast company in food, agriculture and chemicals that has received hundreds of millions of euros in EU farm and other subsidies. Czech courts and EU institutions previously ruled that Babis was in a conflict of interest when he was prime minister from 2017 to 2021.

Before returning to office, Babis said in December he would move

Agrofert into an independently governed trust.

Some Czech authorities have ruled the trust structure complies with regulations. A Czech ministry sent a letter to the Commission in March outlining its position.

The response fell short, according to the latest letter sent by Hugo Sobral, a deputy director-general at the Commission, who wrote "some matters still need to be clarified," according to iRozhlas.cz.

Any EU refusal to reimburse subsidies would leave costs to be covered by the Czech state budget.

Dozens of countries at UN condemn Moscow's 'threats' to embassies in Kyiv

Almost 50 countries condemned what they said were threats by Russia against embassies in Ukraine in a joint statement at the United Nations on Tuesday.

Russia called on Washington to evacuate its Kyiv embassy on Monday, threatening "systematic strikes" on the Ukrainian capital amid similar warnings to other diplomatic missions.

"We also condemn recent threats by Russia to diplomatic institutions and embassies in Kyiv. This is something which we cannot accept," said the joint statement delivered by Ukrainian UN representative Andriy Melnyk.

The statement was signed by European countries, Japan, South Korea and others.

A weekend barrage by Russia — involving dozens of drones and missiles — killed four people and caused widespread damage across the Ukrainian capital.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres registered his concern over Russian attacks.

"I am deeply concerned by a recent announcement by the Russian Federation to launch consistent and systematic strikes against Ukrainian defense enterprises in Kyiv, as well as against decision making centers and command posts following reports of an Ukrainian drone attack on a college building and dormitory in the Ukrainian city of Starobils, presently occupied by the Russian Federation," Guterres told the UN Security Council.

"Now more than ever it is imperative to avoid any escalation of a conflict that has already exacted a devastating toll on civilians and that risks making the search for peace even more distant."

Among the weapons Russia used at the weekend was its Oreshnik hypersonic missile, which can travel 10 times the speed of sound and is capable of carrying nuclear warheads, according to Moscow.

The strikes followed Russian accusations that Ukraine hit a vocational school in the Russian-occupied Lugansk region, killing 21 people.

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his military to retaliate. (AFP)

Four dead after train hits bus in Belgium

AFP
Buggenhout, Belgium

A train yesterday hit a school minibus killing four people, including two children in a "horrific accident" in northern Belgium, authorities said.

The children aged 15 and 12, were killed by the impact alongside the 49-year-old driver and a 27-year-old supervisor, according to Lisa De Wilde, a spokeswoman for the prosecutor's office.

The other five schoolchildren on the bus were injured in the crash at a railway crossing in Buggenhout, a Dutch-speaking municipality about 25 kilometres (15 miles) northwest of Brussels.

"A tragic collision between a train and a school bus took place in Buggenhout this morning. Four people have been killed, including two children," Belgium's deputy prime minister Maxime Prevot wrote on X.

Images from the scene in the Flanders region showed a badly damaged minibus lying on its side on a road next to a railway line, with tents set up by emergency workers around.

The commuter train remained halted on the tracks as forensic teams examined the site.

Prime Minister Bart De Wever posted on social media that he was "deeply moved by the horrific accident... My thoughts go out to the affected families".

The cause of the crash was not immediately clear and an investigation has been opened, the public prosecutor's office said.

Belgium's Infrabel rail agen-



A school minibus is towed away at the scene of a collision with a train in Buggenhout yesterday. (AFP)

cy said footage from the scene showed that the barriers at the crossing had been closed and a red light was showing at the time of the incident.

"The impact was extremely violent," Infrabel spokesman Frederic Sacre told AFP, adding that the train was travelling at 120 kilometres (75 miles) per hour, but had started slowing down as it approached a station.

"The minibus was thrown about 15 metres (50 feet) into a metal pylon," he said.

In total, the vehicle was carrying seven pupils from a school for children with learning disabilities, authorities told a press conference. The other five children on board were taken to a local hospital where they remained in stable

conditions, having sustained severe injuries, prosecutors said.

Their lives were not in danger, added police spokeswoman An Berger. "I can't imagine what the parents are going through," Magda, a woman in her 40s whose son was at the station waiting for the train involved in the crash when the collision occurred, told AFP.

No one on the train was hurt. European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen joined in the stream of commiserations from politicians, saying she was "heartbroken" by the collision.

"My deepest condolences go out to the victims' families and their loved ones," von der Leyen posted online.

"Today, Europe grieves with Belgium."

Fish-eating cormorant lands in EU's crosshairs

AFP
Brussels

The great cormorant bird is eating too much fish for the liking of a group of EU nations that yesterday called for a cull.

Great cormorant numbers have ballooned in Europe since the bird became a protected species in 1979, much to the annoyance of human fishers in countries where the black feathered bird is a rival.

"The annual fish consumption of an adult great cormorant is estimated at approximately 180 kilogrammes whereas the average fish consumption per EU citizen amounts to around 23 kilogrammes," the Czech Republic, Sweden and seven other EU members wrote in a note to illustrate "the urgency of the situation".

The issue was placed on the agenda of a meeting of European Union agriculture and fisheries ministers in Brussels yesterday, where the countries called for the bird's population to be kept at "an ecologically and economically acceptable level". In practice, this would entail lowering its protected status to allow for more hunting — a move opposed by conservationists who say it would not help restore fish stocks.

