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His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani received phone calls yesterday from Greece's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni. Mitsotakis and Museveni conveyed their condolences on the passing of HH the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. His Highness the Amir expressed his appreciation for the sentiments and thanked the leaders for the condolence messages. **(QNA)**

During the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, Qatar maintained a comparatively low case-fatality rate, in part through the rapid expansion of intensive care unit (ICU) capacity, the strategic deployment of telehealth services, and efficient co-ordination across hospital networks, including the transformation of facilities such as Al Wakra Hospital into dedicated Covid-19 centres. **To Page 2**



Arab Interior Ministers Council condemns Iran attacks on Qatar, regional countries

The Arab Interior Ministers Council has condemned Iranian ballistic missile and drone attacks targeting Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Jordan. The General Secretariat released a statement yesterday, slamming the attacks as a “flagrant violation” of international law and the principles of good neighbourly relations. It warned that they threatened security and stability across the region. The statement strongly denounced

the attacks as part of “hostile conduct” that could undermine regional stability and jeopardise international peace and security. The secretariat also reaffirmed its full solidarity with Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Jordan, expressing support for measures taken by the four nations to safeguard their security, sovereignty, territorial integrity and the safety of their citizens and residents. **(QNA)**

Newspaper editorials highlight enduring legacy of Father Amir

The enduring legacy of HH the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, may Allah have mercy on him, dominated the editorials of Qatari newspapers yesterday, which reviewed his significant contributions to Qatar’s progress on political, developmental, humanitarian, and diplomatic levels, and the widespread Arab and international esteem in which he was held.

The editorials also highlighted Qatar’s diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions and resolve conflicts, despite campaigns targeting its mediation role, and emphasised its unwavering stance against involvement in any military action.

The newspapers stressed Doha’s continued efforts, in coordination with its regional and international partners, to reach diplomatic solutions that enhance security and stability in the region, reflecting Qatar’s steadfast policy of prioritising dialogue as a firmly established strategic choice.

In its editorial titled “A special status”, *Al Wasat* stated that the continued stream of phone calls received by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani offering condolences on the passing of HH the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, may Allah have mercy on him, for the fourth consecutive day, reflects the deep respect and appreciation for the nation’s departed leader, and it also reflects the high standing that His Highness the Amir and the State of Qatar enjoy worldwide.

The newspaper elucidated that this standing is a result of Qatar’s achievements at the local, regional, and international levels, through its unwavering commitment to strengthening international co-operation and multilateral action, and its continued collaboration with international agencies and organisations. This is exemplified by the presence of fourteen UN offices at the United Nations House in Doha.

The editorial added that the State of Qatar plays a leading role in providing humanitarian and development assistance at both the bilateral and multilateral levels, with a particular focus on promoting and protecting the right to education, especially in emergencies, within its international development and relief programmes.

The newspaper concluded by affirming that these foundations were laid by HH the late Father Amir and further strengthened by His Highness the Amir, enabling the State of Qatar to continue its journey as a nation with an active presence and significant diplomatic and humanitarian contributions that promote security, prosperity, and stability.

Arrayah, in its editorial titled “The Father Amir: A steadfast path in support of Palestine”, noted that the Palestinian cause remained a benchmark for the sincerity of positions and the steadfastness of principles, adding that the State



HH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani

of Qatar, under the leadership of HH the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, may Allah have mercy on him, presented a model of political and humanitarian commitment to the Palestinian people, stemming from a vision that considers supporting Palestine a moral, national, and humanitarian responsibility.

The newspaper explained that HH the Father Amir, since assuming leadership of the country, worked to solidify Qatar’s presence in various efforts supporting Palestinian rights, defending the right of the Palestinian people to establish their independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital in international forums, and emphasising that a just peace can only be achieved by ending the occupation and respecting international law.

It added that Qatari support was not limited to political stances but extended to vital development projects in the Gaza Strip, including housing, roads, hospitals, schools, and infrastructure, with these projects contributing to alleviating the suffering of thousands of families and strengthening the resilience of Palestinian society.

It also underlined that the visit of HH the Father Amir to the Gaza Strip constituted a historic milestone and a political and humanitarian message that embodied practical solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Arrayah concluded its editorial by emphasising that this approach established a continuous Qatari policy that made supporting Palestine a cornerstone of the state’s direction, and it solidified Qatar’s position as a trusted partner in alleviating suffering and defending the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, ensuring that supporting Palestine remains a firm commitment that reflects the state’s identity and humanitarian mission.

In its editorial titled “The Father Amir in the eyes of the media”, *Al Arab* addressed the continued importance given by Arab and international media to the legacy of HH the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, may Allah have mercy on him, with the editorial reviewing his role in the transformations Qatar witnessed over the past decades and the rela-

Qatar receives further messages of condolence

Qatar’s embassies abroad have received further messages of condolence from officials and senior figures following the death of His Highness the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani.

In Sarajevo, the chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dr Denis Becirovic, paid tribute at the Qatar embassy, expressing condolences over the loss.

In Jakarta, Indonesia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Sugiono paid his respects at the Qatar embassy, while in Rome, the president of Italy’s Chamber of Deputies, Lorenzo Fontana, expressed his sympathies.

Further messages were received in Dar es Salaam from Tanzania’s Minister for Foreign Affairs and East African Co-operation Mahmoud Thabit Kombo, and in Warsaw from Marcin Przydacz, the Secretary of State and Head of the International Policy Bureau Chancellery of the President of Poland. **(QNA)**

tionships he established with various countries around the world.

It noted that the Chinese press highlighted Qatar’s diplomatic role during his reign through its engagement in regional mediation efforts and the building of relationships with numerous international and regional actors, adding that the Chinese press considered the Qatari experience a model of a small country in terms of size, yet significant in its international influence and contributions through the use of soft power.

The newspaper stated that media coverage portrayed the HH the late Father Amir as the architect of major transformations in Qatar and the leader who contributed to elevating it to a prominent position on the global economic, media, and political map.

It also mentioned the statements of condolence issued by numerous official international platforms that praised his efforts in strengthening bilateral relations with various countries.

Al Arab concluded its editorial by noting that numerous reports and analysis have addressed the political and developmental legacy of HH Sheikh Hamad, describing the era he led as a turning point in the modern history of Qatar. These reports also highlighted his role in regional and international mediations, his support for regional issues, the establishment of educational, cultural, and media institutions with global influence, the expansion of foreign investments, and the humanitarian aspects of his era and his efforts to promote dialogue and regional peace. **(QNA)**

Amir sends condolences to Algerian president

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani sent a cable of condolences to his brother the President of the People’s Republic of Algeria Abdelmadjid Tebboune on the victims of a fire at an orphanage in the capital Algiers, wishing the injured a speedy recovery.

His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani sent a cable of condolences to the President of the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria Abdelmadjid Tebboune on the victims of a fire at an orphanage in the capital Algiers, wishing the injured a speedy recovery.

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent a cable of condolences to the Prime Minister of the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria Sifi Ghrieb on the victims of a fire at an orphanage in the capital Algiers, wishing the injured a speedy recovery. **(QNA)**

Qatar intercepts Iranian attacks

From Page 1

Jordan’s foreign ministry said in a statement that the attacks represented a “flagrant breach” of international law and the United Nations Charter.

The Arab Interior Ministers

Council also condemned the latest Iranian attacks, with the General Secretariat saying in a statement that the attacks were part of “hostile conduct” that could undermine regional stability and jeopardise international peace and security.

Study highlights evolution of Qatar’s emergency medicine system

From Page 1

These capabilities were further tested and validated during the 2022 FIFA World Cup, when the emergency medicine system successfully managed large-scale, high-acuity patient presentations while maintaining international benchmarks for patient safety and response times.

Collectively, these developments underscore the transformation of Qatar’s emergency medicine system into a mature, specialty-led network capable of supporting both routine emergency care

and national-level crisis response.

The study notes that all these developments have strengthened workforce capacity, enhanced clinical performance, and supported the delivery of emergency care during both routine operations and major system stressors.

The study concludes that Qatar’s experience provides insights relevant to other health-care systems seeking to develop structured, sustainable emergency medicine services through co-ordinated planning and evidence-informed implementation.

Escalation fears mount as US, Iran attack infrastructure

From Page 1

The US and Iran have been testing the limits of escalation since the ceasefire pact collapsed last week, raising the prospect of a return to all-out war.

Trump has threatened to launch broad-based air strikes on Iran’s infrastructure and has also declined to rule out a ground assault on Iran’s coast or islands.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was concerned about the escalation, particularly over “attacks on civilian infrastructure in Iran and across the region”, his spokesperson said.

In the latest strikes, the US military’s Central Command included “military logistics infrastructure” in the list of targets that it said it had hit, the first time it has mentioned infrastructure in more than a week.

Iranian state media said at least five bridges had been struck in the south.

Seven people were reported killed in attacks on bridges in the southern port of Bandar Khamir, where the train station was also hit.

Iran announced attacks on Gulf countries that host US air-bases, including Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait.

Authorities in Kuwait said one of the country’s power generation and water desalination stations had been hit in an Iranian attack, causing damage to facilities, a fire and the disruption of a large number of electricity generation units.

Iran said that it had struck US bases in Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain, and a US radar station in Oman.

Iran also said it fired at Syria, apparently for the first time in the war, targeting what it described as a US Special Forces base in Tanf, which Damascus and Washington say US forces vacated earlier this year.

Filipino community bowls for a cause, supports typhoon survivors back home



By Joey Aguilar
Doha

The Fraternal Order of Eagles - Philippine Eagles (TFOE-PE) Qatar Region brought together dozens of Filipino organisations for a charity bowling tournament in Doha, raising funds to support residents affected by recent typhoons in General Santos City, Mindanao.

Held on July 10, the ‘Solidarity Bowling Competition’ drew overwhelming support from the Filipino community, with organisers saying the venue reached full capacity as 27 organisations fielded 32 teams.

Part of the proceeds will be sent to General Santos City to assist typhoon-affected residents and survivors, highlighting the organisation’s commitment to extending help to communities in need back home.

TFOE-PE Qatar Region Governor Rene Lloren said the event was about more than friendly competition.

“Today is more than just a day of competition; it is a celebration of unity, teamwork, and com-



munity. These games remind us that when we come together with respect and a shared purpose, we can achieve great things,” Lloren said.

He stressed that while winning was not the primary goal, the tournament underlined the importance of building friendships, supporting one another, and demonstrating good sportsmanship.

“Whether we win or lose, what matters most is the friendships we build, the support we give to one another, and the values we demonstrate through good sportsmanship,” he added.

Lloren also thanked volunteers

and organisers, particularly members of the Supreme Elite Lady Eagles Club, for their dedication in preparing the event, as well as the clubs under the Qatar Region for their unwavering support.

“I would like to thank our volunteers, the ‘ates’ of the Supreme Elite Lady Eagles Club, all the club members under Qatar Region, and everyone who worked hard to make this event possible. Your dedication has brought us all together today,” he said.

He also thanked the wider Filipino community for supporting the fundraising initiative.

Addressing the participants,



Lloren encouraged them to compete with integrity while strengthening the bonds within the community.

“Give your best effort, play fairly and encourage one another. Remember that every challenge is an opportunity to grow, and every game is a chance to strengthen our community.”

“Let us compete with enthusiasm, respect one another, and enjoy every moment. Together, let us make these Solidarity Games a memorable celebration of unity and teamwork,” he stressed.

The organisers described the strong turnout as proof of the Filipino community’s spirit of volunteerism and solidarity, with the tournament serving as both a recreational gathering and a fundraising effort to assist families recovering from the impact of the typhoons in General Santos City.



Suspected pirates seize tanker off Yemen coast in Gulf of Aden, sources say

Reuters
London/Aden

Armed assailants boarded the chemical tanker Asana off the southern coast of Yemen in the Gulf of Aden yesterday and are in control of the vessel, maritime security officials said.

Based on initial assessments, the incident appeared to be related to Somali piracy rather than Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi militia, one of the maritime security sources said.

Attempted attacks on ships in the Gulf of Aden have risen in recent weeks, adding to concerns over safety in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz on the other side, boosting risks for critical energy

shipments from the region to buyers in Asia.

The small tanker, which had no confirmed flag, had listed the Somali port of Bosaso as its next destination, ship tracking data showed.

Efforts were under way to assist the Asana tanker and determine the circumstances of what happened, said an official with the European Union's Aspides naval mission, which is active in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region.

A South Korean warship was in the area, the official told Reuters.

"Details regarding the number of assailants, the circumstances of the boarding, and the status of the vessel and crew remain unclear," British maritime risk management

group Vanguard said.

The vessel issued a distress call in the morning yesterday and did not have an armed security team when the incident occurred, British maritime security group Ambrey said, adding that the assailants were suspected to be part of a pirate action group.

The vessel's operator was listed in shipping databases as Marshall Islands-based Exxon Energy, which could not be reached for comment.

Armed men suspected of being part of a pirate group boarded the Asana tanker yesterday and had taken complete control of it, according to a department linked with Yemen's internationally recognised government in Aden.

"The incident bears clear indi-

cations of an act of piracy aimed at detaining the ship and its crew for ransom," the Regional Maritime Information Exchange Center, which is linked to Yemen's transport ministry, said in a report.

"The vessel remains under the complete control of the armed men, while regional and international efforts continue to ascertain the status and safety of the crew members through appropriate maritime and intelligence channels."

At least three incidents have taken place since June off Yemen's coast involving attempted boarding by armed assailants, according to analysis from Vanguard and the ICC International Maritime Bureau piracy watchdog.

Two of the attempts took place near Yemen's southern coast. A third incident took place on July 5 near the northern Yemeni port city of Hodeidah, an area under the control of Yemen's Houthis, Vanguard said. In that incident armed assailants in fast skiffs opened fire on a dry bulk ship as it sailed from Hodeidah.

The Palau-flagged oil products tanker Honour 25 was seized on April 21 approximately 30 nautical miles off Somalia's Puntland region with 17 crew members aboard.

In the period from January to the end of June, nine incidents were recorded including four ships hijacked in waters off Somalia and the Gulf of Aden versus three in the same period in 2025, ICC In-

ternational Maritime Bureau data showed.

Since the US-Israeli conflict with Iran began on February 28, local authorities in Somaliland and Puntland have been monitoring for any signs that the Houthis might transfer advanced weapons systems or maritime tactics to the region, security sources in the Horn of Africa said.

Iran has asked Yemen's Houthis to stand ready to close the Red Sea oil route if the United States strikes Iranian power infrastructure, sources told Reuters on Thursday.

A vessel was boarded by unauthorised personnel while transiting east in the Gulf of Aden, 65 nautical miles south of Yemen's Al Mukalla port.

Israel kills Palestinians attending Gaza funeral

Reuters
Cairo

An Israeli airstrike killed at least eight Palestinians and wounded 20 attending a funeral in Nuseirat in the central Gaza Strip yesterday for a person killed by another Israeli strike on the area earlier in the day, Gaza health officials said.

Those deaths, along with at least three Palestinians killed in separate Israeli airstrikes elsewhere in the enclave, brought yesterday's toll to at least 12, medics said.

Hamas condemned the Nuseirat strike as a "brutal massacre" against mourners and urged mediators, as well as the United Nations, to act to halt Israeli attacks in Gaza.

Asked about the attack in Nuseirat, the Israeli military said it struck a cell belonging to the fighters, which holds sway in parts of the enclave along with Hamas.

The military said it was "aware of the claims that several uninvolved individuals were harmed as a result of the strike".

Residents in an area east of Deir al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip said Israeli forces used drones to broadcast audio messages ordering them to leave their homes, forcing some families to flee for safety. The



A Palestinian man inspects the site of an Israeli strike at the Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza Strip on Thursday. (AFP)

deaths add to a toll of more than 1,100 Palestinians, mostly civilians, killed by Israeli attacks since an October ceasefire between Israel and Hamas fighters took effect, according to Gaza health officials. Hamas does not usually disclose its losses.

The truce halted major fighting but has not stopped near-daily Israeli strikes. Israel says it is targeting Hamas fighters. Four Israeli soldiers have been killed by fighters in Gaza over the same period.

Conflict monitor ACLED, a US-

based research group that tracks political violence, said Israeli airstrikes against Hamas and other fighters rose to more than 40 in June, the highest monthly total since the ceasefire. Other strikes hit people near the line dividing the two sides, killing and injuring civilians, including women and children, it said.

Nearly all of Gaza's two million people now live on a tiny strip of land along the coast, mainly in makeshift tents or damaged buildings, under Hamas control.

IRGC claims attack on US command centre in Syria

Iran's Revolutionary Guards said yesterday that they had attacked a US special operations command centre at al-Tanf in Syria in retaliation for the killing of Iranian soldiers in Iranshahr, state media reported. Reuters could not independently verify the claim, and there was no immediate comment from the Syrian government or the US military.

The US military said in February it completed a withdrawal from the al-Tanf base positioned at the tri-border confluence of Syria, Jordan and Iraq.