"We cannot consider nature as if it only belongs to humans and treat native predators as a nuisance," Marion Bessol of BirdLife International said

The issue was placed on the agenda of a meeting of European Union agriculture and fisheries ministers in Brussels yesterday, where the countries called for the bird's population to be kept at "an ecologically and economically acceptable level".

as the idea was first floated in September. "Cormorants have as much right to eat fish as we do."

Cormorants' appetite for fish drove the bird almost to the brink of extinction in Europe, with colonies systematically destroyed in some instances with help from fire brigades and military forces, according to a report by the European Parliament.

In the early 1960s, the species numbered only a few thousand breeding pairs in the main breeding range comprising the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Poland, the paper said. There are currently up to 2 mn great cormorants in Europe.

"The great cormorant... is causing a lot of problems in the Baltic Sea," Finnish Agriculture Minister Sari Essayah told reporters in Brussels.

Cull proponents will have to persuade a majority of EU states for their plan to go ahead. A recent similar move against the wolf proved successful, resulting last year in a lowering of the canine's protection status.

SpaceX debut draws a crowd, but few recent hot IPOs outpace the market

Wall Street is abuzz with next month's expected blockbuster debut of Elon Musk's rocket and satellite maker SpaceX, but few of the biggest IPOs in recent years have paid off for investors who bought in when the deals came to market. A Reuters analysis of the 50 IPOs with the highest valuations in the past five years shows that investors would have been better off buying an S&P 500 index fund about three-quarters of the time. The data underscores the difficulty of finding bargains among companies whose valuations have often surged long before the stock's debut. An investor who bought each of the IPOs tracked by Reuters would be up an average of 27% through May 21. That compares to an

average gain of 53% in the S&P 500 over those same periods. The analysis assumes the buyer would be able to purchase shares at the IPO price - often not possible for a retail investor - or simply buy the broad-market S&P. Historical returns for investors buying during the frenzied first day of trading of a stock fare even worse, the analysis showed. "It's difficult to make money unless you're in the early stages of these things and buying these things before the IPO," said Dennis Dick, a proprietary trader at Triple D Trading. SpaceX's debut is expected to be followed by OpenAI and Anthropic, tapping into demand for AI-related companies that has sent the US stock market to record highs. Set to trade under

the ticker 'SPCX', SpaceX filed its prospectus on Wednesday, with a share sale potentially as early as June 11. Founder Elon Musk is making some shares available to retail investors through Robinhood, SoFi and other trading platforms that would allow them to get in at a lower price. The space exploration company is expected to target a \$1.75tn valuation that would dwarf all previous Wall Street stock listings, but the Reuters analysis shows that such superlatives are no guarantee investors will make money. University of Florida professor Jay Ritter, who studies IPOs, said that while most public listings underperform the S&P 500 over the long run, companies with

particularly high valuations as measured by price-to-sales tend to fare the worst. At a \$1.75tn valuation, SpaceX's price-to-sales ratio would be nearly 100, compared to AI heavyweight Nvidia's price-to-sales ratio of 24. SpaceX lost nearly \$5bn last year. "Every one of these companies where investors are willing to pay a very high price-to-sales ratio has a compelling story for why the future potentially can be really bright," Ritter said. "But, you know, stuff could go wrong." Among the IPOs analyzed, AI-related chip designers Astera Labs and Arm Holdings have been the biggest winners. Astera has surged over 700% since its 2024 IPO, while Arm

has soared about 400% since its 2023 debut. Both of those performances outpace the S&P. Cerebras Systems, another AI chip designer, soared 52% from its May 14 IPO price; it is down around 27% from its first intraday high. Among the biggest disappointments in recent years, Chinese ride-hailing giant Didi Global was delisted from the New York Stock Exchange in 2022 following its heavily oversubscribed IPO the year before. Now trading over-the-counter, Didi Global shares are down about 74% from their \$14 IPO price. Electric car maker Rivian Automotive has slumped 82% since its IPO in 2021 that briefly made it the second-most valuable US automaker.

The company continues to lose money for every car it builds, and is burning around \$1bn in cash every quarter. Shares in design software firm Figma nearly quadrupled in their first trading session last July. But with investors worried that generative AI could commoditize Figma's technology, its stock is down 35% from the \$33 IPO price. Even the hottest offerings can lag. Chinese e-commerce company Alibaba, which Reuters did not include in its analysis, holds the record for the largest US IPO by valuation. Touted as the "Amazon of China," its shares have doubled since its 2014 Wall Street debut, during which time the S&P 500 has returned over 300%. - Reuters

Inside one of Middle East's longest-running influence operations



By Marc Owen Jones

Sudan's civil war has produced one of the world's worst humanitarian catastrophes. Since fighting erupted in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), tens of thousands have been killed, millions displaced, and warnings of atrocity crimes and genocidal violence have intensified, particularly in Darfur. Yet the war has unfolded alongside another conflict: a vast online struggle over narrative, legitimacy, and visibility. For years, social media companies have claimed they are doing a lot to tackle disinformation, and bot networks (or electronic flies as we call them in the Gulf). Networks are supposedly identified, exposed, and removed. Yet a recent investigation I conducted as a UNESCO Fellow into influence operations surrounding Sudan uncovered something troubling: a sprawling bot and sockpuppet network that has operated across the Middle East for years, surviving suspensions, adapting to platform changes, and shaping political discourse across multiple countries and conflicts. The operation consisted of hundreds of core sockpuppet accounts supported by thousands of auxiliary bots producing more than 170,000 posts across multiple languages over several years. Its activity stretched across Sudan, Yemen, Tunisia, Mauritania, Libya, Syria, Egypt, and the Gulf - including Qatar. Sudan sat at the centre of the network's activity. The findings suggest these networks increasingly function as parallel media infrastructures. They do not simply spread isolated pieces of false information. They sustain broader political narratives through repetition, selective omission, coordinated amplification, and the simulation of public consensus. Collectively, they manufacture the appearance of organic political sentiment while concealing the centralised and inauthentic nature of the operation itself. The network's activity closely tracked developments in Sudan's civil war. As violence escalated following April 2023, Sudan-related content surged dramatically. The operation overwhelmingly promoted narratives aligned with the RSF, portraying the group as humanitarian, peace-oriented, and legitimate, while assigning responsibility for civilian suffering, famine, and instability almost exclusively to the SAF and alleged Islamist actors.

This framing extended well beyond ordinary wartime propaganda. The RSF leadership was repeatedly associated with diplomacy, civilian protection, and humanitarianism. Reports of abuses attributed to the RSF were systematically ignored, denied, or reframed. The result was a highly disciplined narrative environment in which one side of the conflict was persistently rehabilitated while responsibility for violence was externalised elsewhere. These dynamics matter because information manipulation directly affects how conflicts are understood internationally. In atrocity contexts, coordinated influence operations can muddy attribution, distort public understanding, weaken the visibility of credible reporting, and interfere with humanitarian and diplomatic responses. Sudan's war has already suffered from limited media access, fragmented reporting, and competing geopolitical interests. Large-scale influence operations further degrade an already fragile information environment. One of the most striking findings in the report concerned the structure of the network itself. Rather than functioning as a single unified cluster, the operation was organised into regional "cells." Different groups of accounts posed as users from specific countries, often using local flags, dialects, imagery, and national symbols to enhance credibility. Tunisian-focused accounts interacted heavily with other Tunisian-focused accounts. Sudan-focused accounts clustered around Sudanese themes. Mauritanian-focused accounts amplified Mauritanian content. Longitudinal analysis, however, revealed repeated interaction with the same low-salience "filler" accounts focused on entertainment, viral videos, and generic social media content. These auxiliary accounts acted as connective infrastructure linking otherwise separate regional clusters together. What initially appeared to be dispersed online communities increasingly resembled a coordinated transnational influence architecture.



This photo illustration shows a mobile phone screen displaying the icons for the social networking apps Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. (AFP/File Picture)

Temporal analysis also exposed patterns inconsistent with authentic geographically distributed behavior. Accounts claiming to represent users from multiple countries such as Libya or Tunisia displayed similar posting rhythms aligned with Gulf-region working hours. The further the claimed location was from Gulf Standard Time, the more pronounced the discrepancy became. Perhaps most importantly, the network adapted over time. Accounts were suspended, repurposed, renamed, and replaced. Narratives shifted in response to regional developments. More recently, the operation appears to have incorporated AI-assisted accounts, synthetic personas, and increasingly automated forms of engagement. Some accounts displayed homogenised language patterns, repetitive slogans, and coordinated interaction structures characteristic of emerging AI-enabled influence operations. This persistence is significant. The dominant assumption surrounding online influence operations is often that they are temporary campaigns tied to specific events or elections. What emerged in this investigation was something more durable and infrastructural. The network operated across years, multiple countries, several languages, and different political contexts while maintaining broad narrative consistency and operational coordination. The broader implications extend well beyond Sudan. For years, discussions around coordinated influence operations have focused heavily on Russia, China, or Western elections. Yet the Middle East is one of the world's most sophisticated environments for digital authoritarianism, computational propaganda, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour. Governments, proxy actors, political networks, and commercial operators across the region have developed increasingly advanced methods for shaping online discourse and manufacturing legitimacy at scale. At the same time, social media platforms continue to struggle with systematic enforcement, particularly in Arabic and other non-English contexts. Many of these networks persist for years despite public exposure. Verification systems designed to enhance trust can instead be exploited to increase visibility and perceived legitimacy. Indeed, 40 of the accounts in this network had verification status, but were entirely fake. The consequences may extend even further as AI systems increasingly retrieve and synthesize information from social media ecosystems. Coordinated influence operations don't just shape what users encounter online, but they also shape the informational environment from which AI systems generate knowledge itself. While disinformation is a central issue, perhaps more worrying is the emergence of durable influence infrastructures engineered to manipulate visibility, simulate public consensus, and shape political reality across entire regions over long periods of time.

• The writer is an Associate Professor of Media Analytics at Northwestern University in Qatar, a Unesco Fellow, and author of several books including *Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East*.