Syria has sought to avoid being drawn into the regional conflict that has engulfed several neighbouring countries, including Lebanon, where Hezbollah has been fighting Israeli forces, and Iraq, where Iran-backed armed groups have launched drone and rocket attacks.

Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa said in March that his country would stay out of any conflict unless it came under attack.

The Guards also said Iran retained full control over Hormuz and that no oil or gas would be exported through the waterway for as long as US attacks continued, according to the media report. (Reuters)

Strikes kill nine Iranian Kurdish rebels in Iraq

Drone and rocket strikes killed nine members of an Iranian Kurdish armed opposition group in Iraq's Kurdistan region yesterday, the exiled party said, blaming the attack on Iran.

In Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan, the US-led coalition shot down several drones in the second such incident in the city this week. The attacks, which the Kurdish government also blamed on Tehran, come against the backdrop of renewed military escalation between the United States and Iran, Iraq's main allies. During the Middle East war, the Kurdistan region, which hosts US troops and foreign oil companies as well as exiled Iranian Kurdish rebels, has been a target for attacks carried out by Iran and pro-Iran Iraqi armed groups.

Idriss Kohlhwazi from the exiled Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan told AFP "The Iranian regime attacked at 04:30 am with drones and rockets a camp".

The strikes killed nine members of the party at their camp near the city of Sulaimaniyah, he said. Later, a strike hit another camp belonging to Kurdish rebels, wounding two fighters, according to Komala's Amjad Panahi.

Even after a ceasefire was announced in April, Iran contin-

ued to strike Kurdish opposition groups, which Tehran accuses of serving both Western and Israeli interests.

But yesterday's attack marked the biggest escalation, with these groups having mostly evacuated their bases and camps since the war.

In Erbil, Kurdish counterterrorism forces said that "coalition forces downed eight explosive-laden drones over Erbil early morning yesterday with no damage or casualties reported."

Erbil is home to a major US consulate complex and its airport houses military advisers attached to the US-led coalition.

The prime minister of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region yesterday denounced "the unjustified attacks by the Islamic Republic of Iran against the Kurdistan region".

Masrouk Barzani's office said that "while urging the Islamic Republic of Iran to stop this escalation, we also call on the Iraqi federal government and the international community to end these violations."

On Wednesday evening, the coalition also shot down eight drones over Erbil, with AFP journalists reporting that the drones were hit by air defences near the US consulate, which was a primary target of attacks during the regional war. (AFP)

Two ex-leaders warn of threat to future Palestinian state

AFP
Jerusalem

Two former heads of government from the Elders group of international figures founded by Nelson Mandela on yesterday warned of the potential disappearance of the Palestinian territories and called for an end to what they called Israeli "impunity".

The call from former Ireland president Mary Robinson and former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark comes after they visited Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories, Jordan and Lebanon.

They said in a statement that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government was seeking "to make Palestine disappear physically, economically, culturally and politically".

Speaking to journalists in Jeru-

salem on Thursday, they said the international community must do more to end Israeli "impunity" in the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem, which Palestinians seek as the future capital of a sovereign state.

"I think if we were to summarise the key message that we've heard across civil society, both in the West Bank and here, as to what are they looking for, it's accountability and no impunity," said Clark.

Robinson said she was "ashamed" that the European Union had not taken a firmer stance on the issue, calling for Brussels to suspend the trade component of its association agreement with Israel and to ban the trade of products from Israeli settlements.

The two leaders said they had observed a severe deterioration of the situation in the West Bank since a previous mission in 2023.

The two former leaders warned that continued settlement expan-

sion would result in "Palestine disappearing before our eyes."

Since taking office, Netanyahu has guided his government to approve the establishment of 102 settlements in the West Bank, according to Israeli anti-settlement group Peace Now.

And since the start of the Gaza war in 2023, the UN has reported a sharp rise in settler violence, while some Israeli ministers continue to call for the annexation of all or part of the occupied West Bank.

Excluding east Jerusalem, more than 500,000 Israelis live in settlements in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967, among some three million Palestinians.

All Israeli settlements are illegal under international law.

During their visit, the two former leaders met with Israeli President Isaac Herzog.

"We disagreed on a number of points," said Robinson.

US supporting efforts to revive Iraq-Syria crude oil pipeline, US official says

The United States is supporting efforts by Iraq and Syria to revive a crude pipeline between the two countries, which could reduce Iran's ability to block oil supplies through the Strait of Hormuz, a State Department official said earlier this week.

The US expects American companies to play a role in advancing the construction of the Kirkuk-Baniyas pipeline, which has been mostly out of service since suffering damage during the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

The revitalised pipeline would run from Iraqi oilfields near Kirkuk to Syria's western coast. It is one of several efforts by oil producers in the Middle East to lessen dependence on the strait, through which 20% of the world's oil and gas flowed before the US-Israeli war on Iran began on February 28.

The US has re-imposed a blockade of the chokepoint between Iran and Oman after



An oil field is seen in Dibis area on the outskirts of Kirkuk. (Reuters/File Photo)

strikes on ships in the strait that Washington blamed on Iran.

Bloomberg reported earlier on Tuesday that Chevron could play a role in rebuilding the pipeline.

"As a matter of policy we do not comment on third party statements or matters of a commercial nature," Chevron said in response to a Reuters request for comment. (Reuters)

Doctors rally for release of detained Abu Safiya

AFP
Paris

About 50 people, including doctors, trade unionists and pro-Palestinian activists, gathered outside France's foreign ministry in Paris on Thursday to call for the release of a Gaza hospital director who has been held since December 2024.

"Free Dr Abu Safiya," chanted the demonstrators at the protest organised by hospital unions, among them Patrick Pelloux, the high-profile head France's emergency doctor association – the latest call for release of Hussam Abu Safiya, a paediatrician and director of Gaza's Kamal Adwan hospital, who has reportedly suffered torture and life-threatening injuries in detention.

United Nations experts, the World Health Organisation and Amnesty International have urged Israel to set him free. Abu Safiya rose to prominence in 2024 by posting about the dire conditions in his besieged hospital in Beit Lahia during a major Israeli offensive.

On December 27 that year, Israeli forces assaulted the facility, labelling the only functioning hospital in northern Gaza at the time a Hamas "terrorist centre" and arresting dozens of medical staff including Abu Safiya.

The demonstrators want a non-political medical delegation to be sent to assess Abu Safiya's "state of health" and prevent "his arbitrary detention from becoming a death sentence," said Cyrille Venet, former general-secretary of the SNMH-FO union.

In October, a ceasefire was reached in Gaza between Israel and Hamas following two years of war.

Israeli families move into new West Bank settlement near Nablus

AFP
Ramallah, Palestinian Territories

Israeli families moved into a new settlement on a mountain towering over the city of Nablus in the occupied West Bank on Thursday, the settler regional council for the area said.

"This morning, families from the Ebal founding group are transferring their equipment and moving into caravans in the new Ebal settlement, established in Samaria," the Samaria Regional Council said, using the Biblical name for the north of the West Bank.

Excluding east Jerusalem, more than 500,000 Israelis live in settlements in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967,



A metal fence erected by the Israeli military is seen as it surrounds the town of Sinjil, north of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank. (AFP)

among some three million Palestinians.

All Israeli settlements are illegal

under international law.

In a video shared by the council, a dozen Israeli settlers were seen

carrying moving boxes and furniture into mobile-homes typical of new settlements.

A newly paved road lined with Israeli flags on the mountain was lined with around 10 mobile homes.

Mount Ebal is one of the highest peaks in the West Bank.

In the valley below, residents of Nablus' Old City told AFP that they could see the settlement's homes.

"Palestinian citizens used to go to Mount Ebal to stroll and breathe fresh air, but today they have cut off our air by encircling Nablus from all sides with settlements and attacks," said Ghassan Daghlas, governor of the Nablus region.

He said that a military camp and parts of a settlement on the other

mountain near Nablus, Mount Gerizim, had already made Palestinian residents feel encircled.

Samaria Regional Council head Yossi Dagan said that 600 families were expected to live at Ebal settlement in the future.

"We are establishing here a thriving settlement that will illuminate the entire region, and this is a huge step on the way toward expanding our presence throughout the northern Samaria area," Dagan said at the site.

Since taking office, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, one of the most right-wing in the country's history, has approved the establishment of 102 settlements in the West Bank, according to Israeli anti-settlement watchdog Peace Now.



Opposition figures held in Chad in ‘deplorable’ conditions

Chad is holding eight opposition figures in “deplorable” prison conditions and their health is deteriorating rapidly, their French lawyers warned yesterday.

The eight, critics of President Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno, were sentenced to eight years without parole after they were found guilty of inciting an insurrection and organising a banned demonstration.

Deby has led the country since 2021 after taking charge of a military transition following the death of his father, who was killed by rebels after 30 years leading the central African country.

The eight jailed men belonged to the Political Actors Consultation Group (GCAP), the main opposition coalition, which the Supreme Court dissolved on April 24.

They have been “deprived of medical care in prison” and are “forced to rely on their families to bring them food and water”, lawyers Emmanuel Altit and Yael Mrejen said in a statement sent to AFP yesterday.

“As a result, their detention has weakened the defendants, most of whom are elderly,” they said.

One of the detained is 88 years old, and another needed emergency hospital treatment earlier this week.

“The charges brought against the GCAP leaders, the circumstances under which their trial took place, and their continued detention under unacceptable conditions raise very serious questions about Chad’s international commitments,” the lawyers stated.

Opposition groups have repeatedly complained of intimidation and bans on public gatherings.

Last year, former prime minister Succes Masra was jailed for 20 years after what Human Rights Watch called a politically motivated trial. (AFP)



South African residents hold an ID card as they gesture to protect themselves during an anti-migrant protest in Alexandra near Johannesburg. (AFP)

Sixty-nine detained at anti-immigrant protest

AFP
Johannesburg

South African police said yesterday they had arrested 69 people after an anti-immigrant protest on the country’s southeast coast descended into looting and left at least one person hospitalised.

South Africa has been swept by weeks of protests and unrest targeting undocumented immigrants, causing tens of thousands to flee the country.

Nearly 150,000 people have left the country in recent weeks, according to an AFP tally based on figures provided by African countries that have repatriated their nationals.

Police said the protest in Jeffreys Bay in the Eastern Cape province was organised by anti-migrant group March and March.

Several foreign nationals (were) placed in a temporary shelter for their safety, according to a police spokesperson

At least 23 tuck shops were looted, they said in a statement.

“Several foreign nationals (were) placed in a temporary shelter for their safety,” a police spokesperson said, adding that one person had been hospitalised due to the violence.

“The situation at this stage is still unstable however police visibility is intensified,” police said.

Weeks of protests to demand that undocumented foreign nationals leave South Africa have already claimed the lives of at

least four foreigners, according to police.

However, some African governments repatriating their citizens have put the death toll higher.

Mobs armed with sticks have gone door-to-door in some areas in Gauteng province — home to the capital Pretoria and economic hub Johannesburg — to demand that foreign nationals leave the country, accusing them of taking jobs from locals.

Some 350 people have been arrested for “unlawful conduct, intimidation, incitement and related offences” as of July 8, the government said.

Protests that began with groups like March and March have since spread to ordinary residents taking to the streets, as anti-migrant sentiment continues to spread across the African nation.

Situation worsening in Sudan’s El-Obeid: UN

AFP
Geneva

The humanitarian situation in the Sudanese city of El-Obeid is worsening rapidly, the UN said yesterday, as displacement camps swelled with new arrivals.

The UN has been warning for weeks that atrocities similar to those committed during the paramilitary assault on the Darfur city of El-Fasher in October last year could be repeated in El-Obeid.

The UN’s World Food Programme said El-Obeid’s population had all but doubled, though it was only able to feed a fraction of them.

“The city continues to be stressed on food, water and fuel,” said Abdallah Alwardat, WFP’s Sudan country director, after visiting El-Obeid on Thursday.

“What we have seen, simply: a city over 500,000-600,000 population has almost double” that number due to internally displaced persons (IDPs) moving in from the wider Kordofan region, he told reporters in Geneva.

The war between Sudan’s regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that erupted in April 2023 has killed

200,000 people by some estimates and displaced upwards of 11 mn. Several areas of Sudan have been plunged into hunger and famine.

A strategic hub in the southern Kordofan region, El-Obeid has been encircled for months by the RSF.

Alwardat said more than 120,000 people were living in camps, but many more were living with host communities or making their own shelter.

The WFP has provided food assistance to more than 100,000 people in the camps, “but there are many more IDPs in that city and they need urgent assistance,” Alwardat said, speaking from Kosti in Sudan.

“We are providing not even the full food ration to the people, but even that reduced food ration is being shared by the recipients with other families.”

WFP said it was putting food stocks into place to boost the number of hot meals and food assistance to more than 250,000 people in or around El-Obeid, if conditions allowed.

“It was very clear: whatever we are bringing into the city is the only lifeline for these people,” Alwardat said after his visit.

“We want to do more for sure, but of course we are also stretched on our resources.”

Two South African soldiers die chasing illegal miners

AFP
Johannesburg

Two South African soldiers died yesterday after falling down a mine shaft during an operation targeting illicit mining, a police spokeswoman said.

The deaths are the first military fatalities since President Cyril Ramaphosa deployed troops in March to bolster police operations against crime and illegal mining.

The incident occurred at an abandoned mine west of Johannesburg as soldiers pursued suspected illegal miners, known locally as “zama zamas”, police spokeswoman Athlenda Mathe said.

The soldiers fell into an open

vertical shaft at the abandoned mine, she said.

The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) said the incident occurred early in the morning.

It said efforts to formally identify the soldiers and notify their next of kin were under way.

“The loss of these courageous soldiers is a devastating blow to the security cluster and the nation at large,” acting police minister Firoz Cachalia said.

The clandestine artisanal miners, many from neighbouring countries, have become an entrenched presence in the shantytowns that ring Johannesburg and its satellite settlements along the gold reef.

Driven by poverty and unem-

ployment, the zama zamas — which means “those who try” in the Zulu language — descend deep into still gold-bearing shafts abandoned by mining companies or dig out new ones.

The sector has been linked to organised crime, assassinations, extortion and other illegal activities.

Last week, security forces rounded up more than 200 mostly undocumented foreign national during a swoop on a gold mine shaft west of Johannesburg.

More than 100 of them were from Lesotho, police said.

Mozambicans, Zimbabweans and South Africans were also arrested, and guns and ammunition confiscated.

Since the launch of the joint police-military operation in Gauteng

province, authorities have arrested at least 793 suspects between April 1 and June 30, including 595 undocumented migrants, according to police data.

They also seized mining equipment, including generators, and 973,859 grams of gold-bearing material.

The raids comes as South Africa is cracking down on undocumented migrants, with nearly 150,000 returning home in recent weeks according to an AFP tally.

The figures are based on the data provided by several African countries that have repatriated their nationals.

Codenamed “Operation Prosper,” the military deployment is due to last a year and mobilises more than 2,200 soldiers.

Turmoil in South Africa



Hillbrow Concerned Citizens gather in the street to march against alleged police inaction on immigration enforcement, rampant crime and drug trafficking in Johannesburg on Thursday. (AFP)

Nigeria dismisses suit against Shell’s divestment

A Nigerian court yesterday dismissed a lawsuit by a traditional monarch in the oil-rich delta region seeking to halt Shell’s plan to offload its onshore assets over accusations of decades of environmental pollution.

Bubaraye Dakolo, the monarch of Ekpetiama kingdom in southern Bayelsa state, had taken the British energy giant to court after it announced conclusion of the sale of its Nigerian onshore assets in March 2025.

The case sought to block Shell’s exit from Nigeria’s onshore oil sector, without cleaning up decades of pollution.

More than 40 years of extensive oil spills and gas flaring had caused severe environmental damage that destroyed fishing and farming livelihoods in parts of the Niger delta region, which accounts for most of Nigeria’s oil production.

Farming and fishing communities in the Niger Delta, the heartland of Nigeria’s crude production, have borne the brunt of pollution. But a Federal High Court judge in Bayelsa, Ayo Emmanuel, ruled that the suit was “premature and incompetent,” adding that the allegations against the oil giant were statute-barred under Nigerian law.

“The statement of claim predominantly seeks reliefs for environmental damages, negligence, and the halting of commercial asset divestments,” the judge said. “It does not qualify as a fundamental rights action.”

A four-year-long investigation

by the Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission — a panel of international experts and prominent figures — concluded in 2023 that it would cost \$12bn to clean up Bayelsa state.

Bayelsa is where oil was first discovered in Africa in the 1950s, and where companies, including Shell, have operated for decades.

Shell is “pleased” with the ruling, a company spokesperson told AFP, blaming the “vast majority” of pollution in the region on “large-scale oil theft, sabotage and illegal refining carried out by organised criminal gangs who drill into pipelines to steal oil”.

But it added that its subsidiary alongside its government partner worked to clean up spills from its facilities “regardless of the cause”.

Dakolo’s lawyer said they will appeal the ruling.

“We shall fight this matter to the utmost end and are already looking forward to the Supreme Court,” Chukwudi Uguru told journalists after the court session. “We are not discouraged.”