Back in time



A woman walks past a mural depicting the Cuban national football team that participated in the 1938 World Cup in France, painted on a metro station in Mexico City. (AFP)

US Treasury rout tests Washington's tolerance for higher borrowing costs

US President Donald Trump's resolve on Iran is being tested by a force largely beyond his control: the bond market. As yields rose rapidly over the last week, a White House official said there was significant anxiety among staff over gasoline prices and where the bond market is headed, with fuel prices the biggest source of anxiety right now. Higher yields mean elevated borrowing costs for businesses and consumers while rising oil prices push up inflation expectations. That mixture can cause headaches for the administration as it prepares for midterm elections in November. "The markets are showing him pain, and he has to figure out how to unwind that - and it's not that easy," said Greg Farnello, head of US rates strategy at AmeriVet Securities in New York. "We're already at levels that ultimately will spill over into mortgage rates and it's going to spill over into the housing market." "I do think that if the administration is worried about higher yields, then trying to de-escalate the situation with calmer words is something they can do," said Shawn Snyder, economic strategist at Potomac Fund Management in Bethesda, Maryland. He added that market prices are responsive to comments from Trump about a resolution to the war. Over recent days and weeks, US Treasury investors have focused on the elusiveness of a deal and long-term consequences of the war, lifting yields well above 4.5% on the benchmark 10-year note. Meanwhile, Federal Reserve officials looking to squash inflation have been discussing the possibility of raising interest rates instead of cutting them as Trump has urged. And some Republicans in Congress are growing concerned at some of Trump's calls for spending ahead of the midterm elections which will decide whether they maintain thin control of the House and Senate. Rising Treasury yields feed directly into borrowing costs across the economy, including mortgages, credit cards and business loans, and can cause financial stability issues. Bond investors said the administration would have to pay attention. US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and the White House both suggested that elevated yields would prove temporary. Yields on US Treasuries retraced some of their sharp run-up, after Trump said talks with Iran were in their final stage. Earlier in the week the 10-year yield touched 4.69%, the highest since January 2025. It has surged more than 50 basis points since the

February 28 start of the US-Israeli war with Iran, and was last at 4.56%. Reaction to the latest progress on peace is yet to be seen in the market. A sustained rise in borrowing costs could cool housing demand, weigh on consumer spending and, in a worst-case scenario, tip the economy toward recession. That risk could prove especially significant heading into the US midterm elections. "Affordability is a buzzword in Washington and for good reason because affordability really resonates with a large number of households and interest rates drive a lot of it," said John Kerschner, global head of securitized products at Janus Henderson in Denver. Still, if a peace deal is ultimately brokered, the effects could be transient. This week, Bessent said elevated yields, especially at the long end of the curve, were being driven by the Iran war energy shock that will prove temporary. The White House also said any disruption was likely to be short-lived. "President Trump has always been clear about temporary market disruptions as a result of Operation Epic Fury," White House spokesman Kush Desai said in a statement. He said the administration was still focused on Trump's "long-term agenda of accelerating economic growth, cutting red tape, and slashing fraud in government spending to restore America's fiscal health." The bond market has long been a powerful political force that can shape policy in Washington, which must maintain investor confidence to finance government debt. When investors lose faith, rising borrowing costs can pressure leaders. Former President Bill Clinton's adviser James Carville told the 'Wall Street Journal' in the early 1990s that he wanted to be reincarnated as the bond market, because "you can intimidate everybody." Market participants warned that Washington's ability and willingness to respond may be limited, even if yields spike to a key pain level they identify as 5%, particularly when rates are driven by strong growth and persistent inflation rather than credit concerns. Intervening too aggressively in that environment risks undermining credibility on inflation and could exacerbate the pressures pushing yields higher. Sam Lynton-Brown, head of global macro strategy at BNP Paribas in London, said the rise was being driven less by fears over government borrowing and more by sticky inflation, strong economic growth, and elevated energy prices tied to geopolitical strains. - Reuters

Kyiv expects Nato summit to discuss funding despite trouble securing backing: Envoy

Reuters
Ankara

Ukraine's ambassador to Turkey said he expects Nato to discuss financial support for Kyiv at its summit in July, suggesting each member contributes a small proportion of its budget, despite the proposal not gaining traction with allies.

Ambassador Nariman Dzhelalov told Reuters yesterday he hoped Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy would attend the July 7-8 summit in Ankara, adding

Kyiv also wants members to reaffirm support for Ukraine's strategic goal of joining the military alliance. Kyiv depends on international aid to cover its budgetary needs and fund its war with Russia.

Zelenskyy called last June for Western partners to allocate 0.25% of their GDP to helping Kyiv ramp up weapons production and officials said Nato boss Mark Rutte had floated the idea of alliance members — except the US — spending that amount for Ukraine.

However, the idea has faced resistance and Rutte said last week that he did not believe it would be

accepted. Diplomats told Reuters that discussions were ongoing about ideas to demonstrate Nato support for Ukraine at the summit.

Despite the lack of traction for dedicating a fixed portion of GDP to Ukraine aid, the ambassador suggested Kyiv was pushing for the idea. "A mechanism here (could be) one in which every Nato member contributes a part of their finances to support strengthening Ukraine's security capabilities," he said, acknowledging that not every ally wants to allocate resources as they try to boost their own defences in line with Nato rules.

"But we are not saying 'give us 100%' just a very small piece," he said, without elaborating.

Germany's Johann Wadephul separately proposed at a meeting of Nato foreign ministers last week that European Nato countries boost bilateral aid to Ukraine, three diplomats told Reuters.

The German proposal, one of the diplomats said, calls for European Nato governments to provide €30 bn to €40 bn to Ukraine per year this year and next year. Germany already plans to provide Ukraine with around €11 bn in bilateral aid in 2026. The sources did not

say whether European allies were aligned on that suggestion.

The summit comes amid tensions between Washington and European allies over a variety of issues. US President Donald Trump has repeatedly demanded that Nato partners significantly boost defence expenditure, as the US administration maintains that European allies should ultimately assume primary responsibility for the conventional defence of the continent. Dzhelalov said Ukraine welcomed Turkey's efforts to mediate between Kyiv and Moscow, adding that Ukraine was ready for

talks with Russia at leaders' level.

He said Turkey was the most appropriate venue, since it hosted previous talks and maintains ties with both sides. He said the defence industry stood out as a key area of cooperation between Ankara and Kyiv and that Zelenskyy had held discussions on this with President Tayyip Erdogan during a visit to Istanbul in April.

He said Ukraine had conveyed a proposal to Turkey regarding the possible sale, joint production, or technology transfer for Ukrainian drones, adding Kyiv was also ready to train operators if needed.

Putin to raise Armenia's EU ambitions at Kazakh summit

AFP
Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin will travel to Kazakhstan today for a three-day visit, during which he is expected to address Armenia's EU membership bid — a move Moscow has openly criticised.

Armenia has been building ties with Brussels for years, with frustration in the country over Moscow's perceived failure to protect it during conflicts with neighbouring Azerbaijan.

Last year, Yerevan passed a law formally declaring its intention to seek EU membership, though it has yet to submit a formal application. Armenia still hosts a Russian military base on its territory.

Speaking at a press briefing attended by AFP, Kremlin foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov said Putin would raise Yerevan's EU aspirations at an upcoming Eurasian Economic Union summit — a Russia-led eco-

nomie bloc of former Soviet states that includes Armenia.

"Putin has repeatedly stressed that it is impossible to belong to two associations simultaneously. It simply will not work," Ushakov said.

He added that it was equally "impossible" to expel a member state from the bloc, but that a country could announce it was ending its "cooperation".

The consequences and risks of such a step would need to be discussed at the summit, he added.

The Russian leader will attend the meeting alongside Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov and an Armenian deputy minister, Ushakov said.

Putin is also scheduled to speak at a forum in the Kazakh capital, Astana, on Thursday and hold bilateral talks with Kazakh officials.

He will be joined by the heads of Russia's space agency Roscosmos, which leases the Baikonur cosmo-



Russian President Vladimir Putin during a meeting in Moscow on Monday. (Reuters)

drome from Kazakhstan, and nuclear giant Rosatom, which is currently building Kazakhstan's first nuclear power plant.

Around 15 documents covering energy, economics and tourism are expected to be signed between the two countries, Ushakov said.

Saudi uses drones to shield pilgrims from extreme heat

From Page 1

"Our teams must ensure we reach patients as quickly as possible. This is a crucial factor with these extremely large crowds," he added.

Before the adoption of drones, drivers could spend over an hour en route to clinics running low on supplies.

Now, authorities have centralised operations around a sprawling centre that supplies drones with medications and other necessities.

"We are seeking to integrate new innovations through which we can ensure that medical supplies arrive safely, as quickly as possible, and with the highest quality," said Bathi.

In the operations room — equipped with a giant data screen — staff carefully track drone deliveries, while other employees use electric scooters to get around faster.

Drones are part of a growing arsenal of technology-led solutions aiming to better manage the hajj and the challenges presented by the searing desert climate.

Artificial intelligence has been deployed to help monitor the footage from thousands of cameras in and around the holy city of Makkah. The new solutions help supplement more traditional methods to manage the heat, which include giant fans, trucks distributing free water and mist systems that help cool crowds.

"Heat exhaustion is one of the main issues" during the hajj, said Saudi health official Jamil Abu al-Aynayn. "We maintain a high and rapid level of readiness."

Ukraine fails to pass key vote on parcels tax ahead of IMF's visit

Reuters
Kyiv

Ukraine's parliament failed on Tuesday to pass legislation raising taxes on parcels sent to the country, a key condition to unlock billions in funding, as the International Monetary Fund's mission was due to arrive in Kyiv for its first loan review.

Currently, parcels containing goods worth less than 150 euros (\$175.54) are not subject to taxes in Ukraine. Introducing the tax would generate around 10 billion hryvnias (\$227.53 mn) annually, the finance ministry said. However, the issue has turned out to be a sensitive one for Ukraine as

some parliamentarians fear it will further raise the cost of living for people already battered by more than four years of war. Others argue that it will help domestic producers by helping reduce consumer imports.

The IMF's monitoring mission is expected in Kyiv on Wednesday for its first review of an \$8.1 billion lending program to Ukraine, approved in February.

Opposition lawmaker Yaroslav Zhelezniak said that parliament had failed to get enough votes to pass the required amendments on foreign parcels. It was not immediately clear whether lawmakers plan to return to the issue this week.

The IMF requires Ukraine to expand its domestic revenue base

as the country faces a ballooning budget deficit due to growing defence spending as the war grinds on.

Ukraine currently channels the bulk of its domestic revenues to defence and relies on foreign financial aid to be able to meet its social and humanitarian spending.

The IMF's program remaining on track is also a prerequisite for progressively unlocking a 90 billion euro, two-year, support package for Ukraine from the European Union.

Ukraine has struggled to move forward with several key laws and reforms aimed at expanding its tax base, including another to introduce value-added tax for self-employed individuals.