Shell then owned 30% shares in a joint venture with a government-owned company, TotalEnergies and Agip. In March 2025 the multinational divested from the business, selling its shares — to Renaissance Africa Energy, a consortium of Nigerian indigenous oil companies. Shell remains a major investor elsewhere in Nigeria having announced earlier this year a potential \$20bn in foreign direct investment in a gas project. (AFP)

Ex-president Sall arrives back in Senegal for meeting with successor

AFP
Dakar

Senegal’s ex-president Macky Sall, who is campaigning to become the next UN secretary-general, arrived in Dakar yesterday for a brief meeting with his successor, a visit criticised by the former leader’s detractors.

The trip marks the first time that Sall, who led the nation between 2012 and 2024, has returned to the west African country since leaving office in April 2024.

More than 1,000 supporters turned out in the heat to welcome him mid-afternoon at a military airport in Dakar, where he greeted the crowd from atop a vehicle.

Noisy throngs of supporters then flocked towards the presidential palace downtown as he arrived for his visit, cheering and honking loudly from motorbikes.

Sall’s party, the APR, which he still leads, had invited his supporters to come out to welcome him.

Sall stands accused by the current government of violent political repression during his last years in office that led to dozens of deaths and of covering up unfavourable economic data.

The meeting granted by President Bassirou Diomaye Faye has sparked controversy within his



Supporters of former Senegalese President Macky Sall gather outside the Leopold Senghor Military airport upon his arrival in Dakar yesterday. (AFP)

own camp, which has been divided since he dismissed prime minister Ousmane Sonko, once a staunch ally.

Following Faye’s falling out with Sonko, he may be seeking political support from new quarters. Sonko and Sall are arch-rivals.

One of Faye’s political advisors, Alioune Ibnou Abitalib Sow, announced his resignation yester-

day in protest at the visit.

“He is responsible for a large part of the troubles the country is facing today,” Sow posted on X.

“Senegalese people have died, and families are still waiting for the truth,” he added.

The Senegalese presidency did not respond to a request for comment from AFP regarding the meeting.

Sall, who has lived in Morocco

since leaving Senegal, announced earlier this week that he would travel to Dakar for the visit.

A “collective denouncing the crackdown under Sall has described his visit as an “incident” and is demanding answers regarding the deaths that took place during his tenure.

Sall said he would leave Dakar “immediately” after his meeting with Faye.

Democrats’ split over Israel widens ahead of midterms

AFP
Washington

More than 100 US House Democrats voted this week to cut military aid to Israel, exposing a widening party divide that could reshape both November’s midterm elections and the future of one of Washington’s most durable foreign policy alliances.

The measure, offered by conservative Kentucky congressman Thomas Massie, was defeated overwhelmingly after nearly all his fellow Republicans and 98 Democrats opposed it.

But the vote was striking because 103 Democrats backed ending the aid, while 10 others voted present — a near-even split that would have been almost unthinkable for most of the modern US-Israel relationship.

“When more than 100 House Democrats are willing to vote to cut military aid, that’s no longer a protest vote,” veteran political strategist Mike Fahey told AFP.

“That’s a signal that the party is undergoing a generational and ideological realignment.”

The revolt reached deep into Democratic leadership. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries opposed the amendment, but his deputy Katherine Clark voted for it, as did former speaker Nancy Pelosi, one of Congress’s longest-serving defenders of the alliance.

“For the good of the Israeli people and the Palestinian people, it is clear US policy must change,” Pelosi said.

Clark said Washington should not provide a “blank check” to any country that fails to comply with US law, interests and values.

The amendment had little chance of becoming law. But it became a political marker, revealing how much support for Israel has eroded inside the Democratic Party after years of war in Gaza, mounting Palestinian casualties



President Donald Trump walks to board Air Force One yesterday in Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, US. (AFP)

and frustration with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing government.

It isn’t simply a Washington dynamic; opinion among left-leaning voters has shifted sharply.

A recent Washington Post-Ipsos poll found that nearly three-quarters of Democrats want to reduce or end military support for Israel, while 40% want to eliminate it entirely.

Other surveys show a broader generational shift, with younger Americans far less willing to accept unconditional US support for Israel than older voters.

The shift is already playing out in Democratic primaries.

Progressive candidates in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Colorado have won races while openly criticising US aid to Israel and attacking the influence of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the powerful pro-Israel lobby known as AIPAC.

In Michigan, a key battleground state, Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed has made opposition to Israel’s war and US military aid a central part of his campaign against

Congresswoman Haley Stevens, a longtime Israel supporter backed by pro-Israel groups.

That fight has national implications.

Anger over Gaza helped weaken Democrats in Arab American areas of Michigan in the 2024 presidential election, when Donald Trump carried the state, and party strategists fear the issue could again depress turnout or intensify intraparty conflict. Progressives argue that Democratic leaders are only now catching up with their voters.

They say the party cannot credibly campaign on human rights, economic justice and opposition to Trump while continuing to send billions in military aid to Netanyahu’s government.

But pro-Israel Democrats warn that the left is moving too far, too fast — and that Republicans will use the divide to portray Democrats as hostile to Israel, weak on security or tolerant of antisemitism.

The National Republican Congressional Committee quickly seized on the House vote, saying Democrats had become con-

sumed by a “radical, antisemitic faction” and promising that voters would remember. The issue is also straining Democratic unity in the Senate.

John Fetterman, the Pennsylvania Democrat who has become one of Israel’s strongest defenders in his party, told a political event in Washington he would consider leaving if Democrats officially became what he called the “anti-Israel party.”

“You look at the kinds of individuals that are winning our recent primaries,” he added. “It’s becoming more anti-Israel and hostile to people” who are pro-Israel.

Pro-Israel Democrats acknowledge the warning signs.

Democratic Majority for Israel, which backed the defeat of Massie’s amendment, called it reckless and said it would have weakened Israel and undermined US security interests.

But the group also said the number of Democrats who supported the measure sent “a loud and clear message” that Israel must repair its relationship with the party, especially younger voters.

Wildfire smoke engulfs US ahead of WC final

Dense wildfire smoke billowing down from Canada set off unhealthy air quality alerts across the US yesterday, triggering concern over the weekend’s World Cup final outside New York.

Detroit and Chicago posted air quality index readings in the “hazardous” range, with tracker IQAir saying they were the top polluted cities in the world.

Winds drifting south meant the capital Washington was also hard-hit, coming in at the second-highest “very unhealthy” ranking on the index, when authorities urge all people to avoid unnecessary outdoor activity.

In New York and neighbouring New Jersey, where the final will be played on Sunday in an open stadium, the metro area was experiencing air that could be unhealthy for sensitive groups, an improvement after smog on Thursday made the Manhattan skyline barely visible.

But forecasters at the National Weather Service warned the smoke may thicken overnight into today’s morning.

Tournament organisers are “monitoring closely.” White House World Cup task force executive director Andrew Giuliani told a briefing.

Peter Mullinax, a meteorologist for NWS, told AFP that winds over the Great Lakes could push more smoke into the Northeast, which could keep skies hazy.

But he said forecasts for that region are expecting some improvement. “I don’t believe that this should be as impactful as if you might be playing a game today,” Mullinax said.

The issue for Sunday’s game, said Joel Dreessen, an air quality forecaster for the state of Maryland, is whether more smoke spills south after weekend storm systems. “Some of the models are starting to indicate that we’ll start to pull down some smoke,” he told AFP.

In cities across the Midwest and Northeast, people wore

masks outdoors to filter out the dangerous air. In New York, libraries and train stations were handing them out for free.

The upper Midwest that’s closer to the fires was especially affected, with parts of Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin all recording air quality readings into the “hazardous” range.

The NWS extended its air quality alert in Chicago through yesterday, adding “wildfire smoke may return tomorrow evening and continue into Sunday.” Advocates have stressed the connection between repeated episodes of wildfire smoke and climate change.

“Increasingly smoky skies underscore the importance of a rapid transition to clean energy rather than building more polluting fossil fuel infrastructure that further contributes to climate change,” said Paul Mathewson, the science program director at the organization Clean Wisconsin, among the states that have seen a sharp uptick in smoky days in recent years.

Mark Parrington, a scientist at the Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service, told AFP that climate change was providing conditions for a longer fire season, with higher surface air temperatures and lower soil moisture.

So, he explained, “when there’s an ignition we see these really large-scale, persistent burning where these fires can burn for weeks and weeks at a time through summer.”

The blazes were worsening yesterday in Canada, where more than 200 fires were burning out of control, especially in Ontario, according to authorities there. The damage remains far off the pace of 2023, Canada’s worst wildfire season on record, when nearly 18 mn hectares burned in the country.

But the intensity has rapidly escalated over the past week, with nearly 2.8mn hectares burned since the start of the year, per the latest government figures. (AFP)

Chile storms kill three, displace hundreds as more rains expected

Reuters
Santiago

Heavy rains sweeping central and southern Chile have left three people dead in addition to power cuts, multiple floods and road closures, authorities of the South American nation announced yesterday.

President Jose Antonio Kast traveled to the Biobio region, one of the hardest-hit areas, as the storm system brought strong wind gusts and torrential rain across much of the country.

The three dead include a worker clearing a road in the southern town of Negrete, a person who fell while cleaning a roof in Temuco, and another person who suffered an electric shock in the capital, the government said.

The director of Senapred, the government agency responsible for managing emergency responses, Alicia Cebrian, said that seven people so far have been injured. She added that the count of those affected as 79, while 466 have been sheltered and 158 have been isolated, mainly in the Coquimbo

region due to the reported rising water levels.

Around 257,000 customers lost power, mainly in the south.

Chile’s northern mining zone, home to most of the country’s copper and lithium extraction, was not affected by the storm.

Copper mines in the center-south of Chile were operating normally under standard winter contingency plans, which include temporary work stoppages when weather conditions deteriorate.

State-owned Codelco said it had halted surface operations at its Andina mine due to the intensity of the storm, as well as ore shipments from the El Teniente open-pit mine due to snow accumulation on the slopes.

Meanwhile, Anglo American said it had activated preventive protocols, and that the stability of its facilities was assured despite the heavy rains.

Antofagasta Minerals temporarily restricted access to its Los Pelambres mine and implemented a preventive reduction in non-critical activities.

Schools suspended classes yesterday in the country.

Trump blames Canada for wildfire smoke, says he’ll add cost to tariffs

Reuters
Ottawa

President Donald Trump yesterday blamed Canada for wildfire smoke spreading across the US and said he would add the “incalculable cost” of dealing with the pollution to existing tariffs on Canadian goods.

Heavy smoke from hundreds of Canadian fires enveloped a swathe of the US from the Midwest to the Northeast on Thursday and yesterday, prompting warnings to residents to stay indoors. Trump, who has a combative relationship with Prime Minister Mark Carney, said he would be calling the Canadian leader to find out what he planned to do about the “totally unacceptable” situation.

“We are holding Canada responsible for the fact that they are not properly maintaining their Forests...and the US is being unnecessarily invaded by filthy, polluted, and unhealthy air,” he said in a Truth Social post.

“This is Willful Negligence, and becoming a yearly occur-



View of buildings from Toronto’s CN Tower yesterday. (AFP)



Empire State Building as seen yesterday from Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York. (AFP)

rence, costing the US Billions of Dollars, which cost of this pollution must of necessity be added to the TARIFFS Canada is currently paying.”

Shortly after taking office in 2025, Trump imposed tariffs on several key imports from Canada, prompting Carney to impose countermeasures. Carney said on Thursday the US could do more to combat climate change that is leading to warmer and more extreme temperatures around the world. The two men are likely to meet at the FIFA World Cup final in New Jersey on Sunday.

Most of the blazes are in the giant province of Ontario and are concentrated in the remote and sparsely populated northwest, where the only mode of transport is airplanes. Thousands of people have been evacuated and at least one community has burned to the ground. So far, 650,000 acres (are on fire, compared with 600,000 acres at the same time last year.

Premier Doug Ford yesterday said the province would buy 11 new aircraft to help contain the fast-spreading wildfires and pushed back against US politicians’ criticism of inadequacy.

Strong earthquake rattles Guatemala, El Salvador; no damage reported

Reuters
Guatemala City

A powerful magnitude 7.3 earthquake struck off the coast of Mexico’s southernmost state of Chiapas yesterday, shaking buildings as far away as Guatemala and El Salvador, though authorities said there were no immediate reports of casualties or major damage.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said emergency protocols were activated but that neither Chiapas nor the neighbouring state of Tabasco reported issues, and Guatemalan President Bernardo Arevalo said there were no deaths.

In some parts of Guatemala,

residents in their homes and office workers spilled onto the streets.

The quake struck at a depth of 15.2km, the US Geological Survey said, after revising its earlier assessment of a magnitude 7.4 quake at a shallow depth of 10 km.

Following the tremor, the US Tsunami Warning System said that hazardous tsunami waves were possible along coasts located within 300km of the epicenter, which was in the sea 58 km from the small coastal town of Puerto Madero.

Mexico’s secretary of the Navy, Raymundo Morales, said water levels were not expected to rise more than half a meter, but nevertheless advised people to stay away from beaches for now.

“There is no problem, no serious maritime impact,” Morales said



People react after evacuating the Biblioteca Nacional following an earthquake that struck off the coast of Chiapas, Mexico. (Reuters)

during a regular government press conference. “We only expect some beaches to see a rise in water level of up to half a meter due to the tsunami effect from the earthquake.”

A series of aftershocks, including some with magnitudes between 5 and 6, was also felt in Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador.

In Guatemala City, the earthquake shook buildings and prompted some residents to dash from their homes onto the street, according to a Reuters witness. Local media in Guatemala showed footage of staff evacuating a government building as security protocols were activated.

“I got really scared and it reminded me of the recent earthquake in Venezuela. So I ran out and went down the stairs because

I live on the eighth floor. The shaking wouldn’t stop,” Alexander Valdez, a 29-year-old accountant, told Reuters in Guatemala City.

Adolfo Zacarias, a 43-year-old customer service worker who lives on the third floor of his building, said he sought shelter under a structural column.

“I think the memories of what recently happened in Venezuela came back to us and that scared us a lot,” Zacarias said. Venezuela is still reeling from twin earthquakes that struck the country on June 24, when magnitude 7.2 and 7.5 tremors hit within less than a minute of each other in the north-central region, toppling buildings in Caracas and nearby coastal areas and triggering a prolonged rescue and relief effort.



Beijing rejects Trump allegations of US election meddling as ‘pure fabrications’

AFP
Beijing

Beijing accused US President Donald Trump of making “fabrications” yesterday, after he said China had meddled in US election data, reviving his long-standing baseless claims of voter fraud ahead of midterm polls many expect him to dispute.

Trump said in a White House address on Thursday that the US electoral system had been dangerously exposed and urged lawmakers to adopt new restrictions on voting, despite scant

appetite for the measures even within his Republican Party.

The US president also said he would declassify intelligence that purportedly shows that China had illicitly acquired 220mn voter files.

“The relevant claims made by the US side are pure fabrications and malicious smears that have long since been proven to be groundless statements,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian told a news conference when asked about Trump’s latest claims.

“China has... no interest in the US election and has never interfered in it,” Lin said.

“The international community sees very clearly who it is that habitually interferes in the internal affairs of other countries.”

“We urge the US side to reflect on its own actions, stop baselessly smearing China, refrain from making an issue of China in its elections, and do more to benefit China-US relations,” he added.

Trump’s claim that the 2020 election was “rigged” has never been substantiated. More than 60 lawsuits produced no ruling establishing fraud capable of changing the outcome, while recounts, audits and his own Justice Department found none.

China suppressing Taiwan ‘everywhere’

Reuters
Taipei

Taiwan faces an extremely difficult diplomatic situation because China is suppressing the island “everywhere”, Vice-President Hsiao Bi-khim said yesterday after Papua New Guinea said it was closing Taipei’s representative office in the country.

The Pacific has long been an area for diplomatic competition between China and Taiwan, which Beijing views as its own territory with no right to the trappings of a state. The democratically ruled island rejects China’s sovereignty claims.

Papua New Guinea Foreign Minister Justin Tkatchenko said on Thursday that Taiwan’s office would be closed, drawing praise from Beijing and condemnation from Taipei. Papua New Guinea, like most countries, only has formal ties with China, not Taiwan.

“Our diplomatic situation is truly extremely difficult. China is suppressing us everywhere - suppressing our chances to survive and to expand our international space,” Hsiao told reporters in Taipei.

“For us, this is a setback, but

we will still continue to strive - to strive for opportunities, whether for our overseas compatriots or to continue expanding our co-operation with the international community.”

Only 12 countries now maintain formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan, three of which are in the Pacific - Palau, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands.

New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade said in a statement that it was aware of Papua New Guinea’s statement about the closure of Taiwan’s office.

“We will seek further information about this decision in due course,” it added, without elaborating.

Taiwan and Papua New Guinea are both members of APEC. Port Moresby hosted the group’s annual leaders’ summit in 2018, which was attended by a Taiwan government envoy.

Papua New Guinea very briefly had diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1999, and Taiwan also has a representative office in Fiji.