Russia capable of falsifying GPS signals deep into Europe: official

Russia can falsify GPS signals deep into Europe at a radius of up to 450km (280 miles) from its Kaliningrad exclave due to hugely-expanded capacity, a Lithuanian official said on Tuesday. Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, European nations have often accused Russia of electronic interference but President Vladimir Putin's government denies that, blaming Western smear tactics. Darius Kuliesius, deputy head of Lithuania's communications regulator, told Reuters that Russia increased its GPS "spoofing" antennae, broadcasting false signals to confuse other location systems, from three in early 2025 to 36 now. The antennae are based, he said, in the heavily militarised territory of Kaliningrad, sandwiched

between Nato alliance members Lithuania and Poland on the Baltic coast. "The occasional interference began with the 2023 Nato summit in Vilnius. Now they have built up the infrastructure and the interference has become systemic, permanent, unending Russian provocation against European security," Kuliesius said.

Moscow has frequently denied such accusations in the past. A map from the Lithuanian regulator indicated Russia's Global Positioning System falsification could reach across Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, most of Poland, and parts of Finland, Sweden and Belarus, as well as the Baltic Sea. The range had reached 450km, Kuliesius said, without detailing how that was measured.

Last year, a Spanish military jet with Defence Minister Margarita Robles onboard experienced a GPS disturbance near Kaliningrad while a plane carrying European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was jammed en route to Bulgaria. Estonia and neighbouring Finland have also blamed Russia for jamming GPS navigation devices in the region's airspace. However, most modern airliners and major airports have a variety of navigation tools available if GPS encounters problems.

Kuliesius said Lithuania's mobile phone networks near Kaliningrad are degraded in quality due to interference affecting some frequencies, with spikes notable during Ukrainian drone attacks on Russia. (Reuters)

Record temperatures as spring heatwave bakes Europe

AFP
London

People in western Europe turned to fans and fountains as they sweltered through a record-breaking heatwave yesterday, with temperatures set to soar even further.

Hit by a so-called "heat dome" of warm air from northern Africa that is pushing the mercury well above normal levels for May, some Europeans even admitted they were considering getting air conditioning, in a region famously averse.

Baking in a bright London sun, 47-year-old Gurjit Gill, who works in banking, said he was happy to be going into work — because of the air con.

"I'm thinking about actually maybe getting an AC unit, because the bedrooms at nighttime are quite unbearable," he told AFP.

People across western Europe swarmed beaches, braved streets clutching handheld fans and umbrellas to fend off the sun, and went for a dip or splashed themselves wherever they could — including at Rome's Barcaccia fountain and bubblers in the Jardin du Palais Royal in Paris.

The UK reported its hottest-ever day for May, at 35.1C at Kew Gardens, in southwest London — breaking a record of 34.8C set at the same location Monday — as



Tourists shield themselves from the sun with an umbrella during a heatwave next to Duomo cathedral, in Milan yesterday. (Reuters)

a high-pressure system trapped warm air over western Europe.

In France, which also logged its hottest-ever May day Monday and then again on Tuesday, the weather agency said the heatwave could last through the week, predicting temperatures could go as high as 39C in some areas.

"We are not in an emergency situation," Health Minister Stephanie Rist said, but added: "We need to be wary of these heatwaves, even if we're starting to get used to them."

Tennis fans in Paris baked in temperatures of 33C at the French Open, with players battling through heat that Norway's Casper Ruud said left him feeling "like a zombie".

Scientists say human-driven climate change is amplifying such extremes, with weather events like heatwaves, droughts and floods becoming more intense and frequent.

Bob Ward, from the Grantham Research Institute on Climate



A man paints the hull of a boat in front of the House of Parliament in central London in heat. (AFP)

Change and the Environment at the London School of Economics, said changes in behaviour, homes and businesses were needed.

"We now have the climate of the Mediterranean countries in the summer but we don't have the buildings and offices built for a Mediterranean climate," he added, calling for action.

Swiss tourist Philippe Bigness, 56, visiting London with his father, told AFP they had to change plans and retreat to their hotel.

"If you're not concerned about global warming, you must be deaf, blind altogether, right?" he said.

French authorities on Tuesday reported at least seven deaths linked to the heatwave — five of which were drownings, as many people sought relief at water spots, even though lifeguard supervision on beaches is not due to start in many areas until July.

Authorities in Britain said four teens had drowned in England since Sunday.

A record May temperature of 28.8C was recorded at two of Ireland's weather stations amid the current blast of heat, Met Eireann data showed.

Benjamin Boisson, a fruit grower in southern France, worried the extreme fluctuation in temperature would cause a sharp drop in production, as well as complicate storage.

Already, a previous warm weather spell forced him to harvest apricots five days earlier than planned this year, on May 1, he said.

"That may not seem like much, but it changes everything. The major retailers weren't ready and are still selling Spanish apricots when they should have switched over to French ones," he said.

Spain's State Meteorological Agency (Aemet) also warned of "extraordinarily high temperatures for this time of year" that will continue all week.

"Widespread tropical nights" are also forecast in southwestern Spain from Wednesday, with temperatures peaking from Wednesday to Friday at between 36C and 38C, it wrote on X.

Farther east, Italy's Lazio region, which includes Rome, on Monday approved rules limiting work in conditions "with prolonged exposure in the sun" between 12:30 pm and 4:00 pm.

In Austria, Vienna set up special misters to help passersby keep cool on the street.