In 2020, a Taiwanese diplomat ended up in hospital in Fiji after two Chinese diplomats stormed into a reception trying to gather information on who was attending.

Japan’s ruling party warns about suspected collusion between activist investors and private equity

Reuters
Tokyo

Japan’s ruling party raised concerns yesterday over suspected collusion between activist investors and buyout funds in take-private deals, warning that such arrangements could undermine fairness in capital markets.

In draft policy proposals, the Liberal Democratic Party’s project team on corporate governance said there have been some cases in which activists are suspected of working behind the scenes with private equity funds seeking to take listed companies private.

Such cases “raise concerns from the perspectives of both enhancing corporate value and legal fairness”, the group said in the proposals, which would

be finalised by the end of this month. The group did not cite specific cases of alleged collusion.

It marks one of the clearest expressions of concern by Japan’s ruling party over the influence of activist investors in corporate restructuring and take-private transactions, in a sign of backlash from companies frustrated by pressure from such investors.

The Japan Private Equity Association declined to comment. Private equity deals in Japan jumped 47.8% last year to \$42bn, according to Dealogic. Deal activity continues to be strong this year, including a bidding war for Kakaku.com between Sweden’s EQT on the one hand and Soft-Bank’s LY Corp and Bain Capital on the other.

Japan has become one of the world’s busiest markets for ac-

tivist investing outside of the US, attracting hedge funds that have pushed companies to raise returns, unwind cross-shareholdings and improve governance.

The group’s proposal document also said there were cases in which activist shareholders were suspected of “securing unfair gains” by reinvesting a portion of their sale proceeds into acquisition vehicles established by PE buyers.

The proposals included tightening the criteria for shareholders to call for extraordinary meetings and submit shareholder proposals, as well as restricting shareholder proposals on matters related to management execution.

The group also discussed possible measures to curb “speculative or abusive” arbitrage trading.

There were suggestions that,

Landslide in China



Debris is seen at the site of buildings that collapsed due to a landslide in Chongqing, China, yesterday, in this screengrab obtained from a social media video. (Reuters)

Once shunned, Myanmar leader to visit Thailand next month

AFP
Bangkok

Myanmar’s leader Min Aung Hlaing will make an official visit to Thailand next month as Bangkok seeks to bring the once pariah state back into the diplomatic fold, the Thai foreign minister told AFP on Thursday.

Min Aung Hlaing, the ex-junta chief who led a 2021 coup that deposed democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi, triggering a civil war, was installed as civilian president in April following highly restricted elections.

Neighbouring Thailand has been leading an effort to begin normalising relations, both bilaterally and through the 11-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

“It’s best to bring Myanmar back into the fold,” Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow told a news conference in Bangkok.

“We believe that after five years we need to talk, we need to listen, and they need to explain,” he added.

“We believe that after five years we need to talk, we need to listen, and they need to explain”

Afterwards, the foreign minister told AFP that Min Aung Hlaing “will make an official visit” to Thailand “very soon, in August”.

This will be his first trip to the neighbouring nation since his change of position, and follows visits to India, China and Asean member Laos in the past few weeks.

It was not clear who Min Aung Hlaing would meet in Thailand, with Sihasak saying: “We are working on an official programme.”

News of the visit comes after Thailand hosted on Sunday an informal meeting of Asean foreign ministers that included Myanmar, a member state.

It was the first such gathering since the coup, after which Asean blocked Myanmar’s leadership from high-level summits.

Asean has made little progress with its five-point plan to end the civil war in Myanmar through national dialogue with all sides.

Analysts say consensus within the bloc is now fraying between

those open to seizing on small concessions by Myanmar and others who want more substantive progress before restoring ties.

There has been speculation that Myanmar’s Foreign Minister Tin Maung Swe may join a formal Asean meeting soon.

A diplomatic source from one Asean nation told AFP on Thursday the minister would not attend talks next week in Manila.

But Southeast Asia expert Morgan Michaels told AFP normalisation was coming, and he expected Myanmar’s foreign minister and leader to be reinvented to the bloc at the political level.

“It’s not a matter of if, but when,” said Michaels, of the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

As its neighbour, Thailand has faced the fallout of Myanmar’s civil war, including fighting that occasionally crosses its border and hosting millions of Myanmar refugees.

“Most observers accept that

Thailand has a legitimate position in that it wants to see a de-escalation and a stabilisation of Myanmar,” said Michaels.

Sihasak said that “we have to be realistic - progress won’t be achieved overnight”.

The continued detention of ousted leader Suu Kyi, now 81, remains a major concern.

In late April, Min Aung Hlaing announced the Nobel laureate would be moved from prison to house arrest - but she has not been seen or heard from since.

Asean is pressing for its special envoy to meet Suu Kyi, but so far Myanmar has refused.

After Sunday’s talks in Bangkok, Sihasak said the Myanmar foreign minister had assured his Asean counterparts that she was “in good health”.

“We have been told she has been taken care of well but it needs to be proved,” the Thai foreign minister added on Wednesday.

Min Aung Hlaing visited Thailand in April 2025 for BIMSTEC, a regional economic forum, and met then Thai prime minister Pa-etongtarn Shinawatra.

Japan outlaws flag desecration

Japan enacted a law yesterday that criminalises damaging the national flag, as Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi pushes forward with her conservative agenda despite worries over freedom of expression.

The law states that anyone who publicly damages, removes or defaces the national flag in a manner that causes significant discomfort or revulsion to others will face up to two years in prison or a fine of up to 200,000 yen (\$1,200).

In a statement submitted to lawmakers last week, 148 legal experts said they had “strong concerns that it could curb freedom of political expression” and grave worries “from the viewpoint of criminal law”.

The government argues that the law was needed because Japan already criminalised damaging foreign flags but had no equivalent rules covering its own.

Critics say that rules on foreign national flags were primarily aimed at preventing the desecration of foreign flags from becoming diplomatic issues, and there were similar concerns for Japan’s standard.

A US Supreme Court decision has ruled that burning the US national flag is protected under the First Amendment, invalidating state laws against desecrating the Stars and Stripes.

At a news conference on July 9, Takaaki Matsumiya, law professor of Ritsumeikan University, said Japan “has a history of waging wars of aggression”, and even among Japanese “there are some people who have a negative image” of the national flag.

And yesterday, opposition lawmaker Ayaka Shiomura expressed her opposition, saying: “The destruction of national flags has historically been one of the strongest forms of political expression used by people to resist state power and to condemn discrimination”.

However, the bill passed the upper house to become a new law, with support from the ruling bloc and some opposition parties. (AFP)

Indonesians overworked and abused on foreign fishing vessels

AFP
Cirebon, Indonesia

Lured by promises of good money working aboard a foreign fishing vessel, Akhmad left Indonesia and headed out to sea, enduring months of abuse and exploitation while being cut off from the world.

Indonesia is one of the top contributors of labour for the global fishing industry with several hundred thousand migrant workers, according to government figures.

Many are recruited online and assigned to foreign-flagged ships without being properly informed about their rights, leaving them vulnerable to abuse, experts say.

Akhmad, 25, who left Cirebon on Indonesia’s Java island in 2022, told AFP he would get as little as four hours of rest a day while working on a Chinese-flagged tuna fishing vessel.

“There was no rest. (We) must keep working,” said Akhmad, who like many Indonesians goes by one name.

“It was very tiring. My eyes hurt... If I was slightly sleepy, I

was ordered to wake up and work.”

Crew members had little communication with the outside world and faced regular verbal and physical abuse on board, Akhmad said, recalling the captain once beating a colleague accused of stealing fish they had caught.

In addition to tuna, Akhmad said the crew would also catch sharks, cutting off their fins before throwing them back into the ocean.

The practice known as finning is mostly banned across many fishing zones and countries, including the United States and the European Union, but remains a lucrative business activity in some parts of the world.

Jamaludin, an Indonesian man who worked on a different Chinese-flagged vessel between 2018 and 2020, said he was forced to follow the captain’s orders to harvest shark fins despite knowing that it could be illegal.

The 29-year-old said the captain would hurl verbal abuse at him for a delay in installing fishing gear, for example, or if any tool was missing.

Jamaludin said he once saw the captain ordering a fellow crew



Villagers painting a fishing boat at the traditional port of Bungko Lor hamlet in Cirebon, West Java. Many are recruited online and assigned to foreign-flagged ships without being properly informed about their rights, leaving them vulnerable to abuse, experts say. (AFP)

member to resume work despite an injury to one of his hands that exposed his flesh and bones.

“I was stressed, (but) what can I do? I’d already gotten here,” he said.

Jamaludin’s passport was withheld by the captain, and he feared he would face a penalty for quitting early, leaving him little choice but to see out the remainder of his contract.

Both Jamaludin and Akhmad were working on vessels operating

off West Africa which unloaded fish in Senegal’s capital Dakar.

The port on the Atlantic coast has served as a regional finning hub in recent years, according to a report issued Thursday by London-based NGO Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF).

The organisation’s CEO Steve Trent said that abuse and mismanagement were “systemic” across the Chinese distant-water fishing fleet, and to a lesser extent

the Taiwanese one, which together dominate the sector.

Migrant fishers easily find themselves in debt before beginning work, effectively trapped in bonded labour, said EJF’s head of research, Callum Nolan.

Limited access to the outside world while at sea makes it difficult to seek help, he added.

“It’s an exception to us if we read an experience of an Indonesian fisher or a Filipino fisher who hasn’t had to pay a fee to be recruited, hasn’t had disproportionate deductions from his salaries,” Nolan said.

“These men who are working on these boats in just desperate conditions, but they essentially have no way out.”

Indonesian fishing crews usually come across job opportunities on foreign vessels through social media, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, said Muhammad Kafandi, head of PSP Indonesia, a labour rights group supporting fishing workers.

Many are driven to work abroad because of the lack of opportunities to become “prosperous” at home, said Kafandi.

And while Indonesia has regulations in place to protect prospective migrants from exploitation by crewing agencies, enforcement is generally weak, he added.

The Indonesian government is working to improve oversight of recruitment and pre-departure orientation, said secretary-general of the migrant protection ministry, Dwiyono.

He said the ministry’s information campaigns aim at ensuring that “ship crew candidates choose official agents... understand their rights and obligations, and do not depart through non-procedural channels”.

There are around 300,000 Indonesians working on foreign-flagged vessels, the foreign ministry’s citizen protection director Heni Hamidah said, citing a transportation ministry estimate.

For workers like Jamaludin, at the bottom line, higher income than what he would have earned in Indonesia outweighed the risks or labour abuse.

“It’s better to just go abroad and earn, for example, 10 million rupiah (around \$550 a month), and then have some extra to save,” he said.

Xi pitches China as leader of new global AI order, challenging US

Reuters
Shanghai/Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping yesterday cast Beijing as the champion of a new global AI order, using China's premier tech conference to promote open-source technology and challenge US influence over the rules governing the fast-moving sector.

In a speech to the opening ceremony of the World Artificial Intelligence Conference (WAIC) in Shanghai, Xi urged countries to seize the "historic opportunity" of open-source AI, and pledged to help developing nations build AI capabilities, warning against the emergence of "new historical injustices" from unequal access to the technology.

The remarks amounted to Xi's clearest articulation yet of China's ambition to shape global AI governance, framing its open-source models as a global public good and positioning Beijing as an alternative to Washington at a pivotal moment in the race for technological leadership.

Comparing AI's significance to the invention of the steam engine and electricity, Xi outlined a vision in which China shares AI technology and expertise with countries across the Global South, while leading global efforts to create standards governing the emerging technology.

The speech pitched China's AI coalition as a rival to the US-led "Pax Silica" international initia-

tive to secure global AI and critical mineral supply chains, though Xi avoided naming Washington.

Chinese state media has increasingly portrayed Beijing's AI strategy as a response to what it calls a US-led attempt to erect an "AI Iron Curtain".

In a commentary published on Thursday, Yuyuan Tiantian, a prominent social media account affiliated with state broadcaster CCTV, said China was seeking to build "another order" by "pooling the strength of all humanity and all countries to build an open-source, all-factor AI ecosystem".

The WAIC conference underlined the shifting AI landscape, with Chinese open-weight AI models making rapid gains against proprietary systems from US companies such as OpenAI and Anthropic.

Beijing-based startup Moonshot AI yesterday unveiled Kimi K3, which it described as the world's largest open AI model by parameter count, a month after the US government abruptly pulled Anthropic's frontier-class AI models due to security concerns.

Reuters reported earlier this month that Beijing is weighing restrictions on overseas access to some of China's leading AI models, highlighting the growing tension between its promotion of open-source AI and an increasingly stringent national security agenda.

Xi also called for AI systems to remain under human control and urged countries to establish early-warning and emergency-response



Chinese President Xi Jinping speaking during the opening ceremony of the World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai, yesterday. (AFP)

mechanisms to manage AI risks, in his clearest remarks to date on AI safety.

He further urged measures to guard against loss-of-control scenarios, warning of the dangers posed by autonomous AI systems that could evade human oversight and control.

China will provide AI training and develop AI cooperation centres with Brics, Asean, Latin American and African Union countries, Xi said, aligning its AI diplomacy with major Global South blocs where Beijing already

carries significant influence.

The remarks came a day after the launch of the China-created World AI Co-operation Organisation, or WAICO, which signed up 29 member countries. Xi called the organisation a "milestone in the history of world AI development" and said it responded to demands from Global South nations for greater participation in AI governance.

Analysts said the timing turned what might have been a routine policy speech into a statement linking China's technological advances to a formal diplomatic platform.

"You've got the leader of the second most powerful country in the world, a country that's still posting real technological gains despite everything going on with the US, standing up and laying out China's view on AI," said Alfredo Montufar-Helu, managing director at Ankura China Advisors.

That institutional push reflects a broader Chinese effort to avoid being cast as a rule-taker in a sector increasingly shaped by US companies, US export controls and Washington-led technology partnerships, according to analysts.

"Xi's message is clear: China is not going to follow anyone on both AI technology and standards. Instead, China is going to lead the world in both aspects," said George Chen, chair in digital practice at The Asia Group, a consultancy.

The July 17-20 gathering comes as Washington and Beijing prepare for their first government-level AI



People walk past the Moonshot booth during the World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai, China, yesterday. (Reuters)



People watch humanoid robots dance at the Unitree booth during the World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai yesterday. (Reuters)

talks under US President Donald Trump's administration.

The two powers laid out competing visions at a UN AI dialogue last week, where US officials argued excessive regulation could hinder innovation, while China promoted its low-cost, open-source models as a tool for narrowing global disparities in AI access.

Washington has brought together 35 countries behind its AI Opportunity Statement, compared with 29 countries signed up to the China-led WAICO.

Kazakhstan is the only country listed as joining both initiatives, a person familiar with the US position said, arguing the limited overlap showed most countries aligned with Washington's framework had not endorsed Beijing's competing initiative.

Alongside China's leading technology companies, attendees at WAIC include UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul.

Korea-US team unveils robotic technology that dresses the wearer

Reuters
Daejeon

A team of Korean and US researchers has unveiled a robotic technology that allows a person to suit up without using their hands or aid from others, with potential for applications in chip cleanrooms and emergency services.

The technology developed by researchers at Republic of Korea's KAIST and Stanford University uses soft and flexible "vines" powered by air pressure embedded in clothing. When pressurised, the vines glide the fabric up

close to the wearer's body like an ivy plant climbing on a structure, even if the person does not remain standing still.

"When I was riding a bicycle, it started to rain... and I thought it would be helpful if a raincoat could be put on automatically (as I ride)," said KAIST postdoctoral researcher Kim Nam Gyun, the lead author of a paper on the technology.

"The vine robot stays close to the person and dresses them by turning the clothing inside out as it moves, allowing it to climb stably along the shape of the body," Kim said, adding it takes about 10 seconds to put on a full suit.

A key to the technology's potential is it does not require the wearer to stand motionless and it works without a complex control algorithm, the researchers said.

Inspired by climbing ivy, the robot advances by growing at its tip rather than shifting its whole body, enabling stable movement along curved surfaces, said Ryu Jee-Hwan, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at KAIST.

"It can pass through narrow gaps, grow while adapting to the shape of its surrounding environment, and move regardless of whether the surface is slippery, sticky, or sloped," he said.

Beyond immediate applications for helping the elderly and disabled, the team sees potential for use where the user needs to suit up and off quickly and without using the hands, including in semiconductor cleanrooms and by emergency workers requiring personal protective equipment.

Ryu said given the explosive growth of AI, there was usually much attention on the software powering systems, but the team's self-dressing robot was an example of how mechanical engineering could complement software.

The study was published in IEEE Robotics and Automation Letters, a peer-reviewed journal.

North Korean leader hosts senior Chinese official

Reuters
Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un held talks with China's fourth-highest-ranked official, Wang Huning, the state-run Korean Central News Agency reported yesterday, the latest in a series of high-level exchanges between Beijing and Pyongyang. The meeting in Pyongyang comes on the heels of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to North Korea in June - the first in seven years - and reflects China's efforts to reinforce its influence over its traditional ally amid North Korea's deepening ties with Russia.

The Chinese delegation led by Wang arrived in Pyongyang on Wednesday, at the invitation of North Korea.

Both Kim and Wang said they



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un talks with Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference Chairman Wang Huning, during Wang's visit in Pyongyang, on Thursday. (Reuters)

would work to implement the agreement reached between China and North Korea during Xi's visit.

Xi and Kim agreed to expand co-operation in politics, economy and culture as well as strategic

communication through visits by high-level officials, KCNA said at the time. In his meeting with Kim, Wang said the two countries' ruling parties should maintain close communication and exchanges

to improve practical co-operation, according to China's state-run news agency Xinhua. China stands ready to work with North Korea to advance bilateral relations to a higher level, Wang said in talks with Jo Yong Won, a top official of the Workers' Party, according to Xinhua. Wang visited the city of Wonsan with Jo, Xinhua reported, without elaboration. The coastal city is home to a beach resort and a flagship project driven by Kim for promoting tourism, as well as being the site for North Korea's missile tests.

The Chinese delegation also visited a memorial site dedicated to Chinese soldiers who died in the Korean War, a Workers' Party cadre training school and the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, a mausoleum where the bodies of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are preserved, KCNA said.

North Korea calls Seoul a 'puppet' for its role in US maritime exercise

Reuters
Seoul

North Korean state media yesterday called Republic of Korea a "puppet" following its participation in a maritime exercise led by the US, saying Seoul and Washington would need to bear responsibility for any "unpredictable escalation" in the region.

The comments from North Korean state media outlet KCNA came after the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) in Hawaii last week, which saw the South Korean navy lead the maritime forces for the first time.

The exercise is billed as the world's largest international maritime exercise and is held every two years. Some 30 countries took part this year, including Japan, Canada and Australia, according

to the RIMPAC website.

The KCNA said that "the South Korean puppet forces took part as a main component" at a time when "military collusion is becoming increasingly overt," referring to the recent strengthening of South Korean-Japanese military cooperation and of South Korea's relationship with Nato.

This marks the first time in about a year and three months that North Korea has used the term "puppet" to refer to Seoul, following an incident in April 2025 in which a fuel tank and gun pods attached to an air force aircraft detached and fell in a mountainous area in Gangwon Province during a training exercise.

The KCNA also said that RIMPAC was not just a "routine drill against a hypothetical adversary" but rather a war demonstration by the US and its

allies targeting countries in the Indo-Pacific.

"All these facts point to which forces are truly shaking the foundation of world peace and security and they foreshadow the possibility of unwanted situations occurring on the Korean Peninsula and in the region if not anticipated," it said.

It further criticised a joint Washington-Seoul Marine Corps exercise, stating the joint air drill simulated "deep infiltration into enemy rear areas" from the US Navy's USS Essex.

The criticism comes as North Korea has highlighted its naval modernisation drive.

Earlier this month, KCNA reported that leader Kim Jong-un observed the launch of a strategic cruise missile and tests of weapons systems aboard the new 5,000-ton destroyer Kang Kon.

Taiwan's premium mangoes wing their way to Europe for the first time

Reuters
Taichung/Taitung, Taiwan

Pump, juicy and fragrant, Taiwanese mangoes have long been a top draw for foodies, but traditionally those wanting to experience them have generally had to travel to the island.

Starting this year, however, the yellow and orange-coloured fruit will make its way to Europe, shipping first to France and Britain.

Europe normally imports its mangoes from countries such as India and Pakistan, but David Chen, CEO of fruit export company Natural House Taiwan, said Taiwan's mangoes can easily win on flavour, which helps overcome their premium price.

Exporting mangoes "has really become extremely, extremely expensive," he told Reuters at a fruit packing facility in the central city of Taichung. "It turned out that even though the price was so high this year, people still bought them."

Taiwan may be better known for its dominance in making the advanced semiconductors used in applications as varied as smartphones and AI, but arguably it was agriculture that first made the island famous.

During the 1895-1945 Japanese colonial era, Taiwan exported produce including pineapples and bananas.

While mangoes have long been grown in Taiwan, it was not until the 1960s that the much sweeter, U.S.-imported Irwin variety was introduced. Today, this is the variety for which the island is perhaps most renowned.

Taiwan produced more than 100,000 metric tons of mangoes last year, but exported only a tiny percentage, mostly to Japan, Hong Kong and Korea.

You Tsang-fu has been growing hybrid Summer Snow mangoes for the last 15 years in the eastern county of Taitung.

This year he sent to Europe what he called a trial shipment



Workers sort mangoes at a fruit processing facility in Taichung, Taiwan. (Reuters)

of five boxes, all of which had to comply with EU rules regarding, for instance, pesticide residue.

"In terms of fruit selection, and also in terms of field management, the EU is stricter than for the domestic market," he said.

The government has encouraged fruit farmers to expand export markets given political friction with China, which views the democratically governed island as its own territory.

You said he was confident Europeans would love Taiwan's mangoes. "The best mangoes in Taiwan are Snow Mangoes," You said.

New Labour leader Burnham vows to renew hope as next PM

AFP
London

Andy Burnham vowed yesterday to restore “hope” to the British people as he officially became the ruling Labour party’s new leader, and incoming UK prime minister.

Nicknamed the “King of the North” for a nine-year spell as Manchester mayor, Burnham pledged to work to improve living standards in every region of the United Kingdom.

“People and places ... have been waiting too long for politics to let them hope again ... We’re going to give them hope back,” he promised at a special party conference.

“I am for us, for all of us,” Burnham told cheering delegates.

The 56-year-old takes over from Keir Starmer, who resigned last month after months of political turmoil, scandal and domestic policy missteps.

Centre-left Labour retains an overwhelming majority in parliament after the 2024 general election. As the leader of the largest party he becomes the country’s prime minister, without having to call new polls.

Burnham will enter Downing Street on Monday after meeting King Charles III, becoming the UK’s seventh prime minister in a decade.

It is only four weeks since Burnham sensationally returned as a member of parliament following a nine-year absence, determined to replace Starmer.

Labour MPs reckon he is their best



Andy Burnham smiles as he leaves Labour’s ‘Special Conference’ where he was confirmed as the Labour Party’s new leader and the country’s next prime minister, in central London yesterday. (AFP)

chance of reining in Nigel Farage’s anti-immigrant Reform UK party, tipped in the polls to win the next general election, expected in 2029.

Burnham’s flagship idea is devolving powers to cities and regions, including by setting up a “Number 10 North” office.

Hailing from the party’s so-called soft left, he favours more public control of services, such as water, and reindustrialisation.

“If we want an economy and a country that works for all people and places ... then it requires a new path to the one we’ve been on for the last 40 years,” he said.

Burnham has pledged to boost the construction of public housing to try to resolve the homelessness crisis, and pump resources into social care.

After facing no challengers, he becomes leader at his third attempt, following failed bids in 2010 and 2015.

Burnham was an MP between 2001 and 2017, serving as a minister in Tony Blair and Gordon Brown’s governments.

He has since reinvented himself as a man of the people, melding a relaxed folksy style with slick social media videos.

Labour MPs see him as a better communicator than Starmer and hope will take a more radical approach to reforming Britain’s battered public services.

“It feels like a fresh start. There’s reason to be hopeful,” Labour MP Richard Baker told AFP after Burnham’s speech.

Starmer returned Labour to power after 14 years in opposition in July 2024 with a landslide victory over the Conservatives, who had churned through five prime ministers in the tumult unleashed by the 2016 Brexit referendum.

But his premiership quickly became characterised by domestic

policy missteps and controversies, including his appointment of ex-Jeffrey Epstein associate Peter Mandelson as ambassador to Washington.

Disastrous local and regional election results in May heaped further pressure on Starmer, which became impossible to withstand after Burnham won a parliamentary by-election on June 18, allowing him to run for leader.

Burnham, regularly seen in his trademark dark T-shirt and casual jacket, secured the backing of 379 of Labour’s 403 MPs, with no one mustering the 81 nominations required to challenge him.

He will face the same unenviable challenges that beset Starmer: a tepid economy, high government borrowing costs, a ballooning welfare bill and irregular migrants arriving in small boats that have fuelled support for Reform.

Unpredictable energy prices due to the US-Iran war and a volatile American president in Donald Trump also threaten to buffet his premiership.

Burnham has vowed not to raise the country’s main taxes, but will need to fill a £4.7-billion (\$6.3-billion) gap over four years in the country’s defence investment plan.

“Most of what’s been said by Burnham and his supporters so far has been pretty vague,” politics professor Tony Travers told AFP.

“He’s going to have to come out with a visible plan and policies people understand ... pretty quickly,” or he risks “losing momentum”, Travers added.

Australia protests Laos response to 2024 tainted drink deaths

AFP
Sydney

Australia denounced Laos’ response to a 2024 tainted alcohol poisoning that killed six tourists, saying yesterday it is “bitterly disappointed” the country is not pressing stronger charges.

Canberra summoned the Laos ambassador and dispatched an envoy to Laos to convey the government’s objections and urge justice for the two Australian women who died, the government said in a statement.

Two Danish citizens, an American, a Briton and two Australians — Holly Bowles and Bianca Jones — died following what media said was a night out on the town in Vang Vieng in November 2024.

The Australian government did not specify the charges to be laid against suspects in the alleged methanol-related poisoning but said it had been in “regular contact” with the Laos authorities.

Alcohol tainted with methanol was suspected to be the cause of the deaths.

Methanol is a toxic alcohol that can be added to liquor to increase its potency but can cause blindness, liver damage and death.

Public broadcaster ABC and other Australian media said Laos would press charges that collectively carry penalties of up to one year in jail and a fine equal to Aus\$1,600 (US\$1,100).

The media cited Australian foreign ministry letters sent to

the families of the two citizens killed, informing them that Laos would charge the operator of the Tiger brand of alcohol with operating illegally.

The operator of the Tiger brand has reportedly denied any responsibility.

“The Australian Government is deeply frustrated and bitterly disappointed that authorities in Laos are not pursuing the most serious charges,” Foreign Minister Penny Wong said.

“This devastating news will only add to the immense pain and grief suffered by the families and friends of Holly and Bianca.”

Wong said she would again put Australia’s views directly to her Laos counterpart at a Southeast Asian ministerial meeting in Manila next week.

Vang Vieng has been a fixture on the Southeast Asia backpacker trail since Laos’ secretive communist rulers opened the country to tourism decades ago.

Australian authorities warn travellers to Laos to “be alert” to the risks of consuming spirits-based drinks, including cocktails.

The travel advice notes that Lao authorities issued a ban on the sale and consumption of the local Tiger brand of alcohol due to health concerns.

Australian victim Bianca Jones’ parents criticised the Laos authorities for not pursuing harsher charges.

“It’s like their lives didn’t even matter. We’re just really appalled by it all,” her mother Michelle Jones told the ABC.

Bangladesh students demand minister quit over flood-hit exams

AFP
Dhaka

Several hundred students blocked major intersections in Bangladesh’s capital on Wednesday, demanding the resignation of the education minister over his handling of nationwide school-leaving examinations disrupted by floods.

Protests that grew from an on-line campaign spilled onto Dhaka’s streets on Tuesday and continued into Wednesday, snarling traffic in parts of the city.

The demonstrations were sparked by the education ministry’s refusal to cancel one paper of the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination despite torrential rain flood-

ing examination centres and forcing some candidates to travel by boat to reach test venues.

“We will continue our protests until the minister resigns,” Faisal Khan, an HSC candidate, told AFP.

“Ignoring our request, he mocked us by saying we are broiler chickens that catch cold easily. We want to show him what broiler chickens can do,” Khan said.

He also drew a comparison with student-led protests in 2024 that helped topple former prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

“A group of people had to flee the country after making derogatory remarks about students,” said protester Khan, alluding to weeks of mass demonstrations that culminated with Hasina being ousted.

A student who declined to be

named for fear of reprisals said the education minister, Ehsanul Hoque Milon, was out of touch with students’ concerns.

“He keeps saying he wants to stop cheating in examinations and ignores almost every other issue,” she told AFP.

“We don’t cheat. Instead, he should focus on bringing children who have dropped out of school back into the education system.”

Milon had rejected calls to cancel the HSC examination but said students who were unable to sit the test because of flooding would be given another opportunity.

“Considering the importance of their academic careers, the government has decided to make special arrangements for them,” the minister said.

NZ confirms first H5N1 bird flu case in native bird

Reuters
Wellington

New Zealand detected yesterday the first infection of a native bird by the deadly H5N1 bird flu, days after confirming a migratory seabird had tested positive in the country’s first recorded case of the disease.

A swamp harrier hawk, known locally as a kahu and found in the North Island’s Wairarapa region,

had been infected with the virus, Biosecurity Minister Andrew Hoggard said in a statement.

New Zealand reported its first confirmed detection on Wednesday, in a brown skua found near Wellington.

“While it’s disappointing to find a native bird with H5 bird flu, it’s not unexpected following the confirmation earlier this week of our first case,” Hoggard said.

“This hawk can go out to the coast — especially in winter to hunt. Hawks can get bird flu by

hunting, eating, or scavenging infected birds.”

There had been no detection of bird flu in poultry, he said.

Health officials have started a vaccination programme for 300 core breeding birds from five of the country’s most endangered species, including flightless takahe and kakapo.

Earlier this month, Australia reported its first case of the disease in a local seabird. All previous cases had involved migratory birds.

India’s space sector takes off as private rocket readies launch

AFP
New Delhi

India has sent spacecraft to Mars and the Moon, put hundreds of satellites into orbit and will in the coming days launch its first privately developed orbital-class rocket.

New Delhi’s space economy — valued at \$8.4bn — has rapidly expanded since the sector opened up to private investment in 2020, attracting more than 400 space startups.

Several key government and private firms collaborating with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) also work on defence, creating increasing overlap between space and security.

But Skyroot Aerospace’s plans to launch the country’s first privately developed orbital-class rocket before August 4 mark the next major step for the growing Indian space industry.

“India is pursuing ambitious goals across deep-space exploration, space science, human space flight, and orbital infrastructure,” the Department of Space said.

“These achievements reflect

growing confidence, technological maturity, and a long-term vision for India’s role in the global space ecosystem.”

Here are some of those achievements and ambitions:

In 2014, India became the first Asian nation to put a spacecraft into orbit around Mars.

ISRO has also made strides with its lunar probe programme called Chandrayaan, or “Mooncraft” in Sanskrit.

The programme included a 2008 lunar orbiter, a failed 2019 landing attempt and a successful 2023 mission that deployed a rover.

The rover mission made India the fourth nation to land an unmanned craft on the Moon after Russia, the US and China.

A fourth Chandrayaan mission set for 2027 is expected to bring back Moon samples, and a Venus orbit mission is slated for 2028.

An ongoing solar mission, Aditya, is observing the Sun’s outermost layers and space weather.

On Earth, ISRO technology is helping develop India’s Matsya submarine, named after the fish avatar of Hindu deity Vishnu.

It will carry scientists six kilometres (3.7 miles) underwater by



A Vikram-1 orbital rocket model displayed at Skyroot Aerospace facility on the outskirts of Hyderabad. (AFP)

2027 to “harness deep ocean resources” including rare earth and critical minerals, according to Science Minister Jitendra Singh.

Since ISRO built its first satellite that was launched on a Soviet rocket in 1975, India has garnered a reputation for cost-efficient missions.

Its space programme has accelerated since 2014, seeking a greater slice of the fast-growing

commercial satellite market.

ISRO has launched more than 430 foreign satellites — earning it more than \$600mn — and more than 144 of its own.

The country is expanding its launchpad at Sriharikota on the southeast coast in Andhra Pradesh, and a second spaceport is being built at Kulasekarapattinam in Tamil Nadu on India’s southern tip.

traditional diesel locomotives.

The 10-coach train set, which has a capacity of 2,600 passengers, will run twice a day between the cities of Jind and Sonapat in the northern state of Haryana, bordering the national capital of Delhi.

After flagging the hydrogen train on its 90-km (55-mile) route, Modi said India would continue to find ways to improve efficiency, reduce costs and expand the network.

“The project combines advanced propulsion technology with dedicated hydrogen storage,

refuelling and operational infrastructure,” a government statement said on Thursday.

The train set, designed, engineered and built in India, is expected to operate at a maximum speed of 75km (47 miles) per hour, powered by a 1,200-kilowatt hydrogen fuel cell propulsion system.

India has electrified nearly all of its 70,000-km (43,500-mile) broad-gauge network, one of the world’s largest, in an effort to achieve net zero carbon emissions in its railways by 2030.

Reuters
New Delhi

industries are deeply intertwined, with several government and private companies supplying both sectors.

That includes launch rockets, propulsion, satellite, electronics and guidance systems — technology used in space and for India’s growing missile and military drone programmes.

ISRO has praised the “active coordination” with the government’s Defence Research and Development Organisation, and has had close ties with the BrahMos missile programme, a joint India-Russia venture.

Companies that supply avionics and guidance systems to ISRO are benefiting from a surge in military orders.

India has poured billions of dollars into defence procurement after its 2025 conflict with neighbouring Pakistan, where drones and missiles dominated the fighting.