Souq Waqif: Lights, crowd, the spirit of the season



Residents and visitors thronged Souq Waqif on the eve of Eid al-Adha yesterday, where illuminated heritage facades, a glowing minaret and a balloon-seller's cluster of fairy lights lent the historic quarter a festive shimmer. The marketplace draws crowds each year as families gather to soak up the celebratory mood ahead of the holiday. **PICTURES:** Thajudheen

Pilgrims praise organisational standards of Qatar's Haj Mission

QNA
Makham Al Mukarramah

Several pilgrims from Qatar's Haj mission praised the advanced level of services provided during this year's pilgrimage season, saying the mission delivered an integrated model of field operations and organisation from the moment they departed Qatar through their movement between the holy sites under a carefully co-ordinated operational plan.

The pilgrims said the extensive preparations and advanced facilities helped create an atmosphere conducive to worship and tranquillity, enabling them to perform the rituals in comfort and peace, free from hardship. They also commended the close co-operation between the Qatari Haj mission

and Haj operators, highlighting the high level of co-ordination and teamwork demonstrated in serving Qatari pilgrims and ensuring their comfort and care throughout their spiritual journey.

The operational plan covered reception procedures, pilgrim grouping and transportation, accommodation, medical care and religious guidance, all of which directly contributed to pilgrims' comfort and the ease with which they performed the rituals.

The Qatari Haj mission operated through an integrated support system encompassing service, technical, field and logistical units. Its efforts began with receiving pilgrims at the airport, overseeing their transfer to accommodations and co-ordinating their movement to the holy sites under carefully designed plans

implemented in co-operation with Haj operators and the relevant Saudi authorities. The arrangements ensured the smooth movement of pilgrims between Mina, Arafat and Muzdalifah via the Al Mashaaer Al Mugaddassah Metro line.

This season also saw a marked improvement in the facilities and services provided at Qatari pilgrims' camps in Arafat. The mission continued upgrading its facilities in line with the highest approved standards and specifications to ensure pilgrims' comfort and safety. The camps featured air-conditioned tents equipped with modern amenities, a fully furnished central majlis and walkways fitted with misting fans to ease the heat, in addition to integrated hospitality services, open buffets and modern sanitary facilities. As

a result, the camps were regarded among the most distinguished at the holy sites in terms of organisation and quality of services.

The Qatari Haj mission also continued implementing its operational plan around the clock through its religious, medical, communications, support, field and logistics units to provide pilgrims with a safe and integrated Haj experience. The mission worked to meet pilgrims' varied needs and accompanied them throughout their movement between the holy sites, while also providing immediate medical care and awareness and guidance services, reflecting its commitment to continuously improving services for Qatari pilgrims.

This season, the mission introduced an upgraded version of the innovative "HT Rescue Jacket,"

worn by a number of paramedics accompanying Qatari pilgrims. The jacket includes integrated medical tools and equipment designed to facilitate rapid first aid and emergency response amid crowds during the pilgrimage rituals.

As part of efforts to strengthen communication with pilgrims, the mission's communications and support unit provided a 24-hour toll-free hotline to receive inquiries and reports and refer them directly to the relevant units, improving response times and the quality of services provided to Qatari pilgrims.

The Qatari Haj mission also praised the considerable efforts undertaken by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, the Crown Prince and Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Haj and Umrah, citing the advanced organisational and service

capabilities and integrated operational systems put in place to manage crowds and facilitate pilgrims' movement between the holy sites. The measures enabled pilgrims to perform their rituals safely and with ease in an atmosphere marked by security, reassurance and efficiency.

The mission affirmed that the State of Qatar, under the guidance of its wise leadership, places the comfort and safety of the country's pilgrims at the forefront of its priorities. Through the Qatari Haj mission, the state is committed to providing an integrated system of logistical, medical, religious and guidance services in line with the highest standards, ensuring a safe and seamless pilgrimage experience that reflects Qatar's commitment to serving its pilgrims from their departure until their safe return home.

Karak to matcha: Qatar's beverage market shows resilience, evolving tastes

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

The popularity of both karak and speciality coffee – including premium matcha drinks – is highlighting the strength and adaptability of Qatar's food and beverage (F&B) sector ahead of Eid al-Adha.

In Qatar, a customer can buy a QR2 karak from a roadside cafeteria in the afternoon and later spend QR25 on a matcha latte or speciality iced coffee. Increasingly, many consumers are doing both.

"I drink coffee in the morning to stay awake and active throughout the day, then karak in the afternoon after finishing work," Filipino expatriate Eugene B told *Gulf Times*, describing both beverages as part of his daily routine. "I think it has become normal for many of us, including my colleagues."

Having worked in the F&B sector for several years, Eugene said beverages such as matcha, milk tea, and other refreshing drinks continue to enjoy strong demand in Qatar alongside traditional favourites.

That balance between affordability and premium café culture has become one of the defining characteristics of Qatar's F&B industry, it is learnt. This has helped the sector remain resilient through years of regional uncertainty, in-



Muhammed Kabeer

cluding the 2017 Gulf blockade, the pandemic, inflation, and supply-chain pressures across the Gulf.

Unlike some markets where consumers lean either toward budget spending or luxury consumption, Qatar's dining culture has evolved into a blend of affordable comfort and trend-driven experiences.

At the affordable end is karak – quick, inexpensive, and deeply embedded in daily life. According to Visit Qatar, the drink became one of the country's most recognisable beverages through South Asian influence and Qatar's cafeteria culture.

For many workers, students, and residents, karak is part of a daily routine rather than an occasional indulgence. Its affordability also ensures a steady flow of customers for small cafeterias, even during periods of economic pressure.