ISRO is also planning its inaugural crewed mission, with the first of three expected uncrewed test runs slated for late 2026.

Named “Gaganyaan,” or “sky craft,” the effort aims to eventually send three Indian astronauts into a 400-kilometre orbit for three days.

Espionage arrest over drone flight at German weapons firm: prosecutors

AFP
Munich

A Moldovan man has been arrested on suspicion of espionage after a drone flew over a defence contractor's facility in Munich and allegedly captured images of the site, prosecutors in Germany announced yesterday.

The 37-year-old man allegedly flew the drone over the facility on Wednesday and is suspected of having "taken photographs and video recordings that are sensitive from a national security perspective", the Munich public prosecutor's office said.

Prosecutors suspect the man of planning to pass the images along to "a foreign entity or a banned organisation".

Police arrested the man near the sensitive weapons industry site after receiving a tip about suspicious activity from the public, prosecutors said.

He has been in custody since the arrest.

Authorities in Germany, one of Ukraine's biggest military supporters, have uncovered numerous suspected espionage, sabotage and disinformation plots tied to Russia since Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

A number of Germany's European Nato allies have also levelled similar accusations against Russia, sometimes describing the covert activity as part of a "hybrid war" against the West.

Germany and other European countries have also repeatedly observed instances of drones flying over sensitive sites such as airports, military bases, and power plants.

Moscow has routinely denied being behind any such plots.

Several defence industry players have facilities in Munich, including the Franco-German tank manufacturer KNDS, the European aerospace company Airbus Defence and Space, and the defence electronics specialist Hensoldt.

The Bavarian city is also home to a cluster of defence start-ups, such as drone maker Helsing.

In other cases German police have arrested a number of alleged so-called "disposable" agents, recruited to carry out sabotage and espionage without any formal training for Russia, often in exchange for small payments.

Berlin recently gave police and the military new powers to potentially shoot down unauthorised drones within German territory.

Lawmakers this year also passed new rules aimed at strengthening the "resilience" of critical infrastructure by identifying sensitive facilities and requiring operators to enhance security measures.



The superyacht "Boardwalk" of the US ambassador Tilman Joseph Fertitta is moored in Venice yesterday. (AFP)

Arrival of US ambassador's superyacht sparks protest warnings in Venice

Reuters
Venice

US ambassador to Italy Tilman Fertitta arrived in the lagoon of Venice aboard his superyacht yesterday, drawing protests against President Donald Trump's policies and increased security as the city prepared for one of its most important festivals.

Fertitta, a billionaire businessman appointed by Trump, is touring the Italian peninsula aboard his 117-metre (384-foot) yacht, Boardwalk, on a "Freedom 250 Coastal Diplomacy Tour" marking the 250th anniversary of US independence.

Escorted by a tugboat, the gleaming white yacht slowly berthed at Riva dei Sette Martiri, a broad waterfront promenade about a kilometre (half a mile) from St Mark's Square.

Authorities have tightened security amid concerns over planned demonstrations, set to overlap with the Festa del Redentore.

The ancient celebration commemorates the end of a plague epidemic and will draw thousands of residents and visitors to the lagoon today for fireworks and religious ceremonies.

Residents of the fragile city have long complained about the impact of mass tourism and Venice's growing use as a backdrop for high-profile events such as the wedding of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and journalist Lauren Sanchez in June 2025.

Activists from the Morion social centre called a demonstration under the slogan "Venezia non si Usa" ("Venice is not to be used"), due to march from the centre towards the yacht's berth.

Protest organisers said they viewed Fertitta as a representa-

tive of Trump's policies, which they said were fuelling conflicts, supporting Israel's military campaign in Gaza and driving up global economic instability and prices.

Italy's Green and Left Alliance (AVS) accused the government of diverting hundreds of police from public safety duties to act as "bodyguards" for Fertitta during his tour of Italy, and also urged supporters to protest against US policies.

A series of public disagreements between Trump and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni — notably when she firmly denied his assertion that she had "begged" for a joint photo at the recent Group of Seven summit — have strained what had been a close relationship.

Fertitta has rejected suggestions of a rift, saying Trump and Meloni have a strong personal rapport.

AFP
Bruhl

The leaders of France and Germany yesterday sought to put the collapse of a flagship joint jet fighter project behind them as they agreed on a symbolic step towards greater nuclear deterrence and stronger defences for Europe.

Speaking alongside French President Emmanuel Macron at a press conference after a joint meeting of the two governments, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said that this year would see German troops join a French military nuclear exercise.

"This is complementary to our nuclear participation and deterrence within Nato, which we still hold to," he said.

Macron said earlier this year that Germany was one of eight countries which had agreed to participate in a French-led nuclear deterrence project.

However he has stressed that France — one of Western Europe's two nuclear powers alongside the United Kingdom — will retain tight control over nuclear decision-making.

For Macron, there is an urgent need to make progress in this area before next spring's presidential election in which far-right leader Marine Le Pen is a frontrunner to be his successor.

The prospect of a Le Pen presidency adds yet more uncertainty for European countries already scrambling to boost defence capabilities in the face of the Rus-



German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, French President Emmanuel Macron and Noervinich squadron leader Rene Diegeler on the day of the Franco-German Defence and Security Council (CFADS) meeting at the Noervinich air base, in Noervenich, yesterday. (Reuters)

sian threat and waning US commitment under President Donald Trump.

Merz also said Germany would take part in "a manoeuvre in the autumn held on the initiative of France" as part of the Coalition of the Willing group of Ukraine's allies.

"We will clarify together what form exactly this participation will take," he said.

At a meeting of the group on Monday, Macron said a Multinational Force for Ukraine, which would be deployed once the fighting ends, would hold exercises in the coming months in countries neighbouring Ukraine "to validate our deployment plans and demonstrate that we are ready".

Yesterday morning, Merz welcomed Macron at the Noervenich air base near Cologne, with the two leaders emerging from a Super

Puma helicopter — itself a symbol of successful Franco-German co-operation.

They then led a joint defence and security council held next to a French Rafale jet and a Eurofighter, a key component of Germany's air force.

The full cabinets of both governments got together for talks in a castle near Cologne, where French president Charles de Gaulle and German chancellor Konrad Adenauer agreed on the idea of a friendship treaty between the two countries in 1962.

The two countries had been seeking to "bounce back" from last month's implosion of the joint Future Combat Air System (FCAS) fighter jet project, which fell victim to bickering between Airbus and France's Dassault.

There are also fears for another joint project, the Main Ground

Combat System (MGCS), which aims to replace battle tanks used by France and Germany and has been buffeted by internal tensions since Germany's Rheinmetall entered the project.

A joint statement from the two countries after yesterday's meeting said only that they wanted to "investigate an approach" for MGCS in order to "bring it to a proof-of-concept state".

The allies also pledged to co-operate on long-range missile capacity, air defence, satellite Internet and early warning capabilities.

Asked about the prospect of a Le Pen victory in 2027's election, Merz said that Germany would "extend a hand" to whoever was elected.

"We will continue to do everything we can to ensure that this co-operation with our French neighbours remains as close, as deep and as trusting as possible," Merz said.

"That applies regardless of what voters in our two countries decide".

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has also established a steady lead in German polls, although other parties have so far maintained a "firewall", preventing co-operation with the party.

Macron himself addressed the question of his successor and said that caution should be taken with regard to surveys predicting a Le Pen victory.

"Beware of the polls," he said.

"Trust the French people, don't always predict the worst for them. Allow them to want the best."

US to take lead in probe into Ryanair Boeing 737 engine failure over Greece

Reuters
Washington

The US National Transportation Safety Board said Thursday it will lead the investigation into an incident in which a passenger was partly sucked out of a Ryanair Boeing 737's broken window over Greece last week. The NTSB said Greece had delegated the lead role to the agency in the probe.

A piece of engine broke off the Boeing 737 NG and smashed the window shortly after takeoff from Thessaloniki in Greece on July 10, according to video and the Federal Aviation Administration. The plane, headed to Germany, lost pressure and made an emergency landing.

Fellow passengers held on to the person pulled out of the window, Serbian national Ljubisa Karovic. He was injured and hospitalised.

The event had similarities to problems on two prior Southwest Airlines Boeing 737 NG flights in 2016 and 2018. In the latter, a passenger died after being par-

tially sucked out of a window damaged by a broken fan blade.

But FAA Administrator Bryan Bedford told Reuters in an interview: "I don't think the early indications are that (the recent Ryanair problem) mimics what the Southwest incident was."

After the Southwest incident, the NTSB called on Boeing to redesign the fan cowl structure on 737 NG planes, and the FAA issued an airworthiness directive in 2023 to be completed by 2028.

Bedford said the ongoing investigation is prompting a full reevaluation of the FAA response to the 2018 incident. "Did we miss something? Way too early to tell — but we can't take it off the board yet," Bedford said.

Southwest said Thursday it has completed the work on approximately 80% of its affected planes and was ahead of schedule to meet the FAA's July 2028 deadline.

Ryanair uses CFM56 engines from manufacturer CFM International on all of its Boeing 737 NG models. The NG is the 737 version that preceded the current MAX generation.

Denmark shooting leaves one dead

One person was killed and a policeman was wounded in Denmark yesterday when a gunman opened fire on officers responding to a call of a blaze in a building, police said. The shooter was badly wounded when police returned fire and was taken to hospital. His motive for the ambush was not known at this time and he was not immediately identified. The incident occurred in the industrial zone of the northern city of Norresundby. "A civilian man and a policeman present at the crime scene were hit by gunshots. The civilian is dead. The wounded police officer is in a stable condition," the regional police force said in a statement. (AFP)

N Macedonia police probe water supply after mass poisoning

AFP
Skopje

More than 1,000 people have been treated for poisoning symptoms in North Macedonia, a hospital said yesterday, after contaminated river water was allegedly pumped directly into a town's drinking supply.

Although the hospital in the town of Gostivar — about 50 kilometres (30 miles) southwest of the capital Skopje — did not confirm a direct cause, it said it had treated a large number of people with vomiting, diarrhoea and stomach pain over the past four days.

Police were investigating the cause but believed the local water company may have pumped wastewater directly into the town's water supply.

The local force said in a statement the idea was most likely to increase the supply of drinking water — the area regularly suffers from shortages during the summer.

Authorities have temporarily banned drinking from the town's supply, and the hospital has boosted staff to manage the influx of sick people.

The interior ministry said it was working to "fully clarify the case" and that polluting drinking water could be considered a crime.

Cubes and lubes: Europe's 'Speedcubers' twist for glory

AFP
Arnhem

Rows knitted with concentration, Juliette Sebastien clasps her trusty Rubik's Cube, her fingers moving at a head-spinning speed before flipping the solved puzzle onto her table in just 25.03 seconds.

Welcome to the world of competitive Rubik's Cube solving — "speedcubing" for those in the know — where players compete in disciplines ranging from the blind-fold challenge to solving cubes with oven gloves on their hands.

French national champion Sebastien is pitting her skills against 1,200 competitors from 53 countries in the 11th European speedcubing championships in

Arnhem, eastern Netherlands.

She trains for at least an hour a day, but has been putting in three or four hours daily in the run-up to the competition, her preparation marred by an unfortunate wasp sting to the hand.

"I do training blocks of 100, 200, sometimes 300 solves," the 25-year-old student told AFP. "There are always new techniques that you can learn."

Her time in the 4x4 event — slightly bigger and harder to solve than a standard Rubik's cube — is respectable, but the speeds in the fastest disciplines are mind-bending.

Chinese speedcuber Ziyu Ye holds the 2x2 world record at a staggering 0.39 seconds.

The clacking of cubes echoes through the five cavernous sports



Participants prepare at the Rubik's WCA (World Cube Association) European Championship 2026 in Arnhem yesterday. (AFP)

halls hosting the championships.

"There are more cubes here than people," quipped one competitor, 31-year-old programmer Jeroen Plug from the Netherlands.

But this is serious business: the competition is closely regulated and run with military precision.

Before stepping out onto stage, competitors hand over their pre-

cious cubes to the "scramblers", who secretly set them to exactly the same position for everyone, ensuring a level playing field.

Two players sit side by side, each under the eagle eye of a referee and with a camera tracking their every move, as a digital clock records their time to the hundredth of a second.

The freshly scrambled cube arrives concealed in a box. When the box is overturned, competitors have 15 seconds to examine the state of the cube before placing their hands on a sensor to start the clock and begin their solve.

The speedcubing world was recently rocked by the "Sliding Scandal", a cheating technique where players would surreptitiously slide their hands from the sensor to the cube, gaining critical tenths of seconds.

World records were erased from the history books in the wake of the scandal, which was still being whispered about in hushed tones on the sidelines in Arnhem.

The surprising secret to a prize-winning cube? Lube.

Each player applies a precise amount of lubrication to their cube to ensure it moves at exactly the speed they prefer, explained Loes Wentink, staffing the lubrication stand.

"It makes a big difference to the competition," said the 21-year-old electrical engineering student.

Some lubes actually increase the friction because "some cubes are very fast out of the box."

"Sometimes you can't control it... and if you can't control it, then your solve won't be as good," she told AFP.

Pakistan worries about being drawn into US - Iran conflict after Houthi attack

Attacks on Saudi Arabia by Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis this week have frustrated Pakistan and threaten to draw Islamabad into the conflict, complicating any future role it may have as a mediator between the United States and Iran.

Nuclear-armed Pakistan, which helped broker an interim deal last month in the war between Washington and Tehran, signed a mutual defence agreement with Saudi Arabia last year and thousands of Pakistani soldiers have been deployed to the kingdom, alongside a squadron of fighter jets.

Pakistan had already voiced anger about Iranian strikes on Saudi Arabia earlier this year, but regional analysts and officials said the attacks this week had pushed Islamabad's frustration with Iran to a new level as they raised the prospect of a new Saudi-Houthi conflict. The Houthis fired missiles at Saudi Arabia after accusing the kingdom of bombing an airport under their control on Monday.

The cross-border fire pierced a four-year truce but has so far been contained to a single incident.

"Our top civil and military leaders have conveyed to Iran at the highest level that the attacks on Saudi Arabia are attacks on Pakistan," a Pakistani official told Reuters. "It is our red line."

The source and other Pakistani officials interviewed for this article spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not allowed to speak publicly.

"Pakistan wasn't anticipating that the tensions will rise so suddenly," said Muhammad Amir Rana, a Pakistani security analyst.

Pakistan's frustration appears rooted in growing concerns that Houthi involvement may be more likely to draw Pakistan into the conflict than the Iranian missile strikes were earlier this year.

Pakistan's soldiers are deployed near the Saudi border with Yemen, two Pakistani officials said, increasing their direct exposure.

There are also concerns in Islamabad that a Houthi-led escalation could disrupt shipping in the Red Sea, an important trade route that Pakistan and many other countries depend on.

A widening conflict there could be more difficult to contain and could target Saudi interests in a way that

forces Pakistan to intervene militarily under the terms of its mutual defence pact. Ghulam Mustafa, a retired Pakistani general, said that for now "Pakistan's top leaders are still engaged in appealing all stakeholders".

However, he cautioned that this could change "if the Houthis expand the radius of their attacks in Saudi Arabia". This week's tensions between Yemen's Houthis and Saudi Arabia have fueled broader concerns in Islamabad about Iran.

Two Pakistani government officials said growing divisions within the Iranian leadership have been watched with concern in Islamabad.

The views and objectives of Iran's political leaders, including President Masoud Pezeshkian, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and Speaker of Parliament Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, increasingly differ from those of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Pakistani officials said.

"The military seems to be dominating the decision making in Iran," said Muhammad Ali, a Pakistani defence analyst, adding that this is increasingly "being recognised in Islamabad". As Pakistan seeks a

more prominent regional role, analysts say it will also increasingly face the challenges that come with such exposure. When Pakistan's defence deal with Saudi Arabia was announced last September, it was widely seen as a sign that Gulf Arab states were growing increasingly wary about the reliability of the United States as a security guarantor and looking to Pakistan and other countries as a possible alternative.

However, Pakistan is deeply reliant on Middle Eastern countries for oil and gas.

The tensions around the Strait of Hormuz disrupted Pakistan's supply routes, and the government imposed emergency measures including early business closures to prevent a fuel shortage.

Mediating between the US and Iran has been at least as much about reopening these supply routes as it has been about diplomatic influence, according to analysts and Pakistani officials.

"Yes, there is frustration, but that doesn't mean that we are abandoning this project," one official said, referring to the mediation. "We have invested a lot in it, and we have an interest in keeping it afloat." — Reuters

Collapse of Amazon soy pact to unleash new deforestation: study

The collapse of a landmark Amazon soy pact will drive at least 1.4mn hectares (3.5mn acres) of extra deforestation in Brazil over the next decade, releasing carbon emissions equal to Canada's annual output, according to an analysis published this week. The paper, published in "Science, examined the rise and fall of the Amazon Soy Moratorium – one of the world's most successful voluntary deforestation commitments – under which soy traders agreed not to source or finance soy grown on land deforested after July 2008. When the Moratorium began in 2006, nearly a third of annual soy expansion came from deforestation. After it took effect, deforestation linked to new soy fields fell to nearly zero.

"It generated very positive effects and results," not only environmentally but also by opening new markets, co-author Tiago Reis of World Wildlife Fund-Brazil, told AFP. "It gave the assurance that soy was not causing more Amazon deforestation." However, the agreement came under attack starting three years ago, driven by lobbying from soy farmers, who filed a \$200mn lawsuit against the traders. Brazilian antitrust authorities also investigated the Moratorium's signatories over allegations they were behaving like a cartel.

Finally, laws passed by Mato Grosso and other soy-producing states stripped tax breaks from companies that adopted eco-friendly sourcing commitments beyond what the law required.

Though those laws are being challenged in Brazil's

Federal Supreme Court, they have effectively dealt the agreement a death blow, with the moratorium abandoned in January. The forecast is grim, according to the authors, who included researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, DePaul University and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. They project 1.4mn hectares of additional deforestation by 2036 – roughly 2mn soccer pitches – equivalent to 745mn metric tonnes of carbon dioxide, which is comparable to Canada's annual greenhouse gas emissions. That's also roughly 17% of the total area deforested across the Brazilian Amazon over the past decade. Beyond legal deforestation, the report's authors estimate tens of millions more hectares of "undesigned" public forest – land that is neither protected nor privately or Indigenous held – could come under pressure from land grabs, given its suitability for soy.

Reis explained that while cattle farming is often the initial method of claiming ownership of such land, soy is actually the strongest indirect driver of Amazon deforestation "because it's the most valuable commodity that can be produced".

The authors recommend a combination of stronger deforestation enforcement in Brazil and more ethical sourcing by soy importers, including the EU and China. Companies, banks and financial institutions, they say, also need to demand deforestation-free soy more forcefully. (AFP)

Water woes



Villagers collect spring water with bottles at Gunung Batur village in Cilegon, Banten province, after struggling to access groundwater at their homes in part due to the impact of El Nino, which has brought a prolonged dry season and triggered extreme drought, threatening food security in various regions of Indonesia. Indonesia's Meteorology, Climatology, and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) has warned that the country's dry season will be more intense and prolonged than average – in part due to the El Nino weather pattern heightening risks of wildfires and droughts. (AFP)

The serious health risks posed by wildfire smoke

By Nancy Lapid
Reuters

Massive wildfires are raging around the world during unprecedented heatwaves, blanketing millions of people under pungent haze caused by smoke carrying noxious gases and particulate matter that pose serious health risks.

More toxic than normal air pollution, wildfire smoke can linger in the air for weeks and travel thousands of miles.

Wildfires can burn not only vegetation but also vehicles and buildings as well as their contents.

Along with particles of soil and biological materials, wildfire smoke often contains traces of chemicals, metals, plastics and other synthetic materials.

In laboratory experiments, wildfire smoke causes more inflammation and tissue damage than air pollution, said Kent Pinkerton, co-director of the Centre for Health and the Environment at the University of California, Davis (UC Davis).

Studies have linked wildfire smoke with higher rates of heart attacks, strokes, and cardiac arrests, increases in emergency room visits for asthma, weakened immune defences and poorer survival rates after surgery.

A 2023 study in Maryland identified a spike in heart and lung illnesses that was associated with wildfire smoke originating up to 2,100 miles (3,380km) away.

Wildfires also have been linked with eye and skin problems.

Wildfire exposure in pregnancy has been associated with miscarriage, low birth weight and preterm delivery.

A California study found a link between wildfire exposure and cellular damage in first- and second-trimester placentas.

A separate study found wildfire

smoke exposure during the third trimester may raise the risk of an autism diagnosis.

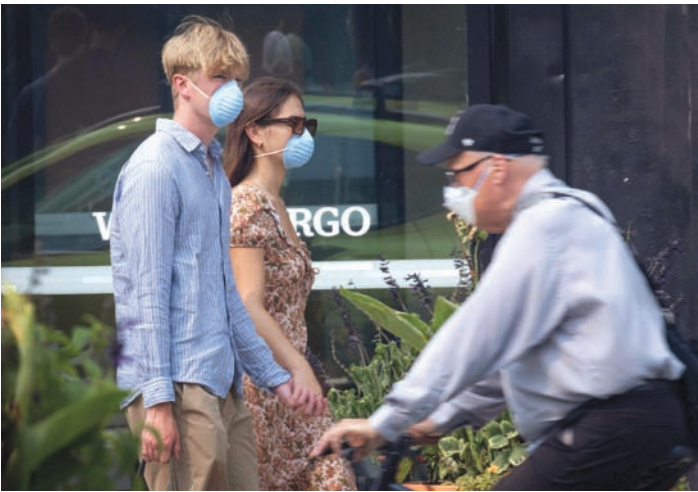
The effects of exposure can persist for years.

After Australia's 2014 Hazelwood Coal Mine fire, heart disease rates remained elevated for two-and-a-half years and respiratory illnesses for five years.

A 2026 US study linked wildfire smoke exposure with elevated risks for lung, colorectal, breast, bladder and blood cancer, with the risks increasing along with the level of pollution from the fires.

Exposure to the 2018 Camp Fire in California was linked to changes in cognition and brain activity six to 12 months later, California researchers found.

Several studies have now linked longer-term wildfire smoke exposure to higher risks for dementia.



People wear masks to protect themselves as smoke from Canadian wildfires blankets the city on Thursday in Chicago, Illinois. (AFP)

Data from California also show an increase in fungal infections in the months following wildfire smoke exposure, likely due to spores in the smoke.

"The bad news is, there's no

safe level" of inhaled particles from wildfire smoke, said Doug Brugge, who chairs the Department of Public Health Sciences at University of Connecticut School of Medicine.

"The higher the exposure, the worse the risks, but even at levels below the national safety standards, these particles can make people sick."

Any amount of inhaled particles will trigger inflammatory responses in the body.

Children, the elderly and people with chronic illnesses are most vulnerable.

Even in healthy adults, some effects of exposure – such as sore throats, excessive phlegm, coughing, headaches and brain fog – can appear immediately and persist long after the smoke plume is gone, said Keith Bein of the Air Quality Research Centre at the University of California, Davis.

To mitigate the risks, experts advise wearing N95 masks when wildfire smoke is present and limiting outdoor activities, especially strenuous sports.

The longer you are outside and the harder you breathe, the more pollution you inhale, said Dr Jasvinder Singh, a lung medicine specialist at Medstar Franklin Square Medical Centre in Baltimore.

Experts also recommend the use of indoor air purifiers that can trap particles smaller than 2.5 microns.

"Air purifiers reduce exposure and in our studies reduced blood pressure and cognitive impacts of air pollution," Brugge said.

For those who cannot afford an air purifier, UC Davis offers simple instructions for building one.

Online instructions for reducing exposure to wildfire smoke are available from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Particulates from wildfire

smoke enter most buildings in high concentrations, experts say.

On average, the concentration of wildfire pollutants indoors is about half of what it is outdoors, Singh said.

If a building is poorly sealed, the concentration may be up to 70% of what it is outside, he said.

Old buildings may expose people to greater amounts of pollution through drafty windows and doors.

The EPA advises that during wildfire smoke events, people avoid indoor activities that put more fine particles into the air, such as smoking cigarettes, frying or broiling food, burning candles or incense, and vacuuming without a HEPA filter.

Bein compared indoor wildfire smoke exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke exposure.

"The particles... end up everywhere – on your clothes, on your walls, on surfaces, and they're still outgassing" – being released into the air – "after the smoke plume is gone", he said.

More frequent wildfires likely linked to climate change mean people will be exposed more often.

The health effects over multiple seasons are not yet clear.

"It is hard to make predictions because it is hard to say how many fires people will be exposed to, how long the fires will burn, or what the smoke will contain," Bein said.

Researchers are looking into the long-term effects of smoke particles in water supplies, on crops or ingested by livestock; of urban wildfire smoke; of wildfire exposure in utero; and whether wildfire smoke amplifies the adverse effects of extremely hot weather.

Nutrients carried in wildfire smoke may contribute to downwind algal blooms, which has implications for drinking water reservoirs and lake ecology, researchers warn.



Smoke from wildfires burning in Canada blankets the Chicago metropolitan area. (AFP)

Wildfires, drought hound Europe as heatwave recedes

Reuters
Ejea De Los Caballeros

Firefighters backed by 30 aircraft struggled yesterday to contain a wildfire in north-eastern Spain that has ripped through an area the size of San Francisco, forcing the evacuation of more than 1,000 people, as recent heatwaves left vegetation tinder-dry across much of Europe. Successive early summer heatwaves, which many scientists blame on human-driven climate change, have pushed temperatures to unprecedented levels in large swathes of the continent, causing water shortages, crop damage, wildfires, and thousands more deaths than normal.

According to the Reuters Climate Monitor, the average high across Western Europe yesterday was forecast to be 27.5 degrees Celsius (81.5 degrees Fahrenheit), which is 4.2C above the normal high for July 17 from 1961-1990.

In France, a drought has worsened day after day since the end of May, even as the latest heatwave continued to recede, with



This screen grab taken from video footage released yesterday by Spain's Military Emergencies Unit shows the military unit fighting a massive wildfire through the night in a sparsely populated part of the Aragon region in the country's northeast, after the blaze doubled in size overnight to scorch over 12,000 hectares. (AFP)

high temperatures expected to be mostly confined to the southeast by the weekend, according to MétéoFrance. A gas-fired power plant in southern France was at risk of going offline as high temperatures in the Mediterranean Sea limited access to cooling water, piling further pressure on an energy system already facing reduced nuclear output due to warmer river waters.

In Germany, shallow water on the key Rhine River has hindered shipping, leading to rising transport costs, though rain has helped bump up levels, with more expected in the coming days.

As the heat receded, giving way to violent storms in some places, two people died in central and eastern France and one in Germany's southern state of Baden-

Wuerttemberg as a result of falling trees or a lightning strike.

A "supercell" thunderstorm brought strong winds and hailstones measuring up to 5cm (2 inches), with drivers seeking shelter under a motorway bridge outside Stuttgart due to the hail. Residents in the state were told to continue to expect severe weather yesterday.

In northeast Germany, firefighters were hoping for rain to help quell a wildfire at the Mueritz National Park that has been burning for nearly a week, their efforts hindered by unexploded ammunition at a former military training facility.

Spain's weather agency AEMET warned temperatures would start rising again today, with highs potentially reaching 42-44C in parts of the Andalusia and La Mancha regions next week. Forecasters also warned of an extreme wildfire risk as hot, dry air from North Africa advances across much of the country.

The wildfire near Ores in the northeastern region of Aragon expanded overnight to more than 12,000 hectares (46 square miles), with 300 military emergency re-



A drone view shows houseboats on Het Meertje river, as the levels of the river are lower than expected for this time of the season in Nijmegen, Netherlands, yesterday. (Reuters)

sponders deployed to contain the fire and helicopters operating in continuous rotations, at times with up to five aircraft loading water simultaneously.

"The houses have been saved, as have the people, but everything else has gone up in flames," evacuated Maria Pilar Arregui told Reuters outside a sports centre turned into a temporary shelter in Ejea de los Caballeros. Firefighters were also tackling wildfires near Madrid and in Guadalajara province, where around 1,500 hectares have burned and a summer camp was evacuated as a precaution. A week ago, one of Spain's deadliest wildfires on record killed at least 13 people, mostly foreigners, in the southern province of Almería.

In Greece's metropolitan area of Athens, authorities went on high

alert for wildfire risks, with drones equipped with thermal cameras patrolling over forests and water cannons stationed outside campsites.

Earlier this month, the World Health Organisation warned that Europe could face "more deadly weeks ahead" from new heatwaves forming over the Atlantic. Scientists monitoring so-called excess deaths said there were thousands more fatalities recorded than normal during a heatwave that swept through Europe and Britain at the end of June.

"Nearly 10,000 excess deaths, and the summer is not yet over," said Dr Hans Henri P Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, criticising governments for "still treating heat as a weather event rather than a health emergency," despite existing tools and WHO guidance to prevent most of these deaths.

Pakistan cargo crash families push for international help to find black boxes

Reuters
Karachi

Relatives of the five crew members aboard a Boeing 737 cargo plane that crashed into the Arabian Sea off Pakistan last week are urging an international search effort to find the flight recorders to determine the cause.

Debris from the K2 Airways freighter was recovered shortly after the July 7 crash, but the water in the area is about 3,000m (9,800 feet) deep.

Finding the "black boxes" would require a costly underwater search likely to need foreign assistance, according to aviation experts familiar with deepwater crashes such as Air France 447 in 2009.

The locator beacons on the 27-year-old plane were designed to transmit pings for only 30 days. Recovering the recorders could show whether a navigation system issue reported shortly before the crash was linked to a navigation component that relatives say was replaced before the flight.

Pakistan has provided no public update on the search for a week, and an industrial company with underwater search expertise told Reuters it had not heard of any requests by Pakistan for assistance from foreign companies or navies.

"The search has to continue, and whatever resources can be deployed, locally and internationally, should be deployed," Yashib



Yashib Rizwan, 33, the son of Captain Muhammad Rizwan Idris, 62, the late pilot of the K2 Airways Boeing 737 cargo aircraft, speaks during an interview with Reuters at his home in Karachi. (Reuters)

Rizwan, the eldest son of Captain Rizwan Idris, told Reuters. "For us a transparent investigation is key."

Engineer Muhammad Arif Siddiqui's son, Abdur Rafay Siddiqui, also called for international assistance if needed.

Both families have held funeral prayers after losing hope the bodies would be recovered.

Pakistan's government has not responded to questions about whether it will seek foreign assistance to search for the plane.

K2, which lost its only plane in the crash, has not responded to requests for comment.

The pilots reported a navigational system issue at 9:18pm Pakistani time while flying to Karachi from Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan's airports authority said last week.

Local air traffic control tried to guide it, but three minutes later radar systems showed the plane descending rapidly and communication was lost, the authority said.

Flightradar24 data showed the plane plunged about 5,000 feet in less than a minute, climbed about 6,000 feet in 30 seconds and then entered a catastrophic dive from 36,550 feet.

The plane spent about 10 days in Sharjah before the flight while the pilots awaited a replacement part from the US after a maintenance fault, said Ghulam Nabi, the father-in-law of co-pilot Faisal Jatoi.

One of the plane's two inertial reference units (IRUs), which feed information on the aircraft's position, speed and orientation to the cockpit displays, was replaced in

Sharjah, the captain's son Yashib Rizwan said.

"If you have a problem with your IRU, you just can't rely upon the instruments," said John Goglia, a former US National Transportation Safety Board member, adding that pilots flying at night over the ocean without visual references could struggle to determine the aircraft's orientation.

Aircraft accidents are usually caused by multiple factors, and it remains unclear whether the replacement of the IRU is related to the crash.

An inertial reference system malfunction contributed to the 2007 Adam Air crash in Indonesia, where investigators found the pilots became fixated on trouble-shooting erroneous information, failed to notice a steep right bank and lost control before the aircraft plunged into the sea, killing all 102 people aboard.

Pings from the Adam Air black boxes were detected about three weeks after the crash in a search aided by the US Navy, but recovering the recorders from about 2,000m of water took a months-long multimillion-dollar effort using a specialised remotely operated vehicle.

US aviation expert Todd Curtis said on the "Flight Safety Detectives" podcast that Pakistan was unlikely to mount a similar recovery operation unless there was a compelling reason given the K2 plane was an ageing cargo jet rather than a current-production passenger model.

Romania signs \$1.1bn deal for radars, helicopters

AFP
Bucharest

The Romanian defence ministry announced yesterday deals worth one billion euros (\$1.1bn) to buy radars and helicopters from European aviation giant Airbus and French defence firm Thales.

The eastern European Nato member has been seeking to modernise its army, especially its air defences, in the face of dozens of airspace breaches and drone crashes since the start of the war in neighbouring Ukraine.

Romania's modernisation drive comes as Europe seeks to re-arm in the wake of Russia's invasion and doubts over the United States' commitment to the continent's security under US President Donald Trump.

The new purchase is of 12 multi-mission helicopters from Airbus for 757mn euros and 12 Thales air surveillance radars valued at 247mn euros, according to a press release from the defence ministry.

The first radar, "which we greatly need to deal with low-altitude drones", is to be delivered within 11 months, defence minister Radu Miruta told a press

conference yesterday.

The deal falls under the European Union's SAFE (Security Action for Europe) lending initiative, which helps EU members to re-arm themselves with loans at lower rates.

The helicopters and radar units are to be delivered by 2030.

The Airbus deal involves 12 H225M Caracal helicopters, while Thales is set to supply 12 Ground Master 200 MM/A air surveillance radars.

A defence source told AFP that they expected the two contracts to generate hundreds of jobs in Romania.

In total, Romania plans to purchase 2.2bn euros' worth of anti-drone systems through the SAFE programme, Miruta said.

"What defends Romania in the Dobrogea region is not just for Romania, it is also for the Nato sky," he added, referring to a region on the Black Sea.