An employee at a popular tea shop along Old Airport Road told

Gulf Times that the outlet attracts a constant stream of customers every day, ranging from delivery riders to office workers, with karak remaining its top-selling drink.

"On almost any day, you'll see customers lining up, probably because karak, when prepared properly and consistently, is both delicious and affordable," he said.

Yet only a few streets away from these cafeterias, another side of Qatar's beverage market continues to expand rapidly.

Doha's speciality coffee scene has grown significantly in recent years, driven largely by younger consumers seeking premium experiences, stylish interiors, and social spaces rather than simply a caffeine fix. Speciality cafés now serve Spanish lattes, cold brews, and handcrafted coffees that can cost nearly 10 times as much as a regular cup of karak.

Operators say customers are paying not only for the drink itself, but also for the atmosphere, branding, and lifestyle associated with café culture.

The same trend is evident in the rising popularity of matcha beverages. Once considered a niche product, matcha has developed a strong following among younger consumers in Qatar, influenced partly by Japanese pop culture, anime, manga, and minimalist café aesthetics widely shared on social media.

Many cafés now offer iced strawberry matcha, ceremonial-grade matcha lattes, and matcha-based desserts aimed at Gen Z consumers seeking visually appealing and wellness-oriented drinks.

Milk tea and boba beverages have also secured a strong foothold in the local market. Driven in part by Korean entertainment, East Asian food trends, and TikTok culture, bubble tea brands continue to expand across malls and commercial districts in Doha. Drinks topped with tapioca pearls, cream foam, or brown sugar syrup regularly sell for QR20 or more despite being considerably more expensive than traditional cafeteria beverages.

Industry observers say consumers rarely view these drinks as competitors. Instead, each serves a different purpose and appeals to different moods and occasions.

Speaking to *Gulf Times*, Muhammed Kabeer, general manager of Family Food Centre's Distribution Division, said the diversity of demand has made Qatar's F&B market particularly adaptable.

"With expatriates making up most of the population, the country's culinary landscape constantly absorbs influences from different regions," he said. "Consumers are therefore more open to trying unfamiliar flavours and quickly adapting to international food trends."

As a result, a traditional cafe-



Karak – quick, inexpensive, and deeply embedded in daily life in Qatar.



Premium matcha



Speciality coffee

ria can thrive beside a Korean-style milk tea shop, while a Japanese-inspired matcha café operates near a speciality coffee roastery – often attracting overlapping customer bases.

This adaptability proved critical during periods of crisis. During the 2017 blockade, restaurants and cafés quickly adjusted sourcing strategies and menus as trade routes shifted. During the pandemic, businesses rapidly adopted delivery apps, online ordering, and hybrid concepts, while consumers adapted just as quickly.

Research from Mordor Intelligence projects that Qatar's foodservice market will continue growing steadily through 2031,

supported by tourism, digital delivery platforms, and evolving consumer habits.

Operators say the sector's resilience cannot be explained by infrastructure alone. It is also rooted in consumer behaviour, with people moving comfortably between affordability and indulgence depending on mood, occasion, and trends.

During Eid al-Adha, that flexibility becomes even more visible. Families gather over traditional tea after prayers, teenagers queue for milk tea in shopping malls later in the evening, while young professionals fill speciality cafés serving premium coffee and matcha drinks well past midnight.

Cultural fiesta awaits public on first three days of Eid al-Adha

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

An exciting cultural fiesta and several health and safety awareness programmes await the public on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, as the Workers Support and Insurance Fund is organising a number of events under the theme "Eid al-Adha Celebrations 2026 for Communities" during the first three days of the festival.

Starting today (Wednesday), the programmes are held at various locations across the country and feature a number of events that begin at 5pm on all three days. The celebrations are conducted with the participation of a large number



of community organisations and in co-operation with various community schools, which will be presenting colourful and catchy programmes to entertain the crowd.

The venues for the events are Asian Town and Al Khor Workers Sports Complex on the first and second days of Eid, and Kreeq Sports Stadium behind Barwa Village on all three days of Eid. The events will start at 5pm and will

take place until 10pm on the first two days, and on the third day, it will last until 11pm.

The Eid Gah (Eid prayer) is also arranged at the cricket stadium parking lot in Asian Town for 5,000 people, in collaboration with the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. The venue will be open for the public from 4.30am today morning for the convenience of the faithful for the Eid prayer at 5am.

The "Eid al-Adha Celebrations 2026" at Asian Town is held at the car parking area of the cricket stadium within the Doha Industrial Area. In addition to this, a musical concert featuring artists from Pakistan will take place on the first, second and third days of Eid at Kreeq Sports Stadium, located behind Barwa Village and opposite Madinatna, and the celebrations in Al Khor will be held in the Barwa

Workers Recreation Complex in the Al Khor Industrial Area.

In addition to the popular musical band from Pakistan, the celebrations include cultural and traditional shows by community and school teams, as well as a musical concert by local bands. The Worker's Support and Insurance Fund has also arranged valuable prizes for the public through raffle draws.

Meanwhile, various departments of the Ministry of Interior will showcase safety and security awareness programmes and film screenings highlighting key social and security issues. There will also be health awareness programmes and free diabetic and blood pressure checkups by private clinics.

On previous occasions, a large number of people would assemble at the venues to watch the cultural and awareness programmes presented by various groups. Several community organisations used to come up with very catchy and exciting programmes that kept the crowd eager and enthusiastic. The programme is open to the public and entry is free for all.