In the most serious drone incident in the country, two people were wounded when an unmanned vehicle smashed into an apartment building in May, triggering condemnation from Nato allies.

Romania identified the drone as Russian, while Moscow said there was no evidence.

Russia fines anti-war politician

AFP
Dolgoprudny

A Russian court fined anti-war politician Boris Nadezhdin \$13 yesterday for displaying "extremist symbols", delivering the verdict moments after paramedics performed a cardiogram on him in court for extreme high blood pressure.

Nadezhdin — one of the few politicians in Russia openly criticising President Vladimir Putin and Moscow's Ukraine offensive — had tried to sign up for running in tightly controlled parliamentary elections in September.

The 63-year-old faced the charges over a 2023 post he made linking to a video featuring the late opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who is designated an "extremist" in Russia. Nadezhdin decried the charg-

es as "nonsense" and said they were designed to stop him from running in the September polls.

Before the hearing, Nadezhdin — who has a history of heart ailments — took a reading of his blood pressure, which appeared to be at extreme hypertensive levels, according to an AFP reporter in the courtroom.

Paramedic staff entered the room and performed a cardiogram on him at about 12:00pm (0900 GMT), around an hour after lawyers called for an ambulance.

Despite his lawyers' pleas, the judge did not defer the verdict, finding him guilty of displaying "extremist symbols" and issuing him a 1,000 rouble (\$13) fine.

The maximum sentence for the offence is 15 days in prison.

"I'm glad to be alive... We live in a sick state," he said following the verdict. He earlier warned he would "simply die" if imprisoned.



Ambulance medics check the blood pressure of Boris Nadezhdin, an anti-war Russian politician, as he takes part in a court hearing in Dolgoprudny, Moscow region, yesterday. (Reuters)

Slovaks outraged by ministry's \$61mn HQ

AFP
Bratislava

Slovakia's defence minister has come under fire for his lavish taste in architecture after unveiling his ministry's new 27-storey headquarters, with many criticising the cost of the 53-million-euro (\$61mn) renovation.

Known popularly as the "corn" because of its resemblance to the summer barbecue staple, the towering former communist-era barracks' facelift is already under scrutiny for potential misuse of the central European country's public funds.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" beamed the minister, Robert Kalinak, one of Prime Minister Robert Fico's closest allies, as he opened the building in the capital Bratislava to the public on Thursday.

Many disagreed. "An overpriced Dubai sky-

scraper" was among the many critical comments on social media, while lawmaker Gabor Grendel of the opposition Slovensko party called it "the most expensive corn in the world".

The prosecutor's office is already investigating a criminal complaint regarding the 958,000-euro renovation of the tower's surrounding 700-metre wall, for which workers were painting a brick-effect concrete facade instead of laying brick cladding. Kalinak has denied any wrongdoing.

Visitors to Thursday's public unveiling were treated to price tags on display throughout the building, listing both market prices and what the ministry said it claimed it had paid instead.

According to the ministry, a sofa originally listed at 4,500 euros cost taxpayers around 2,000 euros, while a coat rack was reduced from 620 euros to 330 euros. A small kitchenette installed on each floor cost nearly 8,000 euros, excluding appliances.

In the meantime, the tower's 400,000-euro outdoor LED screen has been turned off for months after online memes re-imagined it as the baleful eye of Sauron's fortress of Barad-dur from *The Lord of the Rings*.

Opposition lawmaker Veronika Remisova said the lavish spending on the minister's new office was inappropriate at a time when the government is tightening the public finances.

Kalinak defended the outlay, describing the furnishings as being of "mid-range standard" from durable materials and claiming they would last 30 to 50 years.

Slovakia, which joined the EU and Nato in 2004, has spent two % of its GDP on defence since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in line with historic Nato guidelines.

But the central bank expects that to fall below the target this year, with many blaming austerity and rifts within Fico's ruling coalition over defence spending and aid to Ukraine.

structure were damaged in the bombardment, Filatov said.

In a later attack on the nearby port city of Mykolaiv, two more people were killed aboard a foreign-flagged civilian vessel, and two other foreign-flagged ships were damaged, local prosecutors said.

Farther south, in the frontline city of Kherson, a 70-year-old woman was killed and five others, all elderly, were wounded in Russian attacks, said the city's military administration.

Russia denies targeting civilians

and said it struck military-related infrastructure across Ukraine's south. Moscow has stepped up air raids on Ukrainian Black Sea ports in recent weeks.

In Russia, a man was killed after a drone hit his car in the Belgorod region, on the border with Ukraine, the regional government said.

Another person was killed in a Ukrainian attack on Gorlivka, a town in eastern Ukraine controlled by Russia, said Moscow-installed governor Ivan Prikhodko.

Seven dead in Ukraine, Russia after strikes

AFP
Kyiv

Russian and Ukrainian strikes killed seven people in total across both sides of the border yesterday, local officials said.

More than four years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, strikes from both sides have been intensifying for several months, causing a growing number of civilian casualties.

In Ukraine, two people were killed and eight wounded when a missile hit a residential building in the Black Sea port city of Odesa, said deputy mayor Oleksandr Filatov.

"Among those killed was a woman who was walking in a park with children at the time of the attack. The children survived and are receiving the necessary assistance," emergency services said.

Residential buildings, a religious institution, a pre-school facility, vehicles and other civilian infra-



From Page 1

He had an intuition, and he gave credit where it was due.

He sought out talent to lead his different portfolios, and once he chose someone, he trusted and empowered them fully.

I often spoke with him in detail about the projects we were working on, and he would surprise me with how much he retained when he later asked how things were evolving.

That attentiveness wasn't reserved for me alone; everyone around him felt it.

Yuba had many gifts, but to me, his greatest was the way he listened and cared.

The day after I graduated from university in 2005, I began working with him.

Within days, we were travelling the globe – from Chicago to New York, Tokyo to Singapore.

His energy was larger than life; his unrelenting drive kept us all moving forward.

Every decision carried profound meaning. I was 23 when he asked me to take over the Museum of Islamic Art. I remember vividly the day after it opened – he looked at me and asked simply: “What is the next museum we are opening?”

There was no time wasted on celebration; the focus was always on the road ahead.

To him, cultural infrastructure was a socioeconomic catalyst, a driver of quality of life and human development – there was no time to lose.

He kept me on my toes, grounded and humble, and above all, human and real.

Yuba loved to laugh at himself, and he taught me to do the same.

His confidence to act and to embrace showed me I could do the same. He led not by lecture but by example; he taught me everything I know.

When he came to power, he abolished censorship and created Al Jazeera.

I believe this was his proudest achievement, not just for Qatar, but for the Arab world as a whole.

He wanted to elevate the lives of Arabs, to let them live with dignity, to empower their voices in media, education, culture, film, sport, and beyond.

‘Yuba’ – My dear father



(PICTURE: Rik Van Lent)

He believed in dialogue to resolve conflict and had the patience to hear out the opinions of others.

He never treated disagreement as confrontation; instead, he encouraged us to speak the truth and search for insight until a matter was resolved.

Solutions were driven by Qatar's best interests, never by personal bias.

Qatar deserved the best, and whatever needed

to be done had to be done in the best way possible.

In the afternoons, my father would drive around looking at new developments and neighbourhoods, sometimes stopping by people's homes to see how they were doing.

He stayed close to his people, as if they were all his children – because, in a sense, they were. No child, no adult, no Qatari, no resident ever felt too distant from his presence, from his smile.

Behind the visionary leader was simply a devoted husband, father, and grandfather.

He deeply respected my mother and often praised her immense contribution to our upbringing and to society.

The values he demanded at work were the same ones he demanded at home.

Holidays were never for idleness; he woke up early to make the most of every day, ensuring we shared in his discipline.

Lunches were animated by politicians, thinkers, writers, artists, and old friends.

My Yuba was generous with his heart, his attention, and his curiosity.

He was restless, never wasting a moment, and inclusive, never making anyone feel less important than himself.

He often introduced himself simply as “Hamad” – and with his infectious smile and warm brown eyes, it took only one encounter, one conversation, to leave a lasting impression.

When death arrives, it strips away everything but love and legacy.

In these days of mourning, as the world comes to Qatar to pay its respects, I see my father's true masterpiece: A nation united in grief by mourners from near and far.

To honour him is to remain united, focused, disciplined, and determined to deliver the best for our country and our region.

His absolute trust and pride in my brother will no doubt continue to guide us – to make the impossible possible, and to stay focused, undeterred by distraction, on our shared goal.

So as we return to work next week, may we all work harder, remembering what he expected of us:

To be the best versions of ourselves and to contribute in the best way we can.

To remain humble, kind, generous, and hospitable, in the way that we are.

May his memory continue to guide us for the rest of our lives.

May his soul rest in peace.

(Article courtesy of Al Jazeera)

Qatar's transformation under Father Amir an unprecedented nation-building journey

Former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al-Thani has described the era of His Highness the late Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani as one of the most extraordinary leadership experiences in modern history, saying it combined visionary statecraft with exceptional humanity and laid the foundations for the modern State of Qatar.

Speaking in an interview with Qatar Television, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim reflected on his long association with HH the Father Amir, describing him as a leader who regarded Qatar as his extended family and dedicated his life to serving its people. He said the Father Amir possessed the rare ability to combine decisive leadership with compassion, placing the country's interests above personal considerations throughout his years in office.

HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim stressed that one of the defining moments of HH the late Father Amir's leadership was his voluntary decision to transfer power while still at the height of his strength. He described the move as an unprecedented example of leadership driven by the long-term interests of the state rather than the preservation of authority, emphasising that the decision reflected a deeply held conviction that the nation's progress depended on continuity, renewal and preparing the next generation of leadership.

He revealed that HH the late Father Amir had spoken about stepping down years before it actually occurred, repeatedly expressing his intention to hand over responsibility once he was confident that the Heir Apparent was fully prepared to continue the country's development. The transfer had been scheduled well in advance but was delayed by several months due to regional developments, including the Arab Spring.

Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim stressed that HH the late Father Amir never viewed governance as an individual project. Instead, he established a comprehensive vision for building a modern state across every sector, including politics, diplomacy, the economy, education, healthcare, infrastructure, culture and social development. He described Qatar's transformation as comparable to only a handful of international development stories, citing Singapore as one example, though under very different circumstances.

He recalled that when HH Sheikh Hamad assumed leadership, Qatar faced significant financial and economic challenges and possessed limited resources. Despite these constraints, the late leader consistently rejected modest ambitions and insisted on setting bold national objectives. Rather than focusing on incremental improvements, he sought to reposition Qatar as a globally competitive state.

One of the clearest illustrations

of this vision was the strategic development of Qatar's natural gas industry. At a time when international expectations for the sector remained modest, HH Sheikh Hamad believed that gas would become the engine of Qatar's economic transformation. That long-term vision ultimately enabled Qatar to emerge as one of the world's leading producers and exporters of liquefied natural gas, with expansion plans continuing under the current leadership.

He argued that the energy sector's success has not always received the international recognition it deserves, despite fundamentally reshaping Qatar's economy and providing the financial foundation for decades of national development.

Throughout the interview, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim emphasised that HH the late Father Amir considered the Qatari citizen to be the country's greatest asset. Economic prosperity, he explained, was never an end in itself but rather a means of improving people's lives through better education, healthcare, higher incomes and modern public services while ensuring opportunities for future generations. He said this philosophy guided the implementation of successive waves of major national projects, including the development of the gas industry, Hamad International Airport, Hamad Port, transportation networks, hospitals, educational institutions and other strategic infrastructure that transformed Qatar's physical landscape and strengthened its regional and international standing.

Beyond development projects, HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim highlighted HH Sheikh Hamad's personal leadership style, describing him as a leader who worked directly with his teams, delegated authority and placed considerable trust in those around him. He said the late Father Amir accepted mistakes as a natural part of decision-making and always assumed responsibility for failures himself rather than seeking scapegoats.

However, he admitted that the late leader was deeply disappointed whenever individuals failed to honour the trust placed in them or neglected their responsibilities.

Reflecting on HH Sheikh Hamad's personality, he described him as remarkably humble despite the burdens of leadership.

He recalled one of the sayings HH Sheikh Hamad frequently repeated: “A truly strong person serves the people, not rules over them.” That principle, he said, shaped the way officials were expected to deal with citizens by listening carefully to their concerns, regardless of how small they might appear.

He noted that HH the late Father Amir maintained an exceptional memory for people's personal circumstances, often following up on issues years later or asking to meet individuals whose situations he remembered.



HH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani

Despite carrying responsibility for major national and international files, he continued to see himself as a father to all Qataris, remaining approachable and regularly visiting markets and restaurants while encouraging direct interaction with citizens.

He further recalled that HH Sheikh Hamad welcomed constructive criticism and never hesitated to review decisions if presented with better alternatives. His self-confidence, he said, enabled him to accept differing opinions without perceiving them as challenges to his authority. During periods of crisis, HH the late Father Amir remained calm and optimistic, often using humour to reassure his colleagues and strengthen their confidence while tackling difficult issues.

Preserving Qatar's national identity formed another central pillar of his vision. HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim explained that HH the late Father Amir was determined to ensure that modernisation never came at the expense of Qatari traditions, heritage or cultural values. He took a personal interest in matters ranging from

traditional dress and customs to educating younger generations about their history, believing that development should reinforce rather than weaken national identity.

Discussing the transition of power to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, he said HH Sheikh Hamad stepped away from political life completely after handing over authority, choosing instead to observe developments as a supportive father rather than an active political figure. He expressed great confidence in the new leadership and closely followed its handling of major regional and international challenges, often praising the Amir's calm, measured approach while recognising that the current leadership shares the same principles that guided HH the late Father Amir.

He said Qatar's continued development demonstrates the continuity of a single national vision rather than separate phases of governance. Many of the country's largest infrastructure projects completed in recent years, including Hamad International Airport,

Hamad Port, hospitals, transportation networks and sporting facilities, originated during HH Sheikh Hamad's tenure before being completed and expanded under the current leadership.

Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim pointed out that one of HH the late Father Amir's greatest achievements was positioning Qatar prominently on the global stage through active diplomacy and mediation. He said the late leader sought to establish Qatar as a trusted intermediary capable of bringing conflicting parties together, laying the groundwork for a diplomatic approach that has since become an institutional hallmark of Qatari foreign policy.

He noted the mediation efforts involving Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Lebanon and the early stages of dialogue between the United States and the Taliban as examples of this strategy. Since then, he said, Qatar has continued expanding its mediation efforts through specialised teams within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, handling regional and international conflicts, including negotiations concerning Venezuela and other global issues.

HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim stressed that HH the late Father Amir took great satisfaction in witnessing this diplomatic legacy continue to evolve. He recalled that the late leader often expressed comfort and pride in seeing Qatar's institutions continue building on the foundations established during his reign.

Accordingly, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim said that Qatar's financial institutions underwent a remarkable transformation, with the country's central bank reserves increasing from approximately \$500 mn at the beginning of the period to between \$35bn and \$38bn by the time he left office. Foreign investments likewise expanded dramatically, rising from an initial \$200mn to approximately QR280bn before continuing to grow to around QR600bn under the current leadership.

He further noted the establishment of the national pension fund,

which evolved from direct government pension payments into an institutional system with assets exceeding QR100bn, describing it as one of the country's enduring financial achievements.

However, HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim maintained that HH Sheikh Hamad's greatest concern remained the welfare of ordinary citizens. He recalled that the late leader insisted government salaries always be paid on schedule, even during periods of financial difficulty, refusing suggestions to delay payments by even a few days. Improving living standards, education, healthcare, culture, museums and the arts remained among his highest priorities throughout his years in office.

Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim offered personal insights into HH Sheikh Hamad's work ethic, describing an exhausting schedule of continuous meetings, international travel and decision-making that often continued aboard the aircraft during long overseas flights. Yet, away from official duties, he said HH the late Father Amir led a warm, informal family life while remaining disciplined and demanding in preparing his children for future responsibilities, believing they should carry greater obligations rather than enjoy special privileges.

HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim said HH the late Father Amir consistently championed support for the oppressed communities and promoted reconciliation through diplomacy. His commitment to humanitarian assistance extended both inside and outside Qatar, particularly regarding Palestine and Gaza, where he insisted that aid provided by Qatar should always meet the highest quality standards. His concern was never merely that assistance be delivered, but that it genuinely benefit those in need.

He added that the Father Amir frequently emphasised a simple principle throughout his public life: “Qatar first!” Loyalty to the nation, he explained, formed the foundation of responsible public service. While the late leader welcomed constructive criticism aimed at improving governance, he rejected any actions that undermined the country's interests or institutions.

HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim stressed that history would ultimately recognise the exceptional legacy of HH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. More than a decade after leaving office, he remained deeply admired by the Qatari people, whose emotional farewell reflected not only respect for a former ruler but affection for a leader widely regarded as the architect of modern Qatar. He said the continued progress achieved under the leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani stands as the strongest testament to the enduring vision established by HH the late Father Amir and to the continuity of Qatar's national development journey.



Former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al-Thani during the interview with Qatar Television.